

*Employment of the Weak:  
The Role of a Multinational Factory  
in the Life Trajectory of Early School  
Leavers in Sāmoa*

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On 27 October 2016, 740 Samoan workers, mainly young women and men from low-income families, were told that their jobs would end the following year. They assembled to hear more about the proposed closure of Yazaki Electrical Distribution System Sāmoa (YES), the Japanese-owned car parts factory where they worked. The meeting took place at the multipurpose assembly area in the 6.2-acre factory building located in the Vaitele Industrial Complex near Sāmoa's capital, Apia. YES management, with a representative from the headquarters of Yazaki Corporation in Japan, announced that the company would cease its twenty-six years of operations in 2017, with severance packages ready for each employee. The assembled workers listened intently to the announcement and then bravely sang the patriotic song "Lo Ta Nu'u (My Dear Country)" to close the meeting:

My dear country where I was born  
You are the best in the ocean  
You have received blessings from above; my heritage  
Samoans wake up  
Give thanks to Whom has given this to us  
Our heritage in the ocean<sup>1</sup>

Many workers were relieved, however, to hear that the factory would not close immediately and that they could keep their jobs to support their families for at least another few months. Some long-serving workers appeared bitterly disappointed that they would lose the company and workmates with whom they had established long-lasting attachments.

The news of YES's closure shocked people in Sāmoa, a small island developing state with a high underemployment rate and a limited number of jobs available, especially for young early school leavers. Local news media addressed some of the expected impacts the closure of YES would have on Sāmoa's economy and employment opportunities, with headlines like "Economy to Take a Hit as Yazaki Announces Closure" and "Yazaki to Shut, More than 700 to Be Jobless" (Tupufia-Ah Tong 2016a, 2016b). Despite the wishes of their employees and the Samoan government, YES did in fact cease operations on 25 August 2017 and left Sāmoa. This closure was a direct impact of the Australian government's decision to stop subsidizing the car manufacturing industry, which led to the closure of the Toyota Australia assembly plant in Melbourne, YES's sole client since 2007, on 3 October 2017. The closures in Australia and Sāmoa confirmed the tendency of capitalist enterprises to seek the lowest-input cost infrastructure for their activities. The closure of YES in Sāmoa also illustrated how multinational companies regard workers in developing countries as "disposable commodities" (Braddock 2016). From such a structuralist view, low-paid factory workers are typically seen as powerless victims of neoliberalism, which undermines their working conditions and promotes inequality between core and peripheral economies. However, this study offers another perspective: it explores the meaning of both YES employment and the company's closure from the point of view of YES's core employees, the young shop-floor operators.

During its twenty-six years of operations, YES, an export-oriented, labor-intensive manufacturing plant, employed over sixty thousand local workers. Over time, the demographics of the YES workforce changed, but young early school leavers appear to have always dominated the position of shop-floor operator. They came to YES because, unlike other jobs, the operator position did not require specific qualifications or previous work experience. This begs the question: Did the closure of YES impact young workers in ways other than economically?

This study illustrates the everyday activities of shop-floor operators at YES and how these young people used their multinational employment to empower themselves. It sheds light on how Samoan factory workers exercised their agency, even in somewhat limited ways, against the seemingly irresistible and agentless force of multinational operations driven by the quest for profit. I argue that, from the perspective of YES operators, despite the admittedly exploitative nature of their operations, multinational factories were a site for self-empowerment. I call such employment

“employment of the weak,” a kind of work that provides less powerful social groups in a developing country, who otherwise have very limited prospects, with opportunities to earn money, respect, and status in their families, villages, and workplaces and to develop confidence in themselves, regardless of their age, gender, and educational background.

### WEAPONS OF THE WEAK AND WORKER AGENCY

Employment at YES can be analyzed using the concept of work styles as “weapons of the weak,” a term coined by James C Scott in his discussion of peasant worker agency in rural Malaysia (1985). The term refers to low-profile, everyday forms of resistance that less powerful social groups use to undermine arrangements that result in their circumstances of domination. Scott examined the ways these workers responded to authority in everyday situations and how they used actions such as foot dragging, false compliance, desertion, feigned ignorance, and sabotage as tactics or “weapons” to mitigate repressive situations (1985, 29). According to Scott, unlike rioting or protesting, these forms of resistance involve little or no coordination or planning and usually avoid direct confrontation with authority. Yet they are individual, spontaneous actions that people without power use to protect their interests within their limited scope for action. Scott’s concept not only emphasizes the centrality of human agency even in what seem to be the most unsatisfactory situations but also challenges the typical view of low-skilled workers as passive victims.

Other studies similar to Scott’s have highlighted the active roles shop-floor operators in multinational factories play in the industrialization of their developing economies as well as in their own life trajectories (Hancock 2006; Harrington 2000; Lal 2011; Louie 2001; Ngai 2005; Ong 2010; Wolf 1992). These studies have breathed life into characterizations of operators, who routinely have been described as voiceless, powerless, and faceless unskilled workers exploited by the forces of multinational-led development because of their acceptance of low wages and poor working conditions. Leslie T Chang, for example, countered this portrayal in her study of young workers in multinational factories in China by arguing that shop-floor operators are agents of change (2009).

YES has been at the center of debates about development issues in the Pacific Islands region in academic journals, newspaper articles, bank reports, regional economic reports, and business magazines (ADB 2015; Aiavao 1992; Chand 2012; Fraenkel 1998; Malua 2009; Peteru 1998;

World Bank 1996). The majority of these sources have focused on the economic significance of YES at the national and international levels. Only a few have examined the experiences of YES shop-floor operators (Grevel-Lameko 2000, 2003; Tsujita 2002; Liki 2007). Given the thousands of Samoan workers who have passed through this factory, their experiences and perspectives on YES employment warrant more attention. Consistent with Scott's concept of weapons of the weak, I aim to emphasize the agency of young Samoan workers in the space of multinational operations by exploring the ways in which they use their employment as a weapon to mitigate repressive situations, protect their interests, and increase their opportunities. It also discusses the roles this multinational factory played in the life trajectories of early school leavers in Sāmoa and what the loss of YES meant to them.

