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# THE WOMEN OF THE TELEPHONE COMPANY



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# The Women of the Telephone Company



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From October to December 1969 I worked for the New York Telephone Company as a Customer's Service Representative in the Commercial Department. My office was one of several in the Broadway-City Hall area of lower Manhattan, a flattened, blue-windowed commercial building in which the telephone company occupies three floors. The room was big and brightly lit—like the city room of a large newspaper—with perhaps one hundred desks arranged in groups of five or six around the desk of a Supervisor. The job consists of taking orders for new equipment and services and pacifying customers who complain, on the eleven exchanges (although not the more complex business accounts) in the area between the Lower East Side and 23rd Street on the North and bounded by Sixth Avenue on the West.

My Supervisor is the supervisor of five women. She reports to a Manager who manages four supervisors (about twenty women) and he reports to the District Supervisor along with two other managers. The offices of the managers are on the outer edge of the main room separated from the floor by glass partitions. The District Supervisor is down the hall in an executive suite. A job identical in rank to that of the district supervisor is held by four other men in Southern Manhattan alone. They report to the Chief of the Southern Division, himself a soldier in an army of division chiefs whose territories are the five boroughs, Long Island, Westchester, and the vast hinterlands vaguely referred to as "Up-state." The executives at——Street were only dozens among the thousands in New York Tel alone.

Authority in their hierarchy is parceled out in bits. A Representative, for example, may issue credit to customers up to, say, \$10.00; her supervisor, \$25.00; her manager, \$100.00; his supervisor, \$300.00; and so forth. These employees are in the same relation to the centers of power in AT&T and the communications industry as the White House guard to Richard Nixon. They all believe that "The business of the telephone company is Service" and if they have ever heard of the ABM or AT&T's relation to it, I believe they think it is the Associated Business Machines, a particularly troublesome customer on the Gramercy-7 exchange.

I brought to the job certain radical interests. I knew I would see "bureaucratization," "alienation," and "exploitation." I knew that it was "false consciousness" of their true role in the imperialist economy that led the "workers" to embrace their oppressors. I believed those things and I believe them still. I know why, by my logic, the workers should rise up. But my understanding was making reality an increasing puzzle: Why didn't people move? What things, invisible to me, were holding them back? What I hoped to learn, in short, was something about the texture of the industrial system: what life within it meant to its participants.

I deliberately decided to take a job which was women's work, white collar, highly industrialized and bureaucratic. I knew that New York Tel was in a management crisis notorious both among businessmen and among the public and I wondered what effect the well-publicized breakdown of service was having on employees. Securing the position was not without hurdles. I was "overqualified," having confessed to college; I performed better on personnel tests than I intended to do; and I was inspected for symptoms of militance by a shrewd but friendly interviewer who noticed the several

years' gap in my record of employment. "What have you been doing lately?" she asked me. "Protesting?" I said: "Oh, no, I've been married," as if that condition itself explained one's neglect of social problems. She seemed to agree that it did.

My problem was to talk myself out of a management traineeship at a higher salary while maintaining access to the job I wanted. This, by fabrications, I was able to do. I said: "Well, you see, I'm going through a divorce right now and I'm a little upset emotionally, and I don't know if I want a career with managerial responsibility." She said: "If anyone else said that to me, I'm afraid I wouldn't be able to hire them," but in the end she accepted me. I had the feeling it would have been harder for her to explain to her bosses why she had let me slip away, given my qualifications, than to justify to them her suspicions.

I nonetheless found as I began the job that I was viewed as "management material" and given special treatment. I was welcomed at length by both the District Supervisor and the man who was to be my Manager, and given a set of fluffy feminist speeches about "opportunities for women" at New York Tel. I was told in a variety of ways that I would be smarter than the other people in my class; "management" would be keeping an eye on me. Then the Manager led me personally to the back classroom where my training program was scheduled to begin.

The class consisted of five students and an instructor. Angela and Katherine were two heavy-set Italian women in their late forties. They had been promoted to Commercial after years of employment as clerks in the Repair Department where, as Angela said, "they were expected to be robots." They were unable to make the transition to the heavier demands of the Representative's job and returned to Repair in defeat after about a week.

Billy was a high-school boy of seventeen who had somehow been



referred by company recruiters into this strange women's world. His lack of adult experience made even simple situations difficult for him to deal with: he could not tell a customer that she had to be in the apartment when an installer was coming without giggling uncontrollably about some imaginary tryst. He best liked "drinking with the boys," a pack of Brooklyn high schoolers whose alcoholism was at the Singapore Sling stage; he must have belonged to one of the last crowds in Brooklyn that had never smoked dope.

Betty was a pretty, overweight, intelligent woman in her mid-twenties who had been a Representative handling "Billing" and was now being "cross-trained" (as they say in the Green Berets) in Orders. She was poised, disciplined, patient, ladylike, competent in class and, to me, somewhat enigmatic outside it: liberal about Blacks, in spite of a segregated high-school education, but a virtual Minute-man about Reds, a matter wholly outside her experience. By the end of the class Betty and I had overcome our mutual skepticism enough to be almost friends and if there is anyone at the phone company to whom I feel slightly apologetic—for having listened always with a third ear and for masquerading as what I was not—it is Betty.

Sally, the instructor, was a pleasant, stocky woman in her early thirties with a frosted haircut and eyes made up like a racoon. She had a number of wigs, including one with strange dangling curls. Sally's official role was to persuade us of the rationality of company policies and practices, which she did skillfully and faithfully. In her private life, however, she was a believer in magic, an aficionado rather than a practitioner only because she felt that while she understood how to conjure up the devil, she did not also know how to make him go away. To Sally a disagreeable female customer was not oppressed, wretched, impoverished in her own life, or merely bitchy: she

was—literally—a witch. Sally explained to herself by demonology the existence of evils of which she was far too smart to be unaware.

The Representative's course is "programmed." It is apparent that the phone company has spent millions of dollars for high-class management consultation on the best way to train new employees. The two principal criteria are easily deduced. First, the course should be made so routine that any employee can teach it. The teacher's material—the remarks she makes, the examples she uses—are all printed in a loose-leaf notebook that she follows. Anyone can start where anyone else leaves off. I felt that I could teach the course myself, simply by following the program. The second criterion is to assure the reproducibility of results, to guarantee that every part turned out by the system will be interchangeable with every other part. The system is to bureaucracy what Taylor was to the factory: it consists of breaking down every operation into discrete parts, then making verbal the discretions that are made.

At first we worked chiefly from programmed booklets organized around the principle of supplying the answer, then rephrasing the question. For instance:

It is annoying to have the other party to a conversation leave the line without an explanation.

Before leaving, you should excuse yourself and \_\_\_\_\_ what you are going to do.

Performing skillfully was a matter of reading, and not actual comprehension. Katherine and Angela were in constant difficulty. They "never read," they said. That's why it was hard for them.

Soon acting out the right way to deal with customers became more

important than self-instruction. The days were organized into Lesson Plans, a typical early one being: How to Respond to a Customer if You Haven't Already Been Trained to Answer his Question, or a slightly more bureaucratic rendering of that notion. Sally explained the idea, which is that you are supposed to refer the call to a more experienced Representative or to the Supervisor. But somehow they manage to complicate this situation to the point where it becomes confusing even for an intelligent person to handle it. You mustn't say: "Gosh, that's tough, I don't know anything about that, let me give the phone to someone who does," though that in effect is what you do. Instead when the phone rings, you say: "Hello. This is Miss Langer. May I help you?" (The Rule is, get immediate "control of the contact" and hold it lest anything unexpected happen, like, for instance, a human transaction between you and the customer.)

