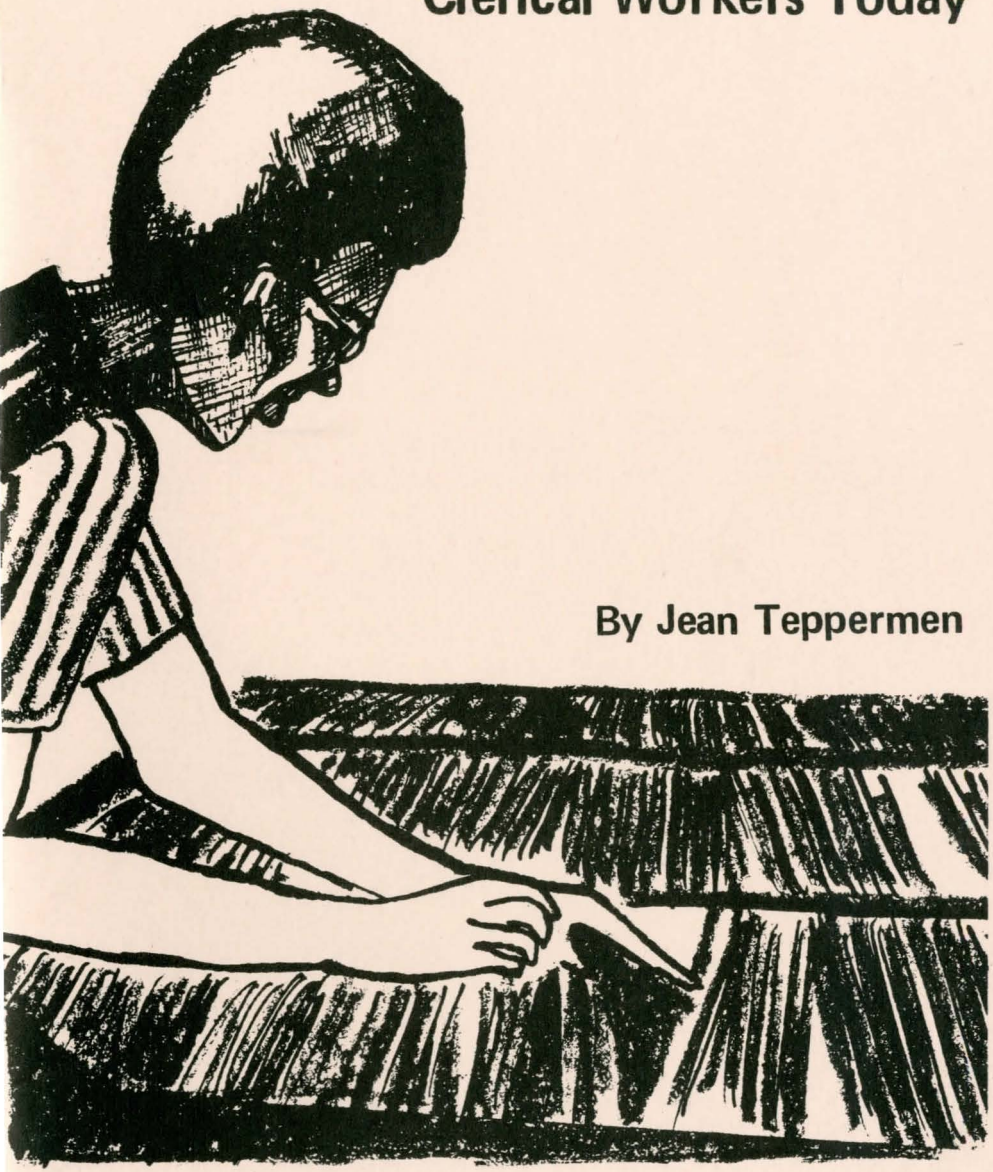
60 Words A Minute And What Do You Get?

Clerical Workers Today



By Jean Teppermen

cover graphic from *Working Women: Our Stories and Struggles,*
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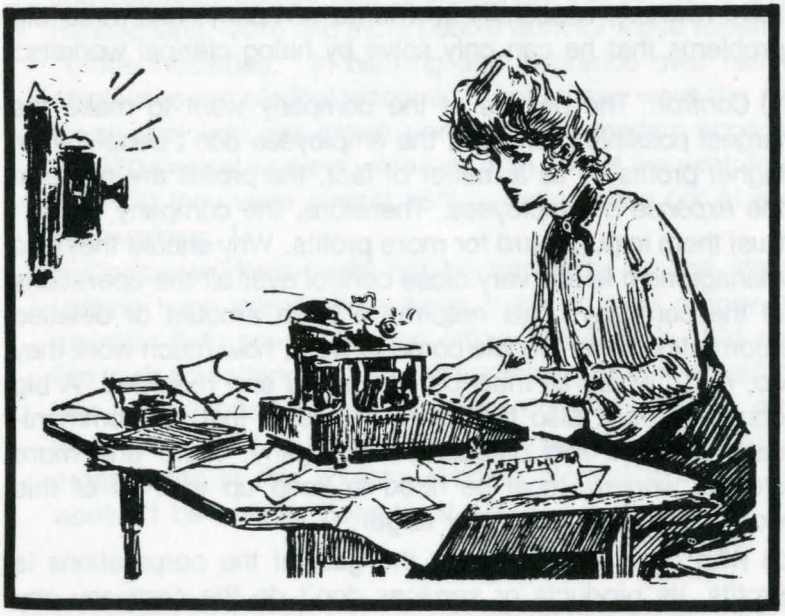
1. WHAT DO YOU DO ALL DAY IN THAT OFFICE?

