

DETROIT REVOLUTIONARY MOVEMENT RECORDS

BOX	5 OF 16
-----	---------

FOLDER	20
--------	----

REFERENCE MATERIAL
WORKING CONDITIONS
REPRINTS

LAW OFFICES OF
GLOTTA, ADELMAN AND DINGES

FOURTH FLOOR, HARTZ BUILDING

1529 BROADWAY

DETROIT, MICHIGAN 48226

RONALD D. GLOTTA
MICHAEL ADELMAN
ROBERT J. DINGES
JOHN TAYLOR
HUGH M. DAVIS

October 16, 1973

313/964-1190

Mr. Jim Reeve
23 Cornelia Street
New York, New York 10014

Dear Jim:

Enclosed please find the article that will be put in the Guild Notes here. Could you please call me and indicate your sense of what this article means. After I hear from you, I will attempt to write another article on what happen in the strikes this summer.

Sincerely,

GLOTTA, ADELMAN, & DINGES

Ronald D. Glotta

RDG/ft

Enclosure

One day late last July two workers, Issac Shorter and Larry Carter took over the power plant at the Chrysler Jefferson Assembly plant. Somewhere between 100 and 200 fellow employees surrounded the cage Shorter and Carter had locked themselves into and protected the two men. By having control of the power plant, the two workers had the ability to shut down the entire Jefferson facility. John Taylor, Guild labor lawyer, was telephoned by clients from the Jefferson plant and he notified the Guild office of the need for criminal defense attorneys at the plant. Several lawyers met John at the plant but the anticipated injunction was not served. Without the necessity for legal support, the workers had within 10 hours won a major victory for the workers at Chrysler Jefferson and working people in general. The agreement was signed in front of and by the two militants (not the union) and, in addition to granting the demand for the removal of Thomas Woosley, guaranteed that no reprisals would be suffered. All the red tape, all the legal procedures and entanglements were bypassed by the brilliance of the two young workers. Worker militance was on the agenda--no longer was the luxury of ignoring these struggles available to the left, legal community.

While heads were still spinning, on the Tuesday night of August 7, the workers at Chrysler's Forge Plant walked out to protest several serious accidents at the plant. For six days Chrysler was deprived of its only source of production for torsion bars and some six-cylinder engine crankshafts. Skilled and pro-

duction workers, whites and blacks, young and old, "insiders and outsiders", came together for a powerful and continuing struggle. John Taylor was again called out this time on the second day of the work stoppage by clients at the plant. The previous afternoon (8/8/73) Chrysler attorneys had obtained a back-to-work temporary restraining order from Wayne County Circuit Judge James Ryan, and many workers had already been fired.

Ron Glotta and Ron Reosti, Guild Labor Lawyers appeared before Judge Ryan on that day to challenge the ex-parte order on behalf of the workers. In the meantime, Guild members David Seals and Ivy Riley, working under grants from the Law School Civil Rights Research Council (LSCRRRC), were preparing removal papers which were filed in federal court by Mike Adelman. Even though Judge Ryan had refused to dissolve the TRO, Chrysler telephoned Judge Kennedy in Federal Court and obtained an immediate hearing on its continued validity. This was obviously an attempt to make an emphatic statement to the workers that the courts were behind the Corporation and that failure to return to work would violate the law. The lawyers and law students worked all night preparing a brief and the evidence for a hearing on the merits to begin on Friday.

Arguments were heard from Friday afternoon until late that evening. Sensitive to the tremendous cost of the strike to the Chrysler Corporation, Judge Kennedy also heard Chrysler's proof in support of the preliminary injunction all day Saturday, and

thereafter to have court all day Sunday.

The legal battles at the Forge confrontation helped to define the nature of the struggle more precisely: the testimony of Chrysler executives at the hearings, a visit to the Forge plant by UAW vice-president, Doug Fraser, and the press left it indisputable that conditions in the plant were abominable. No longer could these actions in response to working conditions be portrayed as isolated events fabricated by mesianic militants. Working conditions were at a point of battle, and the real position of the UAW was beginning to show.

Fraser had called a Local 47 meeting for Sunday ostensibly to decide whether the strike should be continued. In court, the defendants were given the options of either putting on proofs on Sunday by workers as to individual and immediate safety hazards or accepting an order for a preliminary injunction prohibiting the strike. Kennedy had come to this conclusion despite the fact that the National Labor Relations Act (§502), provides that a worker has a right to walk out if threatened with abnormally hazardous or unsafe working conditions. She interpreted this language to mean that there must be an immediate danger to the individual worker and that the individual worker has no right to concerted action. Her position was supported by Chrysler Corporation and the UAW. Since the workers' leadership could not be at two places at once, they decided to accept a modified injunction and continue on Monday if necessary.

At the union hall on Sunday, Doug Fraser was present to run the local meeting. After a debate about whether people should go back to work, Fraser called for a voice vote. The 800 workers

present were about evenly divided and a "division of the house" was called for. This is a right guaranteed by the UAW constitution, and means that there must be an actual counting of the vote. Fraser announced that the voting result was in favor of going back to work, declared the meeting adjourned, flipped off the mike and walked out. The UAW thereby openly announced that democratic procedures would be eliminated from future internal disputes; naked power would decide the course of the union. The veneer was gone.

The Guild prepared to support the workers if they decided to stay out on Monday. Several members of the criminal defense committee were at the plant at 5:30 in the morning to provide back-up legal assistance. Several members of the labor committee who had been representing the workers were on hand as well. Fraser himself arose early to urge workers to return to unchanged working conditions. Accompanied by other international officials and a few goons, he accused John Taylor of being an outside agitator and challenged him to a fist fight in the parking lot.

Just two days after the Forge workers returned to work, two workers at Chrysler's Mack avenue Stamping Plant shut down a conveyer line and again 100 to 200 other employees surrounded them. The strike lasted some 30 hours and ended with the UAW calling out approximately 1,000 goons to make sure the workers went back to Chrysler's workplace. In so doing, the UAW buracracy declared a "war against radicals." Two members of the Workers Action Movement (WAM), an outgrowth of the Progressive Labor split-off of SDS, were beaten by UAW goons and

then arrested by Detroit police. They are presently being represented by Guild lawyer Shel Halpern.

Doug Fraser stated that Chrysler should refuse to "knuckle under" to the militants. This means that the UAW is openly siding with the company, and is taking a position more conservative than the company's. The use of name-calling and goons is clear evidence of the political bankruptcy of the UAW's position. It has become isolated from the workers in the plants. One reason for this isolation is that the leadership has not actually worked in the plants for more than thirty years.

At some levels, the significance of these actions is self-evident, especially to the bourgeoisie. For one month the press was filled with analysis of the importance of plant safety, the loss of control by the UAW bureaucracy, and the illegitimacy of the worker's action. But the tide had been turned, the need to prepare for future actions was clear. The press could not and did not pretend that worker militancy was on the decline. No longer was political action discounted as only student action. In fact, in each of the three strikes, Marxist-Leninists were directly involved. Of course there were different positions by the groups but all unified around several positions: that rank and file action was the only course for resolving in-plant conditions, that the union bureaucracy was openly class collaborationist and must be attacked as such, and that leadership and primacy of plant struggles was undisputed. The in-plant organizing of the last six years was coming to fruition. The UAW in the past scoffed at the people at the gates passing out literature. But now the

Union bureaucrats threatened, or beat these "outsiders". The press tried to picture the fat bureaucrats as the militants of the 1930's when flying squadrons were created. Instead, workers in the plants understood that only a complete elimination of the hardened bureaucrats would give results.