## APPROACHES

My findings are based on information and narratives collected primarily through direct observation while working at YES as a translator and part of the management team for six years. In 2010, I was hired as a Japanese-English translator, and I was later promoted to assistant manager of the production-engineering department. In these positions, I got to know YES operators and observe their experiences inside and outside the factory. Although I did not work on the assembly line as an operator, I was a part of the factory, sharing with other employees the sweat, tears, frustration, and laughter that filled the everyday space of YES. These experiences and narratives form a firsthand account of what it is like to be a factory worker in contemporary Sāmoa. I collected additional stories from YES operators through digitally recorded formal interviews, unrecorded casual interviews, and personal conversations with operators both inside and outside the factory during fieldwork for my master's and doctoral studies between 2000 and 2007.<sup>2</sup>

## HISTORY AND STRUCTURE OF YES

Yazaki Corporation, YES's mother company, is a Japan-based multinational car parts supplier that operates in 596 sites across forty-six countries and employs a global workforce of over 306,000 people (Yazaki Corporation 2018). While Yazaki develops and manufactures a variety of automotive components, its core business has been the designing and production of

automotive wiring harnesses, for which the company has the largest world market share in the automotive industry. An automotive wiring harness is a bundle of wires and data circuits that runs through a vehicle, integrating electrical circuits and multiple systems. It distributes power and relays information to various electrical components, functioning similarly to the nervous system of the human body (Yazaki Corporation 2019). Building a wiring harness is very labor-intensive since most assembly processes are done manually. A large harness is made of more than five hundred cables and circuits that are bundled together and wrapped in insulated tape by human hands and then attached to different branches. This manual assembly process is considered the most flexible and cost-effective method to accommodate a large range of part numbers, vehicle models, and options that require specific sets of wiring harnesses. Minimizing the cost of labor, therefore, is crucial for harness makers like Yazaki to remain competitive in the cutthroat global car parts industry. Yazaki established its first overseas manufacturing plant in Thailand in 1962 and later shifted most of its harness manufacturing operations to less industrialized countries to take advantage of low wages.<sup>3</sup>

In the late 1990s, Yazaki headquarters decided to relocate its harness manufacturing plants from Adelaide and Melbourne in Australia to Sāmoa when the Australian locations became less attractive for harness production. In 1985, the Australian government initiated a Motor Industry Development Plan that reduced tariffs on imported goods for the domestic automotive manufacturing industry. This plan aimed to improve the competitiveness of the industry and encouraged car parts suppliers in Australia, including Yazaki Australia, to outsource their labor-intensive products to other locations with cheaper labor costs and then import them back into Australia. At that time, the minimum wage in Australia was AU\$10–17 (approximately US\$8–9) per hour, whereas in Sāmoa, the minimum wage was only SAT\$1 (US\$0.40) per hour (Malua 2009, 118). In addition to the higher wages paid to Australian workers, Yazaki also faced union disputes at its Melbourne plant (Fraenkel 1998, 52). Given such circumstances, Sāmoa was able to compete strongly with Australia on the basis of low wages and a nonunionized labor force.

Initially, Indonesia, Fiji, and Sāmoa were shortlisted as potential relocation sites. Indonesia offered the cheapest labor pool, and Fiji was geographically closest to Australia, but Sāmoa had the most stable politics and an enthusiastic government. The Samoan government offered Yazaki various tax exemptions, free lease of government land, and the construction

of a factory building, in addition to a moderate-size cheap and nonunionized labor pool (Aiavao 1992; Malua 2009; Sasabe 1994). Furthermore, Sāmoa was in an advantageous position because products manufactured in Sāmoa could be exported duty-free to Australia under the provisions of the South Pacific Regional Trade and Economic Cooperation Agreement. Another factor in favor of Sāmoa was that Yazaki management was familiar with Samoan workers who had been employed at the Yazaki New Zealand plant and were recognized as responsible employees (Malua 2009, 118; Tsujita 2002, 70–71).

In 1991, Yazaki began operations in Sāmoa as a subsidiary of Yazaki Australia, with 1,327 employees serving at three different locations while the Samoan government worked to complete the construction of a 269,000-square-foot factory building in Vaitele (Yazaki Corporation 1991). In 1995, this factory became an independent subsidiary of Yazaki Corporation Asia and Oceania Group and gradually increased the number of employees to meet expanded production volume from its three clients: Toyota, Holden (formerly General Motors-Holden), and Mitsubishi—all in Australia. Between 1991 and 2007, the company employed an average of around 2,200 workers per year, with a peak of 3,500 workers in 1996. However, by mid-2007, business declined when Toyota Australia became its sole remaining client, so YES reduced the number of employees in Sāmoa. After 2012, employees numbered around 800. Despite this decline, from the time of its establishment until its closure, YES remained the largest private sector employer in the country. According to YES's human resources (HR) office, the last employee identification (ID) number issued for a wage worker was 66,302, meaning the company had hired at least that many people in its history. This illustrates YES's significant contribution to job creation during its twenty-six-year period in Sāmoa, a country whose total population is approximately 195,000.

At its closure, YES had 740 Samoan workers (with an average age of 26), 3 Japanese expatriates from Yazaki headquarters, 1 Filipino expatriate from Yazaki Philippines, and 2 locally hired Japanese staff. About 60 percent, or 450, of the total number of employees were shop-floor operators who worked on the assembly line and built wiring harnesses. YES operators were always young, with an average age of 20–23 over the company's history in Sāmoa. The majority were early school leavers who dropped out of school at about age 14 or 15. In the early years of the company, YES operators—especially those working on the final assembly lines where harnesses were laid out, bundled, and taped together on

the conveyor by hand—were predominately female. Male operators, on the other hand, took on the more automated processes in preassembly, where wires were cut, twisted, jointed, and crimped with terminals by machines. Traditionally, the gender ratio for the final assembly lines was 90–95 percent women to 5–10 percent men. In later years, however, men increasingly engaged in manual processes on the final assembly lines. As a result, the gender ratio among YES operators became more equal over time, ending with a ratio of 65 percent women to 35 percent men. Such a change may reflect an increased demand for wage employment among Samoan male youth who, in rural households, usually do unpaid farming and fishing. Initially, manual assembly work seems to have been perceived as a “female” job, but the male operators I interviewed came to see the operator position as an available employment opportunity.

### WORKING CONDITIONS

Shop-floor operators’ working conditions were difficult. Located in a poorly ventilated concrete and corrugated iron factory, the shop floor was both hot and humid with an average temperature of approximately 90–95 degrees Fahrenheit. In this stifling environment, operators were required to stand and assemble wires on the conveyor line while the production leaders stood behind them and periodically shouted at them to work faster in order to achieve the targeted quantity. In periods when overtime was required until eight or nine in the evening, operators worked for eleven to twelve hours a day. Such long hours of work were burdensome, especially for those who commuted from other sides of the island and needed to catch a bus as early as 4:00 AM in order to arrive at the company before the starting time of 7:25 AM.