About 15 million clerical workers go to work every day in America. They disappear quietly into offices to type, file, sort, record, answer phones, and run machines — work which many people, including many office workers, think is really not very important. But in fact the "important" people in the economy would be helpless without them — they wouldn't know where anything was, who owed money to whom, whether people were coming to work, who had called them up on the phone. They wouldn't be able to provide customer services, order supplies, or use their multi-million dollar computer systems. Some wouldn't be able to do their own Christmas shopping, or remember to pick up the laundry.



The more modern and industrialized a country becomes, the more its economy depends on clerical workers. An industrial economy is very complicated because jobs and industries are very specialized. Each job and each product has to fit into a total national and international system of production and distribution — from raw materials to finished products to consumers. Within a single enterprise, many separate jobs have to be organized and coordinated, records kept, orders processed, inventory checked, and supplies maintained.

All of this depends on clerical work — communicating and processing information, keeping records, keeping track of each transaction. The clerical work force is the nerve system that coordinates all the activity of an industrial society.

The American economic system — advanced industrial capitalism — is especially dependent on clerical work. (Capitalism is an economic system in which private individuals or groups own the companies and businesses, and hire other people to work for them. The reason these companies produce things, or perform services, is to make profits for their owners, not to meet people's needs.) A modern capitalist (owner), especially in a large company, has three big problems that he can only solve by hiring clerical workers:

1) *Control:* The owners of the company want to make the largest possible profit. But the employees don't benefit from higher profits — as a matter of fact, the profits are made at the *expense* of employees. Therefore, the company doesn't trust them to push hard for more profits. Why should they? So management keeps very close control over all the operations of the company. This requires a huge amount of detailed information (when people come to work, how much work they do, etc.), which all must be processed and recorded. A big company must also hire a lot of people just for communications inside and outside the company. More and more clerical workers must be hired to keep up with all of this work, as companies grow larger.

2) *Who owns what?:* Since the goal of the corporations is profits, its products or services don't do the company any

good until they are sold. Buying and selling is the basis of the economy. So the job of keeping track of it all is crucial — you have to know who owns what and who owes money to whom at every moment. Keeping up with all these transactions requires a vast amount of clerical work — billing, making payments, accounting, etc.

3) *Cheating:* Since every corporation is trying to make the most money possible, they must try to get the advantage in every transaction. This means they can't trust each other's records — every corporation has to keep its own records to make sure it's not being cheated. Every transaction is recorded at least twice, once in the books of each company involved. This is another reason why so much cleriacl work is needed.

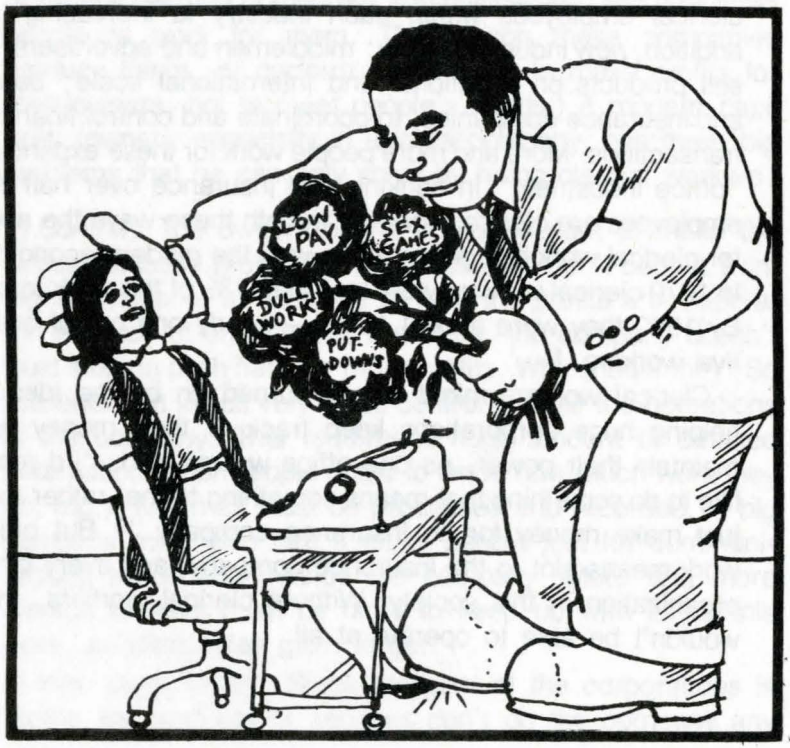
As corporations grow larger and operate in a national and world economy, all of these problems grow larger, and require more clerical work. This is why the percentage of clerical employees *within* each industry is increasing. In addition, *new* industries grow: middlemen and advertisers, to sell products on a national and international scale; banks and insurance companies, to coordinate and control financial transactions. More and more people work for these expanding "office industries." In banking and insurance over half the employees are clerical workers. In both these ways the need for clerical work has grown along with the modern economy. In 1870 clerical workers were less than 1% of the work force. By 1970 they were almost 18% — nearly one out of every five workers. [1]

Clerical workers might not be turned on by the idea of helping huge corporations keep track of their money and maintain their power. As one office worker said, "I'd really like to do something that means something to me, rather than just make money for an insurance company."[2] But office work means alot to the insurance company, and every other organization in this society. Without clerical workers, they wouldn't be able to operate at all.

2. 60 WPM AND WHAT DO YOU GET?

What does all this mean for the millions of people who go to work in offices? It means filling out forms, checking and filing orders and invoices, taking information and correspondence by phone, by dictation, by dictaphone — then typing it, key-punching it, processing it in a dozen ways. Many of the clerical jobs that keep the country tied together require skill in the organization of countless details, or in fast and accurate typing, or in dealing with people tactfully.

