

WE WHO STAYED AT VOLVO: AN ETHNOLOGICAL STUDY OF SENIOR AUTOMOBILE-INDUSTRY BLUE-COLLAR WORKERS' WORKING-LIVES AND FUTURE PLANS*

Björn Ohlsson

The text summarizes a very comprehensive investigation of cultural processes and situations at Volvo's most important production plant (Torslanda, Gothenburg). The investigation concerns many aspects of working life: the self perception of workers as such, the self perception of workers as class, their idea of working conditions and their transformations and so on. The term "culture" in the text is used and encompasses peoples' thoughts, values and actions as well as their economic and social situations. The study can be seen as a part of the long ethnological tradition of depicting workers' working life and blue-collar workers' culture that was particularly prevalent in the 1980's and 1990's. The Ohlsson's basic theoretical approach assumes the existence of a conflict between work and capital, and that economic and sociological conditions between the different classes within society are fundamental to the analysis of societies and cultures.

L'articolo sintetizza una ricerca assai estesa sui processi e sulle situazioni culturali propri del maggiore stabilimento della Volvo (Torslanda, Gothenburg), ricerca che ha riguardato diversi aspetti della vita lavorativa: l'autopercezione dei lavoratori in quanto tali, quella dei lavoratori come classe, la loro concezione delle condizioni lavorative e di come queste si sono trasformate ecc. Il termine "cultura" è nel testo utilizzato per comprendere il modo di pensare, i valori, le azioni e le situazioni socio-economiche delle persone. La ricerca può essere vista come parte di una lunga tradizione etnologica, particolarmente affermata negli anni Ottanta e Novanta, che ha come oggetto la vita lavorativa e la cultura operaia. L'approccio teorico utilizzato parte dall'assunto che esiste un conflitto fra lavoro e capitale, e che le condizioni socio-economiche fra le diverse classi sociali sono fondamentali per l'analisi delle società e delle culture.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Automotive industry has been of very big importance for the region of Gothenburg, especially the last 50 years. During this period the production system has changed in many ways, which has affected the working life conditions of the workers. By interviewing some labour union representatives during the year 2003 I learned that it had been more difficult to find suitable tasks for older blue collar workers in later years. This was how I got the idea to make a study about senior blue collar workers at Volvo, which I worked with from the beginning of 2004 to January 2009, when my dissertation took place.

My study has an historical and life course approach, but I look at the people's history from a contemporary standing point and I am also interested in the future industrial working

Björn Ohlsson, PhD in Ethnology, University of Gothenburg.

* This article is the English summary of B. Ohlsson, *Vi som stannade på Volvo. En etnologisk studie om äldre bilindustrarbetares arbetsliv och framtidsplaner*, Arkipelag, Göteborg 2008.

life. My starting point is the first years of the 21st century, 2005 to be more specific, because this was the year when I made the interviews with the blue collar workers whose working lives the thesis investigates and are based on. Because the conditions for and within the Automotive industry have changed a lot since then, I will here make a short summary of the development of the plant in Gothenburg.

2005 was a good year for the company Volvo Car Corporation (VCC) with increasing production and good profits. The situation was improving until the end of 2007, when the demand for new cars started to decline rapidly. It resulted in the announcement in 2008 that 2 250 blue collar workers at VCC in Gothenburg were noticed to quit, most of them working in the plant Volvo Cars Torslanda (VCT). The crisis for Volvo and the global Automotive industry was deteriorated by the global financial crises which break out in the autumn 2008. During that year more than 2000 workers had to leave the company in Gothenburg, 140 of them left with early retirement arrangements. Totally this meant that about 40 percent of the blue collar employees had to leave the plant. The production dropped from 195 000 cars 2007, which was the highest number ever, to 102 000 cars during 2009. This year the labour union reached an agreement with the company about shorter working hours and retention salaries, for a promise of no more notices of withdrawals. During 2010 and 2011 the company has begun to employ hundreds of workers again, but more than before with contracts for a limited period or employees from agency labour companies. This has resulted, according to reports from the local labour union, in less rotation between the different tasks for the workers, less of in-service training, more monotonous work tasks and a poorer working environment in general. This development consolidates my conclusions in the last chapter, that there is obvious risk to have a working life in the Automotive industry that is not sustainable in the long run.