A normal workday at YES began with a three-minute “radio exercise,” a common practice by factories in Japan to limber up workers before work in order to prevent accidents. The company’s regular operation hours were from 7:30 AM to 5:00 PM Monday through Thursday and 7:30 AM to 2:10 PM on Fridays. All employees had a twenty-minute tea break at 9:00 AM and a forty-minute staggered lunch break starting at either 12:00 PM or 12:50 PM. The company provided a free lunch valued at SAT\$2.30 (US\$0.90). Except for break times, shop-floor operators were required to stand all day on the conveyor assembly line. Standing became more intolerable when rising temperatures made the atmosphere on the shop floor unbearably hot. Ceiling and electric fans were installed at almost all work



stations on the shop floor, but some of them were too high to be effective. Consequently, operators perspired profusely as they worked at their tasks. They often complained about these conditions, particularly compared to those in the service department's offices. One worker explained: "I think our wages are not fair because our work on the shop floor is so hard, standing from morning 'till night, and it's very hot. But they, the ones in office, sit down all day in [an] air-conditioned office and get better pay. We are the ones that make wires, make money for the company, not . . . them." They attributed their complaints about unfairness to the fact that 40 percent of YES employees worked in service departments and received salaries that, as the operators perceived it, were derived from the sale of wiring harnesses built by shop-floor operators. However, because low wages were one reason the factory shifted to Sāmoa, YES needed to carefully manage the cost of labor.

During YES's last five years, the starting rate for shop-floor operators was SAT\$2.30 (US\$0.90) per hour, or about SAT\$4,800 (US\$1,930) per year, with an annual pay increase of SAT\$0.10 (US\$0.04). All the shop-floor operators were weekly wage workers, while salary workers were paid monthly and earned over SAT\$12,000 (US\$4,800) per year. Salary workers received pay raises based on annual performance and attendance reviews, but operators were not entitled to such appraisal. Instead, an operator could sit for an examination to become an inspector, which would add SAT\$10.00 (US\$3.95) to their regular weekly pay. Or if an operator demonstrated good work performance and attendance, she or he could apply for the position of line leader or sub-line leader with recommendations from supervisors or current line leaders. The sub-line leader position came with an additional weekly pay of SAT\$40.00 (US\$15.80), while line leaders received SAT\$100.00 (US\$39.50) extra per week. Still, these allowances were insufficient to classify line leaders as salary workers with annual pay increments. For example, one line leader with twenty-five years of service was still a wageworker who earned approximately SAT\$11,000 (US\$4,350) annually.

Another way for operators to increase weekly earnings was to work overtime, for which they were paid one and a half times their normal hourly rate. YES frequently required operators to work overtime, mainly to catch up with production delays caused by order changes from Australia that added more variations to products. Such customer changes became a priority, and overtime was required due to the geographically distant and infrequent shipments between Sāmoa and Australia. Common overtime



hours extended the workday to 8:00 PM, 9:00 PM, or 10:00 PM on weekdays and to 5:00 PM on Saturdays. Some operators welcomed overtime despite the extra effort because it increased their weekly earnings. Others disliked it but felt obligated to accept extra hours due to demands by their team leaders. These operators complained that if they did not work overtime, their leaders would treat them as though they were betraying other team members since the work on conveyor lines required collaboration. This attitude stems from the fact that the obligation of group conformity is instilled at an early age in Samoan society.

Whether workers were willing or unwilling, overtime was a physical burden when required on consecutive days. At the busiest times, manufacturing continued until as late as 10:00 PM every day or every other day on weekdays and until 5:00 PM on Saturdays. During such periods, operators were exhausted from working long hours. They got home late and were sleep deprived. Even though the company provided transportation home by bus or taxi for those working overtime, it often took significantly longer than ordinary transportation services because employees living in different areas were dropped off one by one. Some workers did not arrive home until after midnight and still had to be ready by 4:30 AM to catch the first bus to work. Thus, views on overtime varied. As one worker explained: "I usually [get] home really late and work on Saturdays, too, so I don't have much time to see my family. But that's ok because when we have lots of overtime, we can make more money. This job is very good." In contrast, another worker shared the following: "Sometimes I finish work early and [go] home, but my children don't want to come to me because I'm not at home most of the time. They still like me, but when they wake up, they always go to grandma. . . . I feel sad sometimes." According to one Samoan manager, many workers requested that the company consider providing sleeping quarters at the factory to avoid the long commutes, but this request was denied for security reasons.

Initially, the company provided overtime transportation for free. This was an incentive especially for operators from villages far from the factory who could thereby save their return bus fare. However, when Samoan labor laws changed and no longer required employers to provide transportation for overtime workers, the service was no longer free. Because most bus services in Sāmoa end shortly after 6:00 PM, the company continued to provide transportation for overtime workers but began collecting bus fares from them. This had the effect of discouraging operators from working overtime hours, particularly when bus fares accounted for more

than half of their overtime earnings. For example, if an operator from Falefā (about an hour's drive from the factory) worked until 8:00 PM, the three hours of overtime would earn her SAT\$10.35 (US\$4), but SAT\$5.40 (US\$2.10) would be deducted for overtime transport. She would not arrive home until around 10:00 PM and would earn only SAT\$4.95 (US\$1.95) extra. Overtime work therefore became a strain for many operators.

Because of these less than satisfactory working conditions, the operator job at YES was low in the occupational hierarchy in status-conscious Sāmoa. YES operators were sometimes even taunted by village peers who looked down on their employment in a factory and regarded teaching, nursing, and office work as more prestigious jobs (Grevel-Lameko 2000; Tsujita 2002). Some operators were uncomfortable with the reputation of their employment, so they commuted wearing regular clothes and changed into the operator's light blue uniform when they reached the factory. One operator shared her mixed feelings regarding her employment, saying, "I like my job, but I don't want my children to work at the factory. I want my daughter to go to college and become a teacher because although pay is not so good, it's a good job." Others had more favorable opinions about their employment, comparing themselves positively to their unemployed village peers. One worker mentioned this pride and the sense of prestige she gained when she heard the government compliment the company: "I feel proud of working at Yazaki because I've heard some ministers at the Parliament meeting were thanking Yazaki for its contributions to Sāmoa. They said if there isn't Yazaki, where will those youth find jobs?" Such positive views reflected the socializing opportunities of work at YES. Almost all employees interviewed cited socializing as the best part of working for YES. On assembly lines, workmates bonded as friends in an important communal unit. They would chat and joke with one another behind the line leaders' backs, sometimes singing together while working on the conveyor. Opportunities to interact socially with workmates came not only through working together but also through company events. Some work-related events aimed to improve production quality, while social events sought to improve the attendance of operators.