Since clerical work is so important to the economy, you



Change/CPS

might expect that clerical workers would be well rewarded in pay and recognition. Instead, office workers get:

Low pay: The average clerical worker makes less than the average factory worker. Clerical work is the lowest-paid category of work in the US today, except for service work. [3] With inflation rising so fast, dollar figures grow rapidly out of date. But in 1974, for example, an average starting salary for clerical workers in many cities was around $5,000 or lower.

Poor benefits: Because most clerical workers are not unionized, policy about benefits (sick days, health insurance, etc.) is completely up to the employer. Some companies give supervisors the power to suspend a person's sick leave "privileges." Many places give clericals as few as five sick days a year, or hassle people if they take sick leave to which they're supposedly entitled. In most companies, employees are not allowed to apply accrued sick leave to maternity leave, which discriminates against the vast majority of clerical workers who are women.

Hassles from supervisors: Many clerical workers are constantly hassled by their supervisors — for talking too much, for being away from their desks, for making mistakes in their work. Companies encourage supervisors to act like this, by pressuring *them* to increase production in their units. They also manipulate supervisors by telling them they are now part of management, superior to the workers under them. All this helps increase production, and therefore company profits — and helps make life miserable in offices.

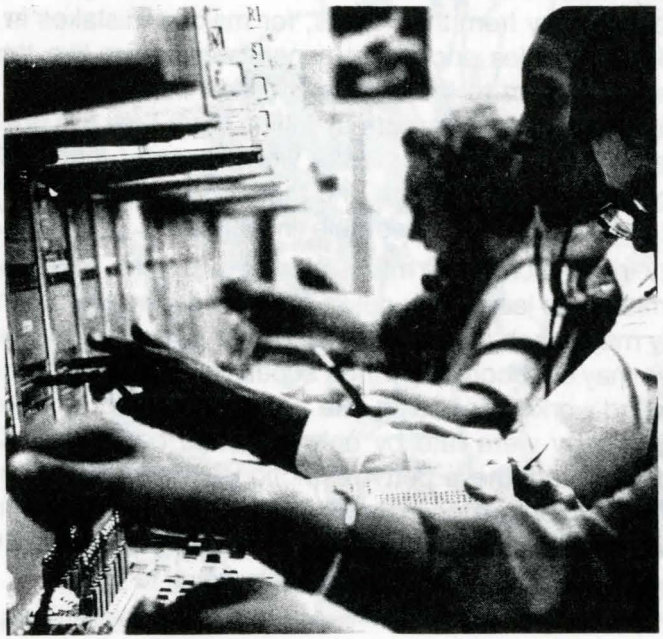
Petty restrictions: In many offices, workers have to ask permission to leave their desks, even to go the the bathroom. They may punch a time clock — or the times they arrive and leave may be recorded by their supervisors. Some companies suspend workers for being late a certain number of times — even if they were late by only a minute each time. Office workers resent these petty restrictions, especially when they see the higher ranking male workers coming and going freely, taking long lunch hours, and generally being treated as if they were above the rules that clericals have to obey.

Race and sex discrimination: Even within clerical work — a "woman's job" — women are at the bottom — concentrated in the lower job categories, and paid less than men for the same jobs.

Racial discrimination bars many Black and other Third World women from the "privilege" of getting clerical jobs at all. Over ⅓ of white women, but only about ¼ of black women are clerical workers.[4] More Black women are pushed into even lower-paid "women's jobs," in factories or service industries.

Even within the clerical field, minority women tend to be concentrated in certain jobs, such as keypunching and filing — routine jobs that pay the least and are subject to the most speed-up and rigid supervision. They are also the most "dead-end" jobs — cut off from other occupations within the company.

The servant treatment: "Sit down, my girl will get you a cup of coffee." "Be an angel and type this for me, will you?" "This OFFICE is a mess — why doesn't anybody straighten up my desk?"



Remarks like these are part of the tradition of office life — that men (bosses) can treat women (clericals) like their personal servants. Traditional secretaries' handbooks include whole chapters on how to manage your boss's Christmas gift list and personal bank account. Even when women are not private secretaries, they are liable to be approached by men from anywhere in the company, who try to charm or intimidate them into doing little chores.

Clerical workers resent not only the chores, but also the patronizing attitude that goes along with this expectation. They resent being seen as "girls" — never as equal adults.

Lack of respect: All of these things — low pay, hassles, restrictions — show employers' lack of respect for clerical workers.

One legal secretary said, "Secretaries are viewed totally as machines. They are ignored. For instance, if an attorney brings a client into his office, he will introduce everybody but the secretary. Unless he wants coffee he won't speak to her."