This series of worker actions generated movement within the "left" itself. While the left was organizationally unprepared, the strikes laid the ground work for a new level of organization. New alliances were forged, new levels of militancy established. The Guild has continuing demands made upon us and we have been pressed to deal with sensitive, difficult and long debated political questions. Guild attorneys represent almost all of the workers who have been fired since the strikes.

The Guild also became involved in the political debate and consequently, the September general membership meeting drew the largest attendance in recent Detroit Chapter history. Members came from as far as Ann Arbor and Flint. Members of the UAW legal department also chose to attend. Questions of appealing Judge Kennedy's ruling, whether the UAW should be sued from both the practical and political perspectives, the factual and political disputes over the UAW's use of goons against their constituency, and the nature of continuing legal assistance to discharged workers, were the major areas of discussion. These in turn sharply raised larger questions as to the kinds of political positions the Guild can take as a broad-based, radical, legal support organization.

But the "left" was unprepared organizationally to answer

the demand for organizational and legal support. Many groups were not involved in the actions because either they were off messing around with electoral politics or hopelessly tied to the union bureaucracy. Other groups were intimately involved in the actions because of years of organizational and legal work. But they were still fragmented and unable to launch the necessary attack on the company and the union bureaucracy.

While militant workers were directly confronting the combined power of the UAW bureaucracy and Chrysler, the most money was being poured into electoral politics. And who was being asked to vote for these petit bourgeois politicians? The very same workers who were carrying on these in-plant struggles alone. The question of a quid pro quo was not asked.

But clearly the strikes laid the ground work for a new level of organization. New alliances were forged, new levels of militancy established. The organizing was inadequate but it transformed itself in the process. In the future new demands will be made on the movement and on the legal community. No longer will the plant workers toil unnoticed and ignored. The mighty power of working class militancy began very haltingly to raise its head.

Atlantic

MONTH



THE ASSEMBLY LINE

by William Serrin

The line, the goddamn line. Fifty-five cars an hour, 440 cars a shift . . . two shifts a day, 4400 cars a week . . . 44 assembly plants, 9 million cars a year . . . lights, machinery, noise . . . hundreds of hustling workers, arms moving, legs moving . . . tightening bolts, fastening cables . . . using big electric wrenches and drills, the hoses stretched out behind them . . . and the colors, the brilliant goddamn colors . . . aqua, grabber lime, pewter, pinto red, sassy grass green, rosewood, ascot blue, Nevada silver, cottonwood green, in-violet, curious yellow, burgundy fire, glacial blue, Tor-Red, amber sherwood, formal black, sunflower, sandalwood, cranberry, Sno White, Bahama yellow, true blue, rallye red, yellow gold . . . The Workers, 700,000 of them across the country, 200,000 of them in the Detroit area . . . men and women, whites and blacks . . . big blacks with Afros and young dudes with processes, paunchy whites, paunchy blacks, red-necks, fathers, husbands, suburbanites . . . women, tight-skinned, almost never pretty, with hair teased in the fashion of ten years ago . . . 8 hours a day, not counting a half hour off for lunch . . . 46 minutes of relief time, when a fellow can sit down or use the toilet or have a smoke or get a Coke or a Mallo-Cup . . . workers sanding gray metal and rough spots on painted metal after the cars have come from the bake oven . . . taking windshields from a pile, slopping glue on and attaching a rubber sleeve . . . a worker attaching the windshield to a hydraulic lift with suction cups and swinging it onto the line . . . workers swinging the engine onto the line . . . workers swinging the rear axle in and laying the rear springs on the line . . . the body now automatically dropped over the rear axle, the springs, the drive shaft . . . tires inflated by machine and workers taking them off conveyors and putting them on the wheels . . . workers bolting the tires down . . . workers in the pits underneath the assembly line, like slit trenches, standing all day at Ford or GM, sitting at Chrysler . . . installing wires, fastening bolts, 8 hours a day, their arms over their heads . . . workers beating on latches with rubber mallets to make the hoods fit . . . 8 hours a day, 48 weeks a year, \$9000 or so a year, \$130 to \$150 a week in take-home pay . . . THE LINE, THE FINEST PRODUCT OF AMERICAN INVENTIVENESS

. . . 350 models to choose from . . . fascinating, absolutely fascinating, how the engines, tires, fenders, hoods are fed onto the line at the right time, a 429 CID V-8 or a 200 CID Six, the right-size tires, the right-color fenders and hood, the system run by teletype and computer . . . A WONDER OF THE WORLD . . . a few days from the time the iron ore is dug in the Mesabi Range in Minnesota, the coal in West Virginia, Pennsylvania, and Kentucky, the limestone in northern Michigan, the tires manufactured in Akron, Ohio . . . the ore hauled to Gary, Cleveland, Pittsburgh, or Detroit, smelted into steel . . . rolled into sheet steel at 2300 feet per minute . . . stamped into side panels, inner panels, outer panels, fenders, roofs, hoods, decks, floor pans . . . the iron cast into engines, steel forged into axles, rolled into frames . . . the body welded together . . . painted with zinc phosphate . . . painted with two coats of primer, wet-sanded, painted with three coats of acrylic enamel, baked for one hour at 250 degrees . . . dollied onto the line . . . the doors and deck hung . . . dropped over the engine and transmission . . . windshield, instrument panel, and upholstery installed . . . then down the final line . . . rear axle, rear springs, drive shaft, gas line, tires, fenders . . . six gallons of gasoline injected into the gas tank . . . battery hooked up . . . a worker gets in, moving fast, turns the key, and this tremendous noise . . . rrrrrrrRRRRRRRRrrrrRRRRR . . . the car starts up . . . Mustangs, Cougars, Torinos, Dusters, Bonneville's, GTO's, Firebirds, Caprices, Mavericks, Pintos, Montereys, Imperials, Furies, El Dorados, Galaxies, LTD's, Thunderbirds, Challengers, Darts, Barracudas, Valiants, New Yorkers, Chevelles, Novas . . . off the line . . . lights aligned, acceleration and brakes tested . . . washed . . . waxed . . . and onto haulaway trucks or railroad cars, 15 to the car, and hauled across America.

In 1933, at the height of the Great Depression, Diego Rivera, the Mexican painter, completed a nine-month project: an awesome set of murals in the garden court of the Detroit Institute of Arts. The soaring murals, depicting life in the auto plants, caused a furor. Rivera did not celebrate life in the

plants as the civic leaders would have had it: he painted the workers as grim-faced robots locked in dreary jobs. Automaton. The city was beside itself. Meetings were held; letters poured in to the papers. Rivera was reviled. Two august institutions, the *Detroit News* and the Archdiocese of Detroit, demanded that the murals be whitewashed. Reason prevailed, however, and the murals remain. So too, of course, do the automobile plants which Rivera painted. And now, more than three decades later, this is clear: in many cases, in many plants, life for automobile workers remains as monotonous and full of drudgery as Rivera painted it. It is preferable, for any number of them, to the mines, the military, or clerical paper pushing. But for many of America's auto workers—the very heart of the working class—life is dull, brutish, weary, stuporous.

This is ironic, of course, for the automobile worker is the beneficiary of the best that America has to offer. It was nothing less than the American Dream that brought the automobile workers to Detroit, the promise that hard work would bring the good life.

