

The Political Economy of Work

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INTRODUCTION: SOME QUESTIONS ABOUT WORK

Work is necessary to provide for our individual livelihoods and our collective way of life. We usually emphasize this fact a great deal, as though it explains the place of work in our lives and society. But in fact necessity explains only a very small proportion of the important characteristics of work in America. It does not explain who works, or why different people from different backgrounds work long or short hours, at easy jobs or hard, under pleasant circumstances or obnoxious ones. It does not explain whose jobs will be eliminated by automation or who will receive the most money for their work. In this chapter we shall attempt to look below the everyday surface explanations of social life to see why work should be structured as it is, and how it comes to have the different effects it has on different members of our society. For the most part the answers have to do with the way in which the work Americans do is determined by the needs of the capitalist economy rather than of the human beings involved.

I. WHAT IS WORK?

We think of work in various senses. First, it is action which requires effort, which is difficult to perform. Generally, we also see work as action directed to some particular end, not aimless. Third, we think of work in connection with our jobs, as a means of earning a living. And we sometimes think of it as a moral value; we consider it good to work hard. We can translate these everyday senses of work into the terms of political economy in a way which will help us to better understand the whole human process of which it is a central part.

Before we do this, though, we must rid ourselves of the preconception that work is unpleasant, something we do only because we are forced to. Some jobs are a great deal nicer than others; some people look forward to the productive activities in which they engage each day. How many people—and which people—begin to feel this way in our society is an important question, for the unpleasantness we associate with work is real for

many people, but it is also avoidable. The habit of thinking of work, or labor, as an unpleasant necessity or obligation comes from three important sources. First is the fact that much of what our labor produces goes to other people, while we retain less than its total value. Second are the particular conditions under which we work, which may unnecessarily exhaust, bore or injure us, and which often do not let us see any meaningful results from our labor. Third is the split consciousness caused largely by the first two, which makes us put our most impersonal, aggressive and defensive selves forward at work, while we seek our enjoyments, our personal attachments, and our satisfactions during our leisure hours.

Political economy reminds us that as human beings we are endowed with creative potential. In the course of our lives we can expend a certain, always limited amount of effort. All that we do is thus part of the gradual process of using up our potential powers as people. At the same time, everything we do is an expression of our basic human capabilities. Work, or labor, is the activity by which we express ourselves through acting on the world of things in which we live. When we make a chair or write a book, for example, we put something of ourselves into that chair or book; by being productive, we express the fact that we are alive. This is closely related to the fact that work is directed, not aimless. Unlike animals who respond primarily or exclusively to instinct, people are able to conceptualize in their minds what they are going to do. It is not innate in us either to make chairs or write books; these activities are products of our conscious choice and cultural background; they reveal that we are thinking creatures.

Much of what we call work, however, is not productive in the same sense in which the creation of chairs or books is. Chairs and books are useful; they possess a certain value precisely on the basis of being useful: use-value. When we make things for ourselves, or for our friends and relatives, and even for the most part when we go to the store and buy things, we do so for the use-value of those things. But there is also another kind of value, exchange-value. When we are paid to manufacture chairs for a furniture company, we are paid to produce a commodity which the company can then sell for more than it pays us (together with what it spends on other business expenses). Thus, two chairs which are equally useful may cost very different amounts depending on whether one buys them before Christmas or on an after-Christmas sale, or on whether the people who work in chair factories are paid well or poorly for their labor. How much these workers are paid depends, similarly, not on how useful the chairs they make are, but on the conditions of supply and demand under which they exchange their labor.

There is also a third, and most fundamental, kind of value: labor-value. Because people put themselves into everything they produce, products acquire value as the embodiments of the creativity of their makers. This is easy for us to see in terms of books or paintings, for we can almost feel the presence of the makers, and we sometimes envy them the permanent expression which they have given to their existence. It is also true, however, of all productive activity, of all work.

Thinking of labor-value helps us to understand such things as the role

of machines in production. We usually think of machines as merely inanimate objects, the property of companies which have bought them. So they are, but only in one limited sense. Machines are also the embodiment of the labor, the creative powers, of the people who invented, designed, manufactured, and repaired them over the years. Many of these people may be dead; almost certainly few of them are still being paid for their work. But through their creation they continue to help in the process of producing use-value and exchange-value. The use values these people create through their machines go to whomever can afford to buy the products; the exchange-values go to whomever owns the machines. Much of the wealth of capital comes from the continued productivity of machines created by workers in the past. These workers, of course, did not receive use-values in proportion to those they have helped to create, or else there would not be wealth left over to go to capital in the form of profit.

Because of modern technology, the work which some people do today produces tremendous use-value, far more than at any time in the past. We are proud of our position as a wealthy and productive country, but there are three questions we need to ask ourselves about this. *First, is all work equally productive?* As we shall see in more detail later in this chapter, a smaller and smaller proportion of people in our society work to create use-values. More and more work in ways which simply circulate or manage material wealth without creating any more of it: stockbrokers, accountants, bankers, many clerks, advertising agents, and salespeople are examples of this sort of nonproductive work. *Second, are we right to think that we are extremely efficient, and that this is the source of our great wealth?* We tend to produce and produce until there is too much, and then throw away the rest or enter a recession until there is a new shortage. We consume vastly more than our share of the world's energy; perhaps this and not efficiency of production is the source of our wealth. Indeed, in some sense we are not as wealthy as we think, for although we have a great many things, we are deprived of many other qualities of life including leisure. Members of "primitive" hunting and gathering tribes in fact have much more leisure time to spend socializing with each other or just daydreaming if they choose, than most of us do. Although they have a much lower material standard of living, it could be said that they are more efficient consumers of energy, and that they reap substantial rewards for this in leisure time activities. *Lastly, just as we produce a great deal of material wealth, do we not also produce a vast amount of what has been called "illth," things that are bad for us?* We produce poisonous leaded paints which children swallow, pollution of the air and water, pavement over which were once open oxygen-producing fields, diseases like cancer which are virtually unknown among the worlds nonindustrialized populations and which have been linked to environmental pollution.

A special part of the illth we produce has directly to do with the experience of work. It has to do with the discriminatory fashion by which we ensure a sufficient number of people willing to do unpleasant and/or unfulfilling labor; the impersonal and often injurious environments in which we expect people to work; the pride with which those of us who do "brain-

work," even of trivial clerical varieties, hold ourselves above those who work, even with consummate skill, with their hands. It has to do conversely with the sense of personal responsibility which those at the bottom of our class structure feel for their positions—as though they were workers, or worse still, unemployed workers, because they weren't good enough in some personal sense. In reality, the class structure exists as a social fact, external to these individuals, enduring long beyond their lives, and coercive over them.

In order to understand the political economy of work, we must look at some historical processes leading to today's situation. In the rest of this chapter we shall look at certain critical features of the organization of work in America today: First, the question of who works? Second, what work do people do? Third, what are the rewards of work? And last, what is the work itself like, and why?

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The organization of work in modern society has certain special characteristics which result from the way in which it was developed. Until the twentieth century, craft production dominated work activity even in the most technologically advanced countries of the world. It had already been under attack for over a hundred years, however, as industry after industry either introduced machines to replace workers, or reorganized production so that low-skilled (and cheap) workers could do the work which more skilled ones had done previously. Often, employers used both strategies to reduce their costs. These were also strategies to gain and maintain control of the workplace. Managers and owners wanted productive activities to be controlled from above, in a clear hierarchy of command, so that their own decisions could be put easily into practice. Any organization of work which left workers with considerable autonomy and/or a wide range of specialized knowledge, meant that the workers were in a good bargaining position. They could effectively compete with management over wages and over the conditions of work itself. To understand how workers came to have the low degree of autonomy, skill, and satisfaction, as is the case in most of industry today, we must look back at the historical process by which craft production gave way to factory and office labor.

