

81-7.243

TOWARDS A "MIDDLE CLASS" AMERICA? A STUDY OF RECENT  
DEVELOPMENTS AMONG BLUE-COLLAR AND WHITE-COLLAR WORKERS

Harold Benenson and  
Eric Lessinger

Two overall economic trends have transformed the character of the American working class in the twentieth century. The first is the increasing standard of living enjoyed by the blue-collar, industrial workforce. The second is the fantastic growth in white-collar employment. Both trends have led social commentators to project an image of American society characterized by a "middle class", self-satisfied, even affluent social existence. Inconvenient facts, like widespread poverty at the bottom of the social pyramid and extreme concentration of wealth at the top, are for many of these writers the exceptions that prove the rule. The vast majority of Americans, they argue, who fall in between these extremes are able to spend an even greater part of their incomes on consumption items not directly related to subsistence needs. Their personal aspirations, styles of life, and social values reflect these new opportunities for acquiring material possessions. And the shift to white-collar employment has reinforced the tendency to status-conscious, individualistic attitudes which have always set white-collar employees apart from manual workers.

In this paper we will examine the ways in which this middle class image distorts and obscures blue-collar and white-collar working class realities, and in particular those aspects of workingclass life

which stem from the worker's immediate job situation. We will attempt to judge the impact of rising incomes on traditional blue-collar attitudes, and the effects of new trends in white-collar work on the traditional middle-class orientations of this group. We are particularly interested in the implications of these developments for collective action and class consciousness among blue-collar and white-collar workers.

## I

The standard of living of blue-collar workers has risen significantly in the past half century. In 1929 the Brookings Institute estimate put 42% of consumer units at or below subsistence-and-poverty level and another 36% at the minimum-comfort level.<sup>1</sup> Roughly comparable figures for 1947 were, 33.5% and 17.7% respectively, and for 1957, 27% and 16.5%.<sup>2</sup>

A major part of these gains were the result of rising wages paid to blue-collar workers: weekly wages among production workers in manufacturing industries rose from \$24.71 in 1940 to \$92.18 in 1964 in current prices, or from \$50.64 to \$85.27 in adjusted 1957/59 prices.<sup>3</sup>

These overall wage figures conceal large differences in gains between various industries, among skilled vs. unskilled, and in unionized as opposed to non-unionized fields of work. There is a particular group of workers for whom the rise in incomes has had special significance: the so-called "second aristocracy of labor."

Prior to the formation of the CIO, the highly paid craftsman were referred to as the 'aristocracy of labor! After World War II, a second aristocracy of labor has been added to the first. The mass production union members at first suffered a deterioration of their lot. Hundreds of thousands were downgraded from skilled to semiskilled or unskilled jobs. Overtime was eliminated, and according to the CIO, earnings were cut by about 20%, while prices continued to rise. But the first four rounds of postwar wage increases remedied the situation... by 1950 it (Their income) was back to 1945 levels and from then on it continued to rise steadily...this (the post 1950 rise in income) is the longest unbroken

period of rises in money wages since at least 1840. The mass production workers are no longer low paid or brutally exploited....Unionism has paid off for the second aristocracy of labor, just as it had for the first.<sup>4</sup>

The industrial unions in the mass production industries -- auto, rubber, steel, electrical equipment, fabricated metals, non-electrical machinery etc. -- have raised the wages of their members from 10-20% over what they would be getting in non-union shops.<sup>5</sup> And these gains have been made at the expense of the unorganized sector:

If we have no evidence that the union's gains have generally been made at the expense of capital, we may ask from whom they have been made...they have been made in large part at the expense of non-union labor... this redistribution can be thought of as arising in either or both of two ways: First, the money wages of non-union labor may be held down by the reallocation of labor produced by unionism; second, the non-union workers may have to pay more for products produced by union labor.<sup>6</sup>

For the newly-unionized mass production workers, the impact of the CIO augmented the wage increases they would have received anyway from rising productivity. For these workers the increases were greater in absolute<sup>7</sup> terms, because of the unions; they were also increases relative to the income of other workers; and they put middle-class consumption items and home ownership within the reach of the mass production worker. By 1950, 32% of the family heads in the suburban work force were engaged in skilled and semi-skilled occupations. By 1956 the figure had risen to 36%.<sup>8</sup> A concomitant of the shift from central city to suburb is an increase in home ownership, in possession of automobiles etc. The industrial worker, like the skilled craft worker before him, appears to many to be drifting off; disappearing into the middle class. Even the labor leaders who have led the struggle for every pay hike, seem to share this assessment:

It is the unofficial contention of the UAW officialdom that their very success in negotiations over the last ten or fifteen years has in a sense foreclosed their being the 'vanguard in America.' That is, the substantial slice of the economic pie that they have gotten for the dues payer and the trimmings, the health insurance, pensions and the rest, have made him into a pretty satisfied fellow, a member...of an elite

an aristocracy of labor, more concerned with paying off his home and getting a boat to go fishing than with 'taking on GM.'<sup>8</sup>

But for Swados, the author of these lines, this is far from the entire picture. The talk of affluence, apathy, middle-class aspirations masks an ambiguous reality for the industrial worker:

his increasing well-being and his endless frustration and bitterness on the job...<sup>9</sup>

An analysis of the impact of rising incomes on the industrial working class, particularly for the workers in unionized mass production industries, must begin with an assessment of the work experience of the industrial worker. It is this experience, and its place in the workers social and personal existence, which together with the increasing possibilities for consumption, shape the attitudes of the industrial worker to long-term goals in life, collective action, and class conflict.