First the immigrants came: English, Italians, Swedes, Slavs, Hungarians, Scottish, Poles, Irish, to make big money, to cash in on the \$5 day. Then the white Southerners from Tennessee, Kentucky, Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia, to make big money in *Dee*-troit. And then—originally because they worked cheaply, sometimes as scabs, and now because they provide a low-skill, close-at-hand labor force—the blacks. Leonard Woodcock, president of the United Automobile Workers, says, "If there ever was a melting pot, I think it's the automobile industry."

In the 1930s, in the stormy strikes in Toledo, Cleveland, Atlanta, Detroit, and Flint, the workers formed the United Automobile Workers. Today they profit from the UAW's liberalism and aggressiveness. They are, moreover, beneficiaries of the fruits of mass production, the assembly line—this is the industry that brought the assembly line to American life.

These days there is unrest in the auto plants once again. Roughly 40 percent of the automotive work force is under thirty. And many of these young men and women say that their jobs, and their lives, are dull and unrewarding. Nearly 35 percent of the work force is black, and this figure often rises to 60 or 70 percent in low-skill jobs—laborers and production workers in the inner-city plants. Many of the older workers, largely whites in their forties and fifties, are also angry and dissatisfied. They want to quit but say that they can't afford to; they wait to retire.

A sizable number of automobile workers, of course, have reached a level of affluence—an accumulation of goods—unmatched in the history of the working class.

A year ago, after a ten-week strike at the General Motors Corporation, the United Automobile Workers won what was one of the most lucrative contracts in the history of industrial negotiations—a package that GM said would cost it more than \$2.4 billion in

wages alone. Cost-of-living allowances could push the total figures much higher. The settlement, later matched at the Ford Motor Company and Chrysler Corporation, could, according to GM, raise the salary of many GM workers to some \$12,000 a year by 1973. (In his initial reaction to the Administration's anti-inflation moves, the UAW's Woodcock threatened termination of the 1970 contracts and the possibility of new strikes if the ninety-day wage-price freeze, or extension of it, interfered with wage increases and cost-of-living adjustments negotiated with the industry last year.)

In a booklet which General Motors Corporation sent to all its 440,000 hourly employees, GM workers were told that they are "well up on the income ladder—in the TOP THIRD income group in the nation!" Earl Bramblett, a GM vice president for personnel and director of its negotiation team, says that it is incorrect even to think of auto workers as the *working class*. Auto workers have achieved *affluence*, Bramblett argues, and there is "a long difference between affluence and the working class." Sidney McKenna, director of labor relations at the Ford Motor Company, says, "I can scarcely believe that [the auto worker] could be identified as working-class poor."

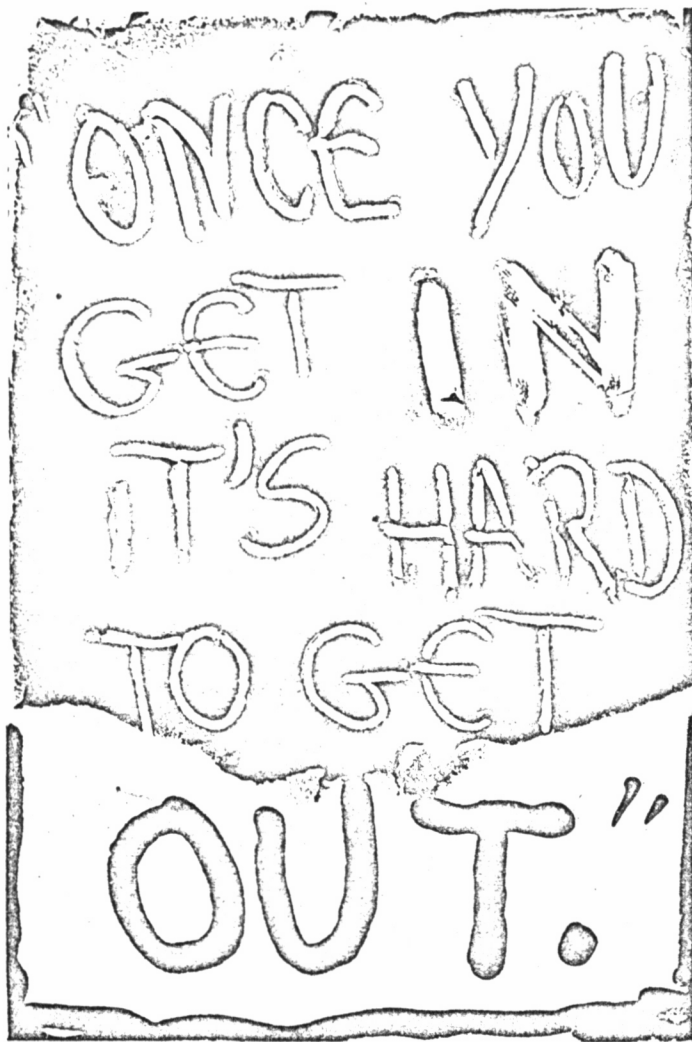
A woman at GM's Fisher Body plant in Livonia: "We're different people than we were. I've worked in the plant since 1928 . . . then we were just a bunch of blue-collar workers who didn't amount to a hill of beans. . . . Now, well, look, a lot of us can afford summer cottages, some of us can afford boats, two cars, things like that."

A black who works at a GM Fisher Body plant in Detroit: "Auto workers have achieved the more comfortable things in life."

Immense strides have also been made in improving shop conditions since the 1930s. Workers now have seniority and job security. They have 23 minutes of relief time in the first four hours of their shift, 23 minutes in the second four hours. Plants are cleaner; toilets now have doors; there are more fans for ventilation. GM's Bramblett: "We have more than 15,000 vending machines in the plants." Automation has eliminated many difficult, backbreaking tasks. Workers can no longer be told there is no work and sent home with no pay; if they *are* sent home, which almost never happens, they must receive four hours' salary.

When plants are shut down for annual model changeover, workers draw 95 percent of their take-home pay. They have paid holidays. The 1970 UAW settlements provided unlimited cost-of-living protection and a new retirement plan, which would allow thirty-year workers to retire at a pension of \$500 a month at age fifty-eight beginning this month. A year later, the retirement age drops to fifty-six. Many of the employer attitudes that helped bring on unionization are gone.

A retired Ford worker: "You know what they done at Ford's? And this is the truth. They had the service



man follow you into the rest rooms, and you're sitting in there, and he made you get up and lift the toilet seat to see if you were doing something. And if you wasn't, you was fired."

A widow of a Ford worker: "Before the UAW came in, why, we never knew when our husbands would come home and say, 'I'm fired.' Here you may have been pregnant, had a doctor bill to take care of, a sick child . . . besides you maybe had parents to take care of, and your bills piled up. And sometimes the husband would get another job under an assumed name, and the lousy spies, factory spies, would come in and spy him and say, 'Your name is John. How come your name is Al?' And he was fired. And that kept on until after the union had organized."

A GM worker who belongs to UAW Local 174, which Walter Reuther led on the historic Kelsey-Hayes sit-down strike in 1936: "You were just a badge number, years ago."

Workers running through the parking lots of the Ford Rouge plant; lined up two- and three-deep in the bars across from the GM plants in Hamtramck, Flint, or Pontiac; shots of

whiskey and beer chasers lined up one after another down the bar. The A & P . . . Krogers, K-Mart, the tract suburb . . . dinky houses with aluminum siding, the Lombardy poplars, the Page fences . . . big jets blasting overhead . . . white brick cocktail lounges . . . cinder parking lots . . . big water towers . . . drive-in movies. One sees the auto worker, if he is white, lined up in the traffic jams headed toward the suburbs or the fringes of the big cities . . . at the grocery stores and discount houses on Saturday mornings . . . drinking Seagrams Seven in paper cups at the Lions games . . . roaring up to deer season . . . whole families at the cramped campsites of northern Michigan, camper trucks wheel-to-wheel, the men in T-shirts and drinking Strohs, the wives in hair curlers and smoking Kools.

