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UM prof says Cutting costs saves jobs

The UAW's current contention that reducing total work time for each employee will increase job security is misguided, a University of Michigan professor says.

According to Prof. Ross Wilhelm, faculty member of the U-M Graduate School of Business Administration, the net effect of increasing the number of paid vacation days in an attempt to reduce the number of worker layoffs each year will be to increase the relative cost of producing cars, and thus actually reduce worker job security.

American automobile companies and workers have benefited enormously as a result of the lowering of the relative costs of producing cars in this country. As the relative costs have fallen we have sold more American-made cars and the number of jobs and job security have increased.

The attempt by the UAW to increase auto workers' job security by increasing the relative cost of producing cars here is misguided. They should be seeking ways to further reduce the relative costs of producing cars here if they wish to increase job security, Wilhelm says.

The U-M professor adds that over the past 30 years, it has been clear that when the cost of producing automobiles in the United States rises relative to costs of production overseas, the number of foreign cars imported rises. When the relative costs of producing cars here falls, the number of imports falls.

Over the period from the mid-1950's up to a few years ago, Wilhelm says, "the proportion of total cars sold here that were foreign-made cars rose steadily. The reason for the increase in the proportions of foreign cars was that it was cheaper on a per pound basis to build cars in West Germany or Japan than it was to build cars in the United States. The reason it was cheaper to build overseas was that first, the worker productivity overseas, and especially Japan, was higher than the worker productivity here. Some estimates indicated that the Japanese were producing up to 60 per cent more cars, trucks and parts per worker than were the Americans."

"A second reason why it was cheaper to produce overseas than here was that the value of the dollar, fixed by international

agreement, was greatly overvalued. The overvaluation of the dollar gave foreign countries a competitive edge and this was part of the reason their costs were lower."

Wilhelm points out that President Richard Nixon in 1971 corrected this problem by floating the dollar and allowing it to fall in value, thus making a major contribution to the relative lowering of American car production costs. He adds that a number of workers in the automobile industry and in auto supplies industries owe their jobs to the shift from fixed exchange rate to the floating exchange rate.

"A third reason why American auto firms were not competitive in the period from the 1950's until recently was that the inflation rate in the United States was higher than that of our primary foreign competitors," he says.

Wilhelm continues, "The higher inflation rate pushed prices and wages paid to American workers well above those of foreign companies and we steadily lost sales and jobs for this reason."

"In recent years the anti-inflation campaign of President Gerald Ford has been highly successful and our inflation rate is now less than that of our foreign competitors. This has also helped lower the relative costs of producing cars here and it too has increased the number of auto workers employed and has helped American firms to supply a larger part of our total automobile consumption. Imports have declined and Volkswagen and other foreign producers are considering building their cars here rather than overseas."

Workers get pay adjusted

Some employers at the Oakland County Road Commission won't be getting a raise for a while because Michigan Department of Civil Service says they were already making too much.

At the same time, salaried employees who were found to be underpaid for their job classification can look forward to a raise.

The salary juggling was one result of a group of 133 recommendations made by the Citizens Research Council of Michigan to improve road commission efficiency.

A later independent study by the civil service's local office was made to define job classification and establish fair pay rates.

"OUR PURPOSE was to assure that the road commission has a current, equitable and technically sound classification and compensation program for its salaried employees," said Road Commissioner William Richards.

"In adopting the new program we feel we have accomplished that purpose."

The revisions were made effective retroactive to July 1, 1975, apply to about 180 of the commission's 500 employees.

The effect of the revision will be to raise some salaries and to freeze others for a time so that employees doing work of equivalent value will be equally compensated.

"THIS SORT of adjustment is not easy for some employees to accept," Richards said, "but fairness demanded it. Its negative effect on some employees is tempered by the fact that no present employee's job will be eliminated, and no present employee's salary will be reduced."

The commissioner said the changes will

increase the road commission's personnel costs by 2.2 per cent annually. He noted that a federal grant paid the cost of the study by the civil service department.

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