He says: "This is Mr. Smith and I'd like to have an additional wall telephone installed in my kitchen."

You say: "I'll be very glad to help you, Mr. Smith (Rule the Second: Always express interest in the Case and indicate willingness to help), but I'll need more information. What is your telephone number?"

He tells you, then you confess: "Well, Mr. Smith, I'm afraid I haven't been trained in new installations yet because I'm a new representative, but let me give you someone else who can help you." (Rule the Third: You must get his consent to this arrangement. That is, you must say: *May* I get someone else who can help you? *May* I put you on hold for a moment?)

The details are absurd but they are all prescribed. What you would do naturally becomes unnatural when it is codified, and the rigidity of the rules makes the Representatives in training feel they are stupid when they make

mistakes. Another lesson, for example, was: What to Do if a Customer Calls and Asks for a Specific Person, such as Miss Smith, another Representative, or the Manager. Whatever the facts, you are to say "Oh, Miss Smith is busy but I have access to your records, may I help you?" A customer is never allowed to identify his interests with any particular employee. During one lesson, however, Sally said to Angela: "Hello, I'd like immediately to speak to Mrs. Brown," and Angela said, naturally, "Hold the line a minute, please. I'll put her on." A cardinal sin, for which she was immediately rebuked. Angela felt terrible.

Company rhetoric asserts that this rigidity does not exist, that Representatives are supposed to use "initiative" and "judgment," to develop their own language. What that means is that instead of using the precise words "Of course I'll be glad to help you but I'll need more information," you are allowed to "create" some individual variant. But you must always (1) express willingness to help and (2) indicate the need for further investigation. In addition, while you are doing this, you must always write down the information taken from the customer, coded, on a yellow form called a CF-1, in such a way as to make it possible for a Representative in Florida to read and translate it. "That's the point," Sally told us. "You are doing it the same way a rep in Illinois or Alaska does it. We're one big monopoly."

The logic of training is to transform the trainees from humans into machines. The basic method is to handle any customer request by extracting "bits" of information: by translating the human problem he might have into bureaucratic language so that it can be processed by the right department. For instance, if a customer calls and says: "My wife is dying and she's coming home from the hospital today and I'd like to have a phone installed in her bedroom right away," you say, "Oh,



I'm very sorry to hear that sir, I'm sure I can help you, would you be interested in our Princess model? It has a dial that lights up at night," meanwhile *writing* on your ever-present CF-1: "Csr wnts Prn inst bdrm immed," issuing the order, and placing it in the right-hand side of your work-file where it gets picked up every fifteen minutes by a little clerk.

The knowledge that one is under constant observation (of which more later) I think helps to ensure that contacts are handled in this uniform and wooden manner. If you varied it, and said something spontaneous, you might well be overheard; moreover, it is probably not possible to be especially human when you are concentrating so hard on extracting the bits, and when you have to deal with so many bits in one day.

Sometimes the bits can be extraordinarily complicated. A customer (that is, a CSR) calls and says rapidly, "This is Mrs. Smith and I'm moving from 23rd Street to 68th Street, and I'd like to keep my green Princess phone and add two white Trimlines and get another phone in a metallic finish and my husband wants a new desk phone in his study." You are supposed to have taken that all down as she says it. Naturally you have no time to listen to how she says it, to strike up a conversation, or be friendly. You are desperate to get straight the details.

The dehumanization and the surprising degree of complication are closely related: the number of variables is large, each variable has a code which must be learned and manipulated, and each situation has one—and only one—correct answer. The kind of problem we were taught to handle, in its own language, looks like this:

A CSR has: IMRCV EX CV GRN  
BCHM IV

He wants: IMRCV WHT EX CV  
WHT BCHM IV

This case, very simplified, means only that the customer has regular residential phone service with a black phone, a green one, and an ivory bell chime, and that he wants new service with two white phones and a bell chime. Nonetheless, all these items are charged at differing monthly rates which the Representative must learn where to find and how to calculate; each has a separate installation charge which varies in a number of ways; and, most important, they represent only a few of the dozens of items or services a customer could possibly want (each of which, naturally, has its own rates and variables, its own codes).

He could want a long cord or a short one, a green one or a white one, a new party listed on his line, a special headset for a problem with deafness, a touchtone phone, and on and on and on. For each of the things he could possibly want there would be one and only one correct charge to quote to him, one and only one right way to handle the situation.

It is largely since World War II that the Bell System abandoned being a comparatively simple service organization and began producing such an array of consumer products as to rival Procter and Gamble. It is important to realize what contribution this proliferation makes both to creating the work and to making it unbearable. If the company restricted itself to essential functions and services—standard telephones and standard types of service—whole layers of its bureaucracy would not need to exist at all, and what did need to exist could be both more simple and more humane. The pattern of proliferation is also crucial for, among other things, it is largely responsible for the creation of the "new"—white collar—"working class" whose job is to process the bureau-

cratic desiderata of consumption.

In our classroom, the profit motivation behind the telephone cornucopia is not concealed and we are programmed to repeat its justifications: that the goods were developed to account for different "tastes" and the "need of variation." Why Touchtone Dialing? We learn to say that "it's the latest thing," "it dials faster," "it is easier to read the letters and numbers," and "its musical notes as you depress the buttons are pleasant to hear." We learn that a Trimline is a "space-saver," that it has an "entirely new feature, a recall button that allows you to hang up without replacing the receiver," and that it is "featured in the Museum of Modern Art's collection on industrial design." Why a night-light? we were asked. I considered saying, "It would be nice to make love by a small sexy light," but instead helped to contribute the expected answers: "It gives you security in the bedroom," "it doesn't interfere with the TV."

One day a woman named Carol Nichols, whose job it is to supervise instruction, came to watch our class. Carol is a typical telephone company employee: an aging, single woman who has worked her way up to a position of modest authority. In idle conversation I inquired into the origins of our programmed instruction. Carol said it was all prepared under centralized auspices but had recently benefited from the consultation of two Columbia professors. One, she believed, was the chairman of the English department; another, an English professor. Their principal innovation, I gathered, was to suggest formal quizzes in addition to role-playing.

Carol took the content of the work very seriously. She was concerned to impress on us the now familiar Customer's Service Ideology that We Do Help the Customer no matter what his problem. She said: "If the customer tells you to drop dead, you say 'I'll be

very glad to help you sir.' " I couldn't resist raising the obvious question, wondering what is the Rule covering obscene propositions, but saying innocently, "Gee, I can think of things a customer might say that you wouldn't want to help him with." Carol looked very tough and said: "Oh. We don't get *those* kind of calls in the Commercial Department."

Carol threw herself into role-playing tests with gusto. In one of the tests she pretended to be a Mrs. Van Der Pool from Gramercy Park South, whose problem was that she had four dirty white phones that needed cleaning and one gold phone that was tarnishing. Carol enjoyed playing the snotty Mrs. VDP to the hilt, and what sense of identity, projection, or simple resentment went into her characterization it is hard to say. On the other hand, despite her caricatured and bossy airs, Carol was very nice to the women in the class. At the end, when Angela and Katherine were complaining that they were doing so poorly, Carol gave them a little pep talk in which she said that she had been miserable on her first day as a Rep, had cried, but had just made up her mind to get through it, and had been able to do so.

"Many have passed this way and they all felt the way you do," she told them. "Just keep at it. You can do it." Angela and Katherine were very grateful to Carol for this. Later in the week when, frustrated and miserable, Katherine broke down and cried, Sally too was unobtrusive, sympathetic, encouraging.