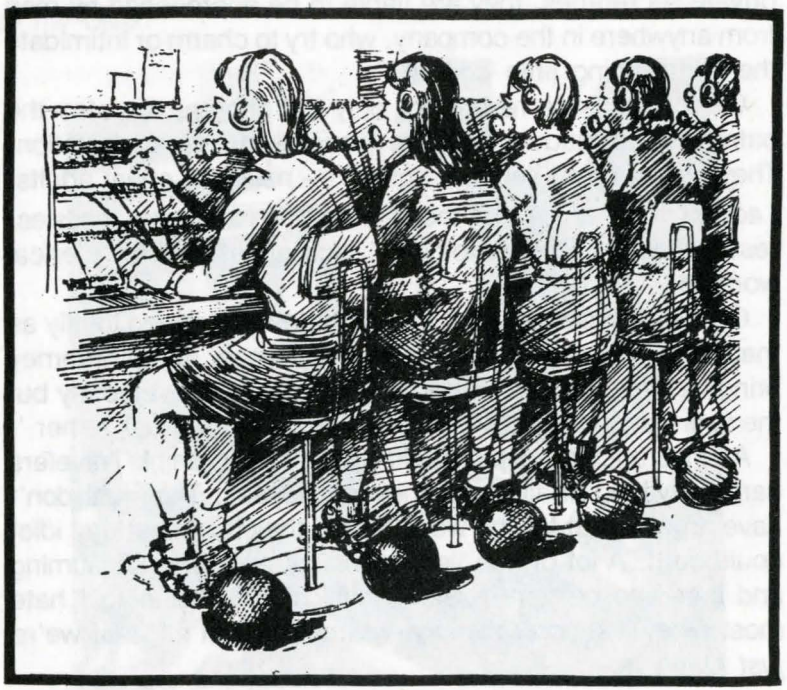
An insurance clerk put it this way: "I don't think Travelers cares anything at all about their employees. They just don't have any respect for the work we do, they think that any idiot could do it. A lot of it is very technical and time consuming and it has to be very exact. I think that's the thing I hate most. They just don't think we're important at all, that we're *just* clericals."

3. WHAT IS THE COMPANY REALLY UP TO?

How can companies treat clericals like this, when clerical work is really so crucial to their operations? Behind every-day office problems are some basic patterns which shape clerical work and working conditions:

1. The job ghetto

One big reason for clerical workers' low pay and poor treatment is that 80% of clerical workers are women.[5] To turn it around, one-third of all working women today are clerical workers — by far the largest occupation of women.



In general, most working women are concentrated in a very few occupations — waitress, sales clerk, teacher, clerical worker, maid, and certain factory jobs. Employers know that a huge group of women must compete for jobs in the same few occupations because of sex discrimination — they have a hard time getting any other jobs. That means employers can offer low pay and poor conditions in these "women's jobs" and still be confident that the women will take them. This creates what Caroline Bird calls the "job ghetto" — and clerical work is the biggest women's job ghetto of all.

We said before that the average clerical worker earns less than the average factory worker. But if you break the statistics down by sex, the picture changes. Male clericals earn more than male factory workers. Female clericals earn a little more than female factory workers. But both categories of men earn more than both categories of women.[6] The average pay comes out lower for clericals because most clericals are women.

This reflects the general pattern of sexism in employment. Today women's earnings still average only about ⅔ of men's.[7] Within clerical work, the same patterns exist. Women clericals earn less than ⅔ of male clerical earnings.[8] Women are concentrated in the lowest job levels — as the job grade goes up, the percentage of women in the job goes down. Even *within* a particular job category (such as "bank tellers with over five years of experience"), men get paid more than women.[9]

Sex discrimination in employment works as a whole system — the fact that women are discriminated against in one occupation makes it easier to pay them low wages in another. Employers of clerical workers reap the benefits of this system — and help keep it going by paying low wages themselves.

2. The job pyramid

As companies grew larger and hired more clerical workers, clerical salaries began to be a significant expense. Companies grew less casual in their treatment of office workers, and started looking seriously for ways to cut costs and increase production in offices. They began to borrow ideas from factories, in re-organizing the work in offices.

"THE ONLY THING SHE SEES IS THAT RED LIGHT, SHE JUST TYPES UNTIL IT GOES OUT."

This mainly meant breaking all the work down into very specialized, routine jobs, like an assembly line in which each person adds one piece to a car. In a typical insurance company, for example, opening mail, coding information for computers, rating policies, checking medical information, filing, keypunching — all are different jobs, each done by people who do only that particular task all day long.

People used to think that this assembly-line principle could only be used for "manual" work. But even jobs that used to be considered "mental" work have been divided into specialized, routine tasks. The real judgments and real control over how work is done are the "specialty" of a few people at the top, who make decisions and send down policies through layers of managers and supervisors.

Private secretaries traditionally had the opportunity to become involved in their boss's work, so their jobs were more interesting and varied. Now executives send most of their big typing jobs to typing pools ("word processing centers" if they have been jazzed up with new machines and terminology). People who remain in the departments as secretaries tend to

work for several bosses, struggling just to keep up with correspondence and phone calls, with little chance to become involved in their bosses' work.

Along with the specialization of jobs has come automation. Routine jobs are easier to automate — and machines further the process of routinizing clerical work. Computers have now taken over many office jobs, such as filing and bookkeeping, but have created new routine jobs, such as keypunching. Computers have also affected the jobs of many people who don't work with them directly, because all information in the office has to be broken down into uniform little bits the computer can process. Computers also increase the pressure for absolute accuracy, because the computer can't interpret or understand anything that isn't exactly what it's been programmed to receive.

The "mag card" typewriter or "word processing machine" has also taken over much routine work, by "individually typing" form letters which it stores in its magnetic tape "memory." But the people who operate it — many of whom used to be secretaries with varied duties — become "specialists" who sit and operate this one machine all day long.

Jobs in modern offices are often so specialized and divided up that workers don't understand their work. They know how to do their particular task, but no one ever explains how that fits into the big picture. A bank employee who operates a check sorting machine said, "They don't give you enough training on what happens to the check. Some of the words they use — 'you're running DDA today.' Fine. I know that DDA means you're running the main type of work with the orange separator card, but I don't know what DDA means. It means debit something. Or DV, or SDA or GLE — you know, all these words. It would be nice if you knew what they were or where the checks come from or where they're going. It's just a feeling of not knowing. It's like the machine running you. You're like a computer. 'WE'll RUn DDA today.'"

