Wage Labor in the U.S. Today

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In the summer of 1973, we took a trip around the country, excepting the South, talking with working people about their lives and what they observed about the social world around them. Since that time we have continued to conduct interviews in the New England area, and to combine what we have learned from our discussions with historical material and current data. While we had by no means a statistically random sample, those we talked with represented a wide range of industries, occupations, and backgrounds, with males and whites particularly heavily represented. Our main focus was on work, but we tried to learn something about community life and the impact of economic conditions as well.

Our research was no doubt affected by who we were—a labor historian and a teamster, both men, white, around thirty years old, with little affection for the present organization of society. We present the following description, not as any kind of definitive portrait, but rather as one contribution to a process of collective self-discovery in which all of us who are the victims of the existing structure of social relations have a part to play.

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I. The Workforce

Over the past century, capitalism has moved from being the dominant form of labor organization to being virtually the universal form in the United States. Small farmers are now only a few per cent of the population, and the self-employed middle class is of comparable size. Housekeeping and childcare remain primarily the work of women in the home, but little other labor remains outside the sphere of exchange and money.

About 75% of the employed population are blue-collar and low-level white-collar workers; for the purposes of this article we will consider them and their families the working class. A widespread myth maintains that the "blue-collar" industrial workforce is rapidly diminishing. Actually, there are more blue-collar workers today than ever before. Blue-collar workers form a larger part of the male workforce today than in 1930. Blacks and the newer immigrant groups, such as Puerto Ricans and Chicanos, are concentrated in blue-collar occupations. The average educational level of blue-collar workers has increased sharply since World War II, closing most of the gap between blue-collar and white-collar workers.

The entire 20th century has seen a tremendous expansion of white-collar employment, largely drawing on the labor pool of women. Within the white-collar sphere there has been a separation of upper- and lower-level white-collar workers, parallel in many ways to the separation of masters and journeymen of an earlier industrial era. Lower-level white-collar workers, such as clerical and sales workers and office-machine operators, have had their incomes move below blue-collar workers; lost their advantage in health, pension, vacation, and other benefits; lost their traditional job security; had their jobs mechanized, and subject to time study and other forms of "rationalization." Their conditions are now far closer to blue-collar workers than to higher-level professionals and managers. This is in sharp contrast to the situation described, for example, in the Lynds' Middletown in the 1920's, where the great division was between the "working class" and a "business class" which included virtually all white-collar workers. The lower white-collar categories are dominated by white women, though blacks, especially black women, have begun to enter them in increasing numbers.

Despite the degradation of much white-collar labor, substantial cultural differences remain between white- and blue-collar workers. "Respectability" remains a more important value in the office than in the shop. Interest in business advancement and orientation toward a career is a potent force for male and some female white-collar workers, and is cultivated by management's advancement hierarchies. Preoccupation with status remains a major theme among white-collar workers. As actual conditions deteriorate, and
as white-collar workers are increasingly recruited from blue-collar families, this orientation has declined somewhat, but more slowly than one might have expected.

The workforce is very distinctly divided along racial lines. Black workers remain overwhelmingly in a separate labor market, working for different firms, in different localities (generally central cities), and within firms in special "Negro jobs." Two decades of civil-rights agitation have done far less to change the minority job situation than brief periods of labor shortage during World Wars I and II. Blacks and other racial minorities are disproportionately employed in small firms in highly competitive sectors of the economy, marked by relatively low rates of profit, insecure employment, and low wages. They are also generally confined to jobs in stagnating central cities. In the post-World War II move to the suburbs of the more prosperous sections of the working class, blacks were largely excluded. The heavy migration of blacks, Puerto Ricans, and Chicanos to urban areas over the past two decades has mainly been to the very inner cities which whites were leaving. Yet four-fifths of all new jobs in metropolitan areas from 1950 to 1970 were in the suburbs (where a large majority of white union members now live). The official unemployment rate for blacks remains double that of whites.

A basic change in the workforce has been the influx of married women into the labor force. In 1940, 15% of married women were in the labor force. Today, about 50% of married women are employed at some point during the course of the year, and until the recession the figure was rising rapidly. Women are still concentrated in "women's jobs." More than 70% are clerical, nonhousehold service, or low-paying operative and sales workers. This results primarily from discrimination against hiring women in other occupations. The "income gap"—the percentage of male earnings made by full-time women workers—deteriorated from 64% in the mid-1950's to 60% in 1970. These figures underestimate the real difference, since 60% of women do not hold jobs full-time or full-year.

