Early Warning and Plant Closings in Chicago in the 1980s

Sara O'Neill-Kohl and Pierre Clavel

During the 1970s and 1980s, plant shutdowns across the nation provoked a grassroots response, spear-headed by community and labor groups. This paper explores the history of one such response in Chicago: early warning systems, which were independent research networks that combined public and private information with worker knowledge in order to provide advance notice of a possible closing. Using primary sources, interviews with activists, and economic and political analysis of the time, the paper looks at the relationship between participating groups as well as the catalytic role played by the progressive Harold Washington mayoral administration. The local capacity generated during this time is viewed in the context of lessons for the current period of economic restructuring.

Introduction

One message from the 2008 financial crisis has been a critique of the unfettered market, which was amplified as the outgoing Bush administration secured legislation for bailouts of financial firms and followed with temporary loans to support the automobile industry. Democrats responded with demands for a more consumer-oriented policy: support for mortgage holders and for a fiscal stimulus that would reach the unemployed.

The new president took the critique a step further. Barack Obama won the election with proposals to stimulate specific sectors: wind and solar energy, hybrid and electric-powered vehicles, and various infrastructure measures. Once in office, he moved to wrap these initiatives into the "stimulus package" enacted in February, and followed with additional proposals to regulate major finance industry units and subsidize particular manufacturing sectors. The stimulus promised to save or create 3.5 million jobs in 2009 and 2010, and promoted the production of non-petroleum energy and transportation.

Thus a likely consequence of the financial crisis was at least a partial policy shift away from the forty-year service-economy trend (led by the finance sectors), back toward some degree of manufacturing. "Keynesian" ideas came back, and with them returned

talk of "industrial policy"—always implicit in any government support for private firms and sectors. Such policies would perhaps be augmented by additional federal government support for manufacturing and other non-service sectors.

Strong federal support for these sectors would be welcome during this time of growing economic insecurity. But if we look back to the late 1970s and early 1980s—a previous period of economic restructuring—there is evidence for the importance of local scale efforts, particularly those embodied in the cities. Specifically, we could learn from the local level response to manufacturing job loss. This history helps reveal the critical role municipal governments, activists, and community members can play in addressing today's related challenge of job loss.

The federal policy environment of the 1980s differed from that of today, partially because the shock

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of plant closings was still recent and ongoing. The shock has faded, but it was well documented at the time (e.g. Bensman & Lynch, 1987). Less well known were the positive responses and hopes for recovery the crisis engendered. One manifestation of this was a national, if brief, call for "industrial policy" that would save the nation's manufacturing base. Economists Barry Bluestone and Bennett Harrison (1982) were among the leaders analyzing the causes of industrial decline and calling for a national industrial policy to stem the job and productivity losses, but *Business Week* (June 3 1980) championed the idea as well.

On the local and regional scales, municipal governments and community labor coalitions were the primary actors. On the government side, there was a shift in local economic development practices from "smokestack chasing" to growing small businesses locally, incorporating new uses of eminent domain and zoning, and developing industry task forces. The community and labor reaction to plant closings was much more diverse, and in many places displayed characteristics of a social movement. It featured initiatives such as employee buyouts, experiments in worker management, support organizations that provided research and technical advice, and fights to

pass laws requiring advance notice of closings. Among these responses, early warning systems may have been the most broadly participatory.

Plant Closings and Early Warning: Chicago

While the battle to pass federal plant closing legislation raged throughout the worst years of industrial job loss, community and labor groups across the country immediately recognized the necessity of providing early warning of plant closures. Early warning networks gathered two forms of knowledge: information from workers about what was going on inside a plant, and public domain research. This information was used to monitor a plant for signs of a potential closure (LeRoy, Swinney & Charpentier, 1986). Early warning of the intent to shut down or move a plant was crucial in order to either prevent the closure or secure a better deal for the workers and surrounding community.

Bluestone and Harrison's 1982 book *The Deindustrialization of America*, while arguing for a national government response to deindustrialization, also accords great import to local early warning systems. While outlining the core tenets of a proposed program of "democratic socialist reindustrialization," they acknowledge that the struggle ahead will be long.



The Steel Task Force presents its findings in a press conference, December 10, 1986. Mayor Harold Washington is on the far right, and Rob Mier, Commissioner of the Department of Economic Development, stands just behind the podium to the left of the presenter. *Photo courtesy of the Harold Washington Archives and Collections, Chicago Public Library.*

However, there is certainty about where to begin:

...in the unions, in the non-unionized workplaces, and in the labor-community-church coalitions that have sprung up in areas such as Ohio, Connecticut, California, RI. People need to systematically monitor their companies' investment and disinvestment activities, beginning with the development of shopfloor early warning systems (263).

