

“Made in St. Paul: Stories from the Ford plant”

Bob Killeen, Jr.

TCAP retiree (millwright), 1977-2007

Interviewed by Peter Myers, August 2017

QUESTION

Tell me about your father, brothers, family legacy at TCAP.

BOB KILLEEN

My dad's name was Bob. He's short for Leroy but he went by Bob. And he started in April of 1949 after he served in the Navy at the end of the war. He worked in the Body Shop, worked in the Trim shop for about five years I think. And then he got elected chief steward of the plant. Which is pretty good. We called it building chairman. And he did that for a number of years. Lost one election to a guy who was an electrician; his name was Art Krause. And he ran on a theme of "Oust the Louse, Vote for Krause." And that was the only election Dad ever lost and he got re-elected chairman a number of times after that. And in mid-to-late-60's he went on the International Union staff where he serviced I believe up to 17 locals in Minnesota. We had car dealerships, we had cabinetmakers, in Fergus Falls. So he serviced all these different plants, not just the Ford plant. And he was very well-respected. And he retired in December of 1989. Went on with George Tenant, formed the Minnesota Council on Quality under the guidance of Rudy Perpich who was governor at the time. And he did that for a number of years until his health started to fail. And he passed in 2002 from cancer.

Then my brother Dan, he started in 1976 and he worked all over the building. He was in Trim department. Then he got into the skill trades through the Apprenticeship program. Served out the remainder of his years until the plant closed. Working in the maintenance department. And he's retired now, too. And my brother John he hired in in the 80's and he got involved in the union, he was elected onto the bargaining committee a number of terms. And he was there up until they announced the buyouts and he took a buyout in December of '07 I believe it was. And he left and went onto college. And now he's doing HR work for a manufacturer here in the Twin Cities.

QUESTION

In your dad's era, what were the main issues he and other UAW leaders wanted to address?

KILLEEN

Dignity in the workplace was the biggest thing. To bring a dignified workplace to the shop floor as a local union official is the biggest job he had. Whether it was doors on the bathroom stalls, milk machines in the plant, break areas in the plant. A lot of local issues like that were very important to the members. The biggest as far as the work goes was production standards. Line speedups. Company was always trying to speed up the line. So that was their biggest fight was line speedups. And dealing with Henry Ford. He was tough. And his managers were tough.

QUESTION

What would your dad say were his proudest moments and accomplishments?

KILLEEN

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I know when he spoke at his retirement dinner back in December of '89, he talked about the greatest honor he had was to be elected by your co-workers. And represent those co-workers and to be re-elected. He said there's no greater feeling in the world than being elected by your co-workers to represent them. And he was so proud of that and he spoke about it often.

QUESTION

Were his dealings with management sometimes pretty contentious?

KILLEEN

They could be, yes. They had local negotiations every three years. And the company would fight tooth and nail. And the union and the leadership of the local at that time would go back and forth. And it could be quite contentious. Once the contract was ratified and everything was set in stone as far as work rules, both sides adhered to the agreement. And it toned down a bit outside of negotiations.

QUESTION

By the time you and your brothers started, I'm guessing there had been some progress re: making it a more respectable workplace?

KILLEEN

They treated us pretty good. It was hard work. We earned our paycheck. And if you went by the work rules and the company went by the work rules, it was fine. I was hired in in '77 and worked there 30 years and we never had a strike. And I don't think they've had a strike since. The last strike was in '76. So, everything they did between the UAW and Ford was joint programs which really made it fluid inside the plant 'cause everything was done jointly.

QUESTION

Did you personally benefit from the training program that allowed you to go into the maintenance department?

KILLEEN

Yes. When I hired in, I went on a list for the apprenticeship program. You could sign up and you tested and you were placed on this list based on your score. '84 I was called up and had a choice of going to a number of different trades. And I went through the millwright trade apprenticeship. They paid for my schooling at St. Paul Technical College. And then they assigned you to work with different journeymen for four years. And they would bounce you around each corner of the plant so you worked in each area of the plant and you worked with all journeymen in the plant. So it was very comprehensive training.

QUESTION

You got to know the different lines and departments....

KILLEEN

Yeah. I worked every corner of that plant. And then after I became journeyman I ended up in what they called Central Maintenance which was kind of taking over the whole building windows, doors, rail heads, those types of things, away from the production part of it.

QUESTION

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What about the role of women and people of color? There weren't many back in the fifties....what kind of changes did you see during your time?

KILLEEN

Prior to '77 the women were not treated very good by even their co-workers. It was hard for 'em. Management was hard on 'em and the co-workers didn't think they belonged there. And these are stories I heard many times from the likes of my father and some of the older guys. When I hired in in '77 they hired a lot of people. And a lot of women were hired, too. Young— young women. And they were treated the way they deserved to be treated. They demanded respect and they got it. And it was the old days were gone. And I think things went pretty good for 'em.

QUESTION

What were some of the top issues that workers were looking to achieve during the time you were there?