II. The Structure of Work

Let us now turn to the work itself. The way work is organized is a reflection, not so much of technology or "economic laws" as of a continuing struggle between workers and employers over the production process and its product. The employer, by employing, brings workers into groups and gives them a common interest against the employer. His problem under these conditions is to motivate workers to work and to prevent workers from organizing against him. Toward that end, employers develop strategies—at times deliberately, at times simply by retaining what seems to succeed and discarding what doesn't—to make workers work.

At their origins, most industries experienced production con-
trolled by skilled workers. Management strategies since the late 19th century have aimed to break this power, often in the name of "rationalization" or "scientific management." Management strategy in the 1970's is based largely on the same elements that employers introduced following the destruction of the early industrial pattern of control by skilled workers. The general management goal is still to condition workers to pursue individual rather than collective self-interest, while making the individual workers' self-interest appear identical with the employer's.

A. Fear of loss of job remains at the core of labor discipline. Despite unionism, most workers feel little reliable protection against job loss. In actuality, firings are relatively rare, although lesser disciplinary actions are common. The limit on the employer's exercise of this power seems to be the resistance and demoralization it creates among the remaining workers.

B. The basic pattern of centralized power and authority established by early 20th century "rationalization" remains virtually universal today. So does the deliberate fostering by management of workers' ignorance about the work — workers are forbidden to explore their plants, to learn about production techniques, scheduling, long-range employer plans, and in many cases even what shifts they will be working a few days or weeks hence.

In industries which matured before World War II, the traditional pattern of non-working foremen responsible for direct supervision of a small number of workers remains dominant, although foremen are increasingly being recruited from college rather than from the shop floor. Foremen are generally regarded by workers with a mixture of pity, hatred, contempt, and sympathy — they are hated as "the boss," the immediate giver of orders, but also felt sorry for as "the man in the middle" who gets it from both company and workers.

Newer industries have somewhat different patterns of supervision. In high-technology industries such as oil, the immediate "boss" is most often a scientist, technician, or professional. In hospitals, the doctors and nurses often form lines of authority over workers distinct from those of the hospital administration, giving workers the kind of room for maneuver that drives scientific managers bats. In offices, it is common to give some workers management titles and responsibility to supervise other workers as well as doing their own work, presumably to create an advancement hierarchy and close supervision to counter the office worker's ability to look busy while not doing much. In small businesses, owner-supervision of course continues, with all its traditional opportunities for paternalism and/or arbitrary meanness.

C. The advance of technology continues to improve the capacity of machines to regulate human labor. This is particularly the case in continuous-flow industries, where workers have no direct control over the pace of work short of downright sabotage. But it is
increasingly true wherever new plants are built so that total production can be planned to increase "productivity." A good example was the Lordstown plant, designed to squeeze out the last few remaining seconds in which an auto worker was not actually producing. The expanding use of machines to pace work is seen in the increasing favor of managers toward "measured day work." This is a system in which work is paid at a flat hourly rate, and workers have production norms set to the pace of machines and enforced by close supervision. (However, it is important to keep in mind that American industry has had great difficulty modernizing its production plant. Fully automated equipment is very expensive. The slowed rate of accumulation in a stagnating economy has led to a general shortage of capital for modernization, and the slow rate of growth and general instability of markets has made employers reluctant to make expensive investments. The advanced, high-productivity factory is the exception, the classical pre-automation model more the norm.)

Regulation of work by machine pacing has become far more important than previously in the office. The publications of the American Management Association are filled with advice on how to "Taylorize" paperwork. Clocks and counters are on every new business machine, and "word processing centers" maintain output quotas indistinguishable from those in physical production.

The elimination of skilled industrial craftsmen by the building of their skills into the machinery is now nearly complete. The last hold-outs, such as the tool-and-die makers, are now finding their jobs broken down by semi-automated machinery, though as usual the general breakdown of skill tends to create a small elite of extremely-high skilled workers who do what the machines can't do. Most "skilled" jobs today can be learned fairly quickly. Indeed, the classification is generally somewhat arbitrary — as many workers who have been skipped over a number of grades to jobs supposedly requiring years of experience can report. Of course any job can require a lot of skill — especially to do it without killing yourself, and knowing what to do when things go wrong — but this can apply to supposedly "unskilled" jobs as well. Jobs which are "skilled" in the old sense, and which provide their workers with the traditional power of craftsmen, remain primarily in the construction trades, and a few other isolated groups.