One work-related event was the ceremony for the monthly Best Line Award, which was given to the assembly line with best performance among all fifteen lines. The lines competed to achieve the targeted product quantity with the lowest number of defects and the highest line-member attendance ratio. The best line was announced as part of a monthly morning assembly held in the multipurpose area after morning exercises. At the

award ceremony, the line leader of the winning line received a certificate and a trophy, usually from the vice president of YES or a Japanese manager. Each member of the winning line received a free meal ticket for a special lunch worth SAT\$5.00 (US\$2.00) for a whole week. This prize was considered the most effective incentive to motivate operators to come to work every day. Some line leaders were viewed as gifted comedians and would do something other employees considered funny, like forcefully kissing or hugging a Japanese manager when he presented the award, to make the audience laugh. Such an event was seen as a little fun for operators before the start of another tough workday. At the same time, the competition helped build a strong line identity, group cohesion, and close friendships among members of the same line.

Besides work-related events, the company also held annual social events including a sports day, ping-pong and *mū* (Samoan chess) tournaments, a Christmas celebration, and an end-of-year ceremony. The sports day was an annual day-long event held at the Marist St Joseph's Stadium. All YES employees, including managers, were divided into four groups to compete in different games and enjoy each other's company. Ping-pong and *mū* tournaments were held in YES recreational areas, and many employees played these games every day during breaks.<sup>4</sup> The Christmas celebration, which was held on a workday morning near the end of November, began with the lighting of a giant Christmas tree installed on the shop floor. Each department performed Samoan dances, Christmas carols, and skits and then took photos with a jumbo decorative Santa. The end-of-year ceremony was held on the last workday of the year. It began with a thank-you speech by the vice president, followed by prizes for perfect attendance, best line of the year, and best operators of the year. Everybody received a premium gift with the company logo (eg, a watch, umbrella, or water cooler) and a special lunch box. In addition to these annual events, the company held special ceremonies to mark company anniversaries and to celebrate company accomplishments, such as when it achieved zero customer complaints or when it received the Best Supplier Award from Toyota Australia. Through these social events, employees developed friendships beyond those with their immediate fellow workers on assembly lines.

For many young operators, working at YES was their first time ever away from the strict oversight of their families, or from supervised communal work organized by villages. They were free to meet with people from other villages and church communities. Many of them found a boyfriend, girlfriend, or future spouse in the factory. In fact, five out of seven

production department managers met their spouses in the factory. For young operators, YES was an ideal place to spend time together while on breaks and without parental interference. For all employees, regardless of age and position, YES was a unique place of socialization where hundreds of members from different villages mingled with each other and shared the factory space every day for long hours, which resulted in the forging of a village-like communal bond. YES benefited from such bonds and social incentives, which mostly outweighed employee grievances about the workplace and encouraged them to continue working.

### PYRAMID SOCIETY AND COMPLEX LAYERS OF RESISTANCE

YES had an overt pyramidal power-class system in place based on occupational hierarchy. In this pyramid, complex layers of resistance to authority and control occurred at different levels and between strata. Although shop-floor operators were the bottom of the hierarchy, they were able to use weapons of the weak to resist authority and escape from repressive situations.

Nominally, the president of YES was at the top of the organization's power-class pyramid. However, because the president of YES doubled as the president of Yazaki Australia and resided in Melbourne, in practice, the vice president of YES in Sāmoa superseded him at the top. Traditionally, Yazaki headquarters appointed Japanese members from Yazaki Japan to both positions. A Samoan general manager was on the second stratum, followed, in descending order, by senior managers, departmental managers, assistant managers, supervisors, line leaders, sub-line leaders, and then operators. Managers were both Samoan and Japanese. In power relations, operators most commonly complained about harsh practices by their immediate bosses, the line leaders and sub-line leaders.

Leaders on the assembly lines were responsible for monitoring the performance of operators, ensuring quantity achievement, and maintaining product quality. In pursuing their responsibilities, leaders often shouted at their team members throughout the day. Some leaders stood right behind the operators who were causing a delay in the conveyor line and shouted at them to work faster. This was sometimes counterproductive when pressure from leaders made operators very anxious and thus slowed down their hand movements. A vicious cycle emerged when leaders shouted louder and more furiously and operators worked less efficiently. In Samoan culture, young people are accustomed to taking orders from their elders, but

in factory conditions, they often resent the authority of leaders in the same age group.

Many operators were of the opinion that leaders' conduct was the main cause of resignation among operators. One of them explained: "I know many operators used *fa'alavelave* [family obligations] as a reason for resigning. They say so because if they want to work again at YES, it will be okay with their leaders. But their real reasons for resigning were their unhappy relationships with their leaders. They can't stand them because leaders are too much, overusing their authority, but operators cannot do anything, so they quit." While some operators quit their jobs, a more common weapon of the weak operators used to mitigate repressive situations was false compliance. In the absence of line leaders, some operators broke production rules and skipped one or more assembly process steps in order to complete given tasks faster and achieve the target quantity. Because they had gone through a series of trainings, operators were well aware of the production rule that bypassing designated manufacturing procedures was strictly prohibited and could result in a defective product. Nevertheless, some operators continued to violate the rule. This did not necessarily mean that they did not care about product quality but rather that they were desperate to escape the pressure from leaders to achieve targets. For this reason, even though the YES quality assurance team took numerous countermeasures to prevent operators from bypassing designated procedures, some operators continued to skip essential steps.

When the quality assurance team identified pressure from line leaders as a possible driving factor behind operators' noncompliance with manufacturing procedures, the issue was taken up at many management meetings. Japanese managers repeatedly recommended not using strong verbal admonitions, while some Samoan managers supported the leaders' tough conduct, believing it was the most effective local method to discipline young operators. Once, as strongly recommended by a Japanese senior manager, a no-shouting rule was passed at a management meeting and implemented on the shop floor. Production leaders initially observed the rule, especially when Japanese managers were present on the shop floor, but old ways soon reappeared. Such a case was typical for YES, where rules for shop-floor workers initiated by Japanese managers were not observed for long without support from Samoan managers. This implies that almost no Japanese authority was recognized on the shop floor even though these Japanese members held managerial positions at YES. Due mainly to cultural and language barriers, Japanese managers rarely interacted directly

with operators, resulting in their placement outside the YES hierarchy of power and control. Production members, including operators and line leaders, were more observant of the directives of Samoan managers than those of Japanese managers. In such circumstances, Samoan managers, who understood the realities of authority on the shop floor, could influence adherence to decisions made by Japanese managers.

