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Workers bracing to say goodbye to Toyota auto plant

Most industry analysts believe it's a foregone conclusion that the Japanese automaker will shut California's last remaining auto plant. That leaves 3,600 union workers to hope against enormous odds.

By Ken Bensinger

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Reporting from Fremont, Calif.

As Mae Fisher sees it, the union has given her a good life.

She's spent more than half her 62 years as a dues-paying member of the United Auto Workers, on the line in the hulking gray auto factory here where Toyota Corp. and General Motors Co. make Tacomas, Corollas and Pontiac Vibes. She credits her union salary for her home, her security and the prospect of a comfortable retirement. Fisher can afford a vacation every year, and her household budget can easily absorb the occasional night on the town.

It's been good to her family too; three of her sisters, two nephews and a grandson all work at the factory, which is half an hour south of Oakland.

But with the auto industry struggling through its worst year in three decades, the smart money is betting that the plant here will be shut down. That would be a devastating blow to Fisher and the 3,600 other union workers she calls her sisters and brothers.

"We're used to making a certain amount of money and living a certain lifestyle, and now they

might not want to give that to us," Fisher said, peering out from big, round glasses beneath a permanent wave. "It's a shock."

On a recent Sunday morning, Fisher and hundreds of other anxious members of UAW Local 2244 shuffled into the union hall across the street from the factory to hear from their leaders. Many seemed prepared for the worst.

Inside the hall, union members stood shoulder to shoulder in jeans, Raiders jerseys and UAW caps. Men pushing 70, their thick hands crooked from years on the line, young women barely out of high school, leather-clad bikers and churchgoers dressed in Sunday finery, they all waited to hear what their leaders would say, hoping for a shred of good news.

In June, GM said it would use bankruptcy to pull out of the plant it has operated as a joint venture with Toyota since 1984, and where it makes the Pontiac Vibe.

That left the Japanese automaker, which still makes Corolla sedans and Tacoma pickups here, to ponder the future of the plant, New United Motor Manufacturing Inc., or Nummi for short.

On this hot August morning, there was one question on everyone's mind: Would Toyota pull the plug too?

With tension heavy in the crowded hall, Local 2244 President Sergio Santos spoke into the microphone, reminding his members that their current contract would soon expire and that he was doing all he could to hammer out a new one to save their jobs.

"Nothing has been decided yet," said Santos, exhausted after countless hours at the negotiating table with factory management. Talks aside, he urged everyone to write to their representatives in Washington and Sacramento on behalf of the factory. "We need all the help we can get," he said.

A way of life

Most auto industry analysts believe it's a foregone conclusion that Toyota will pull out of Fremont, given the auto industry's deep woes. On Saturday a Japanese newspaper citing unnamed sources said that Toyota was considering ending production next year. If so, it would spell the end for California's last remaining auto plant.

The factory, opened as an experiment to implement Japanese manufacturing techniques with American workers, was the first and only one of its kind. Using mostly former GM employees, the factory seemed, for some time, a model for the future of American carmaking.

Its successes emboldened Toyota to open more factories in the U.S. But unlike Nummi, they were not unionized. Toyota has worked hard to keep the UAW out of those plants, where it pays lower wages, doesn't offer a pension and provides benefits that are decidedly less generous.

If Toyota decides to shutter the Bay Area plant, it not only would mean more painful layoffs in the region but also would reflect the end of a way of life, a factory union life in which people with a high school education who are willing to tough it out in the repetitive, grinding jobs on a factory floor could earn as much as \$29 an hour and climb into the middle class without ever having to put on a necktie.

"This is about the decline of good manufacturing jobs in America," said Gary Chaison, professor of industrial relations at Clark University in Worcester, Mass. "These people thought that the plant would always be there and their children would work there. They had it made and they can't make it anymore."

The autoworkers drinking beers and shooting pool at Kirby's, the union hangout just up the road from the plant, know that Toyota's decision will be guided by arcane factors such as foreign exchange rates, tax incentives and supply lines.

But to the men at the bar, there's a feeling that the whole process is a referendum on the union and, by extension, their jobs.

"People have died for what we have," said Robert Moreno, downing the last dregs of his beer as an Oakland A's game flickered on a TV over the bar.

A solidly built, goateed 47-year-old with sole custody of his three grandchildren, Moreno works in door assembly at the plant. He grew up in the East Bay and learned early that union jobs paid the best, had the good benefits and offered the greatest job security.

After being laid off from the factory job he got out of high school, he landed a coveted spot in the auto factory. Two decades on the line have brought him two herniated discs, a bad shoulder and a hurt elbow -- but also a nice home 50 miles northeast of here. He always assumed he'd never have to find another job.