D. In most production work, the subdivision of jobs has now been pushed to its practical limits. Attempts at further subdivision only provoke worker resistance, in the forms of poor-quality work, high turnover, uncooperativeness, sabotage, and strikes. On the whole, it is an effective management technique not only for making workers work during every available second, but also for convincing them of their powerlessness — many workers feel that if they tried to fight conditions, they could easily be replaced, making resistance appear fruitless. The subdivision of jobs is of course the
main cause of the "job boredom" which was widely and mistakenly publicized as the basic cause of worker dissatisfaction in the early 1970's. Equally overpublicized have been modest attempts by employers to deTaylorize to some extent through "job enlargement." Such plans are not profitable to introduce except in cases where they substantially increase productivity; they are not widespread and are not likely to become so. They can be used as a rhetorical cover for speed-up, as they were at Lordstown, although they can also alleviate some of the more brutal effects of scientific management. Mostly, however, they exemplify the ability of American managerial publicists to recycle old ballyhoo.

E. Job and promotion hierarchies, one of the classic strategies for dividing and "motivating" workers, remain widespread, with some variations — hierarchies are marked in steel and utilities, less so in auto, for example. Some of the touted "job enrichment" plans are really based on establishing such hierarchies. These hierarchies, which usually have little basis in technology or skill requirements, are central means of motivating and dividing workers on the job. Not only do individuals compete for the better jobs, but many of the conflicts between racial, sexual, and other groups revolve around the "advancement" ladder. These usually take the form of a struggle over seniority or job bidding. The job hierarchy is of course also central in shaping the inequality of income and status within society at large. While unions in many industries have established the principle of promotion by seniority, our interviews indicate that favoritism is more the rule than the exception — "there's advancement by seniority if all other things are equal, but the company decides whether they're equal. Favoritism was one of the main grievances which led to worker support for the CIO; its significance as a grievance at present should not be underestimated.

F. Form of payment has changed more than most other management strategies since the days of Taylor. The distinction between hourly and salaried workers remains strong, and backed by many forms of apartheid, even as the actual gap between most white-collar and blue-collar workers grows less and less. The use of piece rates continues to decline, remaining primarily in backward industries such as garment and packing. Management has never been able to counter the workers' ability to control the rates by setting their own informal ceilings on output. Piece rates are now seen by management as a last resort to be applied only in the absence of "good supervision." Incentive plans and bonus systems are still widespread, but are frequently "demoralized"— bonus rates are set very low, so that everyone gets the bonus. Sometimes they work so much to the workers' benefit that workers demand their extension — as happened in the steel industry a few years back. The general management trend, as we have noted, is toward measured day work, with fat hourly wages and control by output
norms, close supervision, and setting of machine speed.

III. Workers' Strategies

These employer strategies generate the basic conditions of work, the institutions within which workers spend their days. Whatever the nature of the productive activity, most workers face one or another combination of these structures. In the end, most of these tactics boil down to the carrot and the stick, but in a form that makes them appear the inevitable product of technical and economic necessity. Work is generally viewed in the fatalistic light of death and taxes — something which cannot be fundamentally changed. Consequently, thought and discussion about how work might be performed differently is not widespread. Within the established framework, however, workers have developed a number of strategies for dealing with the power of employers over them.

One obvious possible tactic is to try to please or curry favor with the employer — indeed, the adoption of this strategy by workers is the objective of management's pattern of rewards and punishments. We found this attitude to be normal among managers and other groups with a genuine hope of "getting ahead," but very rare among workers, even relatively favored ones. In fact, the only place we ran into it was among a minority of women in or from rural areas. Far more common, especially among older workers, was the approach of doing only what was necessary but avoiding sore spots, keeping out of trouble, and learning to live around points of irritation with management.

The most common resistance strategy might be described as the use of guerrilla tactics — secret cooperation among workers while avoiding overt confrontation with management. Such tactics are used for a wide range of objectives: controlling the pace of work, winning free time, making the job more interesting or pleasurable, altering unsafe and uncomfortable conditions, undermining the authority of the employer, improving pay and benefits, and sometimes affecting the social results of the work itself. Tactics themselves include: production-output ceilings set by workers' consensus; flexible deciding of how much to produce day by day; organized slowdowns; sabotaging machinery; work evasion; job rotation and division of work by the workers; government work (making things for yourself on company time); inventory shrinkage, high-grading, riding with the flag up, and other forms of quasi-theft; and an almost unlimited number of irregular ways of making life on the job more interesting and satisfying. While such guerrilla tactics are seen by sociologists, many radicals, and many workers as almost insignificant acts of individual frustration, they require at the least a supportive milieu of social acceptance. They require genuine group self-discipline in most cases, and sometimes a very considerable amount of secret organization.
The other strategy used by workers is outright confrontation, usually based on the power to stop production. Short work stoppages, which were normal in the 1930's and '40's, are generally frowned on by unions and are most common around safety issues and in a few shops where they remain a continuing tradition. One-day or one-shift walkouts are common in the auto industry, especially over extremes of temperature and similar grievances. Wildcat strikes over immediate work issues — firings, speed-up, safety, harassment, or almost anything else — occur sporadically in most industries, although they are most common in the coal mines. Our impression is that wildcats were chronic during World War II, occurred in large bursts in many industries during the immediate post-War years, and declined thereafter until the mid-1960's. They then became more common, though never returning to earlier levels, until the mid-1970's, when (except in coal) they began to decline. On the other hand, plant occupations — extremely rare since the 1930's — have begun to reemerge here and there as a tactic — notably in the Chrysler plants in 1973 and in a number of plants, such as the Rheingold breweries in New York, threatened with closing.