Selling is an important part of the Representative's job. Sally introduced the subject with a little speech (from her program book) about the concept of the "well-telephoned home," how that was an advance from the old days when people thought of telephone equipment in a merely functional way. Now, she said, we stress "a variety of items of beauty and convenience." Millions of dollars have been spent by



the Bell System, she told us, to find out what a customer wants and to sell it to him. She honestly believed that good selling is as important to the customer as it is to the company: to the company because "it makes additional and worthwhile revenue," to the customer because it provides services that are truly useful. We are warned not to attempt to sell when it is clearly inappropriate to do so, but basically to use every opportunity to unload profitable items. This means that if a girl calls up and asks for a new listing for a roommate, your job is to say: "Oh. Wouldn't your roommate prefer to have her own extension?"

The official method is to avoid giving the customer a choice but to offer him a total package which he can either accept or reject. For instance, a customer calls for new service. You find out that he has a wife, a teen-age daughter, and a six-room apartment. The prescription calls for you to get off the line, make all the calculations, then come back on and say all at once: "Mr. Smith, suppose we installed for you a wall telephone in your kitchen, a Princess extension in your daughter's room and one in your bedroom, and our new Trimline model in your living room. This will cost you only X dollars for the installation and only Y dollars a month."

Mr. Smith will say, naturally, "That's too many telephones for a six-room apartment," and you are supposed to "overcome his objections" by pointing out the "security" and "convenience" that comes from having telephones all over the place.

Every Representative is assigned a selling quota—so many extensions, so many Princesses—deduced and derived in some way from the quota of the next largest unit. In other words, quotas are assigned to the individual because they are first assigned to the five-girl unit; they are assigned to the unit because they are assigned to the twenty-girl section; and they are as-

signed to the section because they are assigned to the district: to the manager and the district supervisor. The fact that everyone is in the same situation—expected to contribute to the same total—is one of the factors that increase management-worker solidarity.

The women enact the sales ritual as if it were in fact in their own interest and originated with them. Every month there is a sales contest. Management provides the money—\$25.00 a month to one or another five-girl unit—but the women do the work: organizing skits, buying presents, or providing coffee and donuts to reward the high sellers. At Thanksgiving the company raffled away turkeys: the number of chances one had depended on the number of sales one had completed.

As the weeks passed our training grew more and more rigid. For each new subject we followed an identical Army-like ritual beginning with "Understanding the Objectives" and ending with "Learning the Negotiation." The Objectives of the "Lesson on Termination of Service," for instance, were:

1. To recognize situations where it is appropriate to encourage users to retain service.
2. To be able to apply Save effort successfully.
3. To negotiate orders for Termination.
4. To offer "Easy Move."
5. To write Termination orders.

Or, for example, Cords. It is hard to believe such a subject could be complicated but in fact it is: cords come in different sizes, standard and special, and have different costs, different colors, and different installation intervals. There is also the weighty matter of the distinction between the handset cord (connecting the receiver to the base) and the mounting cord (connecting the base to the wall or floor). The ritual we were taught to follow

when on the telephone with a customer goes like this, and set up on our drawing board it looked like this as well:

*Fact-finding:*

1. Business or residence.
2. New or existing service.
3. Reason for request
  - a. handset or mounting cord
  - b. approximate length
4. Type of set or location.
5. Other instruments in the household and where located.
6. Customer's phone number.

Then you get:

*Off the line where you*

1. Get Customers records.
2. Think and Plan What to Do.
3. Check reference materials.
4. Check with supervisor if necessary.

Then you return to the line with a:

*Recommendation:*

1. Set stage for recommendation.
2. Suggest alternative where appropriate or
3. Accept order for cord.
4. Suggest appropriate length.
  - a. Verify handset or mounting
5. Present recommendation for suitable equipment that "goes with" request including monthly rental (for instance an extension bell).
6. Determine type of instrument and color.

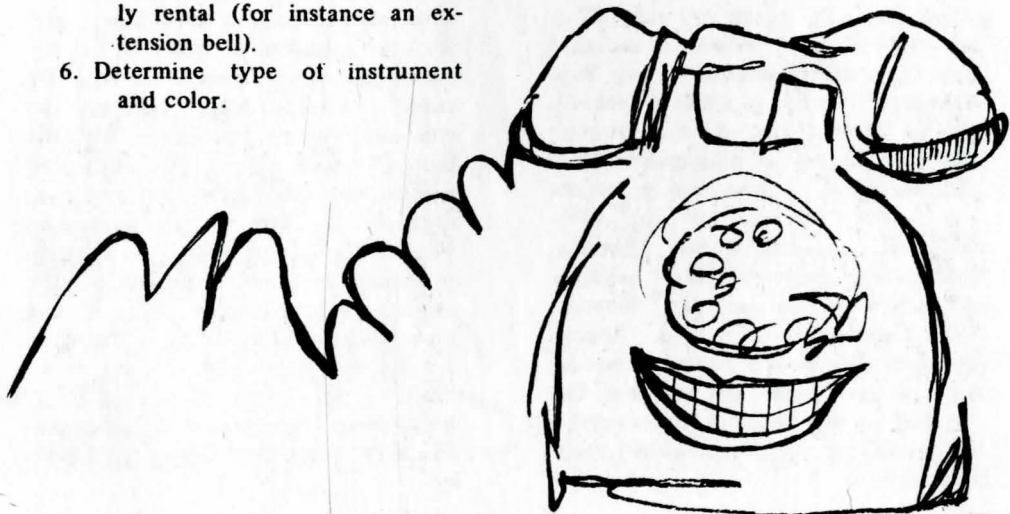
7. Quote total non-recurring charges.
8. Arrange appointment date, Access to the Apartment, and Whom to See.

On the floor, substantial departure from this ritual is an Error (more later). This pattern of learning became so intolerable that, one day, while waiting for Sally to return from lunch, the class invented a lesson of its own. We called it Erroneous Disconnections. The Objectives were:

1. To identify situations in which it is appropriate to disconnect Customer.
2. To apply the necessary techniques so that disconnects can be accomplished with minimum irritation to the Representative.
3. To accomplish these ends without being observed.

We then identified a variety of situations in which our natural response would be to disconnect. I was surprised by how deeply Billy and Betty were caught up in our parody, and I thought it represented an ability to dissociate from the company which most of the time was very little in evidence; it seemed to me somehow healthy and promising.

As the weeks wore on our classes became in some ways more bizarre. On





several afternoons we were simultaneously possessed by the feeling that we simply couldn't bear it and—subtly at first but with increasing aggression as time passed—we would simply stop work: refuse to learn any more. At these times all kinds of random discussions would take place. On one occasion we spent an entire afternoon discussing the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World and calling up information services of newspapers to find out what they were; on another afternoon Sally explained at great length her views on magic.

At first I believed that these little work stoppages were spontaneous but later, as we completed our class work close to schedule, I came to believe that this was not so: that they were a part of our program and were meant to serve as an opportunity for the instructor to discover any random things about our views and attitudes the company might find it useful to know. In any event, partly because of these chats and partly because of the intensity of our training experience, by the end of the class we were a fairly solid little unit. We celebrated our graduation with perfume for Sally, a slightly alcoholic and costly lunch, and great good feeling all around.

## II

Observers at the phone company. They are everywhere. I became aware of a new layer of Observation every day. The system works like this. For every five or six women there is, as I have said, a Supervisor who can at any moment listen in from the phone set on her desk to any of her Representatives' contacts with a customer. For an hour every day, the Supervisor goes to a private room off the main floor where she can listen (herself unobserved) to the conversations of any of her "girls" she chooses. The women know, naturally, *when* she is doing this but not *whose* contact she is observing.