If he is black he comes the other way—to drink Strohs and smoke Kools on the busted porches of the inner city, or to live, mile after mile, in the black middle-class neighborhoods.

Many people have become rich in the automobile industry: scores, if not hundreds, are millionaires—Fords, Sloans, Ketterings, Motts, Wilsons, Roches, Knudsens. Thousands of middle- and top-level executives make good money, as do many skilled tradesmen and foremen. But despite the cheerful phrases of the GM brochure, despite new contract gains, many of the workers in the shops are still pressed to make ends meet. A worker at GM's Fisher Fleetwood plant says: "It takes *two* checks for a family to live comfortably in this day and age."

It is said that no one goes into the shop intending to stay there. This was true thirty-five or forty-five years ago, and it is true today. Always the workers intend to work a year or two, put some money away, and get out. Many dream of going into business for themselves. But many stay in the plants. "Once you get in, it's hard to get out, you know," says a Ford worker, "because you have a wife and a family and this is your means of support." A GM worker: "You get about ten or twelve years in, and you get to thinking about getting out. But like myself, I don't have any training for any other kind of job."

Irving Bluestone, director of the UAW's GM Department: "I just can't imagine that a worker [on the assembly line] can take pride in what he's doing. Just putting on nuts and bolts, you know, what the hell kind of pride can you take in that?"

Ken Bannon, head of the UAW's Ford Department: "You're fighting this iron tiger. You're handcuffed to it. You don't get a fair chance at it. And every so often the big man comes over with his key, and unhandcuffs you, and then you can go get a cup of coffee or have a little break." Pounding the table, Bannon says, "You're actually handcuffed there . . . when that car comes down you better be there; you can't be at the water fountain, you can't be on the

john, you can't be having a snack. You are handcuffed to that line because when that product comes to you, brother, you better be there."

A Cadillac worker: "You walk in the plant in the morning, and the *smell*. As soon as you get to the door, you say, 'What am I coming here for? I'm crazy.'" A fellow worker: "You follow that iron horse"—the assembly line—"all day, and your ass is dragging when you walk out." A supervisor at a GM Pontiac plant says of the assembly-line worker: "You don't think . . . you're just an automated puppet." Another GM worker: "That's all I'm working for—my paycheck and retirement."

At Chrysler Corporation's Dodge Main plant, a member of a militant black union group: "Black workers, they work on the dirtiest, greasiest, nastiest, filthiest, noisiest jobs. You go find the dirtiest, greasiest, nastiest, filthiest jobs, and that's where you'll find the black man." The UAW's Bannon says of the assembly line: "It's a beast. It's an ugly, ugly, ugly beast." Frank Runnels, president of the UAW Local 22: "A guy would have to be a freak to enjoy a life like this."

One UAW woman says she enjoyed the several years she worked on a transmission assembly line: "It was the cleanest place in our plant. It was air-conditioned . . . the floors were cleaner too. Some people say just standing there day after day can be terribly monotonous, which it is—if you think about it. The only thing I found . . . was you can't stand there and think about what you're doing. . . . But after you've once become accustomed to the job you can plan your vacation, you can plan your children's college, you can plan your housework, you can plan all your outside activities . . . while you are working away."

Automation has certainly eased some of the work. Irving Bluestone, who for years served as Walter Reuther's intellectual-in-residence: "In the machine shops, the feeder plants, the stamping plants, you would recognize the difference over the past generation of workers . . . because here the major technological advances have taken place."

GM's Bramblett, who worked on an engine assembly line at GM from 1928 to 1934: "We have engineered out of existence a lot of disagreeable jobs. When I worked on the line we handled the crankshaft by hand, and in a six-cylinder engine that weighed sixty-nine pounds. We had no lifting devices. We picked them up in our hands, moved them to a fixture for checking, and put them in. Nowadays all the cranks are handled with lifting devices, counterbalances. So you can tiptoe them around, and you don't really have to exert a lot of physical energy."

Bramblett goes on: "Another thing that comes to mind is the polishing of paint on a finished car. You

had a big rag wheel and an electric motor that was quite heavy . . . it turned, rotated. There was polish on it. This created wind, dust. It was quite a hard physical job. Modern-day paint techniques do not require that anymore. . . . I'm not suggesting that a factory is a lounge. It's a workplace. But I would say there are a lot of heavy lifting jobs, disagreeable jobs, nasty jobs, that have been improved."

And William Connelly, a member of UAW Local 598 at Flint, a man who participated in the 1936-1937 UAW sit-down strike, remembers: "We was spitting tacks. We used to take a handful of tacks, put them in our mouths to do our work with. And kids would come in there, breaking in, and whoops, they'd swallow a tack. And first thing the old-timers would do is tell them, 'Take a handful of cotton and swallow it right away.' The theory was that the cotton would wrap itself around the head of the tack and protect the stomach. I don't know if it worked or not. But we used to do it anyhow."

Windshields, which weigh about thirty pounds, are now moved into place on automatic lifting arms, the windshields attached to the arms on huge suction cups. Mechanical hoists are used for swinging seats onto the line for installation, and there are now mechanical roof loaders which place roof sections on top of the bodies for welding; mechanical door positioners; machines which place floor pans in position for welding to the underbody; and devices which transfer the completed underbody to what is called the "body build truck," the wheeled platform on which the body is constructed. Side frame fixtures, large as half the side of a car, are moved into place mechanically. All these machines now perform jobs previously done by hand or with hoists which still required much physical effort. In addition, automatic welders have eliminated many demanding welding jobs, and safety in the plants is remarkably improved. GM says that its jobs "are the safest in industry," and that "the most hazardous thing an employee does is to leave the plant."

It is clear that most changes in the auto plants have come about in order to increase productivity, because the UAW hounded the companies into changes such as the present forty-six minutes a day of relief time. As many people see it, the UAW, for all its power to gain higher wages and fringe benefits, can do little to change the working environment.

To many workers, automation is an enemy. Not, as it was once feared, because it eliminates jobs but because, they say, it increases production and gives workers more tasks. Van Brooks, a worker at Chrysler Corporation's Jefferson Assembly plant: "I'll say up until 1958, when you got up in the morning—under the work standards and the system we were working under—it was a pleasure to come out here and meet the fellows and work. You didn't have to work under a strain. But after the recession, and they commenced to drive you and putting in automation . . . putting on so much pressure and adding so

many jobs to you, that when you get up in the morning now, you say, 'Oh, man, I wish I didn't have to go to the plant today.'"

The auto industry—almost seventy years old now—has millions of dollars invested in its tools and machines; the complete automation that some theorists talk about is, from the economic standpoint, impractical. Many assembly lines are not suited to extensive automation. Only men and women, not machines, can perform many of the tasks—crawling in and out of automobile chassis, for example, to install trim. UAW vice president Douglas Fraser believes that many of the tasks eliminated by automation were tasks that required at least some degree of dexterity—tasks that gave the worker some challenge. Says Fraser: "In an auto plant fifteen years ago, there used to be some very fine jobs, what we called semiskills. The internal-external grinder, the trimmer, jobs like this where you can use a little ingenuity and individuality and some skill, and you could sort of beat the game by finding shortcuts. Now . . . I suspect when all these jobs were automated out of existence, some of the most interesting jobs disappeared. And this has hurt the system."

