

# COMMON SENSE *for hard times*



*Jeremy Brecher & Tim Costello*

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*The Power of the Powerless to Cope with Everyday life  
and Transform Society in The Nineteen Seventies*

**JEREMY BRECHER & TIM COSTELLO**

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*This book is for Gillian and Helen, Fanya, Moira and  
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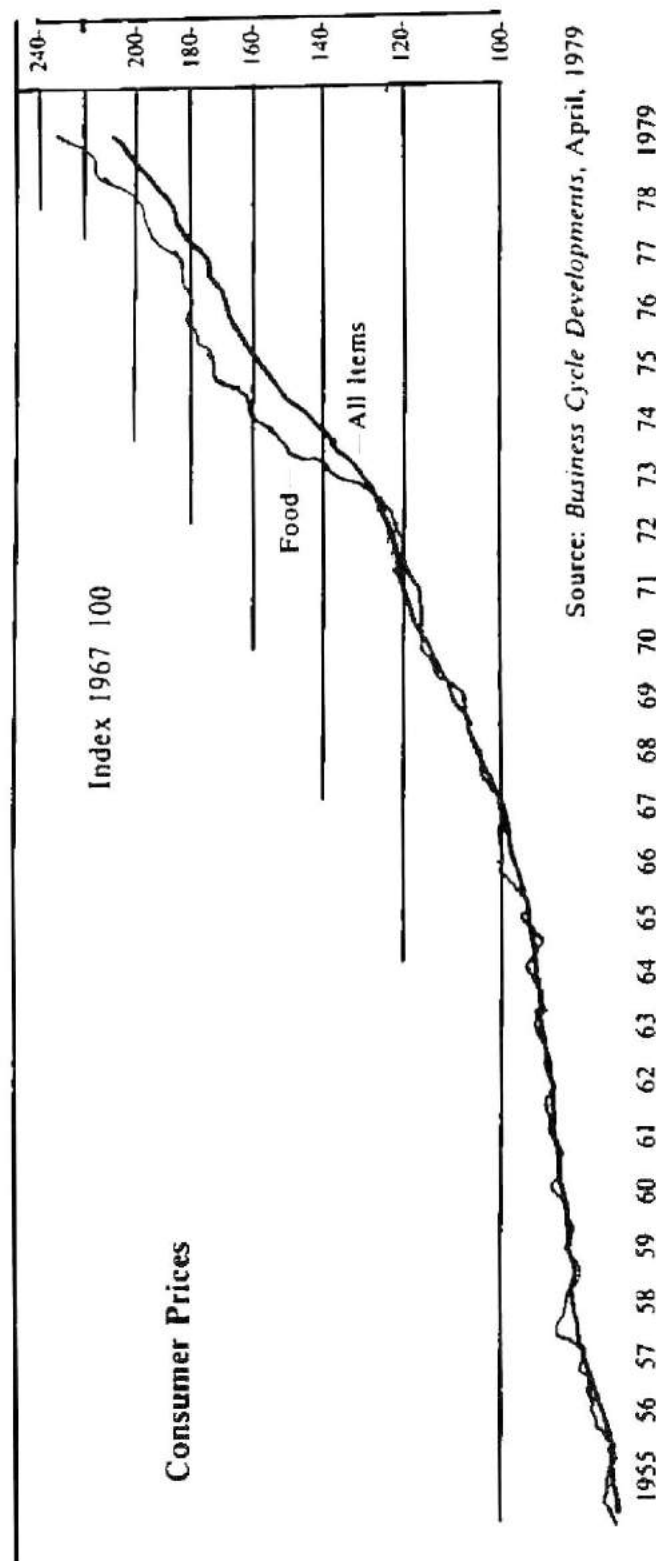
Finally, we would like to thank all our friends who put up with us during the writing of this book.

“Those Who Take the Meat from the Table”

Teach contentment.  
Those for whom the taxes are destined  
Demand sacrifice.  
Those who eat their fill speak to the hungry  
Of wonderful times to come.  
Those who lead the country into the abyss  
Call ruling too difficult  
For ordinary men.

—Bertolt Brecht, *Selected Poems*

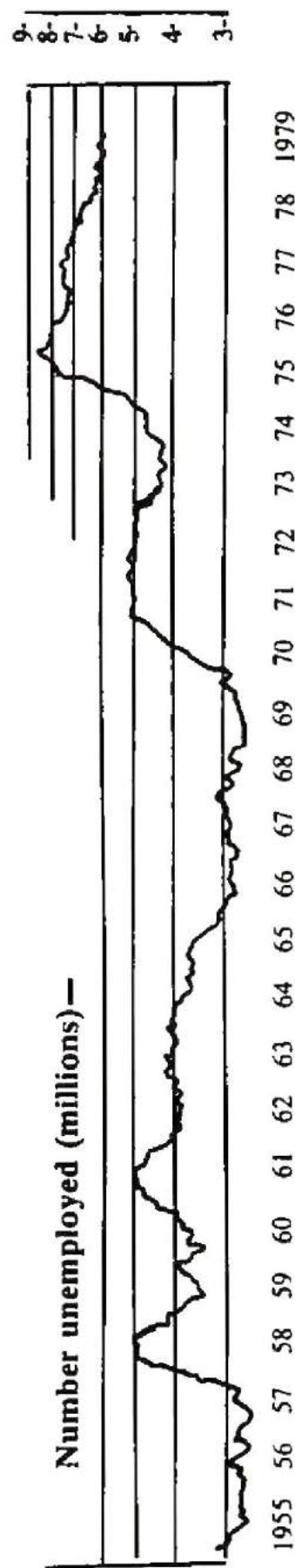
# CHART ONE



**Chart 1:** Squeezed between inflation and unemployment, most people are finding their conditions of life growing worse. Chart 1 shows that prices have risen rapidly and unremittingly for the past decade. Food prices, which affect poor and working people disproportionately, have risen even faster than the average.



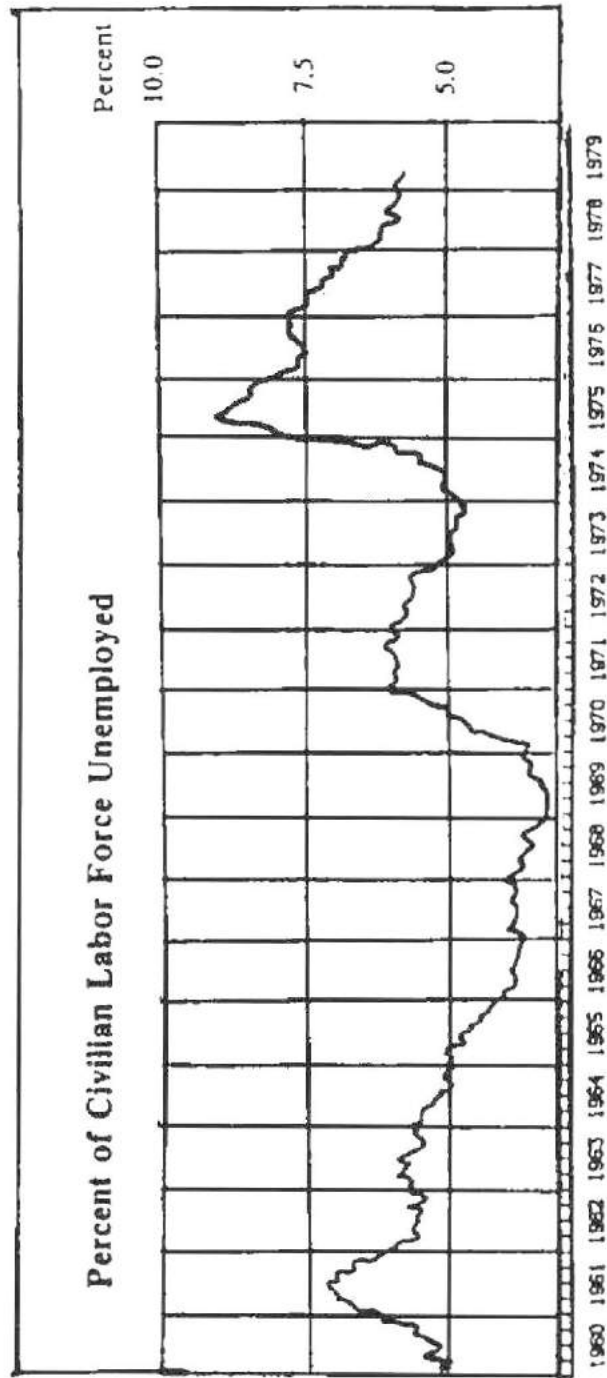
# CHART TWO



Source: *Business Cycle Developments*, April, 1979

Chart 2: More people are unemployed today, supposedly the peak of a "boom," than at any time in the two decades before the 1974-75 recession.

### CHART THREE



Source: *Employment and Earnings*, April, 1979

Chart 3: After more than three years of economic recovery, the unemployment rate remains at what were traditionally considered recession levels.

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# Preface To Second Edition

In our 1976 introduction to this book we wrote, "The choice for the majority is either to accept a continuing deterioration of their way of life or break the power of those who now control society." Since that time, the United States has supposedly been in a period of economic expansion. Yet real weekly earnings for nonsupervisory workers have fallen more than 5% since 1972.<sup>1</sup> The number of unemployed has never dropped below five million.<sup>2</sup> Prices are currently rising at a double-digit rate. Pollution standards have been cut; public services have been reduced. People have faced speed-up and worsening conditions on the job. In the harder times that are almost certainly ahead, people are likely to pay an even higher price for not controlling the basic processes of society.

Many people are already refusing to pay that price. They are fighting against the institutions of social power, trying to force them to meet the needs of all. Their struggles are going on in a great many arenas—in workplaces, schools, communities, the streets, even—through the truck drivers' blockades—on the highways.

Out of these struggles, we can see the emergence of a possible strategy for taking control of society. This might be described as the combination of struggles from inside and struggles from outside the institutions which control social power. On the one hand there is the struggle by those who are subject to control of employers, schools, government bureaucracies and the like to enlarge their democratic control over the institutions which envelop them. On the other hand, there are the efforts from without to force these institutions to serve the needs of all members of society, rather than the wealth and power of a few.



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What we need now is to link the movements of people taking over their institutions with those which are forcing such institutions to serve the interests of all. Such a confluence could ultimately create a society in which workplaces and other institutions are run democratically by those whose activity makes them up—subject to guidelines designed to make them responsible to the needs of society as a whole, and to all its members. In the years ahead we need to test the hypothesis that such a confluence is possible, and that it can realize the goal of a society controlled by all.

The movement for control of institutions from within is illustrated by a new form of worker organization which has emerged in the past few years. When this book was completed three years ago, the principal alternatives to existing union bureaucracies were union reform caucuses whose basic goal was to elect new leaders to union offices, and informal networks that workers created to fight for their interests through direct action on the job. Now workers have begun to develop a new form of "union dissidence" which expands the network of direct action beyond the single workplace, acts as a pressure group on the union, and runs officers for union positions as a tactic rather than as a basic goal.

An example the authors have been able to watch at close hand is the Teamsters for a Democratic Union. This is a national organization with chapters in many cities. It functions locally and regionally as a network of drivers who put out newspapers, attend an occasional meeting, and help each other out on the picket line and in other forms of action. When a reform slate promised open and free elections, accounting of all union funds and a variety of other reforms, the comment in the regional TDU paper was characteristic: "We certainly support all the measures the reformers promise, but we know promises are more easily made than kept. We intend to do what we can to make sure the promises are kept."

TDU newspapers publicize grievances in different companies and expose problems with the leadership in different teamster locals. Common grievances, such as the introduction of new work standards and increasing use of part-time drivers, are stressed. TDU activists propose contract bargaining demands for various groups of drivers and organize the rank and file around the country to press for them. They

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mobilize the rank and file to turn out for crucial union meetings and pass their own programs. They organize support for strikes, and organize and extend picket lines where the union officialdom ignores or opposes them. When workers are fired for militant action (as one of us was recently) they picket the employer, provide legal assistance, and help get other jobs. In short, they continue the direct action and mutual support of informal workgroups, but on a much expanded scale. Such action and organization begin to indicate the road toward an alternative for workers to bureaucratic unionism.

The power and seriousness of such a challenge from within is indicated by the recent struggles of rank-and-file coal miners.

Late in 1977, coal operators demanded "draconian penalties against wildcat strikes," "firing or suspension of strike instigators,"<sup>3</sup> and "takeaways" which would eliminate many of the health and pension benefits won by miners since World War II. Although United Mine Workers president Arnold Miller (himself elected originally as a rank-and-file reformer) was willing to accept many of the demands, rank-and-file coal miners clearly were not. After striking for more than three months, they voted down the proposed contract two-to-one, even though the union leadership had hired a public relations firm and spent \$40,000 trying to sell it to them. President Carter invoked the Taft-Hartley Act and ordered the miners back to work; the order was almost universally ignored. Defying both the government and their own union leadership, the miners held out for a total of more than 100 days. While the contract they finally accepted made a number of concessions to management, it was substantially better than the one they had turned down, and their struggle itself defeated the management effort to break their solidarity and power to resist.

Such rank-and-file power threatens the structures that have kept workers in line. The business magazine *Fortune* understandably viewed the miners' action with alarm:

Bad as union dictatorship undoubtedly is, union anarchy is potentially more destructive. Unfortunately, the miners have just shown that anarchy pays. They have demonstrated that a rambunctious rank and file with control over a vital resource can get a better deal by spurning the settlement made by their



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elected leaders and defying court back-to-work orders.<sup>4</sup>

In the wake of the strike, a Teamsters dissident reported:

At recent meetings of Teamster rank and file in many cities the dominant theme has been admiration, awe, and respect at the degree to which the miners have been able to stick together and get justice.<sup>5</sup>

Now let us consider a "struggle from without": the way people are pushing into areas once considered the sacred precincts of private control in order to put a stop to the expansion of nuclear energy. Traditionally, questions of whether one or another technology should be utilized have been considered a matter of "management rights." Whether railroads should introduce diesel locomotives, or whether machine shops should automate their tools, have seldom been nationwide issues. With the struggle for "No Nukes," the question of whether a particular technology will be accepted has, for perhaps the first time in our history, become universally recognized as a social question.

Tens of thousands of people have been arrested in protests against the building of nuclear power plants, and over 100,000 demonstrated against nuclear power in Washington following the Three Mile Island "incident." Nothing could show more graphically the price we pay for not controlling our society than the threat to our health and that of our descendants unto the tenth generation posed by the proliferation of nuclear generators and nuclear wastes. Millions of people have demonstrated their determination that the profitability of nuclear industry and the power of the government's nuclear bureaucracy will not prevent them from protecting their health and their future.

The possibility of convergence between the "movements from within" and the "movements from without" can be seen in the response of workers and the community when, in 1978, a conglomerate called the Lykes Corporation indicated that it was closing down much of the Youngstown Sheet and Tube Company, creating the largest peacetime layoff in recent U.S. history. Workers at first responded in a way that must have pleased the steel companies: they collected 110,000 signatures

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in four days for a petition asking the government to stop foreign steel imports, withdraw environmental regulations, and let steel prices rise. But in a series of mass meetings around the Youngstown area, many people quickly realized that this was not an adequate response. At one meeting somebody got up and said, "Why don't we buy the damn place?" A few local steelworkers picked up on the idea and set up an action committee of steelworkers to work for community-worker ownership of the plant. At the same time, local clergy and other community members had been meeting to look for solutions to the economic devastation the plant closing would cause in the Youngstown area. Together they launched a substantial movement for reopening the plant under worker-community control. A feasibility study concluded that the plant could produce steel at a competitive price if sufficient government credit or loan guarantees were made available, and if government procurement policies supported the company. In short, it called for something like the TVA, which would operate to meet social needs in ways which ignored the regular capitalist criteria of profitability.

The obstacles to the development of worker-community controlled production at Youngstown Sheet and Tube may well prove insurmountable. But the fact that the issue has been raised in such a way is itself significant. It represents the beginning of an assertion that there are other things besides profitability that should determine how and where capital is allocated, that society needs to take into account the effects of production on human needs and on all aspects of human life. The issue of whether production should be under the control of those who do the work, and for the needs of society, is "on the agenda."

The convergence of "movements from within" and "movements from without" poses a powerful threat to those who run our society. Hence those in power naturally try to manipulate the present social crisis and divide the forces for change by playing off one group against another. It is important to avoid playing into the hands of such attempts at "salami tactics":

\*"Greedy" workers are being blamed for inflation. "Public opinion" is being mobilized through "wage guidelines" and other means to oppose the attempts of each group of workers to



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keep up with inflation. Attempts to maintain decent conditions of work are attacked as inflationary because they forestall management efforts to increase "productivity" through speed-up.

\*There has been an attempt to play off workers in the private sector against those in the public sector, the poor, and minorities. Budget and tax cuts have been presented as panaceas for economic problems. This was seen most clearly in the Proposition 13 referendum in California. Working people need tax reform; that need is being manipulated to pass tax measures which actually benefit the well-to-do. This was clearly the case with Proposition 13, which benefitted landlords and real estate interests more than the ordinary home owners to whom it was designed to appeal. Such issues neatly distract attention from the great wealth at the top and the tax loopholes that help maintain it.

\*Attempts have been made to mobilize opposition to the social rights won by women, manifested by opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment and an attempt to eliminate Medicare payments for abortions—in effect making them available for the well-off but not for the poor. These efforts have manipulated a well-intentioned desire to rebuild such institutions as the church and family as a means of social survival in a threatening period of change.

\*Attempts are being made to revive a militaristic nationalism of the sort that was largely interred by the lessons learned in the Vietnam War. The military establishment is currently lobbying for a revival of the draft. Top government officials have explicitly stated that American military forces would be used in the Middle East if necessary to protect U.S. interests. Energy and economic problems are being blamed on other countries—lest the blame fall on our own economic system. The military budget has continued to grow as other government programs have been cut back.

\*Environmentalists are being played off against workers and the poor. The latter are being told that protection of the environment threatens their jobs. Environmentalists are told that workers oppose protection of the environment. The nuclear power industry has even tried to use unions and black groups as the spokespeople for expanding nuclear power, on the specious grounds that it will create more jobs.

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The key to fighting such salami tactics lies in establishing coalitions for mutual support. We need to create a broad community of allies who will support each other on all the issues that affect working people's lives. Those who participate in "struggles from within" and "struggles from without" need to support each others' demands.

There are two dangers to which any strategy for social change may succumb. One is that movements will limit their objectives and agree to accept control of social institutions by a minority as long as limited concessions are made to their particular group. We need to assert the principle that centers of power not equally open to the control of all are illegitimate. Movements may make tactical compromises with them when necessary, but shouldn't agree to accept their power in the future—even when these power centers accede to the movement's "legitimate demands." Such a refusal is necessary to avoid the common fate of trade unionism, which agreed to accept "management's right to manage" in exchange for the right to bargain over wages and benefits—and found itself, as a result, often serving as the cop who prevented workers from challenging management's power at work.

The second danger is that the institutions created by social movements themselves become independent centers of power separate from the uncontrolled by their rank-and-file participants. Rank-and-file groups need to retain their own freedom of action. They should cooperate and form coalitions with those with whom they share interests—but they should be careful not to give away their own power to act on their own initiative and on their own behalf. Further, they should protect their power to communicate and coordinate directly with other rank-and-file groups, independent of control by any central organization or bureaucracy. It is only by retaining this power that they can protect themselves against being sold out—and can maintain grassroots control of the movement and of the social transformation it generates.

Almost daily prices rise and most people are able to buy less of things they need. We are told to reduce our travel and heat because there is a shortage of energy. We are told to reduce our expectations for social services because there is a shortage of resources available for them. And what cure is recom-

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mended in nearly all quarters for inflation and shortages? Letting the millions of unemployed construct solar energy accumulators, build public transportation systems, and provide expanded public services? No. Democrat or Republican, liberal or conservative, economist or policy maker, nearly all call for increasing unemployment, reducing production, and holding down the incomes of working people. As the *New York Times* business section recently stated, "The Carter White House clearly prefers recession, if choose it must, to double-digit inflation."<sup>6</sup> What could show more clearly the price we have to pay for a system of social production which is not based on using available resources to meet human needs?

There is an alternative, but it does not lie in one or another government economic policy. It lies in reorganizing social production to serve the interests of all, rather than the profits of a small minority. But that is not an alternative which can be realized by an Executive Order or even by a Constitutional Amendment. It entails the entire process which we have been discussing, a series of experimental actions through which people can develop the capacity to organize themselves and fight for their needs. Only through this process of organization and struggle can we learn how to assert our control over our society.

## Footnotes

1. Calculated from table on page xx, *Economic Indicators*, April, 1979, Council of Economic Advisers, Washington, 1979.
2. Ibid. p. 11.
3. A.H. Raskin, "Coal Dust Darkens the Bargaining Table," *Fortune*, April 24, 1978, p. 62.
4. Ibid. p. 58
5. Ibid. p. 62
6. *New York Times*, May 27, 1979

# INTRODUCTION

"Hard times" — they're something difficult to pin down, even when you can feel them all around you. It's not just high prices, or the difficulty of finding a job or trouble getting fuel, housing and food, the things you need to live. Hard times really mean an end to everything wrapped up in the phrase "living well."

Faced with deteriorating conditions, threatened by the destruction of their established way of life, millions of people over the past two years have begun questioning aspects of their society they have long taken for granted and turning to actions they have never before considered. As a contribution to this process, this book will examine the problems of daily life as they are experienced; uncover their roots in the way our society is organized; report on the ways people are already getting together to cope with them; and show how these actions can be made the starting point for a challenge to the power of those who control the life of our society.

Until recently, such a challenge seemed unnecessary — indeed undesirable — to most Americans. For since the Great Depression some forty years ago, most people have lived better each year than they did the year before and expected such improvement to continue into the future.

But now that expectation has been undermined. For many people, the standard of living began to decline in the mid-60's. During 1974 and early 1975, real take-home pay for a typical worker decreased 9.5% as a result of inflation<sup>1</sup> — a loss which has yet to be made up. Meanwhile, unemployment reached the highest levels since the Great Depression — and remained there through nearly a year of reputed "business upswing." What once seemed like a good income is now hardly enough to get by on. Many people do not eat as well, have been forced to give up hopes and plans, or find it necessary to take on extra work.

\*Footnotes have been provided for readers seeking sources for quotations, suggestions for further reading and discussion of various technical issues, starting on page 231.

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Does the future promise an end to such conditions? The chances seem slim. The country might well experience a rapid but temporary "business revival" — accompanied by a resurgence of inflation. Alternatively, revival may falter and unemployment rise still higher. Neither development would alter the underlying deterioration of living conditions for most people. For while business indices may fluctuate and politicians may promise that "prosperity is just around the corner," in reality we are in the midst of a world-wide economic crisis with no end in sight. Most people recognize this; as pollster Peter D. Hart stated at the end of 1975, "The public does not expect any substantial improvement in economic conditions in the foreseeable future. The public believes that the current respite from the severe difficulties of a year ago is nothing more than the calm before the storm."

