



INDUSTRIAL WORKERS OF THE WORLD

## JOBS (& MORE JOBS)

BY NORM WALLEN

*"It is useless for us to disguise from ourselves the fact that, under the present arrangement of things, there exists a perpetual antagonism between Labor and Capital...one side striving to sell their labor for as much and the other striving to buy it for as little as they can."*

—INTERNATIONAL TYPOGRAPHICAL UNION, 1850

The small businessman\* still thinks he's the backbone of America. He doesn't realize that he is on a very short leash; only until Big Business gets around to gobbling him up (unless, of course, that's what he had in mind all along). Foolishly, he thinks the answer is to copy their methods, thereby alienating those workers, public servants and enviros who are his natural allies.

The professor thinks of himself as an independent professional whose Brahmin status is justified by his vast expertise. He sees teaching as an unfortunate nuisance. He fails to recognize that his expertise is mostly seen as irrelevant and his poor teaching is remembered. These account for public willingness to watch from the sidelines as he is downgraded to just another employee.

The physician believes his advanced training and professed dedication justify his exorbitant income. He doesn't understand that people only care about what he delivers which is often found wanting. So he is resented even as he is needed.

The craftsman doesn't know what happened to him; why his skills are no longer valued or needed. He need look no further than the assembly line and automation. Long ago, the bosses concluded that people are an impediment to production. The solution: get rid of him.

The human services caseworker starts out wanting to help people. He ends up disillusioned and lazy as he realizes society wants him to be a detective and paper pusher. He uses his excessive caseload to justify his incompetence.

The lawyer wants to believe our system of justice works. Gradually he comes to understand that justice isn't its purpose; the law is to maintain the social order as decreed by those in power. He either accepts this "reality" and works hard for the high-end lifestyle it can provide or tries to manipulate the system to serve justice and/or takes to the bottle.

The university president is hurt that he's not regarded as an intellectual leader. He thinks he can have respect at the same time he mimics corporate CEOs; and usually winds up wishing he was one.

The executive begins just wanting to climb the ladder of success by being a hard working member of the corporate family. By the time he is disgusted with the company's products or methods it's too late. He fears loss of status and lifestyle should he ever violate the bottom line.

The stockbroker sees himself as a smart insider cleverly playing the game while pretending the game is not just a crapshoot. He rationalizes the cheating as "atypical" and pretends his job requires high level intellectual analysis.

The politician starts out either as a crook or a dedicated public servant. The latter gets overwhelmed by complexity, the power of the establishment and the rigidity of law and tradition. With rare and wonderful exception, he ends up tinkering around the edges.

The banker tells his wife he simply provides essential capital while protecting people's money. He doesn't tell her that since banking is a business, the need to show a profit to stay competitive has made him timid, rigid and sometimes cruel.

The speculator justifies his existence as being very necessary to his god: *The Market*. The fact that he produces

nothing of value while taking advantage of others' misfortune or ignorance, corrupting the rules or profiting from dumb luck is nothing compared to the "killing."

The civil servant, that faceless bureaucrat is, more often than not, a competent hard worker who by choice or accident ends up in the public sector. Over time he learns to do his job, keep his nose clean and not question his bosses. Just like in the private sector.

The preacher intends to do good for people, here or later. Since he can't preach without a religion he either preaches louder as his doubts multiply, gets in trouble with his superiors, becomes a counselor or starts his own church.

The dedicated teacher wants to believe he teaches more than simple skills and memorization; he develops critical thinking. He forgets that most teachers can't do it and those who control schools have almost never wanted it — too dangerous to the establishment.

The judge pretends to temper precedent with wisdom. But wisdom is hard to come by and those who have some find themselves imprisoned by precedent.

The farmer loves his land enough to withstand its unpredictability and the boom and bust of prices. What he can't withstand are the relentless pressures of banks, corporate agribusiness and developers, all driving him out of business.

The scientist prizes his independence in searching for the elusive truth. He is depressed to discover that his findings are used for technology of dubious merit as his independence is increasingly compromised by corporate influence in its careless search for profit.

The developer, after all, only provides what people want: shopping malls, sports stadiums, the biggest possible house on the biggest possible lot. It's not his fault if, in the process, communities are destroyed and the planet is paved over. And he has to fight those damned regulations and NIMBYs. Who can blame him for cheating?

The investigative reporter's job is to expose malfeasance; never in short supply. Nowadays his editors only let him play around the edges — small business corruption, individual malpractice. Never take on big government (not since Watergate) or big business (leave it to Michael Moore). If you want to do that, start your own paper and try to survive.

The artist just wants to create something new and hopefully beautiful. He must believe in his talent but can never be sure of it. He has the ability, the inclination and venue for undressing the emperor, but he must also put bread on the table.

The athlete falls in love with the game. His love withers under relentless regimentation and fierce competition. He either loses out to a combination of injury and competition or he gets rich. Either way, it's never as much fun as it was.

The corporate part-timer, working his 30 hour week at a nonlivable wage and little or no benefits, knows he's expendable at any moment. He also knows he's capable of more than mind-numbing routine designed to prevent any use of his judgment. But he needs the job. Worst of all, he has to take part in the "one big happy family" bullshit.