The most basic sort of labor is that which provides people with the means of subsistence, principally food. Until very recently, the vast majority of work in every country and civilization was devoted to agricultural production, and/or to pasturage, hunting, and other means of securing food. This situation changed only when agriculture could provide a food surplus beyond the needs of the farmers themselves. During certain times, farmers produced a surplus sufficient to support fairly large cities. This was the case during the period of the Roman Empire. Partly by means of slaves and other mechanisms of forced labor, Roman agriculture provided for the subsistence of a very rich elite class. Specialization was not limited to rich people and farmers, however; there was also a large number of craftsmen. After the collapse of the Roman Empire, most of Western Europe lost the

ability to produce a large-scale surplus of food, and reverted to a much lower standard of living. Very few people could be spared from agricultural production so that they could make things. Technology at that time was very simple in all areas of production. Those who worked at various crafts had only relatively simple tools to assist them. Their products were limited for the most part to (a) tools for farm work, (b) military equipment, and (c) luxury goods for the political and religious elite. Even the construction of shelter was at first not the primary occupation of very many people. Only on the Italian peninsula was there retained a very considerable tradition of skilled craft work from the days of the Roman Empire.

Gradually, during the Middle Ages, agricultural productivity improved, and the proportion of the population engaged in nonagricultural pursuits increased correspondingly. This trend has continued in Western Europe and the world's other industrial societies. When early intelligent estimates of what the population of Britain did were made in 1688 and 1803, they revealed the distribution shown in Table 10-1. (You may want to compare this with the figures given in Table 10-2 for present-day America.)

Most of the productive work outside agriculture was done in handicrafts. Human muscle-power was the main source of energy in this method of production. There were very few machines, mostly only hand tools. Gradually, inventions increased people's ability to draw on nonhuman sources of power, such as water mills. Improvements in agricultural productivity also meant that a larger proportion of the population worked on

Table 10-1 Occupations of the Population of England and Wales, in Number of Families

	1688	1803
Aristocracy	16,586	27,204
Middle Ranks:	435,000	634,640
agriculture	330,000	320,000
industry and commerce	70,000	230,300
professions	55,000	84,340
Lower Orders	919,000	1,346,479
craftsmen (artisans)	60,000	445,726
others (farm laborers, military, pensioners)	449,000	566,574
paupers, vagrants, etc.	410,000	334,179
Total	1,370,586	2,008,323

Sources: for 1803, P. Colquhoun, 1806, *A Treatise on Indigence*. London: J. Hatcherd; for 1688, G. King, 1696, *Natural and Political Observations and Conclusions Upon the State and Condition of England*, as cited in Perkin, 1969.

producing craft goods. At first, craftsmen worked largely for lords and other members of the elite classes as servants, receiving the necessities of life and perhaps some luxuries directly, not through barter or wages. Increasingly, however, craftsmen began to produce commodities—goods intended for sale. They congregated in cities and grouped themselves together in organizations called guilds. Guilds had three classes of members, masters (initially the best craftsmen, but increasingly simply those who owned businesses in which the others worked), journeymen (those who were fully fledged, independent members of a craft, but not wealthy enough to employ others) and apprentices (trainees).

Various cities specialized in different kinds of work. This meant that elaborate patterns of trade had to be developed to move goods from producers to consumers. These goods were handled by middlemen, merchants who bought from craftsmen or employed them directly, and then marked up the price of goods and sold them to other people. The more craftsmen worked directly for the middlemen, the more they lost their independence. The guilds started out as ways of protecting particular crafts. Eventually, however, the masters gained control of them and became employers of the rest. They were middlemen, too.

Until about the nineteenth century in most of Europe and America, most craftsmen were still in control of the labor process; that is, even though they worked for other people, and could not do whatever they wanted with their products, they still set their own hours and pace of work. They could do this largely because they were paid by the product produced (piece-rate) not the time worked, and because they often worked in their homes or other settings beyond direct supervision. Because the craftsmen were highly skilled and passed on their craft by training apprentices (who were often their children or the children of friends and relatives), they were in a strong position to control *how* they worked. No one knew enough to tell them to change, or if they did, they didn't have an ability to force them because no one else could replace such skilled workers.

This situation began to change rapidly with the introduction of high-technology industry. Such technology is often thought of as "labor-saving," but this is somewhat misleading. In an economy as a whole, advanced technology may create new jobs, because it creates new wealth. In specific parts of an economy, however, workers are often thrown out of jobs because machines can produce marketable products faster and cheaper. This happened, for example, in many parts of the English textile industry. When power looms came into widespread use, thousands and thousands of handloom weavers either lost their jobs altogether or were forced to accept extremely low wages. Thus, even as the wealth of English society grew, many workers suffered. It takes quite a while for workers from an out-moded craft to find new jobs, if indeed they can, as adults, learn a new trade.

Another way in which industrial change affects the work force is by changing its nature and composition. In the long run, this has probably been more important than the problem of technological unemployment, even though the latter creates great personal crises for the people it affects.

Most of the jobs created by machines, especially in the early years of their use, have been relatively low skilled. An easy way to compare the skill level of jobs is to measure how long it takes to learn how to do them. Whereas many craftsmen had to spend years training as apprentices to become journeymen, many factory jobs could be completely learned in a few weeks. In the early part of the industrial revolution, indeed, many jobs were performed by children. Aside from the harmful effects this had on the youngsters, it also created problems by increasing adult unemployment.

What are the implications of the increase in low-skilled work relative to high-skilled? One of the most important is that the bargaining position of the worker is undermined. If a high-skilled worker wants to bargain for a wage increase, for example, he is in a fairly good position because he cannot easily be replaced. If he withholds his labor (i.e., goes on strike), his employer will not be able to go on producing very readily. A low-skilled worker faces problems in attempting the same kind of action. If he goes on strike, the employer can very likely hire new workers to replace him. Workers who help employers defeat strikes in this way are called "scabs" or "blacklegs." They are often impoverished and forced to go against their fellows out of desperation.

Another implication of decreasing the skill level of jobs is to make it easier to increase the extent of managerial control over what goes on in the workplace. Craft work depends very largely on the skills of individuals. It is somewhat similar to artistic endeavor, in that the worker must exercise a considerable amount of judgment on the job. This is also true of managers and many professional workers. Relatively low-skilled work—most assembly-line production, for example—does not depend on the specific judgments of the workers doing it. This means, on the one hand, that the work is less interesting to the worker, who gets less opportunity to use his or her special talents. At the same time, supervisors, engineers, and others are able to determine from outside or above how the job is to be done. They can decide, for instance, to speed up the rate at which a conveyer belt carries items past a worker on an assembly line, thus making the work harder.

The general trend over the last two hundred years in the industrial countries of the world has been for low-skilled work to increase relative to high-skilled. We do not always realize this because we are so impressed by the increasing complexity of technology. But many high-technology industries have largely low-skilled jobs. Most computer programmers, for example, are much less skilled than were the coppersmiths, wheelwrights, framework knitters, shipwrights, and other craftsmen of two hundred years ago. The general level of education in the advanced countries is higher than it was, but the specialized training necessary to teach the average person a particular line of work has been reduced. In addition, we might bear in mind that all the workers in the Third World who produce the raw materials on which high-technology industry, and the luxuries of industrial society, depend, are poorly trained.