The work experience of industrial workers is not homogeneous. In the following discussion we will use that of auto workers as the primary example because of the large number of good studies about auto workers. Some aspects of work in auto plants are not representative of industrial mass-production work in general.<sup>10</sup> But it is possible to make some generalizations from the case of the auto industry.

Three characteristics of auto production and assembly work have a significant impact on the outlook of workers in the industry: the alienating mass-production characteristics of the work itself; the lack of job security in the industry; the lack of opportunities for advancement in the plants. The first and third characteristics are particularly marked in the auto industry, although they are found to a lesser degree elsewhere. Job insecurity is, on the other hand, more acute in other industries.

Jobs on the assembly line display the following "mass production" characteristics according to Walker and Guest in The Man on the Assembly Line: 1. mechanically controlled work pace, 2. repetitiveness, 3. minimum skill, 4. predetermination of tools and techniques, 5. minute subdivision of product, 6. surface mental attention.<sup>11</sup>

This means that the workers have almost no control over the quantity of goods they produce, and their effort is only minutely related to the quality of the final product. It means that 61% of the unskilled (mostly assembly-line) workers interviewed in 1947 found their jobs dull most or all of the time.<sup>12</sup> The human costs of assembly line work are incalculable: as Walter, a fictional character in Swados' On the Line, puts it:

The worst thing about the assembly line is what it does to your self respect... It's hard to keep from feeling like a fool when you know that everybody looks down on what you're doing, even the men who are doing it themselves.<sup>13</sup>

A second part of auto work is job insecurity: "in 1953, 917,000 auto workers turned out 7.3 million cars, trucks and buses; in 1963, 723,000 workers produced 8.3 million vehicles."<sup>14</sup> The cutbacks in employment require layoffs, which often mean that workers will never work again. The shrinkage in production employment in manufacturing industries is not confined to the auto industry: from 1947 to 1959, jobs in production in textile mill products were cut back 30%; in lumber and wood products, 24%; in tobacco manufactures, 18%; in food and kindred products, and petroleum and coal products, 16%; in primary metal industries, 15%; in rubber products, and leather and leather products, 10%.<sup>15</sup> Among the unions hit hardest have been the Mine Workers, the UAW, the Steelworkers, the Packinghouse workers, the machineists, and others.<sup>16</sup> A young worker who gets a job in an auto plant can never be sure that he'll be able to work there in ten years, or fifteen years, much less until his retirement.

The lack of opportunities for advancement has been well documented by Chinoy in his Automobile Workers and the American Dream.<sup>17</sup> The openings for unskilled or semi-skilled workers in the ranks of skilled labor, the foremen or the white-collar staff are extremely limited. Most men soon give up hope of ever moving up inside the plant soon after they get there. In addition, the prospects for getting out of the factory, and going back to a farm or opening up a small business are also very remote. The typical worker can only hope to rise to one

of the better semi-skilled jobs, paying at most a quarter an hour more than the job he started on, hopefully a 'clean' job off the line, and also a job that is steady, although the prospects for layoffs are always uncertain.

These aspects of manual semi-skilled work in the auto industry are increasingly characteristic of mass production industries in general as mechanization ties production workers to machines and conveyor belts; as employment decreases for blue-collar workers in the manufacturing sector; as the growth of corporate bureaucracies and high educational standards for supervisory jobs makes rising from the ranks evermore difficult. Work alienation, job insecurity, lack of occupational mobility show no signs of diminishing with the advent of recent trends like the automation of some plants and processes.<sup>18</sup>

In addition, the labor movement has always been powerless in the face of these conditions. It has largely limited its demands to wages, grievance procedures covering arbitrary discipline and seniority rights in the shops, and fringe benefits which cushion the impact of some of these conditions (for instance, supplementary unemployment benefits for layoffs) without alleviating them.<sup>19</sup> Without a political party and a program to deal with control over work, loss of jobs, and education and employment in the entire economy, the trade unions will accomplish little in these areas in the future.<sup>20</sup>

It appears that these conditions are likely to continue to be everyday facts of life for the mass production industrial workers. How do these aspects of the work situation affect workers' attitudes and aspirations, their personal and social consciousness, in a period when these same workers are coming to enjoy a "middle-class" standard of consumption?

The evidence from studies of industrial workers' participation in community life, their political affiliations and social attitudes, and their own aspirations, consumption patterns, and feelings about being manual workers reveals ambiguities vis-a-vis the thesis that the

mass production workers, the "second aristocracy of labor," are becoming "middle-class oriented." On the one hand, many facets of working-class life are still dominated by the manual job ; the feelings of identity with fellow workers, and the conditions of work described above. And, on the other hand, the rising incomes have led to increasingly privatized, family-centered aspirations. But here too, the conditions of work on the job are still extremely important in shaping the new aspiration and consumption patterns.