During the last decade the traditionally quite good climate of cooperation between the blue collar labour union and the corporate and factory management at Volvo became more strained, due to continuing rationalisations without any influences by the union, which has made the work more monotonous, stressfully and less interesting. Stricter attitudes to rules and agreements, and the increasing volume of employees from agency labour companies have also deteriorated the industrial relations. In March 2011 about 400 of the production staff at the plant was hired from agency work companies, which, according to the union, results in conflicts between workers with different contracts, as well as poorer working environment and larger risks for long term sick leaves later on. This decisions taken by the management in order to achieve a greater numerical flexibility, also prevent the earlier plans to develop a working organisation which stimulate motivation and learning at work.

During 2010 VCC got a new owner, when Ford Motor Company sold the company to the Chinese company Geely Holding Group. What this means for the production and for the working conditions at the Torslanda plant in the future is hard to foresee today.

Because this article is a summary of a thesis there are no references to literature or other sources in the text. A complete bibliography could be read in Ohlsson (2008).

The thesis is based on two much discussed issues in Sweden: the demographic consequences an ageing population and the changes that have taken place in working-life as a result of, or in response to, the so called globalisation.

Most politicians, authorities and researchers agree that there can be a serious effect on the social economy when a smaller section of the population, in the form of gainfully employed people, has to support an ever-increasing number of pensioners. The most advocated solution to this problem is delay their retirement and pension. Since early

retirement has been particularly common within certain sectors of production and since Sweden is to a large extent still an industrial economy, I chose to base my study at Volvo Torslandaverken (Volvo's "Torslanda" plant in Gothenburg, Sweden) with ca. 5,000 employees (2005), where Volvo Cars has been producing automobiles since 1964.

The purpose of the thesis is to describe and investigate the effect that many years of industrial labour have on people and their attitudes towards their work, their daily lives outside of work, their future at work and as pensioners. My aim has been a tentative understanding of how workers' experiences and their ageing have affected their thoughts, opinions and general behaviour. An important issue is whether it is possible for industrial workers to continue until the age of 65 or older and if it is desirable from a worker's, company's or union's perspective? I am also interested in how these workers see the changes in the workplace during the last decades.

The main sources of material for this thesis consist of qualitative in-depth interviews with 16 senior workers within the 49-62 years of age range. The interviews took place in 2005 and the selection took into consideration the gender, ethnic background and work experience at Volvo. The interviews were geared towards their life histories with the focus on work experiences. I see the narratives as socially informative and related to the situation but I would not call them constructions, because a life lived and narrated is built around people's experiences and incidents in their lives. By adopting the title *We who stayed at Volvo*, I would like to emphasize that the study investigates the conditions and experiences of some of those who chose to remain in the company, not amongst all those who left.

Apart from the interviews with the sixteen chosen candidates, I have also interviewed eight other white collar employees and elected representatives of the blue collar unions. I have also taken part to the partially EU-sponsored development project about senior workers "Life Competence 50+", as well as carrying out a working study by interview at Volvo Cars' plant in Ghent, Belgium. This provided extra insight into the company's way of working as well as new perspectives on the importance of sociological and cultural circumstances. The study is based on the present and stretches back to the 1970's, when many of the interviewees took up employment at Volvo.

The thesis is an investigation of cultural processes and situations, where the term "culture" encompasses peoples' thoughts, values and actions as well as their economic and social situations. I see the study as a part of the long ethnological tradition of depicting workers' working life and blue-collar workers' culture that was particularly prevalent in the 1980's and 1990's.

My basic theoretical approach assumes the existence of a conflict between work and capital, and that economic and sociological conditions between the different classes within society are fundamental to the analysis of societies and cultures. I see capital as a constant and always present part of the power structure and this power structure can be influenced by various human factors and is not only purely situational, relational or linguistic, but it is also existing when it is not practiced or expressed. I see class as a constant cultural process, a subjective experience of solidarity and/or conflict, where the home environment as well as experiences from school and working life have particularly great influence on people's thoughts and actions. I also analyze the importance that gender and ethnicity could have had on their experiences at the workplace, life outside the workplace and on thoughts about the future. The term "work", in the context of salaried employment, form, function and meaning is also discussed in this section. "Senior" is in reality a relative term, but is often used as an absolute term within various frameworks according to the context. My use

of the term in this thesis follows that of Volvo, where “older” or “senior” means a person who is at least 45 years old and has worked for Volvo for at least 15 years.

