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CENTER FOR LABOR RESEARCH
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BERKELEY, CALIFORNIA 94720

THE CHANGING WORLD
OF WORK

Report of the
Western Assembly of Workers
September 27-29, 1974
Rickeys Hyatt House
Palo Alto, California

Sponsored by
Center for Labor Research and
Education
Institute of Industrial Relations
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and
The American Assembly,
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PREFACE

WESTERN ASSEMBLY OF WORKERS ON THE CHANGING WORLD OF WORK

On September 27, 1974, a group of some fifty persons representing a broad cross-section of union members met at Rickey's Hyatt House in Palo Alto, California for the WESTERN ASSEMBLY OF WORKERS ON THE CHANGING WORLD OF WORK. The Assembly was unique because it provided a forum for workers who are active in their unions to develop and express their own views concerning job-satisfaction and quality-of-worklife issues which are the subject of growing debate and experimentation at home and abroad. Participants were drawn primarily from trade unionists enrolled in the Labor and Urban Studies Program of the Center for Labor Research and Education, Institute of Industrial Relations, University of California, Berkeley. For two days in small groups they discussed various aspects of the topic in the context of both their employment and union experiences. On the third day in plenary session they adopted the report which appears in these pages.

The Assembly was jointly sponsored by the Institute's Labor Center and the American Assembly of Columbia University with the support of a grant from The Ford Foundation. Harry Bernstein, Labor Editor of the Los Angeles Times, served as Chairman of the Assembly. During the course of the Assembly formal addresses were given by Peter S. diCicco, International Vice-President, New England District No. 2, International Union of Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers; Aileen Hernandez, Consultant and a leading advocate of equal rights for women and minorities; Robert Schrank, Special Program Officer, The Ford Foundation; and William Winpisinger, General Vice-President, International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers. Other speakers at general sessions included Professor Lloyd Ulman, Director of the Institute of Industrial Relations, University of California, Berkeley; Basil Whiting of The Ford Foundation; and Harry Polland, Labor Consultant and Economist.

Background for the discussions consisted of a number of papers which were distributed to the participants in advance of the Assembly. They included: Job Satisfaction: Is there a Trend?, Manpower Research Monograph No. 30, U.S. Department of Labor; European Trade Union View of Workers Discontent by Joseph Mire; Comments on Work in America by Robert Schrank; and papers contained in The Worker and The Job, edited for the American Assembly by Jerome M. Rosow.

The Center for Labor Research and Education of the Institute of Industrial Relations, like the American Assembly, takes no stand on subjects it presents for public discussion. The findings in the report are those of the participants to the extent that the report represents the general agreement of the participants at the Assembly.

Don Vial, Chairman
Center for Labor Research and Education
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Report of the Western Assembly of Workers

on

The Changing World of Work

At the close of their discussions, the participants in the Western Assembly of Workers at Rickey's Hyatt House, September 27-29, 1974, reviewed and discussed as a group the following statement. The statement represents general agreement; however, no one was asked to sign it. Furthermore, it should not be assumed that every participant subscribes to every comment or recommendation.

This first Western Assembly of Workers calls for a major extension of democratic principles in the workplace. While our individual needs vary widely, we have the strong conviction that we as workers generally have too long been ignored in making critical decisions affecting our work life.

However, we do not accept the idea that our desire for increased job satisfaction through increased democracy in the workplace can or should detract from our historical effort as individuals and through our unions to achieve higher wages, more job security and better working conditions. We firmly reassert the continuing high priority we place on the traditional needs for wages, job security, and improved working conditions.

These priorities emphasize the common goals which we share as workers. At the same time, we recognize that there are groups within the workforce which, by necessity, have their own sense of priorities. In reconciling the priorities of different groups, a labor movement that responds only to the top priority demands of the majority of its members will become stalemated at the status quo.

Our experience has shown that without advances in traditional "bread and butter" areas, worker participation schemes could become devices for exploitation of workers by employers whose sole interest is to increase profits through increased productivity. We reject outright, however, any fear that our call for a significant expansion of workplace democracy is somehow incompatible with our traditional and continuing concerns with our basic need for improved wages and working conditions.

It is totally unnecessary to debate the degree of job dissatisfaction in America. Clearly the overall quality of life would be improved by a vast extension of worker participation in the decision-making process in the workplace. Shared authority in the workplace must be extended to the job itself -- to the way work is organized and carried out.

Our individual needs for such participation may differ substantially, but we stand together in demanding respect and dignity on the job, the kind of treatment which would flow naturally from greater industrial democracy than we now have. Worker-initiated changes in the workplace that have determined feasibility should be implemented.

Much of our discontent comes from employers who treat us as inferiors. Our dignity as workers is affronted when we are forced to work under authoritarian conditions and are not considered intelligent enough to understand our own functions on the job, much less our place in the broad scheme of the operation. People will work more efficiently if they are not harrassed.

Those of us who have had experience in shaping our jobs have realized greater satisfaction in our work than those whose jobs have been structured for them by management. We do believe that the best jobs are those which are supervised least.

We are determined that our interests in increased workplace democracy and job satisfaction will not be achieved as a trade-off whereby we are forced to buy these gains with lesser wage increases or low wages. We are informed that recent experiments with the job environment, self-management work teams, workplace restructuring, and other proposals for improved job satisfaction have been inconclusive. Nevertheless, we believe that such experimentation should be continued and extended. We are convinced that all experimentation in this direction can only succeed with the meaningful involvement of workers and with the presence of unions to safeguard established work practices.

Unions, however, because they are rooted in the adversary tradition of industrial relations, and also because of sometimes conflicting job interests among their members, have not concerned themselves with actively promoting greater flexibility or autonomy of individual workers. Nevertheless, it is imperative that unions broaden their horizons since their contribution in protecting standards is essential to the success of experimental efforts.

We will no longer accept management's traditional authoritarian prerogatives, and, therefore, we seek more meaningful ways to take part in the decision-making process. While our present economic system does not encourage a major shift in power relationships, there can be a significant shift in such relationships in the workplace through the absorption of functions of first-line supervision by workers. Our resentment over some first-line supervision stems from their lack of competence, their inability to schedule work, their too frequent lack of concern for workers, and their insufficient authority to make decisions or settle grievances. Workers must have a higher degree of autonomy before real job satisfaction becomes a reality. Possibly there should be experiments with worker-elected supervisors, without disciplinary powers, whose primary function should be that of coordination.

Our traditional adversary relationship between management and labor discourages such concepts, but need not block them. This adversary relationship, which has served us well, also discourages such concepts as co-determination which is practiced in some European countries. In our discussions, however, the question of co-determination was not pursued beyond noting the potential conflict with our system of industrial relations.

A great impetus for change and experimentation in the workplace is coming from women and minority group workers who are often especially militant and sensitive to unfair treatment of all kinds. Because of their lack of job mobility and limited options, women and minority group workers often feel a stronger need to improve their job satisfaction than older, white, male workers. We endorse such concepts as

child care programs, increased job mobility, and extended leaves for educational purposes to help meet the needs of workers.

However, we must bear in mind the overriding needs of minority group workers and women. They are primarily concerned with job opportunities, pay, and job security, just as white, male, older workers. These crucial issues do often override questions of job satisfaction and workplace democracy.

Regardless of the outcome of any specific experiments regarding job satisfaction issues, the end result must be that as workers we will share directly in any benefits derived from them.

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