On the most basic level, most manual workers still identify themselves as working class.<sup>21</sup> Many recent polls have been misleading in this regard, since most workers when forced to choose between lower, middle and upper class designations will call themselves "middle class". But as Goldthorpe and Lockwood have shown, the meaning of "middle class" to a manual worker may be very different from its commonly understood connotations.<sup>22</sup> But when the choice includes "working class", often a majority of working-class respondents choose this designation.<sup>23</sup>

Working class self-identification is also correlated with other, more ideological, workingclass attitudes: John Leggett's study, "Sources and Consequences of Working-Class Consciousness," demonstrates the correlation between tendencies to think in class terms, beliefs that middle class people benefit more from society's allocation of resources, class militancy, and belief in the need for an egalitarian redistribution of wealth with 1. minority group membership, 2. recent arrival into the industrial working class, 3. union membership, 4. lack of skills, 5. lack of permanent employment.<sup>24</sup> But these attitudes are also present, though to a lesser degree, among more privileged sections of the working class. Kornhauser's study of political affiliations among auto workers, When Labor Votes, which found a definite "labor vote" and union and political consciousness in the UAW in Detroit, corresponds to Berger's findings in Working Class Suburb: A Study of Auto Workers in Suburbia. Among the autoworkers Berger interviewed, 81% were Democrats, 31% said labor had too little power (as compared to 15% too much) and of the 20% who said they trusted the political opinion of some organization, 19% specified the union as that organization.<sup>25</sup>

Robin Williams has summarized the findings of a number of field studies,

sharp cleavages between occupational groupings and income strata are evident on questions dealing with the distribution of wealth, the role of the government in economic affairs, the place of labor unions, and with political affiliations and inclinations.

but he adds,

At the same time, persons in the lower income levels 'cling devotedly to the American belief in individual opportunity. They expect themselves or their children to 'get ahead'." <sup>26</sup>

The existence of seemingly contradictory attitudes, at the same time affirming a working-class outlook and yet denying its reality for one's own aspirations, is an important point which we shall return to later, in the discussion of working-class attitudes to collective action and class conflict.

The persistence of working-class attitudes to politics is reinforced by other characteristics of working-class culture which have also resisted "embourgeoisement." Berger's study of workers in suburbia found that, contrary to the popularized image of suburbia's power to transform new arrivals into ardent joiners, climbers, Republicans, etc., of the auto workers he interviewed,

81%...were Democrats; 56% attended church rarely or not at all; 70% belonged to no clubs or organizations ...43% of the total sample said they had little or no hope of getting ahead; 64% of the sample men did not want to be foremen. <sup>27</sup>

Berger explained his findings as follows,

auto workers can experience vast social and economic gains and yet still remain workingclass in their outlook and their political loyalties. It seems to me that this was possible because these 'gains' are collective gains; they were not achieved in the classic American manner, by capitalizing on the tradition of individual opportunity. <sup>28</sup>

Berger's explanation-- that the economic gains have been experienced collectively -- is only part of an explanation. It is apparent from his book that the characteristics of manual work, as opposed to white collar or supervisory jobs, the carry-over outside the factory of the

social distinctions of the workplace, and the common income level and job-centered problems (lack of advancement, old-age insecurity, need to escape the boredom of the job) of blue collar workers, also reinforce a common workingclass culture.

There are, however, forces working in the opposite direction. Higher levels of income, even when they have been achieved collectively, make possible the pursuit of individual, "middle-class," consumption oriented goals. But these goals are also in part determined by the common situation of industrial workers -- the lack of personal fulfillment on the job, the insecurity of employment, the lack of advancement opportunities.

Ely Chinoy in his Automobile Workers and the American Dream notes the prevalence of the desire to get out of the factory and set up in business for oneself.<sup>29</sup> But as the prospects for accomplishing this become ever more remote as years go by, the average worker limits his aspirations to buying a new car or owning his own house. As a nonskilled maintenance worker who had been in the plant for fourteen years put it,

A lot of people think getting ahead means getting to be a millionaire. Not for me though. If I can just increase the value of my possessions as the years go by instead of just breaking even or falling behind and losing, if I can keep adding possessions and property --personal property too-- and put some money away for when I can't work, if I happen to own two or three houses like this one and have five thousand dollars put away in the bank, I'll figure I got ahead quite a lot.

A welder stated his goals more succinctly,

My next step is a nice little modern house of my own.  
That's what I mean by bettering yourself...

Chinoy concludes from these and other statements,

American culture encourages men to seek both occupational advancement and the acquisition of material possessions. But workers who respond to both of these admissions use the second to rationalize their failure to achieve the first. <sup>30</sup>

The significance of these and other individualized aspirations in the factory -- like concentrating on getting a job off the line, projecting ones ambitions onto ones children, etc. -- lies in their

impact on workers' attitudes to collective action and class conflict. Accumulating material possessions is not, per se, a middle class goal. But along with the emphasis on personal consumption, there often develops an instrumental attitude to the union which replaces traditions of solidarity and class-conscious militancy. Goldthorpe and Lockwood have sketched the difference between "solidaristic collectivism" and "instrumental collectivism" in sociological terms,

solidaristic collectivism (mutual aid) implies collectivism as an end and not just as a means. It is typified by an affective attachment to a local class community... (In the case of instrumental collectivism) the means are still collective action (through the union) but they are subordinate to the primary goal of economic and social advancement of the individual nuclear family... (T)his family orientation... may be defined as orientation to consumption... which involves the family as an independent unit...<sup>31</sup>