Much of this historical change in the nature and organization of work has taken place despite the active resistance of workers. Some of this has

been because even changes which were good for society as a whole caused hardship for certain people, and there has historically been little effort to help such people. More is because many of the bad features of changes have not been taken into account. Workers have struggled to have changes be truly progressive, not simply more profitable or easier for management. Thus, there is no necessary reason that business organizations have to try to centralize more and more power in the hands of a few managers, instead of allowing some form of greater democratic control. Often the centralization of control hurts productivity, instead of helping it, but it goes on anyway. Further, it is not clear that the creation of so many low-skilled jobs has been very much to society's benefit. It has caused workers to turn their attention to their leisure time—which may be more interesting and is at least their own—rather than their productive activity. This has not only fueled consumerism, but caused high rates of absenteeism and shoddy workmanship in many cases. Instead of using our wealth to make productive life attractive and fulfilling for people, we tend simply to use people to try to increase our wealth. Instead of thinking that capital exists for the benefit of workers, we act and think as though workers exist for the benefit of capital. Thus, many of the criticisms which Marx made of nineteenth-century society's organization of work remain fundamentally accurate today, despite the tremendous advance of technology and wealth. For most people, work still is at least as much a necessary evil as it is an opportunity for personal fulfillment. That this should be so is one of the major social problems facing our society.

WHO WORKS?

Who works in America? The answer is not as obvious as one might think, especially if one looks carefully at the question. In the first place, surprisingly few people work in America, by one accepted definition—that used by the United States Bureau of the Census to describe the “total labor force.” Only 97.5 million Americans, or about 62 percent of the adult population were in the labor force in 1977. What happened to the rest? Some were wealthy enough not to have to work; others—like housewives—work but are not officially “employed” and for this reason are not counted as part of the labor force; some have retired; still others suffer from physical disabilities or have given up hope of finding work. And from those 97.5 million Americans in the labor force we have to deduct 7.5 million—nearly 8 percent—who were unemployed. So not every adult American works—not by a long shot. And, of course, there are non-Americans who hold jobs in the United States, legally and illegally, sometimes because they are better qualified and sometimes because it is simply cheaper for their employers to hire them than U.S. citizens. Let us examine the question of who works more closely.

Among nonworkers we have counted some of the very wealthy, others who are, at least officially, too old or not healthy enough to work, some who can't find work and others who work in ways which officially do not count because they do not contribute to the growth of capital in the econ-

omy. The positions of all of these people are greatly influenced by the fact that they live in a capitalist society. This is perhaps least obvious in the case of the elderly, injured or sick, but it is still true. Since we look on work primarily in terms of increasing the wealth of society which is stored in the form of capital, we only employ people when they can contribute to that growth of capital. Many people are able to produce goods which society and other people need, but simply not at a fast enough rate to make their work *economically efficient*. This is a major problem for capitalist society: we evaluate work not in terms of its usefulness but in terms of the money it makes. Thus many employers only employ handicapped people when there are specific government programs paying them to do so. For other employers, who could employ the elderly or handicapped, there are simply too many unemployed younger, healthier people around for them to be willing to take the trouble. And besides, if these people who don't at present get counted in the labor force were to be more frequently employed, what would happen to the ranks of the unemployed? Because our capitalist industry gears production to profits, not to human needs it employs as few workers as possible. If we insist that older people be allowed or encouraged to work longer, then there are fewer jobs for young people.

In 1972 the richest one percent of the population owned about one quarter of the total assets in America (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1978). Thus, just over two million people owned \$1,046.9 billion worth of personal wealth out of a total of \$4,344.4 billion of total personal assets in the country. In some areas, like corporate stock, the richest one percent owned a still greater proportion—well over half. It is obvious that many of these people do not have to work for a living on the same basis of day-to-day necessity as the rest of us. Many of them may have offices, to which they go either regularly or occasionally, but in general they do not work for other people in the sense most Americans do, and they do not depend on their work for their major living expenses. Many people in this group may choose careers not on the basis of the income they will provide but for personal satisfaction or, as is obvious in the example of politics but also true in other fields, for the power they may bestow.

In some, but, of course, not all, ways the position of housewives is similar. For one partner in a marriage not to bring income into the home is something of a luxury, though it has been common in America for some time. It depends on the ability of the other spouse to earn enough to provide for the entire family. In this sense, the housewife's work is compensated by a share in the husband's income. It may seem sexist to continually refer to this in terms of "housewives," not to "househusbands," but it is very statistically accurate. In 1976 nearly 33 *million* women were not in the labor force for reasons of home responsibilities, while only 221 *thousand* men were out of the labor force for the same reason. A great many women, in short, choose to stay out of the work force. This should be borne in mind when one considers official statistics on unemployment. If these women were to seek paid jobs, as an increasing proportion of them are doing, there would at least initially be a much higher rate of unemployment. Perhaps when we consider how good a job our society does at offering everyone a

chance to participate in the economy, we should consider this large number of women who are unofficially, but very really, unemployed. And when we add up our national productivity we should consider the work done by people like one not paid for it.

When women do work for pay, they tend to do very different work from men and be paid very different wages for it, as we shall see below. This is related to something else which concerns us here, however: underemployment. We frequently hear of statistics concerning the number of people unable to find work. This is unemployment, though even official statistics vary widely because of differing definitions and methods of measurement. Almost as many people as are unemployed are underemployed; they work at jobs requiring a lower level of skill or training than that which they possess. Thus, because of layoffs in the aerospace industry during the early 1970s, many highly qualified engineers were forced to work at relatively low-level jobs, such as television repair. This also applies to women, for many more women receive advanced education, such as college or graduate degrees, than in fact use their education in their employment. One often hears the stories of highly educated women who can find no other work than as secretaries. They may have degrees in physics, which would qualify a man for a technical or managerial position, but the women are still asked first and foremost if they can type. This is reflected in the fact that women are about four times more likely to be clerical workers than men, though women are likely to attain approximately equal levels of education.

Unemployment is a major problem in America today. It affects a smaller proportion of the potential work force than the sexual roles which keep women from working, but it is often of much more dramatic economic importance to the families concerned, because it generally means eliminating a primary source of income rather than a possible supplement. It is also much less often a matter of choice. Official statistics count as unemployed only those unable to secure any work on a regular basis (less than fifteen hours a week is not counted). Even those who only work part time or at jobs with very low incomes or skill levels below their qualifications are officially considered employed. Even so, the statistics are misleadingly low. Only those people who actively sought work during the month before the census check are counted as unemployed. Those who have given up hope of finding work or who don't have very good ideas of where to look are not included in the figures.