2. HISTORY AND BACKGROUND

Industrial development has, in the 1900's, been stamped by “Fordism” that has, amongst other things, been characterized by Taylorist principles and assembly line production. After the Second World War a system for the determination of time and motion studies – MTM (Methods-Time Management) – was developed. This was that widened the gap between planning and production. Volvo was first in the use of MTM in Sweden in 1951 and the system is still in use in a modified form.

During the 1970's, the socio-technological school began to make inroads and Volvo was seen as the forerunner in its adoption at the new assembly plant in Kalmar in 1974 that had no assembly line. When the Volvo plant in Uddevalla started up in 1987, it involved a completely new assembly system where teams, each completing a car, worked in parallel, which in itself was a break away from the Taylorist concepts. Despite greater effectiveness and more interesting tasks for the workers, production was stopped with arrival of the economic crisis at the beginning of the 1990's. Since then, more and more industries in Sweden have gone from various forms of alternative assembly methods back to assembly line production.

During the 1990's, industry in the West took great notice of the success in the Japanese Automotive industry. Lean production does not in reality imply conflict with Taylorist concepts. The largest change is the demand for increased involvement in the work. Other important points are: teamwork, getting it right from the start, striving toward constant improvements and minimizing the workforce, buffer and stocks. A consequence of this way of working at Volvo is that the number of jobs in the assembly plant that suit senior workers has diminished, partly though outsourcing of certain types of production. Widespread automation in the body and paint shops illustrated also the need to create new opportunities for the older workers. In the 1990's, therefore, a new service unit was created, where the employees carry out a variety of different tasks. A unique venture was also started at the assembly plant where senior workers were allowed to take part in normal assembly but at a lower rate of performance – 75-80% – while retaining the same salary. This was a way of diminishing the risk for long-term sick leave and to solve the problem of finding suitable types of jobs for senior workers or the physically disadvantaged. At the most, about 400 people worked having such agreements. When the management was to rationalize production at the beginning of the 2000's, they chose to outsource certain departments and to rescind these senior agreements, which consequently meant that many senior workers had to change jobs.

In 1999, another important event took place that has affected the employees. The car division of Volvo was sold to the Ford Motor Company. Since then AB Volvo, that among other things produces trucks and heavy vehicles, and Volvo Cars, have nothing in common other than the brand name.

Working hours have, since the impact of industrialism in Sweden, been an important question. In 1920, a law was passed concerning the 48-hour week. In 1970, this was reduced to a 40-hour week. Some unions have through negotiation reduced working hours

even further. Workers at the Volvo plant have, on average, a working-week of just over 38 hours in length.

In 1913, a state pension was established in Sweden for those 67 years of age and older and in 1948 this was made common for all and was enough to live on. A new pension reform took place in 1957 that meant all employees would receive a supplementary pension based on income. In 1976, the retirement age was lowered to 65. A parliamentary decision was taken in 1994 to introduce a new scheme based on an individual's total income. At the same time, the age of retirement became flexible, from 61-67 years of age, with an economic incitement that makes it economically disadvantageous to claim a pension at an early stage. The average age of retirement has increased over the last few years and in 2006, stood at 63.1 years of age.

3. VOLVO WORKERS RECOUNT

All except two of the sixteen interviewees' had parents who were workers, often where the mother was a housewife. Most left compulsory school at the age 14-16 with no particular career plans. After several different jobs they started at Volvo, often when they were around 20-25 years of age. At that time the intake of personnel was great and it was easy to obtain employment. Most say they had only planned to stay for a few years, but they got on well and decided to stay.

Nearly all the interviewees agree that the physical environment has improved a great deal during the period they have been employed at the plant. Much of the heavy lifting has disappeared and there has been an improvement in the ergonomics of the workstations. At the same time though, many mention that the social interaction has worsened, owing to automation and increased stress. The greatest change in working conditions was the transition to teamwork that took over when lean production was introduced at the beginning of the 1990's. Several interviewees are positive about the improvements in organization and quality consciousness, while others think that the new methods are complicated and that they do not have the time to carry out the extra duties that are expected from them.

