Fourth District Auto Production

By July 24, 1998, the United Auto Workers’ strike had affected nearly 200,000 employees at General Motors’ North American Operations and Delphi Automotive Systems facilities; 16.4% of them were at plants in the Fourth Federal Reserve District.

Much of U.S. auto production is located along the Interstate 75 corridor, which runs from Detroit through Ohio, Kentucky, Tennessee, and Georgia. Most of the nation’s final assembly plants are in Michigan and Ohio, but parts producers are spread out along this corridor, so labor disputes like the recent GM–UAW work stoppage will affect all these areas.

Motor vehicle production’s share of U.S. employment is decreasing; even so, the industry has been experiencing strong employment growth (4.9% annually) since 1990. That year, only 726,200 workers were employed in the motor vehicle and equipment industry—the sixth-lowest level since the late 1950s. In the 1990s, foreign auto makers expanded their U.S. production, and domestic companies began to recover some of their market share. After seven years of upward movement, automotive employment reached a near-record average of 1 million workers for the (continued on next page)
first half of 1998, only slightly below the 1979 peak of 1.04 million.

Although real earnings in manufacturing and total nonfarm employment have dropped over the past 20 years, they have remained relatively high in the motor vehicle and transportation equipment industries. In fact, average weekly earnings of workers in the motor vehicles and equipment sector have exceeded those in transportation equipment as a whole, which also encompasses aircraft production and shipbuilding.

The Fourth District’s employment in the transportation equipment industry is concentrated along its western border. Final assembly plants are found in only 10 of the District’s counties, but parts suppliers are widespread and account for a large share of its auto industry employment.

Ohio leads the District in the share of employment devoted to producing transportation equipment; indeed, it exceeds the national average. However, like the U.S., Ohio’s employment in the industry has declined as a share of total nonfarm employment. The pattern is similar in Michigan, where transportation equipment accounted for 17.5% of total employment in 1956, but only 6.5% by 1997. States that have been able to buck this trend, like Kentucky and Tennessee, have benefited from the automotive industry’s move southward. However, they have also become more vulnerable to labor disputes like the recent GM-UAW work stoppage.