There are, of course, ways a worker can improve his lot. If he performs well and is nominated by his supervisors, he can be promoted to foreman and earn a 25 percent increase in pay. He can apply to become a skilled tradesman. Under the new contract, for example, millwrights earn about \$5.41 an hour, die-makers about \$5.67, as compared with the average assembler's pay of about \$4.30 an hour. Yet few workers show interest in becoming foremen, despite the fact that it seems a natural goal. "The tension is too great," says the UAW's Fraser. "The kids are extremely difficult to discipline, if not impossible. They're afraid of confrontation with the blacks . . . there are all sorts of pressures." And the skilled trades are often closed trades, especially to blacks.

The easiest and most frequently used way to get out of the shops is to quit. There is another, more aimless method: staying home, or at least off the line.

Absenteeism, which traditionally ran at a rate of about 2.5 percent of the work force, has soared in the last five years to more than 5.5 percent, an all-time high. On Fridays and Mondays, says GM's Bramblett, "it's not wild to have 10 percent of the people absent." In April, 1970, on the second shift on a Friday, more than 200 workers of the 2700-man work force (about 8 percent) were absent at a GM Chevrolet assembly plant in Baltimore. GM shut the plant down. The plant manager sent letters to the families of each worker urging employees to be "at work every day on time: to avoid the necessity of harsh disciplinary measures."

In a Chrysler glass plant, a place the UAW's Fraser calls "scrupulously clean, very quiet, by the na-

ture of the operation," absenteeism averages 8 to 9 percent on midweekdays, and around 15 percent on Fridays and Mondays. A great many of the workers who stay off the job are younger workers who feel that they can make enough money in three or four days to meet their needs. Black workers contribute heavily to the absenteeism rate: on Friday afternoons, after payday, they sit in cars in a parking lot behind a block-long string of bars across the street from Chrysler's Dodge Main plant drinking beer, whiskey, and Boone's Farm Apple Wine. Often they don't return to work those Friday afternoons. Fraser says: "I would say that the young people are rebelling against the system."

In July, 1970, at 4:55 on a Wednesday afternoon shift, a thirty-six-year-old black employee of the Chrysler Corporation, James Johnson, Jr., walked into the Eldon Avenue Axle plant, pulled an M-1 carbine from his pant leg, loaded it with a 30-round banana clip, and went on a wild killing spree. "He's firing at everybody in white shirts," a worker cried. Within minutes, three men were dead: a foreman, Hugh M. Jones, who had suspended Johnson for insubordination an hour before, plus another foreman and a job setter. Johnson told a UAW committeeman who captured him, "They took me off the job I had held for two years and put a man with less seniority in my place."

That shooting made banner headlines, but was only one of several violent incidents in the plants. A man was killed in a shooting in a Chrysler plant the same month, and there have been other shootings, as well as cases involving the display of weapons.

According to James McGahey, president of the 23,000-member United Plant Guards, "there has been an extensive increase in incidents of assault with deadly weapons, the use of narcotics, and a complete breakdown of respect for plant guards." He thinks—although the estimate is high—that probably as many as 60 percent of the automobile workers have guns on their persons or in their cars or lockers.

Nelson Jack Edwards, a UAW board member and its highest-ranking black, says of the Johnson incident in heavy understatement, "We're not in sympathy with that kind of action." A majority of black workers agree with Edwards; they see themselves making progress and remain allied with the UAW. But other blacks see it differently.

For the fact is that blacks are still making only small inroads into the skilled trades and foreman ranks. They tend to have the lowest-paid, most disagreeable and difficult assembly-line jobs. With no seniority, they are also the first laid off (hundreds of hard-core "unemployables," hired in a well-publicized recruiting drive after the Detroit riot, were let go last year).

A member of a black union group, an affiliate of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers: "The

"Some guys can't wait to get a white collar on and work in a computer center feeding cards."

morning the *Free Press* came out with the front-page headline of the shooting in the Eldon plant, this blood came in that had been off for two days, see, and the foreman said to the blood, real tough, see, 'Come here. Where you been?' I took the front page of the *Free Press* and I went over there and held it up to his face. He turned his back."

Last May, in a stunning decision, a Recorder's Court jury found Johnson innocent because of temporary insanity. The jury held that two conditions were responsible for the insanity: Johnson's early life as a sharecropper in the South and the conditions of factory life, including violence, unsafe practices, harassment from foremen. "Did you see that cement room in the plant?" a juror was heard to ask during a four-hour deliberation. "Working there would drive anyone crazy."

More than a year ago, Malcolm Denise, vice president for labor relations of the Ford Motor Company, addressed a group of management executives privately. (The UAW pirated a copy of the speech and made it public.) Denise declared: "Employees in the seventies . . . will be even less willing [than they have been in recent years] to put up with dirty and uncomfortable working conditions, even less likely to accept the unvarying pace and functions on moving lines." He went on: "Large numbers of those we hire find factory life so distasteful that they quit after only a brief exposure."

Auto executives' statements on these subjects tend largely to be reserved for confidential talks. Many of them echo GM Chairman James M. Roche, speaking out with rare bluntness a year ago in an address in

St. Louis in commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the General Motors Corporation. His subject was absenteeism. Roche declared, "Management and the public have lately been shortchanged. We have a right to more than we are receiving." He said that GM had an investment of \$24,000 in each of its hourly employees, but that "tools and technology mean nothing if the worker is absent from his job. We must receive the fair day's work for which we pay the fair day's wage."

Two questions come to mind: Must factories always be distasteful places to work? Will men who work in them always be looked down upon?

The new GM plant at Lordstown, Ohio, is the most automated plant in automotive history, capable of producing 100 Chevrolet Vegas (GM's new subcompact) each hour, compared with the usual production rate of 50 to 60. Many difficult welding jobs have been eliminated, with huge robots replacing workers. GM's John DeLorean, general manager of the Chevrolet division, insists, "Every tedious job [at Lordstown] has been eliminated from the assembly line."

The Ford Motor Company has produced a film called *Don't Paint It Like Disneyland*, which attempts to give the employee an accurate picture of the drudgery of factory life. It is perhaps the most candid look that a company has given its employees, and viewers are told, "It's a drag at first, but you realize you got to do it, so you do it." Chrysler Corporation experimented with S & H Green Stamps at its Mound Road plant, giving trading stamps each month to workers with perfect attendance records. And some foremen have been given sensitivity training.

But UAW demands for voluntary overtime and in-

verse seniority, for example, went by the boards in the 1970 negotiations as the talks got down to money. And even when progressive proposals are enacted, they do not get to the heart of the matter: the system. Auto and union men alike say that it is the system—the assembly line, and emphasis on productivity—that makes the auto industry, for better or worse, what it is.

Says Douglas Fraser of the ground swell of support for the UAW's 30-and-out, a contract proposal that workers be allowed to retire after 30 years "in service": "Fellows my age, and I would not want to say this in a mass meeting because it's so regrettable, these fellows—fifty-one, fifty-two, fifty-three—guys I had worked with, would be calling me up and saying, 'Doug, you got to get this 30-and-out. We got to get out of here.'"