Further off the main floor is a still more secret Observing Room staffed by women whose title and function is, specifically, Observer. These women "jack in" at random to any contact between any Representative and a customer: their job is basically to make sure that the Representatives are giving out correct information. Furthermore, these observers are themselves observed from a central telephone company location elsewhere in the city to make sure that they are not reporting as incorrect information which is actually correct. In addition the Observers make "access calls" by which they check to see that the telephone lines are open for the customers to make their connections. This entire structure of observation is, of course, apart from the formal representative-supervisor-manager-district supervisor-division-head chain of managerial command. They are, in effect, parallel hierarchical structures.

One result of the constant observation (the technology being unbounded) is that one can never be certain where the observation stops. It is company policy to stress its finite character, but no one ever knows for sure. Officials of the Communications Workers of America have testified, for instance, that the company over-indulged in the wired-Martini stage of technology, bugging the pen sets of many of its top personnel. At —Street there were TV cameras in the lobby and on the elevators. This system coexists with the most righteous official attitude toward wiretapping. Only supervisors and managers can deal with wiretap complaints; Federal regulations about the sanctity of communications are posted; and the overt position toward taps, in the lower managerial echelons, is that they are simply illegal and, if they exist, must be the result of private entrepreneurship (businesses bugging one another) rather than Government policy.

"If someone complains about a tap," Sally said, "I just ask them: Why would anyone be tapping your phone?" Consciousness of the Government's "internal security" net is simply blacked out. Nonetheless, the constant awareness of the company's ability to observe creates unease: Are the lounge phones wired into the Observing structure? Does the company tap the phones of new or suspicious personnel? Is union activity monitored? No one can say with confidence.

Sally had two voices, one human, one machine, and in her machine voice on the very first day she explained the justification for Observation. "The thing about the phone company," she said, "is that it has No Product except the Service it Gives. If this were General Motors we would know how to see if we were doing a good job: we could take the car apart and inspect the parts and see that they were all right and that it was well put together. But at the phone company we can't do that. All we can do is check ourselves to see that we are doing a good job."



She took the same attitude toward "access calls," explaining that a completed access call is desirable because it indicates to the manager and everyone up the line that the wires are open and the system is working as it should. The position toward Observers she attempted to inculcate was one of gratitude: Observers are good for you. They help you measure your job and see if you are doing well.

The system of Observers is linked with the telephone company's ultimate weapon, the Service Index by which Errors are charted and separate units of the company rated against each other. Throughout training-in class and in our days on the floor—hints of the monumental importance of the Index in the psychic life of the employees continually emerged. "Do you know how many Errors you're allowed?" Sally would ask us. "No Errors"—proud that the standard was so high. Or: "I can't afford an Error"—from my supervisor, Laura, on the floor, explaining why she was keeping me roped in on my first days on the job. But the system was not revealed in all its parts until the very end of training when as a *pièce de résistance* the manager, Y, came in to give a little talk billed as a discussion of "Service" but in fact an attempt to persuade the class of the logic of observation.

Y was a brooding, reserved man in his mid-twenties, a kind of Ivy League leftover who looked as if he'd accidentally got caught in the wrong decade. His talk was very much like Sally's. "We need some way to measure Service. If a customer doesn't like Thom McCann shoes he can go out and buy Buster Brown. Thom McCann will know something is wrong. But the phone company is a monopoly, people can't escape it, they have no other choice. How can we tell if our product, Service, is good?" He said that



observation was begun in 1924 and that, although the Company had tried other methods of measuring service, none had proved equally satisfactory. Specifically, he said, other methods failed to provide an accurate measure of the work performance of one unit as opposed to another.

Y's was a particularly subtle little speech. He used the Socratic method, always asking us to give the answers or formulate the rationales, always asking is it right? Is it fair? (I'm certain that if we did not agree it was right and fair, he wanted to know.) He stressed the limited character of observation. His units (twenty "girls"), he said, took about 10,000 calls per month; of these only about 100 were observed, or about five observations per woman per month. He emphasized that these checks were random and anonymous. He explained that the Index has four components which govern what the observers look for:

- Contact Performance Defects (CPD)
- Customer Waiting Interval (CWI)
- Contacts Not Closed (CNC)
- Business Office Accessibility (BOA)

The CPD is worth 70 percent of the Index, the other factors 10 percent each. The elements of CPD are, for example, incomplete or incorrect information, making inadequate arrangements, or mistreating a customer; the elements of BOA are the amount of time it takes a customer to reach the central switchboard, and the promptness of the Representative in answering the phone after the connection has been made. Points are assigned on a scientific basis, based on the number of errors caught by the observers. Charts are issued monthly, rating identical units of the company against each other. Y's unit (mine) was the top unit in Manhattan, having run for the preceeding three months or so at about 97 or 98 percent. While I was there there was a little celebration, attended by high company officials, in which Y was awarded a plaque and the women

on the floor given free "coffee and danish."

Now, a number of things about this system are obvious. First, demeaning and demanding as it is, it clearly provides management with information it believes it has a desperate need to know. For instance, there was a unit on the East Side of Manhattan running at about an 85 percent level. The mathematics of it are complicated but it basically means that about 12,000 people every month were getting screwed by the department in one form or another: they asked for a green phone and the Representative ordered a black one; they arranged to be home on the 24th and the woman told the installer to come on the 25th; they were told their service would cost \$10.00 and it actually cost \$25.00, and so forth. Management has to know which of its aspirants scrambling up the ladder to reward and which to punish.

On the other hand, their official justifications for observation are a lie for two reasons. First, the Index does not measure actual service: our unit could run at 98 percent while half the phones in our area were out of service because the Index does not deal with the service departments of the company which are, in fact, where its troubles are. The angriest customer in Manhattan would not show up as an error on the Index if he were treated politely and his call transferred: the Commercial Index is a chimera capable of measuring only its internal functioning, and that functioning, being simply bureaucratic, is cut off from the real world of telephone service and servicing. Secondly, it is a lie because it does not spring from the root that management claims—that is, the absence of a tangible physical product (observation is in fact commonplace in industry where the nonexistence of a product is not an issue) but from another root: the need to control behavior. That is, if the system is technically linked to measurement of



service it is functionally linked to control.

Furthermore, it works: it absolutely controls behavior. On December 24, the one day of the year when there is no observation (and no contribution to the Index) the concept of service utterly disappeared. The women mistreated the customers and told them whatever came into their minds. Wall lights whose flickering on a normal day indicates that customers are receiving busy signals were flashing wildly; no one cared about the BOA.

But on a normal day, the Index is King. It is a rule, for instance, that if one Representative takes over a call for another, the first must introduce the second to the customer, saying "Sir, I'm going to put Miss Laramie on the line. She'll be able to help you." "Don't forget to introduce me," said Miss L. anxiously to me one day. "An observer might be listening." Or: we were repeatedly told *never* to check the box labeled "Missed on Regular Delivery" on the form authorizing delivery of directories. "It will look as if Commercial made an Error," Sally told us, "when the Error is really Directory's." This awareness of observers and Errors is constant not because of fear of individual reprisal—there is none—but because of block loyalty: first to the immediate unit of five women, then to the twenty-women unit, then to the still larger office.

The constant weighing, checking, competition, also binds the managers to the women and is another source of the overwhelmingly paternalistic atmosphere: the managers are only as good as their staffs and they are rated by the same machine. The women make, or don't make, the Errors; the managers get, or don't get, the plaques and the promotions.

