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Women Who Work in Factories

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The current feminist literature largely ignores women who work in factories and their special problems. Is this justifiable? Is industry truly a declining sector in the economy, employing an ever-decreasing percentage of the labor force while the service sector keeps expanding? Women in the academy and the mass media have been organizing to demand their rights; so have some welfare mothers, domestic workers, and white-collar workers. Have the voices of the blue-collar women not been heard because their numbers are declining to a point where improving their conditions is not worth the effort?

Statistics show no such decline. The proportion in the U.S. of women among industrial workers-as well as the proportion of women industrial workers among all working women-has remained stable. This is borne out by the latest figures available from the U.S. Department of Labor, covering the years 1967, 1968, and 1969. In those three years the numbers of blue-collar women were 4.597 million, 4.9 million, and 4.974 million. The proportion of women among all employees in industry was 27 percent, which seems constant for these years (I cannot check the data with absolute accuracy). The percentages of blue-collar women among all working women was 16.7 percent, 17.3 percent, and 17.1 percent. Looking at the 1960s as a whole, the proportion of women among operatives and in industrial crafts,

though constant among employed women, has slightly declined in the total population. Of much more significance, however, is the continued concentration of blue-collar women in the lower skills and the backward branches of industry.

It is said that the storm of automation is already reducing the number of male industrial workers and soon will affect women, too. Such forecasts may sound reasonable and simple, but the realities are complex and varied. The influence of women workers on the development of industry undoubtedly is limited. But if this influence were channeled through large-scale union and political organizations, more effective action could be planned.

It is a serious mistake to think that a number of industrial working women may lose their jobs without affecting the general position of women in the labor market. Janice Neipert Hedges of the Bureau of Labor Statistics pointed, in June 1970, to the over saturation in such typical women's professions as nursing, teaching, and social work-at a time when the proportion of women, and especially of married women, in the labor force is on the constant increase. She warned that if women will not branch out into the main growth occupations, the competition will become cut-throat, especially between young and older women entering or reentering the labor market. Clearly the job situation of all working women will be adversely affected by a serious shrinkage in *any* part of the still limited women's labor market.

Do Women Have a Future in Industry?

To answer this question, let us first discuss whether industry has a future as an employer. In the popular literature there lingers the nightmare

utopia of the 1950s: the workerless factory. But our recent experience has proved that this is merely a remote possibility- with the one exception of power stations, where we now find a miniscule labor force. True, much semiskilled machine-tending and many old industrial skills are becoming superfluous with the advance of automation. In such sectors of industry where continuous flow processes have been automated, there have been spectacular reductions of manpower. But in other sectors, reductions have not been drastic. In most industries, automation is far from complete and will remain partial for the foreseeable future. Besides, all automated production processes need programming, and constant maintenance and supervision. The more varied the product, the more will human work be required. Supply, warehousing, the shipping of materials and parts and finished products, as well as related accounting-all these require extensive manpower even under the most streamlined conditions.

What is more, the very process of automation has created many new jobs that require new skills. And as automation reduces costs and makes feasible the mass production of a whole range of new products, new industries spring up. Although these automated manufacturing industries will continue to employ human labor, women are in danger of losing their work place because they only possess inferior skills and are concentrated in industry's most backward sections.

The old industrial craft skills that survive automation include those of industrial electricians, carpenters, pipe fitters, machinists, tool- and die-makers, and draftsmen-and, as we know, women's share in these old skills is minimal. But now to the new skills that are developing in the automobile, aircraft, office machines, household appliances, air conditioning, radio and television, and computer industries. These new skills are used both in

industry and in retail-in installation and maintenance, i.e., in the services. Until recently, few women workers were trained in these new craft skills. In the technical occupations on the borderline between blue and white collar-such as electrical, electronic, and chemical technicians-women, too, have only made limited entry and work mainly in the lower ranks. All this demonstrates that women workers in industry are concentrated in semiskilled and low-skill jobs-using hand tools, some electrically powered and some not. Some women operate simple, manual, old-fashioned machinery, the sewing machine or its analogue, or feed and tend isolated semi-automated machines, such as the buttonhole or soldering machines. And women do the assembling, checking, pressing, folding, packing, stacking, and stamping of products.

In theory, automation or increased mechanization will abolish the great majority of industrial jobs now held by women. What may follow?