Nine of them currently work in special areas for senior workers, so called "senior workstations". One of them works at a former senior workstation and the other six work as part of the ordinary production, in areas considered more suitable for older workers. Here the work is less arduous, the tempo in general is somewhat slower and/or the work is not carried out in an assembly line manner.

All the interviewees think that Volvo has been a good place of work if they were to formulate a general judgement. One of the foremost explanations has been that they felt their employment was secure. The interviewees claim, however, that they have experienced an increasing uncertainty in the last few years. Another negative change is that the corporate culture, the so called "Volvo spirit", that was present in the company has more or less disappeared. The former CEO, Pehr G. Gyllenhammar who resigned in 1993, was seen as a symbol for this spirit. The term "Volvo spirit" is linked to everything that is positive about the company, openness and respect between managers and workers, the security and care shown towards employees, comradeship and a will to jointly resolve problems as well as a pride about the company and workplace.

All the interviewees belong to the local union that claims a membership of over

95%. They think it is important that the union exists, as security, but feel it was stronger before and now often backs down to demands made by the company's management.

4. THE MEANING OF WORK

For several of the interviewees it was natural to start work very young to support themselves and their families. The actual jobs and what they have to do is of less interest. Pay is the most important reason as to why they sought employment at Volvo and pay is one of the most important reasons why they stay. Therefore, one can say that the interviewees fundamentally have an instrumental attitude to their work. Another sign is that they make a clear division between work and free time. They probably retain their attitude from their working class background which in turn is strengthened by the nature of the work and the insignificant affect they can have on the organization or shaping of their workplace. It is, in the main, only the social solidarity, comfort of fellow workers and other work conditions such as freedom/restraint and change/monotony that sometimes has had a greater effect than pay.

Apart from economic security, the interviewees mention comradeship as an important reason for staying at Volvo. There are many to socialize with and they have an enjoyable time together. The actual routines, of being part of a social environment and of being useful to society are also mentioned as being important. It implies a secure place in society. Even though the basic attitude is instrumental, the jobs have had many different meanings to the interviewees.

Job assignments for a Volvo worker can differ greatly and are not insignificant in regard to a sense of well being. Particularly those with qualified posts with great responsibility for personnel or equipment point out that the assignments are interesting. What the interviewees value as good qualities are in particular a degree of freedom and independence, change and variation, that the work is not too physically demanding and that the level of stress is relatively low, which reduces the physical strain and increases the possibilities of partaking in social intercourse. These positive qualities should be placed in relation to the tied, controlled, monotonous and relatively stressful work that is particularly characteristic for work on the assembly line.

They have, in general, a positive attitude towards their work and several of them express a pride about working at Volvo; a secure workplace that provides them and their families a good life. They are proud of handling a job and building a life with self-esteem and dignity. Even though the working conditions occasionally have been less than good and the social attitude in regard to industrial work has at times been negative, they have through their work been able to create a positive balance in their lives.

In line with my starting point that the course of people's lives and culture in broad terms are of great importance for attitudes about working life and experience of working life, I have also studied the attitude towards leisure and family. Their view about leisure time can also have an affect on their retirement from working life. It is evident that to the interviewees, family life is an important part of leisure time. Fourteen of the interviewees have children and all except two have resolved child care by working different shifts to their partners. In that way they could take care of both the children and the family's economy. Family life has had a great influence on working lives because, for one thing, working hours

are governed by family demands. Work also has an influence on leisure, because shift work obstructs relationships with family and friends, and it affects physical stamina and the possibilities of pursuing leisure activities.

Some post modern researchers frequently bring up the idea that work and leisure can no longer be seen as two separate worlds. In an industrial production plant such as Volvo the difference though is obvious. Until the end of the 1990's there were time clocks but now it is pass cards and the factory gates that stand as the obvious symbols of division. Outside of the gates, the interviewees seldom think about work, which several of them see as a distinct advantage. In industry, time is an ever present and exact marker. Breakfast is between 8.30-8.51 and tasks are timed down to hundredths of a second, according to the MTM system. It is just that particular emphasis on time and the control of their tasks and working day that illustrates the deep division between work time and leisure time. The strict government of the workers' time and the control of their tasks and working day reinforce the instrumental attitude to work.