Sidney Lens, the labor journalist, has described the transition more graphically,

What emerges is... "cash register" unionism. The union becomes for the rank-and-file worker nothing more than an insurance policy... The union is no longer a way of life based on cooperative effort, but a guarantee against management abuse and the rising cost of living.<sup>32</sup>

The higher levels of consumption permit an escape from the realities of the workplace. As workers adjust to never being able to do anything creative or meaningful on the job, they seek meaning in leisure activities: many purchase power tools, or do gardening, to have an opportunity to work creatively with their hands. But most watch TV and simply forget about the day at work: in fact, among the workers Berger studied, almost half said they watched for over 16 hours a week.<sup>33</sup> Daniel Bell distinguishes between play, which is merely a temporary release from work, and leisure or recreation which is creative as well.

Play (not leisure or relaxation) is a release from the tensions of work,

an alternative use of muscle and mind. But a tension that is enervating or debilitating can

only produce wildly aggressive play or passive, unresponsive viewing... If work is a daily turn round Ixon's wheel, can the intervening play be anything more than a restless moment before the next turn of the wheel ? <sup>34</sup>

But the need for money to enjoy leisure activities and consumption items that are increasingly expensive is one of the main rationales for holding down a job. The alienating features of the work experience become somewhat bearable when the worker is able to look forward to spending his money at play.

Increased income, as Chinoy has shown, also permits an escape from the fact of failure on the job, in terms of failure to advance, to "get ahead." Buying a car or a house, or putting a few dollars in the bank, become talked about signs of success. As workers get older they view accumulating seniority, and saving money for retirement, as equivalent to having "made it." "If you're secure, then you're getting ahead," a thirty-nine year old oiler explained to Chinoy.<sup>35</sup> This concern with security is, however, extremely rational in the face of the temporary and permanent layoffs the auto industry has experienced in the past few years. But each worker seeks a personal way out of this danger beyond minimal seniority rights and pension plans won by the union. These latter gains will be of little help if a worker is laid off for good before his retirement and has to seek work elsewhere. The only answer is to accumulate a reserve of money, or to see that your kids get a good education so that they could support you temporarily if need be, or to own some property which could be sold at some future time.

The increased income of industrial workers -- the average auto worker made \$130.00 per week in 1964, or about \$6,500 per year (putting him at the top of the fifth income tenth in the population) <sup>36</sup>-- means that new avenues are open to him, but means of personal, family centered consumption, to escape the work alienation, job insecurity and lack of advancement characteristic of blue-collar work. The union serves as a collective instrument that becomes subordinated to whatever personal goals the worker has set for himself. Thus it becomes possible for workers to affirm workingclass attitudes in their general orientation

to politics, social problems, community life etc. and still maintain individualistic aspirations which seemingly contradict these other views.

But if "instrumental collectivism and family centerdness" characterize the attitude of what Goldthorpe and Lockwood have called the "privitized worker," this is not the only attitude found in the work place of modern industry. A subordinate, but still important, attitude found among mass production workers is deep attachment to the union, not as a means to serve personal ends, but,

as a kind of psychological bulwark against pace and boredom and against the bigness and impersonality of management.<sup>37</sup>

The union is an outlet for feelings of aggression directed at the company. It is a community of fellow workers who share the same fate and who can do something about their frustration by striking or taking some other collective action.

A self-sacrificing, rather than narrowly economic commitment to unionism was what started many of today's labor leaders on their careers.

The labor leader may begin his career as a business-like man, a political man, or a distinguished workingman. Throughout the history of the American labor movement, the third way has been and still is dominant. Many older labor leaders, in fact, began their career by being fired for their union ideas. They answered back in the only way open to them during certain economic periods -- by fighting for or even by founding local labor unions.<sup>38</sup>

Chinoy found that leadership in the UAW local that represented the workers he studied was viewed as a "semisacred task," demanding personal sacrifice and devotion to fellow workers in the shop. What started many local leaders out was a particular incident which aroused their anger at the company.<sup>39</sup> Many said they liked the "companionship" of active union participation; others stated that they didn't like to see their fellow workers stepped on by the boss. Thus, there remains in many workers attitudes to their union what Goldthorpe and Lockwood have called solidaristic collectivism, "an affective attachment to a local class community."<sup>40</sup> This attitude arised out of shared dis-

satisfaction with life in the shop, and the perception that workers' personal problems have a common cause. Further, it stresses the intrinsic satisfactions of identifying with a community and fighting together for everyone's rights. This awareness contrasts strongly with the instrumental collectivism described above, which sees the union as a bargaining tool that can extract higher wages and provide personal security in the service of the workers personal goals outside the factory. These two attitudes, although contradictory, coexist in the same union locals, and probably even in some workers' consciousnesses.

The impact of a rising standards of living on the industrial working class is not easy to measure. First, it is clear that traditional problems associated with blue-collar work persist: the jobs, if they have changed, have usually changed for the worse. Speed-up and mechanization increase job dissatisfaction. Employment is insecure in a period of contracting demand for labor in the manufacturing sector. Advancement out of manual work is rare. And second, traditional working class attitudes and cultural patterns remain strong: working-class self identification, working-class attitudes to social problems and politics, and working-class community living patterns continue to predominate among blue-collar workers studied by sociologists.