Unemployment is very discriminatory by age and race, and somewhat by sex. In 1977 the official U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics report classified 7.9 percent of all workers as unemployed. But over 13 percent of Black, Hispanic, and other minority group workers were unemployed compared with 7.2 percent of white workers. Of teenagers seeking work, 19.2 percent were unemployed, 6.5 percent for adult men, 7.3 percent for adult women. Vietnam veterans were significantly more likely to be unemployed (8.7%) than the rest of the population, despite incentives for hiring veterans. Blue collar workers (10.2%) were more often unemployed than white collar workers (4.6%). It had been almost four months since the average unemployed person had had work. These figures represent some of

the ways in which our society discriminates against some of its members, even in terms of whom it will let work for a living. They also indicate serious problems for specific areas and populations with especially high rates of unemployment. If a person who lives in a rich area, or most of whose friends and family work, becomes unemployed, he (or she) has many chances for aid. Not only can his friends and family help him out financially, but they can help him get a job. A study has shown that most people get their jobs through personal contacts (Granovetter, 1974). If the people you know are out of work, they are much less likely to know where you can get work. Thus the concentration of unemployment among black youths means that each of them is proportionately hurt more in some ways than whites or adults who may also become unemployed. Unemployment is also concentrated in regions and types of work: industrial New York and New Jersey had unemployment rates over 10 percent in 1976; more heavily rural Nebraska and North and South Dakota had less than 4 percent unemployed. Unemployment doesn't just hurt the individuals or even families involved. It hurts all of us. In 1977 well over 8 percent of the possible working time of the labor force was lost due to unemployment. That means that many fewer goods and services were supplied to the country than could have been. Further, a high unemployment rate means that large numbers of people have very little money with which to buy even the necessities of life. Some of these people are supported by social welfare payments—which come from the taxes paid by the rest of us. But even with the still quite small aid supplied by welfare, unemployed people are not going to buy very much. That lowers the total demand for the products made by those people who do have jobs, which makes it more likely that they may become unemployed, less likely that they will be able to advance due to industrial expansion. And the lower demand hits particularly hard in certain aspects of industrial work, such as the manufacture of consumer durables such as washing machines, television sets, air conditioners. People cannot very well do without food, but they can do without these appliances. Unemployment thus indirectly as well as directly hits blue collar workers much harder than white collar workers.

What of foreign workers in the United States? There are about four to five million foreigners now living here, perhaps two-thirds of them illegally. The legally sanctioned alien workers are concentrated in particular skilled and often professional positions, the illegal ones in low-paying relatively low-skilled work. Many of the illegals work in jobs which Americans consider too low. For this reason they are very valuable to their employers, who often help them to evade the law enforcement efforts of various government agencies charged with preventing the entry of illegal aliens. Farm work, especially migrant labor, is the most famous occupation of these workers. Here they are paid extremely low wages for long hours of often backbreaking work. Until the recent successes of the unionization movement, such workers, including many citizens, had almost no recourse against unscrupulous employers. Because of the seasonal migrations associated with harvesting and other such farm work, family life, schooling of children and other "normal" functions of American life were difficult for

these workers—indeed, even for the legal workers in these occupations, of whom there are many. Less well-known than farm work, but employing about as many illegal aliens (as well as legal aliens and naturalized citizens) are service occupations. Domestic service in many areas increasingly relies on Spanish-speaking immigrants, legal or illegal, who are willing to accept the low wages and job security which are offered. More significantly, in many areas immigrant workers have come to fill an increasing number of positions in restaurants, laundries, shops, shipping companies—even, for example, positions in Nevada casinos. Where these immigrants enter manufacturing work, it is most likely to be under “sweated” conditions, in relatively low-skilled jobs that demand a high rate of productivity. Productivity is often maintained by payment on a piece-work basis, or by the number of units of work done rather than by payment of a regular wage. This is one of the most unpleasant forms of work organization, and so is actively fought against by most workers and unions in manufacturing industry. It is also somewhat harder to ensure consistently high quality when work is organized in this way, and so it is impractical for employers in the electrical and chemical industries, for example.

In short, most immigrant workers tend to fit into niches of low-skilled work where the intensive use of human labor rather than automation is the rule. Such niches exist because of the uneven advance of technology, and particularly its uneven application. The understandable, but unfortunate, tendency of capitalist employers is to want machines which will enable them to replace highly skilled (and therefore highly paid) labor. Thus, the most attractive jobs are the ones which are usually eliminated by automation. If the demanding and often unpleasant lower-skilled jobs can be filled with immigrant laborers who don't demand high wages, then it is still profitable for capitalists to run them without automation.

In any case, for most of the United States alien labor counts for only a small percentage of the total. It is as visible as it is largely because of its concentration in certain industries and geographic regions. With regard to the latter, it is interesting to note that although the West does have the largest number of illegal aliens, the figures are not dramatically different for the Eastern and Southern regions. Only the North has fewer than a million illegal foreigners, by U.S. Immigration and Nationalization Service estimates, and it has less than half that number. It is also worth noting that although Mexican nationals are the most publicized and the largest grouping of illegal workers, they are by no means the majority. There are other Hispanic groupings and significant numbers of Chinese and even some Europeans. Of course, the easier it is to become a legal foreign worker, the less likely one is to live and work illegally. It is partly our prejudice against the large minority of American citizens who are of Hispanic background which makes us pay such disproportionate attention to Mexicans working in the United States illegally.

In summary, then, who works in America? Well, about two-thirds of the adult population are in paid employment at any one time, a figure that includes over three-fourths of the men and just under half of the women. Of these people, about 6 to 8 percent work only intermittently; they are

likely, for example, to lose their present jobs in the near future and be replaced by someone previously classed as unemployed. Another similar, or perhaps a little larger, percentage are employed in work significantly below their level of skill and training. Most people in America either work, or will work, for about forty years of their lives in some form of paid employment. The next big question for us to ask is what kind of work do they do?

WHAT WORK DO PEOPLE DO?

Let us return to the distinction we made earlier between work which is productive of use-value and work which is not. When we say unproductive work, in this sense, we don't mean that someone isn't doing his or her job very well. We don't mean what an employer would, for he or she would consider anything which added to the profits productive. Our criterion is the production for the satisfaction of human needs, not for the increase of capital, so we are concerned with the production of use-value.¹ In our society, in terms of both economic rewards and prestige, we often value unproductive work more than productive. We pay lawyers and accountants and bankers and insurance agents and salesmen and stockbrokers and officials more than we pay those who make the paper these people write on, the pens they scratch with, the chairs they sit on, the carpets on their office floors, and the title plaques on their doors. We seem to believe that becoming a "success" means no longer having to produce useful things but rather being able to direct the consumption of such things and dictate who shall produce them and which shall be produced. A worker who stays on the assembly line all his life may be seen as attentive, or loyal, but he will seldom be described as successful. Indeed, in many ways he will be regarded as inferior, and may even come to see himself as inferior because he cannot provide his family with as many of the things which he and others like him produce as can a man who sits in an office. As one metalworker put it:

It was so upside down, like. I don't think anyone should strut around like a cock, not *any one*. But if the *workers* strutted about, I would not be so surprised, since that is the way production is in society, the money for the social reforms and everything must come from export, so the worker is important. But today—the worker is almost the only one who does *not* go around strutting. Instead, the worker goes around crouching. Pretty odd (Palm, 1977:107).

Despite this peculiar social ordering of prestige and reward, there is a certain dignity in knowing that by one's work one is producing something useful. This is evident when manufacturing workers talk about their feelings for their jobs, even when they express their resentment against sons and daughters who "act like they're too good to do some *real* work." "Real work" means work making something, generally with one's hands. If one mines coal, or makes telephones, or builds highways, or makes cars, there is a considerable satisfaction in knowing that one has contributed something useful to society. Unfortunately, in many ways work is organized in America to make production workers feel as little of this satisfaction as pos-

sible. For reasons of efficiency (not always accurately applied) production tasks are subdivided so much that no one can feel that he has, for example, made a telephone. Instead, he is likely to have made some small part of a telephone and never even have seen the entire process by which his part and a thousand others are put together to constitute the complete product. Such subdivision also has the effect of making the worker feel less a unique contributor to a creative process and more a readily replaceable cog in an industrial machine. The organization of work—especially industrial work—in America today thus conspires to rob the worker of any sense of feeling productive. A desire to feel productive might well be an important reason for working, but ordinary workers are supposed to limit their aspirations to making a satisfactory wage.