The particular forms taken by hard times today may be different from those of the past, inflation and shortages may have joined unemployment, but the basic reality for most people — living less well — is the same. And when their way of life is threatened, people have little choice but to try to do something about it. As a union official warned, working people are

"scared as hell. Unless we get straightened out, we are in for a hell of a lot of trouble. I'm not talking about strikes. I'm talking about real social upheaval. We'll see riots in supermarkets, gasoline stations and other places."<sup>2</sup>

Such actions have already begun. The past two years have seen the largest protest in American history — the nationwide consumer boycott of meat. They saw the truckers' blockades, the first coordinated national tie-up of traffic ever. They saw the largest strike wave since 1946. They saw an unprecedented industry-wide wildcat strike by coal miners against employers, union, and government. They saw a series of occupations of factories and other workplaces, practically unknown in the U.S. since the 1930's.

Many people are trying to figure out just what kinds of action can be effective. At a gas station in Lincoln, Nebraska, we overheard two men talking. The older one, about fifty, said:

The thing that gets me is that what you have to pay for food, gas, rent, you name it, keeps going up, but if you're a worker, your wages don't go up. It doesn't matter whether you work construction or in a factory or drive a truck or anything else, it's all the same.

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The younger one, about twenty-five, replied, "I think we should strike." The other answered:

I think what we should do is turn Robin Hood, go out and take the stuff from the rich and give it to the poor people. After all, they're stealing from us, especially the ones up in Washington.

Once again, as in John Steinbeck's description of the Great Depression of the 1930s:

In the eyes of the people there is a failure. . . . In the souls of the people the grapes of wrath are filling and growing heavy, growing heavy for the vintage.<sup>3</sup>

That wrath results from the fact that those who own and manage this society are proving themselves unwilling and unable to provide a decent life for the majority. They can no longer be looked to for solutions to the problems most people have to cope with day by day. Whatever action they take, they will take in their own interest. People have become the victims of a system which functions to meet the needs of the rich and powerful. The choice for the majority is to either accept a continuing deterioration of their way of life or break the power of those who now control society.

A basic argument runs through every chapter of this book. The life of our society is based on the cooperative labor of the great majority who do the work; it is controlled by the small minority of owners, managers, businessmen, politicians and bureaucrats for whom they work. For most people, every aspect of daily life is shaped by the power of the dominant minority. What you experience at work, what you have available to meet your needs at home, the very environment in which you live—all depend upon the often chaotic interaction of decisions made by the rich and powerful.

When things go smoothly, when the ways to achieve a good life seem evident, most people see this control by others as something to accept, not something to challenge. But when, as now, people's needs go unmet, when the future looks bleak, when the power of that minority promises nothing but misery, insecurity and endless labor, then it is time to put an end to the system of minority control.

The means to do so are at hand. Our society is created by what working people do in their daily life. Corporations would crumble,



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governments collapse and armies disintegrate if those whose activity made them up simply refused to continue the behavior that maintains them. If the majority took control of their own activity, they would have the power to shape this activity as they choose, and thereby shape society. This reality gives ordinary people, who often appear so powerless, a great potential power. What is necessary to end minority rule is for the majority to *use that power*.

Even in normal times, people join together in a variety of ways—strikes, informal resistance on the job, consumer boycotts, community protests—to challenge particular aspects of minority power. In the past two years, under the pressure of deteriorating conditions of life, millions of people have adopted such techniques of action. For those who do not own or run this society, the key to making a good life under today's conditions is to turn these actions into a concerted challenge to every aspect of minority control.

Each of us evolves a strategy for living in the world. It is pieced together from what we learned as children, what we have observed others doing, what we have learned from our own experience and the ideas we have of what might work in the future. Such strategies can be quite conscious plans and decisions or they can be largely a matter of unconscious habit, just repeating what an individual—or his social group—has “always done.” Strategies that are well adapted to real social conditions work—people find their activity meaningful and useful in getting what they need and want. But when realities change, the old strategies may stop working; accepted practices no longer “make sense” or achieve their objectives. We believe this is exactly what is happening today.

The basic strategy most people have adopted over the past quarter of a century has been an acceptance of the existing organization of society and an attempt to make their way within it as individuals. There have been exceptions: many people have joined together to defend their interests on a small scale or to protest particular policies. But the basic strategy for making a good life has been to get more education, find a higher-paying job and move into a better neighborhood *as individuals*. Because of an expanding economy, relative social stability and luck in forestalling a variety of potential social disasters, such a strategy by and large has worked.

It is natural to cling to strategies that have worked in the past, but dangerous to do so when reality has changed so that the strategy no longer fits. We believe that the strategy of individual advancement within the existing organization of society can now only lead to individual and social disaster.

When old strategies break down, it is natural to look for new ones. One possibility, to which some people are turning today, is a kind of fatalism, often justified in spiritual or religious terms, that abandons any effort to act in the world. As one young man told us: "If I can't change my scene, I have to change my head." Such fatalism was also a common reaction to the beginning of the Great Depression, and this attitude weakened every effort to end the horrible and unnecessary suffering of that period. Another method is to work through the established political institutions to select representatives who will make necessary changes. Such approaches have been notoriously unsuccessful of late, both because the political apparatus itself overwhelmingly favors those with wealth and power, and because the main centers of power in our society lie beyond the control of elected politicians. A third possibility is to try to solve the problems of one race or nation at the expense of others, often by force. This approach reached its logical conclusion in the military aggression and mass exterminations by the Nazis. A fourth possibility is to organize all society under a giant government bureaucracy, whose managers make all decisions and direct the labor of everyone. The tyrannical outcome of such an approach is indicated by the state socialism of the countries in the Eastern bloc.

We can learn from history that these approaches do not work, but we cannot learn what will work. To solve our problems we shall have to create something new, a type of social organization that presently does not exist. Only by acting in new ways, analyzing the results and trying again can we develop the means to create such a society. Such a process is risky—but far less risky than continuing to follow strategies which we know are doomed.

Fortunately, the elements of an alternative strategy are already being forged in the activity and thought of millions of people. The actions and discussions recounted throughout this book indicate that many of the ideas and tactics necessary to challenge minority power are already widespread. These familiar approaches, applied on a massive scale for more far-reaching objectives, would provide the majority of working people with an irresistible social power. With such power, they could wrest control of society from the owners, managers, bureaucrats and politicians, and organize their activities to meet their own needs.

Such a task may seem impossible. But the development of society has already laid the basis for it. Our entire life is now based on the interdependence of millions of people all over the world, each living on products the others produce; this interdependence creates a



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network of social cooperation which, if people took control of it, would allow them to shape their mutual activity.

Most people already use cooperative strategies on a small scale at certain points in the course of their daily lives. As the great majority of society and the creators of its life, they possess a power potentially greater than any other social force. Faced with deteriorating conditions and disastrous alternatives, that majority can choose to expand the scope of its cooperation to the point of taking complete control of its social activity. Only such a strategy can promise survival, security and a daily life not sacrificed to the needs of the few.

Such action is often viewed as impossible because of the supposedly fixed characteristics of the working people who make up the majority of our society. There are a number of stereotypes by which workers are commonly portrayed. Sometimes they are presented as a "silent majority," one-dimensional puppets dedicated to preserving the status quo, whatever it may be. Alternatively, they are seen as dissatisfied and alienated, perhaps potential followers of left-wing or right-wing politicians. They may be portrayed as intolerant Archie Bunkers and ignorant "Joe Six-Packs" or as sinister "authoritarian personalities." Occasionally they are viewed as ripe for revolution, if only given the "right" leadership.<sup>4</sup>

We believe all such stereotypes contain more insult than insight. All bear the mark of some other group—most often politicians, managers or intellectuals—looking down their noses, threatened and uneasy, at the majority of society. In this book, we view people not as fixed objects to be classified and labelled, but as human beings engaged in making their own lives. From this perspective, it is possible to make sense of most people's actions as reasonable responses to the situations they face, given the information and resources available to them. Throughout American history, as the conditions faced by the majority have changed, so have their responses. At those times when collective action has seemed necessary and promising, millions of people have in fact turned to it as a means of solving their problems. Mass strikes and other actions by working people, often acting outside of any official union or political channels, have been a repeated feature of American life, but one which has been largely omitted from history books. Likewise today, collective action by working people is often massive, but frequently passes with little notice.

The sheer fact that people's experiences take place entirely within the existing society often makes the idea of any fundamental change

in that society seem a mere fantasy. A lower level manager at an auto plant in Detroit told us: "Someone will always have to come out on top. It's human nature, and animal nature too. It's always been that way and it always will be."

We believe that such assumptions are false. Society can be transformed because of the following facts about human nature—facts borne out, we believe, by the whole of human history:

*Human beings can change.* They are far less guided than other animals by fixed, inborn instincts which direct their action. For that reason, human history has been a history of change. At any given time people's existing patterns may seem so fixed as to be immutable. Yet over and over again, people have in fact been able to transform their patterns of thinking and living when it has become clear that their old strategies no longer work. They have been able to do so with amazing speed when necessary.

*Human beings can cooperate.* Even more than other mammals, they are social beings, interdependent and equipped with complex means to communicate with each other, to make joint plans and to modulate each other's behavior. This by no means implies that people always cooperate. Nor is this capacity always used for good—cooperation may be arbitrarily limited to a narrow group or used for the most destructive of purposes. But the ability to cooperate is there and people can use it, if they so choose, to serve their individual needs far more effectively than they ever could alone.

*Human beings can think.* For individuals and groups, action is not just a reflex; it is guided by people's ideas about the world in which they live. These ideas do not arise in a realm cut off from the world of action and experience; on the contrary, there is a constant back-and-forth exchange between the realm of ideas and the world in which people face and cope with the problems of daily life. The ideas on which people act are their tools for functioning in that world; they are guided by past experience and by possibilities for future action of individuals and groups. To understand how people think and act, it is necessary to examine the contexts out of which their thought and action come. And to decide how to act, it is necessary to examine the realities in which you find yourself and to evaluate your ideas in terms of them.

We believe human beings can realistically hope to create good lives for themselves as long as they retain the capacity to change, to cooperate, to think and to create new social solutions to the problems they face.

## *Introduction*

In this book, we have tried to combine insights and information from a number of different sources. Much of the book is based on a trip we took around the country in the summer of 1973, visiting the pleasure spots—Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Detroit, Gary, Seattle, Portland, Los Angeles and smaller towns in between. Many of our insights have come from the Teamsters with whom Tim works, and with whom many of our ideas were discussed. We have drawn on Jeremy's research in labor history to try to understand the historical roots of what is going on today. We have tried to bring to bear whatever we could find that others have written on the subjects we were pursuing.

The problems people face today are global in origin; all humanity will have to cooperate in their solution. While the context of this book is limited to the United States, the action it calls for will have to cross all boundaries of nationality and place in order to be effective. Indeed, those boundaries and the forces that preserve them are among the greatest obstacles to creating a secure basis for a good life.

We hope readers will not take this book as any kind of last word, but rather as a starting point from which they can take what is useful to them, criticize what seems wrong and add what they know from their own experience. We wrote it, not to prove any argument or theory, but because we want to participate with others who share the same problems in a common effort to avert impending catastrophe and make a good life for ourselves. Above all, we have tried to develop a method for analyzing the social world and the roots of its problems—a method that others can apply for themselves.

Throughout this book, our starting point for thinking about society is not what happens in the president's Oval Office or the board rooms of some powerful corporation, but the basic life situation of ordinary people. We focus on daily life for two reasons. First, as we have emphasized, our whole society is based on the daily activity of working people—taking control of that activity is the key to transforming society. Second, daily life is what most people are most concerned with, and rightly so. Living well day by day, not some abstract principle or future glory, should be the objective of social life. What happens every day is the actual substance of human life; if it is unpleasant, stunting, impoverished or unfree, any political, religious or philosophical justification is hollow.

Almost everyone has experienced times that have been good, when they have felt happy and fulfilled. Almost everyone can remember activities that have been enjoyable and creative expressions of themselves. Of course, what people want and need changes over time and differs for different individuals. But a good life

depends on having the freedom to do what you want and having the resources with which to do it. If they had the choice, most people would no doubt choose a way of life which makes such experiences possible.

The relative prosperity of the past quarter of a century raised hopes that our society might be entering an era of "post-scarcity" in which such a good life would be available to all. But that prospect now seems highly unlikely. For most people, the few years they are given here on earth must be dedicated primarily to making a living at work they would rarely do by choice, under the command of employers who use their labor for their own purposes. Even that employment is rarely secure; the threat of being out of work lurks constantly and from time to time is realized. After a lifetime of such labor, people are sent into retirement with a few years of pensioned-off old age left before they die. With the advent of hard times, even the relatively high standard of living which has been enjoyed since the Great Depression and has helped compensate for the other meannesses of life is being replaced by a life of scraping to get by. At the same time, the natural and social environment is descending into a mire of pollution and decay, destroying the overall quality of life. Finally, the future promises a continuation of the chronic international warfare that has marked recent decades, taking the lives of many who fight and accompanied always by the threat of mass destruction through nuclear, chemical and biological war.

Nearly two hundred years ago, on the eve of the American Revolution, Thomas Paine wrote in his famous pamphlet *Common Sense* that "a long habit of not thinking a thing *wrong*, gives it a superficial appearance of being *right*."<sup>5</sup> Paine asserted that the domination of the North American colonies by Britain, accepted for over a century as inevitable and even desirable, was in fact a form of slavery which promised nothing but impoverishment and oppression for those subjected to it. His argument for a complete end to British power in America rapidly swept a country in economic and political crisis; the discussion and action it provoked helped lay the groundwork for the revolution that was to come. We believe that today the time has come for a complete end to the power of owners, managers, politicians and bureaucrats over the lives of the majority who now must work for them. This power may superficially appear to be legitimate simply because it has so long been accepted, but today it guarantees impoverishment and oppression for the majority of our society. The opportunity to declare its independence from that power—indeed the chance to abolish it—lies in the hands of that majority.





# I WORKING



"We have made this daily experience—the power of employers over the labors of others—the starting point for this book because it is the key to understanding our society and its present crisis. It is through their control of other people's labor—so easily taken for granted—that employers can shape every aspect of life, on and off the job alike. Only by abolishing that power can people get control of their lives, either at work or away from it."

# 1. THE TIME OF YOUR LIFE

We were sitting in a kitchen in Chicago drinking coffee, while Sam Howard was making sandwiches to take to work. Sam worked swing shift in the morgue at a Chicago newspaper, and it was nearly three o'clock. What Sam said to us could have been said by tens of millions of other people that day:

It's terrible having your whole day revolve around work. No matter what you're doing, you always have to keep an eye on that clock. It's not that I would worry about showing up late for the company—I wouldn't mind getting fired that much anyway. But it would just mean more work for the other guys.

Whatever else it is, for most people work is unfreedom. It means giving up the time of your life to an employer to use for his purposes. Work consumes more time than anything else most people do during their waking hours. Contrary to a widespread myth, full-time workers work just about as long on the average today as they did forty or fifty years ago—nearly fifty hours a week on the job or commuting to and from it.<sup>1</sup>

We have made this daily experience—the power of employers over the labor of others—the starting point for this book because it is the key to understanding our society and its present crisis. It is through their control of other people's labor—so easily taken for granted—that employers can shape every aspect of life, on and off the job alike. Only by abolishing that power can people get control of their lives, either at work or away from it.

Having to spend the time of your life working for someone else often seems as inescapable as death itself. The reason is obvious—for all but a privileged few work is the main source of income. In a

## *The Time of Your Life*

society where almost everything you need has to be paid for, the amount of money you have goes a long way toward determining the quality of life. No doubt "money doesn't buy happiness," but the lack of it can bring misery. As Bertolt Brecht put it:

Ah, how very sorely they're mistaken,  
They who think that money doesn't count.  
Fruitfulness turns into famine  
When the kindly stream gives out.  
Each one starts to yell and grabs it where he can.  
Even were it not so hard to live  
He who doesn't hunger yet is fearful. . . .  
Good plus money, too, is what it takes  
To keep man virtuous without a slip.<sup>2</sup>

Most people in our society have barely enough to support themselves for a few weeks or months into the future—many are even in debt. The most recent U.S. government study available, made in 1962, found that 44 percent of American households had less than \$5000 in assets, and 60 percent had less than \$10,000.<sup>3</sup> The wages that most people receive from their employers, even when enough to provide relative comfort, consign them to what a forty-five-year-old Teamster in Boston called a "week-to-week, paycheck-to-paycheck life." In the week-to-week world of most people, loss of a job can be a catastrophe, especially in times of high unemployment. Finding and keeping a job becomes an absolute necessity. As an old chant of the Wobblies—members of the militant Industrial Workers of the World in the early years of this century—put it: "We go to work to get the dough to buy the goods to get the strength to go to work to get the dough. . . ." Such conditions make insecurity a way of life.

Why does the need for goods and services—and the money with which to buy them—lead to having to sell the time of your life to someone else? The answer is evident. People cannot produce the things they need out of thin air with their bare hands. To produce requires natural resources and the tools, equipment and machinery that people have made in the past, not to mention something to live on while you are producing. But most people possess none of these things; they have barely enough to support themselves for a few weeks or months. The sophisticated machines, large factories, fleets of ships, trains and trucks, the vast tracts of oil fields, farmlands and coal mines, are owned by a small minority. These are the means by which the great bulk of society's needs are met. And since the only

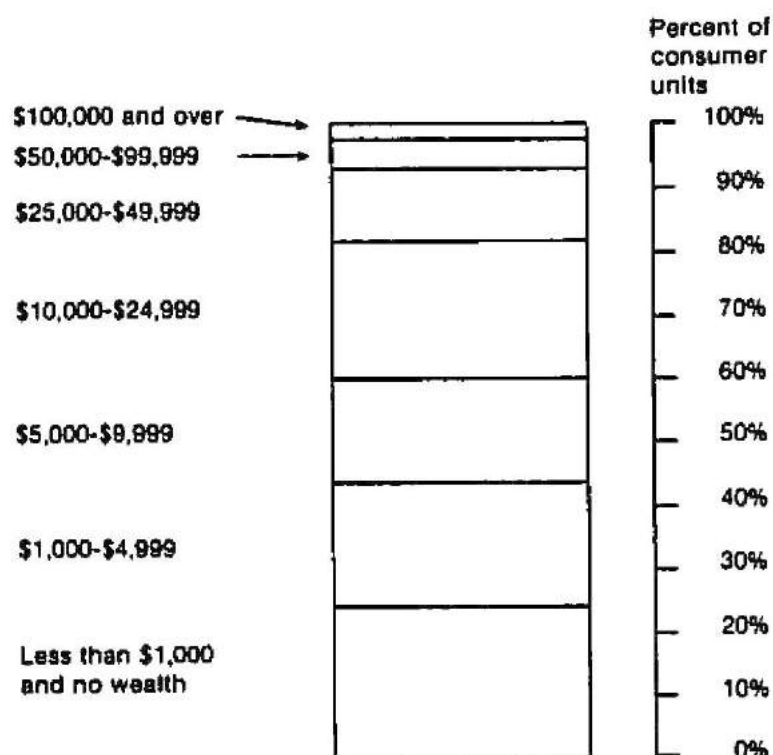


## Working

thing most people have to exchange for the things they need is the time of their lives, they have to go to work for those who own these means of production if they are to live.

### Most People Possess Little Wealth

The most recent government figures on the distribution of wealth show that in 1962, 60 percent of consumer units possessed less than \$10,000 wealth—including their cars, homes and savings. Our society is rich, but most people have little share in its wealth. Most families have no way to live for more than a few weeks or months without working.



Source: *Social Indicators*, 1973. U.S. Department of Commerce, Washington, D.C., 1973.

The news media have recently been full of reports that workers, especially young workers, are dissatisfied with their work. College professors have announced the astonishing finding that a large proportion of jobs are boring, unfulfilling and detested. But it doesn't take a sociological survey to find out how people feel about work—just try asking the next five people you meet.

What makes so many people resent the work they have to do? It is not just an irrational railing against the fact that, no matter what kind

of society they live in, people have to produce the things they need. Most people understand that the products they consume do not spring ready-to-use from the earth; they know that you have to change what nature offers to meet your needs.

Nor does this resentment of work stem from a desire to be as passive as possible, to lie around and do nothing at all. Many of the people we talked with had passionate interests of their own which they would have pursued if they had not had to work. Indeed, many of life's greatest pleasures and satisfactions come from people's own activity—witness the energy people give to the things they do by choice, from sports to making music to making love to the finest works of craftsmanship and art.

There are often some aspects of their activity at work that people enjoy. For many, work provides an important part of their social contact with others. The work itself may at times be interesting, challenging or pleasurable. And even if it is not, the job may provide a framework of activity around which life can be organized. Since they are born, raised and live as adults in a society where most people are expected to spend the heart of their days working, work is the normal way to be active in the world. A thirty-eight-year-old truck driver explained:

I like the layoff time. Life is more than work. When I was younger I used to work all the time, all year 'round with just a short vacation—I'm talking fifty, sixty or more hours a week. Hey, no more. My wife works, I get by and take a lot of time during the summer. But I still work more than I have to, I suppose, because it gets me out of the house in the winter. Every year I get laid off, you know, I can't wait for the layoff. But after a while, a couple of months, I want to get back. It's not the job; Christ! That's monotonous, doing the same thing every day—I don't care for it—but it gets me out.

But if most people enjoy activity, most jobs are anything but an expression of their interest in an activity they would pursue for its own sake. On the contrary, going to work usually means giving up the possibility of determining your own activity, and relinquishing this control to the employer who has hired you. At times, such work can provide some measure of satisfaction but it is, above all, time when you are not free to pursue your own activities and desires. Such work is all too meaningful—it means giving up the time of your life. The real reason people resent work is that it is first and foremost the realm of unfreedom.

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In theory, of course, people are free to choose their work. But most jobs are hardly what people would do, given the choice. Few people plan to grow up to install gas tanks in Chevrolets or to work as file clerks in insurance offices. Even those who get specialized education or training usually have to choose their occupation on the basis of where the jobs are available—otherwise, they have little chance of finding a job that uses their training. What job you're in depends more than anything on what job openings you find—often as much a matter of accident as anything else.

As resentment about work has grown more visible in the past few years, managers, academics and a variety of would-be reformers have proposed various schemes for "job enrichment" to make work more fulfilling and expressive of personal needs.<sup>4</sup> But such plans, however well-meaning, do little more than gild the bars of the prison to which people are consigned for the best part of their days. They may alleviate some of the worst abuses, but they cannot touch the basic source of resentment about work in our society—the fact that it is forced servitude.

Even the more specific grievances about work result directly from this condition of subordination. The fact that you have to spend your time under the control of someone else means that you spend it under conditions that at best are not what you would freely choose, at worst downright destructive to the mind and body. Irene Pastrio, a young woman who worked in a clothing factory in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, told us:

The air is so bad that when you blow your nose it's full of lint and blood. People's arms are green from working on newly dyed uniforms.

Howard Kalado, a young man who had worked in the U.S. Steel mills, in Gary, Indiana, spoke of equally bad conditions:

I already lost about half my hearing working there in one year. And all the time I was breathing hot filings and dust from the heated steel—that doesn't do you any good, either.

Howard had escaped the mills and gone to college, but he lost his savings and went into debt trying to start a community newspaper. When we met him, he had just gone back to work in the mills. He put his feelings succinctly: "Yesterday was the worst day of my life."