But on the level of personal aspirations, rising incomes have a significant impact. They have stimulated a "privatization" of goals. a search for fulfillment or simply pleasure in consumption and leisure after working hours. But these consumption patterns are often conditioned by the need to escape the insecurities and frustrations of life on the job. The inadequacies of the work situation continue to be felt strongly, and find an outlet in hostility to management, militant union activity, and identification with the union as a source of communal involvement for the individual.

But these tendencies do not appear to be as strong as the dominant type of union involvement: a narrow economic "instrumental collectivism." The union, to many, has become an insurance policy, a service performed by paid professionals in return for dues payment and token loyalty. This attitude, which stands in sharp contrast with the sense of personal

involvement, struggle and self-sacrifice which contributed greatly to the formation of the CIO in the 30's, corresponds to the worker's privatization of his own goals in life. It is this development, brought about by the rising incomes of industrial workers, which is the primary evidence for the thesis that industrial workers are acquiring a "middle Class" outlook.

## II

The other structural trend in the labor force in this century has been the great increase in white-collar workers. C. Wright Mills estimates that between 1870 and 1940, white-collar employment rose from 6% to 25% of the labor force, while the "old middle class" fell from 33% to 20%, and wage workers fell from 61% to 55%.<sup>42</sup> In the decade 1940-1950, white collar employment showed a 41.9% increase, while manual work increased 36.9%. In the decade 1950-60, white-collar employment increased 27.7% as against a 5.8% increase in manual work.<sup>43</sup>

The 26.6 million white-collar workers in 1960 made up 43.3% of the employed civilian workforce. Of these, 7.2 million were professional, technical and kindred workers, 9.3 million were clerical and kindred workers, 4.6 million were sales workers, and 5.4 million were managerial workers, officials and non-farm proprietors.\* The professional and technical sectors were the fastest growing sector of the entire labor force, increasing 47.0% in the 1950-60 decade.

The growth in white collar employment reflects the changing structure of the economy,

Yet, one must note that while the percentage of white-collar workers in the labor force has increased steadily for decades, the nature or source of this increase has changed in the past ten years. Until 1950, gains in the white-collar sector reflected declines in extractive employment such as agriculture and mining; other manual percentages

---

\* Subsequent discussion of white-collar will omit these last groupings from consideration, since we are interested in trends in the working class.

were still advancing slightly or holding even... The trend in the 1950-60 decade, however, was of a different nature. Farm employment continued to decline, but so did manual of blue-collar employment. The upsurge of white-collar workers in the 1950's was a result of a relative decline in the number of both farm and manual workers.<sup>44</sup>

Projections by the Bureau of Labor Statistics in the early 1970's show a further development of these trends, during a period of rapid expansion of the labor force.<sup>45</sup>

The white-collar worker is the prototype of the middle-class American: the great increase in white-collar employment has been regarded by many as evidence that more and more Americans are moving into middle-class positions.

The middle class has traditionally been associated with a certain social perspective and with working conditions which generally fostered the perspective. The social perspective has been most marked by individualism: "Those who have ability and initiative can overcome obstacles and create their own opportunities. Where a man ends up depends on what he makes of himself."<sup>46</sup> People who see themselves as middle class see the social structure as a highly subdivided hierarchy, and are very conscious of their own position in that continuum. The working conditions which have fostered their outlook are closeness to the management, which has made the ability to rise through the hierarchy an evident possibility, and has allowed workers to identify with the boss, and a certain amount of freedom in their work, which has allowed them to use their brains and be creative.

An examination of the work situation of white-collar workers reveals large areas for which the middle-class image is a very inaccurate description of reality.

In 1960, the six largest occupational groups in the professional and technical category were teachers, engineers, professional nurses (including student nurses), auditors and accountants, physicians and surgeons, and lawyers and judges, which altogether made up more than half the employment in that category.<sup>47</sup> For these groups, the middle class model still has a fair degree of validity.

For many clerical and sales workers, however, the work situation has taken on alienating features formerly associated more exclusively with blue-collar work. These are the antithesis of closeness to management, ability to rise by individual effort, and freedom in the work environment which characterize "middle-class" jobs. They have their origins in structural economic changes: The increasing size of businesses, the bureaucratization and rationalization of managerial functions, the subdivision and mechanization of clerical tasks, and the standardization of qualification for white collar employment.

The growing powerlessness of white collar workers manifests itself in a lack of control over the conditions of employment and over the work process itself.

White-collar workers have always enjoyed greater job security than manual workers. In some measure this has been due to the fact that in manufacturing, the white-collar force was relatively small and could be treated as fixed overhead costs.<sup>48</sup> However, recently white-collar has increased as a proportion of employment in manufacturing. Moreover, the greatest increases in white-collar work are now coming in trade and service industries. Thus it will be increasingly difficult for the white-collar worker to remain immune to fluctuations in the business cycle. Nevertheless, taking into account other factors such as the high turnover among women workers, who account for well over half the white-collar force, it seems likely that white-collar workers will retain a somewhat greater measure of job security than blue-collar workers in the future.