There were examples of local early warning networks in several locations, but our analysis begins with a review of the Chicago case. Chicago of the 1980s, similar to other rust belt cities of its time, was undergoing a painful transformation of its economic base. The city lost 13,000 jobs in the steel industry and the manufacturing sector declined 27% overall between 1977 and 1982 (Giloth & Moe, 1999).

Raymond Gutierrez was one of the 13,000 workers who lost their jobs during this time. The *Chicago Tribune* reported:

Gutierrez and his co-workers were pushed out of the mainstream economy on March 28, 1980, the same day they were locked out of Wisconsin Steel. "They put us out the way you put a stray dog onto the street," he said. "They didn't say nothing. When our shift was over, they just locked the doors behind us. It wasn't until the next day that we found out the mill was shut down, maybe for good. It took a year before they even let us back in to clean out our lockers.

Gutierrez's story was not atypical. At the time there was no legal obligation for companies to give their workers notice of an imminent closure. In fact, companies were loath to do so. Plans to close or move a factory were often kept secret as long as possible, so as to avoid work slowdowns or other labor unrest.

In response to the plant shutdown, workers in Chicago and elsewhere did not remain passive victims. Instead, workers and community members mobilized. In Chicago, early warning work was a key part of the mobilization against plant closures.

The two primary organizations instrumental in developing Chicago's early warning network during the early 1980s were the Midwest Center for Labor Research (MCLR) and the University of Illinois' Center for Urban Economic Development (CUED). In addition, the city government played a catalytic role, reflecting the establishment of a community development orientation in the Department of Economic Development (DED) under the new mayor, Harold Washington.

MCLR was founded by Dan Swinney in 1982.

The organization was inspired by Swinney's personal experience of job loss. From 1975, Swinney worked as a lathe operator at Taylor Forge. But when Gulf and Western purchased Taylor Forge, they implemented a destructive business strategy that would become increasingly common during the 1980s. Gulf and Western drained the value from the company over a period of years, with the hope of investing the capital in other sectors to make a quick profit. By 1983, Taylor Forge had been shut down.

Swinney began MCLR as an organization designed to provide research and technical aid to workers, labor unions, progressive local government and business, and community activists engaged in attempts to stem manufacturing job loss. Swinney's analysis of the Chicago manufacturing economy directly challenged the dominant narrative of the time period. He found that the majority of manufacturing companies in Chicago weren't large, publicly traded companies, struggling in the face of global competition; rather, they were small, often privately held companies facing the types of problems that could be solved.

Swinney estimated that, with enough notice, 75 percent of the plants that were shut down in the 1980s could have been saved (Swinney, 1998). This finding reinforced the defining idea behind the early warning movement in general, which held that the job and productivity losses of the 1980s were not inevitable. Organizers of early warning networks maintained that there were alternatives to the majority of plant shutdowns, and with enough time or resources solutions could be developed.

The other center involved in the Chicago early warning experiment was CUED, where David Ranney was a key intellectual and activist. Ranney, like Swinney, also had experience working in factories and labor organizing. During the 1970s Ranney left his teaching at University of Wisconsin to work in Chicago factories, where he organized for better pay and working conditions. Ranney worked with steel workers on the South Side of Chicago, where he saw firsthand the effects of deindustrialization on communities.

In 1983 Ranney joined CUED to work with Rob Mier in order to study alternatives to deindustrialization. Throughout the 1980s, Ranney continued to devote his academic work to questions of job loss and economic restructuring in Chicago and beyond. In addition, Ranney continued to work with the Wisconsin Steelworkers Save Our Jobs Committee and other worker groups, seeking to increase understanding of broader economic forces (Ranney, 2003).

Starting in 1983, CUED and MCLR were funded by the Chicago DED to develop a cohesive early warning system on the West Side of Chicago. Together the two groups founded the West Side Jobs Network, a community labor coalition designed to gather

information on plants and organize community and worker support in order to implement early warning. As a result of their early warning work, the West Side Jobs Network engaged in several fights over key plant closings (Giloth & Rosenblum, 1971). The symbiotic relationship between Washington's progressive DED and community activists was complicated, but ultimately valuable. The fact that tension between the city and community groups did exist was clear. Nonetheless, Ranney later reflected that while an early warning network is not dependent on local government for "formation or continuation," it probably cannot operate well without local government support (Wiewel & Ranney, 1985).