Certain technologically backward industries, which employ large numbers of low-paid and low-skilled workers, may simply disappear from the U.S. economy or from whole areas of the country, priced out by rival industries employing cheaper and more stable labor. This has recently happened in the shoe industry, largely undercut and priced out by competitors from Italy and Spain, and also in the New England textile industry, which moved South during the '30s and is now endangered, together with the clothing and plastics industries, by competition from the Far East. The same is happening in food industries that did not modernize.

Protectionism may, in all these cases, draw out the process of mechanization. Yet, since about half of the industrial women workers in the U.S. are concentrated in clothing, food, and textiles, nearly half of the

women's jobs are in jeopardy-which means well over 2 million. If we add other backward industries with great numbers of women workers-such as footwear, plastics, toys, costume jewelry, and notions-we can add almost another half a million. The displacement of women workers from all these industries would be a disaster for all working women in the economy.

But the end of these industries and jobs is not inevitable. Although all their production processes pose special problems, they can largely be overcome. Through the resolute introduction of high mechanization or automation, productivity in these industries could be raised to such levels where they could compete with low-wage countries while paying acceptable U.S. wages. There are already blueprints for prototypes of such fully or semi-automated machinery for these branches, and some of the new machinery is in production, though not in the U.S.

The obstacles to modernization are many: the financial weakness of small businesses; the load of old buildings and old machinery; the traditionalism and lack of boldness of management; and, also, government protection. But the women workers themselves provide the most serious obstacle: as long as women are willing to fill these demanding, high-speed, mind-dulling, and nerve-racking dead-end jobs for wages lower than those of most male workers, management will not invest in modernization. In the lowest-paying industries, the supply of native women workers has nearly dried up, and the remaining native labor force consists largely of middle-aged and older women. New employees are drawn from a few remaining immigrant communities. In the greater Boston area, these women workers used to be French-Canadians. Now they are Portuguese immigrant women who usually arrive with limited schooling (Portugal has only four years of compulsory education), know little English, have a mother or

mother-in-law to look after their babies, are used to low pay, and urgently need ready cash. Most of them find jobs in the needle trades. Yet the girls of the next generation, born in the U.S., won't do this kind of work. And so this labor supply is scarce and will become scarcer. Now is the time to demand changes in these industries-before unplanned modernization will result in unemployment for large numbers of women workers, exacerbating the disadvantageous position of all women workers, in or out of industry.

But will not modernization reduce and thoroughly change jobs, and remaining jobs be declared men's work? Will not women be pushed out of their old strongholds in one way or another?

Such displacement of women could be blocked by an agreement between employer and union guaranteeing the jobs of those now employed. (There are major precedents of unions protecting male workers whose jobs have been threatened.) The resulting, inevitable reduction could be achieved gradually, through normal turnover. To be sure, if these industries were to expand rapidly through modernization, there would be no need for reducing the labor force. But whatever happens after modernization, women should push for the training of women workers in preparation for new, upgraded jobs. This strategy has just been adopted by the German textile workers' union, whose membership is largely female.

So much for the future possibilities in the backward, traditional women's industries producing food and clothing. Let us now turn to the future of a second concentration of women workers, employed in the electrical and electronic industries. Here basic production is technologically ultramodern; yet in the production departments one rarely finds a woman. The women still work in assembly, adjustment, drilling, spot-welding,

soldering, threading, lettering, calibrating, checking and rechecking of tiny components-at jobs where the technology is backward or spotty, at jobs still performed by hand-and-eye co-ordination.

A parallel situation holds in the ultramodern chemical industries, especially in pharmaceuticals. In such jobs as the filling of containers, packing, stamping, and labeling, modern technology stops, and women go on performing their old jobs. Professor Günther Friedrichs, a European expert, reports that there are solutions to nearly all the problems of automatic assembly in packing, whatever the size of components or containers; but these solutions are not applied, because it is cheaper to employ women.

Assembly methods in the prosperous and until recently rapidly expanding electronics industries resemble those in backward industries-modernization is undercut by cheap labor, and most women are in the two lowest wage grades. Yet pay in electronics is relatively high, and women still are considerably better paid here than, say, in the needle trades.

Some of the electronics firms recruit only high school graduates; some have abolished the piecework method, which remains pervasive in the traditional women's industries. While most women workers in electronics still do routine and repetitive work and have little chance for advancement, the loss of their jobs- if they were to be displaced by greater automation-would of course be a heavy blow. In the recent recession, considerable numbers of part-time women workers in electronics, especially those on mothers' shifts, have already lost their jobs.