Another aspect of the conditions of employment is working hours. While most white-collar workers continue to work nine to five, telephone operators are among several large groups which do not share this distinction:

The hours, indeed, are likely to be less desirable than those in a factory, because the switchboards must be manned around the clock every day of the year, necessitating night-work, Sunday and holiday work, and split shifts.<sup>49</sup>

Powerlessness in the work process is a much more widespread phenomenon among white-collar workers than shift work, however. It

is an unavoidable result of the economic processes mentioned above: increasing size, rationalization and so on. A girl who can type can no longer expect to become the boss's secretary in a big company; if she can type rapidly enough and passes other more or less objective tests she may be hired as a typist. As such, she does not operate various office machines, circulate and chat among the other secretaries in the office, take dictation from the boss, type his letters, and handle incoming and outgoing mail. She may be placed in a secretarial pool that receives material to be typed from all executive offices. She may transcribe tapes from nine to five, repeatedly using just her one machine, maintaining a rapid pace under steady pressure, unable to take a break or chat with her neighbors except at specified times, and unable to leave her machine and walk among her colleagues. Such a job incorporates all the powerlessness over pace, physical movement, and techniques as the most alienating factory work.<sup>50</sup>

Apart from the nature of the work, such jobs display other important characteristics which differentiate them from the middle class model -- they are not at all close to management, and, largely as a consequence, they do not permit the worker to rise as a result of his individual ambition:

(C)oncentration into larger units and their specialization have made for many blind alleys, lessened the opportunity to learn about "other departments" or the business as a whole. The rationalization of white collar work means that as the number of replaceable positions expands more than the number of higher positions, the chances of climbing decrease. Also, as higher positions become more technical, they are often more likely to be filled by people from outside the hierarchy. So the ideology of promotion -- the expectation of a step-by-step ascent, no longer seems a sure thing.<sup>51</sup>

A very important recent development which sharply accentuates these trends is the growth of office automation. While the potential for automation of the industrial production process is far lower than much of the fanfare might lead one to believe,<sup>52</sup> the automation of large clerical units is one of the few areas which is presently economically feasible, and which in fact has begun to occur at a significant rate.<sup>53</sup>

Ida Hoos has sketched the effects if the introduction of a computer into a large clerical operation:<sup>54</sup> with 500 "positions potential for computer application," the computer leaves in its wake 10-15 positions for programmers, and 50-100 positions for keypunch operators and others in actual operation of the system. Thus

it remains evident that the number of programmers actively associated with computer installation is a relatively small proportion of the total office staff affected....As for the change in classifications, key-punch and tabulating machine operators, for the present at least, replace bookkeeping and accounting clerks as well as routine clerical workers.

The work situation of the keypunch operator and tabulating machine operator is as alienating as any now found in the labor force, producing obvious tensions in the workers. It leads to no automatic promotions, is done in three shifts, permits no variations of technique or pace, no freedom of physical movement, and no conversation. The work is intrinsically meaningless. Work output measurement is "standard procedure" in both government and business, and the operator whose output lags is fired.<sup>55</sup> The pace required is quite fast. All of this leads to a tremendous tension in each worker. One former keypunch comments,

If you just tap one of them on the shoulder when she is working, she'll fly through the ceiling.<sup>56</sup>

Even if one attributes the brutal pace and output requirements to an initial over-zealousness to "make it pay, which will in time disappear, the inherent meaninglessness and alienating nature of the work remains. Thus, to whatever extent office automation turns out to be a significant trend, it will be to the further detriment of the work experience of the white collar work force.

The idea of a "middle class" is naturally an ambiguous one; it can mean a variety of things to different people in different contexts,<sup>57</sup> but whatever else it may connote in a given instance, it almost always carries with it the implication of being "in the middle" in terms of income strata. An examination of the incomes of white-collar groups shows that while their median incomes have been and continue to be somewhat above those of manual workers, thus placing them in middle

income strata, the income differentials between majority sectors of the two groups have shown a long term narrowing.

Mills estimates that the average income of white-collar groups in 1890 was about double that of wage workers.<sup>58</sup> In the great period of unionization after the mid-30's, the incomes of manual workers rose much more rapidly than those of white-collar groups.<sup>59</sup> In the period 1950-63, income for operatives still rose slightly faster than income for clerical workers, 76 against 71%, but income for laborers in the same period rose only 55% as against 88% for professional and technical workers. In 1963, the median annual income for these groupings were: professional and technical, \$7182; clerical, \$5318; operatives, \$4830; and laborers, \$2862. These figures can be misleading in two respects: first, the slower progress of manual workers reflects in part less steady employment, and therefore only in part a slower rate of wage increase, and second, which is probably much more important, these figures are calculated only for men, whereas women made up fully two-thirds of the clerical employment as of 1956,<sup>60</sup> and more than half of all white-collar employment (excluding managers) as of 1960, at which time they accounted for only 15% of the blue collar force.<sup>61</sup> And men earn more, because, in addition to outright discrimination in pay rates,

the disproportionately high number of women in white collar work made (and still makes) the promotion possibilities of the more "stable" male white collar workers much greater.<sup>62</sup>

Taking all these factors into account, we can say that white-collar incomes continue to be somewhat higher than those for manual workers, but also that the incomes of the mass of clerical workers are now only slightly if at all above those of the skilled and semi-skilled operatives, and that the closing of this income gap has been due largely to the strong unionization of blue collar workers.