It is not only your time that an employer extracts. You have to give

up control of your every movement, turn over your muscles, nerves and mind to someone else to use as he or she sees fit. A waitress in Boston told us:

Waitressing is totally demanding, physically and mentally. Take Brigham's, for example, working at a counter. Even if no one is there, you're supposed to be busy all the time. Even if there's nothing to do the manager will yell at you if you don't look busy. . . . Then you have to remember the orders. At Brigham's, for example, I handled eleven at a time, carrying them all in my head. One restaurant here has a menu literally half the size of the table—it's a sort of joke—and the waitress may have to master a hundred or more different possible orders. If you're like me and your mind turns to jelly under pressure, it can be a real nightmare. . . .

Since the job is supposed to be totally mindless, you feel really stupid when they yell at you for making mistakes, although the work is mentally very demanding in fact. It's as if the whole thing was designed just to humiliate you.

Such humiliation is possible because of workers' subordination. Employers are in a position to treat them like children. Irene Pastrio, the clothing factory worker, told us:

The man who hired me said, "You don't want to work here, you're too intelligent." He talked as if the other women who worked there were mules. . . . It is literally true that they would instruct me in how to hold my little finger while running the sewing machine.

A worker from another sweatshop in Portland, Oregon, told us that you actually had to raise your hand to go to the bathroom.

Along with the authority of the supervisor goes the attempt to squeeze more labor out of workers. A student at the University of Massachusetts described a job at an ice cream chain:

What really gets to you on a job like that is having the supervisor always breathing down your neck, keeping you turning out the orders as fast as you can bear it. It's like being on piece rate, where you have to turn out so many pieces in an hour.

The pressure to work fast for the employer's benefit can greatly reduce whatever intrinsic satisfactions a job might have. This was



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brought out when we went on a late-night call-in radio show in Detroit, most of whose callers were just coming off the night shift from the auto plants. One of them expressed a sentiment voiced by many who called:

How can you have "pride in your work" when the company doesn't care? They just want to make production. When I first started I tried to do the job right, but after a few months I decided what's the point, they don't care.

We talked to one worker who loved his job. Steven Harper was about twenty-five, and his great passion was for skilled craft work. He made guitars as a hobby, and would have liked to make violins for a living. He loved working with tools, so he considered himself very lucky to get a job as an apprentice toolmaker at a tool and die shop in Warren, Michigan, a suburb of Detroit. The company made machines for the auto industry, such as one which would take a rough casting at one end and produce a finished carburetor at the other. Such a machine might be fifteen feet by thirty feet, and require tolerances of 2/1000 of an inch. Because tool and die makers are highly skilled workers and nobody else can do the job, their relation to the employer and the work is quite unusual. Steven told us:

I've never heard a foreman tell anybody to work harder. . . . It doesn't matter how many times you have to do it as long as you get it right. The guys work at a nice easy pace. The foremen don't really discipline the workers at all—they're more like master workmen. They've been working there for thirty years and know how to do everything. They are under pressure themselves to speed the work, but they never hassle the workers.

Steven Harper found his job as an apprentice toolmaker overwhelmingly better than his previous jobs in auto assembly lines and forge departments, but he still wanted to get away from it eventually if he could. For one thing, he wanted to pursue the activity that interested him most, making musical instruments. For another, as he told us: "I just don't like having to get up and go to work every day, just to meet someone else's schedule."

It all adds up to the fact that the various complaints about work are rooted in having to give up the time of your life to the control of someone else. It's a bit like selling yourself into slavery, only it's done a little at a time. Of course, unlike a slave, you can always quit.

But then you will just have to go to work for another employer. So, in effect, a worker is a slave to employers as a group—you get to pick your master. Conditions may be better or worse, but as long as people live in a society where those who do the work are a group distinct from those who control it, this basic situation will remain the same. As someone once put it: “You either own it or you work for it.”

Of course, many people look for avenues of escape. Some start small businesses so they can be their own bosses. A young truck driver in Pittsburgh told us he didn't like truck driving, didn't like having a boss: “I'd like to have my own business and have some 290-pound guys who like to work for me. I'd sit on my ass, travel and do what I wanted while they did the work.”

But 400,000 small firms go out of business annually, 100,000 of them in their first year, carrying with them the broken hopes and lost savings of their owners.<sup>5</sup> And even those few who manage to survive in business often find competitive conditions so bad that they would be better off as workers. “I had a gas station for a while,” a factory worker in Pittsburgh explained, “but the gas business wasn't so good, and I didn't like the long hours.”

Others try to escape by going back to school, but the motto “For a good job, get a good education” rings more hollow every year. While the cost of college soars wildly, jobs for the college-educated grow increasingly scarce—an estimated four-fifths of all new jobs in the 1970s will not require a college degree.<sup>6</sup> We found many people with at least some college education working as unskilled and semiskilled workers in factories all over the country. Andrew Korenko, for example, a crane operator at Republic Steel in Cleveland, had graduated from college in liberal arts, but was unable to find any work except in the mills. Even when college graduates do find work that requires their degree, the job is often characterized by the same lack of creativity, subordination to authority and pressure to produce as other labor.

Many people, especially younger people, work for a few months, save up some money and then quit for as long as they can survive—reviving the work pattern of migratory workers half a century ago. In this way they are able to avoid working for a while, but sooner or later they find themselves forced to look for another job.

Drugs and booze form another avenue of escape. An auto worker in Detroit told us: “You ought to write a whole chapter about dope.” Another auto worker explained: “Some people say how can you

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work stoned? But I figure, how can you do it not stoned?" And Andrew Korenko at Republic Steel said: "People start looking around to see who has any grass after about 7:30 p.m.—that's when the bosses go home. A few older guys smoke dope, and some of them bring a jug." A young worker in Portland, Oregon, pointed to the rows of frame houses surrounding his own and said: "The kids here know what work is like; that's why they spend their time instead just hanging out and doing downs."

Many people try to escape from a job that seems intolerable by looking for another job somewhere else. Yet for most people, this and all other seeming paths of escape lead right back to selling the time of their lives to an employer. They will continue to do so as long as most people don't themselves possess the means to produce what they need to live.

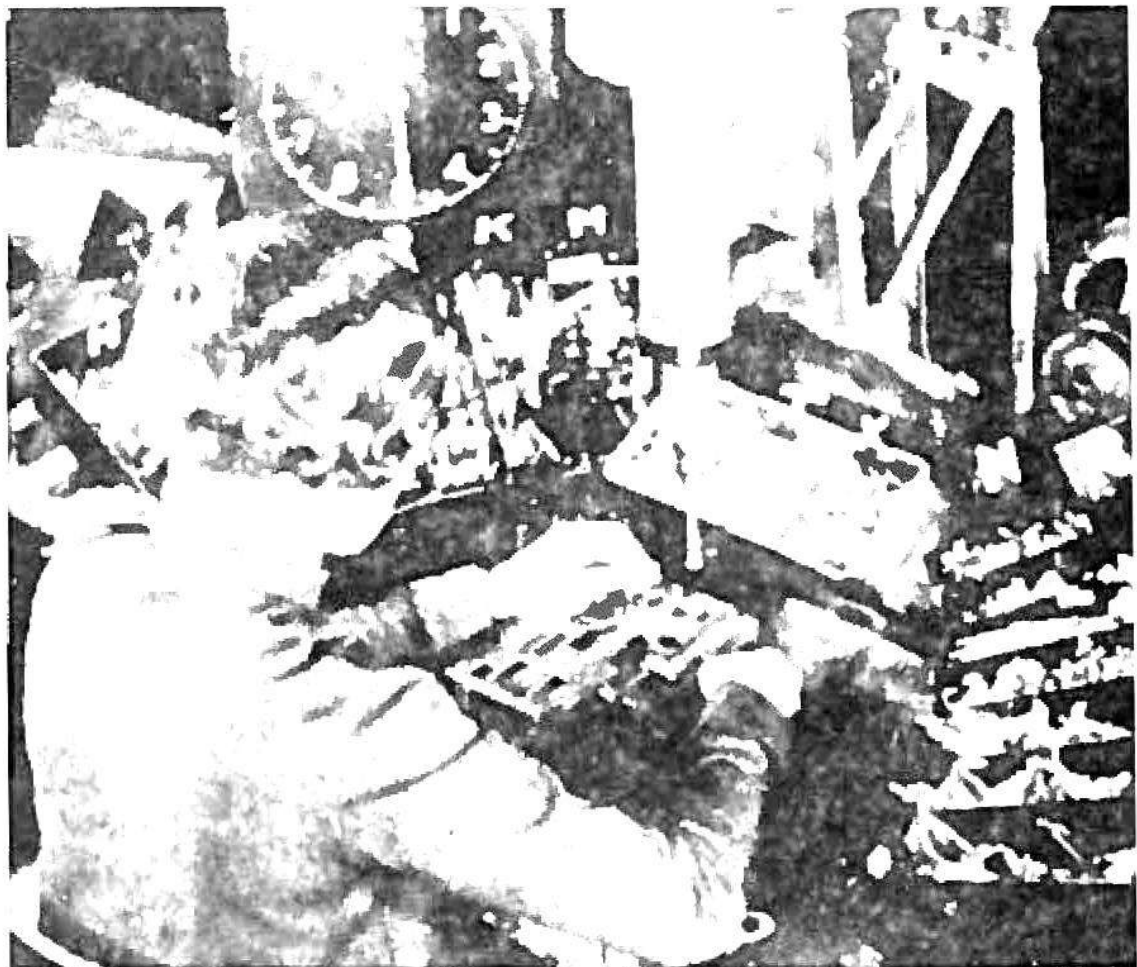
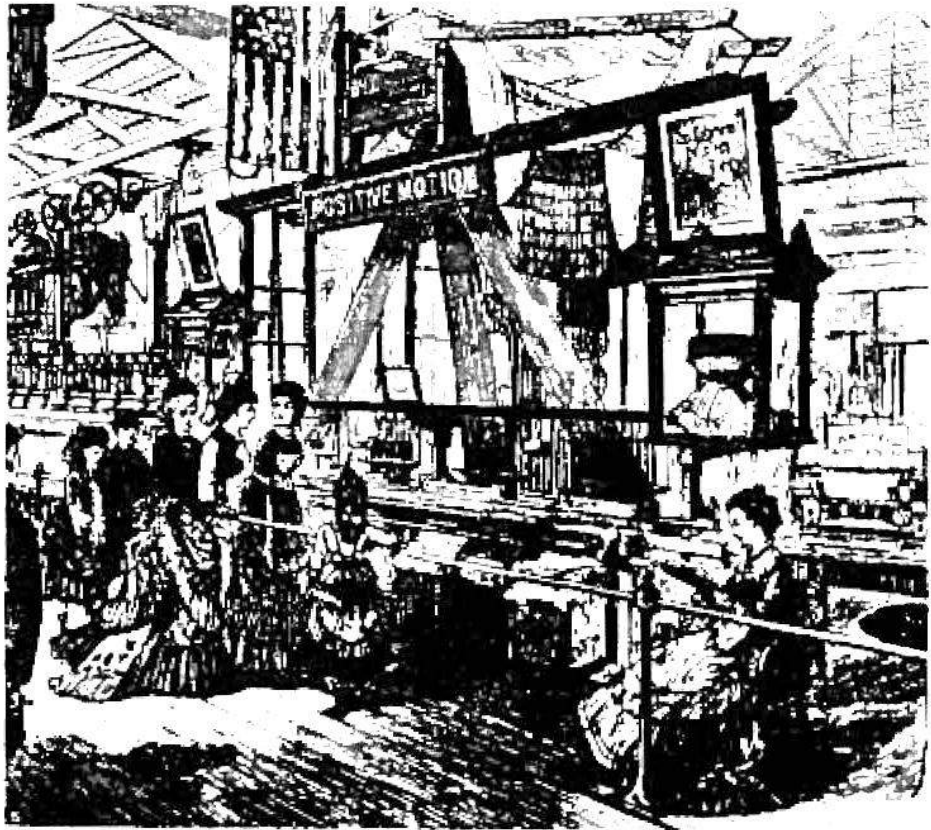
Many people, recognizing that they cannot escape this position, try to pay as little attention as possible to the realm of work. They figure, why think about work—you might just as well think about sleep. You have to do it, and there's nothing you can do to change it. They try to blot out work as much as possible and consider their real lives to be what they do away from work. One is making a living; the other living. Such a separation between work and nonwork worlds may not have been possible in the days when people worked on farms and in home workshops, but today when you finish your labor time you leave the workplace and your employer's direct authority behind. You enter a region which, compared with work, is a world of freedom, or at least of some choice. By slipping into a private world, you can create for yourself the illusion that you are free. As an old-time Wobbly militant put it: "There is a time-clock mentality, that when you punch out from the job all your involvement with the rest of society is over." At home, separated both from the workplace and those with whom you work, it is possible to forget the reality of work like a bad dream and think of yourself as a "citizen," equal with all others, free to establish your own life style, rather than as a worker who takes orders from a boss or the movements of a machine all day. Such a fantasy does little more to eradicate the miseries of work than the dreams of a prisoner that he is free. It leaves the realities of powerlessness intact in all realms of life.

No doubt people will always have to engage in some activities to meet their needs. But there is no reason that they should always have to do so for the benefit and under the control of employers separate from themselves. As the next chapter will show, the way production is organized in our society is something relatively new. If workers

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could gain control of their labor, they could transform the realm of work from an expression of servitude to an expression of their own needs and purposes—a chosen activity radically unlike the forced labor people must suffer through today. By taking control of their work, they could also take control of the society it creates.





## **2. HOW DID WE EVER END UP HERE**

### **THE WELL-BOTTOMED POTS**

The daily experience of being controlled by others conflicts with the belief that people in our society are free and equal individuals. That belief is rooted in a past that was far different from today.

At the founding of the United States two hundred years ago, employees in the modern sense were a rarity. About two-thirds of Americans were farmers, working farms they owned themselves. A large proportion of the rest were independent artisans, who, like the farmers, owned their own tools and materials and sold their products themselves, mostly to people in their town or backwoods area. Occasionally neighbors might join together when the labor of many hands was required to build a house, barn or ship, but generally the early American families worked for themselves on their own property, dividing up the tasks by age and sex. They often had to work hard for scanty return, but they decided themselves how and when they would work, and whatever they produced they owned themselves.

People made most of the products they needed at home. Edward Wakefield, an economist, described the situation in 1833:

Free Americans, who cultivate the soil, follow many other occupations. Some portion of the furniture and tools which they use is commonly made by themselves. They frequently build their own houses, and carry to market, at whatever distance, the produce of their own industry. They are spinners and weavers; they make soap and candles, as well as, in many cases, shoes and clothes for their own use. In America cultivation of land is often the secondary pursuit of a blacksmith, a miller, or a shop-keeper.<sup>1</sup>

Such people had little need for economic involvement with others because they were largely self-sufficient.

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Since most people could work for themselves, there was little reason for them to work for others. Indeed, the economist Wakefield complained:

Where land is cheap and all men are free, where every one who so pleases can easily obtain a piece of land for himself, not only is labour very dear, as respects the labourer's share of the product, but the difficulty is to obtain combined labor at any price.<sup>2</sup>

These conditions seemed natural and right to most early Americans. Individual proprietorship—the private ownership of the means of production—was felt to mean that all were free, all were equal and all were independent. The slogan “let every pot sit on its own bottom” seemed both practical and self-evidently just, for the simple reason that every pot had a bottom to sit on—every farmer could have land, every artisan his own shop. Although there were great variations in wealth, most people did not have to work for someone else—at least permanently—and rarely could anyone exercise power over others through a monopoly of the means of livelihood. The conception of economic individualism that reflected these conditions has marked American society down to the present and is the basis of the belief that it is a land of freedom and equality.

In reality, of course, there were always exceptions to this pattern. The most glaring was slavery. Europeans had early bought slaves in Africa to work the mines and sugar plantations of the West Indies and South America; later, when the North American colonies were formed, traders imported slaves into all of them. The northern colonies and the mountain regions of the South tried slavery to meet the shortage of “combined labor,” but it did not prove profitable and virtually died out. In the lowlands of the South, natural conditions proved excellent for crops like rice, tobacco, sugar and later cotton—crops for which a plantation system with slave labor was well suited. The result was the importation of large numbers of African slaves into these areas. By the first census of 1790, nearly one-fifth of all Americans, and two-fifths of those in the South, were African slaves.<sup>3</sup> Other exceptions to the rule of self-employment occurred in the major cities (where less than 4 percent of the population lived in 1820), which provided considerable employment for porters, carmen, longshoremen, seamen, house servants, seamstresses, and other wage laborers.<sup>4</sup> Many people first came to America as indentured servants, sentenced by courts in Europe or

## *How Did We Ever End Up Here?*

agreeing to work for employers in America in exchange for their boat fare. Even in rural areas, a mason, carpenter or other artisan might hire himself out to work for others. In the years to come, the control of labor by employers was to move from the margins of society to become its central structure.

### **“UNNATURAL RELATIONS”<sup>5</sup>**

The market for which early artisans produced was small, since people made most of the things they needed themselves, and it was local, since transportation was expensive and most communities had their own craftsmen. But toward the beginning of the nineteenth century cities began to grow, larger areas to the south and west were settled, and canals and railroads reduced transportation costs to a tenth or even a twentieth of former rates. This caused markets for manufactured goods to grow as well, and master workmen began to employ journeyman assistants to help them increase their production.

At first the journeyman worked side by side with the master and received only moderately less income and respect; he could expect to become a master himself within a few years. As the market continued to expand, merchants—who, unlike the master workmen, bought and sold but did not produce goods—began dealing over large areas and buying products wherever they were cheapest. This put all their suppliers into competition, no matter where they were. The whole process was clearly, if not enthusiastically, portrayed by a Massachusetts labor paper in 1847:

The rich are growing richer and the poor, poorer, and Mammon is usurping sovereignty in all places. In proportion as railroads and canals are constructed, these mammoth establishments in tanning, shoemaking, saddlery, blacksmithing, and every department of work and skill, send their productions and fabrics to distant parts of the country, and reduce smaller capitalists . . . constantly killing out their rivals and monopolizing the business to themselves.<sup>6</sup>

Master workmen responded to the new conditions by hiring more journeymen, subdividing, lengthening and intensifying their labor and cutting their wages. Merchants with capital and access to markets began to sponsor large-scale production themselves. A group of Philadelphia shoemakers protested in 1835:

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If we take a retrospective view of our trade we will find that . . . the trade has been gradually sinking, at least so far as the interests of the journeymen are concerned. The cunning men from the East have come to our city, and having capital themselves or joining with those who had, have embarked in our business and realized large fortunes by reducing our wages. . . .<sup>7</sup>

Thus evolved the forerunners of the modern industrial employer and the modern employee. Many workers understood, resented and opposed their increasing subjugation to employers, which directly contradicted the principles of freedom and economic independence of the early economy. In 1854, for example, a group of highly skilled piano makers declared that working for a daily wage—in contrast to working for themselves and selling their own product—was equivalent to slavery. They hoped that

the day is far distant when they[wage earners] will so far forget what is due to manhood as to glory in a system forced on them by their necessity and in opposition to their feelings of independence and self-respect. May the piano trade long be spared such exhibitions of the degrading power of the day [wage] system.<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, the *Awl*, published in Lynn, Massachusetts, by an association of shoemakers, compared their situation to slavery:

We are slaves in the strictest sense of the word. For do we not have to toil from the rising of the sun to the going down of the same for our masters—aye, masters, and for our daily bread?<sup>9</sup>

These changes made the older ideology of economic individualism largely obsolete. The workplace of the individual artisan was no longer efficient enough to compete economically; only an enterprise which could hire many workers and buy and sell on a large scale would thrive. Many individuals, no longer able to own the means of production necessary to make a living, had to go to work for someone else and ceased to be self-sufficient and economically independent. As enterprises grew, more and more people came to work for the same employer, thus becoming members of a work group and of a working class, with common problems, common interests and a common antagonism to their employers.

Almost as soon as there were workers, there were strikes over particular grievances. In many trades, such as shoemaking and



## *How Did We Ever End Up Here?*

printing, trade unions developed to set wages and other conditions of labor. The reasons for such combinations were made clear in a statement of the National Typographical Society in 1850:

To remedy the many disastrous grievances arising from this disparity of power [between employer and employed] combination for mutual agreement in determining rates of wages and for concert of action in maintaining them, has been resorted to in many trades and principally in our own. Its success has abundantly demonstrated its utility. Indeed, while the present wage system continues in operation, as an immediate protection from pressing calamities, it is clearly the only effective means which labor can adopt. So far as it extends it destroys competition in the labor market, unites the working people and produces a sort of equilibrium in the power of the conflicting classes.<sup>10</sup>

As many workers came to see their problems as common to other workers, whatever their trade, working class movements developed, demanding reforms to improve workers' position in society—free public schools, an end to imprisonment for debt and, above all, a shorter working day. Yet early American workers by no means accepted the idea that they might permanently remain in what seemed to them the unnatural position of employees, and much of their organized effort was directed toward alternatives to the emerging system of capitalism. They participated in attempts to create producers' cooperatives, rural utopian communities and movements to keep public lands available for settlement as an escape from permanent status as workers. While none of these strategies proved to be a viable alternative to the new system—known to friends and foes alike as capitalism—they indicate that in its early stages workers were looking for such alternatives.<sup>11</sup> As the printers' union continued in its argument for working class organization:

[We] regard such an organization not only as an agent of immediate relief, but also as an essential to the ultimate destruction of those unnatural relations at present subsisting between the interests of the employing and the employed classes. . . .

A combination merely to fix and sustain a scale of prices is of minor importance compared with that combination which looks to an ultimate redemption of labor . . . when labor determines to sell itself no longer to speculators, but to become its own employer, to own and enjoy itself and the fruit thereof, the necessity for scales of prices will have passed away and



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labor will be forever rescued from the control of the capitalist.<sup>12</sup>

### **THE "INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION"**

Labor for others might have remained an island surrounded by a sea of individual proprietorship, had the methods of production themselves not been revolutionized by the development of machinery. A series of inventions, starting with the power loom, the spinning machine and the steam engine, made it possible to do by machine the work that had previously been done by skilled human labor. Machine production required a larger initial outlay of money than an artisan had spent on his tools and materials, and to be efficient it required many more people working together. Thus it accelerated the tendency toward the concentration of many workers in one enterprise. Large-scale machine production was cheaper than the old craft production, so that one group of artisans after another was driven out of business and into the factory by its competition.

The first substantial use of machinery was in the cotton mills established in such towns as Lowell and Fall River, Massachusetts, early in the nineteenth century. Machine production made cloth far cheaper to produce:

In 1815, when cotton cloth was still woven chiefly by hand . . . the price of ordinary cloth for sheeting was forty cents a yard. In 1822 it had fallen to twenty-two cents, and in 1829 to four and one-half cents.<sup>13</sup>

The reason for this reduction was increased productivity—the larger amount produced by each worker in a given time. Where a hand-wheel spinner spun about 4 skeins of yarn a day, a mill spinner in 1815 could tend spindles producing 180 skeins. By 1860, factory production had completely eliminated home production of cotton fabrics.<sup>14</sup>

Throughout the course of the nineteenth century, machinery replaced hundreds of jobs in scores of industries that were once performed by hand, and even created new industries to perform functions unthought of before. New inventions were introduced almost daily. Milling machines, sewing machines, water turbines—the list could go on and on. Thousands of factories sprang up, employing an ever greater proportion of the population. This "industrial revolution" transformed the pattern of laborers working for employers from the exception to the rule in American society.