What the system adds up to is this: if we count both supervisors and observers, at least three people are responsible for the correct performance of

any job, and that is because the system is based on hiring at the lowest level, keeping intelligence suppressed, and channeling it into idiotic paths. The process is circular: hire women who are not too talented (for reasons of social class, limited educational opportunities, etc.); suppress them even further by the "scientific" division of the job into banal components which defy initiative or the exercise of intelligence; then keep them down by the institutionalization of pressures and spies.

Surely it would be better if the jobs' horizons were broadened—a reformist goal—the women were encouraged to take initiative and responsibility, and then left on their own. And it would be better yet if those aspects of the work directly tied to the company's profit-oriented and "capitalistic" functions—the Princess and Trimline phones and all the bureaucratic complications that stem from their existence—were eliminated altogether and a socialized company concentrated on providing all the people with uniform and decent service. But . . . □





## II

Daily life on the job at the New York Telephone Company, where I recently worked as a Customer's Service Representative, consists largely of pressure. To a casual observer it might appear that much of the activity on the floor is random, but in fact it is not. The women moving from desk to desk are on missions of retrieving and refiling customers' records; the tête-à-têtes that look so sociable are anxious conferences with a Supervisor in which a Representative is Thinking and Planning What to Do Next. Of course the more experienced women know how to use the empty moments that do occur for social purposes. But the basic working unit is one girl: one telephone, and the basic requirement of the job is to answer it, perhaps more than fifty times a day.

For every contact with a customer, the amount of paperwork is huge: a single contact can require the completion of three, four, or even five separate forms. No problems can be dispensed with handily. Even if, for example, you merely transfer a customer to Traffic or Repair you must still fill out and file a CF-1. At the end of the day you must tally up and categorize all the services you have performed on a little slip of paper and hand it in to the Supervisor, who completes a tally for the unit: it is part of the process of "taking credit" for services rendered by one unit vis-à-vis the others.

A Representative's time is divided into "open" and "closed" portions, according to a recent scientific innovation called FADS (for Force Administration Data System), of which the company is particularly proud; the innovation consists in establishing how many Representatives have to be available at any one moment to handle the volume of business anticipated for that month, that day, and that hour. Under this arrangement the contact with the

customer and the processing of his request are carried out simultaneously: that is, the Representative does the paperwork needed to take care of a request while she is still on the line. For more complex cases, however, this is not possible and the processing is left for "closed" time: a time when no further calls are coming in.

This arrangement tends to create a constant low-level panic. There is a kind of act which it is natural to carry to its logical conclusion: brushing one's teeth, washing a dish, or filling out a form are things one does not leave half done. But the company's system stifles this natural urge to completion. Instead, during "open" time, the phone keeps ringing and the work piles up. You look at the schedule and know that you have only one hour of "closed" time to complete the work, and twenty minutes of that hour is a break.

The situation produces desperation: How am I to get it done? How can I call back all those customers, finish all that mail, write all those complicated orders, within forty minutes? Occasionally, during my brief time at the job, I would accidentally press the wrong button on my phone and it would become "open" again. Once, when I was feeling particularly desperate about time, I did that twice in a row and both times the callers were ordering new telephone service—a process which takes between eight and ten minutes to complete.

My feeling that time was slipping away, that I would never be able to "complete my commitments" on time was intense and hateful. Of course it was worse for me than for the experienced women—but not much worse. Another situation in which the pressure of time is universally felt is in the minutes before lunch and before five o'clock. At those times, if your phone is open, you sit hoping that a complex



call will not arrive. A "new line" order at five minutes to five is a source of both resentment and frustration.

Given the pressure, it becomes natural to welcome the boring and routine—the simple suspensions or disconnections of service—and dread the unusual or complex. The women deal with the pressure by quietly getting rid of as many calls as they can, transferring them to another department although the proper jurisdiction may be a borderline matter. This transferring, the lightening of the load, is the bureaucratic equivalent of the "soldiering" that Taylor and the early scientific managers were striving to defeat. It is a subtle kind of slowdown, never discussed, but quickly transmitted to the new Representative as legitimate. Unfortunately, it does not slow things down very much.

As Daniel Bell points out in his extraordinary essay, "Work and Its Discontents," the rhythm of the job controls the time spent off the job as well: the breaks, the lunches, the holidays; even the weekends are scarcely long enough to reestablish a more congenial or natural path. The work rhythm controls human relationships and attitudes as well. For instance: there was a Puerto Rican worker in the Schrafft's downstairs whose job was to sell coffee-to-go to the customers: he spent his day doing nothing but filling paper cups with coffee, fitting on the lids, and writing out the checks. He was very surly and very slow and it looked to me as if the thoughts swirling in his head were those of an incipient murderer, not an incipient revolutionary. His slowness was very inconvenient to the thousands of workers in the building who had to get their coffee, take it upstairs, and drink it according to a precise timetable. We never had more than fifteen minutes to get there and back, and buying coffee generally took longer. The women resented him and called him "Speedy Gonzales," in tones of snobbery and hate. I know he hated us.



The women of the phone company are middle class or lower middle class, come from a variety of ethnic backgrounds (Polish, Jewish, Italian, Irish, Black, Puerto Rican), mainly high-school graduates or with a limited college education. They live just about everywhere except in Manhattan: the Bronx, Brooklyn, Staten Island, or Queens. Their leisure time is filled, first of all, with the discussion of objects. Talk of shopping is endless, as is the pursuit of it in lunch hours, after work, and on days off. The women have a fixation on brand names, and describe every object that way: it is always a London Fog, a Buxton, a White Stag. This fixation does not preclude bargain-hunting: but the purpose of hunting a bargain is to get the brand name at a lower price. Packaging is also important: the women will describe not only the thing but also the box or wrapper it comes in. They are especially fascinated by wigs. Most women have several wigs and are in some cases unrecognizable from day to day, creating the effect of a continually changing work force. The essence of wiggery is escapism: the kaleidoscopic transformation of oneself



while everything else remains the same. Anyone who has ever worn a wig knows the embarrassing truth: it is transforming.

Consumerism is one of the major reasons why these women work. Their salaries are low in relation to the costs of necessities in American life, ranging from \$95.00 to \$132.50 *before* taxes: barely enough, if one is self-supporting, to pay for essentials. In fact, however, many of the women are not self-supporting, but live with their families or with husbands who also work, sometimes at more than one job. Many of the women work overtime more than five hours a week (only for more than five extra hours do they get paid time and a half) and it seems from their visible spending that it is simply to pay for their clothes, which are expensive, their wigs, their color TVs, their dishes, silver, and so forth.

What the pressures of food, shelter, education, or medical costs contribute to their need to work I cannot tell, but it seems to me the women are largely trapped by their love of objects. What they think they need in order to survive and what they endure in order to attain it is astonishing. Why this is so is another matter. I think that the household appliances play a real role in the women's family lives: helping them to run their homes smoothly and in keeping with a (to them) necessary image of efficiency and elegance. As for the clothes and the wigs, I think they are a kind of tax, a tribute exacted by the social pressures of the work-place. For the preservation of their own egos against each other and against the system, they had to feel confident of their appearance on each and every day. Outside work they needed it too: to keep up, to keep their men, not to fall behind.

The atmosphere of passionate consuming was immeasurably heightened by Christmas, which also had the dismal effect of increasing the amount of stealing from the locker room. For

a period of about three weeks nothing was safe: hats, boots, gloves. The women told me that the same happens every year: an overwhelming craving, a need for material goods that has to find an outlet even in thievery from one another.

The women define themselves by their consumerism far more than by their work, as if they were compensating for their exploitation as workers by a desperate attempt to express their individuality as consumers. Much of the consuming pressure is generated by the women themselves: not only in shopping but in constant raffles, contests, and so forth in which the prize is always a commodity—usually liquor. The women are asked to participate in these raffles at least two or three times a week.

