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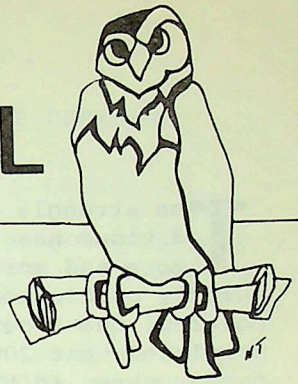
THE AMERICAN OWL



WARNING: WORK MAY BE DANGEROUS TO YOUR HEALTH

At the start of his film Modern Times, Charlie Chaplin portrays a factory worker who has trouble remembering that he is not a machine. The lunch whistle blows and the machine shuts down, yet the worker continues to move to the beat of the assembly line. After several moments he regains control of his body, though a visible factory twitch remains.

When Modern Times was made in the 1930's, conditions at workplaces in the U.S. were management's domain. True, if a worker was injured, small sums were available under state workers compensation programs. However, employers were almost never required to correct dangerous working conditions. Furthermore, workers compensation was limited to physical injuries. Emotional disorders like Chaplin's, and occupational diseases, were simply a part of the job for which the employer escaped all responsibility.

In the last ten years, management tyranny in this area has crumbled and business has been forced to compensate employees for a wide range of occupational disorders at skyrocketing rates. Damage suits involving mine workers alone cost industry an estimated $1 billion in 1977. Workers compensation programs in many states have expanded and now allow benefits for any "job-related" malady. Employer costs for this program have soared and industry executives complain that workers compensation has become an easy way for young workers to retire. No doubt, workers are far more sophisticated today and use whatever means available to escape the hazards of working life.

At the same time, the federal government, responding to mounting pressure, has enacted tougher legislation in an attenpt to force business to improve working conditions. In 1970, Congress passed a law which recognized a legal right of workers to a safe place to work, and created an agency with authority to set safety standards and inspect all workplaces for violations (The Occupational Safety and Health Administration, OSHA). Due to underfinancing, OSHA's enforcement capabilities are close to negligible. Nevertheless, the agency has been under scathing attack from industry.

Unions, also, have found themselves unable to avoid the issue of workplace conditions. Rank and file militancy has made this a key issue in recent collective bargaining agreements, particularly in the mining, auto and chemical industries. Some contracts establish local safety committees and the right to refuse work under hazardous conditions. Other unions have insisted on the right to company-paid medical examinations, access to illness and injury data, and higher insurance benefits.

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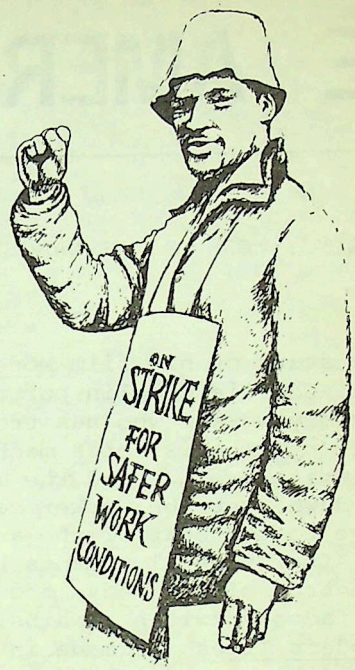
The struggle over working conditions has intensifed as more and more hazards, particularly carcinogens, have been discovered. One recent federal report concluded that 20% of all future cancer cases in the U.S. will be contracted on the job. Other studies have established links between high noise levels and nervous disorders, toxic chemicals and asthma, pesticides and sterility. In fact, there seems to be no limit to the number of potential carcinogens and other dangerous substances.

Business has adopted a quasi-existential attitude toward all this, arguing that modern life is full of risk and exposure to some carcinogens is simply unavoidable. The warped logic of capital is evident in a recent proposal of the National Peach Growers Council. Acknowledging proof that exposure to a certain industry pesticide causes sterility, the Council made the absurd suggestion that this work be given to older workers and women who did not want to have children.

Worker militancy has prevented the implementation of such proposals and, in fact, has focused more and more attention on the non-physical hazards of work. Several workers compensation boards now award benefits to employees with a wide range of nervous or mental disorders. Two years ago, the Kentucky board approved compensation for a woman who sorted thread at a clothing factory for many years; her mental collapse, the board ruled, was due to the exacting nature of her work.



Similar effects have been detected among large groups of workers in a single workplace. Not long ago, Business Week reported on an illness it called "workplace hysteria." Symptoms are labored breathing and nausea that strike in epidemic proportions, despite the absence of any immediate physical cause.

All this raises the question whether there is such a thing as a job free of health hazards. Not only is it likely that removal of all dangerous substances cannot be achieved, but phenomena such as "workplace hysteria" suggest that a major hazard is the labor process itself. The battle over conditions on the job will undoubtedly lead to a greater sense that there may be a fundamental contradiction between work and health.

