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Ben Hamper's Account on the Automotive Industry in the U.S. in the 1970-80s

In his collection of stories *Rivthead: Tales from the Assembly Line*, not only does Ben Hamper vividly describes daily routine of common workers at General Motors, but he also reveals many policies of the company's management and their attitude to workers. The most eye-catching aspect is the naivety of GM management. Hamper also argues that the management of the company does not care much of workers at the assembly line. In addition, the company's management does not control their workers' discipline and introduce no efficient policies to motivate them. The author implies that all these factors eventually make GM unable to compete with the growing Japanese automotive industry.

The crisis in the American automotive industry begins when Japanese companies become the major competitors of such big American companies as GM. At this time, the naivety of GM executives becomes obvious. Instead of introducing new technologies and improving their factories' efficiency, GM management invents a mascot, Howie Makem, whose aim is to increase workers' motivation. However, the mascot does not help the company, whereas common workers, such as Hamper, only make fun of it. Another example of similar techniques is that management places "a massive electronic message board directly across from Hamper... to transmit [motivating] messages" (Heitmann 188). This primitive method proves the naivety of

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GM management. The company does not utilize any effective motivational techniques to increase its workers' productivity but uses outdated means of propaganda instead.

The worst thing is that GM management also neglects safety standards in many cases for the sake of increasing the level of production. Hamper mentions a number of incidents that clearly reveal GM management's carelessness toward the company's workers. For example, a rivet gun hits a woman at the assembly line, and one of the workers stops the line. At this moment, all the higher-ranked employees come to the line to see who stopped it. In thirty seconds, the line works again. This incident shows that workers' health and safety are unimportant for GM management, and their major priority is that the production process must be uninterrupted.

At the same time, GM does not control their workers much. Hamper reflects on the role of alcohol in the assembly line workers' lives. They drink in the morning before work, during different breaks, and after work. Some workers even take drugs while working at the assembly line. Hamper also describes different methods to make his own and other workers' job less boring and monotonous. For example, workers read newspapers, walk around the factory, organize spitting contests, and feed rats. However, during his work at Pontiac, Hamper discovers that management's attitudes are different there. In fact, there are no motivation initiatives at Pontiac, but every worker's day schedule is strictly timed, and it is forbidden to read at work or do anything else apart from one's job.

In general, I believe that Hamper's account is on target, because he has been working in the automotive industry for many years and has learned almost everything about this job. During the 1970-80s, such companies as GM were unprepared to compete with Japan's automotive industry. Management was unable to invent anything to save the company, because they had

been monopolists in the industry before the Japanese expansion. It is likely that in the 1970-80s, GM executives were sure that the company would collapse, so they did not care about the industry and workers but just tried to earn as much as possible before the crisis would lead to bankruptcy.

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Work Cited

Heitmann, John. *The Automobile and American Life*. Jefferson: McFarland, 2009. Print.