KILLEEN

Well, cost of living allowance on the paycheck was a big thing, in national negotiations. The vacation entitlements went up a lot. When I left I had five weeks of vacation. Time standards, you know, line speedups was always, always an issue. And we had a lot of local issues like overtime equalization and things like that. And job postings and biddings and bumping procedures. Where it really was took a lot of homework to make sure everything happened correctly.

QUESTION

Talk about how the plant maintained quality standards, with workers themselves on the front line of that effort, wanting to stop the line if a car didn't meet the standards. Was there tension between quality and speed of production?

KILLEEN

No that was not resolved. We had a whole management to the values of the Q1 program is what Ford called it. And if our people noticed something that just wasn't right and a supervisor in the back end was refusing to fix something like a cross threaded bolt that would happen on every third vehicle or something—something significant, our people would raise all kinds of hell about it. And we would stop the line and try and get it resolved. And management—there was a lot of pressure on them to get them vehicles down the assembly line, so they needed a little help with it.

QUESTION

You were there when the plant won the Q1 award, weren't you? Talk about that and why it was important.....

KILLEEN

Quality is Job 1. And our members knew it was important. They didn't think it was important. They knew it was important. Because people like my father and the local union leadership would talk about quality and how that was gonna save us and because it's such a competitive atmosphere out there between plants that quality was the only thing that was gonna really keep us in the business. And when we got the Q1 award, we had the big presentation out in the pre-

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delivery area. And the entire plant came out and actually my dad said a few words. And I think Mr. Majors was the Plant Manager at the time, I’m not sure. But they all talked about how important quality was and it was really a good accolade for our—our team there at Twin City. So it was very important, we knew it was important.

QUESTION

What was the reaction in the plant during the time when the Twin Cities plant was absorbing a lot of preferentials from other Ford plants that had downsized around the country?

KILLEEN

The local union put out a person to help with housing and finding apartments and stuff, ‘cause so many came in at one time. So you know they tried and they—I think that local did a pretty good job. But what —what bothered me and bothered a lot of preferential people that came in was they weren’t treated very kindly. By the people that were already in the plant. And it was made clear that they really weren’t welcome by some people. But a minority of people can have a major impact and we all know that. And there was a lot of animosity towards the existing workers from the new workers. And as time went on, everything healed itself. Everything was fine. But it was tough for them. And they were uprooted. Most of ‘em were young. Never left their hometowns. So, it was tough.

QUESTION

I’ve met a lot of people who said there were married couples working at the plant, or fathers and sons, daughters and nephews....did anybody who didn’t have family in the plant care that people had their relatives working there too? Was that kind of unique to this plant, do you think, or common in the industry?

KILLEEN

No, I don’t think it was unique at all. It’s common in industry. I work at Honeywell now and they encourage it. They encourage you to recommend family. Because they know they’re gonna get somebody who’s got a track record providing the name for someone to get a job. But as far as Ford, I probably didn’t hear a lot about it because my father worked there. My uncle Don worked there, he was a stock department employee. My cousin Tim was a Superintendent. And I actually worked in his department as a Maintenance person. So I wasn’t directly working for him, but if he asked me to do something I did it. And my brother Dan worked there. He started the year before I did. And my younger brother John; and I actually had my wife worked there for two summers. As a replacement help for when the guys would wanna take vacation they’d bring in temporary part-timers. That’s what she did. And they would team ‘em up with another temporary part-timer and they’d do someone’s job so they could take time off. ‘Cause we were on 10-hour days every day. And 8 hours every Saturday back in those days, so time off was a premium.

QUESTION

As I hear the stories about the hardships and battles that people like your father fought to make it a better workplace, do you think some of the workers who didn’t start at the plant until, say, the 80’s—do you think they have much understanding or appreciation for how much progress was made by UAW before they got there?

KILLEEN

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I think in our plant, they did appreciate it. Because when they hired in, the local union gave ‘em a copy of the book *The Brothers Reuther*. That talked about the early organizing drives at Ford. And we had a what they called standing committees that did education. Whether it be on trade, whether it be on worker relations and we had probably the most educated workforce at Ford. And they knew their history. They knew more about trade than any other plant in the country I’ll bet. And they understood. And the old-timers that are at the picnic today, they talked about how it was. And it didn’t fall on deaf ears.

QUESTION

Speaking of trade, at the time when the Japanese imports starting to cause some heartache for the American automobile companies, what were some of the discussions about trade that you heard among your colleagues?

KILLEEN

We felt it was unfair trade because it was pretty much at the same time when the television industry left this country and Japanese manufacturers took over that industry. And we’d seen what happened there, and we were terribly afraid that it was gonna happen here with the auto industry. And there was some racism in the plant towards the Japanese manufacturers. And it was scary times, but we knew that somehow we had to build a better product. And they built a good product, believe me. They built a fine product. And it took years, but when I left, our product was better than their product.

QUESTION

Any favorite memory or story about your time at the plant?

KILLEEN

I really enjoyed my work when I worked in the Maintenance department. I enjoyed all 30 of my years there. But in Maintenance, I got all over the building, I got to know almost everybody in the building, and we had a really nice crew and it was just a pleasure to work in that department with all my co-workers. And get to know everybody in the building.

END - BOB KILLEEN INTERVIEW