In addition to false compliance, operators had other available weapons, including foot dragging, feigned ignorance, and dissimulation. Some operators deliberately worked slowly before break time so that they would not need to start assembling a new product and could pack up faster to go to lunch or to go home. When their non-compliance with production rules was discovered, many operators dodged questions about manufacturing procedures or feigned ignorance, saying, "I never knew such a process." When a defective product was found in their line, many operators denied that they had disregarded production rules or skipped assembly steps.

Line leaders also dissimulated when a defect was found on their line and their supervisors and managers accused them of failing to control operators effectively. In extreme cases, when faced with criticism about defects from those in authority, line leaders made all of their line members dissimulate in order to discredit the accusation. However, dissimulation was not always successful for line leaders, and some were terminated for such practices. Unlike operators, line leaders, who were not the weakest in the authority structure, could not use weapons of the weak effectively. Line leaders were in some instances in the more vulnerable position because they had to deal with pressure from their supervisors to control line performance and observe the rules, and from operators using weapons of the weak to challenge their authority. It was not uncommon to see line leaders crying behind the conveyor after being scolded by their managers.

Being at the bottom of the power pyramid, operators had limited scope for action but still resisted authority by exercising false compliance, foot dragging, and dissimulation to mitigate oppression at work. Apparently, some aspects of the working conditions for the shop-floor operators were less than satisfactory. Even so, the young operators were able to use their YES employment as an available weapon to expand their life choices.

### EMPLOYMENT OF THE WEAK: ACCESSIBILITY

Education qualifications and previous work experience were not required to become an operator at YES. When the company needed to hire more

operators, an HR manager would make an announcement to current workers in the factory requesting that they let their family members and village peers know about the new vacancies. Interested applicants would be asked to come to the factory on the following Monday at 8:00 AM wearing a white top and black bottom and bringing a copy of their birth certificate and their ID number from Samoa National Provident Fund (SNPF). By 7:00 AM on the designated Monday, a long queue of applicants would be standing by the YES front gate. At 8:00 AM, applicants would be called in to take an entrance examination involving simple computational questions. An HR officer would then interview them individually and review their birth certificates and SNPF numbers. Typically, no questions were asked about education background or previous work experience. The main purpose of the interview was to assess whether the applicant was physically and mentally fit for full-time work and able to understand simple instructions in the Samoan language. In effect, YES hired all applicants with these abilities, regardless of the examination result. A few days after the interview, the names of prospective workers would be posted on the YES bulletin board, and the current workers who had been their referees would convey the results to the applicants. This would complete the recruitment process, and the newly employed operators would start work the following Monday. This simple process for operator recruitment encouraged young people, particularly early school leavers, to seek jobs at YES.

According to a youth employment study by the Samoa National Youth Council (SNYC), most of Sāmoa's youth, especially those from rural areas, lack comprehensive access to information on employment opportunities (SNYC 2017, 73). This is because few mechanisms are available to village youth and most jobs are in the urban area. Sources like the Samoa Public Service Commission Circular and the *Samoa Observer* newspaper advertise job vacancies, and the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Labour operates an online job-search service,<sup>5</sup> as does the Makeki Online Facebook page.<sup>6</sup> However, these sources are not easily accessible to rural youth due to limited access to newspapers and the high cost of Internet access (SNYC 2017, 59). In this regard, YES had an effective user-friendly method, relying on word of mouth and family networks to inform job seekers. The company promoted recruitment through current workers' connections, which easily reached village youth in different districts. Those wanting a job at the factory could simply ask current YES workers in their villages about openings.

According to the SNYC survey, about 70 percent of the young respon-



dents identified limited education and lack of work experience as the main obstacles to finding employment (2017, 51–52). Despite these disadvantages, early school leavers were encouraged to get jobs at YES because of the company's lack of qualification and experience requirements and because they knew people just like themselves were working at the factory. For example, one YES operator told me, "There are different jobs in Sāmoa, but other jobs need references or certificates and connections to apply. But here, Yazaki, you just sit for an exam, and if you pass, you can work. It's good, good for people in villages, because they never worked before, have no reference." As another operator explained, "Many young people are looking for jobs, but they can't find it because they dropped out from school. This company makes it very easy for them to get a job and very helpful because they need money, too." Highlighting the impact of identifying with current employees, one young operator from southern 'Upolu described her motivation to join YES: "My neighbor was just like me until three months ago. She was staying home and just helping her mother, but now she's working at Yazaki and earns some money. So I thought I should go there and get some money like other village girls working at Yazaki." Peer networks encouraged early school leavers to seek jobs at the factory. These applicants were not deterred by the tough working conditions of operator jobs, which they were likely to have heard of already. They still applied, seeing a YES job as an opportunity. Although the majority of YES operators were early school leavers, reasons for leaving school were complex and often related to poor academic performance, lack of interest in school, financial difficulties, and family obligations. No current research cites the prospect of employment at YES as a reason for leaving school.

YES was established in Sāmoa to take advantage of the country's pool of cheap and nonunionized labor, a practice typical of multinational corporations in the world capitalist system. However, the factory workers did not necessarily perceive YES as exploitative, and young operators with few options to earn money viewed YES employment in positive terms. Other jobs for unqualified young people in Sāmoa are scarce, pay the same wages or less, and are often on a casual or daily basis. The only other option such youth have is to participate in unpaid family labor, such as household chores, farming, and fishing. In today's Sāmoa, villages receive government services including piped water and electricity, but cash is needed to pay for these services and for other items now regarded as necessities. Furthermore, churches and traditional ceremonies require a

considerable amount in cash donations. According to a study on church contributions by Cluny Macpherson and La'avasa Macpherson, one typical mainstream church receives an average fortnightly monetary offering of SAT\$2,500 (US\$950) from its members, in addition to labor and commodity donations (2011, 321). Such contributions take up a substantial part of a household's income, and if income is inadequate to meet a tacitly understood amount to be donated, a family may even borrow money from commercial lenders to make up shortfalls (Macpherson and Macpherson 2011). The demand for cash is strong, but Sāmoa has a high underemployment rate and limited wage employment opportunities. Therefore, for young early school leavers without marketable skill sets, YES was one of the few companies that provided a much-needed opportunity to earn money.