## *How Did We Ever End Up Here?*

The spread of machinery under the control of owners seeking profits strengthened the tendency toward polarization between a class of employers with large personal fortunes and a class of employees who worked for them. This was evident to contemporaries. A doctor in the textile mill town of Lowell, Massachusetts, wrote in 1841 that the introduction of machinery meant that

those who labor are not only required to toil longer than before, but, compared with their employers, are as a class sinking day by day to a still deeper degradation.<sup>15</sup>

A newspaper published by a group of workers in the same town stated:

That the factory system contains in itself the elements of slavery, we think no sound reasoning can deny, and every day continues to add power to its incorporate sovereignty, while the sovereignty of the working people decreases in the same degree.<sup>16</sup>

And a cotton factory manager in Fall River, Massachusetts, declared in 1855:

I regard my work-people just as I regard my machinery. So long as they can do my work for what I choose to pay them, I keep them, getting out of them all I can. . . . When my machines get old and useless, I reject them and get new, and these people are part of my machinery.<sup>17</sup>

Many of the basic trends established in the "industrial revolution" continue to this day. First trains, then cars and trucks, next airplanes, jets and pipelines and now rockets, have speeded up, extended or cheapened transportation. Telegraph, telephone, radio, movies and television have speeded and widened direct, mass communication. Steam, electricity, oil and atomic power have increased the amount and flexibility of energy sources. Output per worker has advanced by leaps and bounds as new machinery and processes—increasingly created by deliberate scientific research—have become the basis for virtually all production (rationalized for maximum productive efficiency) and now are becoming increasingly automated and computerized. Companies have grown into corporations and then multinational conglomerates. And an ever-growing part of the American people has become employees.

## THE CONTROL OF PRODUCTION

Instead of working for themselves, people had to go to work for those who owned the means of production. But in the early days of capitalism, it was usually the workers, not the owners, who directed the work itself. This was because only the workers had the knowledge and skills required to produce. While some owners might be skilled workers themselves, they were more likely to be merchants—businessmen who might know about buying, selling and making money, but not about production. As Frederick Winslow Taylor, the inventor of time-and-motion studies, wrote in 1905 in his *Principles of Scientific Management*:

In the best of the ordinary types of management, the managers recognize the fact that the 500 or 1000 workmen, included in the twenty or thirty trades, who are under them, possess this mass of traditional knowledge, a large part of which is not in the possession of the management. The management, of course, includes foremen and superintendents, who themselves have been in most cases first-class workers at their trades. And yet these foremen and superintendents know, better than anyone else, that their own knowledge and personal skill falls far short of the combined knowledge and dexterity of all the workmen under them.<sup>18</sup>

Only through a long and sometimes bloody struggle did employers establish their present domination of the workplace. To do so, they had to break the power of the skilled workers and gain control of the skills needed to produce. In some cases, such as the textile industry, the power of the earlier skilled workers was destroyed at the same time that factories and machine production developed; in others, workers' power was broken only long after mechanization occurred. Many aspects of this struggle are unknown, even to historians, yet it shaped the whole structure of modern work. Fortunately, a thorough study by Katherine Stone<sup>19</sup> has uncovered that history for the steel industry, revealing much about how employers came to have so much power over work. Other industries, and even many white-collar occupations, have gone through much the same transformation.

The steel industry of the late nineteenth century was already divided into workers and employers. But curiously enough, the employers had little control over the actual work of making steel. Production was run by teams of highly skilled workers who hired their own helpers and organized their own labor, using equipment

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and raw materials supplied by the employer. There were no supervisors hired by the owners to organize production and direct the workers. Only the skilled steelworkers knew the complex and tricky process of producing steel, learned through years of experience. They were organized into a union, the Amalgamated Association of Iron, Steel and Tin Workers. A company historian testily described the power over production formalized in the union contract at the Homestead mill in 1889:

Every department and sub-department had its workmen's "committee," with a "chairman" and full corps of officers. . . . During the ensuing three years hardly a day passed that a "committee" did not come forward with some demand or grievance. If a man with a desirable job died or left the works, his position could not be filled without the consent and approval of an Amalgamated committee. . . . The method of apportioning the work, of regulating the turns, of altering the machinery, in short, every detail of working the great plant, was subject to the interference of some busybody representing the Amalgamated Association. Some of this meddling was specified under the agreement that had been signed by the Carnegies, but much of it was not; it was only in line with the general policy of the union. . . . The heats of a turn were designated, as were the weights of the various charges constituting a heat. The product per worker was limited; the proportion of scrap that might be used in running a furnace was fixed; the quality of pig-iron was stated; the puddlers' use of brick and fire clay was forbidden, with exceptions; the labor of assistants was defined; the teaching of other workmen was prohibited, nor might one man lend his tools to another except as provided for.<sup>20</sup>

John Fitch, in the classic Pittsburgh Survey, confirmed the power the skilled steelworkers had over production:

A prominent official of the Carnegie Steel Company told me that before the strike of 1892, when the union was firmly entrenched in Homestead, the men ran the mill and the foreman had little authority. There were innumerable vexations. Incompetent men had to be retained in the employ of the company, and changes for the improvement of the mill could not be made without the consent of the mill committees. I had opportunity to talk with a considerable number of men employed at Homestead before 1892, among them several prominent leaders of the strike. From these conversations I



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gathered little that would contradict the statement of the official, and much that would corroborate it.<sup>21</sup>

The employers wanted to increase output and introduce new machinery, and they saw the workers' control of production as a block to this. As Henry Clay Frick, chairman of the Carnegie Steel Company, wrote to Andrew Carnegie in 1892: "The mills have never been able to turn out the product they should owing to being held back by the Amalgamated men."<sup>22</sup>

The company decided to wrest control of production from the workers. It ordered three hundred guards, closed the works, laid off all the workers and announced that it would henceforth operate nonunion. There ensued a bloody conflict in which dozens of men were killed in battles between the Homestead workers and Pinkerton detectives, strike breakers and state militiamen. After four months, the workers were finally defeated and forced to return to work on the company's terms.<sup>23</sup> With the employer in control, the skilled workers could no longer determine who was hired, who promoted, how the work was divided, what machines were introduced, how much was produced in each heat and its quality, the materials to be used or the teaching of skills. The direction of production had been taken over by the employer. The steel companies, and most other employers as well, were eventually able to impose this new pattern throughout industry.

Only a few occupations today resemble the earlier pattern of highly skilled workers directing their own work. The toolmakers with whom Steven Harper worked (see page 18) were still all-around craftsmen, much like those of the nineteenth century. Their remarkable working conditions reflected their unusually powerful position. But in the great majority of work situations, as in the case of the steel industry, the power to organize production has long since been secured by the employers, whether through violent struggles like the Homestead strike or through less dramatic means. The lack of control over the work situation that most workers experience is the result.

## **THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE BOSS**

Originally, most businesses were directly owned and managed by single individuals or partners. Many small businesses continue on this basis today, although primarily in the less profitable fields like retail trade and services. Because of their competitive situation, low profit rates and invulnerability to unionization, these small com-



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panies generally pay low wages. They provide a great deal of the employment for women and the working poor; indeed, a large proportion of them survive only by paying substandard wages.

Throughout the history of capitalism, however, the tendency has been to concentrate more and more workers into larger and larger companies. We have seen how this process began with the growth of markets and was augmented by the development of technology. It was further accelerated by the combination of businesses into larger and larger units to try to increase profits and counter the effects of heightened competition.<sup>24</sup> In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, thousands of small companies were reorganized into a few hundred huge ones, dominating the major industries of the nation. At the same time, companies began taking over the functions of their suppliers and merchants. The U.S. Steel Corporation, for example, owned and managed mines, ships, railroads, blast furnaces, rolling mills, other plants and its own marketing operation—every step from the raw materials in the earth to the final sale.

An individual capitalist or even two or three partners could hardly supervise an enterprise of such size and complexity. Over many decades, therefore, a new management structure has developed, through which decisions are made and activities supervised in almost all large-scale modern businesses. At the top are a half-dozen or fewer high-level officials—generally the president, the chairman of the board, and a few vice-presidents and members of the executive committee. They make the basic decisions about company objectives and the allocation of funds, but have little to do with the day-to-day functioning of the enterprise. Under them are officials responsible for divisions of the company or particular departments such as finance, marketing, production, purchasing. Below them are large numbers of middle-level managers responsible for supervising day-to-day operations in plants, offices and stores. At the lowest level of the management hierarchy are foremen and supervisors who command the workers who actually do the work. To service this vast bureaucracy, there developed a large group of clerical and other white-collar workers. In their day-to-day experiences at work, most workers in large companies—white- and blue-collar alike—are supervised not by a capitalist, but by a low-level manager who is both a boss and an employee himself.

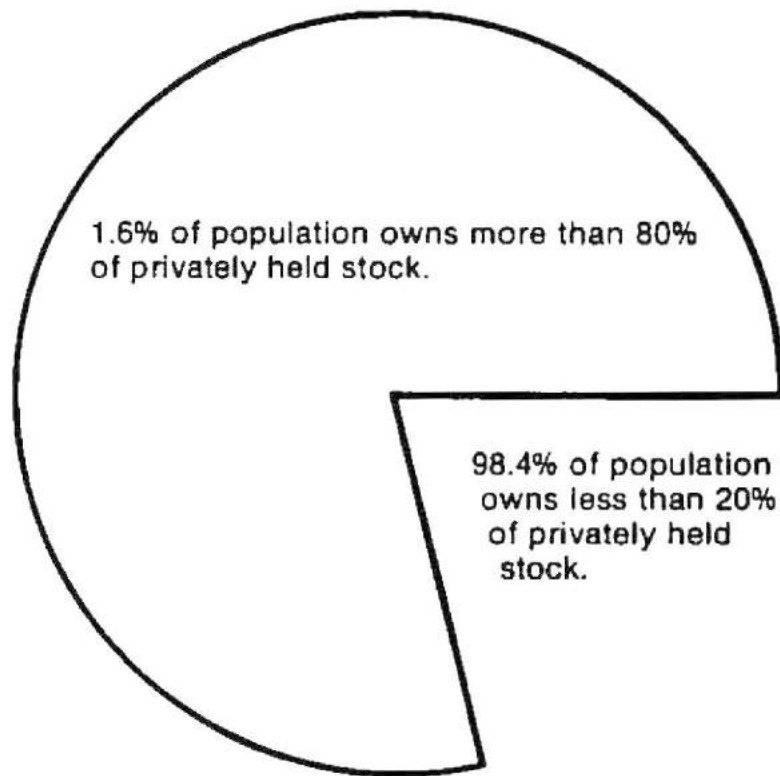
When businesses were owned and managed by identifiable individuals, it was easy to pinpoint a class of capitalists and employers. But the development of a complex hierarchy of managers, who often own no share of the company at all, makes it seem somewhat unclear just who workers really are working for.

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Along with the growth of business size and management hierarchy, there developed a legal form—the corporation—which further obscured the social division of power and wealth. In legal terms, a corporation is an artificial person which can make contracts, assume debts, own other companies and conduct economic business as if it were a human being. As this form of organization came to dominate

### Who Owns the Corporations

It is well known that most production in our society is controlled by the powerful private corporations. It is not so well understood that four-fifths of the privately-held corporate stock is owned by a tiny minority of barely one million families. The great majority of workers in effect work to produce profits that belong primarily to this small group.



Source for statistics: Robert Lampman, *The Share of Top Wealth-holders in National Wealth, 1922-1956*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J., 1962. Graph drawn by Mark Wilson.

more and more of the economy, it became ever harder to identify single individuals for whom others worked; the "artificial person" of the corporation came to be experienced as the employer, for whom the immediate boss was just another employee. The existence of a "capitalist class" dominating the economy became less and less evident. By World War I, corporations turned out more than 80 percent of the goods manufactured in America.<sup>25</sup>

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Corporations, instead of being the property of a single owner or a few partners, issued stock which could be bought by anyone with the money. It is often difficult, therefore, to find out just who really owns a corporation. Though it may appear that ownership has been democratized, with thousands of individuals receiving the profits, a great deal of careful research has proved otherwise.<sup>26</sup> The most thorough available study of the subject, conducted by Professor Robert Lampman of the University of Wisconsin and published by the National Bureau of Economic Research, found that a tiny group of 1.6 percent of the American people—fewer than two million individuals—owned more than 80 percent of privately held stock.<sup>27</sup> Many other studies have essentially confirmed Lampman's results.

The ownership of big business by individual capitalists has thus been transformed into the collective ownership of the entire corporate economy by a small, wealthy minority. Not only is the ownership of each corporation spread among many members of this group, but most of its members own stock in a number of different companies. The bulk of the profits produced by all the employees of all corporations belongs to this group as a whole.

### **INTERDEPENDENCE AND SERVITUDE**

Looking back in 1900, the United States Census described the sharp contrast between the production system of early America and that which followed it:

Until about 1850, the bulk of general manufacturing done in the United States was carried on in the shop and the household, by the labor of the family or individual proprietors, with apprentice assistants, as contrasted with the present system of factory labor, compensated by wages, and assisted by power.<sup>28</sup>

This change in production was the core of a revolution in the whole organization of society.<sup>29</sup> At one time, each family unit was largely self-sufficient, producing most of the goods it needed itself. The new system was based on a completely different division of labor. Each product was produced by the cooperation of a number of different workers, who made little else. Each individual did only one part of a vast social labor. In return, he received a share—though by no means necessarily an equal one—of what the whole labor of society produced. He necessarily depended on the labor of thousands of other workers who produced the things he needed, just as thousands

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of others depended on the things he helped produce. This interdependence became a basic characteristic of modern society.

Such a division of labor was essential if society was to make use of the new, large-scale technology introduced by the industrial revolution. Most machine processes required the cooperation of a number of workers. At the same time, each ensemble of workers and machines could produce goods sufficient for thousands or even millions. There was no way independent individuals alone could have utilized such techniques.

Unfortunately, this cooperation did not generally take the form of individuals getting together to produce for each other's needs. Most people simply did not possess the wealth to obtain the factories and machines needed for industrial production. Instead, the entire development of large-scale economic production and cooperation took place under the control of those with the wealth to buy means of production and hire workers. The interdependence of workers was not reflected in any direct communication or planning among them. Cooperation in production appeared only in that many workers were hired by the same employer. The reality of workers producing for each other was manifested only in the fact that all workers bought from various companies products that had been made by other workers.

The new capitalist system grew by leaps and bounds, drawing more and more workers into its net. Between 1850 and 1910, the number of wage earners increased sevenfold.<sup>30</sup> Wage labor became the standard pattern not only in manufacturing, but in mining, lumbering, transportation and construction. Office and sales work became largely a realm of employees, usually paid in the salary rather than the wage form. Even in farming, wage labor became prominent.

The progress of the economy toward greater integration and productivity was at the same time a progressive elimination of economic independence. Most people had little choice but to go to work for someone else. The methods of production that might have made it possible for people to cooperate directly in producing what they needed were used instead to subordinate the majority to the power of a few.

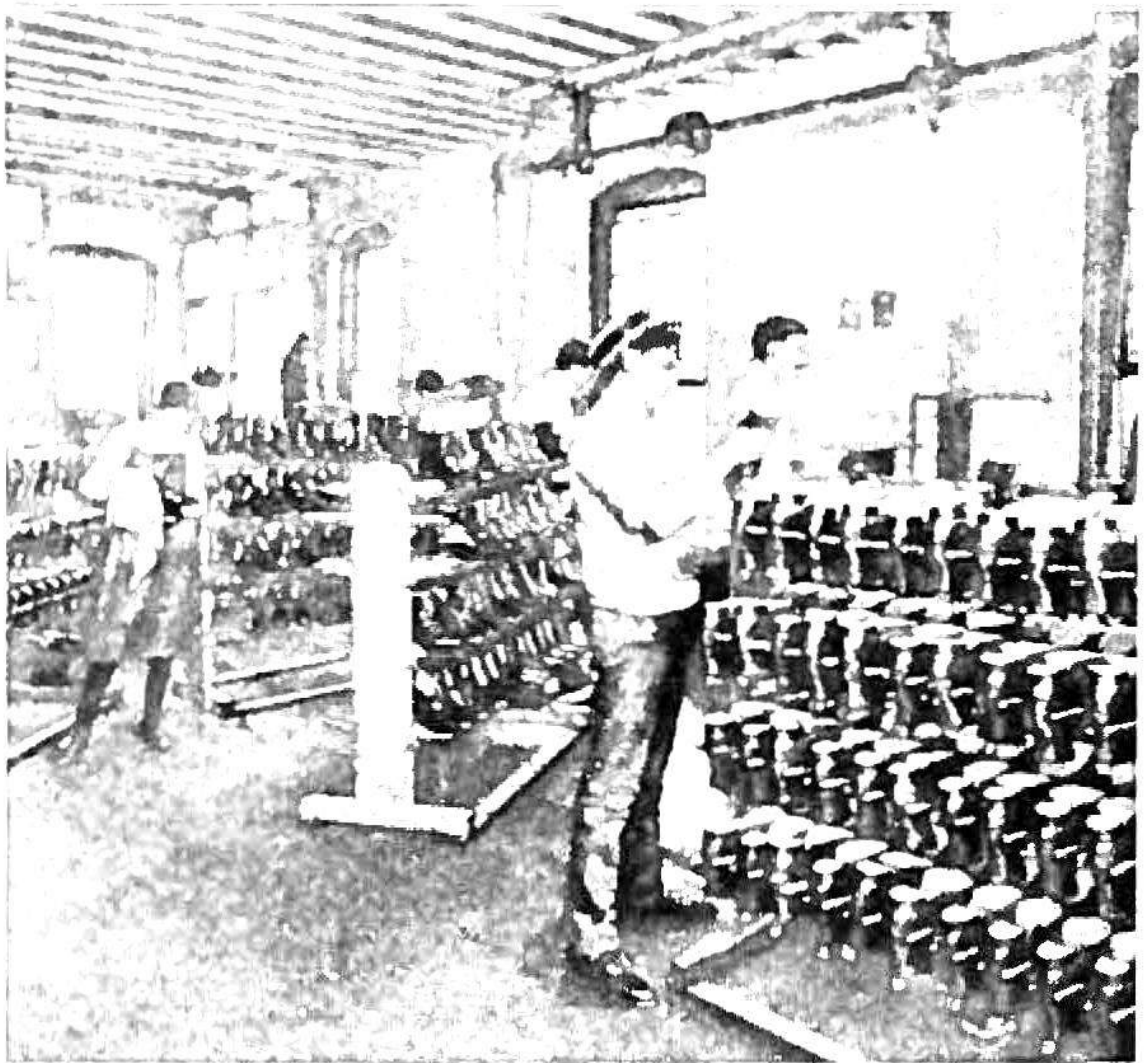
This pattern, in one form or another, exists not only in America, but in all the countries of the modern world. All "capitalist" countries resemble the United States closely in this regard; in "communist" countries, title to the means of production is lodged in the state, but workers continue to work for large-scale enterprises controlled by a minority of managers and politicians from the ruling

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party. In both cases, the time of their lives remains dominated by others.

Whether some day working people can achieve "the ultimate destruction of those unnatural relations" between workers and employers, whether the time will come "when labor determines to sell itself no longer to speculators, but to become its own employer, to own and enjoy itself and the fruit thereof . . . forever rescued from the control of the capitalist," depends on the actions they choose to take. As we shall see in the next chapter, however, employers do not hesitate to use their power over the workplace to prevent workers from cooperating in their own interests even for much lesser goals.





# 3. THE STRUCTURE OF WORK

## THE EMPLOYER'S STRATEGY SHAPES THE EXPERIENCE OF WORK

It seems natural: you don't have any money, so you have to go to work. At work, the workplace and the equipment in it belong to those who own the enterprise. So does what the workers produce. The owners or their representatives are the bosses. They decide who to hire and who to fire. They determine the purpose of the work and dictate its technique. They divide up the tasks and assign them to various workers, telling each one what to do, when and how to do it. You expect to carry out their orders, using your own ingenuity to a greater or lesser extent depending on the particular job.

Yet as we have seen, there is nothing natural about this situation at all. It resulted from a historical process through which one social class developed power over another. The entire structure of modern work—the conditions under which people spend much of their life—results from that process.

Early American farmers and artisans had considerable control over the hours and pace of their work, and set their own balance between their need for various products of labor and their desire for free time. Their work pattern was far different from the steady concentration on the same task with few breaks, eight hours or more a day, day after day, week after week, that characterizes modern labor. The early shoe worker of Lynn, Massachusetts, for example, was farmer and fisherman as well as artisan:

He felt that he could work in the fields or in the shop as he chose, and when disinclined for either he could lock up his "ten-footer" (the small shoe shop beside his home) and go fishing. When it was too cold for work indoors or out, he sat in his kitchen reading.<sup>1</sup>

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When an apprentice left his work at night,

he might be expected back in the morning, but there were no special grounds for the expectation. He might drop in the next morning or the next week.<sup>2</sup>

The right to use your own time in your own way, even at work, was so well-established that when, in 1854, New York lithograph companies issued rules against having visitors while at work, the printers made it an issue in a strike on the ground that it was "conflicting with the liberties of American working-men."<sup>3</sup> A woman who spent time long ago among cotton mill workers in southern Appalachia told us that in the early years of this century they absented themselves to go fishing whenever they felt like it. Employers apparently accepted their right to do so. When the boss would inquire where they had been, their laconic and self-satisfied reply was "goin' fishin'."<sup>4</sup>

When employers took control of the work process, such worker independence presented them with a terrible problem. All their wealth, all their complex machinery and all their apparent power could produce nothing unless they could make the workers work. As an early nineteenth-century British economist wrote of the rise of factory production:

The main difficulty . . . lay . . . above all in training human beings to renounce their desultory habits of work and to identify themselves with the unvarying regularity of the complex automaton.<sup>5</sup>

This difficulty has never been fully overcome. As we shall see in the next chapter, workers can find a multitude of ways to use their time at work for themselves rather than their employers. They develop secret techniques to conceal such actions from their employer. Even more threatening, they can combine in strikes and related actions that can considerably weaken the employer's power.

To counter these forms of worker resistance and establish an authoritarian "work discipline," employers evolved a number of institutions and policies characteristic of modern workplaces. In some cases, employers understood clearly the effects of these structures and introduced them deliberately. In other cases they may simply have tried a variety of structures and retained those which—from the employer's point of view—seemed to work. Later generations of managers may have continued them without even knowing why they were adopted. But whatever their origin, they constitute a

collection of strategies which make workers work and discourage them from combining against the employer.

These job structures determine much about the quality of people's lives at work. A careful look at the reasons for them indicates that in the main the miseries of work do not result from the unchangeable nature of work itself; nor are they simply due to "unenlightened management," subject to cure by the introduction of "job enrichment" and similar "enlightened" managerial policies which could "humanize" work without changing the actual power of the employer. The present structure of work is the result of policies which are, in most cases, already "enlightened" from the point of view of the employer—a point of view whose objective is to get as much work as possible out of workers, under conditions where the lion's share of the benefit does not go to the workers. The structure of work could be far different, but only if its control is taken away from those who now possess it.

