

Mike Parker Knew Not to Trust the Boss

BY

STEVE EARLY

In the 1980s, corporations began promoting "quality of work life" and "lean production" schemes as a win-win for workers and bosses. But autoworker Mike Parker insisted these schemes were about better exploiting workers and undermining solidarity.

While spending thirty years as a working autoworker, Mike Parker had as much or more influence on members of other unions than most full-time labor educators.

A good example was the impact of his 1985 book, *Inside the Circle: A Union Guide to Quality of Work Life*. The book appeared at a time when employers in both union and nonunion workplaces were promoting labor-management collaboration during a decade of terrible concession bargaining, lost strikes, and decertification drives.

This olive branch from management took multiple forms — “quality circles,” “employee involvement” groups, participation teams, and joint problem-solving committees. The ensuing “quality-of-work-life (QWL) process” was widely hailed as ushering in a new era of peaceful labor relations in which traditional “adversarial bargaining” would be replaced by labor-management cooperation.

QWL was supposed to be a win-win. Employers would get the benefits of better morale and efficiency by involving their employees in discussions about how their jobs should be done. Unions would achieve tangible improvements in working conditions that would make their elected leaders more popular with the rank and file. Labor-oriented academics and union educators would get new gigs as paid consultants who would facilitate the QWL process. In the fevered imaginations of some, QWL was even viewed as a step in the direction of industrial democracy, in the form of greater workplace control over decision-making.

Top officials of unions like the United Auto Workers (UAW), United Steelworkers, and International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) were big fans of this approach, as was the AFL-CIO. Only a handful of unions — the United Electrical Workers, International Association of Machinists, and American Postal Workers — warned their members that QWL schemes could be used to speed up work, eliminate jobs, weaken worker solidarity, and erode collective bargaining.

A Unique Critique

Entering the debate — and altering it considerably — was a forty-five-year-old Detroit autoworker named Mike Parker, part of the group that founded *Labor Notes*.

Parker's critique of "employee participation" was unique because of his shop-floor perspective. When *Inside the Circle* was published, Parker was employed as a skilled electrician at Ford's River Rouge plant and a member of UAW Local 600. His study combined considerable personal anecdotal material with a survey of the mainstream academic literature on the subject and the results of his own interviews with scores of other workers involved in QWL programs in major industrial firms.

Inside the Circle acknowledged that employer invitations to participate were often quite well received, initially, because they appealed to "workers' best instincts — to do a good job, to be part of a group, to make a contribution." Historically, he noted, it was unions that had tried to "improve the quality of working life, increase workers' control over their jobs, and democratize the workplace and the entire economy." But in workplaces or industries where labor organization influence had declined, particularly on the shop floor, this left a vacuum for savvy unionized employers to exploit. "Instead of providing us with more control or influence," Parker warned, "QWL-type programs are further eroding the only real power we have by undermining our unions."

Parker's book explained the nature of this threat clearly and persuasively. Collective bargaining is easily discredited if issues that should be the subject of formal labor-management negotiations are addressed instead in QWL meetings, particularly when these do not include elected stewards or bargaining-committee members. When management showed greater willingness to make changes and improvements — however minor — through the QWL process than in union bargaining sessions or grievance settlements, union dues-payers were likely to start questioning why a contract or grievance procedure was even necessary.

Inside the Circle also made the equally important argument that the QWL process fostered a narrow "company union" mentality among trade unionists. These processes could — and did — become a ready-made transition belt for the idea that jobs can only be protected through labor cost reductions achieved via contract concessions and heightened competition with fellow union members employed in other work locations of the same employer or rival firms in the same industry.

"The main point of quality of work life," Parker wrote, "is to convince workers that their security and future are tied to the success of the company (or plant or department) instead of to their union — hardly the way to build labor solidarity throughout an entire industry."

Good Strategy Advice

Some ideologues on the labor left argued that the best response to labor-management cooperation schemes was “Just say no” — as if most unions, at the time, had the institutional capacity or leadership will to boycott QWL (which they did not). In contrast, Parker provided much useful and practical advice about how shop-floor organizers could “push quality of work-life programs to their limits” by keeping them focused on union-defined solutions to problems like mandatory overtime, job speedup, and other stressful and unsafe conditions.

That’s exactly the approach Mike took in training sessions and discussions with telephone workers in the Northeast after leadership changes in Communications Workers (CWA) District 1 made it possible to blow the whistle on a blizzard of new telecom management schemes for “Process Improvement,” “Self-Managing Teams,” and “Making Things Better” — all under the rubric of a “Vision Quest” for “Quality.”

Not surprisingly, this management charm offensive was launched after a bitter four-month anti-concessions strike at NYNEX (now Verizon) involving sixty thousand CWA and IBEW members in New York and New England. The company began herding hundreds and eventually thousands of bargaining-unit employees into two- and four-day training sessions whose message was, “We must find ways to serve our customers better, faster, and cheaper or we’re not going to be in the ball game.”

At the union’s counter-training for local officers and stewards, Parker led participants through a series of group exercises designed to draw out the upsides and downsides of “employee participation,” as management defined it. He helped CWA strike veterans and contract-campaign activists see how “management’s drive to gain more control over the work process” could lead to an “eventual breakdown of the informal standards that various work groups have set for what’s reasonable output.”

Parker also helped key leaders develop a union agenda that focused on getting the Public Service Commission in New York to impose new service quality standards on NYNEX that would create more work for techs and service reps and enable them to serve customers better. At a CWA District 1 conference, Mike debated a NYNEX local president who was a proponent of the company’s new approach and sharply disagreed with the critique of QWL contained in *Inside the Circle*.

Taken to Heart

But as the debate within the union continued, the influence of Parker’s book and *Choosing Sides: Unions and the Team Concept*, coauthored with Jane Slaughter, became more apparent. In upstate New York, the president of one small CWA local read both books and then worked with his executive board to craft a policy statement entitled “Their Quality and Ours,” which could have been lifted from either of these *Labor Notes* guides.

This statement from Local 1115 outlined the union’s own agenda for workplace improvements, training, technology, and health and safety, and providing “quality services for the customer, while insuring more and better jobs.” The local rejected “the introduction of alternative workplace structures which purport to represent workers’ interests while circumventing the union.” It warned of the threat to “worker solidarity” posed by “structures which require conformity to company-determined objectives, divide workers into competing groups internally and statewide, undermine workplace conditions, and erode the independence of the union.”

There was no footnote referencing Mike Parker, but his influence was reflected throughout this document. And it remains in my dust-covered files as just one small indication of the very big role Mike played during a critical union debate in the 1980s — and many other labor and political struggles before and since.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Steve Early was a longtime Boston-based national union representative for the Communications Workers of America. He has written four books about labor and politics, including *Save Our Unions*, and he just coauthored a new book dealing with veterans' issues.

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