The engineer loves the satisfaction of building things. The bigger the challenge, the more fun. His heart swells as concrete plugs rivers or reaches to the sky. He is dismayed that some think his beauties are evil.

The computer whiz sees his job as one endless puzzle to solve. It never occurs to him that it is a desecration to reduce everything to two choices. He does get lonely sometimes.

The political activist/organizer knows what he's up against. He must expect to lose most of the time. He must be patient with all those who don't get it — or get it but are afraid to risk. Risking one's life he understands; but afraid to risk discomfort?

## UNION DUES

Labor Day is the second bookend of the silly season, the first being Memorial Day. Neither holiday means much anymore, although the first one will probably be gussied up to absolve and perpetuate the new harvest of war dead. Labor Day continues to decay because workers who produce the GNP are consistently undervalued, which originally forced them to unionize.

I was president for three years of a small company union affiliated with a much larger parent union. I was not so much an activist president as I was a caretaker attempting to hold together an unpopular union that seldom had the support or participation of its rank and file. I represented a membership generally inactive and unhappy they had to pay union dues on salaries barely above minimum wage, which the union was not very successful raising.

I was president during two contract negotiations and we did not score well with wage raises or benefits. Management stonewalled us with shrinking state social services budgets. One year the rank and file rejected a contract in which they lost benefits but received no wage raises in exchange (nor cost of living). They accepted a second offering that did not raise wages but at least retained the earlier lost benefits. Of course management awarded itself rather generous raises and benefits.

I wrote a letter to the wage slaves I represented admitting the union side of the table poorly negotiated the contract and suggested they vote it down:

*We gave away hardwon benefits hoping to raise wages at every level to compensate for the lack of cost of living adjustments, which did not occur...This year's contract talks demonstrated the power meager funding gives an employer (which) spawns an iron fist and managerial power is almost supreme as it dictates allocations of what it claims are sparse resources, and employee wages and rights are hammered as a result...Some of you believe the union is just another bureaucracy that takes money out of your paychecks. Most of you rarely attend union meetings or participate in decisions that affect you, yet the union is your opportunity to have a voice and a measure of power over your working lives, the more so you the more you participate. You can choose to vote down this contract and demand we get you a better deal than we have, which we cannot guarantee unless you show management that you are actively involved to increase the union's strength and potency. Of much greater importance is that you take the power the union offers you to determine your working future.*

At the end both company and union engineered me out of job and union. The parent union did to me what I thought the company would do. It fired me. The company wished to be rid of me as a result of my union activities and to decertify the union entirely. The company spread poison among its employees about the union, claiming it prevented them from receiving wage raises the company was willing to give, and promised "scabs" promotion if they succeeded in ruining the little support the union had.

The dues problem might have been my undoing with the parent union. My company union members were paid the least, making barely subsistence wages, yet our dues were equal those paid three times as much. I argued for progressive dues rates but union solidarity among the general membership stopped at that point. One union official said progressive rates would put the burden on those paid the most instead of those least paid, and that seemed to be the clincher argument for the majority whose dues would have been raised.

A futile showdown over arbitration for a woman who was fired for an act she denied was my last act as company union president. I characterized my presidency as a tightrope act above two snakepits, company and parent union. And felt I was snagged in a Darwinian swamp of bureaucratic savagery.

My small company union signifies much that beleaguers unions these days. Although grievously weakened and suffering a tremendous loss of political power as a result of savage union busting and massive layoffs begun during the Reagan years, claims that the labor movement is dead are exaggerated and labor might actually be reviving because, as the man says, "Unions are bad, but without them it's worse." That perception is all too apparent when tens of thousands of workers lose their jobs and pensions to massive endemic corporate corruption, the discrepancy in wages and benefits between management and labor is obscene, and the people who have jobs are required to produce more for less pay with little or no job security.

The bottom line in union work is representing the rank and file. There is a tendency in unions as in management and any other group for power to flow to the top and for elected union officials to form a clique of sorts that distances itself from the rank and file, exacerbated by contact with paid union officials whose business is generally with local union leadership instead of the membership. It does not matter whether a union officer likes or despises the rank and file; they pay dues to be adequately and fairly represented whether they are active or a bunch of deadheads grouching about union dues extracted from their paychecks. And regardless if only three or four participate in elections, attend meetings and act active, a union's job is to represent them all.

"Perhaps most of you are vague or do not particularly respond to what to what our ancestors considered necessary fundamentals for maintaining personal and political liberty, but erosions of them will eventually ruin your lives." I wrote in my letter to my former rank and file. "Democracy is always in flux between those who wish to protect and enlarge it and those who reduce and confine it. We are in a period of severe (decline) of the personal and political rights of people who work for a living, which makes it imperative we understand what is at stake on the job and in the democracy at large."

—MICHAEL McCUSKER

\*For the purpose of reading this article, assume the overlay of 'she' or 'her' onto 'he', 'him' or 'his' whenever appropriate.

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