The modern workplace brings groups of workers together and gives them a common interest in conflict with the employer. A major goal of employers, therefore, has been to structure the workplace in ways that divide workers up, promote loyalty to the company, and prevent them from getting together. To develop a strategy to fight for their own interests on the job, workers need to understand and counter the strategies that are being used against them.

Every job and every workplace has its own characteristics, changing over time. A few basic structures, however, can be recognized in most of them.

### **"SUBJECT TO BE DISCHARGED"**

From the early days of masters and journeymen down to the present, the most obvious way for employers to establish power over workers was direct economic coercion—to fire those who would not obey. In 1842, when employers were extending their control over many industries, a New York labor paper complained:

The capitalists have taken to bossing all the mechanical trades, while the practical mechanic [worker] has become a journeyman, subject to be discharged at every pretended "miff" of his purse-proud employer.<sup>6</sup>

No doubt tens of millions of workers have been fired for one or another "miff" in the generations since.

Actually, firing is used surprisingly infrequently as a means of disciplining workers; demotion and suspension are far more com-

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mon, along with harassment designed to make workers quit. But firing remains the employer's reserve threat. As an auto worker in Lordstown, Ohio, reported:

The whole plant runs on fear. The top guy in that plant is scared of somebody in Detroit. And the guy below him is scared of him and, man, it comes right down to the foremen, and the foremen are scared to death. And when they're scared to death they really put the heat on the people, and the people are scared to death 'cause they're afraid to lose their jobs. And they know if they don't do the work they will lose their jobs. . . .<sup>7</sup>

Much the same could be said of any factory, office or other workplace. The employer's power to cut off a worker's economic sustenance remains the stick in the closet backing up all management authority. The vulnerability of workers to such intimidation lies in economic dependence—the fact that you have to have a job in order to live.

As a New York truck driver said: "Clubs are still trumps."

## **THE MANAGEMENT CADRE**

One of the near-universal features of contemporary workplaces is the division of the personnel into a minority of managers and a majority of other workers. The managers organize the work and direct the workers. This situation may seem quite natural, since the managers possess most of the skills and knowledge needed to run the enterprise. In fact, managerial authority over work developed not because workers were *unable* to direct their work themselves, but rather to prevent them from doing so.

In early industry, as we saw in the last chapter, production and knowledge about production were often controlled by skilled workers. Employers took control of production in order to break that power. But if workers were no longer to direct their own work, employers had to find an alternative means to control it. To organize the work and command the workers, a new cadre of managers was established. In 1919, the president of a training school for foremen described the ideal of this cadre: "From the foreman to the president right straight through, you have got one body of mind workers, and they do but two things: they organize knowledge and then they use the knowledge as organized."<sup>8</sup>

In reality, power and authority were as important as knowledge to the managerial role. A steel company official compared the new organization of authority in industry to that of the "army, with the



necessary distinction between the commissioned officers and the ranks''; such a comparison was frequent and appropriate.<sup>9</sup>

Unfortunately, the superior souls chosen for management were not born with the knowledge of how to direct production. If they really wanted to run the work, there had to be what Frederick Taylor described as

the deliberate gathering in on the part of those on management's side of all the great mass of traditional knowledge, which in the past has been in the hands of the workman, and in the physical skill and knack of the workman, which he has acquired through years of experience.<sup>10</sup>

Most of the technical and scientific knowledge thus ''gathered in'' was transferred to special engineering, laboratory and planning departments. Typical was Taylor's advice that ''all possible brain work should be removed from the shop and centered in the planning or laying-out department.'' In many if not most workplaces, much of this knowledge is actually kept secret from those who do the work. A young man from Oregon related his experience of this:

I wanted to learn how to make musical instruments, so I applied for a job at a factory where they made high-quality flutes. When a job came open they called me and I took it. I was a skilled worker, one of about forty people who worked there. Of course, it was like any factory: they wanted to break me in on one job and keep me there. They tried to make sure I didn't learn about the whole process. I was able to learn a lot anyway by keeping my eyes open. Finally, one guy who worked there, who had frustrated ambitions to become a foreman, caught me making sketches of the way certain keys were made. He turned me in to the boss, and it was made pretty clear to me that I'd better not get caught doing it again.

It is often impossible for workers to find out about schedules for future work, or even on what shift they will be the following week, let alone information on the production process or management's long-range planning. It would be hard to find more telling evidence that knowledge is centralized in the management cadre not primarily to increase the intelligence with which work is performed, but rather to reduce the power that workers can exercise over it.

As knowledge passed to special departments, authority over workers was given to foremen and other ''front-line supervisors.'' In the early days of American industry, foremen were characteristi-

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cally lead workers in labor gangs. In the steel industry, for example, they had little authority over the skilled workers and did manual labor themselves. But when employers took control of the production process, they tried to create for foremen a new status separate from the rest of the labor force and with authority over it. An editorial in *Iron Age* in 1905 quotes approvingly a superintendent lecturing foremen:

You men have no business to have your coats off when on duty in your shops unless you are warm. You have no business to take the tools out of a workman's hands to do his work. Your business is to secure results from other men's work. . . . A man cannot work with his hands and at the same time give intelligent supervision to a gang of men, and the foreman who does this is apt to lose control of his men while he is weakening the confidence of his employers in his ability as a general.<sup>11</sup>

Management developed special training programs for foremen in line with their new role. But this training usually has little to do with production itself—a fact evident to many workers, as we shall see. Supervisor training is largely concerned instead with managing workers. Such weighty topics are studied as “organizational structure and communication,” “intergroup relations” and “organizational psychology.” At times this training can approach the ludicrous. A front-line manager at a large computer company told us:

At one training session we played a game where the instructor held a handkerchief. Two trainees stood on either side, each trying to “steal the bacon” without getting tagged by the other. I know it sounds rather humorous; the only thing is, the company always observes how you react, and every time we have one of these training sessions, you look around the next week and you notice that someone has disappeared from the organization.

Supervision by foremen remains characteristic of industries like steel which developed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Most other jobs have some variant of this pattern. In many occupations of more recent origin, authority over workers is held by professionals or technicians. In hospitals, doctors and nurses often are the bosses for the various grades of workers below them. In factories with advanced technology, such as in the chemical industry, chemists and technicians often directly supervise the blue-collar work force. In many stores and other small businesses, the employees are supervised directly by the owner. In offices, it is

common practice to give some workers management titles and make them responsible for supervising other workers as well as doing their own work. The reason for this pattern may well be that in offices, the speed of work is not so often set by the machine, and therefore only close supervision can make sure that workers actually work.

Front-line supervisors, whatever their titles, directly wield the power of employers over their workers. They exercise an authority which contradicts every ideal of equality and freedom. They are in a position to command and harass the workers under them, and often to demote, suspend and fire them as well. Subjection to their authority may well be the specific aspect of work that workers dislike most intensely. Yet the front-line supervisor is usually an employee himself, only partly separated from those he directs, making a small or moderate amount more than them. The attitude of many workers toward him is a mixture of hatred, pity and contempt, reflecting the ambiguity of his position. As Andrew Korenko put it:

In a funny way, a lot of the workers have sympathy for the foremen, even though they hate them too. They're caught in the middle—the company on one side, the workers on the other. Some of them will help out. A few of the older ones were hired off the shop floor, but most of them now come out of college. They can't really boss—they don't know anything about production. They don't do much—the people that work there know how to do the work and do it. The foremen just have a disciplinary function.

And a track maintenance worker in Detroit told us:

People give the foremen a real hard time. They don't talk to them. Our foreman's name is Alison. They all call him Alice, except me; I always call him "Prick."

As we shall see in Chapter 4, the sparring between foremen and workers is not all verbal. Foremen are not called "front-line managers" for nothing; they represent the employer in the daily battle to keep workers under control and to make them work.

## **TIED TO THE MACHINE**

One of the most common criticisms of industrial society is that it turns human beings into mere appendages of machines, controlled by "the unvarying regularity of the complex automaton." It is an illusion, however, that machinery per se dictates such a pattern of work. Rather it is the way in which today's machines are designed

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and used. If workers controlled the design and use of the machinery, it would be possible to create far different schedules and rhythms. The subservience of many workers to “their” machines is a product of their subservience to their employers. It results from the deliberate effort of employers to use machines as a way to control those who work for them.

One of the first attempts to use machines to control how hard workers worked occurred in the nineteenth-century cotton mills. When the mills were first founded, there was little systematic attempt to use every second of the workers’ time. A former textile mill worker, Harriet Robinson, remembered that in the early 1840s,

the girls were obliged to tend no more looms and frames than they could easily take care of and they had plenty of time to sit and rest. I have known a girl to sit idle twenty or thirty minutes at a time.<sup>12</sup>

But employers soon discovered they could greatly increase their production simply by running the machines faster and having each worker run more of them. Between the 1830s and the 1870s, the number of looms and the number of picks per minute a worker had to tend doubled and perhaps tripled.<sup>13</sup> This so-called stretch-out put an end to the once-leisurely pace and greatly increased the amount of labor extracted. Such crude speed-up techniques are still everyday occurrences in all kinds of jobs. To complement these tactics, employers have had equipment redesigned to extract more work from fewer workers; indeed, engineering science has built this managerial objective into its basic principles. A steelworker told us:

The old-timers agree that the work has gotten worse. It’s speeded up by introducing new machinery, increasing the number of jobs per person and cutting crews. My crew was cut in half when we moved to the new plant. The provisions in the union contract give no protection. The company has a free hand in introducing new machinery, setting crew sizes and scheduling.

Nor is this simply a question of introducing more “productive” machines. Generally, the organization of the workplace as a whole is designed with the objective of making workers work well. The placement of desks in an office, the layout of a department store, the moving belt of an assembly line—all involve strategies devised by employers to make workers work.

The design of machinery and other aspects of the production process has also been an important means for employers to combat



workers' power. Traditionally, the more skilled workers have been, the more power they have had over their work. Mechanization made it possible for employers to do without the highly-skilled industrial craftsmen, and therefore made it possible to break their power. As the British inventor/industrialist Nasmyth said more than a century ago:

The characteristic feature of our modern mechanical improvements is the introduction of self-acting tool machinery. What every mechanical workman has now to do, and what every boy can do, is not to work himself but to superintend the beautiful labor of the machine. The whole class of workmen that depend exclusively on their skill, is now done away with.<sup>14</sup>

In the United States, a study in 1921 found that little skill was required in most industries either using or building machinery, such as steel, shoe, clothing, meat-packing, baking, canning, hardware and tobacco.<sup>15</sup>

This process was evident in the history of the American steel industry. The traditional skills of heating, roughing, catching and rolling, once performed only by very highly skilled workers wielding tools, were instead built into the machines. The crushing defeat of the skilled steelworkers at Homestead (see page 32) could never be recouped because employers were no longer dependent on their skills.

The process continues to this day. Employers introduce equipment which reduces skill levels wherever they believe it will pay to do so. Automation and computers are reducing the need for human skills in factory and office alike. The fact that today machinery is designed to keep the element of human skill to a minimum helps explain both the mindlessness of most work and the powerlessness of most workers.

## **JOB DIVISION**

Any work process consists of a series of operations, performed simultaneously or in succession. When skilled craftsmen controlled production, they carefully regulated which workers could perform any given operation to be sure that their work was not broken down into components that required less skill. Once management established control of production, it set about redividing jobs. Its usual objective was to break down the production process into many separate jobs, each as simple as possible. This process—considered



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by management the "rationalization" of work—had two virtues for managers: By making each operation as simple as possible, it allowed employers to hire workers with no skills and train them in a few weeks or even a few hours, thus making the employers independent of skilled labor; by reducing the job to one constantly repeated operation, it made it possible to speed up the jobs to an extreme degree.

This subdivision of jobs is often closely coordinated with the physical design of the production process and its machines. The automobile assembly line is an extreme example of combining production engineering and job subdivision to squeeze out every possible drop of labor. In his autobiography, Henry Ford, inventor of the auto assembly line, described its development:

Along about April 1, 1913, we first tried the experiment of an assembly line. . . . We had previously assembled the fly-wheel magneto in the usual method. With one workman doing a complete job he could turn out from 30 to 40 pieces in a 9 hour day, or about 20 minutes to an assembly. What he did alone was then spread into 20 operations; that cut down the assembly time to 13 minutes, 10 seconds. Then we raised the height of the line 8 inches—that was in 1914—and cut the time to 7 minutes.

That line established the efficiency of the method and we now use it everywhere. The assembly of the motor, formerly done by one man, is now divided into 48 operations—those men do the work that 3 times their number formerly did.<sup>16</sup>

Thus the assembly line, the great symbol of modern production, was above all a means to increase the amount each worker turned out by eliminating every second that he was not actually producing.

Subdivision of jobs greatly weakened workers' power; those performing such simple tasks could easily be replaced. The results are evident today. When we asked a young auto worker in Detroit about using walkouts as a tactic to improve the job, he replied it would be ineffective because the workers would simply be fired and replaced: "We're just trained monkeys."

The subdivision of jobs was often based on time-and-motion studies which established supposedly "scientific" judgments about the "one best way" to do each operation and how much time it should require. Frederick Taylor, the inventor of so-called "scientific management," developed techniques for analyzing people at work to break down each job into its component movements, and the time-study man with stop watch in hand became a stock figure in American industry.

The reduction of work to a single repeated function makes it far more boring and deadening than it need be. The monotony of repetitive jobs has often been portrayed by journalists and social scientists as the prime source of discontent about work. In reality, monotony is only one source among many, but it remains one of the most degrading results of the power employers wield over workers.

The extreme subdivision of jobs, in addition to its evident inhumanity, has at times proved less than effective for management's purposes. The extreme boredom it engenders often generates poor quality work, high turnover and general worker resistance. Many managements are therefore cautiously experimenting with various forms of "job enrichment" or "job enlargement," amidst considerable ballyhoo about "the Job Revolution." In a Manhattan bank, for instance, until recently checks were processed in production-line fashion, each worker performing a simple repetitive step of the process, such as copying out a single digit of the account number. Job enlargement consisted of giving each individual responsibility for processing the entire check, including handling any questions about the results that customers might raise. In Sweden, there are even attempts to break up auto production into subassembly operations, in which teams of workers have responsibility for one cluster of parts, deciding in what order to work, who will do what job and the rhythm of work.

Such job enlargement may ease some of the more brutal effects of "scientific management." A young woman who worked at Techtronics, a factory in Portland, Oregon, where job enrichment techniques were applied, told us:

They have this job enrichment. You assemble a whole unit; each person does a number of different operations. Bad as it is, I know when I'm working it would be worse if I had to do just one operation.

But job enlargement can be simply a way to increase the difficulty and responsibility of jobs without increasing their pay. In 1973, for example, a book somewhat extravagantly titled *The Job Revolution*, by ex-*Fortune* editor Judson Gooding, hailed the new General Motors Vega plant at Lordstown, Ohio, as a prime example of a "forward-looking approach to improving auto assembly jobs"; his book had barely appeared when a highly publicized strike against speed-up made the Lordstown Vega plant a national symbol of intolerable work conditions.

Having three operations on a production line instead of one may look good in a company press release; but speed-up by any other

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name is just as bad. As long as control of the workplace remains in the hands of employers, the extent to which "job enlargement" is introduced, and the extent to which it genuinely benefits workers, will be determined less by how much it "humanizes" work than by how much it enlarges profits.

### **JOB HIERARCHIES**

On most jobs, workers are stratified into a number of different job categories and pay grades. At first sight, these may appear to result directly from the nature of the various functions to be performed. But in reality, they are one more weapon in the employer's arsenal of control.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, machine production and the subdivision of jobs tended to equalize the amount of skill needed to do various jobs. Where it might once have taken from four to seven years' apprenticeship to master a trade, the overwhelming majority of jobs were redesigned to be learned in a few weeks or months. A group of British iron masters who visited the United States around the turn of the century reported:

The tendency in the American steel industry is to reduce by every possible means the number of highly-skilled men employed and more and more to establish the general wage on the basis of common unskilled labour. This is not a new thing, but it becomes every year more accentuated as a result of the use of automatic appliances which unskilled labor is usually competent to control.<sup>17</sup>

By World War I, such skill reduction had reached the point where the time required to train workers in the shipyard trades averaged only nineteen days.<sup>18</sup>

Of course, many workers classified as "unskilled" or "semi-skilled" actually possess a tremendous range of skills and knowledge that they have acquired on the job. There are usually knacks and tricks that may take a considerable time to learn; even more expertise is required to cope with the difficulties that arise when machines break down, bosses don't know what they are doing or other special conditions arise. This may be true for the simplest jobs, as well as those that are classified as more skilled. Many workers have had the experience of being skipped many skill grades to jobs that supposedly required long previous training, only to find that they are not much harder than the "unskilled" jobs they had held before. Most "skilled" jobs require little formal training, unless it is demanded by apprenticeship or other regulations. A number of workers told us

that, as a steelworker put it: "On every job, you learn what to do from the other workers, just watching them and then doing it yourself." Except for a few remaining highly skilled occupations, most jobs can be learned by most people in a relatively short period of time.

In a few places like the auto industry, the result of this equalization of skills has been a general equalization, with most jobs offering similar pay and status. But such equality presented problems for management. It gave individual workers little incentive to compete with each other for management's favor in order to "get ahead," and it strengthened the basis for workers' cooperation with each other against the employer, by making clear their common position and common interests.

Both problems were clearly recognized by employers. An industrial manager named Meyer Blumfield, for example, wrote in 1918:

A good deal of literature has been published within the last dozen years in which scathing criticism is made of what has come to be known as "blind alley" or "dead-end" jobs. By these phrases is meant work of a character which leads to nothing in the way of further interest, opportunity, acquisition of skill, experience or anything else which makes an appeal to normal human intelligence and ambition.

He added revealingly: "The work itself is not under attack as much as the lack of incentive and appeal in the scheme of management."<sup>19</sup>

Frederick Taylor warned of other dire consequences of treating all workers equally:

When employers herd their men together in classes, pay all of each class the same wages, and offer none of them inducements to work harder or do better than the average, the only remedy for the men comes in combination; and frequently the only possible answer to encroachments on the part of their employers is a strike.<sup>20</sup>

To counter these results of job equalization, the management of many companies deliberately divided their work force into different job grades and categories, linked by promotion hierarchies. While this was by no means required by the production process itself, and left the jobs as unsatisfying as ever, it offered workers some chance to "get ahead." As Bloomfield continued:

A liberal system of promotions and transfers has therefore become one of the most familiar features of a modern personnel plan, and some of the most interesting achievements of



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management may be traced to the workings of such a system.<sup>21</sup>

Most large companies today have developed such complex systems of job grades and promotion hierarchies. While ostensibly benefiting the employees, they actually serve as a means to motivate workers to work in the present by dangling before them the carrot of future advancement. At its most effective, this technique can lead workers not only to perform as their employers desire, but to adopt the attitudes they think their employers would like them to hold. It can likewise turn workers against one another in a scramble for each other's jobs. Many of the conflicts on the job between different age, race, sex and other groups grow out of competition for the more favored ranges of the job hierarchy. Job stratification even has powerful effects off the job, determining much of the inequality of income and status that marks our society at large.

Such advancement hierarchies continue to be constructed today, sometimes under the banner of "job enrichment." For example, the telephone company has great difficulty keeping people at work on the low-paid and onerous job of operator. In Los Angeles in 1969, the turnover of operators reached 65 percent; many operators simply grew disgusted with the job after six to nine months and quit. Rather than change the job or raise the pay, the manager in charge started promoting a certain number of operators to better paid and more prestigious jobs as "service representatives," a position which had previously been filled from outside the company. He brags that during the first eight months of 1970, the number of operators lost decreased by nearly 40 percent, as workers kept their detested jobs in the hopes of rising to something better.

Many promotion systems have been modified, often under union pressure, to provide for advancement on the basis of seniority. Such a system, if administered fairly, would still tend to divide workers into conflicting interest groups, but at least it would protect them against being punished with bad job assignments. In fact, favoritism often plays as great a role as seniority in such systems, contract clauses notwithstanding. An assembler at a lightbulb factory in Cleveland told us:

People working here are still taking home \$130 a week after fifteen years, the same as I make after two. There really is no advancement. One opening came up for a good job; six people bid for it, but were turned down as "theoretically unqualified." The boss's nephew, right out of high school, got the job. The second guy ever to go from assembly to the tool and



die department was the son of the president of the union. People were outraged. People in general just don't advance.

A steelworker confirmed this:

I tried to bid out of my job as crane operator but it's a dead-end job and it's a nervous job moving weights over people. They have a hard time getting people to stay on it so they won't let me go. It's a grade 9 which isn't too good. There really is no seniority. Other things being equal there is seniority, but the company decides if other things are equal. A lot of guys stay grade 9 for twenty years. Others go right up if they have connections. There is a lot of favoritism.

Under such conditions advancement by seniority is little more than a fraud.

The effects of job hierarchies were apparent to many workers when they were introduced. Nearly seventy years ago, the founders of the Industrial Workers of the World described with precision the new pattern of labor and its objective:

Laborers are no longer classified by difference in trade skill, but the employer assigns them according to the machine to which they are attached. These divisions, far from representing differences in skill or interests among the laborers, are imposed by the employers that workers may be pitted against one another and spurred to greater exertion in the shop, and that all resistance to capitalist tyranny may be weakened by artificial distinctions.<sup>22</sup>

The management strategy of divide and rule can be just as apparent to workers today, as a teamster explained:

They just try to keep us fighting among ourselves. They love that. Show a little favoritism here, give certain people the cream, it makes some people happy and some people mad. The ones that are happy aren't going to say anything and the ones that are mad usually get mad at the people who are getting the cream.

## **FORMS OF PAYMENT**

The forms in which workers are paid are often used as techniques for dividing them and making them work. The most obvious of these is the distinction between wages and salaries. Employers measure the

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premium system. It betters the workingman's condition materially, and, best of all, improves his frame of mind.<sup>23</sup>

As time went on, incentive plans became more and more complex, combining a maze of day rates and individual and group bonuses. Howard Kalado described a meeting where the general foremen explained a new wage-payment system:

I looked at the paper they were handing out. I'm a college graduate, I studied math, and I couldn't make head or tail of it, but the workers just said, "Sure, sure." So I said, "This is fine, but will we make more money or less?" I guess they weren't used to questions, because the foremen didn't quite know what to say. Finally one of them said, "More, if you work hard."

Bonus systems can also be used to turn workers against each other. A manufacturer queried in 1928 explained eloquently why he had adopted output incentives:

To break up the flat rate for the various classes of workers. This is the surest preventive of strikes and discontent. When all are paid one rate, it is the simplest and almost the inevitable thing for all to unite in support of a common demand. When each worker is paid according to his record there is not the same community of interest. The good worker who is adequately paid does not consider himself aggrieved so willingly nor will he so freely jeopardize his standing by joining with the so-called "Marginal Worker." There are not likely to be union strikes where there is no union of interest.<sup>24</sup>

In many cases, however, workers have been able to turn incentive systems to their own advantage as they did with piece rates. Forty-five years ago, a manufacturer warned that the group bonus "has a strong tendency to make the men organize, at least informally, in cliques and become somewhat dictatorial."<sup>25</sup> At times, workers have even fought to maintain or extend incentive systems. In the 1950s, the United Steelworkers union pressured the steel industry into introducing incentive pay for workers in coke ovens and blast furnaces, even though "most industrial engineers were of the opinion that workers could exert no positive influence over production in these units and any incentive installed would represent an outright gift."<sup>26</sup>

Some of the recent schemes for "job enrichment" are essentially

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new descriptions for group incentives and bonuses. But the main trend in management is away from such incentive plans. Management has considerably increased its ability to make workers work through the timing of the production process itself, backed by close supervision. The result has been a tendency away from output incentives and toward so-called "measured day work," in which workers are paid a flat hourly rate and required to expend a measured amount of labor. But incentive systems remain in a great many workplaces to this day.