It would be possible to organize work differently — to work in groups, to share or rotate responsibilities, to discuss among all the workers the best way of getting a job done. But the way work is organized now helps capitalist businesses

make more profits, in several ways:

Justifying low pay to workers. If most work is divided into routine tasks, companies can pay low wages, claiming that's all these jobs are "worth." It's one of the principles of capitalist management that every task should be done by the lowest-paid worker who can possibly do it. This means that in every organization there's a job pyramid, with most people in low-paid, low-status jobs at the bottom, and a small group controlling everything from the top. If ordinary workers were given more knowledge and responsibility, it would be harder to justify low clerical salaries. This way the company talks about how simple each task is — and hides the fact that it couldn't operate at all without the clerical workers.

Increasing production. When clerical work is centralized and specialized, it is possible to hire "professional" supervisors — people whose job it is to see that the clericals are working as fast as they can. In addition, with most people doing routine, repetitive jobs, the company can actually *measure* how much work a person is doing. Many clerical jobs require the employee to keep a count of how many pages she has typed, or cards punched, or forms processed. Sometimes machines are set to keep track automatically, so no cheating is possible.

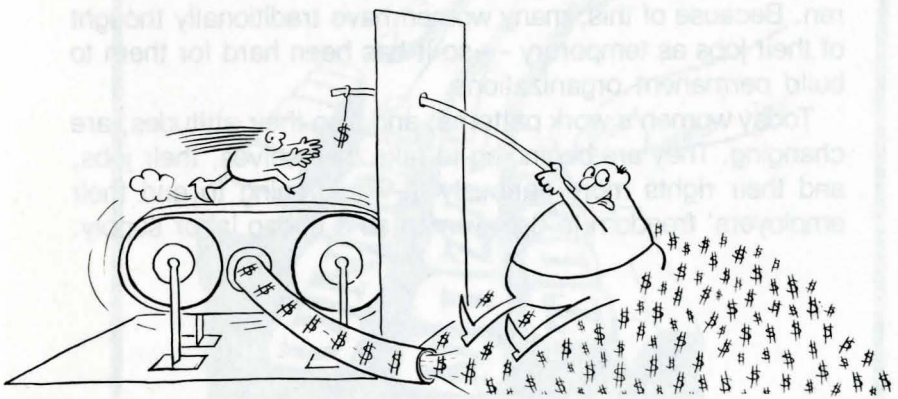
Managers can then compare a person's output per day with what they think it *should* be. They decide what the output should be by using various techniques of "scientific management." Some "efficiency experts" might time a fast worker doing the job, and set the standard by her. Others might use standard tables of how many seconds each kind of motion is supposed to take. These tables rate motions like "grasp paper," "insert page in typewriter," etc. The manager simply has to add up all these time values to come out with a "standard" time for typing a particular form.

However the company sets its standards, it can use them to decide whether to give someone a raise or fire her. Knowing this, many office workers are under constant pressure to produce. Some companies have gone farther, actually paying people bonuses for producing more work. This system —

called "piecework" in factories — has long been recognized by blue collar workers as a way of goading people into working faster. Factory workers have discovered that the "rates" are rigged so that most people don't make much — but everyone pushes to make as much as she can.

Keeping control. When work is divided up into separate tasks, nobody understands how it fits together except management. So it's easier for management to keep total control, and force workers to do things exactly the way the company decides is most profitable. If workers were involved in deciding how the work was to be done, they might decide to do it differently — so it would be more interesting for them, or so they could give better service to customers, even if these things cut into the profits.

Even now, many insurance company employees are shocked at the way their companies cheat policy holders. Publishing employees have protested against sexist language in textbooks. If workers had more say in what they were doing, they might decide to put human needs and values before profits. But this goes against the whole logic of capitalism.



3. Lack of power

The fact that jobs are "simple" or routine isn't the real reason for low clerical pay and poor conditions. In a capitalist economy, any group of workers gets only as much as it can force employers to give. Some clerical workers in the past have organized or joined unions to get more power in bargaining with their employers. But the percentage of clerical workers who are unionized has always been low — it is now lower than for any other major occupation.

Partly this is due to women's lack of alternatives on the job market. Women usually can't quit to get a better job, because of the system of sex discrimination — most women's jobs are the same or worse. When they challenge their employers, or try to organize, it is easy for bosses to find replacements for troublesome or "uppity" women.

In addition, office employers have often successfully manipulated clerical workers into thinking they could make it on their own, without getting together. Clerical workers often buy the line that they are "above" organizing unions, because their jobs have "white collar" status.

Especially in the past, there were also difficulties in organizing such a predominantly female occupation. Most women are taught that their jobs aren't a very important part of their lives. Women's responsibilities have often taken them in and out of the job market, as they juggle jobs, homes and children. Because of this, many women have traditionally thought of their jobs as temporary — so it has been hard for them to build permanent organizations.