The study shows that home/household and/or leisure play a large role in their free time. Thanks to a relatively good salary, the interviewees have been able to realize a good life, been able to take care of their children, been able to buy a house, as well as a holiday home and/or car and travel on holiday. The aim of life has not been about work itself but about family, home and leisure time. At the same time, I would like to call attention to the complimentary aspects of work and leisure, where work increases the value of leisure time.

5. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF AGEING AND HEALTH

Despite the thirteen years difference between the youngest and the oldest of the interviewees, they all see themselves as "senior" Volvo workers. This is because many have had to change jobs due to their age and because they had noticed that age had affected them, particularly in regard to their physical state and health. The majority has been placed in areas that suit senior workers and for that reason the company classifies them as senior. Because tasks in various sections make various claims on speed and physical requirements, work areas are thereby created that show a marked dominance of younger and older respectively workers. In this way, Volvo becomes a fairly age-segregated workplace despite that both management and the senior workers themselves would rather prefer that the younger and the older could work more together. The interviewees accept that they are seen as old but feel the company ought to make better use of their experience and knowledge.

The interviewees also report in several ways the notions that exist about senior members of the workforce: that they have a negative attitude towards change, that they are uninterested in in-service training and that they value security in life to a greater degree than when they were young. It is my understanding that their attitude above all depends on the working class background and their experiences as industrial workers. The interviewees have class-related attitudes towards work, which affected their desire to make a career. Their experience as industrial workers has reinforced this attitude, partly because they are constantly forced to accommodate new situations and changes in the workplace.

Ageing itself has also revealed another view of life where work is of less importance. At the same time other situations have changed, which has affected their attitude. At Volvo,

a good number of lighter tasks have disappeared and it has become increasingly more difficult to gain new employment outside of the company at their age.

The interviewees also value their health highly. Even when the questions do not deal with health or injury issues, they often speak of their own or other's health. Several have experience of long-term sick leave and some have their injuries classified as work-related. All of the women say that they have or have had pain or experience some form of injury or physical strain that affects their ability to work. They also believe that heavy physical work is the negative aspect of the current tasks. In regard to men, the picture is different. Five of the seven male interviewees declared that they have no physical problems that adversely affect their work.

The study shows that age has had a great influence on the interviewees' attitude to their work and their physical condition for various tasks. The larger number of years as industrial workers has also affected most of them in a negative way regarding their physical condition. Besides physical ill-health, several of them mentioned mental tiredness. This is largely because they feel that work has deteriorated in certain aspects such as the opportunities for social contact, a raise in the levels of stress as well as recurrent involuntary changes. Age and health are factors that affect both their current situation and their future opportunities at work. With increasing age and increasing ill-health, they have fewer opportunities to be able to choose what they want to work with. Their influence on their working lives has therefore diminished.

6. INFLUENCE AND RULES AT WORK

When I started to analyze the interviewees' working life stories I discovered that many of them had experienced great changes in working conditions such as their place of work, working hours and/or tasks. These changes I have called turning points. Irrespective of whether the workers have been involved with the change of work or not, the turning points have often been voluntary when they were younger while involuntary when they were older. Often it has been a result of production or organization changes, outsourcing or other rationalization plans. Most of the interviewees experienced their first large involuntary turning points when they were between 45-50 years of age. The interviewees often became disappointed and concerned though, since they had lost the security of social links and work experience built up over many years that was for the majority the foremost reason behind their sense of well-being at work. The occurrences also reminded them of their subordinate position they had. The turning points in general have produced negative consequences for them though several have, after a while, seen the advantages in being given an easier and less stressful job than before even though it was less qualified.

In order to study the various phases of working life, I have also tried to determine at which age the interviewees felt were their best years at work. It was often when they were able to demonstrate their professional abilities and when the tasks were varied and relatively free. Most reached their peak at around the 35-45 years of age. There are also some who still retain the best jobs.

As I base my study on the idea that class affiliation is a key if one is to understand people's lives and culture, I have investigated how the interviewees see the class issue and their sense of belonging, as well as how class, gender and ethnicity are brought to the fore at work. The workers feel there are class differences in society but most of them say they

have not pondered a great deal about it. They regard it as a hierarchical ranking built upon economic means and income. The view of class is fairly unclear for many, but it is much more distinct when they relate it to their situation at work. The interviewees then reveal that they think social background can be just as important as the position at work when related to their subjective class affiliation.