In recent years there has been an increasingly rapid unionization among white-collar workers also. Between 1900 and 1935, the percentage of white-collar workers unionized went from 2.5 to 5.0. In 1948, Mills estimated that white-collar unionization stood at 16.2%.<sup>63</sup> Kassalow, calling Mills' estimate an early effort, estimates the figure

for 1964 at 11%.<sup>64</sup>

The largest white-collar union is the Retail Clerks International Association, which grew from 259,000 in 1955 to 410,000 in 1965.<sup>65</sup> Much of this rapid increase in membership has come for employees of the large supermarket chains. The Communications Workers of America, composed largely of telephone operators and clerical workers, grew from 249,000 to 288,000 in the same period. Other large and growing unions among clerical and sales workers are the American Federation of Government Employees, 132,000; the National Association of Letter Carriers, 130,000; the United Federation of Postal Clerks, 117,000; the Office Employees International Union, 52,000; the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union, 114,000; and the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, 237,000.

Among the professional and technical workers significant unions include the American Federation of Musicians, 225,000; the Associated Actors and Artists of America (Equity), 61,000; the American Federation of Teachers, 97,000; the American Newspaper Guild, 23,000; the American Federation of Technical Engineers, 11,000; and the Air Line Pilots Association, 18,000.

What does this upsurge of unionism mean in regard to the white-collar workers' traditional middle class attitudes? Obviously, unionization is a collective approach to the employer-employee relation, which the purely middle class model would deal with individually. It implies at least some differentiation between worker's interests and the employer's interest. However, it has not implied rejection of individualistic goals or of extreme status consciousness; it has merely meant a recognition of the usefulness of collective means for attaining the same goals.

Unions, 'instrumentally' accepted, are alternatives to the traditional individualistic means of obtaining the traditional goals of success. They are collective instruments for pursuing individual goals; belonging to them does not modify the goals, although it may make the member feel more urgently about these goals.<sup>66</sup>

In fact, much white-collar unionization appears to be a conservative attempt to restore the shrinking objective basis of status claims. However,

in so far as white-collar claims for prestige rest upon differences between themselves and wage workers, and in so far as the organizations they join are publicly associated with worker organizations, one of the bases of white-collar prestige is done away with.<sup>67</sup>

Nevertheless, white-collar unionism grows because of the manifest necessity of "instrumental collectivism" for groups attempting to maintain the material basis for status claims.

It is quite likely that the progress of unionism among clearly identifiable professional groups may require of their unions that they become guardians of their members' professional status.<sup>68</sup>

Some existing "professional associations," such as the National Education Association and the American Nurses Association, have become collective bargaining agents for their members. The ANA makes a feeble attempt to maintain status differentiation by claiming that "collective bargaining is not to be confused with labor unionism,"<sup>69</sup> but they come out of contract negotiations looking very much like other unions just the same.

There are perhaps a few examples in which white-collar unionism is beginning to look like something more than instrumental collectivism.

the fact that union affairs can be exciting during times of struggle must not be underestimated in the unions appeal to the white collar people.<sup>70</sup>

the New York City teachers' strike of 1962 was certainly an example of such excitement. In the New York City welfare caseworker strike of January, 1967, welfare clients in some areas jammed the welfare centers, "creating confusion for scabs and generating solidarity with workers."<sup>71</sup> Both strikes were formally illegal under the Condon-Wadlin Act. These actions displayed a remarkable disregard for traditional middle class values, and are among the few developments in connection with white collar workers which might suggest the possibility for the development of class consciousness.

III

The thesis that American Society is becoming increasingly "middle Class" has been discussed first in regard to the rising standard of living of the industrial workforce, and second in terms of the increase in white-collar employment. We have examined, in addition, other trends: mechanization in blue-collar work, the contraction of employment in the manufacturing sector, the increasing size of modern businesses, the sealing off of avenues of advancement for both blue collar and white collar workers, and the rationalization and automation of white collar work.

The net result of these social and economic developments have been ambiguous: on the one hand, white collar workers are turning to trade unionism. In fact, the growth of white collar unionism, along with the upsurge in militancy and rank and file revolts in the blue collar unions, are the most significant new features of the labor movement in the middle sixties.<sup>72</sup> And among the industrial workers in mass production industries, 1. working class attitudes to politics, social problems and class differences, 2. the need for collective action to deal with employers and 3. the persistence of the problems of work and employment security, have acted as barriers to the penetration of a thorough middle class outlook. The middle class norms of individual advancement through one's own efforts, of perceiving the social structure as a ladder to climb with no basis conflicts between those on the top and those further down, and of self-development and freedom in one's work are even more irrelevant to working class realities today than they were fifty years ago. The only solutions a status-conscious, consumption orientated culture can offer to the real problems of blue-collar and white-collar life on the job are escapist and unreal.