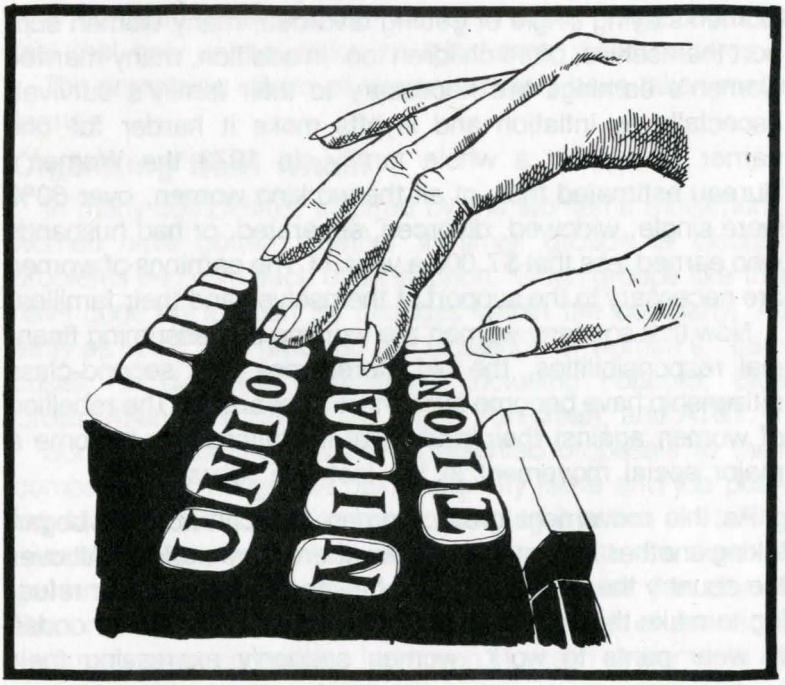
Today women's work patterns, and also their attitudes, are changing. They are beginning to take themselves, their jobs, and their rights more seriously — threatening to end their employers' freedom to use women as a cheap labor supply.

4. "NOW YOU CAN BE AN UPPITY WOMAN ON YOUR JOB AND NOT BE ALONE."

—a California clerical worker

Most office workers are still unorganized. But there are signs all over that this is changing, that a new spirit and a new movement are growing among office workers.

Labor statistics show that every year more groups of white collar employees vote to join unions.[10] Employers' magazines run worried articles with titles like, "Is Bank Unionization Inevitable?"[11] Organizations of women office workers have begun in several cities: 9to5 in Boston, Women Employed in Chicago, etc. Women in universities, publishing houses, and other companies are forming women's commit-



tees and clerical committees where they work.

Why are office workers organizing now, after holding back from group action so long? There are two main reasons:

Office work is changing. The trend toward large-scale, factory-like offices is continuing. Clerical workers, who used to be paid more and treated better than the average worker, are now paid less, and have lost traditional "white collar" privileges like job security and a "personal" relationship with the boss. The economic problems of the seventies — inflation and unemployment — have also made many office workers feel that they have to get together and fight in order to make any gains.

And women are changing. The most basic change in the lives of women is that more of them are working outside the home, for more years of their lives. The average woman now works outside the home for 25 years. [12] Her job is not a little something to keep her busy for a few years until she gets married, but a major part of her life.

And the money women earn is not "pin money." With more women staying single or getting divorced, many women support themselves, often children too. In addition, many married women's earnings are necessary to their family's survival, especially as inflation and layoffs make it harder for one earner to support a whole family. In 1973 the Women's Bureau estimated that, of all the working women, over 60% were single, widowed, divorced, separated, or had husbands who earned less that $7,000 a year. [13] The earnings of women are necessary to the support of themselves and their families.

Now that so many women are working and assuming financial responsibilities, the old stereotypes and second-class citizenship have become even more unbearable. The rebellion of women against their traditional limitations has become a major social movement in the last five years.

As this movement grew, women clerical workers began taking another look at the offices where they worked. All over the country there were small rebellions — secretaries refusing to make the coffee, groups of clerks defying dress codes to wear pants to work, women suddenly expressing their

anger at being called "girls" or patted on the behind.

This questioning grew deeper. They started looking at pay, promotions, benefits — seeing that the higher ranking men in their companies had it better on every score. They began to feel that only united action could change these patterns.

The organizing efforts of clerical workers have taken many forms:

Organizing from within

In many companies, inspired by the women's movement, women have gotten together in small groups to discuss problems and give each other support. Often groups like this have gone on to push for changes within the company. As early as 1972, *Ms.* reported the existence of women's "caucuses" in over 100 companies, including Polaroid, Blue Cross, Atlantic Richfield, GE, Scott Foresman, and AT&T.[14]

Some groups like this have presented proposals to their companies for things like paid maternity leave and job posting. Many found that they had to use legal action — taking companies to court or threatening them with the loss of government contracts. Women who worked for the city of Boston, Polaroid, Kraft Foods, AT&T, the Bank of America, and many other companies have won big cash settlements as

compensation for past discrimination, plus agreements on promotions for women, through legal action.

Many clerical workers have participated in and benefitted from groups like this. Besides the concrete victories they win, they bring women together in a way that may be tolerated by the company. But often women's caucuses are started and dominated by women with higher positions in the company to begin with — professionals and lower-level managers. The focus tends to be on promotion, rather than on improving the conditions of women at every level. But only a minority of women will benefit from promotions — because of the job pyramid, there just aren't enough high-level jobs to go around.

Some clerical workers, especially in universities, have formed action groups just for clericals, or for all non-professional staff, such as the Committee for the Rights of Office Workers at Syracuse University, and the Concerned Clericals at the University of Michigan.

City-wide organizations

Some office workers from several companies have joined together to form city-wide organizations, like 9to5 in Boston, and Women Employed (WE) in Chicago. Often office workers will find each other through a chapter of NOW, and set up a "task force" to organize other office workers, like the Indian-

apolis group that decided in 1974 to make the insurance industry a target of their organizing.

Groups like this provide support for women organizing within particular companies. For example, WE was important in helping Kraft women win their legal battle against discrimination. WE also set up classes and training sessions on organizing skills and strategies. Group members can also provide practical help for each other's organizing efforts. It's a common practice for WE members to leaflet each others' companies, so employees' jobs will not be jeopardized by actions against their company.

