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Labor Is Losing Ground In The Workplace

By **KENNETH LASSON**

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Punching time clocks, swinging lunch pails, still chasing the American

Dream, most American wage-earners find little more escape in their frenetic mass exodus from work every afternoon than did their counterparts 100 years ago, when a national holiday was first set aside "for special recognition of the workingman."

Although there have been changes over the years - men no longer plumb coal mines with picks and shovels nor do women work 60-hour weeks in sweatshops for beggars' wages - many other conventions long associated with manual labor are as firmly entrenched and drudgingly monotonous in the 1990s as they were at the turn of the century.

The number of people blessed with truly satisfying jobs is still sadly small. For a hundred million Americans there is no such thing as an interesting job. They are the blue-collar workers.

Statistical profiles cast them without color or personality, in clinical detachment: people who earn between \$15,000 and \$30,000 a year, live in semi-suburban ghettos, have 2.3 children. Whatever their economic burden they are often stereotyped as flag-waving construction workers or red-necked unionizers.

There was a time when the laborers' less-than-peaceful demands for unionization gave them a radical hue: To turn-of-the-century capitalists they were little more than rabble roused by occasional crusaders like Upton Sinclair. But the growth of unionism itself has likewise served to obscure the individuality of working people. The personal qualities that make them unique are also hidden by the arch academic voice of sociologists and economics professors.

It's been left to the balladeer or philosopher to humanize the working class. Y'load sixteen tons, and whaddya get /another day older and deeper in debt; or "The callous palms of the laborer are conversant with the finer tissues of self-respect and heroism, whose touch thrills the heart," as Henry David Thoreau wrote. Those able to look beyond the stereotypes soon realize that what blue-collar workers do day in and day out bears great influence on the quality of everyone's life.

Indeed where would we be without garbage collectors, road crews, or construction workers? Talk to them, and you'll hear fascinating blends of the mundane and the profound:

The auto mechanic in Baltimore who diagnoses an oil leak as he tells you about his love of Mozart and modern sculpture; the New York policeman describing his advanced education in the University of the Streets; the coal miner from West Virginia patting his granddaughter on the head as he whistles her a lullaby.

For many workers in the lower-middle-income bracket, though, their voices are the last to be heard. Their service is taken for granted. Whatever gains they make in wages are eaten up by inflation.

Whether they lay bricks or bake bread, they usually pay a disproportionate share of taxes. Their frustration with the utter stagnancy of their status, where going home often means merely substituting one set of environmental problems for another, is often kept to themselves.

In one way or another, of course, all working people lead lives of quiet desperation. The blue-collar trap has become increasingly familiar to white-collared wage-earners as well. Whether or not they are satisfied with their dead-end labors may indicate only the degree of their numbness on the job. Even office journeymen must endure endless computer chatter for their slightly higher incomes.

In most segments of the working world, there need not be a great gulf between management and labor. We're not talking salary caps for millionaire athletes here, but simple economic equity and material well-being for everyday working-folk. This isn't communism, but the essence of capitalism and the Protestant work ethic: an honest day's pay for an honest day's labor.

Nor is it a pipe dream to think that the generation about to enter the job market will be able to find work that is less morally and physically degrading. Common sense is good business sense as well: Reducing heat and noise in factories leads to greater productivity, just as giving workers a bigger share of the pie leads to greater prosperity for all.

If we play our democratic game right, we are likely to increase what is already the highest standard of living in the world - not only materially but spiritually as well. More people than ever before will be able to count their blessings, and be happy with them.

That's the best way to celebrate Labor Day.

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