Several different kinds of factors seem to affect the strategies workers choose. To some extent the choice reflects individual experiences, values, and temperament — what managers perceive as the "bell curve" of cooperative and resistant individual workers. Behind these lie class strategies embodied in social values: the strategy of individual advancement embodied in competitive striving vs. the strategy of solidarity embodied, for example, in the still widespread repugnance at scabbing, crossing picket lines, etc., and a general support for the struggles of other workers.

Even more important, however, seem to be the past experiences of a particular work group. A new group — such as a newly-hired shift at a plant — may be little more than a collection of unconnected individuals, with no cooperative strategy. Where there is high turnover or extreme isolation, this situation can be chronic. More often, however, interaction, shared experiences, and realization of common interests develop over time, creating a milieu in which cooperative strategies can be attempted. The success or failure of these then becomes part of the shared experience of the group, both limiting and supporting future action. Social pressure applied both to group members and particularly to new workers turns the group itself into the key determinant of strategies.

Several factors outside the workplace also appear to affect workers' strategies on the job. There certainly seems to be a decrease in respect for authority and a decline in willing acceptance of work and of the "work ethic," especially among young people. The onset of recession has had contradictory effects: on the one hand, it generates greater caution about keeping one's job; on the other, it generates general discontent and rejection of the status
White-collar workers frequently have been regarded as less militant on the job than blue-collar workers. Growing discontent among white-collar workers was apparent in the late 1960's, however. Lack of defenses against inflation further embittered white-collar workers in the first half of the 1970's. In some urban centers, the woman's movement has brought the subordination of women into question, especially among younger women. Where white-collar movements have broken through in the past several years, such as the Harper and Row strike in the New York publishing industry, it seems to have been in good part the result of the convergence of these two factors. On the other hand, divisions between workers of different status, and preoccupation with one's own status, are still powerful impediments to white-collar organization in most companies.

One of the surprising results of our interviews was the discovery that racism does not appear to be a major factor impeding workers' resistance on the job. Both black and white workers in numerous industries told us that, while social contact tends to go along racial lines, resistance to management cuts completely across race lines, and cooperation in fighting the employer is very strong. Even in cities as notoriously racist as Detroit and Cleveland, sabotage, wildcat strikes, and the like normally involve black and white workers side by side. White workers are also often outspoken in their admiration for the solidarity of blacks in resistance to management at work. If there is a potential growing edge for racial cooperation in the U.S., this may well be it.

Traditionally, women have been viewed as less militant and effective in organizing on the job, either because they consider their work temporary and secondary to their main role or because they are used to accepting a subordinate position. But it has to be kept in mind that most women workers are concentrated in occupations with labor surpluses and no tradition of resistance on the job. Where this is not the case, women appear to organize effectively to control production rates, resist supervision, and organize the job to meet their needs.

How widespread is worker resistance on the job today? The great diversity makes it hard to generalize, but it is fair to say on the basis of our interviews: 1) places where people are so unorganized that they will, for example, bust their asses on piece rates without limit are exceptional, and limited to competitive, small-firm, low-capital industries such as the garment industry, where most workers are easily replaced and stay with the company a short time, and where any substantial improvement in wages or conditions would be likely to put the employer out of business; 2) most blue-collar workplaces have, at the least, general cooperation in regulating the pace of work; and 3) greater initiatives for
more control of time and labor are very widespread, but normally sporadic rather than continuous.

Usually quite distinct from this informal worker organization is the formal bargaining agent for the workers, the union. Union agreements cover about 20% of all jobs, including the great majority of those in large industrial enterprises and a growing percentage of public employees. Public employees in the past few years, like industrial workers in the past, are winning union representation through a combination of their own struggles and the aid of politicians seeking their support.