#### EMPLOYMENT OF THE WEAK: REHIRING

Although low-paid factory laborers like those at YES are often described as victims of a multinational corporation's quest for the lowest wage, YES operators were able to take advantage of the labor demands of harness manufacturing that forced the company to change its recruitment policy. Initially, YES had a strict policy that forbade rehiring as a way to retain operators by discouraging them from resigning once trained. Eventually, however, in the context of the Samoan labor market, YES allowed changes to its rehiring system that gave operators flexible work choices.

In the climate of cutthroat competition, the performance of car parts suppliers like YES is measured by good quality, low cost, and just-in-time delivery. To remain a competitive supplier, the company hired most of its operators at minimum wage to keep production costs low. To achieve production goals, YES needed to retain a sufficient number of trained operators and maintain production efficiency. However, keeping an adequate number of operators was one of the most difficult challenges the company faced, as operators generally did not stay with YES for long. More than half of the operators employed left the factory within their first year, over 75 percent left within three years, and only about 10 percent worked at YES for longer than ten years.

Japanese managers were frustrated by the high turnover rate and wondered why young workers in Sāmoa gave up their jobs so easily, given their very limited employment opportunities. A Samoan manager provided two main reasons. First, their weekly earnings from YES were not high

enough to be essential to the survival of their families. In Sāmoa, the cost of living is high due to an influx of imported goods and the high cost of basic services. Operators' earnings supplemented their household incomes but could not cover all the necessities of daily life. Second, most Samoan households have a range of strategies to survive economically. In addition to wages, remittances from overseas family members and subsistence farming and fishing are means of livelihood, while the customary land system secures their access to land. For these economic reasons, the level of operators' commitment to YES employment was low.

Moreover, daily life in Sāmoa is full of unexpected communal demands, such as funerals, church hall openings, village cleanups, hosting visitors, or looking after a sick grandmother or a sister's baby. Young adults are expected to do work for and to give priority to these family, church, and village activities. In this cultural context, the young adults' labor is an important household resource to contribute to events, and their service is often considered more important than earning a minimal wage from the factory. Therefore, operators left YES when more important life events came up.

The company needed to modify its recruitment policy to cope with the intermittent commitment of young Samoan workers. Eventually, a production manager convinced the top management that rehiring trained operators would increase production efficiency by reducing the required training period. Usually, the company would provide one month of training to make new operators productive and efficient industrial workers. The training included modules on Yazaki corporate philosophy, YES rules, manufacturing processes and techniques, and Japan-based work ethics. Rehiring former operators reduced the needed training period from one month to one week, just long enough to refresh their skills and the techniques previously acquired. This system allowed the company to secure sufficient operations-ready manpower to meet customer demands on time.

At the same time, the rehiring system became a convenient tool that allowed young workers to move in and out of the factory according to their circumstances and needs for immediate cash. When operators joined YES for the first time, they typically had high expectations for earning much-needed cash income. But when they encountered hardships, such as scolding by line leaders or disappointment over low pay, or when an important family event came up, they would quit the job. Then, sometime later, after unsuccessfully looking for another job or becoming tired of helping in the household or on the family farm and feeling the need for

cash, they would return to YES. In most cases, they would wait until the company called for the return of “formers,” or former operators. When these operators reapplied, YES rarely checked the circumstances under which they left the job. Therefore, by the following Monday, they were generally rehired. The company had no limitation as to how many times they would rehire the same operators. Some operators were rehired more than five times. The most common reason for their return to YES was boredom at home. Other returning operators said that the jobs they took after YES were not as much fun and that they missed their coworkers at the factory.

Although this rehiring system was adopted in order to secure operations-ready manpower, it had the effect of increasing the turnover rate among operators and lowering attendance. YES had a strict attendance policy that required that every employee gain a supervisor’s approval for a leave of absence by at least the previous day. Those who failed to show up for work for three days without approval faced termination. This rigorous rule was based on the company’s time-sensitive production system. Because a shortage of operators not only caused delays but also affected the quality of the products, production leaders repeatedly reminded workers of the attendance policy. Operators were aware of the policy, but many were terminated for disobeying it.

On average, 75 percent of the operators who left YES had not resigned but rather had been terminated. Of all terminations in 2016, 70 percent were for breaking the three-day absentee rule. This suggests that most operators were not afraid of being terminated. For some operators, dismissal was preferred over resignation because resignation required an employee to go through tedious processes, including completing an exit interview and returning ID cards and uniforms. They knew that those who had been terminated could come back to YES as formers as long as their dismissal was not due to misconduct, such as stealing company tools. They also knew that, in practice, the company did not thoroughly check the reasons for termination and often even rehired those who were terminated for stealing in order to meet a required number of trained operators. This meant that operators, knowing that they could return as formers anytime, could easily quit when they were dissatisfied with their working conditions or when they had more important priorities. In this respect, quitting the job was a weapon of the weak that the workers used to protect their interests. At the same time, the rehiring system provided operators with increased bargaining power with their employer, the multinational-owned

factory, because they knew the company depended on an adequate number of operators.

The rehiring of operators represented some of the adjustments the company reluctantly made in the Samoan context in order to maintain its production efficiency as a competitive supplier in the global automotive market. Because harness production required intensive manual labor, YES had to retain a core number of operators to meet the supply schedule its clients demanded. By 2011–2012, holding on to the required number of operators became more challenging because growth in Sāmoa's private sector, particularly in wholesale and retail trade, opened more low-skilled jobs for local youth (MCIL 2013). This trend narrowed YES's options, leading to their acceptance of a rehiring policy. In this way, young factory workers became active agents who could shape the company policy and expand their options.

#### EMPLOYMENT OF THE WEAK: EMPOWERMENT

A third aspect of the employment of the weak is the way YES employment enabled young unqualified women and men to develop a sense of self-worth, empowered by the opportunity to demonstrate their capabilities. In Sāmoa, a person's traditional family rank in a village and their age, gender, and education level play key roles in determining their social status. Youth, particularly young women, from traditionally low-status families have relatively few opportunities for social mobility. Working at YES created such opportunities. On the shop floor, the occupational hierarchy was built on capabilities and skills rather than family rank, gender, age, and education background. In this hierarchy, some young line leaders were given a sizable degree of authority over those who might be older despite the Samoan tradition that younger people honor and respect their elders. These cultural values made some operators reluctant to accept promotion to a line leader or sub-line leader position because they were uncomfortable giving orders to older operators or criticizing their work. However, many young operators welcomed the chance to jump the traditional age and status hierarchy by gaining promotion on their own merits, becoming leaders, possessing power, and receiving higher wages. One young operator, for example, said, "I wanna move up to be a line leader or even a sub leader. I wanna be a leader and have an allowance like them. I know I can do it, so I'm trying my best to achieve good performance." All leaders of the assembly lines originally joined YES as operators and attained

their leader positions as a result of good performance and attendance. Young operators were motivated when they realized that age, gender, and traditional status values did not hinder the opportunity to progress in the factory.