When we think of a worker, we often think of a relatively uneducated blue collar worker with rough hands and a hard hat, but that is a misleading image. Most employed people in the United States today are white collar workers. In fact, the old distinction between blue collar (primary production) and white collar (office) work no longer tells us very much. There is a certain prestige still clinging to the notion of white collar “respectable” work, but it is being rapidly eroded—just as the wages paid to clerical workers are no longer high relative to production workers. In 1977 white collar workers numbered almost forty-five million out of a total of just under ninety million employed people. But of that number sales and clerical workers, on the one hand, and professional, technical, and managerial employees, on the other, each counted for about half. And the latter, more highly paid and prestigious category still includes, in the census data, a large number of relatively low-skilled, low-level employees such as computer programmers and operators, buyers, administrators who manage only small and low-level work forces themselves, and the vast number of specific “professions” which require at most a few months or a year of on-the-job training and offer very limited opportunities for advancement: title searchers, proofreaders, some draftsmen, paralegal assistants, “technologists” whose skills are limited to adjusting dials on machines and so forth.

Similarly, blue collar workers, as defined by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, range from completely unskilled laborers making the minimum wage (and exceptional, but not quite rare, cases less) up to highly skilled craftsmen who have served apprenticeships longer than the college training required of high school teachers. A skilled equipment operator is likely to earn considerably more than the assistant manager of a fast food franchise, and to have a much higher level of skill. So we—and perhaps eventually the Bureau of Labor Statistics—had better revise our stereotyped impressions. Even graduates of prestigious university business schools with MBAs do not generally run their own businesses, they work for corporations. Although their wages and their ability to set their own conditions of work may be very different from production workers, they are in the most important respect in the same situation: they are employees; they work for someone—or in most cases *something*, a corporation—else, and they are considered valuable only to the extent that they enable the corporation to make a profit. Indeed, the bottom line is even more stringent; one must

not only help the corporation secure a profit, but one must see to it that he or she is helping more than the next, usually younger, person breathing down one's neck.

Who gets to work in what kind of occupation? Table 10-2 summarizes some dimensions of the process whereby people are selected for one or another line of work, though still using the relatively crude census categories. It is apparent that both sex and race are important in determining who does what kind of work in America. The chances are remote, for example, that men will ever do domestic service; yet well over a million women do such work, most of them black (and a good many of the rest Hispanic). Professional and technical and managerial jobs are among the most common for white men, but a considerably smaller proportion of black men are offered such positions. As we shall consider further below, these are the jobs which carry the greatest material rewards and most power. One of the great disparities occurs in the category of clerical work. This is the occupation of a new and growing sector of the working class. Most clerical positions are low skilled and very low paid. Most are also filled by women. It is increasingly likely, in our society, for a marriage to take place between a woman employed as a white collar worker, but at a clerical level, and a man employed as a blue collar worker, whether as craftsman or operative.

Clerical and related work is a particularly important topic for consideration. One of the reasons we in America are able to go on believing that we are all "middle class" is that we judge class boundaries by old-fashioned standards. As suggested above, we consider workers in terms of a stereo-

Table 10-2 Employed Persons, 1977

<i>Occupational Group</i>	<i>Total Number (1000s)</i>	<i>Percent Male</i>	<i>Percent Female</i>	<i>Percent White</i>	<i>Percent Black and other Minority</i>	<i>Median Weekly Earnings</i>
Professional/technical	13,692	57.4	42.6	91.6	8.4	\$277
Managerial and administrative	9,662	77.7	22.3	95.2	4.8	302
Sales	5,728	56.7	43.3	95.5	4.5	225
Clerical	16,106	21.1	78.9	90.2	9.8	167
Craft	11,881	95.0	5.0	92.6	7.4	259
Operatives (except transport)	10,354	60.4	39.6	85.7	14.3	171
Transport operatives	3,476	93.2	6.8	85.4	14.6	231
Nonfarm Laborers	4,500	90.6	9.4	81.9	18.1	181
Farmers and farm managers	1,459	93.6	6.4	97.5	2.5	n.a.
Farm laborers	1,296	70.6	29.4	86.3	13.5	127
Service	11,234	41.7	58.3	81.9	18.1	142
Private household	1,158	3.0	97.0	64.2	35.8	59
TOTAL	90,546	59.5	40.5	89.8	10.8	212

type which does not generally include office workers. Yet more people work in offices than on assembly lines, so why should this stereotype persist. One reason is clearly the sex difference; because clerical work is considered women's work, we don't give it the same weight in our considerations as the occupations of men. It is also true that this high number of positions in clerical work is relatively new, the result of a dramatic increase especially in the last quarter century. It appears that clerical work is the characteristic creation of the capitalist economy, that just as jobs are eliminated by automation in production work, jobs are created in record-keeping, correspondence, etc. Because capitalist businesses are oriented toward making profits, not producing useful goods for the sake of consumers, actual production becomes in many ways less important than the tasks associated with sales and billing, advertising and public relations, keeping track of employees, and avoiding paying taxes, if possible.

A considerable amount of this clerical work results from the increases in size and centralization of authority characteristic of modern corporations. Our commonplace ideas of capitalism revolve around individual entrepreneurs who make money by selling a better or cheaper product as a result of their ingenuity as inventors or enterprise as businessmen. But this is not the way capitalism works in America. The vast majority of manufacturing is done by large corporations—for many years the thousand largest manufacturing concerns have controlled well over three-quarters of the assets in American industry. Proprietorships and partnerships account for less than two percent (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1978). These very large corporations can no longer be run by a single individual who keeps track of important information himself. The result is the multiplication of jobs which have little or nothing to do directly with production, but are concerned instead with simply keeping the corporation functioning. In addition to purely clerical workers, many managers fall into this category along with a large number of professional and technical workers—lawyers, for example, who protect the corporation from governmental or private citizen intervention and supervision, accountants who oversee its financial records, computer specialists who supervise machines which perform clerical functions, and personnel specialists who attempt to keep employees performing efficiently.

One of the effects of combining increases in size with centralization of authority is to prevent workers from making many of the important decisions affecting their lives and work. If a simple work routine, say fitting a plastics casing over an electrical component, is to be changed, an expert from above is usually brought in to evaluate the situation; he or she reports back to an executive who makes a decision and delegates responsibility to an engineer or other specialized subordinate to put it in practice. If the change necessitates some new assembly equipment, the workers who will actually use this equipment are seldom asked to participate in its design. That is not their job. One result is a tremendous flow of paperwork and attendant delay and sometimes error and confusion. Another result is frequent inefficiency—despite the fact that the whole procedure was de-

signed to increase efficiency by having experts decide what will work best and according to company policy. But the most obvious experts, the workers themselves, are treated as though they were passive automatons, and are not asked to participate.

This is a situation which probably benefits neither the capitalist nor the worker. The ideology of management in capitalist industry—and the same is often true of nationalized industries, for ownership alone does not make the difference—seems to be that it is best to keep as much control over the work process in the hands of nonworkers as possible. The ostensible reasons for this are primarily ones of efficiency. The executives wish to ensure that the work is done in the manner which will result in the most product for the least corporate expense. But this authoritarian procedure often becomes habitual, and control is kept centralized even when there are no clear reasons for it. There seems to be among managers a pervasive mistrust of workers. The former seem to feel as though if you leave a worker unsupervised, or worse still, let him or her take some responsibilities for decision making on his or her own, then the worker will at best gum up the works, and more likely act in some greedy, irresponsible, or lazy way out of self-interest. Managers treat the supervision of workers as something of a battle in which the object of the worker is to do as little as possible, and the object of the management is to force as much work out of the workers as possible. This stands in peculiar contrast to the assertions of business leaders that capitalist industry is in the interests of everyone, and workers ought to trust their employers and work hard because they too will benefit from corporate success.