Early Warning and the U.S. Economy

Chicago was an important site for organizing antiplant-closing campaigns and early warning activities, but it was one of many. Early warning took hold across the country during the early 1970s and through the 1980s as a practical method of addressing plant closings. By the 1980s a movement was building in opposition to the waste of so many previously productive factories and communities. But early warning's appeal was more than practical; it also represented an alternative vision for the nation's economy.

The scholars and activists who wrote about early warning argued that it was more than just a response to the immediate event of a plant closing. Rather, it represented a broader argument about how the economy should and could work. Swinney and others maintained that by the 1970s, labor had erroneously ceded too much power to business regarding decisions about our nation's productive capacity.

These arguments at the community level found reinforcement in academic work, most prominently from Bluestone and Harrison, whose aforementioned landmark book on deindustrialization established that falling profits from international competition, as well as emerging technologies that afforded greater capital mobility, provided a context for plant closings. By the 1980s manufacturing plants were regularly bought by conglomerates to be used as collateral to access capital for investments in other sectors, where large profits might be made quickly. Increasingly, it seemed that factory owners were not acting as benevolent stewards of the productivity and potential that their factories and workers represented. According to Bluestone and Harrison,

One possible reaction to [falling profits] would have been to try to meet the new competition in the old-fashioned way—an active search for new markets, increased research and development, and investments in more efficient technology. Some American

firms took this route, but many more decided instead to abandon the competition altogether (as in electronics), to reduce their investments (as in steel), or to focus all their energies on reducing labor costs and circumventing public sector taxes and regulations. In a desperate attempt to restore, or preserve, the rates of profit to which they had become accustomed in the halcyon days of the 1950s and 1960s, American corporate managers in the 1970s went to extraordinary lengths to shift capital as rapidly as possible, from one activity, one region, and one nation to another. In the process, the industrial base of the American economy began to come apart at the seams.

Coalition Work

Organizers concluded that the economy needed a much broader set of people, particularly workers, to have decision-making roles. Early warning activists believed that in order to get more power, they needed to build broad-based coalitions with diverse groups that would be affected by the closing: labor, community-based organizations, local politicians, and city economic development representatives. At times, coalition work extended into the business realm. Many early warning groups drew distinctions between good and bad business practices, and in some cases they worked successfully with plant owners, either to avert a closing or to arrange a solution such as an employee buyout.

Worker Participation

Worker participation was the foundation of community and labor-led early warning systems, and distinguished them from advance notice plant closing legislation. While the organizations that built Chicago's early warning system benefited from support from Mayor Washington's administration, government-only early warning systems were limited. Early warning community leaders agreed that there was a core element of these systems that had to come from below (Nissen, 1991, 1995; Wiewel & Ranney, 1985; and Giloth & Rosenblum, 1987). Employee knowledge was essential for understanding the nuances of the workplace and the work itself.

In addition to practical concerns about gaining access to insider knowledge, early warning leaders expressed a normative commitment to building early warning networks around workers. Lynn Feekin, Director of the Calumet Project for Industrial Jobs in Northwest Indiana in the 1980s, believes that a core idea behind early warning was to instill a sense of a worker's right to participate in decisions about the economy. Part of the Calumet Project's early warning training included asking workers to envision the future

of their region's economy. Asking questions about who makes the decisions about a region's economy, and who bears the consequences, helped to reveal structural forms of injustice.

Dissemination

The ideas behind early warning, and the diversity of local groups involved in fighting plant closings, were well represented in the stream of publications issued on the topic between 1981 and 1994. The publications were authored by university study groups, community-based organizations, progressive research and technical organizations, and labor unions. Several of the publications were linked to conferences or other events that had drawn activists together under the umbrella of broader progressive agendas, such as the Conference on Alternative State and Local Policies.

Many of the publications included checklists designed to help workers spot indicators that a plant might be in danger of closing. They often included how-to sections, with aids such as sample legislation, drafts of letters to the editor, and instructions on how to locate public records, as well as the names of individuals and organizations to contact for further resources. These tools conveyed the idea of working documents, intended for the hands of those who wanted to take action.