The interviewees' perception of the "them and us-relationship" at work is created by all the everyday occurrences that make up the subordinate position in their working lives. Particularly noticeable is at meetings when decisions perceived as negative by the workers are communicated by a superior. It is then that it becomes clear who has the power – it is the owner's representatives, the management and other authority figures. It brings forth the power structure that exists in the workplace where the power of language is subordinate to the power of capital.

Workers at Volvo and other industries have always tried to oppose the control and subordination that they believe that are being subjected to. Partly, it deals with creating one's own rules for how one should think and act, and of creating one's own space and influence over one's own time. It can also be a case of maintaining comradeship and not allowing the will of the company to take over. The instrumental relationship to work can be seen both as a result of working conditions and a way of opposing them.

According to the official categorization, the interviewees belong to the working class but their subjective affiliation is not self-evident. One reason is that they highlight the economic aspects of belonging to a class. Since they earn a relatively high salary, they are fairly close to being middle class. Another reason could be that class differentiation is not discussed so much in society any more. Class identity thereby becomes a passive concept and demands particular circumstances to be activated. Class has become a stigmatic identity instead of a positive and constructive sense of belonging. This change I see as the foremost reason why blue collar Volvo workers affiliation to the working class is not more pronounced than it is.

There is however something that binds them; the insecurity that many feel concerning their own circumstances and working life. Despite the fact that the present welfare state has reduced the consequences of becoming unemployed, concern remains. In their upbringing they have experienced how it feels to live with financial constraints which in turn reinforce their fear of economic insecurity. A sense of belonging also comes out of the "us and them-relationship" in the workplace that I mentioned before. From their backgrounds and lives as workers, they are used to not having much influence at work or in society in general, which leads to class oriented attitudes and actions. In this way, class becomes an interactive element with the surroundings, a process that has an effect on the attitude to work and working life.

Volvo has always been a male-dominated workplace, but at the beginning of the 1970's there was an influx of women seeking employment. The number has steadily increased and in 2005 they represented 27% of the workforce. The division between men and women has varied a great deal between various sections of the plant which is based on the idea that they can handle various tasks in various levels of competence. Men have had to take care of physically heavy jobs and technically complicated tasks while women have taken care of work that demands dexterity and precision. The female interviewees think that the workplace was equal because they were treated similarly regarding tasks, pay and other working conditions. Despite this perceived equality I maintain these women lay claim to a weaker position in the workplace than men, since the majority have less qualified jobs

with less influence and independence, and since many of them have physical health problems.

Almost right from the start, Volvo has been a workplace where a large portion of the employees were born abroad. During the whole of the 1970's the number of foreign citizens amongst the workers was over 50%. The many economic migrants were a prerequisite for the success of the company. Volvo is still a multicultural workplace with over 25% of the workers born abroad. None of the interviewees state that it has been a problem that many of their co-workers had another ethnic background than Swedish. Relationships have reported to be relatively without conflict and this can depend on several reasons. Discussions about discrimination and racism have created a climate where it is unnatural to put forward opinions that could be interpreted as xenophobic. The interviewees in general also refer to the current situation and therefore arguments from the past become less important. My understanding, however, is that the main reason results from being in the company of people from another ethnic background becoming a natural part of daily life. As long as the individual worker has fulfilled the demands and requirements that the company and union make, there has been no conflict. Work has been marked by peaceful coexistence. This though does not imply that immigrants have not experienced difficulties or have been discriminated against. All of the immigrant interviewees who arrived as adults report they have had problems with the Swedish language, but none of them say they have experienced discrimination.

Starting at Volvo has required an adjustment to the production system and the workplace culture which indeed was basically "male" and "Swedish" but has changed by immigrants and women. To be a blue collar Volvo worker is not the same as being a Swedish male blue collar Volvo worker. During my interviews I have not encountered any "them and us" thoughts between native-born Swedes and immigrants, or between men and women. There has been, and still is, between workers and managers, particularly with higher management, irrespective of gender or ethnic background. In accordance with the norms of justice and equality that most have formed through their working class backgrounds, the interviewees want to play down the differences between each other. All are part of a large and heterogeneous workers' collective with a realization that they all share the same working conditions. Solidarity with work colleagues has been the most important thing in the workplace, with the feeling of collective subjugation created by a number of everyday incidents in the workplace depending on the power structure in the company. This feeling has resulted in various forms of resistance and defence, a collective feeling, and a class adherence, expressed or otherwise, based on the restriction of articulation and the stigmatization of class that has taken place in society during the last few decades.

