



Reckoning to Revival

How American Workers
Rebuilt an Industry

Keith Naughton, Bloomberg News

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How American Workers Rebuilt an Industry

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INTRODUCTION

How U.S. Workers Rebuilt an Industry



Photograph by Christopher Morris/VII for [Bloomberg.com](https://www.bloomberg.com).

In June 2009, the last auto plant in Detroit was idle, mausoleum-quiet, and a symbol of failure. Weeds had grown three feet tall around Chrysler's sprawling Jeep factory at the desolate crossroads of Jefferson and Conner as the company went dark during bankruptcy. Among the bills the near-dead automaker couldn't afford to pay: lawn service.

Yet on one Monday morning came the drone of lawnmowers and the buzz of weed-whackers—sounds of rebirth. Chrysler was emerging from Chapter 11 and something

had to be done about the eyesore the plant had become. So, before reopening this important factory, a small band of bosses and workers loaded their own mowers into their cars and trucks, drove them to the plant, and began to clear a path for returning employees. “You know we’re bankrupt,” the plant manager, Richard Owusu, exhorted the group in his charming Ghana accent, “but let’s not *look* like we’re bankrupt.”

Seventeen years earlier, when Chrysler opened its Jefferson North plant, prosperity was all anyone could see. The factory had been designed to produce a single model: the new Jeep Grand Cherokee. Chrysler Corp., which a few years earlier had acquired the Jeep line in its buyout of American Motors Corp., scrapped AMC’s plan to produce a rough-and-ready Jeep in the tradition of the World War II runabout. Instead, it designed a refined four-wheel-drive model with an opulent interior and a powerful V-8 engine. Chairman Lee Iacocca dubbed it the Grand Cherokee, following the nomenclature he’d used to name the Dodge Grand Caravan minivan. And he indelicately boasted of the “ghetto factory” Chrysler built to manufacture it.