But the atmosphere is also deliberately fostered by the company itself. The company gave every woman a Christmas present: a little wooden doll, about four inches tall, with the sick-humor look that was popular a few years ago and still appears on greeting cards. On the outside the doll says "Joy is..." and when you press down the springs a little stick pops up that says "Extensions in Color" (referring to the telephone extensions we were trying to sell). Under that label is another sticker, the original one, which says "Knowing I wuv you." The doll is typical of the presents the company distributes periodically: a plastic shopping bag inscribed with the motto "Colorful Extensions. Lighten the Load"; a keychain with a plastic Princess telephone saying "It's Little, It's Lovely, It Lights"; plastic rain bonnets with the telephone company emblem, and so forth.

There were also free chocolates at Thanksgiving and, when the vending machine companies were on strike, free coffee for a while in the cafeteria. The women are disgusted by the company's gift-giving policies. Last year, I was told, the Christmas present was a little



gold-plated basket filled with velour fruit and adorned with a flag containing a company motto of the "Extensions in Color" type. They think it is a cheap trick—better not done at all—and cite instances of other companies which give money bonuses at Christmas.

It is obvious that the gifts are all programmed, down to the last cherry-filled chocolate, in some manual of Personnel Administration that is the source of all wisdom and policy; it is clear from their frequency that a whole agency of the company is devoted to devising these gimmicks and passing them out. In fact, apart from a standard assortment of insurance and pension plans, the only company policy I could discover which offers genuine advantage to the employees and which is not an attempt at manipulation is a tuition support program in which the company pays \$1000 out of \$1400 of the costs of continuing education.

Going still further, the company, for example, sponsors a recruiting game among employees, a campaign entitled "People Make the Difference." Employees who recruit other employees are rewarded with points: 200 for a recommendation, an additional thousand if the candidate is hired. Employees are stimulated to participate by the circulation of an S&H-type catalogue, a kind of encyclopedia of the post-scarcity society. There you can see pictured a GE Portable Color Television with a walnut-grained polystyrene cabinet (46,000 points), a Silver-Plated Hors d'Oeuvres Dish By Wallace (3,900 points), and a staggering assortment of mass-produced candelabra, linens, china, fountain pens, watches, clothing, luggage, and—for the hardy—pup tents, power tools, air mattresses.

Similarly, though perhaps less crudely, the company has institutionalized its practice of rewarding employees for longevity. After every two years with the company, the women receive

a small gold charm, the men a "tie-tac." These grow larger with the years and after a certain period jewels begin to be added: rubies, emeralds, sapphires, and eventually diamonds and bigger diamonds. The tie-tac evolves over the years into a tie-clasp. After twenty-five years you may have either a ceremonial luncheon or an inscribed watch: the watches are pre-fixed, pre-selected, and pictured in a catalogue.

The company has "scientifically structured" its rewards just as it has "scientifically structured" its work. But the real point is that the system gets the women as consumers in two ways. If consumption were less central to them, they would be less likely to be there in the first place. Then, the company attempts to ensnare them still further in the mesh by offering as incentives goods and images of goods which are only further way stations of the same endless quest.

Another characteristic of the telephone company is a kind of programmed "niceness" which starts from the top down but which the women internalize and mimic. For management the strategy is clear (the Hawthorne experiments, after all, were carried out at Western Electric): it is, simply, make the employees feel important. For trainees this was accomplished by a generous induction ceremony complete with flowers, films, a fancy buffet, and addresses by top division representatives, all of which stressed the theme: the company cares about you.

The ceremonies had another purpose and effect: to instill in the minds of new employees the image the company would like the public to have of it, that it is a goodhearted service organization with modest and regulated profits. A deliberate effort was made to fend off any free-floating negative ideas by explaining carefully, for instance, why AT&T's monopolistic relationship with Western Electric was a good thing. The ideology of Service, embraced without much cynicism by the low-level managers who are so



abundant, is in that way—and others—passed along.

The paternalism, the “niceness,” filters down and is real. Employees are on a first-name basis, even the women with the managers. The women are very close to one another, sharing endless gossip, going on excursions together, and continually engaging in ceremonial celebration of one another’s births, engagements, promotions. The generosity even extends to difficult situations on the job. I have, for example, seen women voluntarily sharing their precious closed time when one of them was overcommitted and the other slightly more free. Their attitude toward new employees was uniformly friendly and helpful. When I first went out on the floor my presence was a constant harassment to the other women in my unit: I didn’t know what to do, had to ask a lot of questions, filed incorrectly. As a newcomer, I made their already tense lives far more difficult. Nonetheless I was made to feel welcome, encouraged. “Don’t feel bad,” one or another would say at a particularly stupid error. “We were all new once. We’ve all been through it. Don’t worry. You’ll catch on.” In the same way I found them invariably trying to be helpful in modest personal crises: solicitous about my health when I faked a few days of illness, comforting in my depression when a pair of gloves was stolen, always friendly, cheering me (and each other) on.

This “niceness” is carefully preserved by the women as a protection against the stress of the work and the hostility of customers. “We have to be nice to each other,” Sally told me once. “If we yelled at each other the way the customers yell at us, we’d go crazy.” At the same time it is a triumph of their spirit as well. There is some level on which they are too proud to let the dehumanization overtake them; too decent to let the rat race get them down.

On the job, at least, the women’s sense of identification with the company is absolute. On several occasions I tried to bring up issues on which their interests—and the public’s—diverged from that of the company, and always I failed to make my point. It happened, for example, on the issue of selling, where I told my class frankly that I couldn’t oversell, thought it was wrong, and that people needed far fewer telephones than we were giving them. Instead of noticing that I was advocating a position of principle, my class thought that, because I was so poor myself (as measured by having only one black telephone) I just somehow couldn’t grasp the concept of the “well-telephoned home,” but that I would catch on when I became convinced that the goods and services in question were truly valuable and desirable.

It happened again during a discussion of credit ratings when, because welfare women are always put in the lowest category, I said I thought credit rested on racist assumptions. The class explained to me that “if you worked in Billing and knew how hard it is to collect from those people” I wouldn’t feel that way. And it happened another time during a particularly macabre discussion over coffee when the women were trading horror stories about tragic cases where telephone service had to be cut off because people weren’t paying their bills: they were grotesque tales about armless veterans and blind old ladies of eighty-five.

I kept saying that terminating those services was intolerable, that some way should be found for people to have services free. Instead of thinking that was an odd position, the women reported that “every new representative feels that way,” that they used to feel that way themselves, but they’d gotten over it. In other words they began their jobs with all the feelings any decent (never mind radical) person would have, and gradually learned to



overcome them, because of the creeping identification with the company produced by their having to act out daily a company-defined role. Their basic belief in the legitimacy of the "make a buck" system established in their minds a link between company revenue and their own paychecks. "That's where your money comes from" was a common conclusion to these discussions.

The women have a strangely dissociated attitude toward company operations that aren't working well. What company *policy* is—that is the way they learn things are supposed to be—gets pressed into their heads so much that they get a little confused by their simultaneous understanding that it isn't really working that way at all. I pointed that out a lot to see what would happen. For instance our lesson books say: "Customers always get Manhattan directories delivered with their regular installations." I said, in class: "Gee, that's funny, Sally, I had a telephone installed recently and I didn't get any phone books at all." Sally would make sure not to lose control and merely repeat: "Phone books are delivered with the regular installations."

It was the same with installation dates, which, in the company's time of troubles, are lagging behind. Company *policy* is that installations are made two days from the date they are requested. In reality we were making appointments for two, three, or even four weeks in advance. There are explanations for these lapses—everyone knows that things go wrong all the time—but there are no reasonable explanations which do not undermine the basic assumption that the company has everything "scientifically" under control. Thus the "policy" is that they are not happening at all.