7. FUTURE PLANS AND ATTITUDES TO THE SENIOR WORKERS

All of the interviewees are happy with their present places of work and their jobs. Irrespective of age, gender, ethnic background and tasks, all have a wish to continue to work at the same place as long as possible, preferably right up to retirement. They want a secure conclusion to their working lives, which has its roots in their long working lives, age and class affiliation. Several, however, expressed concern about whether they could remain because of health and eventual changes in the business.

All the interviewees, except one, relate that they are certain that they would retire before 65 years of age if they received an early retirement offer with acceptable conditions. A few say they would willingly take early retirement as early as 55 years of age. Ill-health, or the risk of future ill-health, is the normal reason for wanting to retire early. Several report how some others had become ill in connection with retirement. To be able to utilize their time as healthy pensioners and to be able to have more time for family and leisure pursuits attracts them away from work. They see early retirement as a question of fairness, a class-related cause based on the nature of their work and the consequences in regard to physical demands, plus the fact that they have been employed for so many years. They realize that retirement constitutes many changes but do not express any worries about filling their time or being socially isolated. The only point of concern is that their health will remain good enough to be able to travel and enjoy life as pensioners. Since the company during the last decade has made several offers concerning early retirement, it has become a rule to retire at 60 years of age.

The will to retire can also be affected by the attitude of others at the workplace. The interviewees' views about the company's attitude to senior workers differ a little. Most have a relatively positive view and feel that the company cares about them. They mention job security and that they have been reassigned tasks to suit their later years. The women have a weaker position at work and are less positive. Four of them feel the company has a negative attitude towards senior workers. They highlight the changes they have had to put up with that forced them away from the jobs they liked. They feel that these rationalisations show that the senior workers have less value and that the company would prefer to get rid of them. The fact that they have remained is a result of legislation and the unions, they say. This feeling of depreciation is integral to their class background and gender. They also feel an insecurity about where they will end up next time they are forced to change assignments, because their influence and their opportunities have diminished with increase in age. The difference in attitude is also dependent on different perspectives of time. When they reflect on the work attitude at Volvo as a whole they are more positive than if they just look at the last few years.

When I analyze what the company's representatives say and what the company has done, there is much that indicates that senior workers are above all seen as a burden. Since many of them have physical health problems and are in poorer physical condition, they require easier tasks and particular needs in their working environment, which is an obstacle for maximum effective production. The trial of effective rehabilitation that I followed in 2006, clarified the kind of opposition that exists between taking care of people with special needs, such as older workers or those suffering from industrial injury, and the reaching of production goals as set up by the company. My view is that many of the managers at a lower level take great care of their staff and try to meet with their requirements, but the company management's goals for production and economy make it difficult for them to meet these ambitions. When they are forced to choose, production is top of the list. This opposition between work and capital is regulated partially by the laws for work environment and the laws concerning job security, but where one ends up within these frameworks is also a result of relations at work, the changing spirit that characterises Volvo, of the power relationships between management, unions and the workers collective and how high the demand is from the owners regarding profit.

The development at Volvo during the last decade has been disadvantageous for the senior workers because suitable employment has disappeared through rationalisation, more

jobs from the assembly section have been moved to the assembly line and the professional experience they have gained in their working lives no longer has any value. The phasing-out of senior work areas results in senior workers being seen as a problematic group because it requires great efforts to find suitable tasks for them. The involuntary changes in places of work have reinforced their sense of subordination, which diminishes their commitment in their work. They feel a lack of appreciation. The positive characteristics that senior workers are reckoned to have such as loyalty, good working ethic, attendance, their effect on communication and working atmosphere do not seem to balance out the negative aspects in the form of lower productivity.

According to the human resources department, physical ill-health and early retirement are the usual reasons why senior workers leave the company. Since 1992, senior blue collar workers and white collar workers have frequently been offered early retirement or severance arrangements, dependent on age. Those who had reached 60 years of age were offered a pension that matched 70% of their salary up until the age of 65, while the company makes additional payments so that they received the same pension at 65 as if they had continued to work until that age. The offer can be seen as both a positive care plan for the senior workers as well as proof that the older workers were no longer required. The aim is to reduce the company's staffing costs and rationalise production. The advantages compared to giving notice are that they are perceived as positive, both by employees and the unions, and that the job security principle of "first in, last out" does not have to be followed. In this way the company can retain members of staff who are younger, are high achievers and/or have unique skills.