The UAW has made some specific proposals: voluntary overtime, so that only those workers who want additional hours will have to work them; inverse seniority, so that older employees with more seniority can be home during layoffs and new employees (this would be especially beneficial to hardcore unemployed—the blacks) can earn more. The UAW's Nelson Jack Edwards would allow employees to declare how many days a week they wish to work. This would permit the younger employees, who add so much to absentee rates, to take off the time they wish, and allow the companies to plan for this as well. If, as John Kenneth Galbraith writes, overtime broke the "barbarous uniformity of the weekly wage" that assumed that "all families have the same tastes, needs," this "undertime" proposal would go far toward meeting particular needs of individuals and families. Frank Runnels, the UAW Local 22 president, proposes installing service centers in plants so that blue-collar employees can share the opportunities of white-collar workers who do not punch time clocks: purchase of stamps and money orders, haircuts, check cashing, paying of utility bills. Blue-collar workers, for example, ought to have as much right to air conditioning as white-collar workers. Air conditioning remains a white-collar amenity.

The UAW's Ken Bannon has proposed abandoning the present assembly line for a system in which cars would be built by teams: a team would take an automobile—or a major component—and follow it down the line, assembling it entirely by themselves. "The average guy wants to do a decent job, I don't give a damn what walk of life he's in." His proposal, Bannon argues, would "give men dignity" and pride in their work. But neither management nor the UAW took the proposal seriously.

The auto executives know there is discontent in the shops: the staff psychologists and psychiatrists say so. The company reports say so

too, when they tell the number of toilet seats ripped off toilets, the absenteeism rates, the vandalism, the parking-lot crime, the turnover, the sabotage.

Yet the executives point out that millions of American workers, white- and blue-collar, are unhappy. Lee A. Iacocca, president of Ford: "What the hell. I have tough days. It's boring as hell up here sometimes." He says: "Some guys . . . can't wait to get a white collar on and work in a computer center feeding cards. And *that's* monotonous. That's *really* monotonous."

Most auto executives believe that while, in the words of Ford's McKenna, "we're frank to admit that working on the line is different than working in a bank or supermarket," the drudgery, the physical exertion, the monotony of the shop are exaggerated. Or they believe, at the least, that many jobs are tough—that it is time that workers, and the work philosophers, accept this. That it is time that workers start showing up on time, start giving their jobs their all—and stop complaining.

"The truth of the matter," says Earl Bramblett, "is that GM jobs are good jobs."

To many people, however, the assembly line—which Daniel Bell has said represents the "distinctive ethos" of twentieth-century America—is a cruel, dehumanizing place, one that should not, need not, be tolerated in a nation as rich and technologically advanced, as professedly concerned with human dignity as America.

Through the years, critics have proposed many reforms: job rotation, job enlargement, participatory management. Charles R. Walker and Robert H. Guest, using suggestions of the workers themselves, proposed in their book, *The Man on the Assembly Line*, increased rest periods and, where possible, that the companies allow workers to create "banks" and to "work up the line"—that is, to work as fast as they wish so that they can get ahead of their job—say, build up a stack of fenders or tires, and then rest. They called for "real communication," arguing that "both groups"—management and labor—had "much of mutual interest to tell each other about the assembly of automobiles."

Daniel Bell, in his short book, *Work and its Discontents*, recommended extensive use of multipurpose automatic machinery which, he said, would bring about "decentralization of the industry . . . [construction of] new plants away from major cities." He declared: "If one hopes to consider the worker as more than a part of 'human relations' . . . his job must not only feed his body; it must sustain his spirit."

Dr. Stanley Seashore, a psychologist with the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan, says that auto companies must learn to "minimize status differences and maximize learning." He says changes will come not by increasing salaries and fringe benefits—normal results of company-union negotiations—but when "some manufacturer takes a

hell of a big risk and makes a dramatic change in the whole philosophy of the organization—the conception of the relations between the management and the employees, between the employer and the community.”

Dr. Christopher Argyris, a Yale University psychologist, warns that people “must stop assuming that the humdrum, programmed life that a worker now leads is going to be changed” drastically, no matter what a company might do. But he says that while there are limits to change, much change can come. He says: “You can make jobs attractive enough so that the worker has the chance to experience some meaningfulness, some growth in his life.”

Dr. Edward Lawler, a Yale psychologist, says that a “sort of class racism—classism” exists in which managers say, “‘Those guys don’t have anything to offer and therefore we don’t ask. And when we do ask they don’t really say very much.’ Well, there are a lot of reasons why they don’t say very much, including the fact that they’re rarely asked.” Ross Stegner, a psychologist at Wayne State University, says: “We may have to abandon some of the efficiencies of assembly line production and go back to small factories where people work as a congenial group.”

Dr. David Whittert, vice president of a Manhattan industrial consulting firm and a consultant to General Motors, says: “I always tell them [GM] that there are two things they ought to do. They ought to automate those jobs as fast as possible—and they’re doing that, really—no human being should be required to do that kind of work. . . . And the other thing—something I tell them not to do—is to stop kidding these people by giving them the big picture, this kind of nonsense where you go down and tell a guy he’s building America, that kind of bullshit. The poor bastard ought to be left alone and not tortured with that kind of nonsense. He knows better. He puts bolts on wheels, that’s what he does. Let’s not kid him by calling it something else.”

Victor Reuther, brother of the late UAW president and director of the UAW’s international office, suggests that union and management join as partners to improve work conditions. “If the union is to be forced solely into a position of a negative attack on the corporate structure . . . then it will constantly remain in a combative position. If the trade union, however, is invited to play a constructive role in these areas—in the problem of absenteeism, the problem of drugs, the problem of joint participation in the training of workers—then I think the whole relationship between the union and management can undergo a significant change.”

To automobile executives—top men like Henry Ford II, Iacocca, James M. Roche, Edward N. Cole, Lynn Townsend—to thousands of middle-echelon executives, division managers, plant

managers, sales managers, superintendents, accountants, engineers, the men from whose ranks the future generation of automobile leaders will come—to these men such criticisms and proposals are, at minimum, impractical. At the extreme, they are Utopian claptrap.

The intellectuals, of course, say the executives are difficult to work with. Dr. Louis Davis, a UCLA psychologist, says that one of the difficulties of working with management “is to try and convince them that what they are seeing is a consequence of what they have asked for.”

The executives, in reply, say they are doing what they can to improve plant life—new plants, noise-abatement programs, elimination of unpleasant jobs—within limits of practicality, their obligations as employers, and the finances they feel they can address to the problem.

General Motors has commissioned the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan to conduct a three-year survey of its blue-collar workers to see exactly what complaints exist and, it is hoped, to chart a course to combat them. The study, if for no other reason than GM’s gigantic size, will likely be one of the largest, most significant studies to come from American industry.

Critics condemn the companies for negligence in improving factory conditions, but they also have harsh words for the unions—including the UAW, despite the fact that it is probably the most socially concerned of the major unions in the country.

Most unions, says Louis Davis of UCLA, see jobs only “in terms of the number of people who can be working and the amount of money per hour that can be gotten.” Companies strive to reach accommodation with the unions, he says, and as a result both sides help inflate wages and the cost of fringe benefits, and do little toward improving work environments.

Dr. Whittert says that what the workers say is: “OK, if you’re going to make me do something this stupid, if you’re going to torture me this badly all day long, then I’m going to make you pay through the nose . . . because all I can get from you is money.” He says: “Then management looks at them and says, ‘Look, what money grubbers—all they want is money.’” He says: “That isn’t all they want; it’s all they can get.”