Although leader positions were open to both genders, line leaders were disproportionately female, even after more men became operators. One female operator said, “In our society, we young girls have to show respect for others and have no opportunity for our own. We have no freedom to do what we want to do. But here is different. I can see we have more chances and freedom here at this company. Like our supervisor, I can be like her, to make my life better and earn more money for my family.” As she perceived it, opportunities existed for young women to progress at YES. Five out of seven production managers and supervisors were female. All of them initially joined the factory as young operators and climbed their way to the top. One woman supervisor said, “I was an operator and promoted to be a sub leader because I mastered all my tasks and always achieved the production target. I was promoted to be a line leader and then supervisor because I had a good record of performance and attendance. I’d never missed work. I believe the most important thing as a worker is, whatever the top says, we obey or at least try our best to follow their instruction. This is my respect to the company, and I got this position as a reward.” As she explained, common attributes of production managers and supervisors were the ability to lead a team to meet production targets, to show obedience to authority and company rules, and to maintain good attendance. In addition, according to one Samoan manager, they had a unique capacity for endurance—they did not quit their jobs but rather remained with YES for more than twenty years. In fact, the majority of the employees who worked for YES longer than twenty years held supervisory positions, with exception of those who did not wish to take leader positions. In this sense, not quitting the job was a viable weapon these leaders could use to protect their interests, although it took some time to be effective. Shop-floor leaders served as role models for young operators by demonstrating a pathway to a better position, higher pay, and power and authority—opportunities young women seldom had outside the factory.

Another rare opportunity YES provided was an office job for early school leavers without any qualifications. Vacant positions, including office jobs, were open to all, regardless of age or gender. Vacancy announcements were usually posted on the company bulletin board located by the security

gate; both current employees as well as outsiders could apply. However, the company gave priority to applications from current workers primarily because they were accustomed to the unique YES culture, including its early starting time and frequent overtime demands. Applications from current employees mainly took account of the applicants' work performance and attendance. This recruitment policy created a new avenue for operators to attain a longed-for office job. One operator who won a job as a document controller in the production office said: "One day, I saw an opening for a document controller position, so I applied for it. I was called for an interview with HR manager and got the job because I have good record of performance as cutting machine operator, always achieving the target, and I have good attendance, almost 100 percent. This company gives us more opportunities than any other places in Sāmoa. If this is a government job, you'll never get it unless you have high qualifications or you know somebody there. People like me who have no family connection never get an office job like this." This woman had left school early and did not have work experience prior to starting at YES. She seized the chance to work in an air-conditioned office after several years of working on the hot shop floor as a cutting machine operator. As an office worker, she wore a different colored uniform—office workers wore white and operators wore light blue. Wearing the white uniform symbolized her higher status than that of operators in the YES occupational hierarchy, an achievement that others envied and that motivated others to work toward an office position.

Some youth, even those with relatively good education backgrounds, took operator jobs at YES knowing that the company gave preference to current employees. They perceived the operator job as a stepping-stone to an office job. One financial officer told me: "I have a certificate in accounting, but I can't get an office job at other places because I don't have any connection, so I applied here. I knew I could get a job here easily as operator. I didn't mind to be an operator because it's only for a while and I wanted to apply for an office job when it opened up." There were other operators who did have school or job qualifications working on the assembly lines, waiting for an opportunity for a better job. In this respect, as one Japanese manager put it, the shop floor operators were a gold mine of human resources. The presence of those with better education and qualifications did not necessarily reduce office job opportunities for operators with more limited education because office jobs in manufacturing-related sections usually went to those with some work experience as a YES operator.



Another factor in building self-worth among YES operators was their satisfaction with helping their families and hearing their parents express gratitude to them for earning money. One young female operator said, “I’m happy and grateful when my father compliments my job in his evening prayer, saying that because of my hard work we are rewarded and our family has some money.” Like this operator, many others thought the greatest reward for their employment was their parents’ gratitude. They said that working at YES was a way to *tausi mātua* (support or serve one’s parents).

According to Loia Fiaui and Vao‘au Tuimaleali‘ifano (1997), “*tausi mātua*” refers to the reciprocal obligation between children and parents; parents *tausi* (care for) young children, who then serve their *mātua* (parents). As children become adults, they in turn assume the role of *tausi* (caregiver) for their elderly parents. In short, *tausi mātua* is a life duty of Samoan sons and daughters. Caring for parents is also reinforced with reference to the fifth commandment in the Bible in that children will be blessed for honoring their father and mother (Fiaui and Tuimaleali‘ifano 1997). Within this belief system, young operators were proud of themselves and their factory employment because their wages enabled them to serve their parents. They felt their hard work was rewarded with their parents’ acknowledgment of their service. Moreover, their wages enabled them to financially contribute to *fa‘alavelave* (which can include gifts of money and food) and church donations. Even though wages were low, earning money allowed young workers to feel that they too were capable and valued members of their families and church communities.

Even if their village peers looked down on the operator job at YES, the factory employment was attractive to young early school leavers because it provided rare opportunities to gain power and status, earn higher pay, be able to financially contribute to the family and church, and perform their filial duty of *tausi mātua*. From their perspective, factory work was a source of empowerment that enhanced their sense of self-worth and agency.

## CONCLUSION

In August 2017, Yazaki ceased its twenty-six years of operations in Sāmoa as a result of the decline of the car manufacturing industry in Australia and its global supply chain, of which YES was a part. The closure of YES was a typical example of the flow-on effects of changes in transnational

operations, reflecting the critique of the neoliberalism that undermines the situation of workers in peripheral economies. However, I argue that the history of YES suggests that exploitation may be in the eye of the beholder. The Samoan government courted Yazaki Corporation with offers of tax breaks and the provision of premises, knowing that low labor costs was the key attraction of Sāmoa for this multinational corporation. Within the Samoan context, however, YES was eventually forced to revise employment policies and to rehire operators who had resigned or been dismissed in order to maintain production efficiency and meet customer demands. The revised recruitment policy expanded young early school leavers' options for work and increased their bargaining power with the employer because they knew the company depended on them.