City-wide organizations also campaign for things that affect all office workers. For example, 9to5 lobbied in the state legislature for a bill that would extend maternity leave rights.9to5 members who work in insurance drew up a set of regulations against sexist practices in insurance companies, and pressured the state insurance commissioner to adopt them. Through rallies, hearings, and public campaigns, they make clerical workers aware of the possibility of organizing and taking action.

Office workers participating in these groups change more than employers' practices and state regulations. They also change themselves. WE's chairperson, Darlene Stills, describes it like this:

"I don't believe there was one of us in Women Employed who had ever made a speech or written a leaflet or engaged in any type of organizing before. We didn't know we could to it because we had never had a chance to do it. And it's one of the most pleasant surprises that a woman can have, to get up to do something new and find out that indeed she can do it! And we all give each other a great deal of support."

Unions

In spite of a growing movement toward more organization, many office workers are reluctant to join unions, for several reasons. One is that many unions are male-dominated and undemocratic, and haven't made much effort to organize office workers. Another reason is that many people think of unions as something just for factory workers. But the first thing office workers usually say when unions are mentioned is

"If that ever happened in my company, they'd fire everybody." Fear is the trump card management uses to keep workers unorganized and powerless. In spite of all these things, clerical workers are increasingly turning to union organizing, as they find that only a strong organization that unites all the workers has the power to win big changes.

Some clericals who are public employees have joined unions as part of the great movement toward unionizing among all public employees. Others, especially in universities and publishing, tried women's committees and clerical groups first, and concluded that they needed an organization with more power. So they turned their groups into union organizing committees — at Harvard, the University of Michigan, the University of Indiana, and many other schools.

Banks and insurance companies have been slower to organize, mostly because of their huge size and repressive atmosphere. But even in these giant "office industries," the number of unionized companies is increasing. Other banks and insurance companies have seen unsuccessful attempts to unionize — but that, too, is part of the process of organization. Even unsuccessful union drives show that the idea of unionization is spreading into these industries. And the efforts tend to be more successful the second time around. Some companies, like the Bank of America in San Francisco, pour their resources into high-powered anti-union campaigns — only to find employees making an even stronger effort to organize the following year.

Union troubles

Office workers who join unions often discover that some of their fears came true — the union *is* bureaucratic, male-dominated, cozy with management. But in organizing, clerical workers have developed a spirit of independence and a confidence in their strength as women and workers. With this spirit, they have gone on to fight for rank and file control in their own unions.

Some have decided to form independent unions, like the clerical and technical employees of the city of Pasadena. One of them wrote, "It seems the local AFSCME has *not* done well

for its present membership... We believe that, at present, we will be better off with our own union... Also the leadership of AFSCME is all male and doesn't understand us."

Most groups, even if they start off independent, eventually decide they need the financial backing and experience of an established union. But inside the union they are standing up for themselves. Some groups of clerical workers have organized themselves first, then picked their union carefully. The workers at Mastercharge, in San Francisco, for example, insisted on writing their own leaflets and running their own organizing campaign, although they were told by "expert" organizers that they should leave everything up to professional union staff.

Some clerical workers in established unions have formed their own councils or caucuses to demand more say in their unions. This is especially true in the San Francisco area, where rank and file caucuses of clerical workers have gotten together in several locals of the Service Employees Inter-

national Union and the Office and Professional Employees. These groups put out newsletters, push clerical workers' and women's special concerns, and try to mobilize clerks to participate more in their unions. Their actions challenge the male-chauvanist idea that women should leave leadership to men. They also challenge the bureaucratic habits of most American unions, whose full time staff members often consider workers too "dumb" or "apathetic" to be involved in union decision-making.

Unions and beyond

A democratic, fighting union can win workers real gains in pay, working conditions, and benefits. Unions can also be a powerful weapon for fighting sex discrimination. A good union contract can require the employer to follow fair hiring and promotion procedures and provide benefits that are especially important to women, such as paid maternity leave and more paid "personal days" off.

But clerical workers, like other unionized workers, have found that even a good union doesn't solve all the problems. Ginny Cutting, a business agent for telephone operators, explained it this way:

"Unfortunately, a union's position is to react... People say to me, 'Stop them from laying me off,' and I can't. The company has the 'right' to lay these people off. The only thing that you can see is that they do it according to the contract. And there are problems that we can't get rid of. Constant supervision. Constant observation. They have the right to observation. They have the right to measure the work an employee does. We have the right to grieve it if we feel she's being treated unfairly."

The deepest problems workers have are built into the capitalist system itself. They come from the simple fact that the employers own the companies, and that their goal is profits, not workers' or customers' welfare. Any gains workers make — in pay, work rules or benefits — will have to be fought for, because they cut into the company's freedom to use people in a way that makes the most profits.

Clerical workers, like others, are now organizing and fighting to defend themselves against company power and

priorities. The stronger their organizations grow, the more benefits they can win.

The growing clerical workers' movement is also a part of a larger working class movement, and adds to its power. Clerical unions, as they form, will join other workers' organizations to build a stronger union movement. Clerical workers who become active organizing on the job may also be part of community, tenants' and women's groups. Members of their families may be active in other workers' organizations most clerical workers' husbands are blue collar workers. Many others work as public employees or in other occupations with strong union activity.

Like the office workers' movement, this larger working class movement is growing, as working people rebel against being forced to bear the burdens of capitalism's economic problems. In the long run, the problems of clerical workers — and all workers — can only *really* be solved when the workers' movement gets strong enough to wipe out capitalism completely, and set up a new system in which workers own and run the companies themselves.