Auto officials often imply—they never say it outright, only suggest it in private conversations—that the men and women who work in auto plants are unambitious, that if they had the characteristic American drive to get ahead, to better themselves, they wouldn’t be in the plants. To this, the UAW’s Douglas Fraser replies, “When a guy tells you the workers are not like you and me, that’s nonsense. It’s precisely because they are like you and me that the companies are having the goddamn problem. The workers are thinking, ‘What the hell am I doing here?’” □

THE NATION

AUGUST 17, 1957 . . 25c

The MYTH of the HAPPY WORKER . . by Harvey Swados

"From where we sit in the company," says one of the best personnel men in the country, "we have to look at only the aspects of work that cut across all sorts of jobs—administration and human relations. Now these are aspects of work, abstractions, but it's easy for personnel people to get so hip on their importance that they look on the specific tasks of making things and selling them as secondary..."

—*The Organization Man*,
by William H. Whyte Jr.

THE PERSONNEL man who made this remark to Mr. Whyte differed from his brothers only in that he had a moment of insight. Actually, "the specific tasks of making things" are now not only regarded by his white-collar fellows as "secondary," but as irrelevant to the vaguer but more "challenging" tasks of the man at the desk. This is true not just of the personnel man, who places workers, replaces them, displaces them—in brief, manipulates them. The union leader also, who represents workers and sometimes manipulates them, seems increasingly to regard what his workers do as merely subsidiary to the job he himself is doing in the larger community. This job may be building the Red Cross or the Community Chest, or it may sometimes be—as the Senate hearings suggest—participating in such

HARVEY SWADOS' new novel, On the Line, will be published by Little, Brown in September.

August 17, 1957

communal endeavors as gambling, prostitution and improving the breed. In any case, the impression is left that the problems of the workers in the background (or underground) have been stabilized, if not permanently solved.

With the personnel man and the union leader, both of whom presumably see the worker from day to day, growing so far away from him, it is hardly to be wondered at that the middle-class in general, and articulate middle-class intellectuals in particular, see the worker vaguely, as through a cloud. One gets the impression that when they do consider him, they operate from one of two unspoken assumptions: (1) The worker has died out like the passenger pigeon, or is dying out, or becoming acculturated, like the Navajo; (2) If he is still around, he is just like the rest of us—fat, satisfied, smug, a little restless, but hardly distinguishable from his fellow TV-viewers of the middle-class.

Lest it be thought that (1) is somewhat exaggerated, I hasten to quote from a recently-published article apparently dedicated to the laudable task of urging slothful middle-class intellectuals to wake up and live: "The old-style sweatshop crippled mainly the working people. Now there are no workers left in America; we are almost all middle-class as to income and expectations." I do not believe the writer meant to state—although he comes perilously close to it—that nobody works any

more. If I understand him correctly, he is referring to the fact that the worker's rise in real income over the last decade, plus the diffusion of middle-class tastes and values throughout a large part of the underlying population, have made it increasingly difficult to tell blue-collar from white-collar worker without a program. In short, if the worker earns like the middle-class, votes like the middle-class, dresses like the middle-class, dreams like the middle-class, then he ceases to exist as a worker.

BUT there is one thing that the worker doesn't do like the middle-class: he works like a worker. The steel-mill puddler does not yet sort memos, the coal miner does not yet sit in conferences, the cotton mill-hand does not yet sip martinis from his lunchbox. The worker's attitude toward his work is generally compounded of hatred, shame and resignation.

Before I spell out what I think this means, I should like first to examine some of the implications of the widely-held belief that "we are almost all middle-class as to income and expectations." I am neither economist, sociologist nor politician, and I hold in my hand no doctored statistics to be haggled over. I am by profession a writer who has had occasion to work in factories at various times during the Thirties, Forties and Fifties. The following observations are simply impressions

based on my last period of factory servitude, in 1956.

The average automobile worker gets a little better than two dollars an hour. As such he is one of the best-paid factory workers in the country. After twenty years of militant struggle led by the union that I believe to be still the finest and most democratic labor organization in the United States, he is earning less than the starting salaries offered to inexperienced and often semi-literate college graduates without dependents. After compulsory deductions for taxes, social security, old-age insurance and union dues, and optional deductions for hospitalization and assorted charities, his pay check for forty hours of work is going to be closer to seventy than to eighty dollars a week. Does this make him middle-class as to income? Does it rate with the weekly take of a dentist, an accountant, a salesman, a draftsman, a journalist? Surely it would be more to the point to ask how a family man can get by in the Fifties on that kind of income. I know how he does it, and I should think the answers would be a little disconcerting to those who wax glib on the satisfactory status of the "formerly" underprivileged.

For one thing, he works a lot longer than forty hours a week—when he can. Since no automobile company is as yet in a position to guarantee its workers anything like fifty weeks of steady forty-hour paychecks, the auto worker knows he has to make it while he can. During peak production periods he therefore puts in nine, ten, eleven and often twelve hours a day on the assembly line for weeks on end. And that's not all. If he has dependents, as like as not he also holds down a "spare-time" job. I have worked on the line with men who doubled as mechanics, repairmen, salesmen, contractors, builders, farmers, cab-drivers, lumberyard workers, counter-men. I would guess that there are many more of these than show up in the official statistics: often a man will work for less if he can be paid under the counter with tax-free dollars.

NOR is that all. The factory worker with dependents cannot carry the

debt load he now shoulders—the middle-class debt load, if you like, of nagging payments on car, washer, dryer, TV, clothing, house itself—without family help. Even if he puts in fifty, sixty or seventy hours a week at one or two jobs, he has to count on his wife's paycheck, or his son's, his daughter's, his brother-in-law's; or on his mother's social security, or his father's veteran's pension. The working-class family today is not typically held together by the male wage-earner, but by multiple wage-earners often of several generations who club together to get the things they want and need—or are pressured into believing they must have. It is at best



a precarious arrangement; as for its toll on the physical organism and the psyche, that is a question perhaps worthy of further investigation by those who currently pronounce themselves bored with Utopia Unlimited in the Fat Fifties.

But what of the worker's middle-class expectations? I had been under the impression that this was the rock on which Socialist agitation had foundered for generations: it proved useless to tell the proletariat that he had a world to win when he was reasonably certain that with a few breaks he could have his own gas station. If these expectations have changed at all in recent years, they would seem to have narrowed rather than expanded, leaving a psychological increment of resignation rather than of unbounded optimism (except among the very young—and even among them the optimism focuses more often on better-paying opportunities elsewhere in the labor market than on illusory hopes of

swift status advancement). The worker's expectations are for better pay, more humane working conditions, more job security. As long as he feels that he is going to achieve them through an extension of existing conditions, for that long he is going to continue to be a middle-class conservative in temper. But only for that long.

I suspect that what middle-class writers mean by the worker's middle-class expectations are his cravings for commodities—his determination to have not only fin-tailed cars and single-unit washer-dryers, but butterfly chairs in the rumpus room, African masks on the wall and power boats in the garage. Before the middle-class intellectuals condemn these expectations too harshly, let them consider, first, who has been utilizing every known technique of suasion and propaganda to convert luxuries into necessities, and second, at what cost these new necessities are acquired by the American working-class family.

NOW I should like to return to the second image of the American worker: satisfied, doped by TV, essentially middle-class in outlook. This is an image bred not of communication with workers (except as mediated by hired interviewers sent "into the field" like anthropologists or entomologists), but of contempt for people, based perhaps on self-contempt and on a feeling among intellectuals that the worker has let them down. In order to see this clearly, we have to place it against the intellectual's changing attitudes toward the worker since the Thirties.