AN AGING CONFLICT: THE POLITICS OF RETIREMENT AND PENSIONS

Amid continuing concern in the U.S. over the opportunities for entry into the active labor force (the issue of unemployment), there has been growing controversy surrounding the conditions of departure from the job; that is, the question of retirement. Last year, in a move that was supposed to show "the new political power of the old," the federal government raised the mandatory retirement age from 65 to 70. The law prevents employers from forcing anyone younger than 70 to retire but it doesn't affect the freedom of workers to retire voluntarily at a younger age. The campaign in support of the law asserted the importance of work in delaying the effects of old age, while business opposed the law, saying it would restrict its ability to get rid of older workers with "declining productivity."

Overlooked in the debate was the fact that workers themselves have been struggling for years for earlier rather than later retirement. Industrial workers have led the way, and in some sectors workers can retire after 30 years as young as 55. In general, labor force participation by workers aged 50-64 has fallen steadily in the past 20 years, giving rise to a new group in the working class: the young retiree.

Yet there are contradictory trends, since many workers no doubt are unhappy about being forced to retire. This is largely a matter of money. The better organized sectors of the class have won pensions that provide decent (though never fully adequate) income levels, whereas lower-waged workers and housewives confront old age as a period of even worse poverty. As a result, these workers are compelled to remain on the job as long as possible and for housewives there is, in fact, no such thing as retirement.

These workers with inadequate private pensions, or none at all, are dependent on the federal Social Security program, begun in 1935 in response to the struggles of unemployed and retired workers. S.S. has never been sufficient to meet the needs of retired workers, since: benefit levels are tied to one's former pay (thus reproducing the great wage inequalities of the active labor force); housewives are only eligible on the basis of their husband's waged work; and payments until recently did not rise automatically with inflation.

In addition, the funding of the system comes only from compulsory contributions by active workers and their employers (the state gives nothing). Active workers are thus put in the position of supporting retirees through reductions in their wage (taxes); and given the growing proportion of retired workers, this burden is increasing rapidly. There is much talk of the crisis of S.S. financing--including threats that the funds will be exhausted--despite the fact that benefits (maximums now are $5610 a year for one person, or $8415 for a couple) are still meager. Not surprisingly, the government has responded by sharply increasing the S.S. tax on active workers and proposing reductions in benefits and tighter eligibility requirements. But the attempts to cut benefits will face strong opposition, since older and retired workers have become more militant, organizing themselves into groups such as the Grey Panthers.

Pension plans other than Social Security have also been at the center of struggle. In last year's coal miner's strike a central demand was to end the two-class system of retirement, in which miners who retired before 1976 received only $250 per month while later retirees got $425. The workers also objected to the fact that employer pension fund payments were based on the amount of coal mined--which meant that wildcat strikes by active workers (which cut output) jeopardized the pensions of retirees. The miners failed to abolish these arrangements in the final contract, but the solidarity developed during the strike among younger, older, and retired miners will be crucial for the future of their struggle.

Pensions have likewise been a major element in the struggles of public workers, especially in New York. In the wave of militancy in the 1960's they won greatly improved benefits and continuous decreases in the amount they had to contribute to the funds. Not surprisingly, in capital's fiscal counterattack since 1974, public worker pensions have been one of the main targets, and many previous gains have been reversed. Moreover, the financial junta now managing New York has forced pension fund trustees to invest huge sums (nearly $4 billion out of $11 billion in assets) in New York bonds to "bail out the city." This has placed public workers in a position in which further resistance to austerity could threaten their pensions if the junta declares bankruptcy.

This issue of investment of pension fund money has gained more attention as analysts have noted that total assets of private pension plans (which are usually managed by banks and invested in stocks and bonds) are about $500 billion, equal to 25 percent of the entire equity capital of all U.S. corporations. Some business writers have, on the basis of this fact, declared the advent of "pension fund socialism," in which workers are said to own the means of production and are supposed to be more concerned with corporate profits than class solidarity. The socialist movement has responded to this by arguing that workers should demand control of pension fund investment policy in order to use the money--which one advocate of this strategy enthusiastically calls "social capital"--for "socially responsible" investments such as the rebuilding of the abandoned factories of the older industrial areas. The socialists are thus following the logic of capital (exhibited most clearly in New York) in urging the use of "deferred wages" to replace investments abandoned by business because of poor profitability.

Besides the political problems involved in having workers subsidize the least profitable sectors (or any sectors for that matter) of capital, this strategy diverts the debate over pensions from what is the main issue: forcing capital to meet the needs of retired workers. The amount of money in the funds and how it is invested mean little to the retired worker trying to survive on a few hundred dollars a month. As long as pensions remain low, workers will be forced to choose between working until they drop dead on the job or retiring to a life of poverty and isolation.

A PARLIAMENT OF OWLS