The separation of informal worker organization from unionism has been a historical evolution. In the background of most unions lies a period of militant struggle against employers, in which workers identified the unions with themselves — although they may have identified more with their own locals and felt some distrust for the international. With recognition, the union leaderships reached accommodation with the employers. This stage, which occurred in the late 1930’s and early 1940’s for most contemporary unions, often saw chronic conflict between the shop-steward level and the local and international leadership. As unions normalized relations with the companies, undertook “joint administration” of “labor problems,” and established discipline over their own lower levels, on-the-job worker organization and action grew increasingly separate from all levels of the union.

Among workers today, loyalty and commitment to the union is concentrated among older workers who have received very substantial benefits from unionism and who remember the “bad old days” before unionization. Unions are also supported because they give some degree of protection from the company, and because conditions are generally superior in unionized workplaces, since there is at least some recourse from the arbitrary authority of the boss. Many lower-level union officials are personally liked and respected, and many workers have received favors and services from union officials. But the union is generally seen, at best, as a source of such help, not as an embodiment of workers’ own activity or will. There are partial exceptions to this picture, particularly in craft unions where the union plays a large role in hiring or for other reasons remains a live force.

Negative attitudes toward the union, particularly among younger workers, are more widespread than even those as critical of unionism as ourselves would have supposed. It would be hard for us to recount the number of times during our trip that we were told, “I hate to say it, but I guess I hate the union worse than I do the company.” In many cases, such as many steel mills, the union is hardly even a presence on the job — many workers never see a griever or know a union official. Grievance procedures are generally slow and ineffective, in some cases backed up for years. Else-
where, the union plays a central role in enforcing labor discipline, preventing wildcats and other forms of direct action, even occasionally timing jobs and forcing workers to meet production standards. Union support for the companies is notorious in many industries, including some with supposedly "progressive" unions: it is a common statement in Detroit that "they couldn't run the auto industry without the U.A.W." The union is often experienced as a buffer which prevents workers from taking action against the company. While corruption seems to be relatively uncommon or taken in stride, charges of favoritism against union officials are common and bitter.

While unions are met by a devastating critique, the idea of solidarity among workers is still bound up with the idea of "the union." While forms of informal organization exist separate from the union as an institution, they are considered an expression of "unionism" in a vaguely defined sense. This leads to the fascinating paradox of militants who attack the union up and down in every statement being referred to as "strong union men."

One highly-publicized development in unionism has been the tendency toward giving up the right to strike, notably in the recent steel-industry contracts. While the press hailed a new era of labor peace, few unions can be expected to go this route; they would have virtually no function could they not oppose management from time to time. Less noticed but perhaps more significant is the development of the official union strike as a way of managing discontent and "rolling the steam out of workers' discontent." This was seen most vividly — and admitted most frankly — in the 1970 U.A.W. strike, but is generally understood by union officials.

While unions have functioned within a rigid legal structure at least since the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947, which carefully specified the actions they could legally take, two recent legal developments have turned them further into means for controlling labor for capital. The first, now in abeyance but bound to be reinstalled if inflation continues, is government wage control. The controls installed in the early 1970's were accepted and cooperated with by the unions, despite the fact that workers' real incomes were falling as a result of inflation. These conditions also led to widespread contract rejections and nationwide wildcat strikes in response to union policy. The second legal development is the recent court ruling that employers can be granted injunctions against unions whose members engage in unauthorized strikes. Many United Mine Workers locals now have fines totalling hundreds of thousands of dollars against them for their members' participation in wildcats. This is forcing the U.M.W. to become even more direct an agent of labor discipline than it was before. A similar evolution may be expected if and when substantial unauthorized strike activity breaks out in other industries. This appears to imply a return to the age before the Norris-LaGuardia Act outlawed the use of injunctions.
against strikes and unions; today it can again be a crime not to work.

Unions continue to play a role in dividing workers into competing groups. This is most clear in the traditional craft unions, which have excluded women, blacks, and minorities from many of the more favored occupations. But it is also true for the industrial unions, which have accepted or encouraged discriminatory hiring patterns and supported principles of seniority and advancement that favor males, whites, and other established groups.

Within most unions there exist reform and rank-and-file caucuses of one kind or another. They appeal both to workers who feel the existing leadership is rotten and to aspiring union politicians who would like to be in that leadership’s place. While from time to time they may achieve enough support to overcome entrenched union machines, in general workers regard them with considerable cynicism. This is usually based on past experience—a good proportion of today’s union bureaucrats were yesterday’s militant reformers. Reform movements in office face the same constraints as the officials they replaced. For example, the Miners for Democracy leadership, which came to power largely in reaction to the cooperation of the U.M.W. with the coal operators, has become the major tool for opposing miners’ strikes over immediate grievances. It contributed greatly to the defeat of last autumn’s massive walkout in West Virginia. Union administrations may turn over somewhat more rapidly in the present period of economic discontent than they have in the past, but this is unlikely to be the way in which major changes in working-class organization develop. We believe a more promising strategy lies in trying to develop the informal organization of workers on the job beyond the limits of unionism.