The effect of the pressure of work and the ethos of niceness is to defuse political controversy. There is a kind of compact about tolerance, a govern-

ing attitude which says, "Let's not talk about religion or politics." During the time I was there I heard virtually no discussion of Vietnam, the city elections, or race. There was a single exception—an argument between Betty and myself over Songmy—after which I had the feeling that something had been breached, that she would take particular care not to let it happen again.

This is not characteristic of the men's departments of the company where political discussion is commonplace, and I believe the women think that such heavy topics are properly the domain of men: they are not about to let foolish "politics" interfere with the commonsensical and harmonious adjustments they have made to their working lives. Race relations were governed by the same kind of neutrality and "common sense." The black women of the Commercial Department were of the same type as the whites: lower middle class and upwardly mobile. Among the Representatives, not an Afro was in sight. There were good and close relationships between the blacks and the whites—close enough for jokes about hair and the word "nigger"—and, as far as I could tell, the undercurrents of strain that existed were no greater (though certainly no less intense) than are characteristic of such relations in the more educated and "liberal" middle classes.

Normally the question of unions is far from the interests of the women in the Commercial Department. The women do not see themselves as "workers" in anything like the classical sense. The absence of this consciousness—deliberately stunted by management personnel strategies—is a natural and realistic response to the conditions of their work. Customer's Service Representative is the position from which lower (female) management is recruited, and promotions are frequent. Supervisors are always former Representatives and



their relations with the women they supervise are close and friendly. The absence of rigid job definitions is an economic boon to the company as well as a psychic advantage to the employees. When a Supervisor is ill, for example, a "rep" will take over and handle her functions, and reps as well as Supervisors are occasionally asked to teach classes, coach new employees, or take "acting" titles: a natural managerial flow which is unthinkable under most union rules.

This is not to say that the women think their working conditions are good: they object to the salaries; they hate the pressure; they dislike Observation; and they resent the internalized time clocks which control their lunches and breaks. But the women's trust remains with the company and their hopes for escape are mainly fixed on the individual's upward mobility into managerial ranks. "Worker solidarity"—the consciousness that all workers advance through collective action—is weak.

The Union of Telephone Workers, which "represents" the Commercial Department, reflects this condition. It is an "independent" union lineally descended from the company-sponsored employee organizations that existed in the Bell System before the Wagner Act. It belongs to an Alliance of Independent Telephone Unions composed of similar unions in Bell companies along the Eastern Seaboard. The UTW explicitly rejects the philosophy of "international" or "big" unionism in favor of a company-oriented approach "close to the problems" of workers and management. Its successes are precisely those modest concessions and policy changes which any remotely modern management would have had to make in recent years to maintain its work force.

The UTW's role is to stamp those concessions into the language and mold of "negotiated" agreements. It swings into action readily enough when it is attacked—a large part of the machinery

of the Alliance exists for precisely this purpose—but it is generally a sleepy beast content to nuzzle in the bosom of Ma Bell. Numbers are irrelevant to its strength—only about 40 percent of the women belong—and it does not seem interested in recruiting. As a new employee, I had to seek it out. Similar company unions represent the telephone operators in the Traffic Department (the serfs of the system) and the Accounting Department. The only AFL-CIO Union in New York Telephone is the Communications Workers of America, which represents the Plant bargaining unit—installers, repairmen, switchmen, and so forth. CWA has a reputation for company-mindedness elsewhere in the labor movement, but despite recent challenges it has long been the only "real" union with which New York Tel's management has had to deal.

This divided labor force (in addition to the four unions there are seven contracts, no two of which expire simultaneously) is crucial to management for three reasons. First of all, the work rules and sensitivities of the CWA would drive any rational management crazy. In the Plant department, a clerk will not answer a Foreman's telephone unless she is reclassified as a secretary; the men will not work "alongside" management even when—as now—a manpower shortage has created acute emergencies. And the men in the union not only obstruct a "rational" flow of work: they have interfered with management's efforts to expand its work force by hiring new employees at more generous starting salaries than those of the old employees. That—in addition to an undercurrent of racism—was a key issue in the telephone strike last fall. If that mentality were transferred to other departments, the company would be in far greater difficulty than it is now.

Second, it is precisely the absence of solidarity between departments that



gives management the leverage to break or control the frequent strikes the men provoke. When CWA strikes occur, they are usually ignored by the other unions, and lower-level management from the other departments is sent around to Plant to help with repairs, handle complaints, and so forth. If their departments were also on strike, these junior executives would have to attend to their own jobs: they could not be used as scabs against the CWA.

Third, though more remote, is a larger threat: the possibility of a single militant union of telephone workers, perhaps nationwide, actually stopping, or more fancifully, seizing, the network of telephone communications. For all these reasons, it is clear, management prefers the present arrangement to a more unified one.

In any event, the union question, normally static, uncharacteristically sprang to life during my stay at the telephone company because at the end of November the CWA opened a raid on the UTW. Its ultimate intention was to begin to assemble all company employees into a unified body. In this plan was a measure of wishful thinking, if not deception. CWA is not so popular within the company and though it recently won an election in the city Plant department (over a teamster-inspired challenge) it has also lost several others (against company unions) in upstate New York and in New England. Nevertheless, consolidation was its chief arguing point: in unity there will be strength.

CWA's problem was that members of the Commercial bargaining unit were spread out in small clusters in dozens of locations throughout New York. Their efforts, however, seemed particularly lackluster and should make New Left organizers take heart: the old dogs have no new tricks to teach.

They began their campaign in my area by calling an after-work meeting of Commercial Department women in a small working-class bar close by

several of the Commercial offices downtown, attempting to lure people there by desultory leafleting the same morning. From my office—that is from among the one hundred Representatives who worked with me—no one came but me, though there was a handful of women from other Commercial units in the same building.

From another office, however, whose function was identical to mine, about forty women came, and in exploring why I discovered subtle differences between offices in the relations between managers and women. It seems that a manager at the other office had just held a meeting with his women in which he complained that they were stretching their breaks too long and cheating on their closed time. They found his remarks threatening and reacted with hostility. I later learned that this office is particularly understaffed and has an intracompany reputation of being one of the more tense places to work. I believe that the ethers of solidarity that float between our manager, Y, and the women in my office would have prevented such an exchange from taking place there.

At the meeting the CWA was represented chiefly by shop stewards who had jobs as installers, switchmen, repairmen, and by one somewhat puffy and intellectualized bureaucrat from the International. The men were plain, decent, and serious, and had an intelligent point to make: if we stood together we would be the stronger for it. CWA dues were higher than UTW's, they admitted, but they paid for real union services: hard bargaining by trained negotiators, grievance procedures, fringe benefits, and so forth; most of the gains made by Commercial employees were the results of CWA pressures elsewhere in the Bell System.

The women's reaction to the sales pitch was pure Gomperism: what about free dental care, medical check-ups, low cost car-purchasing programs? Some issues were raised that were more basic. They were women and



they were being raided by men. They would be asked to walk out to support the men. Would the men walk out to support them? Why were there no women in top positions in the union when 45 percent of the members were women? Why did women's salaries in the company start at \$79.50 when the lowest amount paid to a man was \$95.00?