"I never learned computers," Moreno said. "In this economy, there's not too many jobs where you stay 30 years and get your pension."

Just down the bar, Clarence Simpson sips a cocktail. He recalls coming to California from his native North Carolina in 1985 to work at the factory, tired of working in the tobacco business. Good with words and quick on his feet, he was selected by the UAW to travel to Kentucky two years ago in a bid to organize Toyota's huge plant there. It was a failure; the Fremont plant remains Toyota's only union factory in North America.

"Toyota spent so much to keep us out," said Simpson, who hung up the bump cap and retired in July and now looks forward to playing more golf at the Tracy Golf and Country Club, where he's a member. "We just didn't have the money."

Simpson, like others, believes the union's failure to make inroads at any of the plants built by

Toyota, Honda Motor Co. and other foreign automakers in the U.S. is a symptom of the UAW's bigger woes.

Once a behemoth with more than 1.5 million members, the Detroit-based union shrank to 431,000 members last year. With Ford Motor Co., GM and Chrysler slated to close more than a dozen factories in the next two years, the UAW's relevance seems to be shrinking with each passing day.

To union loyalists, the UAW's diminishing clout is in great part a casualty of decades of mismanagement by U.S. carmakers that have closed plants and moved manufacturing overseas to keep up with foreign competitors.

For others, however, the feelings are more ambivalent.

Ruben Barrios stepped out of the factory into its sprawling parking lot as the first shift ended at 2:30 p.m. on a recent Monday, blinking in the hot sun. After 15 years in the body shop at Fremont, he's built up a catalog of gripes with his representation on the floor.

Strict union rules mean that everyone gets paid the same once they've logged a few years on the job, whether they're on their feet, groaning on chassis assembly for eight hours a day or sitting in a chair, checking parts inventory. Seniority, rather than skill, is what matters most.

Barrios worries that the concessions on pay and benefits that the UAW has given in recent years aren't enough.

"Something is going to have to give," said Barrios, who counts himself among a group of factory workers who refuse to attend union meetings and who pay their roughly \$60 a month in dues only because they have to. Tired from the eight-hour shift on the hot factory floor, which isn't air conditioned, he hung his head and scowled. "What's best for me is not getting involved."

'It's very scary'

Leticia Quesada has been down this road before.

She started working on cars right out of high school, landing a job at GM's plant in Fremont. In 1982, the factory, which had among the worst records for quality and relations between union and management of any GM facility, was closed.

"There was a lot of divorce, people losing houses, even a couple of suicides," Quesada recalled. "It's very scary when you've had that security blanket for so long to have it pulled from you."

With few other options, she accepted an offer to move to Kansas to work in a GM factory there, moving away from family and friends to a place where the winters were bitter cold and

Latino faces were rare.

Lonely, she quit in less than a year and came back to California to work in a nonunion cannery, a grueling job with bad pay and what she thought were dangerous work conditions.

Then in 1984, GM and Toyota agreed to jointly reopen the factory that GM had closed just two years before. Quesada rushed to apply, landing a coveted spot in quality control.

To her, having a union job is everything. "Some people think we'd be fine without a union," said Quesada, who has five relatives working at the plant, including her husband and son. "They never worked in a plant without one."

On a Monday afternoon, Quesada drops by the union hall and chats with old friends. One of them is Maria Trevino, who sits in a folding chair marked "UAW 1364" -- the extinct local from the former GM plant -- while she pores over lists of candidates for an upcoming union election.

Trevino worked at the old GM factory too, hired in 1977, when a woman couldn't walk across the floor without hearing catcalls and whistles.

When the plant closed, she considered moving to Kansas but ended up staying in the Bay Area, toughing it out in odd jobs until the plant reopened. Today, Trevino works in paint, and despite the intense heat in the shop, enjoys the work.

Despite all that being in the union has afforded her and her family, not one of her three children sought work in the factory. One is in music and the other two manage retail stores where "they get paid more than me," Trevino said. "They didn't want any part of the factory."

Trevino credits the union for giving her the means to afford some of the good things in life, like her brand-new Chevy Tahoe. Without a union job, she said, "how could I ever afford to make the \$600-a-month payment on my truck?"

Sadly, Trevino and other old-timers concede, such feelings for the UAW just don't seem to run as deep or as strong as they once did.

At any given time on EBay, there are a handful of UAW rings for sale, given to commemorate 25 years of service to the American automobile industry, a token to the sweat and the promise and all those things that are going away.

Bidding starts at a penny.

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