The only way out of the present decline in the number of employed women workers- whether caused by recession or competition of cheaper Asian labor-seems to be a campaign for the resolute upgrading of the technology, demanding guarantees that women employees will be trained for

the new, up-graded job. Many women have developed considerable yet unused mechanical skills and knowledge, and management would profit were it to consult them on ways to overcome weaknesses in existing semiautomatic production processes. The upgrading of production processes and jobs might soften the blow of an otherwise disastrous cut in the female work force.

But to achieve equality for women in industry, an all-out onslaught is needed on the so-called man's jobs-this is the only way to improve the general skill level of women. How can it be done?

At least as important as the women workers' demand for training, wherever automation is in the offing, is their need for resolute entry into industrial craft skills requiring training and still wholly staffed by men. I have in mind skills as those of electricians, draftsmen, and machinists; all the new photographic skills used in printing; and, also, various precision jobs. As we have learned from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the greatest increase in industrial employment is expected among the new craft skills needed for the checking, maintenance, installation, and repair of new machinery-from aircraft and automobile to dishwasher and percolator. These jobs are somewhere between industry proper and services. Some of these craftsmen now work in industry, some are employed by industry but outside it, others by independent service firms, and some operate as independents. The most important barrier keeping women out of such occupations has been their inability to procure training-especially in older crafts; they are excluded by the men who control the training - sometimes employers, sometimes unions. Training for the newer crafts is increasingly provided by vocational schools, community colleges, and the armed forces, especially the Air Force.

Here, as we know, a major obstacle has been the sex-typing that both girls and their parents have accepted as a matter of course. But this seems to be changing. Now that the Air Force, for example, has started training women in the new aviation skills, there may be a turning point and precedent for a new tradition - training women on an equal basis with men in industrial crafts. Recent data on women enrolled in vocational schools for training in various crafts related to appliances are also encouraging, though still too low to change the imbalance. There has to be a far greater number of technically skilled women before a campaign for equality of opportunity in skilled and supervisory industrial jobs can succeed. As long as there is only an insignificant number of skilled women in a given occupation, it is hard to convince men that women are in earnest about equality.

Can Equality Ever Be Achieved?

The question of equality pertains both to what kind of equality we wish to achieve, and in what respect men and women are potentially equal. Concerning industry, the second question can be rephrased: are women, potentially, as technically proficient as men? A recent psycho-technical survey of U.S. school children shows that girls' all-around technical ability, on the average, equals that of boys. Obviously, for adults this is not true - presumably because of lack of training and opportunity for women, not to mention the strong psychological factor which causes many women to suppress technological ability because it is considered unfeminine.

The question of equality, therefore, is rooted not in technological ability but in women workers' special needs as mothers. In the work life in industry, as in the work life in other branches of the economy, the norms were created by men. These norms demanded a continuous work life, the

eight-hour day plus overtime and shift work, interrupted only by weekends, holidays, annual vacations, and brief sick leaves. When women entered industry, they were expected to satisfy these norms; they still are. Any deviation, by men or women, is considered a weakness that will result in certain penalties. Since working mothers can hardly fully conform to these norms and since by now many women workers are mothers, employers (who usually are males) still regard female labor with strong reservations; and women, even known campaigners for women's rights, accept these norms and find themselves in a weak position.

These rigid and accepted norms are outmoded and bad, almost as much for men as for women. Yet employers and unions make rules and regulations favoring immobility and uninterrupted work life, which are detrimental both to the individual and the economy. The introduction of study sabbaticals, for example, and exchange programs obviously is beneficial; they have trickled down to the lower levels of management, but hardly at all to workers. The recent introduction of the ten-hour-a-day, four-day week is creating an entirely new pattern, where men's lives are divided into nearly two halves, one in industry and one with the family. This, then, is the right time to examine the possibility of adapting the norms of work life to needs of working mothers, so that they can advance in their work life without being forced to neglect their children or suffer from constant strain.