This managerial view is simply the other side of a sentiment common among workers: "I only work here." Because workers are not involved in the overall decision-making process, because work is not organized in a meaningful way, it becomes increasingly common for workers to treat their jobs as only a necessary evil, as the price they must pay for leisure time and pleasurable activities outside of work. This is one of the reasons that the demands of workers, especially through trade unions, have focused so heavily on pay and other aspects of material security. There was a time when a minimum standard of living was not the norm, and workers had to fight hard to secure that, and to secure the simple recognition of their unions from employers who hired blacklegs and massed private armies of guards beating up and often shooting workers and organizers. But those days are largely (if not quite entirely) past. Workers continue to fight largely for more money because, like management, they are convinced that they cannot find work itself pleasurable, and so must seek all satisfactions in leisure time activities.

This attitude runs contrary to human nature and is the specific product of modern capitalist industrial organization. In the first place, there is little logic to the split in individual lives which says that half of one's waking hours must be spent unpleasantly to entitle one to spend the other half seeking happiness. But the problem runs deeper. It is difficult to find much happiness if your work is dehumanizing, so that you can never recover your self-respect, or if it is so exhausting that your leisure time must

be spent dozing off in front of the television. And why is it that we somehow feel that we must differentiate a working self from a private self. We may be warm and loving at home or with our friends but at work we must be more aggressive and distant in our relationships, we must maintain an instrumental attitude toward other people. In many ways family, friends, and neighborhoods have been eroded as refuges from the torments of work. The divorce rate now runs fifty percent of marriages in the United States. Transfers (another product of large corporations in part) lift families out of their familiar neighborhoods and their networks of friends and relatives. All of this has a result very favorable to capitalist industry. It makes people more materialistic than ever and more vulnerable to the advertisers' artificially created needs of a consumer society. It would appear that finding work distasteful only makes us want to buy more things to help us enjoy our leisure—a result which favors capital far more than it favors people.

We all know that there are people who love their work, who don't watch the clock just waiting for the lunch break to come or the day to end. Some such people are to be found among doctors, academics, executives, artists, engineers, and craftsmen. Why not the bulk of workers? The answer has a long history and is deeply embedded in our attitudes. We make a large distinction between mental work and physical work. This distinction dates most especially from the period of the industrial revolution. At this time most production was not yet carried out in factories or by corporate industry. Instead it was spread around the countryside in small workshops. Workers knew each other, maintained a certain pride in their special skills, were frequently in close contact with family and friends during the working hours, and, perhaps most important of all, were creatively involved in the process of production. The craftsman's work involved both the conception of the thing to be made and the execution of its manufacture. He did not have to wait for an engineer to come from the design department with blueprints and instructions on how to do his work. Nor was his part only to produce a tiny component in a larger process. He was truly the creator of his product. Indeed, when capitalists began to take over a larger share of industry, one of the most frequent of workers' protests was that the new more "efficient" workshops produced lower quality goods and debased the craft.

The new capitalist organization of industry worked in large part by taking apart the production process as the craftsman had performed it and dividing it into smaller tasks. Some of these could be performed at lower wages by unskilled workers, including women and children. Others could be done by machine. In both cases the rate of productivity was increased, but at the expense of creative and pleasurable participation in the production process. This process has continued into the present day. Some people are paid to work with their minds on the organization and supervision of work; others are paid to work with their hands in its execution. This whole process reached a peak in the early part of this century with the introduction of time and motion studies by F. W. Taylor and his associates. These men made detailed observations of the minute physical activities which a

worker had to perform to make a specific object. They used these as the basis for further subdivision of tasks in some cases, and in all instances for the production of standards of how long the action should take. Workers could then be made to work at certain rates. In fact, these studies were almost always used to increase the rate at which people worked, not simply standardize it. Even punching a time clock was allowed only a very specific standard time; the process was divided into six steps, and the duration of each was measured to the ten-thousandth of a second.

The most dramatic use of such time and motion studies in "scientific management" is payment by piece-rate where the rate is set by such formal standards. The basic idea is to reduce productive activity to a sufficiently simple task that it can be done in a routine fashion, and then to reward the worker for the speed at which he or she accomplishes it. Workers are pitted in an implicit competition against each other, since the rate of payment of each is determined by the standards set by observation of all. This is a way of internalizing some supervisory functions within each worker; each becomes his or her own taskmaster. But it is interesting to note that among the things workers most resent about this system, the shoddiness it encourages in their work ranks near the top. This organization of work is demeaning because it reduces the worker to a machine, whose only input into the production process is the speed at which he produces. Further, the worker is encouraged not to do a good job (identifying him or her self with the potential usefulness of his product) but only to do a fast job (for the maximum profit of the company).

Piece-rate payment is stimulated in industries where it has been abolished by the introduction of "productivity deals" and other means of setting minimum standards for rate of performance. All such procedures are based on the assumption that workers would rather slack off, that work is not something people will voluntarily do. But the unpleasantness of work is only an arbitrary function of modern industrial organization, and relates only to certain kinds of work. In fact, people who feel creatively involved in their work are apt to work much harder than they have to for any financial necessity. Studies have repeatedly shown that workers—all workers—regard the meaning of their job as important. In a 1973-74 survey it ranked most important, ahead of possibilities for promotion, income, security, and hours (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1976). Meaning is a complex variable, though, and people who think of work only as a necessary evil may be surprised to learn that workers at all occupational levels regard understanding the importance of their jobs and being able to get them done well to be of great importance. People want to be productive, to contribute to society, to see the results of their work. As a survey supported by the Department of Labor found, when workers at all levels were asked to rank some twenty-five aspects of work in their importance to them, they produced the following front runners (Special Task Force to the Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare, 1973:13):

1. Interesting work
2. Enough help and equipment to get the job done

3. Enough information to get the job done
4. Enough authority to get the job done
5. Good pay
6. Opportunity to develop special abilities
7. Job security
8. Seeing the results of one's work

Taylorism—the extreme version of scientific management—does not speak to most of these needs. It attempts to work by rewarding the worker for doing as he is told and increasing his output. It was never a very pleasant ideology. Even its efficiency must be doubted in today's society where the majority of workers have an education extending beyond high school and a strong interest in meaningful work.

In many low-skilled occupations people express their dissatisfaction by high rates of moving from one job to another and by absenteeism. When asked whether they would choose similar work again, people responded very distinctively according to occupational grouping. Members of some "intellectual" professions—professors, scientists, lawyers, some journalists—responded in over 80 percent of the cases that they would. A cross-section of white collar workers responded positively 43 percent of the time. Only 24 percent of blue collar workers responded that way, however, although some skilled workers, such as printers, were more positive than white collar workers (Special Task Force to the Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1973). One reason that managers find it so necessary to constantly supervise workers is that they are asking people to do work which is not satisfying.

Work is not organized in a fashion contrary to human nature simply because people find it dissatisfying. Thousands of people are killed and millions injured at work in the United States every year. There are ten injuries for every hundred workers in private industry resulting in a loss of about fifty-five workdays each year. In some particularly dangerous industries, like coal mining, there are over a hundred fatal injuries every year. And these figures, relating only to injuries, do not include the diseases which are caused entirely or in part by working conditions: black lung in coal, brown lung in textiles, cancer in asbestos plants, and so forth. A great many of these injuries, like much of the immediate unpleasantness of work, could be eliminated. Because work is organized for corporate profits, not for human needs, they are not. But, you may say, people are paid; they have a choice. Let us consider income and other reasons why people work.

WHY DO PEOPLE WORK?