IV. The Impact of Hard Times

Real working-class incomes rose very substantially from the end of the Great Depression to about 1965, as a result of relatively full employment, unionization, and the increasing proportion of working wives. Estimates of the increase range from 30% to 100%, with the more realistic ones at the lower end of that scale. With the general stagnation of accumulation in the world capitalist economy, real wages fell from 1965 to 1970, and, after a brief rebound, decreased 9.5% in 1974 and early 1975—a loss which has yet to be made up. The results have been the loss of luxuries, such as boats, vacation homes, and second cars, for the upper working class; loss of comfort and a return to penny-pinching for the mainstream working class; and general impoverishment, nutritional deficiency, and family disruption for the lower working class.

1974 saw the rise of mass unemployment, with furloughs, layoffs, and plant closings leading to the unemployment of roughly
a quarter of the workforce at one time or another in the course of 1975. A large proportion of the rest have experienced short hours and reduced incomes. At first this was seen as simply another cyclical recession. Now, despite the current modest revival of business activity, it is widely believed that we are at the beginning of a long-continuing period of “hard times.”

A number of “cushions” have been widely touted as making unemployment less devastating than in the 1930’s. They indeed have replaced destitution with impoverishment. Unemployment insurance averages $65 a week, one-half to one-third of the average wage. Supplemental Unemployment Benefits (SUB’s) financed by employers exist in only a few industries, and are inadequately funded for conditions of mass unemployment — some SUB funds in the auto industry simply ran out. Millions of “new entrants,” “re-entrants,” “discouraged workers,” workers not covered, and long-term unemployed receive no protection from either of these sources. While there was a substantial expansion of welfare in the 1960’s, the fiscal crisis of the state has led to substantial “welfare reform” — cutting the rolls — at the very time that need has increased.

There are also several “cushions” that existed in the 1930’s but are lost today. In the Great Depression, consumer prices fell by about one-third; food in particular was plentiful and very cheap. Many workers still had relatives on the farm, to which they could return during spells of unemployment. And it was far more possible than today to substitute more primitive technologies — wood for oil, ice for refrigeration, local farmers for food chains — and thereby survive at a lower cash level. How an urban area would survive a full-scale depression today is not at all clear.

Workers’ action has been quite closely correlated with the economic developments we have described. The years from 1948 to the mid-1960’s saw a relative ebb of class struggle at work; much of what occurred was focused on questions of job security in the face of “automation,” and controversy over work rules. The new wave of discontent that surfaced in the mid-1960’s was largely focused on the workplace, with conflicts over safety, bosses’ authority, and the like. By 1969-70, however, the cumulative effect of inflation was substantial, and there was a big strike wave, marked by the official electrical and auto workers’ strikes and the wildcat teamsters’ and postal walkouts. Strike activity declined in 1971-72, a period of low inflation when real wages tended to rise. By early 1973, however, prices were rising sharply. The mass response was the national meat boycott, unquestionably the largest mass protest in American history, in which an estimated 25% of consumers participated, centered in families with incomes around $10,000 to $12,000 a year.

With the continuing rapid inflation, compounded by the seemingly trumped-up fuel shortage in the winter of 1973-74, there seemed
to be a general shift in attitude toward serious worry and anger.  
This expressed itself first in the extraordinary nationwide highway  
blockade conducted by independent owner-operators, a group with  
some working-class and some small-business characteristics, and,  
that summer, in the largest strike wave since 1946. This strike  
wave was centered in small and medium-size workplaces, with the  
emphasis on catching up to inflation through wage increases and,  
particularly, cost-of-living escalators. Many of the strikes  
resulted from rank-and-file contract rejections. Union officials also  
reported a surge of interest in unionization among the unorganized.  

This strike wave came up against the sharp increase in unem-  
ployment that began in late 1974 and within half a year raised the  
official unemployment rate to the highest level since the Great  
Depression. This long unfamiliar situation requires a complete  
reorientation of working-class strategies to be dealt with effect-  
ively; such a reorientation has not yet occurred. (Exceptions in-  
clude the development of solidarity, including sympathy strikes,  
among municipal and state workers in response to layoffs, speed-  
ups, and wage cuts, and the increasing frequency of workplace oc-  
cupations.) While there is a much more general appreciation of the  
social nature of unemployment today than in the early days of the  
Great Depression, there appears at present to be much the same  
sense of waiting "to see if something turns up."