As Amartya Sen pointed out, development should be seen as a means not only to eliminate economic insufficiency but also to enhance the freedom of those who lack real opportunities by expanding their capabilities and increasing their choices (1999). In this light, employment in multinational factories like YES can contribute positively to development in developing countries like Sāmoa because it enables many members of less powerful social groups to earn cash income, build self-confidence, and seize opportunities that would otherwise be beyond their reach. Despite long, hot working hours standing to assemble automotive wiring harnesses, and despite pressures from their line leaders, most operators valued their jobs at YES. In fact, conversations with YES employees revealed that most wished Sāmoa had more multinational factories like YES to provide wage employment, especially for early school leavers. They were saddened by the factory closure because, although wages were low and the cost of living high, their life opportunities were expanded by their YES employment. Such positive views complicate critiques of the profit-oriented operations of multinational corporations searching for places to exploit cheap labor. As this study shows, the voices of the young workers themselves, in their circumstances of limited opportunity, also need to be acknowledged. This Japanese wiring factory has closed, but the aspirations and experiences of YES operators remain an important part of Sāmoa's economic history and should be considered when evaluating the country's future development path.

In the post-YES situation, despite widespread concerns, the negative impact of YES's closure on the Samoan economy does not seem to be significant, and the economy is recovering quickly. According to an International Monetary Fund Country Report, an expected low level of growth

in the 2017–18 fiscal year due to YES's closure would rebound the following year due to expansion in the construction industry (IMF 2018). In the 2014–15 fiscal year, YES accounted for more than 40 percent of the country's total exports, generating SAT\$50 million (US\$19 million) per year (Government of Samoa 2016). A major impact on trade was anticipated, but a local forwarding agent reported that although business was affected by the loss of YES, it is now being buoyed by the growth of other industries, including wholesale and retail.

Similarly, YES's closure does not seem to have had a significant long-term effect on the underemployment rate in Sāmoa. According to employment statistics (SBS 2019), the rate decreased by 2.9 percent in the December 2017 quarter. However, it has since recovered, with a positive growth of 0.4 percent in the June 2018 quarter and 2.0 percent in the December 2018 quarter, reflecting the increase in job opportunities in other industries, including restaurants, accommodations, transportation, and food manufacturing. Further, as this study shows, about half of the YES operators would have quit their jobs within a year anyway, even if YES had not closed. As the closure approached, YES provided all employees with a transitional support package including various training programs and severance allowances to help them prepare for their future careers. As a result, some members started their own businesses, while many others found new jobs. For example, my former office mate who participated in a fabric-printing training program started a textile business and is currently selling her original tie-dye fabrics at local stores in Apia. The majority of former production managers and line leaders, along with sixty other ex-YES members, are now working at a New Zealand–owned wiring company that occupies part of the old YES facility in Vaitele. Moreover, notably, three former YES employees have transferred to Yazaki Japan and work for the company's global training teams.

On 13 December 2017, Prime Minister Tuilaepa Lupesoliai Sailele Malielegaoi officially handed over the former YES building to new tenants. It officially marked the end of a chapter in Sāmoa's development history in which YES played an important role in its trajectory. For most employees, it was the day they lost their company and the workmates with whom they had established attachments. For them, the loss of YES was the loss of an employment of the weak—a valuable weapon that, even if somewhat limited, helped them become active agents of change in the trajectory of their own lives and development in the context of seemingly irresistible forces of multinational operations.

## Notes

1 Translated by Meleiseā Leāsiolagi Mālama Meleiseā for this article.

2 I collected operators' perspectives using different methods, including formal interviews, casual interviews, and conversations with operators and other employees, but I treat all accounts equally in this paper. For interviews, I obtained written consent from formal interview participants and oral consent from casual interview participants. For stories collected from conversations and direct observations, I obtained oral consent from the informants who held supervisory, managerial, or higher positions, as they might be identified given the small size of the local community.

3 In 2017, Yazaki had a total of fifty-five automotive harness manufacturing plants outside of Japan, operating in thirty-one countries including Argentina, Brazil, Bulgaria, Cambodia, Colombia, Czech Republic, El Salvador, India, Indonesia, Lithuania, Mexico, Morocco, Nicaragua, Paraguay, People's Republic of China, Philippines, Poland, Portugal, Republic of China, Romania, Russia, Sāmoa, Serbia, Slovakia, South Africa, Thailand, Tunisia, Turkey, Ukraine, Uruguay, and Vietnam (Yazaki Corporation 2018). Wiring harness factories in Japan are currently used as pilot facilities for the research and further development of lean production mechanisms based on cost-effective and time-saving assembly processes.

4 The recreational area located on the shop floor filled a space vacated after the loss of clients Mitsubishi Australia and Holden Australia. The area had ping-pong tables, mū tables, a television, tables and chairs, and a wooden bed. The vice president of YES set up the recreational area to provide a space for operators to sit down and chat, lie down for short naps, watch rugby games or Filipino dramas on television, or play games during tea and lunch breaks.

5 The Samoan Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Labour's Job Seeker Service is available online at: <https://www.mcil.gov.ws/services/employment/job-seeker-service/>.

6 Makeki Online, established in 2014, is one of the first and most successful online trading forums in Sāmoa: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/makekionline/>.

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### *Abstract*

Yazaki Electrical Distribution System Sāmoa (YES), a Japan-based car parts factory, ceased its operations in Sāmoa in August 2017 as a result of an Australian government decision to stop subsidizing the automotive industry. YES's closure was a classic example of the flow-on effects of changes in global supply chains and illustrates how the neoliberal economy has undermined the circumstances of workers in developed and developing countries. This study, however, offers an alternative perspective. It explores the meaning of the factory closure from the standpoint of young workers in Sāmoa. I collected their stories and voices



primarily through direct observations and conversations with them while working at YES as part of the management team for six years. During the company's twenty-six years of operations, YES employed over sixty thousand local workers, predominantly young early school leavers. These youth sought employment at YES because, unlike most other jobs, the company offered job opportunities for school leavers without education qualifications or specialized experience. This study examines what the loss of this multinational factory meant to its young workers. It portrays the everyday world of shop-floor operators and describes how their factory employment contributed to their lives. I argue that from the perspective of YES operators, despite the admittedly exploitative nature of their operations, multinational factories can be seen as sites for self-empowerment. Factory employment provided increased opportunities for less powerful members of Samoan society who otherwise had very limited prospects to develop confidence in themselves and earn money and status in their families, their villages, and the workplace.

**KEYWORDS:** Sāmoa, multinational corporations, factory employment, early school leavers, weapons of the weak, agency, empowerment