At the time of the organization of the C.I.O., the middle-class intellectual saw the proletariat as society's figure of virtue—heroic, magnanimous, bearing in his loins the seeds of a better future; he would have found ludicrous the suggestion that a sit-down striker might harbor anti-Semitic feelings. After Pearl Harbor, the glamorization of the worker was taken over as a function of government. Then, however, he was no longer the builder of the future good society; instead he was second only to the fighting man as the vital winner of the war. Many intellectuals, as government

employees, found themselves helping to create this new portrait of the worker as patriot.

But in the decade following the war intellectuals have discovered that workers are no longer either building socialism or forging the tools of victory. All they are doing is making the things that other people buy. That, and participating in the great commodity scramble. The disillusionment, it would seem, is almost too terrible to bear. Word has gotten around among the highbrows that the worker is not heroic or idealistic; public-opinion polls prove that he wants barbecue pits more than foreign aid and air-conditioning more than desegregation, that he doesn't particularly want to go on strike, that he is reluctant to form a Labor Party, that he votes for Stevenson and often even for Eisenhower and Nixon—that he is, in short, animated by the same aspirations as drive the middle-class onward and upward in suburbia.

There is of course a certain admixture of self-delusion in the middle-class attitude that workers are now the same as everybody else. For me it was expressed most precisely last year in the dismay and sympathy with which middle-class friends greeted the news that I had gone back to work in a factory. If workers are now full-fledged members of the middle-class, why the dismay? What difference whether one sits in an office or stands in a shop? The answer is so obvious that one feels shame at laboring the point. But I have news for my friends among the intellectuals. The answer is obvious to workers, too.

They know that there is a difference between working with your back and working with your behind (I do not make the distinction between hand-work and brain-work, since we are all learning that white-collar work is becoming less and less brain-work). They know that they work harder than the middle-class for less money. Nor is it simply a question of status, that magic word so dear to the hearts of the sociologists, the new anatomizers of the American corpus. It is not simply status-hunger that makes a man hate work which pays *less* than other work he knows about, if *more* than any other work he has been

trained for (the only reason my fellow-workers stayed on the assembly line, they told me again and again). It is not simply status-hunger that makes a man hate work that is mindless, endless, stupefying, sweaty, filthy, noisy, exhausting, insecure in its prospects and practically without hope of advancement.

THE PLAIN truth is that factory work is degrading. It is degrading to any man who ever dreams of doing something worthwhile with his life; and it is about time we faced the fact. The more a man is exposed to middle-class values, the more sophisticated he becomes and the more production-line work is degrading to him. The immigrant who slaved in the poorly-lighted, foul, vermin-ridden sweatshop found his work less degrading than the native-born high school graduate who reads Judge Parker, Rex Morgan, M.D., and Judd Saxon, Business Executive, in the funnies, and works in a fluorescent factory with ticker-tape production-control machines. For the immigrant laborer, even the one who did not dream of socialism, his long hours were going to buy him freedom. For the factory worker of the Fifties, his long hours are going to buy him commodities . . . and maybe reduce a few of his debts.

Almost without exception, the men with whom I worked on the assembly line last year felt like trapped animals. Depending on their age and personal circumstances, they were either resigned to their fate, furiously angry at *themselves* for what they were doing, or desperately hunting other work that would pay as well and in addition offer some variety, some prospect of change and betterment. They were sick of being pushed around by harried foremen (themselves more pitied than hated), sick of working like blinkered donkeys, sick of being dependent for their livelihood on a maniacal production-merchandising setup, sick of working in a place where there was no spot to relax during the twelve-minute rest period. (Some day—let us hope—we will marvel that production was still so worshipped in the Fifties that new factories could be built with every splendid facility for the stor-

age and movement of essential parts, but with no place for a resting worker to sit down for a moment but on a fire plug, the edge of a packing case, or the sputum- and oil-stained stairway of a toilet.)

The older men stay put and wait for their vacations. But since the assembly line demands young blood (you will have a hard time getting hired if you are over thirty-five), the factory in which I worked was aswarm with new faces every day; labor turnover was so fantastic and absenteeism so rampant, with the young men knocking off a day or two every week to hunt up other jobs, that the company was forced to over-hire in order to have sufficient workers on hand at the starting siren.

To those who will object—fortified by their readings in C. Wright Mills and A. C. Spector—sky—that the white-collar commuter, too, dislikes his work, accepts it only because it buys his family commodities, and is constantly on the prowl for other work, I can only reply that for me at any rate this is proof not of the disappearance of the working-class but of the proletarianization of the middle-class. Perhaps it is not taking place quite in the way that Marx envisaged it, but the alienation of the white-collar man (like that of the laborer) from both his tools and whatever he produces, the slavery that chains the exurbanite to the commuting timetable (as the worker is still chained to the time-clock), the anxiety that sends the white-collar man home with his briefcase for an evening's work (as it degrades the workman into pleading for long hours of overtime), the displacement of the white-collar slum from the wrong side of the tracks to the suburbs (just as the working-class slum is moved from old-law tenements to skyscraper barracks)—all these mean to me that the white-collar man is entering (though his arms may be loaded with commodities) the grey world of the working man.

THREE quotations from men with whom I worked may help to bring my view into focus:

Before starting work: "Come on, suckers, they say the Foundation wants to give away *more* than half

a billion this year. Let's do and die for the old Foundation."

During rest period: "Ever stop to think how we crawl here bumper to bumper, and crawl home bumper to bumper, and we've got to turn out more every minute to keep our jobs, when there isn't even any room for them on the highways?"

At quitting time (this from older foremen, whose job is not only to keep things moving, but by extension to serve as company spokesmen): "You're smart to get out of here. . . . I curse the day I ever started, now I'm stuck: any man with brains that stays here ought to have his head examined. This is no place for an intelligent human being."

Such is the attitude towards the work. And towards the product? On the one hand it is admired and desired as a symbol of freedom, almost a substitute for freedom, not because the worker participated in making it, but because our whole culture is dedicated to the proposition that the automobile is both necessary and beautiful. On the other hand it is hated and despised—so much that if your new car

smells bad it may be due to a banana peel crammed down its gullet and sealed up thereafter, so much so that if your dealer can't locate the rattle in your new car you might ask him to open the welds on one of those tail fins and vacuum out the nuts and bolts thrown in by workers sabotaging their own product.

Sooner or later, if we want a decent society—by which I do not mean a society glutted with commodities or one maintained in precarious equilibrium by over-buying and forced premature obsolescence—we are going to have to come face to face with the problem of work. Apparently the Russians have committed themselves to the replenishment of their labor force through automatic recruitment of those intellectually incapable of keeping up with severe scholastic requirements in the public educational system. Apparently we, too, are heading in the same direction: although our economy is not directed, and although college education is as yet far from free, we seem to be operating in this capitalist economy on the totalitarian assumption that we can funnel the underprivileged, undereducated, or

just plain underequipped, into the factory, where we can proceed to forget about them once we have posted the minimum fair labor standards on the factory wall.

If this is what we want, let's be honest enough to say so. If we conclude that there is nothing noble about repetitive work, but that it is nevertheless good enough for the lower orders, let's say that, too, so we will at least know where we stand. But if we cling to the belief that other men are our brothers, not just Egyptians, or Israelis, or Hungarians, but *all* men, including millions of Americans who grind their lives away on an insane treadmill, then we will have to start thinking about how their work and their lives can be made meaningful. That is what I assume the Hungarians, both workers and intellectuals, have been thinking about. Since no one has been ordering us what to think, since no one has been forbidding our intellectuals to fraternize with our workers, shouldn't it be a little easier for us to admit, first, that our problems exist, then to state them, and then to see if we can resolve them?