The Chicago-based publications of the time period were representative. The MCLR's 1986 pamphlet, "Early Warning Manual: Against Plant Closing," is a "how-to" manual addressed to unions, workers, community-based organizations and economic development officials. It defines the early warning system as a labor and community-based network of information sharing and research, combining information from the shop floor with every possible public source in order to anticipate a company's shutdown or disinvestment plans while there is still time to intervene. The authors pay special attention to both the difficulty and potential rewards of coalition work, emphasizing union participation as an essential element of gaining institutional knowledge. The manual goes step by step through early warning indicators, includes case studies, gives instructions for forming an early warning network, and provides methods for fighting the closing.

David Ranney's 1988 article "Manufacturing Job Loss and Early Warning Indicators" reviews the literature on plant closings to identify 16 local management practices that can be used as early warning indicators by those concerned with industrial retention. Ranney emphasizes the need to understand the broader context of the plant and its location, ownership structure, and industry in order to make sense of the indicator.



Rob Mier, Commissioner of the Department of Economic Development, and Mayor Harold Washington at a January 18, 1985 Economic Development Press Conference. Photo courtesy of the Harold Washington Archives and Collections, Chicago Public Library.

If one of the early warning indicators regarding local management practice is present, particularly in combination with conglomerate ownership or a local ownership succession problem, then further research is advised. Ranney also provides a list of reasons why management would close a plant, which could assist workers in understanding the larger economic landscape. Ranney stresses the importance of accessing worker knowledge, as local management practices may not be visible otherwise.

Common Principles

The core ideas behind early warning were shared throughout the country. In 1985, when Swinney founded the Federation of Industrial Retention and Renewal (FIRR), Chicago became a base for those involved in early warning efforts to meet and communicate ideas and strategies. At its peak, FIRR had 40 member organizations. While FIRR's membership probably represented the nucleus of early warning work, additional groups around the country used a parallel approach.

In addition to a national network, there were regional groups that met to share information and resources. These included the California Coalition against Plant Closures, which drew together groups across the West Coast, and regional meetings organized by MCLR Research that enjoyed participation throughout the Rust Belt. Organizers described these coalitions as presenting crucial opportunities to share strategies, stories, and resources. After attending regional and national meetings, leaders would return to their base organizations with a renewed sense of solidarity.

Along with discussing ideas about how and why early warning work should be done, many organizations across the country shared an intellectual foundation. Interviews with organizational leaders, as well as the publications of the period, reveal the influence of writings such as Bluestone and Harrison's insights on deindustrialization and Luria and Russell's 1981 book *Rational Reindustrialization*.

Effects of Early Warning

Early warning systems produced both concrete and intangible effects. Lynn Feekin wrote that early warning as implemented in Indiana had concrete success in preventing plant closures and saving jobs. Other positive effects included clean-ups of contaminated sites, commitments of more training dollars, and services for displaced workers, all of which came out of the community pressure that early warning created. Another immediate effect of early warning was that by calling attention to the crisis of plant closings and the resulting devastation of communities, early warning and the resulting anti-plant-closing campaigns set the

stage for attempts to pass local and national legislation designed to protect workers. Most prominently, the 1988 federal "Worker Adjustment Retraining and Notification" (WARN) law required that any plant with 100 or more employees give a 60-day notice of a scheduled closing.

Transformative Effects on Participants

But other effects, equally important, were less tangible. Many organizers involved in early warning evaluated their success broadly, not only in terms of plants saved. Early warning had significant potential for transformative effects on participants. While early warning work did not directly address structural issues, it did provide an entry point for workers to begin exploring questions of economic justice.

Swinney describes the potential of early warning work as a process of transforming "civic consciousness." A worker can go through his or her entire career and never be asked his or her opinion regarding the management of the company. However, when a worker is consulted, be it through the vehicle of early warning or not, it can be a powerful experience and confirm that his or her knowledge on the topic is essential.

Early warning work required training sessions and meetings, where workers engaged with each other and developed stronger community links. Through interactions with both peers and formal educators, workers often developed a richer understanding of how the economy worked and why a profitable plant might be shut down. This knowledge could help them to channel the anger and despair of job loss.