My major point here is that changing the norms of work life for working mothers may benefit them, and our whole society. As things stand, working mothers seldom conform completely to the norms: they have to leave work in emergencies, and/or work part-time, and/or interrupt their work life for some years. For all this they are penalized. They receive lower

pay; for example, the hourly pay for a six-hour day is significantly lower than that for an eight-hour day. They lose seniority through interruptions or never acquire it when working part-time. They lose pension rights and security at every interruption, or never acquire them at part-time work; in many firms even steady six-hour-a-day mother-shift workers have no job security. And, of course, women in general are frequently excluded from either training or promotion out of fear, or on the excuse, that they may quit.

If the part-time work most common among and satisfying to working mothers were to become normal, women would be much happier in their work life, and in a better position to catch up in technological skills.

These suggestions are not mere dreams- they have partly been achieved in Western Europe. In all of Western Europe paid maternity leave has acknowledged the fact that working women bear children. In the United States this is still in the stage of a government "recommendation." In some countries, much more far-reaching accommodations are on the way. German unions, for instance, now demand an 18-month optional, unpaid maternity leave with full protection of seniority and pension rights, as well as leave in case of sick children. In Sweden a more radical solution has been adopted: working women have the right, during their careers, to work up to 15 years part-time, without loss of rights for training, promotion, etc. In Sweden this provision has caused deep changes in attitudes, leading to the highest labor participation of women and their highest pay ratio in the West.¹

¹A word about traditional protective legislation for women, such as laws against assigning women to lift heavy weights or against exposing them to moral danger by employment after midnight. Woman trade unionist now debate whether these protective laws should be retained or abolished. Yet undoubtedly, both here and in Europe, many of

Absence of adaptive legislation is matched by an absence of community-services, such as a full range of day-care centers, nursery schools, kindergarten classes, school lunches, early afternoon supervision for school children, and community summer camps. Only in the last two years or so has anything been done regarding day care, and this mainly in metropolitan centers; much of it is still too expensive for the average working mother. Throughout most of suburban and small-town America, nursery school, and some-times even kindergarten, is still provided only privately, at a high price and for short hours. Most grade schools do not provide school lunches, and afternoon supervision is a rarity. That so many mothers work, nonetheless, is a sign of their ingenuity, but also a cause of unnecessary and harmful stress.

If all these ideas were successfully implemented, more mothers would work in industry; more would work full-time and would have longer work lives; and more jobs would be created in the child-care field. The chief beneficial effect on the economy in general would be a more rational distribution of the burden of social services and social security in a society with a rapidly growing retired population. Also, of course, as more women develop a meaningful life outside the home, they will be enabled to overcome passivity and limitations. Once women workers are recognized as both workers and women, not only will their chances to work increase, but also their chances for more challenging jobs, which will be a positive compensation for domestic chores.

Why should the United States, the most technologically advanced industrial nation, be so backward in both legislation and services for

these laws are used to stave off equality, and to justify the exclusion of women from better jobs.

working mothers? Only a few years ago, it was a widespread view that the American abhorrence of ideology has prevented the development of the strong feminist ideology that is essential for a strong feminist movement. Recent experience, however, makes it superfluous to debate this point: there is plenty of ideology around today, feminist and otherwise, but unfortunately few social scientists have thought out the problems and possible solutions regarding women in industry. Most of the literature concerning women's rights centers around the professions. Today's feminist movement is decidedly upper-middle-class in orientation, with the typical slumming tendencies of middle-class radicals who, except for their own kind, notice hardly anyone but welfare mothers.

The reason for the conspicuous backwardness of the U.S. in legislation and services for the working mother lies in the historically weak position of women in the union movement and in industry. This goes back as far as the 19th century.

While all over Western Europe it was taken for granted that working-class wives would go to work in the factory, in the United States up to the '30s married women, even in the working class, were expected to stay home. The exceptions were the most newly arrived and needy immigrants, and Southern blacks. While in Western Europe it was the norm for workers' daughters to enter industry upon leaving school at the age of 14, in the U.S. free public education kept many workers' and farmers' daughters in school up to 16 or even 18, thus also qualifying them for clerical jobs. Besides, the United States was the first country to provide a great number of clerical jobs for women, and many young working-class girls chose office instead of blue-collar jobs. And so even the positive aspects of American society have contributed to the present backward position of women in

industry. These positive aspects include prolonged public education, relative prosperity that has enabled most working-class wives to stay home-and the relative flexibility of the American class structure which permitted the daughters of workers to enter middle-class jobs.

The American people need to be awakened to the problems of working-class women, and then much can be done to make their lives easier through the development of services and legislation comparable to the best in Western Europe.