Back at my office it developed that the women were not nearly so uninterested as their nonattendance had made it seem. Nor were they as anti-union as their lack of interest in the UTW suggested. It was more that they were not meeting-goers, on the one hand, and that they were disgusted by the UTW on the other. A group of women I talked to in the cafeteria one day told me that every time a UTW contract came up for approval, they and others they knew voted "no" but that somehow their votes didn't get counted. They were seriously interested in the CWA alternative, discussed it a great deal among themselves, and began filling out the cards required to petition the NLRB for an election.

The union issue stirred up the most serious conversation I had heard at the company, and, for a time, I had private fantasies about the possibilities involved in a CWA takeover: could the women be made to see their women's interests in some opposition to a male-dominated union, once they were in it, more clearly than they could see them opposed to the company, which was always holding out the carrot of personal advancement? Would the union, simply because it was in motion and in some way organized, because consciousness in it was more free-floating, be the right forum in which to raise war-related issues such as AT&T's involvement with the ABM? Could the racism inherent in the union's opposition to the company's new policies of hiring what it always referred to as the "hard core" possibly be overcome? For a time, these things seemed possible to me. Then manage-

ment began its counterattack.

By early December management was calling private meetings of Supervisors to feed them anti-CWA propaganda, which they in turn would feed back to the women. Sally came back from such a meeting filled with grisly facts: "The President of CWA makes \$35,000 a year," she said; the top officials recently voted themselves a \$4-6000 salary raise; top pay in New York is higher than top pay in places represented by CWA; it's true there's a dental plan but you have to use CWA dentists.

The main point of management's message was, if you're dissatisfied, reform the UTW. Is the President too old? Throw her out and get a more modern President. But don't throw away the union that has gotten you eleven paid holidays and all your other gains; don't throw out the baby with the bath. Later these arguments were repeated (almost word for word) in a similar chat which my floor supervisor, Laura, had with the women in her unit. The company also began to engage in all sorts of other activities, turning over the payroll lists to the UTW at an early date for propaganda mailings to the employees' homes, and at one point even circulating a UTW phone number which we were advised to call for "unbiased" information on what the raid was all about. The recorded message went like this:

This is a message to all Commercial Department employees. Your independent union and all of you are being raided by CWA. They are trying to mislead you into believing that the raid is for the sake of unity. Nothing could be farther from the truth. They want you only for your money. CWA dues run from \$5.50 to \$10.50 a month to support their Washington fat cat. The dues you pay to your independent union, the Union of Telephone Workers, are not wasted for Washington offices and fat cats. CWA claims to represent a lot of telephone work-

ers in the United States but not a single contract for Commercial workers can meet your contract for wages. Your independent union, the UTW, has negotiated the highest wage rates for Commercial Department employees, anywhere in the United States.

Your intelligence will caution you not to become a tool of CWA's misleading tactics.

Your desire for effective and orderly representation will caution you against buying CWA's walk-out, wildcat strike sellout policies, and the constant loss of wages over ridiculous disputes.

Your experience and knowledge of human nature will keep you from getting fouled up in foolish frustrations and the hopeless fury of CWA's ineffective puppets.

A step toward CWA is a costly step downward: more dues, frequent assessments, loss of autonomy and less take-home pay.

This does not make good sense, does it?

Stay with your independent union, the Union of Telephone Workers.

This propaganda was later multiplied in individual mailings, and I believed it was likely to be effective, particularly when communicated to the women by Supervisors whom they trust. At least in my department (a small fraction of the overall bargaining unit) the women did not have enough class consciousness to suspect it merely because it was coming from the company. In addition, the CWA's rebuttal campaign—conducted through mailings—did not deal solidly with these concrete objections. In the election, held in mid-February, the CWA lost by about seven to two.

**M**y ultimate conclusion about the CWA-UTW issue as I watched it struggling to its finale was that it simply did not matter. Images were left in my head: Dan, a fat CWA chief steward, driving me to an appointment uptown

in a car decorated with American flags and an antique Veterans Poppy; a later meeting with him in which he described the company's new employees exclusively as tramps, pushers, and smelly apes; an interview with a union official after I quit in which he sighed and remarked, "The trouble with people today is that they want change for the sake of change." I thought: CWA does inspire something more closely akin to true "consciousness" than the company unions, but the consciousness it inspires is not close enough to what is needed. In view of the top-down control and inflexible ways of the CWA, and the marginal role of any union in the women's lives, the women's immediate interests probably are better represented by the UTW; and the CWA does not offer the compensation of initiating fights for larger political objectives, or even for objectives that have to do with the quality of life within the company. Thus the issues of dues, strike pay, and socialized dentistry become real.

Perhaps the best way to think about the women of the telephone company is to ask the question: what reinforces company-minded behavior and what works against it? It is a difficult question. The reinforcement comes not from the work but from the externals of the job: the warmth of friendships, the mutual support, the opportunities for sharing and for gossip, the general atmosphere of company benevolence and paternalism; not to mention the need for money and the very human desire to do a good job.

I never heard any of the women mouth the company rhetoric about "service to the customer" but it was obvious to me that a well-handled contact could be satisfying in some way. You are the only person who has access to what the customer needs—namely, telephones—and if you can provide him with what he wants, on time and efficiently, you might reason-



ably feel satisfied about it. The mutual support—the sharing of closed time, helping one another out on commitments—is also very real. The continual raffles, sales contests, gimmicks, and parties are part of it, too. They simply make you feel part of a natural stream.

Working in that job one does not see oneself as a victim of “Capitalism.” One is simply part of a busy little world which has its own pleasures and satisfactions as well as its own frustrations but, most important, it is a world, with a shape and an integrity all its own. The pattern of co-optation, in other words, rests on details: hundreds of trivial, but human, details.

What is on the other side? Everyone’s consciousness of the iron fist, though what they usually see is the velvet glove; the deadening nature of the work; the low pay; what is going on in the outside world (to the extent that they are aware of it); the malfunctioning of the company; the pressure of supervision and observation. There was a sign that sat on the desk of one of the women while I was there, a Coney Island joke-machine sign: “Due to Lack of Interest, Tomorrow Will be Postponed.” For a time I took it as an emblem and believed that was how the woman really felt. But now I am not sure.

I think that for these women to move they would have to have a sense of the possibility of change—not even to mention the desirability of change—which I am certain they do not feel. They are more satisfied with their lives than not, and to the extent that they are not, they cannot see even the dimmest possibility of remedial action through collective political effort. The reason they do not have “class consciousness”—the magic ingredient—is that in fact they are middle class. If they feel oppressed by their situation, and I think many of them do, they certainly see it only as an individual problem, not as something which it is their human right to avoid or over-

come.

How one would begin to change that, to free them to live more human lives, is very hard to know. Clearly it would require a total transformation of the way they think about the world and about themselves. What is impossible to know is whether the seeds of that transformation lie close beneath the surface and are accessible, or whether they are impossibly buried beyond rescue short of general social convulsion. It is hard to believe that the women are as untouched as they seem by the social pressures which seem so tangible to radicals. Yet I saw little evidence that would make any other conclusion possible.

I have a strong feeling of bad faith to have written this at all. I know the women will not recognize themselves in my account, but will nonetheless be hurt by it. They were, after all, warm and friendly: sympathetic about my troubles, my frustrations; helpful in the work; cheerful in a businesslike way. Betty, at least, was a friend. It is almost as if a breach of the paternalism of the company is involved. I fear a phone call asking “Was that a nice thing to do?” and I would say, perhaps not, perhaps the intellectual and political values of my life by which I was judging yours make equally little sense. Perhaps the skills which give me leverage to do it allow me only to express alienation and not to overcome it; perhaps I should merely be thankful that I was raised as an alpha and not a beta. Sometimes I am not sure. But I know that however it will seem to them, this piece is meant to be for the women of the telephone company, and that it is written for them with both love and hope. □

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