Several groups developed international links and solidarity with foreign workers. This was particularly important as a method for combatting potential xenophobia among U.S. manufacturing workers. Ellen Teninty, Director of the Plant Closures Project in Oakland, described a regional conference in Los Angeles in 1982 that drew diverse groups together:

We rented ourselves a bus, and planned a conference—we joined the LA coalition with the Bay Area Coalition, and the Northern California, the Eureka people, and the Modesto-Salinas people. We all went to Los Angeles. We had a two-day conference. One thing that was really fabulous about it was that we all had simultaneous translating headsets. That really blew everyone away! ... And that experience—like a little UN or something! ...And people were trying to understand the economic basis of the crisis. This was the beginning, I mean people were saying, our plant was making money, why did it need to close? We don't understand that... It was really the beginning of this whole coalition's

education about globalization, and how you can't just think it's the Japanese, because of the US investment that's there and how production is being chopped up and divided out, and who gets what, and there's reasons for that, that have to do with controlling labor costs.

By engaging in this type of worker education, early warning groups sought to shift the manner in which the crisis of deindustrialization was understood, thereby dispelling false blame from foreign workers.

Effects on Local Development Practice

In Chicago, early warning efforts had a strong effect on local economic development policy under Mayor Washington's administration. As noted above, the city's DED provided support to MCLR and CUED in the city's West Side beginning in 1983; but the interactions between organizers, community members, labor, and factory owners further energized city officials on behalf of industrial retention. of Robert Mier's first actions as DED Commissioner was a lawsuit designed to support the effort to save the Playskool facility. The campaign to save Playskool had originated in the West Side Jobs Network's early warning work. Parallel efforts included the creation of task forces aimed at retaining jobs and firms in printing, apparel, and steel; and the successful campaign led by community activist Donna Ducharme to create planned manufacturing districts protecting small manufacturers from development pressures in prime real estate. Mier (and others) cited the Playskool campaign—and the Chicago early warning network—as the key to the city's efforts on other fronts to support its manufacturing jobs base (1993).

In addition to encouraging an official city response, early warning work led many organizations and individuals to become involved in developing standards for local economic development practices, in particular the use of public money. For example, Feekin described the Calumet Project's evolution toward advocacy for worker-friendly economic development policies as a realization that behind much of the early warning work

...was the fact that a lot of companies were using public dollars and were threatening either closure or moving—and they would get the public dollars and it wasn't just a ripoff where they were exploiting the workers and the community but now (in addition) the public dollars were being used and stolen. So we tried to think how we could get a handle on it.

While the objectives and outcomes were not always

parallel to, or derivative of, the history of early warning work, many figures in what became a campaign for increased corporate and government responsibility reveal interesting linkages with the early warning movement.

Conclusion

Our conclusions are twofold. First, while the local response to industrial decline was ultimately limited by the lack of a cohesive national agenda, such a national agenda would not have been a substitute for local action. Both the national and local levels were important.

Second, regarding the legacy of local institutions and policy innovations developed during this time, we believe that they remain a powerful resource, and one that can be built upon to address contemporary challenges. The local capacity developed in response to the manufacturing job loss of the 1980s still exists.

The two organizations discussed in the Chicago case—CUED and MCLR—are still working to make Chicago's economy stronger and more just. MCLR has further evolved, creating the Chicago Manufacturing Renaissance Council, a coalitional organization with the mission of strengthening Chicago's manufacturing sector, as well as Austin Polytechnical Academy, a public high school in the Austin neighborhood that prepares students for four-year colleges and careers in high-technology industry and entrepreneurship.

Other organizations across the country are working from a foundation of local innovation, activism and research reminiscent of early warning. The Steel Valley Authority, a regional development authority focused on revitalizing the Monongahela Valley, depends on its Strategic Early Warning Network (SEWN) as a major component of its ongoing fight to save jobs. The Ohio Employee Ownership Center at Kent State University (OEOC) provides outreach and technical assistance for workers and business owners interested in employee ownership, as well as general support for employeeowned businesses. The Center on Wisconsin Strategy (COWS) is a policy center that focuses on "highroad" economic development, and it has founded other innovative ventures in workforce development, such as the Wisconsin Regional Training Partnership (WRTP). The COWS also co-founded the Apollo Alliance, a partnership between labor and environmentalists working for clean energy and good jobs across the nation. A further example is Good Jobs First, a national policy research center that focuses on keeping the development practices of government and corporations accountable, as well as on "smart growth for working families."

These worker-oriented and coalition-based approaches to local economic development represent an important piece of the national memory. As the federal government crafts a response to today's epidemic job loss, ideally organizations like the ones listed will have

an important role to play in the recovery. Their workercentered approach can help keep government spending and corporate actions accountable, and may lead to a more participatory economic recovery process and more equitable outcome.

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