V. Workplace and Community

A fairly standard urban pattern structured working-class com-  
munity life from the late 19th century through World War II. It  
consisted of concentric circles with a central business district  
surrounded by a circle of old, decaying buildings for immigrants  
and other poor at the core. This was surrounded by another circle  
of working-class housing: row houses, apartments, two- and three-  
family dwellings, and small detached houses on postage stamps of  
land. Beyond this was the middle-class housing of the suburbs,  
itsel segregated by income. The poor and mainstream working  
class were largely clustered by nationality. Car ownership was  
the exception, and public transportation was available and finan-  
cially accessible.

The post-World War II boom decades superimposed on top of  
this the pattern of urban organization with which we are all famil-  
 iar. The key change was the building of a wheel or grid of high-  
speed highways. This was followed by the migration of industries,  
jobs, and stores to the urban rim four-fifths of all new jobs in  
metropolitan areas from 1950-1970 were in the suburbs, and more  
than half of all retail business is now done in shopping centers,  
mostly suburban. Only older, less dynamic, low-pay industries  
remained in the central cities, while black migrants from the South  
poured in to replace former impoverished groups.

In the post-War years, the more prosperous sections of the
working class, overwhelmingly white, moved to the suburbs — 60% of all AFL-CIO members, for example, live in the suburbs. This move involved the loss of valued community roots, but for many families it represented the most dramatic symbol of the general improvement in living standards experienced in these years. The new highways opened a vast job market to workers with cars — as well as the experience of commuting 50 miles or more each way. The decline of public transportation, which started in 1946 and continues today, simultaneously excluded carless inner-city workers from the good labor market on the periphery.

Even before the current recession, a number of factors were bringing the era of residential and environmental improvement for the working class to an end. Housing construction turned down in the 1960’s until it fell behind the rate at which older housing stock deteriorated.

This was at the very time that the “baby boom” children born after World War II reached the age of family formation. Housing and mortgage costs put home ownership out of reach to most young working-class families. What residential construction continued shifted to apartments, especially garden apartments, although even they have now declined drastically. All this reversed the general post-War trend toward single-family suburban home ownership.

At the same time, the once superior conditions of suburban life began to deteriorate substantially. Poverty and even slum-ghettos became widespread in inner suburbs, while suburban crime rates increased several times faster than those in cities. A large proportion of working-class suburbs have become in effect “outer cities,” indistinguishable except by a somewhat larger lot size from the regions of working-class housing of the pre-World War II cities. The long-term increase in environmental pollution now strikes the suburbs as well as the central cities. And the fiscal crisis of the state is leading to a deterioration of community services in urban and suburban areas alike. The general though unmeasurable sense that environmental conditions are deteriorating contributes an unmeasurable amount to a general decline of commitment to the status quo.

The restructuring of urban areas that followed World War II had a major impact on working-class communities. One major effect was to widen the gap between work and neighborhood. Neighborhoods no longer have a concentration of people who work for the same company or industry, while those who work side-by-side are likely to come from dozens of communities scores of miles apart. This definitely makes mutual support between community and workplace struggles harder and less frequent.

Suburbanization — and the sheer passage of generations — has led to a partial dissolution of ethnic clustering. There is both less ethnic-based community solidarity and — more often overlooked — a tremendous decrease in inter-ethnic conflict and hostility. Along
with this appears to be the gradual creation of communities whose main characteristic is that they are working-class communities, and a gradual replacement of ethnic identification with a somewhat vague working-class identification. The erosion of traditional forms of ethnic-group self-protection and self-advancement (which often meant in practice advancement for the middle-class leadership) may be increasing the potential for class-based community movements. Certainly most urban-community movements in recent years — such as those against urban renewal and highway construction — have generally cut across ethnic ties.

The most striking limitation on the residential homogenization of the working class remains segregation along racial lines, which has become more pronounced over recent decades as a result of the influx of blacks to central cities and the migration of whites to the suburbs.

The dispersion of the older urban population undoubtedly disrupted the older networks which tied together working-class communities. It would be a mistake, however, to assume that workers are now "atomized." The fact is that older communities are always breaking down, if only through death and migration; less visible is the fact that new ties of neighbors, friends, co-workers, members of organizations, and the like are always being born. What has changed is that friendship networks, while not as densely packed in any one neighborhood, are now far more extended, reaching through whole metropolitan regions. (Again, the main limitation appears to be that they do not generally cross racial lines.) The extent to which these networks can be used for self-organization when the desire for self-organization is there was seen in the 1973 meat boycott, which was organized without any national leadership by tens of thousands of housewives getting on the phone and holding kaffee-klatches with their friends and neighbors.