### **RATIONAL FOR WHOM?**

Any workplace is a collection of people, equipment and materials organized to produce some intended result. But in our society that organization takes the form of a minority with power controlling the great majority of workers. The key to understanding the workplace as it is experienced day by day is to recognize that it is shaped not only by the work to be done, but also by management's need to control those who do it. Insecurity of employment, the managerial structure, the selection and organization of equipment, the assignment of tasks, the hierarchy of jobs, the form in which workers are paid—these basic structures of work in our society, far from expressing any "technological necessity," are all used as means for the control of workers.

Many of these control techniques have been described by management theorists as aspects of the "rationalization" of work. They may well be rational from the point of view of those who are in control and want to stay there. Examined from other perspectives, however, they are totally irrational. When it comes to getting the work done easily and efficiently, for example, managerial control may be nothing but an interference. A track maintenance worker at a steel company in Detroit gave an illustration of this:

Until recently, each maintenance crew had responsibility for the track in one section of the plant. But the company felt the crews were getting too together—in some cases the foremen were going out to buy beer for the guys at work, and workers were coming in and sleeping most of the shift. So they changed the system; now they send each crew out wherever they are needed all over the plant. The result is that the accident rate has been soaring from poorly maintained track. But I guess they got what they wanted.

Many workers can cite similar cases.

The present organization of the workplace is irrational in a still

more profound sense. In it, many people cooperate on the various parts of a common task. But those who do the work cannot directly coordinate their efforts. Those in one work group cannot, for example, decide how to divide up the work among themselves, nor can they arrange a convenient scheduling of work with another department. Both the knowledge and the authority for such coordination are jealously guarded by management. Therefore workers, instead of cooperating through their own intelligence and social capacity, are supposed to do so only through obedience to the plans and orders of management. Thus, the entire structure of work in our society is based on denying and obstructing the majority of the population's ability to think, cooperate and create. That ability could only be realized if people controlled their work themselves.

Of course, the schemes that exist in the heads of managers and on the drawing boards of engineers do not always determine what happens in reality. The actual pace of work, even in a highly mechanized workplace, is often set by jockeying between workers and management. Production really depends on the problem-solving capacity of those on the spot.

However sophisticated the techniques of management control become, in the end they mostly boil down to the carrot and the stick. They comprise a system of rewards and punishments designed to condition workers' day-to-day behavior and their basic life ambitions. But therein lies the weakness. Unlike laboratory rats, workers can understand the objectives of those who try to manipulate them through rewards and punishments. And as we shall see in the next chapter, they can devise their own strategies to counter those of management. For, to paraphrase Bertolt Brecht:

Your warplane is a powerful weapon, general,  
But it has one fault:  
    It needs a pilot.  
Your machine is a great producer, capitalist,  
But it has one fault:  
    It needs a worker.  
Your worker is a marvelous creature, boss,  
But he has one fault:  
    He has a brain.<sup>27</sup>



Cidne Hart/Liberation News Service



# 4. RESISTANCE ON THE JOB

## WORKERS' STRATEGIES

When you go to work you give the employer the right to control your activity. Not only that, you are faced with an elaborate organization of authority and technology designed to maintain and perpetuate that control. Your activity and your cooperation with other workers is supposed to be entirely at management's direction.

Under such circumstances, workers might appear to be nothing but tools in the hands of their employers. Unfortunately for employers, however, workers are not just tools; even after they go to work they remain human beings, pursuing their own ends, their own satisfactions and their own freedom. Worse still, they retain their human ability to think and to relate to each other directly, even though they are only supposed to follow orders and relate through management.

There are a number of ways that workers attempt to deal with the power of their employers. We find it helpful to think of these as alternative strategies. This does not mean that workers always think out a conscious strategy. But even when these strategies are largely a matter of habit, they are still ways of acting to achieve a purpose in a context. Few individuals or groups use any one of these strategies exclusively; most workers resort to most of them at one time or another.

One basic strategy is to try actively to please the employer and follow his desires. The structure of the workplace, with its rewards and punishments, is designed to elicit such a response. In our experience, however, this attitude in its pure form is quite rare. Only a very small proportion of workers have any real expectation of "getting ahead" on the job beyond whatever advancement they can expect with seniority. Workers sometimes feel a psychological identification with their employer; a number of women employees at a factory in a rural area, for example, felt proud of what they had

matter what. They'll give the company their all, sometimes more than it really deserves. Then there are the majority of workers in the middle. They'll do what is really required but no more. Finally at the other end are the bad ones. They're the guys who will look for any excuse to get out of work and always try to find some way to goof off. The problem for your front-line supervisor is to keep them from influencing the rest. If they get to the ones in the middle and begin to pull them down, you're in bad trouble.

The selection of strategies may have even more to do with the history, experience and situation of the work group as a whole than with the individuals who make it up. A new group of workers just coming together for the first time have no relationships with each other except those which the employer imposes on them. They have little basis for cooperation. Over time, however, they talk, get to know each other and develop a complex web of interrelationships. Common interests become apparent. Within such a context, the possibility of cooperative strategies may open up. The success or failure of such ventures becomes part of the shared experience of the group. Since such strategies usually depend on considerable unity among the participants, the group exerts social pressure on its members not to break ranks. New workers are carefully indoctrinated in the values and practices of the group. Thus the strategies of the various individuals may be primarily influenced by the strategy of the group as a whole. In turn, each individual tries to fulfill his or her needs through the action of the group. Such a work group can become what a sociologist who took a job as a machinist once described as "a guerrilla band at war with management."

The choice of strategies is also influenced by many factors originating outside the workplace. Although these influences would be difficult to establish statistically, there are several we think are particularly important at present. First, there is a general decrease throughout our culture—especially among young people—of respect for authority. This makes many people less willing to simply accept whatever they are told to do, more willing to try strategies that challenge the employer's authority. Second, there is a parallel decline in the willing acceptance of a life spent doing onerous work for someone else. This often makes grievances on the job seem more irritating, and makes people less willing simply to "live around" them. Third, there is the evident onset of "hard times." This has several conflicting effects. On the one hand, it makes people much more cautious about taking any action that might result in losing their jobs. On the other hand, it creates a general sense of discontent and rejection of the status quo. The feeling that people need to act to

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improve their conditions often translates into increased militance on the job. Finally, many companies, pressed financially themselves, try to take advantage of workers' increased economic vulnerability by increasing workloads and "tightening up." This direct deterioration of conditions on the job undermines the strategy of "going along with the company" and encourages strategies of resistance. Most people we talked with agreed that over the past few years resistance on the job has been increasing.

## **GUERRILLA TACTICS**

In recent years, Americans have become all too familiar with the tactics of guerrilla warfare by which a native population can resist a centralized and apparently vastly superior military and political force. When the authorities are watching, the guerrillas appear to be nothing but peasants going about their business. They seem to obey directions willingly, yet somehow what is ordered rarely seems to get done—the population, too numerous to watch every second, practices a silent noncooperation. Once the authorities turn their backs, the peasants change into a resistance army, harassing them when the opportunity arises. Yet when the official military attacks, the guerrillas avoid a confrontation and appear to simply fade away.

The workers on many jobs apply a strategy strikingly similar to that of guerrilla warfare. They try to avoid outright confrontation with management which might lead to firings and other reprisals. Yet they try to improve their own conditions as much as they can through secret cooperation. Their objectives may include controlling the pace of work, winning free time for their own use, making life on the job more interesting and pleasurable, altering unsafe and uncomfortable conditions, diminishing the authority of the boss, improving pay and benefits and even getting the job done in a more socially constructive way. Their actions constitute a conspiracy to improve the quality of life on the job.

**Time for Yourself** As we have seen, management has developed elaborate techniques for controlling the pace at which workers work. But workers have developed their own tactics to gain counter-control for themselves. This requires cooperation; if some workers go too fast, management can use them as a lever against the rest. When new workers first come on a job, there is often a contest between management and the other workers for their allegiance on this issue. A woman who phoned when we spoke on a late-night call-in show in Detroit told us:

## *Resistance on the Job*

My husband's been working in an auto plant here for five years. When he first started he was really, you know, gung ho—trying to do the job well and get it done fast. But the people that work there really got down on him, telling him to work slower and everything. His father worked there too and he asked him what he should do and his father told him to go along and slow up.

Did he? we asked.

Oh yes, he did slow up. Now they've got a new guy coming in and they're having to teach him the same way.

At a manufacturing plant in Gloucester, Massachusetts, an older worker told a newcomer to the job:

The hours are long  
And the pay is small  
So take your time  
And screw them all.

Management first developed piece-rate and incentive pay to counter such "restriction of output." Under these payment systems, workers get paid more if they produce more. The hitch is that when workers are able to earn far above a normal wage on a particular job, management often reduces the payment per piece. The result is that, in the long run, a worker who works as hard as possible only increases the amount of work required to make a normal wage on that job. Workers under many such plans have found ways to fight this technique of speed-up. One way is by setting their own ceiling on how much production to turn out on each job. An assembler on an electrical production line in Cleveland explained:

We work on group incentive pay. We set the rate ourselves at eighty pieces. We can do the job in six hours. No one tries to speed up the job—they feel that they wouldn't really make any more money if they worked harder. The company more or less accepts the rate. But right now we have a new foreman who tries to make us work the full eight hours, even if we make the rate earlier. I tell him, the company pays me for my work; it doesn't buy my life. If I finish the amount of work defined in the contract, then I'm free. They've got an incentive system; well, John, what are you going to do, we're just not feeling very ambitious.

the pace of work. For them, something is always going wrong with the equipment. When something goes wrong, they always blame it on something or someone else. Sometimes we have to take the entire work group and make them exchange places with another group that has been producing well, to show that it is the workers and not the equipment that's at fault. If they still don't get out production, then we know who's responsible.

Where the pace of work is set by the machines themselves, controlling it may require workers to make alterations in the machinery. A steelworker told us that in his mill there are slowdowns all the time. We asked him how do you slow down when you are dealing with a continuous process?

You can break down the mill by sending a bar through too fast. Or maybe the guys might ask the crane operator to drop a piece down too hard, which screws things up. Or he can pull a piece in such a way that the cable comes off the pulley. When the mill breaks down, it might be four or five hours before it's fixed. Whenever the electrician comes he always forgets his tools—people cooperate that way—so he has to go back to get them, even for the smallest job. The mill breaks down probably a couple of times a week. People do it to keep the company from stockpiling, as well as to get a break. No one would say anything to the company about it even though they might be afraid to participate themselves.

Does the company know? we asked. "Sure, but there's nothing they can do about it. There's thirty-five or forty people could have done it."

Techniques for altering equipment are widely known. A worker in Pittsburgh informed us: "In the machine shop sabotage is easy—just forget to put oil in the machine, or something like that." An auto worker told us: "Sabotage goes on all the time. You don't know who does it but the line's always stopping and you know it could be any one of thirty people."

Sometimes workers are able to win quite substantial blocks of time for themselves. A young man working at Great Lakes Steel in Detroit described to us an extreme case:

I work in track maintenance—the job used to be called a gandy dancer. When I came on the job, they told me the last time they went on strike was 1959. I thought, oh wow, this must be like a company shop. But when I saw what goes on, I came to the



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conclusion that they had been on strike for fourteen years.

The way we get the most free time is going to and from the jobs. We'll just go out to a shanty in a deserted part of the yard, do a couple of joints and hang out for an hour or two. If they challenge it, we just say we got held up by a train going to the job or there was a furnace we couldn't go by without a safety man. Nobody works too hard. I get in four hours of reading a night, myself.

I'm on the second shift. We used to do only emergency work. Then the company began sending us out to do routine maintenance as well. We used evasion tactics to stop it. We would shovel dirt, but only pick up a tiny bit in each shovelful—then, awhile later, someone else would shovel it back. We worked for hours, but lo and behold, nothing got done. When the foreman complained, we said, "What do you want, we've been working steady." Spike-hammer handles are supposed to be unbreakable. Well, when we go out on a job, we'll break three or four of them. Then we'll take turns using the one that's left while the other guys hang around and take it easy.

By contract we don't have to work if the safety man says a condition is unsafe. We have two safety men. One is an old union man; we can't do much about him. The other position we rotate among ourselves. The safety man doesn't have to do anything, so this gives everybody a chance to take it easy for a while.

The struggle over time sometimes has a comical dimension, as a foreman at a large computer corporation related:

Some of these guys you wouldn't believe. I came in one day at ten to eight and Joe was there jumping up and down like this. [He imitates someone on a pogo stick.] I said, "Joe, what's happening?" He said, "Oh, man, I got to go to the can so bad." I said, "So, why don't you go?" He said, "Are you crazy, do you think I'm going to go to the can on my time?" Sure enough, ten minutes later when work started he made a beeline for the bathroom and didn't show up till half-an-hour later.

**Workers' Strategy for "Job Enrichment"** In recent years there has been considerable public concern about "boring work" and a variety of proposals to make work more interesting through "jobenrichment." However, workers find a number of ways of their own to make work less boring. Sally Maxwell, a young woman

currently working as a printer in the office of an auto company in Detroit, was formerly employed in a factory and at a post office:

Wherever I work, I try to think of things to do to liven the place up. I try to do something different every day. One day I just Xeroxed off a sheet under the company letterhead with a few cracks about what was going on as an office newsletter. Another time the union steward came around with a questionnaire asking what we thought the union should do for us. He was someone I intuitively distrusted, who spent most of his time talking with the supervisors. So I wrote down, "There should be fewer bosses and the union officials shouldn't spend so much time hanging around with them." I passed it around the office and everyone cracked up. Then we had a big discussion about whether I should hand it in. "Everybody knows it, but you're not supposed to say it," they told me. Finally we agreed that I should not expose myself so much until I had my ninety days in. But it sure got us all talking. People really get off on stuff like that.

At the post office, everybody took it easy. People would pull five trucks together and blow a joint. We used to goof a lot.

One time I was taking the mail up to a plant that was pouring huge clouds of pollution into the air. Just then a dude in a business suit got out of a Cadillac and said, "Give me the mail." I figured he had to be the general manager or something, so I said, "I'm not going to give you this mail till you stop putting that stuff into the air." When I got back to the post office the superintendent was waiting for me because the dude had called him up. "What happened today?" he says. I'd forgotten it by then, you know, because I was stoned. Then I remembered: "Oh yeah, I wouldn't give this guy his mail until he stopped polluting." He goes through this rap about me having to deliver the mail anyway, but I told him I wouldn't do it so he just found someone else to do it.

At times, workers counter the repetitiveness of jobs by establishing job rotation. We talked with Jerry Sands, a black auto worker at a plant outside of Detroit, who told us how job rotation had gotten started on his job.

The brother who worked next to me wanted to get a drink of water; I was a few pieces ahead, so I walked around the table and began running my buddy's job. When he came back he just took my old place. That gave us the idea, and we began trading

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off regularly. Pretty soon a Chicano who worked further up the line suggested that we begin rotating regularly.

We asked about people who didn't want to rotate.

There were a few guys with the easy jobs at the beginning and end of the line who didn't want to rotate. So we got some of our guys with more seniority to bump them around. There are a few old-timers who don't want to rotate, but we've got the foreman pretty much under our control, and he's easing them out.

On one line, they like to work fast for forty minutes, then take a rest for twenty. There was one older worker who couldn't take the pace; so we put him on an easy job and rotated around him.

The idea spread. The next line, also mostly young workers, began to imitate the rotation idea. The company eventually broke up the original group and dispersed it around the plant. But wherever its members came together on a line, they started rotating with each other there. Jerry explained the two advantages of rotating: "Because the jobs are quite different, rotation helped break up the monotony. It also helped equalize the work, spreading the hard and easy jobs around."

Another example of rotation came from Sam Howard, a clerical worker in the morgue of a Chicago newspaper, who reported:

There are eight of us who work in my department. It's mostly a nonunion company. In the morgue we've organized ourselves, so we don't really need a union. The work used to be organized by seniority—the two guys at the bottom did all the work, and the people at the top didn't do anything. Everyone was always on everybody else's back—the whole atmosphere was really tense. Finally one day one of the guys at the bottom just blew up. So we all just stopped working and talked about it for a couple of hours. We decided to divide up the work equally and do it together. Now we start by doing a bunch of miscellaneous preliminary jobs. Then we throw dice and the winners get first pick of the various filing jobs. The whole atmosphere is a lot better now—everyone gets along and the old sense of pressure is gone. The supervisor has his own job to do, so he just leaves us alone.

Similarly, a worker at a Veterans' Administration hospital, where militants had won most of the union positions, told us:

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People are very organized, but they don't pay much attention to the union. There used to be individual job assignments. Now people in each unit get together and divide up the work themselves.

Academic authorities have at times pointed out that work sometimes offers less opportunity for self-expression than might be considered desirable. However, workers sometimes find their own ways to express their thoughts and feelings on the job, and to exercise their own creativity. During the 1972 Presidential campaign, for example, some younger workers in a recreational equipment factory managed to achieve self-expression by pasting "Nixon Sucks" stickers on six thousand bumper pool sets they had manufactured. Another example was given us by a West Coast radio disc jockey:

The engineers make \$7.50 an hour, but they're bored out of their skulls. They'll do anything they can to get at the station, if they can do it without getting caught.

The company has a tape machine which records everything that goes out over the air. My engineer spent many tedious hours recently connecting a microphone in such a way that I could say stuff on the air that wouldn't get recorded.

They'll go to extraordinary lengths for a goof, just to break up the boredom. One time they took a daytime TV show about doctors and spliced into it footage from that night's horror movie—the only one that ever grossed me out to the point that I had to turn it off. As the serious-looking doctor on the afternoon show announced, "We're going to have to operate," suddenly the screen was filled with pictures of people eating rotting arms, drinking eyeballs and engaging in other questionable medical procedures. The parent company sent in people from L.A. to nail the culprits, but it was done so skillfully that they were never able to find out who was responsible.

Sometimes what workers do with time they win is constructive as well as creative, as in the case of "government work." We asked a business agent and several workers at one plant whether people ever made things for themselves in their extra time. One of the workers replied:

Oh, you mean government work? Yeah, we do that all the time, though you can't do as much on the day shift when the bosses are around. Guys will bring in their hunting equipment to work on, or make something for their car. I didn't even

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know what government work was when I came here, but I found out soon enough.

“See these metal name plates on my desk?” the business agent added with a smile. “They’re government work.”

In a certain sense, all these activities are attacks by workers on the authority of management. But we found, especially in the auto industry, that such attacks can take a more direct form. An auto worker told us:

The spot-welding department over at the Chrysler Jefferson plant—they call it the jungle because there are so many wires hanging down that it looks like vines. They can shoot sparks something like thirty feet with those welders. Guys come home looking scarred and suntanned from them. Anyone comes through with a white shirt, they turn the welders on them. There was a kid—just a kid from engineering—walked through with a white shirt, you know, by the time he got to the other side he didn’t have a shirt. They thought he was a foreman or something.

Jerry Sands said of his plant:

When they created the new shift, they put on a lot of young foremen. Most of them pretty much let the workers do what they want; they know that’s the only way they’ll ever get production out. They’re afraid of the workers anyway—several foremen have been taken down.

**An Interest in Your Work** Employers often complain that their workers are not interested in what they produce. Because their product belongs to someone else, this is often quite true. However, workers at times reach out for at least some power over the product itself.

One such effort is known to management as “inventory shrinkage.” It refers to the direct appropriation of the product by the immediate producers. We picked up a hitchhiker from Leadville, Colorado, who gave us an example of how interested workers can be in the quality of their product:

The miners there have something they call highgrading. If they hit a vein of high-grade ore, they don’t tell the boss about it; instead they take some home every night in their lunchbox.



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Taxi drivers have developed the technique of "riding with the flag up"—that is, without using the taxi meter—for the same purpose. New York City taxi officials complained that this practice doubled in 1973.

Usually the drivers are young and articulate, their offers come late at night and, for most trips around midtown Manhattan, the most frequently suggested "fee" is \$2. Usually the approach is: "Do you mind if I make this one for myself?"<sup>1</sup>

At times, the interest in the product can be more altruistic. A young man was working in a company which processed books for libraries. Among its other services, it selected for libraries those of their present books they should discard. This employee discovered that the company was choosing the most valuable books for discarding and then selling them itself. He tipped off the libraries and had the pleasure of watching the librarians enter the warehouse and open up the boxes wherein the books subject to this sophisticated pilfering had been concealed.

Real concern about the product of their work is far more common among people who perform non-profit services for other human beings than among those who produce things for someone else's profit. A woman who worked at a home for mentally retarded kids told us:

Our shift is really together. It's all younger people. A whole bunch of us came on together a few months ago. During the day shift they run the place like a factory—they relate to the kids as things, not as people. We've really changed things since we got here, and you can really see it in the kids. They are really changing—kids are learning who never learned before. But we freak out the people in the office. For example, we stopped wearing uniforms. We can justify that in terms of the kids, anyway; it's not good for them to deal constantly with identically-dressed ladies. Another thing—we started visiting other homes, just to get ideas about possible ways to do things better. The office really came down on us for that; they said we weren't "professionally qualified."

But even factory workers can have reason to take an interest in what they produce, especially if its purpose is clearly known. We talked with a young worker at a company that made walkie-talkies for police forces and the like. The Chicago Police Department had

Work stoppages can be simply extensions of the tactics we have already discussed. For example, when grievances arise, workers often use short work stoppages and walkouts to force the employer to settle with them. An auto worker told us he knew of twelve wildcats in Detroit in the preceding year. Six were one-shift heat walkouts—people just walked out when the heat got too high. The others were over firings and speed-up, lasting anywhere from one shift to five days. A UAW committeewoman who had been working in auto plants for decades listed the same causes for wildcats and added:

There are not nearly as many walkouts now as there were in the time right after World War II, but they have definitely been increasing over the past few years. The walkouts come from the rank and file; even the lowest levels of the union are not involved.

The V.A. hospital worker quoted above similarly told us that they pull a work stoppage in a unit whenever grievances aren't settled rapidly.

A social worker in Chicago described some other uses for direct confrontation:

In the welfare department, people pull various work stoppages and sabotage the work. Of course, at times it is really doing management's job for them. If some bureaucrat, for instance, comes up with a new form that takes the welfare workers twice as long to fill out, the copies of the form are likely just to disappear in great quantities, until it is finally phased back out.

Once they expanded the work of one section but continued with only two finance clerks, through whom every application had to pass. Eventually they had tens of thousands of applications backed up at the bottleneck. So all the workers in that section just stopped working one day and refused to continue until something was done. Next day they had additional clerks on the job. In some cities, the welfare workers would take the files for all their cases in excess of official guidelines and dump them en masse in the welfare headquarters.

