

Dignity and Exploitation: Julia Reichert and Steven Bognar's American Factory

Reviewed by Rachel Horowitz

American Factory is a nuanced, moving, and thought-provoking account of Fuyao, a Chinese auto glass company, that reopens a shuttered General Motors (GM) factory in Dayton, Ohio. Directed by filmmakers Julia Reichert and Steven Bognar and produced by the Obamas, the documentary traces the loss of 10,000 local United Automobile Workers (UAW) jobs -- from the 2008 closing of the GM factory -- to the initial optimism about Fuyao in 2016, to the American workers' eventual misgivings with the company and the culminating union drive. The documentary is beautifully shot with scenes of glass production and life in the factory interspersed with intimate interviews with both the American and Chinese workers and management. Guided by these personal stories and perspectives, Reichert and Bognar create an impressively full picture through the incredible access they have. Their effort to tell a complicated story forces their audience to consider a non-didactic and thoughtful situation that raises many difficult questions about the future of American industrialism, the fate of American workers, Chinese labor standards, and issues of global class struggle.

As the film begins with the opening of Fuyao, optimism abounds. The American workers are thrilled to return to work, since many of them faced financial hardships and unemployment exacerbated by the Great Recession. The managers, both Chinese and American, are enthusiastic about the opening of Fuyao America, and the Chinese workers, the group least heard from, seem to be interested in and occasionally enthusiastic about their time in America. However, the American workers soon grow uneasy with the working conditions and expectations of Fuyao and the Chinese standard of industrial work. Faced with workplace injuries, a low paycheck (\$12.84 per hour, down from about \$29 at unionized GM), and increased pressure to work overtime, the American workers begin to recognize that changes in labor standards have greatly shifted since their time at GM. Some Chinese workers and supervisors perceive American labor standards, such as having weekends off,

as a form of “laziness” or entitlement. In turn, U.S. workers resent their poor treatment in the factory. Despite these clashes, *American Factory* isn’t necessarily a film about the tension between the American and Chinese workers, many of whom form bonds while working on the factory floor. Rather, it interrogates the disparity in labor standards between America and China and the impact of increasing globalization on workers.

A turning point in the film comes when a delegation of American supervisors goes to China to visit the Fuyao factory and headquarters there. Alongside the supervisors, the viewer takes in the conditions in the factory, an environment where the Chinese workers rarely see their children (sometimes only once a year), where some workers pick through glass shards without protective gloves, and where they are given numbers in their production groups as they count off in a militaristic line. These shots from the factory transition into a kind of corporate celebration/spectacle, in which the workers put on a highly choreographed pageant and swear loyalty to Fuyao as they sing its anthem and perform musical numbers about its greatness. Through these scenes of Fuyao in China, Reichert and Bogner establish the demanding expectations of work that Fuyao’s CEO, Cao Dewang, repeatedly complains the American workers are lacking, and implicitly contrast it with an American’s idea of a typical workplace.

For many of the American workers, who serve as the major threads of the story, including Bobby (a furnace off-loader), Jill (a forklift operator), Shawnea (a glass inspector), and Rob (a furnace supervisor), these expectations begin to feel demeaning and exploitative. As the UAW begins organizing Fuyao, the harshness of Fuyao’s already blatant anti-union measures mount. After a series of mandatory meetings, in which anti-union consultants intimidate the workers, and by the firings of union supporters, the union drive fails and a sense of futility creeps in as it becomes clear that the hope of achieving a GM-like and union-protected workplace might now become a relic of the past.

Throughout the film, Reichert and Bogner place a clear emphasis on the dignity of work. Many of the workers take incredible pride in the auto glass process. Like Wong, a Chinese furnace engineer, whose skillful understanding allows him to teach the American workers the furnace’s technical intricacies. Or Bobby, who on returning to work in the factory prides himself on his ability to navigate through the numbered post locations, which often confuse others. Many people repeat throughout the film that they are good workers. Therefore,

when the documentary becomes a tale of exploitation, many of the American workers are shocked. For the older workers especially, who knew a working to middle class life from industrial work at GM, the transition to a Chinese standard of industrialism is a step down, not only due to its lower material and safety standards, but because without a sense of Fuyao's respect for them as workers, the American workers begin to realize that they are open to new forms of exploitation. Taking these changes into account, Reichert and Bognar succeed in crafting a story that is powerful in how deeply unsettling it is to see American workers grapple with the uncertain future and falling status of American industrial work in an increasingly global economy.

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