The union representatives are, in the main, positive to the pension offers since it is good for those that want it and they get the chance to retire earlier. On the other hand, it is not good for working conditions or for the company as a whole, they claim. As the pension offer is used as a way of rationalising and reducing staff, it often means that those who remain must work more. The union representatives are also critical of the fact that office staff takes their decisions without negotiations. The blue collar workers' union's basic point of view is that all members should retain good health and therefore have the possibility of being able to continue to work until the age of 65 years old. Therefore, it has opposed the phasing-out of senior departments, but has not succeeded in preventing them.

8. A SUSTAINABLE WORKING LIFE? A CONCLUDING REFLECTION

The blue collar Volvo workers' statements and accounts of their experiences aim to provide an understanding for how industrial workers have contributed to shape their lives and culture in the broad sense. A result of this is the instrumental relationship to work, as both an expression for adaptation and opposition. The interviewees' views can hopefully also provide a perspective on the meaning of work, in a society that is dominated by middle class values.

One question I asked was if an extended working life was desirable. The answer has to be no. The interviewees want to retire early for three reasons: health issues brought on by long-term physical labour, less motivation caused by a sense of subordination, diminished influence and fewer opportunities, as well as the rule about early retirement created by the company through frequent pension scheme offers. The social norm of everybody's right to a healthy existence as a pensioner, as well as the class norm about the right to an early

pension if the work has been physically demanding for many years, has also had an effect. The company believes that early retirement is a good way of rationalising the operation while at the same time avoiding the effort of finding alternative employment for senior workers.

For many of the workers, it would certainly have been possible for them to continue until the age of 65 if they could retain the tasks they had at the time of the interviews. The many steps taken to rationalise the operations have though rendered the possibilities more difficult. Both the interviewees and the union representatives want to reintroduce senior departments with lower performance demands. There are also other ideas about competence improvement schemes and a better collaboration between different sectors of the company. Age researchers point out that employers must work more actively with “age management” if people are to work longer. Volvo has done this before but the solution in recent years has been early retirement.

With this study I would also like to discuss the ambition of extending people's working lives. One of the reasons that the problem with Sweden's ageing population started to be noticed was the situation in other EU countries. In Belgium, Volvo's other production country, conditions are completely different. Up to now, workers have been able to retire at 55 years of age thanks to support from the state. That is one of the reasons why the plant in Gent did not need to create senior departments and therefore it could rationalize production more. The new law in Belgium about rising the retirement age to 58 will probably cause problems both for company management and for more senior workers. Sweden has a much higher average pension age than most European countries which means that the situation should not be so alarming here.

This study deals with a number of senior Volvo employees, but should also be seen as an example of the changing in working environment in Sweden during the last few decades. Trials with alternative assembly methods and socio-technical working methods have had to give way to assembly line production and lean production which has impaired the conditions to allow senior employees to remain longer in employment. The risk is that increased stress, monotony and less influence leads to an increase in the exclusion of people from the labour market. Contrary to what many claim, industrial labour for the majority, at least at Volvo, has not become more qualified. Based on my interviews, I think that the developments that have taken place at Volvo in the last few years are running the risk of leading to a working life that is not sustainable in the long run. The question is, what will the working situation be like for employees who are 25-30 years old today when they have become “senior” in 15-20 years time. Will they still be working for Volvo then? Will the Torslanda plant still be there?

In 1985, the Swedish Metal Workers' Union produced a new vision – “The Good Work” – that amongst other things included the aim of employment security, participation in decision making, professionalism, working hours, working organisation and working environment. The vision never became reality and the distance to its realization has increased. Even the former CEO, Pehr G. Gyllenhammar, regrets the development towards a deteriorating working environment. The opinion of the author is that questions about influence and cultural processes such as class affiliation have to be taken up if there is to be progress towards the goal. Another kind of power balance is needed between work and capital as well as new discussions about job satisfaction, working conditions, productivity and the meaning of work. It is just as important for blue collar workers at Volvo as other working categories in society. Why do we work – really?