Andrew Korenko told us:

I operate a crane and I have to swing stuff over men's heads. The equipment is lousy. I stopped the mill four or five times

## 5. THE UNION

One of the basic structures on many jobs is the union. About 20 percent of all jobs are covered by union agreements, including the great majority of those in large industrial companies. Unions are more significant than this statistic suggests, because they are at present the most important kind of formal organization to which workers belong. Whenever workers get together to consider doing something to change their conditions, one of the possibilities is to change the union if there is one, or bring one in if there is none.

Historically, trade unions often developed out of the kind of informal cooperation among workers we described in the last chapter. They started as a means by which workers in different workplaces could establish direct relations among themselves on a lasting basis.

The first combinations of workers often did not accept their complete and permanent subordination to employers. In some cases, unions of skilled craftsmen gained the kind of power over the production process we have described in the case of the skilled steelworkers at Homestead (see page 31). (Even today, vestiges of this nineteenth-century pattern persist among workers in a few industries, notably construction, whose craft unions still largely control who can enter the trade and how the work is done.) In other cases, early unions challenged the whole idea that some people should have to work for others.

But as time went on, a strategy of unionism developed that was far more limited. It did not challenge the employers' right to direct the labor of others; rather, it sought to strike a bargain that would be beneficial to both. Employers, at least in periods of prosperity and growth, could afford to provide a slowly rising standard of living to their workers. They could also afford to give up some of their more authoritarian practices—favoritism in hiring and laying off, for

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example. At the same time, they could reap great advantages from being guaranteed a stable, satisfied work force which could be counted on not to disrupt production or strike unexpectedly. The essential strategy of unionism was to exchange workers' ability to strike and disrupt production for certain concessions from employers over wages and working conditions. This exchange was embodied in the union contract. As one labor lawyer put it:

Collective bargaining as it has developed in the United States since the nineteen-thirties is premised on the existence of a "settlement range" within which both labor and management feel that it is in their interests to reach an agreement rather than resort to economic pressure in the form of slowdowns, strikes, lockouts or boycotts.<sup>1</sup>

Since employers initially had little desire to deal with unions at all, unions had to use militant tactics—strikes, occupations and violence—to raise the cost to management of not accepting unionization. Such struggles were often successful—not because the unions were more powerful than management, but because they could make enough trouble so that it was cheaper for management to recognize and deal with them than to resist them. From the point of view of the unions, such recognition was the objective of militant tactics. Once companies were willing to "bargain in good faith," strikes and violence became generally unnecessary.

Once recognized, the unions began fulfilling their side of the bargain—providing a stable work force and seeing that it did not disrupt production. William Serrin, a journalist with the *Detroit Free Press*, sums up the contribution made by the union to the functioning of the auto industry today in a recent book on the 1970 General Motors strike:

What the companies desire—and receive—from the union is predictability in labor relations. Forced to deal with unions, they want to deal with one union, one set of leaders, and thus they have great interest in stability within the UAW and in a continuation of union leadership. They also want to have the limits of bargaining clearly understood and subscribed to.

Serrin quotes a former negotiator as saying that "GM's position has always been, give the union the money, the least possible, but give them what it takes. But don't let them take the business away from us." The union, Serrin concludes, "has come to accept this philosophy as the basis of its relationship with the companies."<sup>2</sup>

As the function of unions narrowed, their organizational character changed to match. Many unions originated where workers simply met and decided to form a union. If officers were elected, they remained at work alongside those who had elected them. Union officials had little power of their own; the power to decide and act lay with the workers themselves as a group. Gradually, however, the balance shifted. More and more of the real power came into the hands of union officials who evolved into professional "labor leaders" with a daily life far different from those they represented. Labor leaders became essentially politicians, organizing affairs primarily to maintain their own power. Under them there developed a bureaucracy of lawyers, economists, organizers, publicists and other professional experts not even subject to election; these union bureaucrats became the real, permanent managers of the unions—often surviving when elected leaders were thrown out. The union ceased to be an expression of workers' direct relations with each other; it became another external group to which they related one by one.

This change was not necessarily the result of corrupt or malicious leaders; it grew out of the basic function of unionism. If unions were to sign contracts with employers, they had to develop means to enforce those contracts, even against the will of their own members.<sup>3</sup> To bargain effectively with management, unions had to develop a structure of power centralized in the hands of expert negotiators. While there may be much show of democracy, the elected bargaining committees and other representatives of the rank and file generally have little power. In the UAW, reputedly one of the more democratic unions, journalist Serrin found that once negotiations reached the crucial stage, the elected bargaining committee did not even know what was going on. As UAW secretary/treasurer Emil Mazey explained: "The basic decisions were not made by the committee; we make the decisions, the top leaders of the union. And the decisions are conveyed to the committee and they agree."<sup>4</sup>

The result, as *Business Week* wrote, is that "today, a union is very much like a business set up to serve as legal agent for workers." Union leaders have little choice but to act like the managers of such a business, lest they lose out to other leaders or unions who would perform that function better.

This process has repeated itself many times in the course of history. Unionism enters most workplaces when discontented workers get together to try to improve their conditions. Most unions have a militant struggle somewhere in their past, in which workers cooperated directly with each other against the employer. The last



### How Much the Top Labor Leaders Earned in 1972

Union officials have become a social group distinct from the rank-and-file workers they are supposed to represent. Their incomes, as this chart indicates, are often closer to those of corporate managers than to the unions' working members. Union officials don't face the same daily life conditions as regular workers and therefore naturally develop interests different from the rank-and-file.

Rank	Salary	Allow- ances	Ex- penses	Total
1. Frank E. Fitzsimmons, pres., Teamsters	125,000	2,745	3,736	131,481
2. Murray W. Miller, sec.- treas., Teamsters	100,973	4,295	8,960	114,228
3. Hunter P. Wharton, pres., Operating Engineers	80,833	22,200	—	103,033
4. Joseph Curran, pres., National Maritime Union	85,257	5,200	1,636	92,093
5. C. L. Dennis, pres., Railway Clerks	70,000	—	21,069	91,069
6. John H. Lyons, pres., Iron Workers	48,000	15,120	18,071	81,191
7. James T. Housewright, pres., Retail Clerks	60,000	13,000	8,082	81,082
8. Peter Fosco, pres., Laborers	75,000	—	5,599	80,599
9. Edward J. Carlough, pres., Sheet Metal Workers	50,000	19,490	8,166	77,656
10. George Meany, pres., AFL-CIO	72,960	—	1,816	74,776
11. Terence O'Sullivan, sec.- treas., Laborers	70,000	—	3,410	73,410
12. Ed S. Miller, pres., Hotel & Restaurant Employees	49,999	12,810	8,841	71,650
13. David S. Turner, sec.-treas., Sheet Metal Workers	45,000	19,490	6,345	70,835
14. Jos. D. Keenan, sec., Electrical Workers (IBEW)	55,000	—	15,640	70,640
15. I. W. Abel, pres., Steelworkers	60,000	—	9,937	69,937
16. Patrick Gorman, sec.-treas., Meat Cutters	50,976	—	15,276	66,252
17. Martin J. Ward, pres., Plumbers	47,610	17,690	—	65,300
18. Chas. H. Pillard, pres., Electrical Workers (IBEW)	60,000	—	4,439	64,439
19. Paul Hall, pres., Seafarers	55,609	—	8,383	63,992
20. William T. Dodd, sec.-treas., Plumbers	39,675	22,310	1,211	63,196
21. Walter J. Burke, sec.-treas., Steelworkers	42,500	—	19,892	62,392

Source: *Business Week*, August 18, 1973, p. 63. Based on union reports to the U.S. Department of Labor.

22. Robt. Diefenbach, sec.-treas., Hotel, Restaurant Employees	43,000	12,810	5,520	61,330
23. Alvin E. Heaps, sec.-treas., Retail, Wholesale Workers	30,577	—	30,747	61,324
24. Newell J. Carman, sec.-treas., Operating Engineers	45,783	14,970	386	61,139
25. William W. Maguire, sec.- treas., Retail Clerks	47,500	10,400	3,753	61,082
26. Hal Davis, pres., Musicians	50,000	5,105	5,492	60,597
27. Thomas F. Murphy, pres., Bricklayers	40,000	14,640	4,552	59,192
28. David Selden, pres., Teachers	30,000	—	27,911	57,911
29. Newton W. Black, pres., Glass Bottle Blowers	37,500	18,200	—	55,700
30. Juel D. Drake, sec., Iron Workers	35,000	17,525	2,679	55,204
31. S. Frank Raftery, pres., Painters	44,223	5,975	4,806	55,004
32. Max Greenberg, pres., Retail, Wholesale Workers	38,221	—	16,783	55,004
33. Lane Kirkland, sec.-treas., AFL-CIO	46,878	—	8,052	54,930
34. William Sidell, pres., Carpenters	48,140	5,443	1,311	54,894
35. Thomas W. Gleason, pres., Longshoremen (ILA)	40,000	13,099	1,732	54,831
36. W. A. Boyle, pres., Mine Workers*	47,917	—	6,912	54,829
37. John T. Joyce, sec., Bricklayers	33,333	14,640	6,173	54,146
38. Alexander J. Rohan, pres., Printing Pressmen	39,022	6,940	7,970	53,932
39. William DiSilvestro, sec.- treas., Painters	33,167	7,325	12,902	53,394
40. Frank Bonadio, pres., Building Trades Dept., AFL-CIO	39,167	10,722	2,052	51,941
41. George Hardy, pres., Service Employees	49,585	—	2,338	51,923
42. Al H. Chesser, pres., Transportation Union	46,706	—	5,118	51,824
43. Robert Georgine, sec.-treas., Building Trades Dept.	34,167	11,061	4,789	50,017
44. Charles E. Nichols, treas., Carpenters	39,000	5,460	3,669	48,129
45. James B. Cole, treas., Iron Workers	30,000	17,820	113	47,933
46. Leonard Woodcock, pres., Auto Workers	38,134	—	9,315	47,449

\*The UMW reduced salaries after Boyle lost office.

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big wave of such union building was in the late 1930s and early '40s. But even at its militant height, experienced observers could predict accurately the "maturation process" the new unions would follow. Benjamin Selekman, for instance, writing in 1937 when CIO militance was at its height, was able to predict the unions' changing role. During their initial phase, they were regarded by management as a dangerous threat to be suppressed. The negotiation of the first agreement would establish a *modus vivendi*, allowing for the development of supplementary union activities, but at the same time decreasing identification of members with the organization. A period of building joint relationships would follow, marked by further union bureaucratization and the development of a set of consistent attitudes by both management and the union. Still later would come acceptance of the union as a permanent fact, and the development of a joint administrative channel for the handling of grievances and the regular reopening of negotiations.<sup>5</sup> John L. Lewis, founder of the CIO, foresaw the evolution from recognition struggles to labor peace more succinctly: "A CIO contract," he said, "is adequate protection against sit-downs, lie-downs or any other kind of strike."<sup>6</sup>

At the beginning of many unions it would have been difficult to separate the activities of informal work groups from the enthusiastic support their members gave to the newly organized unions. Many workers felt that the unions were truly their own organizations. John Sargent, a local leader of the union at Inland Steel, gave a picture of what unionism in the steel industry was like in the early days of the 1930s:

Without a contract, without any agreement with the company, without any regulations concerning hours of work, conditions of work or wages, a tremendous surge took place. We talk of a rank-and-file movement; the beginning of union organization was the best kind of rank-and-file movement you could think of. John L. Lewis sent in a few organizers, but there were no organizers at Inland Steel, and I'm sure there were no organizers at Youngstown Sheet and Tube. The union organizers were essentially workers in the mill who were so disgusted with their conditions and so ready for a change that they took the union into their own hands.

For example, what happened at Inland Steel I believe is perhaps representative of what happened throughout the steel industry. Without a contract we secured for ourselves agreements on working conditions and wages that we do not have today, and that were better by far than what we do have today in

the mill. For example, as a result of the enthusiasm of the people in the mill, you had a series of strikes, wildcats, shut-downs, slow-downs, anything working people could think of to secure for themselves what they decided they had to have. If their wages were low there was no contract to prohibit them from striking, and they struck for better wages. If their conditions were bad, if they didn't like what was going on, if they were being abused, the people in the mills themselves—without a contract or any agreement with the company involved—would shut down a department or even a group of departments to secure for themselves the things they found necessary.

This approach went far beyond the strategy of trade unionism. Far from recognizing the legitimacy of management power and the employers' need for hard work and steady production, it assumed that the workers' needs were the only legitimate criterion for action. A struggle between unbridled workers' militance and the employers' need for a pacified labor force was inevitable. In this struggle, the union leadership, especially at the national level, soon became the employers' ally. John Sargent continued:

What happens to a union? And what happened to the United Steelworkers of America? What makes me mad, and what makes thousands of other people in the mill mad, is that the companies became smart and understood that in order to accommodate themselves to a labor organization they could not oppose that labor organization. What they had to do was recognize that labor organization. And when they recognized a labor union they had to be sure they recognized the national and international leadership of that labor union and took the affairs of that labor union out of the hands of ordinary elected officials on a local scale.

The result was that the union became

a watchdog for the company. The local union has become the police force for the contracts made by the international union. If a local union tries to reject a contract in the Steelworkers Union, the contract is put into effect and the local union acts as the police to see that the men live up to the contract.<sup>7</sup>

As this account indicates, what really happened is that groups other than the rank-and-file workers grew to have more and more power over the actual functioning of the unions. Even at the local

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level, the union leadership, no longer personally affected by conditions in the workplace, began to emerge as a separate group with an interest in maintaining their own power position. The International, now firmly in place, no longer needed to rely on rank-and-file militance to secure its acceptance by the corporations. The great powers given it to lead coordinated struggles—control of union funds, authority over contracts, ability to appoint officials, power to suspend or take over locals, even the right to discipline and ensure the firing of workers—were now focused on getting workers into line, ensuring that their action did not overstep the bounds of the strategy of unionism.

The contract itself, a legally binding document, introduced the courts as another determinant of what the unions could do. The complex grievance procedures established by the contracts created a whole bureaucracy of lawyers, company and union officials, mediators and arbitrators to administer them, by whose decisions the unions were bound. Through a mass of labor legislation, the government has similarly become an important factor in labor relations, defining by law exactly what unions may and may not do and regulating their activity through the National Labor Relations Board, the Labor Department and a vast mediation bureaucracy. More recently, wage controls and government pay boards have limited the unions' range of action even more.

This legalism makes fairly simple disputes into complex ones by removing them from the shop floor. They become legal debates over what management can and cannot do, not what workers need. It is common for management to do something workers object to, and then bring in the union to say that management has the right to do it because it isn't forbidden in the contract. The use of worker action to deny a management "right" is taboo with most unions since it is extralegal—something that an organization which bases its existence on the legality of court-enforced contracts does not want. This legalism is supported by an almost magical belief in the beneficence of the law. Like a magician who simply pulls cards from his sleeve but distracts the audience's attention by making mysterious and unnecessary movements, legal obscurities can make conflicts between workers and employers into issues comprehensible only to legal professionals. A shop steward and aspiring union politician described to some militants his experience in negotiations with management:

Have you ever dealt with these people? Well I have. I've been on the contract negotiation committee and I've gone with the



B.A. to solve some beefs. Well, I used to be like you; I would argue with anybody. But now I see how complicated things are. When you negotiate with the boss he comes with lawyers; not a lawyer, but lawyers. And they sit down with big stacks of papers and it gets complicated and detailed.

This legal rigmarole turns union business into a mystification workers are supposedly incompetent to understand, let alone control.

Finally, the employers themselves wield vast power to influence what unions actually do. They can offer jobs in management to those lower level union officials who are cooperative. They can help make or break the careers of top union leaders by allowing them the appearance of victories or pressing them to defeats. For the unions as institutions they can offer easy cooperation or perpetual harassment—or downright unionbusting. And in the end, their superior power assures that they have the knockout punch, should it ever be necessary to slug it out to the end, a fact which does much to keep union leaders “reasonable.” A local union official at the Lordstown Vega plant told journalist Emma Rothschild that during the negotiations with GM, he had a recurrent fear that “if they had a strong desire they could just evacuate the buildings and leave.” And a GM official said of auto workers: “They complain and yet, if we closed Lordstown down and then reopened, we’d get 50,000 applications.”<sup>8</sup> In short, rank-and-file workers have become only one of the many groups able to shape what unions can and will do.

In our travels, we found one shop where the union’s role was reminiscent of John Sargent’s description of early unionism. It was a large plant in an industrial town outside a major midwestern city. A microcosm of industry, the plant made its own rubber and had a foundry, machine shops and assembly operations. The plant dominated the landscape as we drove past small houses on steep hillsides, into the downtown area (railroad tracks ran right through its center) to the union hall. We talked for several hours with the elected Business Agent, who had been a scrappy militant in the strikes of the 1940s, and four young shop stewards he had recruited to become active in the union.

Conditions at the plant were exceptional, because the union supported and even encouraged workers to settle complaints right on the shop floor. If a grievance got bogged down, they stopped the unit where it occurred. The B.A. told us: “They don’t leave, they just sit down by the machines. The bosses say get to work and they just sit there. Pretty soon the company gets someone who can settle the thing.”

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When we asked for an example, he turned to one steward and said:

We had one in the machine shop two-and-a-half weeks ago, didn't we, Tony? A supervisor was doing a production job. He'd been warned about it over and over. No one would have objected if he'd asked the steward was it okay for him to try to straighten out this particular job, but he maintained he had the right to do anything he wanted. So we closed down the department. The company will squall, but I tell 'em, "What the hell, we let 'em let off a little steam."

The plant was largely on piece rates, and the B.A. told us: "We control the rates. When rates are readjusted, they always move upward, never downward." The result, according to the workers we talked with, was that they were able to "make out" in five-and-a-half to six-and-a-half hours, using the rest of the eight-hour day for themselves. The B.A. boasted:

If there is no conflict here, it's because we're on top, not because we're too weak. I called up the plant personnel man the other day about something and asked him how he was. "Terrible," he said. "What's the matter?" "I don't hear from you with complaints enough, and when I don't hear from you, I know we're taking it too easy and you guys are stealing the plant."

It was clear, though, even to the B.A., that these conditions were based in part on this particular management's tolerance. "I've got to give a lot of the credit to this company," he said. "They believe a flexible policy is in their long-run interest." Perhaps, too, the union was tolerated because it had only called one contract strike in the last thirty years, and it lasted for only two weeks.

Needless to say, workers preferred working where the union made a real effort to maintain decent working conditions. People who left this company and went to work at other plants often tried to get back because conditions were better. As one worker there told us:

I worked in a steel mill for six months and the only reason I knew what a steward was is that my father knew them and introduced me. Over there, you'll get a foreman on your back, and if you don't do something about it yourself he'll just keep on you, because there is no steward around.

Yet even though the workers in the plant considered the union exceptionally good, they still viewed it largely as something external

to themselves, not as something for them to participate in, let alone an expression of their own activity. When we asked the stewards about the workers' attitude toward the union, the answer was:

Well, there are always some people who gripe if you don't get a hundred percent of what you go for, but mostly people are pretty satisfied. We try to get them involved in politics and things, but they are mostly pretty apathetic.

Perhaps most telling was the fact that they had to change from monthly to quarterly meetings of the union, because they were unable to get a quorum of fifty members to meetings. The union has 2500 members.

A union which will regularly close down departments over grievances is rare, even archaic. (So is a company which will tolerate it without disciplining workers or retaliating against the union.) Indeed, the usual pattern is just the opposite. When we asked a crane operator whose department had just been flooded with noxious gas and extreme heat, produced by a newly installed process, why they didn't just close the job, his reply was simple and direct: "That would be a wildcat, and the union and company wouldn't allow it."

When union officials prevent groups of workers from acting—even to protect their own health—they clearly have become something separate from the workers on the job. They have instead become part of the apparatus which makes workers work. This is often explicitly recognized by union officials themselves. For example, a UAW committeeman at the Ford plant in Wixom, Michigan, generally regarded as an "outstanding" committeeman, told a *Wall Street Journal* reporter:

The committeeman is finding himself more and more doing a foreman's work, because they say they're too busy, and they know we'll do it for the people. . . . The main function of a committeeman is to settle problems right on the floor. I'm a mediator, a foot-soldier out there. Without the committeeman, Ford couldn't run this plant.<sup>9</sup>

The extent to which the union may take over the task of enforcing "work discipline" would surprise even a hardened cynic. This committeeman, who carried his own stopwatch, described how he took over the role of that most-hated of management officials, the time-study man. He recalled that a man "was working a job installing back-window trim. He said he didn't have enough time to do it, but I timed him, and he did. When I told him, he accused me of not doing my job."<sup>10</sup> The image of a union official standing over a

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worker with a stop watch telling him that he had to do his job in less time than the worker considered reasonable tells much about the current role of unions.

Another story told by the same committeeman shows the role of the union in breaking up workers' resistance at the lowest level. A worker was switched out of his regular job to one that was considered less desirable. The foreman contended the change was the result of the man's poor attendance record; the worker claimed it was really a retaliation because he had left early one day to take his wife home from the hospital. The committeeman worked out a compromise with the company. Meanwhile, however, the worker had staged a one-man strike on his new job. Far from backing him up, the committeeman, furious, berated the worker and allowed the company to forego the compromise and send the man back to the undesirable job.<sup>11</sup>

Of course, most unions don't do management's work in quite this direct a way. But unions can be resented as much for what they fail to do as for what they do. One worker at U.S. Steel in Gary told us:

I was there for a year and I never knew my griever. The union does absolutely nothing. I hate it worse than the company.

A worker at Republic Steel said:

There's a steward appointed for every hundred or so men and they're under four grievors. The stewards don't know the law, though. All they can do is file a grievance. The grievors know more but you can never find them.

A young auto worker in Detroit was totally disillusioned with the union:

I once took a grievance to my chief steward. He said, "Look, I'm not going to file a grievance for you, quit bothering me."

Even a group of workers at U.S. Steel and Inland Steel we talked with, who believed in the union and were trying to reform it, agreed that it was hardly a presence on the job, and that it was almost universally hated by the workers.

In some places, we found the union riddled with petty corruption. Many people had little stories to tell from their own experience. A UAW committeewoman in Detroit reported:

The lower levels of the union have gotten increasingly corrupt over the past—say five—years. Chief stewards go in and out

of the plant with company permission, and get all kinds of other privileges. That's a real change in the union.

A worker in an electrical shop in Cleveland described how, after many other people were turned down for the job, the son of the union president was promoted from assembly to the tool-and-die department. In many plants, union positions are a regular steppingstone to foreman and other management jobs. Many union officials are able to make private gain off pension funds and other powers of their office. While such corruption is not the core of the problem, it certainly adds to the distaste with which unions are viewed.

The core of the problem is the assistance the unions render to management. It would be a mistake to underestimate its extent, for labor stability is extremely important to management. In 1950, when the UAW agreed to a five-year contract with General Motors after more than a decade of short-term agreements, *Fortune* wrote:

General Motors has regained control over one of the crucial management functions . . . long-range scheduling of production, model changes and tool and plant investment. It has been so long since any big U.S. manufacturer could plan with confidence in its labor relations that industry has almost forgotten what it felt like. The full consequences of such a liberation of engineering and production talent can as yet only be guessed at, but one estimate from Detroit is that in planning freedom alone the contract is worth fifteen cents per man per hour to the corporation.