But, on the other hand, middle class consumption patterns are shaping manual workers aspirations and their attitudes to their unions, and status considerations are still a major component of the white-collar worker's view of himself and his goals, even after he accepts the need for collective action through unionism. The only counter-tendencies towards a class consciousness and potential radicalism

characteristic of earlier working class generations, are found among manual workers who stringly identify with a solidaristic unionism that stresses group involvement, conflict, and self socrifice; and among some social service professionals, whose backgrounds and values come into conflict with what is required of them in their work.

The middle class picture of the American working class is more a distortion of reality than a pure fabrication: it fails to account for the contradictory of many who accept collective action yet pusue individualistic goals. It misses the significant counter trends which limit the impact of rising living standards and white-collar employment, or which change the meaning of these phenomenon for the workers involved. Above all, it is largely irrelevant to the work experiences of most blue-collar and white-collar workers.

1. Gabriel Kolko, Wealth and Power in America, p.99.
2. Ibid, p.101.
3. U.S. Bureau of the Census, Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1965, p.237.
4. Sidney Lens, The Crisis of American Labor, p.210.
5. Albert Rees, The Economics of Trade Unions, p.78.
6. Ibid, p.96.
7. Kolko, op. cit., p.85.
8. Harvey Swados, "The UAW: Over the Top of Over the Hill," in The Radical Papers (Howe, ed.), p.247.
9. Ibid, p. 247.
10. Robert Blauner, Alienation and Freedom, p. 89.
11. Charles Walker and Robert Guest, The Man on the Assembly Line, p.19.
12. Blauner, Op. cit., p. 207.
13. Harvey Swados, On the Line, p. 65.
14. Swados, 'The UAW' op. cit., p. 129. Quoted from Newsweek, April 1, 1963.
15. Solomon Barkin, The Decline of the Labor Movement, p. 11.
16. Ben Seligman, "Automation and the unions," in The Radical Papers
17. Ely Chinoy, The Automobile Workers and the American Dream, Chapters Four and Five.
18. William Faunce, "Automation and the Automobile Worker" in Labor and Trade Unionism, (Galenson and Lipsit, eds.)
19. The unions are also concerned with job classification and working conditions, but in these areas as well they have generally hesitated to challenge the right of management to determine the uses and impact of new technologies.
20. C. Wright Mills, The New Men of Power, Chapter 1.
21. Robin Williams, American Society: A sociological Interpretation, pp. 107 & 133.
22. John Goldthorpe and Davis Lockwood, Affluence and the British Class Structure, p. 7.
23. Williams, op. cit., p. 133. and Bernet Berger, Workingclass Suburb: A Study of Auto Workers in Suburbia, p. 119.
24. John Leggett, "Sources and Consequences of Workingclass Consciousness," in Blue Collar World, (Shostak & Gomberg, eds.), p. 242.
25. Berger, op. cit., pp. 37, 112 & 122.

26. Williams, op. cit. , p. 108.
27. William Dobriner, Class in Suburbia, pp. 51-52.
28. Berger, op. cit., p. 39.
29. Chinoy, op. cit., p. 97
30. Ibid, p. 128.
31. Goldthorpe and Lockwood, op. cit.
32. Lens, op. cit., p. 274.
33. Berger, op. cit., p. 119
34. Daniel Bell, The End of Ideology, p. 259.
35. Chinoy, Op. cit., p. 125
36. Bureau of the Census, op. cit., p. 237. and Kolko, op. cit. p. 85.
37. Walker and Guest, op. cit., p. 133.
38. Mills, op. cit., p. 95.
39. Chinoy, op. cit., p. 106.
40. Goldthorpe and Lockwood, op. cit., p. 11.
41. Bureau of the Census, op. cit., p. 250.
42. C, Wright Mills, White Collar, p. 61.
43. Everett M. Kassalow, "White Collar Unionism in the United States"  
in White Collar Trade Unions, (Sturnthal, ed.), p. 307.
44. Ibid, p. 206.
45. Ibid, p. 308
46. Goldthorpe and Lockwood, op. cit., p. 8.
47. Kassalow, op. cit., p. 312.
48. Ibid, p. 308.
49. Seidman et. al., The Worker Views His Union, p. 141.
50. Blauner, op. cit.
51. Mills, White Collar, pp. 274-275.
52. Gorges Friedman, The Anatomy of Work, p. xiv.
53. Ida R. Hoos, Automation in the Office, pp. 23-25.
54. Ibid, p 45.
55. Ibid, p. 79.
56. Ibid, p. 67.
57. Goldthorpe and Lockwood, op. cit., p. 6.
58. Mills, White Collar, p. 72.
59. Kassalow, op. cit., p. 361.
60. Hoos, op. cit., p. 23.
61. Kassalow, op. cit., p. 309.
62. Ibid, p. 340.

63. Mills, White Collar, p. 302.
64. Kassalow, op. cit., p. 338.
65. Ibid, p. 340.
66. Mills, White Collar, p. 309.
67. Ibid, p. 312.
68. Kassalow, op. cit., p. 354.
69. Ibid, p. 352.
70. Mills, White Collar, p. 310.
71. Barry Gorden, "SSEU: Problems and Prospects" Independent Socialist March-April 1967, p. 16.
72. Gus Tyler, "Fresh Breezes in the Labor Movement," New Republic, May 20, 1967. and Stanley Weir, The New Era of Labor Revolt