VI. The Shared Experience

The American working class was recruited largely from groups of impoverished peasants and squeezed-out artisans whose past experiences were marked by extreme poverty and insecurity. For most of them, migration to urban America meant a great improvement in conditions of life. Even if they faced a life of hard toil, the opportunity to have a job and make a living was itself a big step forward compared to their conditions before; the opportunity for their kids to get an education and move up the social ladder was likewise seen as a substantial upgrading. A steady job was defined as a basic requirement for a good life.

The Great Depression left a heavy scar on the generation that lived through it in large part because it shattered these expectations. It left many with a tradition of working-class militance, but one oriented toward the effort to maintain economic security and
debunked somewhat the glamour attached to "college jobs" by exposing the fact that many of them, too, reduce their holders to "cogs in the machine." This was compounded in the early 1970's by the inability of college graduates to get jobs using their education. By 1973 large numbers of college graduates were driving taxis, working in factories, and generally facing working-class conditions. Meanwhile, steeply rising education costs reversed the trend toward ever-increasing rates of college attendance and priced higher education out of reach of many working-class families. Taken together, these factors mean that for a substantial proportion of kids, education is no longer seen as an available road of escape from the working class.

The Vietnam experience is another factor affecting the current American working class. This is seen most directly among Vietnam veterans, who form a particularly alienated, oppressed, and militant group, and who are known in particular for their resistance to authority on the job. Within the working class as a whole, published surveys and our own impressions indicate that reflex support for the state, for the military, and for foreign intervention is greatly weakened.

Finally, there is unquestionably a great loss of commitment to political parties, a rapidly deepening distrust and resentment of all politicians, and a general alienation from the state and the entire establishment, extending even to the most respected groups, such as doctors. Organizers from left-wing groups appear to be little less subject to this skepticism than others, although they have had somewhat more success in involving themselves in workplace struggles in the past two or three years than before. Discontent doesn't seem to be moving toward support for one or another political movement, but rather, at present, seems to be moving toward a deepening awareness of the conditions facing working people themselves.

While there are exceptions to any generalizations that can be made about the working class, there is one we would suggest in conclusion. Most current members of the working class have shared expanding aspirations that make a steady job and income inadequate definitions of a good life, and now face sharp deterioration of real incomes and general social conditions.

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a reasonable level of domestic comfort.

The two decades that followed World War II led, as we have seen, to a very great improvement in incomes and living conditions for most workers—often far beyond what those reared in the Depression expected for themselves. The quite natural result was what Harvey Swados called "the conservative temper" of the American working class in those years, a sense of support for the status quo and its benefits.

The post-World War II generation that has flooded into the workforce in the past decade took employment, education, and the absence of deprivation more or less for granted. They were more aware of the cost than the gains of their parents' generation's sacrifices. They were told by the official media of the society that they would be able to escape from the working class through education, and most expected to do so. As a result, they developed a higher range of aspirations than earlier generations; they wanted time for personal pleasure and satisfaction, freedom from arbitrary authority, a clean, safe, esthetic environment, and work that was interesting, creative, expressive, and self-directed. This generation, when they went to work, were widely and accurately reported to be less tolerant of authority than older workers, and more willing to risk their jobs through various forms of resistance. Compared to older generations of militants, they tended to use more individualistic forms of resistance, such as sabotage and absenteeism, while being less well schooled in some of the basic experiences of collective class struggle.

In the late 1960's, as the "baby boom" generation flooded the workplace and generational conflict was rife throughout the entire society, the "generation gap" was a significant force in the workplace. Indeed, the conflict between older and younger workers, combining conflict of interests and conflict of cultural styles, was the main polarization in many workplaces. In the years 1972-76, however, this "gap" has greatly narrowed and there has been a virtual reconciliation of the generations. This has resulted in part simply from habituation, in part from the "greening" of the older generation, in part from the lessening of generation-based conflict in the society at large.

The current economic crisis began hitting younger workers first, since they lacked the protection of seniority and had little power within the unions. Their weak economic position was aggravated by the demographic fact of their large numbers. The result appears to have been the spread of a value system and life style based on an unwillingness to plan or sacrifice for the future; no resurgence of the "work ethic" has yet appeared widespread among working-class youth. There has also developed a large pool of young people who have never worked regular jobs.

A second major shift for this generation has been the decline of the "education fetish." The student movement of the 1960's already