*Fortune* concluded that "GM may have paid a billion for peace [but] it got a bargain."<sup>12</sup>

The unions serve as a buffer, heading off workers' own attempts to use their strength directly against the employer. The union presents itself as a channel through which workers' problems can be solved without taking matters into their own hands. The whole apparatus of the grievance procedure is designed to keep workers at work when a dispute arises, so that production will not be disrupted. When workers pull a work stoppage or a walkout, the union makes it its business to try to work out a compromise to get them back to work. And when dissatisfaction with more general conditions arises, the union sees that it leads to a strike only when the contract expires, and in an orderly way that the company can plan for. The union thus protects employers from the one real weapon workers have: their ability to control or stop production.

Unions have not become identical with employers; they are a third force, standing between workers and management and pursuing



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interests of their own. Since their only real power lies in their claim to represent their members, union leaders, like any politicians, have to try to retain the support of their constituents. They make a great show of leading a militant struggle against the employer, especially at contract time. Gus Tyler of the ILGWU told Wilfred Sheed that it never hurts to seem tougher than you are:

When Mike Quill, the New York transit workers' leader, would stand up at those Garden meetings and really lace into Lindsay and let the other guys have it, the members would stand there and cheer and yell. He didn't have to call a strike. And he didn't. If they didn't have a chance to ventilate, he'd get the strike and it'd go wildcat.<sup>13</sup>

A Detroit labor lawyer explained the cynicism appropriate to interpreting the language of union demands:

*Our Members Demand Establishment of a Company-Funded Day Care Center So That Our Members' Wives Can Work*—This or any other similar, seemingly revolutionary, concept broached as part of a union's initial package of demands is probably a trade-off item that the union will give up in return for something else, such as money.

This demand may have been something bandied about at a meeting held by the union's negotiating committee with the rank and file. The committee incorporated it into its demands to placate the employees and to serve as the basis for the refrain throughout negotiations that the company doesn't pay a living wage.

*This Item Is Critical to Our Members*—This can be and often is applied to almost any type of union demand. It often signifies that union politics require that management offer something in a specific area to preserve the credibility of the negotiating committee in the eyes of the rank and file.

This frequently occurs where a dissident element has arisen within the union to oust the present leadership. The union will often accept just a small part of the proposal in the contract or possibly just a promise by management to study the matter. . . .

*Any Agreement We Reach Is Subject to Approval by the Membership*—This is a standard union refrain. . . . Often rank-and-file approval is a foregone conclusion, especially when the contract is heartily endorsed by the union leadership. On occasion, however, the union anticipates membership rejection and then returns to the bargaining table for something additional for the membership.

In reaction, management often holds something back for just such a situation. Every so often, though—and with greater frequency in recent years—rank and file rejection of an agreement comes as a surprise to both the union leadership and the management. This creates extremely difficult problems and in some cases may unravel everything to which the parties previously agreed.<sup>14</sup>

Such negotiations, in short, are an attempt to establish the basis on which workers can be gotten back to work.

Even strikes themselves, when controlled by the union, can be a means of manipulating workers to return on terms they might not otherwise accept. Emil Mazey, secretary/treasurer of the UAW noted:

I think that strikes make ratification easier. Even though the worker may not think so, when he votes on a contract he is reacting to economic pressures. I really believe that if the wife is raising hell and the bills are piling up, he may be more apt to settle than otherwise.<sup>15</sup>

And labor journalist William Serrin of the *Detroit Free Press* observed:

A strike, by putting the workers on the streets, rolls the steam out of them—it reduces their demands and thus brings agreement and ratification; it also solidifies the authority of the union hierarchy. . . . "A strike," explains a man who has intimately observed automobile negotiations for two decades, "does not have to be a stress to be avoided. It can be a tool for agreement."<sup>16</sup>

Most unions still hold that the power to strike remains necessary to ensure their survival, but a number of unions are taking the logical last step in union/management cooperation and giving up the right to strike altogether. The United Steelworkers of America, for example, had an agreement with the steel corporations not to strike when contracts expired in August, 1974; any issues they could not settle between themselves were to be submitted to binding arbitration. Such plans are spreading, amidst much fanfare about a "new era of labor peace." In the steel industry, the plan has met relatively little rank-and-file opposition for the simple reason that many workers feel they have not won much through such official strikes anyway. A worker at U.S. Steel in Gary said of the last

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national steel strike: "Nineteen fifty-nine—everybody knows they lost that strike."

When we asked Andrew Korenko what his fellow workers felt about the steel contract, he replied: "Nobody liked it. They didn't like the money and to a lesser extent they didn't like the no-strike deal. But there is stockpiling anyway, so you probably couldn't get much through a strike."

Andrew Korenko also pointed out the distinction workers sometimes make between the national level of the union and their own local: "People have *some* feeling about the local, but the international is just a monolith." It is common for workers to feel that the local to some extent still represents them, or at least is led by people they know and on whom they can put pressure. The same people may view the higher levels of the union as just another alien bureaucracy. At times locals may support or even lead strikes that the national leadership is opposing, as in the 1970 postal workers' wildcat. These union grass roots in turn help keep workers from rejecting unionism decisively.

The development of the union into something separate from workers themselves, though inevitable, did not become apparent all at once, either to management or to workers. For workers, it has been a gradual realization. One older radical in Detroit, an auto worker since the forties, told us:

The separation of workers from the union has steadily moved further and further down. There was always conflict in the UAW between locals and the International. During World War II it often came down to the stewards versus the local, when it came to supporting wildcats and the like. For a long time now most workers haven't had any use even for the lowest levels of the union. In the mid-fifties one really powerful rank-and-file leader I knew who was steward in his plant said that during a strike the barrier between workers and lower-level union officials would dissolve, but that within a few days the old distrust, suspicion and sense of separateness would return again.

Today, the attitudes of many workers, especially younger ones, have moved from distrust to bitter hostility, largely as a result of the factors we have described. When we went on a late-night call-in radio show in Detroit, just as the night shift was coming off, antagonism to the union was the common theme of the auto workers who called in. Indeed, there were more complaints about the union than about the work itself. The sentiment of many younger

workers was expressed by a phrase we heard over and over again, not only among auto workers but among many others as well: "I don't like to say it, but I guess I hate the union as much as I hate the company."

Many people recognize that this reflects a sharp change in attitude. As we sat in the call-in show, an older woman phoned in to complain:

The young people don't know about the union. I remember when we would walk four miles to bring food to my daddy when he and those men were inside the Chrysler plants during the sitdowns. We'd hand it up to them on long poles to the second floor. My daddy was a strong union man. Now he's retired and has a union pension and a good life. The young people just don't understand what it was like before the union. The men had to give gifts to the foremen to keep their jobs. They should appreciate all the union's done for them.

Many a younger worker has received a similar lecture from older workers and union officials.

Unions still retain a degree of support for several other reasons besides this lingering loyalty among older workers who remember the "bad old days" before unionization. Many lower level union officials—like many foremen—are personally known and liked by workers. Many people recognize that conditions are generally better where there are unions and support them for that reason. Sometimes the union will maintain credibility by supporting the demands of part of the workers, often those with the most seniority. Like any political machine, unions perform a great many small services, pushing selected grievances, fixing some things up with the employer, getting a worker off a bad job or even helping to solve problems off the job. As a worker in a small electrical factory in Cleveland told us:

People hate the union worse than the company. It's nothing but a private clique of leaders. But it has done enough favors so that if their back was pushed against the wall, a lot of people would probably support it.

Many more workers consider themselves "union men" or "union women," but mean by that a commitment to something far different from the unions as they now exist. They are the inheritors of a social and even moral tradition that workers should stick up for each other and not let themselves be pushed around. That tradition existed before modern unionism and it exists today outside of it, but



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because unions are the most visible form of workers' organization, loyalty to workers as a group often goes under the name of unionism. The paradoxical result is that even militants who attack the unions are often known as "strong union men."

In many unions there are reform and "rank-and-file" caucuses and movements which attempt to restore greater democracy and militance to the union structure. Such an aim is a natural response to the "maturation" of unions. Even the Gary steelworker who told us, "I hate the union more than I do the company," also felt that "maybe the first step for changing anything has to be taking over the union."

Yet the cynicism about such efforts is quite general. Many of today's distrusted officials were yesterday's militants. Even personally honest union officials find they have to play by the rules or be defeated by them. In Detroit we had described to us a young black worker, unconnected with any political organization, who got elected chief steward in an auto plant.

He was gung ho to do a good job and be different from all the other stewards. The job defeated him. There was nothing he could do. Within eight months all his enthusiasm was gone and he was convinced it was impossible to do anything with the union.

Not all officials who start out honest remain that way. Once they enter the union structure their own interests become different from those they represent. They enter a world of offices, lawyers, cocktail parties and negotiations. They no longer share the income level or the working conditions of the workers on the job.

But the social separation of union officials from ordinary workers is not primarily a problem of the personal qualities of individuals; it has its root in the nature of unionism itself. The crux of a union is its ability to bind its members to an agreement with management. This is what distinguishes it from any other form of workers' organization. All its institutional characteristics are devoted to this end. The goal requires that workers' relinquish their right to determine their own action. The actual authority to initiate action in a union resides in its officials and bureaucrats, not in its members—and this top-down organization of power is essential if the union is to prevent its members from violating its agreements with management. It is this, far more than their sheer size or the need to coordinate large numbers of people, that makes top-down organization a nearly universal characteristic of established trade unions.

In a very profound sense, there is no way that the rank and file can take over a union. The structure of unions is top-down—the best that



can happen is that a new and perhaps better group will take power at the top. That group, in turn, has to oppose itself to the rank and file at a certain point if it wants to maintain its agreements with management.

This was vividly illustrated by the recent take-over of the United Mine Workers by a rank-and-file reform organization, the Miners for Democracy. Arnold Miller, a retired miner, stricken with Black Lung disease from his years in the mines, was elected president of the union in 1973. Miller was as close to the rank and file and as free of corruption as any major union reform leader in many years. With his election, the UMW was changed from a corrupt and dictatorial racket to a progressive union with democratically elected leaders. Yet the UMW has continued and even improved its role in limiting workers' direct action and holding them within the limits of the contract with management. The reform leadership has launched a campaign against wildcat strikes and other forms of direct action which miners had developed over such issues as safety, health and pensions. When West Virginia coal miners struck on a massive scale to protest the lack of gasoline for getting to work in early 1974, the union reform leaders organized the effort, including substantial radio appeals, to get them back to work. Conflict between miners and the U.M.W. came to a head in late summer, 1975, when the firing of a participant in a local wildcat led first to a regional strike and then to a walkout which closed 80% of the bituminous coal industry demanding the right of local miners to strike. The union executive board—controlled by the reformers—ordered the miners back to work, and union opposition to the movement was so pronounced that miners closed down "their" union headquarters with picketlines. It took nearly a month from the strike's beginning for union officials and court injunctions to get the miners back to work.

Workers are usually better off with honest unions than with corrupt ones, but efforts to reform unions, like the unions themselves, serve to channel and contain discontent. Instead of using their direct power over production to change their situations, workers are urged by such reform movements to support efforts to "take over" the union from unsatisfactory leaders. But as the example of the mine workers indicates, even with reform leaders, the union remains a power separate from and often even opposed to the groups of people who actually work side by side on the job. If workers are to gain more control over the time of their lives, they will have to do it themselves.

## **6. THE BIG PICTURE: THE BIG RIP-OFF**

So far we have looked at work from the viewpoint of the individual and the workplace. The fundamental patterns we have found reveal much about the organization of our society as a whole.

Every day, hundreds of millions of people throughout the world go to work. At the workplace they produce goods and services that are considered useful. But what is produced by no means belongs to those who produce it—when workers go home from work, the products they have spent their previous hours creating remain behind, the property of the employers who have hired them. This is hardly hot news; most people realize they're working to fill someone else's pocket.

Often the workings of society seem complex and mysterious. The newspapers are filled with the gyrations of the stock market, the complexities of diplomacy, the speeches of politicians. But the foundation on which all such activities rest is the labor of those who produce society's wealth; without their activity, the stockholders would be reduced to eating their stocks and the politicians their words.

No matter what kind of society people live in, they have to work. This might not be true in the imaginary world of hobo song, where

you never change your socks  
and little streams of alchohol  
come trickling down the rocks. . . .  
There's a lake of stew  
And of honey, too—  
In the Big Rock Candy Mountain.

But in the real world, most things we need do not spring from nature ready to use. We have to make the things we need by applying human labor, and the tools and materials created by past labor, to the resources provided by nature.

### *The Big Picture: The Big Rip-off*

them again, wealth with which they are controlled. The result of workers' work is that the rich get richer and the rest of us have to go back to work for them.

Yet this very organization of work creates an organization of workers. They share common interests and a common predicament. They are connected by the cooperative nature of their work and their need for each other's products. They often join together in struggles to improve their lives. If these struggles and their goals could be sufficiently expanded, they could abolish a social organization in which some people have to work for others, and lay the basis for a society in which people could directly coordinate their own work to meet their own needs.



# II

# LIVING



Laurie Laffer/Liberation News Service

“Whether people feel off-the-job life is getting better or worse probably determines, more than any other single factor, whether they adopt strategies that accept the status quo or try to change it. . . . If the benefits offered by the existing organization of society continue to fade and the costs of accepting it continue to grow, action to reorganize society will become not just a feared or hoped-for dream, but the most immediate self-interest.”



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People don't live on the job. Indeed, many people think of their real lives as starting when they get off from work. The time clock seems to carve out work as a realm apart from the rest of life.

This apparent separation of work and nonwork realms is relatively recent. For an early American farm or artisan family, the relation between work and the rest of life was close. Work was carried on in and around the home. Work time and free time were interspersed. Work mates were usually family members as well. Much of the work was for the immediate needs of the family.

As production came to require the cooperation of larger numbers of people, and as it came under the control of employers, work moved away from the home and into factories, offices, stores and other workplaces. The job came to seem cut off from everything else.

But this is largely an illusion. Even when you leave the factory gate or walk out the office door, your life is still affected in a multitude of ways by what goes on behind them. The powerful institutions and forces which surround us, affecting us even inside the walls of our homes, gain their strength from the life they suck out of us at work. Far from escaping into a realm of freedom, people are faced with further consequences of their lack of control over the making and use of what they produce. A young worker overheard in a bar in Somerville, Massachusetts, put it eloquently:

You go to work for someone and they rip you off all day. Then you drive a car some other company ripped you off for, go shopping and get ripped off at the store and go home and get ripped off by the power company, the gas company and the landlord. It seems like the only thing you can do without getting ripped off by them is sit in the park and shiver.

Only by gaining control over work itself would it be possible to shape freely the rest of life.

The importance of the nonwork realm was brought home to us by a discussion we had with a group of young steelworkers in Chicago. For several hours the talk had focused on what went on at work, when one of them broke in to chide us:

Look, work isn't the whole story. I drive to work and maybe listen to the Watergate hearings on the car radio. I go home and face all the crap of the cities. Everywhere I go I have to breathe the air. Not so long ago we had a war going on.

Whether people feel off-the-job life is getting better or worse probably determines, more than any other single factor, whether they adopt strategies that accept the status quo or try to change it.

During the quarter of a century that followed the Great Depression, most people experienced dramatic improvements in their general conditions of life. The society as a whole likewise seemed to be growing, and growing better. There was a profound and widespread optimism that things would go on improving steadily. This sentiment underlay the widespread support for the existing organization of society and much of the hostility toward those who wanted to change it. Many people had indeed never had it so good.

Over the past decade, however, this situation has begun to change, first gradually, then more rapidly. Most people we asked agreed that living conditions were worsening. Few expected any rapid improvement. This change, its causes and results, are the main subject of Part II of this book.

We believe the feeling that things are likely to get worse may force many people to consider life strategies based on changing rather than just accepting the status quo. This has already been reflected in waves of consumer boycotts, wildcat strikes and truckers' blockades. If the benefits offered by the existing organization of society continue to fade and the costs of accepting it continue to grow, action to reorganize society will become not just a feared or hoped-for dream, but the most immediate self-interest.



Cidne Hart/Liberation News Service

## 7. HARD TIMES

People need goods and services that are created by human labor. Some of these products, like food, are necessary for biological survival. Others are needed for survival as a human being in a particular civilization—primitive bushmen may not need electricity, but modern city dwellers can hardly live without it. These products are what most people create every day at work.

But in our society, as we have seen, most people cannot produce directly for their own needs. They can produce only when they sell their time and creative abilities to an employer who owns the necessary means of production. As a result, production is organized first and foremost not to meet the needs of the producers but to increase the power and profit of those who own and direct productive wealth. Despite the amount of labor that working people do, and despite the tremendous amount workers can produce with modern technology, most people's needs for the products of labor are inadequately met.

This reality was masked during the decades that followed the Great Depression. The United States experienced sustained prosperity, during which incomes rose substantially, inflation was moderate and the occasional recessions relatively short and mild. It was widely asserted that America had become an "affluent society." While there might remain a few isolated "pockets of poverty," it was said, the good things of life were in general distributed quite equally, and all but a small minority had high incomes and a high standard of living. If anything, the problem was that people consumed too much, not too little; such affluence disturbed the natural ecology and left people's spiritual needs unmet in their endless acquisition of unnecessary gadgets and other consumer goods. Further, it was assumed that this affluence was bound to continue and steadily increase; the depressions, crises and "hard times" that had periodi-

## *Living*

cally struck the economy in the past could now be prevented through newly discovered government policies. In short, the economic problems of society had essentially been solved. As a result, the social movements that had addressed the economic needs of working people in the past were now largely obsolete.

This view has been rudely shattered by the realities of the past several years. "Hard times" are not only possible; they are upon us. They have substantially reduced the standard of living for most Americans and have led to protest actions on a massive scale.

### **AMERICA'S LARGEST PROTEST**

Mrs. Ann Giordano recalls that she was never particularly conscious of food prices; her Staten Island kitchen didn't have enough shelf space for her to buy in large quantities. But one day when she had put the groceries away there was still space left on the shelf. She vaguely wondered if she had left a bag of food at the store. Next time she came home from shopping, she looked in her wallet and concluded that she had accidentally left a \$20 bill behind. When she went back to the supermarket and found out how much her food really cost, she suddenly realized where the shelf space had come from and where the money had gone.

It was early spring in 1973. Food prices were soaring, and millions of shoppers were having similar experiences. Mrs. Giordano, who was thirty-three and described herself as "just a housewife," called some of her friends and discussed the idea of a consumer boycott—an idea that was springing up simultaneously in many places around the country in response to rising food prices. Soon a substantial grapevine of women were calling homes all over Staten Island, spreading word of the boycott. They called a meeting at a local bowling alley to which over one hundred people came on two days' notice, named themselves JET-STOP (Joint Effort to Stop These Outrageous Prices) and elected captains for each district. Within a week they had covered the Island with leaflets, picketed the major stores and laid the basis for a highly effective boycott.<sup>1</sup>

Mrs. Giordano and her friends were typical of those who gave birth to the 1973 consumer meat boycott, "a movement which started in a hundred different places all at once and that's not led by anyone." As a newspaper account described it:

The boycott is being organized principally at the grass-roots level rather than by any overall committee or national leadership. It is made up mainly of groups of tenants in apartment



buildings, neighbors who shop at the same markets in small towns, block associations and—perhaps most typical—groups of women who meet every morning over coffee. All have been spurred into action by the common desire to bring food prices back to what they consider a manageable level.<sup>2</sup>

The 1973 consumer meat boycott was undoubtedly the largest mass protest in American history. A Gallup poll taken at the end of the boycott found that over 25 percent of all consumers—representing families with fifty million members—had participated in it.<sup>3</sup> Large retail and wholesale distributors reported their meat sales down by one-half to two-thirds.<sup>4</sup> The boycott was strongest among what the press referred to as “middle income” families—those with incomes around the national average of \$10,000 or \$12,000 a year. It represented, in the words of one reporter, “an awareness that, for a whole new class of Americans like themselves, push has finally come to shove.”<sup>5</sup> In “low-income” neighborhoods, sales fell less during the boycott, largely, as retailers pointed out, because the residents, who can’t afford much meat at any time, had been cutting back for weeks due to high prices. As one Harlem merchant said: “How much can these people tighten their belts when they don’t have too much under their belts in the first place?”<sup>6</sup>

Some advocates of the boycott made the dubious argument that it would bring meat prices down by reducing the demand for meat. For most participants, however, the movement was seen as a protest, a way of making visible to politicians and others what they felt about the rising cost of living. President Nixon responded by putting a freeze on meat prices, but his move was met by scorn among many boycotters who felt that prices were already far too high (“They locked the barn door after the cow went through the roof,” commented one housewife).

The boycott did not prove to be an effective tactic for combatting high prices, but it did show the tremendous capacity of ordinary people to organize themselves on a massive national scale around issues of mutual concern.

It also suggests that the development of society has made popular movements possible on a larger scale than ever before. The interdependence of the economy means that many problems, instead of just affecting one or another limited group, affect most people in common. Rapid and widespread communications allow word of proposed actions to spread almost at once to virtually everyone. Faced with similar problems in the future, people should be able to act on just as massive a scale, but with far more effective tactics.

## GET POOR QUICK

Massive protest over rising prices should have come as no surprise. Inflation has steadily reduced the living standard of most working people over the past few years. Average take-home pay—adjusted to account for inflation—fell slowly but steadily from 1965 to 1970. After a brief respite in 1971–72 it began to fall again.<sup>7</sup> In 1973 and the first half of 1974, it fell nearly 7 percent.<sup>8</sup>

Inflation has had somewhat different effects on different groups of people. For better-off workers, it has often meant an end to the nonnecessities that made life more than just a struggle to get by. A butcher, shaking his head over meat prices, put it this way:

People are just going to have to change their habits and what they expect. There are going to be fewer two-car families, fewer boat families, fewer vacation-home families and fewer snowmobile families.

A letter carrier in Gloucester, Massachusetts, illustrated this point:

I work this job and then I work at a liquor store on the side. Even so, it gets harder all the time to get by. The bills keep piling up. You can do without a lot of things, but you can't do without food. I've got a vacation place up in New Hampshire. I'm really fond of it, but I don't have any money to do anything with it. It seems like something is always going wrong and I can't afford to fix it. Seems like I should sell the place if I can't keep it up, but then with prices going the way they are, you don't know what to do.<sup>9</sup>

A number of people we talked with whose incomes were near the national average wondered how people who made less than they did could even manage to survive. The question was very much to the point; inflation hits harder the less money you have to start with. The widow of a parking-lot attendant in South Boston, for example, lives with four of her children in a four-bedroom tenement apartment. She receives \$220 a month from social security, about \$216 from federal welfare funds, and nets about \$16 a week baby-sitting for a neighbor; her total income is about \$6000 a year. "I used to be able to go to the store with \$50 and come back with six or seven bags of groceries," she stated. "Now I'm lucky if I come back with three." The family diet is now almost exclusively government-surplus macaroni and rice, canned spaghetti and frozen potpies, with chicken or cold cuts every other night and fresh vegetables about twice a week. She has