5. OFFICE WORK IN A SOCIALIST SOCIETY

Once the goal of profit is eliminated, and workers participate in running their companies, a lot of things become possible. First of all, we could eliminate the practice of paying women and Third World people less. The "job ghetto" is kept going by people who profit from exploiting cheap labor — if they lost their power to use people this way, discrimination would be a lot easier to fight. And if no money was going to profits for the rich, there would be enough to pay everyone a decent salary.

Within an office, workers could sit down together regularly to discuss how the work is going. We are in the best position to figure out solutions, since we do the work every day. We would not have to put up with people coming down from the executive suites and laying down the law about new and cumbersome procedures. We could decide the best way to divide up work among everybody in the office — a way that would be best for *us* (like sharing boring jobs, or assigning people to tasks they preferred). Everyone in the office could learn all the jobs — no one would have a stake in keeping other people ignorant, to preserve his own importance.

Low pay, layoffs, piling more and more work onto people — all these exist because companies are trying to "cut labor costs." In a socialist office, people's needs could be considered before money — because there would be no owner demanding maximum profits. Workers' opinions about how much work they could handle could be taken seriously. If there wasn't *enough* work for all the people in the office, some could be transferred to another job, because the economy would be planned and coordinated. No one would have to sit

at her desk trying to look busy, for fear of being unemployed. If the goal is meeting people's needs, not profit, there's always work to be done.

In a capitalist system, most office work doesn't *mean* anything to the people who do it. We can spend days, weeks, years, carefully keeping track of which invoices have been paid, or which salesmen have earned which commissions — but deep down, we couldn't care less.

In a socialist economy, the purpose of clerical work would not be to help the company make more profits. A lot of the complicated financial dealings of capitalism would be eliminated. Instead, clerical workers would do necessary coordination, communication, and record-keeping: making sure people got the goods and services they needed, making sure everybody had a job that suited their abilities, etc. In a society where profit was not the goal, many more of the jobs would be in service organizations like hospitals, day care centers, schools, and social agencies — including many clerical jobs. But wherever a clerical worked, she or he would have the satisfaction of knowing that the work was serving a real purpose, helping to improve the lives of ordinary people.

China, an example

All of this is so different from the offices we work in that it may sound utopian. But there are countries where many of these ideas are being put into practice.

In the US a person can be fired for criticizing company policy, or her boss's way of running the department. But in a socialist country, such as China, workers in every department hold regular meetings to discuss how their department is being run, and make suggestions for change.

Do you have a boss who's never available when you need him? Your department meeting could decide to set a certain time every day when he had to be in his office to answer questions and help solve problems. Does your boss call everyone who works for him "what's-her-name?" In China his department would probably criticize him for this lack of respect — and that's considered a serious failing in a management person!

China's policy is to encourage and develop workers' ideas and ability to run their workplaces. One official in a Chinese factory told a European visitor that he was glad when a worker criticized factory policy, even if the criticism was unjustified, because it showed the worker felt confident enough to speak up.

In a Chinese workplace all policies — from workload to schedules to fringe benefits — have to be discussed by the workers before they are finally adopted. New machinery is developed by teams that include the workers who will use it.

Chinese workplaces are supposed to treat the worker as a whole person and pay attention to her or his needs. Many run classes, day care centers and recreational programs. Some workplaces schedule exercise breaks, and have developed exercises for particular occupations, that help people overcome the effects their job may be having on their health.

So many American office workers sit all day, getting weak and flabby, eating doughnuts out of boredom. Even a little change like an exercise break could make a big difference. But management would never bother to think of a thing like that, in an office whose goal is profits.

A socialist United States would be very different from socialist China, because we have a very different history, culture, and economic level. But these examples show a little about the possibilities that exist when working people run things for themselves, not to make a small group of rich people even richer. In a socialist society, workers would have the benefits and respect that *should* go to the people who keep everything going. No one would be considered "just" a factory worker, or "just" a housewife — or "just" a clerical worker!

FOOTNOTES

1. Braverman, Harry, *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, Monthly Review Press, New York & London, 1974, p. 295
2. All quotes from office workers are taken from interviews conducted while doing research for a book by this author called *Not Servants, Not Machines: Office Workers Speak Up*, Beacon Press, 1976
3. Flaim, Paul and Peters, Nick, "Usual Gross Earnings of American Workers," in *Monthly Labor Review*, March, 1972
4. U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, *1974 Handbook of Labor Statistics*, table 19, p. 69-73
5. Davies, Margery, "A Woman's Place is At the Typewriter," *Radical America*, September-October, 1974
6. Flaim and Peters, *op. cit.*
7. U.S. Department of Labor, Women's Bureau, "Women Workers Today," Washington, D.C., 1973, p. 6
8. *ibid.*, p.7
9. This was shown in two studies by the Bureau of Labor Statistics in the 1960's:
   "Industry Wage Survey: Banking," Bulletin #1466, Washington, D.C., 1964, p. 6 *and*
   "Industry Wage Survey: Life Insurance," Bulletin #1569, Washington, D.C., p. 5-6
   A more recent local survey shows the same pattern: *Nine to Five, Claim Against the Boston Insurance Industry*, 1974
10. This trend is shown for the sixties in National Industrial Conference Board, *White Collar Unionization*, Personnel Policy Study #220, New York, 1970. More recent periodic reports by the Bureau of National Affairs show a continuation of this trend.
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12. U.S. Department of Labor, Women's Bureau, "The Myth and the Reality," Washington, D.C., 1974 revised edition
13. *ibid.*
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Jean Tepperman has worked in a variety of clerical jobs. She is also the author of a book that treats the subject in greater length. The book, **Not Servants, Not Machines: Office Workers Speak Out,** is published by Beacon Press in paperback for $2.95. The book includes interviews with over forty office workers talking about their work and their organizing experiences.

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