People do work for money, it is true, but that doesn't tell us very much. In the first place, as we have suggested above, pay is only one of the important considerations people make when choosing a job. In the second place, the fact that people are paid does not mean that they are paid what they are worth; indeed, if workers were always paid what their work is worth, there wouldn't be money left over to give to stockholders who haven't worked for it (and the majority of the corporate stock in private hands in

America—56.5 percent in 1972—is held by the richest 1 percent of the population in the form of dividends). In the third place, what kind of work people do may have more to do with how much money they (or their parents) already have than with the wages or salary they themselves are paid.

Table 10-2 has already given an indication of how pay differs among occupations. Table 10-3 shows how rate of pay is correlated with sex and race.

It is evident that what one may expect to earn for one's work varies a great deal depending on what work one does, and even for the same work, depending on one's race and sex. Part of this disparity is due to the fact that within such broad categories as "operative" (i.e., one who runs machinery or performs tasks in a mechanized manufacturing process) women and men are likely to work in different industries. Women, for example, are much more likely to work in bottling and canning factories, a relatively low-paying line of work; men are much more likely to be mine operatives, at nearly three times the median earnings. But even for exactly the same work, men and women, blacks and whites are paid dramatically different wages. For purposes of comparison let us look at the data for 1977. In this year the median earnings of male secondary school teachers were \$9,002; females averaged \$6,723. While airline pilots as a whole were one of the nation's highest paid occupational groups, earning over the \$15,000 top end of this scale, black airline pilots had a median income of \$8,974. Part, but far from all, of this is the result of the gradual weakening of segregation which means that there are more young blacks (and women) in the categories, bringing the averages down because they have little seniority.

The more basic reason for the inequities in earnings is that people are not paid according to any consistent standards of their worth in production or in rendering services. They are rewarded on the basis of what position they occupy in a class society. That this is not simply a matter of saying that our society values certain kinds of work more than others is obvious from the fact that it pays different people different amounts to do the same work. The fact that people of different class positions, and members of the different ethnic groups or of the two sexes, have differential chances at education and other opportunities helps to keep this discriminatory system working.

Another way of seeing the extent of inequality in America is to look at

Table 10-3 Weekly Earnings of Full-Time Workers, 1977.

	<i>White</i>	<i>Black and Other</i>	<i>Total</i>
Male	259	201	253
Female	157	147	156
Total	217	171	212

Source: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 1978, *Statistical Abstract of the United States*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, p. 423.

the distribution of money income. In this way we see that those who are well off are a great deal richer than even the middle class, which in turn is much ahead of the poor. Let us divide the population into five groups based on the income of members. We shall then see how much of the total money income in the United States went to members of each group in 1977 (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1978:461):

Highest fifth -----	48.2%
Second fifth -----	24.0%
Middle fifth -----	14.7%
Fourth fifth -----	9.0%
Lowest fifth -----	4.1%

The richest twenty percent of the American population gets half of the total income every year! The richest forty percent gets almost three-quarters. Even the middle class does not get its fair share. Clearly this is not because the top fifth of the population works harder. It is because (a) they own most of the wealth in private assets, and (b) they work in the highest-paid occupations.

Workers have struggled to get a living wage for generations, and even those who have reached this minimal level continue to struggle for their fair share in the national wealth. Unions have been their main tool in this struggle, and they have been fairly successful in securing wage benefits and in security at work for workers. A little over one-quarter of American workers are members of labor unions. Union membership is highest in Michigan, West Virginia, New York, Washington, and Hawaii; so it is obviously not a highly localized phenomena. The lowest proportion of unionized workers is in North Carolina, with South Carolina close behind. Not surprisingly, these two states also pay among the lowest wages to manufacturing workers. Wages vary quite considerably from region to region: they are lowest in the South, highest in the Midwest, for manufacturing work. They ranged in 1977 from \$4.10 in North Carolina up to \$7.54 in Michigan and \$9.12 in Alaska. Office employees have a much higher national average hourly wage than nonoffice employees (\$6.33 vs. \$4.32 in 1976), but this is largely the result of high professional and managerial salaries (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1978). Clerical workers earn considerably less, on the average than do blue collar workers. This gap is narrowing, however, with the growth of white collar unions and with the movement to give women and men equal pay for equal work.

In addition to wage increases, the labor movement in America has fought hard to bring various other supplementary benefits such as health care, paid vacations and holidays and retirement plans. In 1976 employer contributions to such programs added just over a dollar an hour to average employee compensation. All in all, however, the American labor movement has focused on demands for wages and security (i.e., freedom from harrassment or unwarranted firing). It has spoken thus to an important need, but not to all of the needs we have seen workers express. It has not done much, for example, to deal with workers' desire to feel that they have a creative input into the production process; their desire to feel that they

are doing a meaningful job well. The Special Task Force of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare found "perhaps the most consistent complaint" which workers reported was the failure of bosses to listen to workers who wish to propose better ways of doing their jobs (Special Task Force to the Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1973). This brings us to one of the most important, most neglected, and most difficult to deal with aspects of the political economy of work in America: the work itself.

THE WORK ITSELF

The work people do in America needlessly angers, frustrates, bores, injures, and insults them. Automobile workers in Michigan and Ohio are among the highest paid manufacturing workers in the country; they have a strong union and a relatively good supplemental benefits scheme. Yet they are absent from work at an alarmingly high rate; they leave for other work almost whenever they can, even at pay cuts; they feel very little sense of commitment to what they do. And why should they? They don't make cars, they make small parts of them. They aren't treated as responsible adults but as recalcitrant children. Their employers find it necessary to issue long lists of rules, to keep them under constant supervision which some feel borders on harassment, to make sure they work fast enough by pressuring them with a moving assembly line which forces them to keep up a consistent rate of speed. The work is boring and meaningless—this was one of the key reasons for the famous Lordstown, Ohio, strike of 1970; the workers resented being treated as less than fully productive human beings. A hundred daily snubs remind manufacturing workers that they are not considered as good or as responsible as white collar workers. Why, for example, do almost all of the former have to punch time clocks while few of the latter do? Why are production workers egged on by piece rates or paid only hourly wages (which in many cases can be docked by a supervisor without "due process") while white collar workers are paid a monthly salary? Why do production workers—and many clerical workers such as members of typing pools—face constant supervision when most managerial and professional workers are assumed competent to organize their own work, keep themselves motivated, and be judged by the results?

This treatment of blue collar workers stems more from the class-based attitudes of their employers than from any rational considerations about the organization of work. Members of the lower classes are assumed to have less developed capacities for self-control, to need some kind of external overseer to keep them in line. Because they are members of the educated upper classes, managers and employers assume they have the right to complete control over those who work for them; they further assume that exercising such control is practical and reasonable, because they, the elites must have the best judgment. So they ignore the suggestions of workers about how to organize the production process—if indeed they make it possible for workers to offer such suggestions.

Workers are generally in a position to know a great deal about what

will work in actual practice on the shop floor. They could and sometimes do suggest ways of organizing work—a grouping of several separate assembly processes together, for example, so that a worker does not use the same set of muscles all day. Studies have shown that while such work may appear inefficient to the time and motion engineer, who thinks only of the fewest and most rapidly repeatable actions, it may be very efficient for real people. Real people grow fatigued if, for example, they sit in one single position without moving for hours at a time. Allowing workers to get up and move about—say by going to get their own boxes of materials instead of having them “efficiently” brought to them—can relieve this fatigue and actually increase worker productivity. It also might help to prevent some of the occupational injuries that are among America’s leading but least publicized killers. In 1968 as many Americans died in such accidents as in Vietnam. A metal worker’s job is more dangerous than a policeman’s (Sexton and Sexton, 1972).

The assumption that workers are of low intelligence and/or drive also contributes to the frequent management decisions to attempt to reduce the skill levels of employees (even as more and more firms make a high school diploma a rather meaningless criteria for hiring). Instead of attempting to mechanize the simplest, most routine tasks and thereby make workers’ lives more interesting by freeing them up for more complex and interesting work, management seems often obsessed with breaking down the interesting tasks which do exist. In this way a once complex and creative job is turned into a set of monotonous tasks—some to be performed by people (at a lower rate of pay than the original worker) and some by machines. The only apparently valid rationale for this is that it sometimes allows firms, at least in the short run, to increase profits by reducing the number of well-paid workers they employ. A more important reason, though, is to be found in the ideology of control. Because managers feel that they need to be able to plan and control every action of workers, it is a problem for them when a worker has a high level of skill and must therefore be allowed some autonomy in his work. The manager attempts in such circumstances, to get the skill out of the head (and hands) of the craftsman and into an instruction manual or machine.

In addition to constantly attempting to control the work process, American production management has in various ways chosen to prevent workers from socializing with each other at work. This is not only part of a policy of making workers competitive with each other, so that they will work harder for the proffered carrot of a chance at advancement. It is also the result of the very layout of the workplace, of noise and of the incessant demand of the production process. Recently, the so-called “human relations school” of management experts have suggested that workers will perform better if they have more pleasant surroundings and better chances to socialize. Unfortunately, although many of the recommendations of these researchers have been adopted, they have almost always been treated as an incidental add-on to the work process, not part of its nature. So, for example, although workers may occasionally be organized in groups this is to promote conversation, not so that they will help each other with their

work. But why should they not? Why is it necessary that everyone be out for himself, responsible for himself? Why couldn't work groups decide how they wanted to divide up work, rotate various tasks among themselves and even decide in which kinds of work they want to specialize? The only answers seem to be that managers fear what workers may decide, and thus feel a need to keep their control, and that managers don't believe workers really want to work. The two fears are, of course, contradictory. If workers could organize themselves so well that they could replace the managers, then why is it that they must constantly be treated as though they have no capacity for concerted effort at all? Perhaps it is only to keep everyone thinking so.

The problems created by this dehumanization of the workplace have begun to come to a head, partly because of new affluence which brings with it rising expectations and partly because new generations of workers are entering offices and factories with different attitudes. During the 1960s government and business urged the youth of the nation to plan for careers; expenditures on education were multiplied; the proportion of high school graduates in the population increased from about 34 percent in 1950 to 65 percent in 1977; the number of college graduates has doubled to nearly a quarter of the people in their late twenties in the country (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1978). This means that an increasing number of people have been brought up to think that they have something worthwhile to contribute to society and that they deserve a certain amount of respect and autonomy. Unfortunately, we have not provided an equal number of opportunities for creative contributions, respect, and autonomy. Despite their increased education, most of these young people will enter working-class occupations. This is frustrating not only to them, but to parents who may have worked hard to try to send their children to school, to help them get ahead in the world, and then see them back where they started. There are fewer opportunities for an individual to go into business for himself, fewer chances to work for a small business where one has a personal relationship with one's employer instead of a large corporation. Indeed, even unions have become large, often highly centralized and impersonal. Workers' dissatisfaction with this can be seen in the large number of wildcat strikes and rebellions of young members and particular locals against the established union hierarchy.

It is peculiar in any case that we seem to think that the only way for a person to advance in society, in the respect of his fellows, in earnings, in autonomy is to leave the ranks of production workers. To want to be a worker, but even more so, to be a better one or work under better conditions, is considered odd or impossible. This is an ironic contradiction both to the basic needs of people to engage in productive work, and to society's need for the useful products of productive work. This also ties into our odd individualistic notion that workers must "move up" on their own, by themselves, as individuals, not as a class. Instead of according work the dignity it deserves, our capitalist society at best offers a few workers the opportunity to join the ranks of the privileged. In order to take advantage of such an

opportunity a worker often has to leave his familiar community and family roots and live out his life in the partially alien culture of the middle classes.

CONCLUSION

Capitalist society has created an odd paradox in America. Its members seek the products of human labor with a materialist lust never before equaled. At the same time, people are able to gain less and less satisfaction from the work by which those products are made. We have subjugated the working people, the human beings, to the rule of the goods they create and in particular the wealth stored up as capital. Instead of valuing the people, and therefore attempting to provide the opportunities for personal fulfillment which might make work one of the most, not the least, pleasant activities in most people's lives, we value the objects and the wealth. As a result, we use people however it suits us, justifying this exploitation on the basis of increased productivity or other economic considerations. We have come to regard work as a sort of offering of him or herself which everyone in our society must make to the materialist gods. We have lost track of the human importance of work, of the fact that through work people express some of their greatest potentialities and transform themselves and the world in which they live. Because work is fundamental to humankind, it ought never to be relegated to the service of some superficial goal. A good society will be one in which work is clearly reconnected with the rest of human activity and in which it can bring satisfaction, not just material reward.

NOTES

1. This differs also from Marx's treatment of productivity in which he was primarily concerned with showing how labor went to increase capital, not to benefit the laborer. In Marx's sense, labor was termed productive if it produced capital, but Marx's analysis did not end there.

SUMMARY OUTLINE: *The Political Economy of Work*

INTRODUCTION: Work is necessary to provide for our individual livelihoods and our collective way of life.

I. WHAT IS WORK?

- A. Work is defined in terms of effort, difficulty, productivity and pay.
- B. Work can be pleasant, creative and fulfilling.
- C. Work can be oriented to the production of use-value, exchange-value, the creative expression of the worker or some combination of the three.
- D. Not all work is equally productive.
- E. While modern societies are usually fairly efficient in terms of exchange-value, they are not always efficient in other terms—such as the use of energy or labor.
- F. At the same time that we produce good things, we often produce bad things.

II. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND.

- A. The present nature of work is the result of a specific process of historical development.
- B. The most basic sort of work is oriented to providing for subsistence.
- C. Only recently have people been able to devote much energy to production for other wants.
- D. Traditional crafts have been replaced by a combination of machines, low-skilled labor and managers.

III. WHO WORKS?

- A. The opportunity and the necessity for work are not spread evenly among Americans.
- B. The most important difference is probably that between men and women.
- C. Race, class and age are also important.
- D. Unemployment, underemployment, and unsatisfactory employment are all problems.

IV. WHAT WORK DO PEOPLE DO?

- A. There are large class, race, and sex differences in people's opportunities to pursue different occupations.
- B. Different occupations are also treated differently because of their class make-up.
- C. Some workers have much more control over their conditions of work than others.
- D. There has recently been some decrease in heavy industrial work, a large decrease in farm work, and a large increase in both clerical and service work.
- E. The size of firms has also increased.
- F. Modern work is much more closely supervised and routinized than traditional work.

V. WHY DO PEOPLE WORK?

- A. People work for money.
 1. But, people are not paid what they are worth.
 2. Pay for the same work varies considerably with sex and race.
 3. Pay is often determined by the prestige of an occupation, and its control over competition, not by the value of its contributions.
- B. Some people work for personal satisfaction.
 1. This is common only in certain occupations.

VI. THE WORK ITSELF.

- A. The work people do in America needlessly angers, frustrates, bores, injures, and insults them.
- B. People who don't like their work don't work very well.
- C. People who aren't given much self-control or responsibility don't contribute much initiative.
- D. Workers could contribute a great deal of knowledge and creativity to improving the organization of work.
- E. Management, however, is very much oriented to control.

Conclusion: Work in America has come to be a necessary evil rather than a positive good.

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