

## ***Diatribes 183***

### ***Technology and “unemployment”. A reassessment.***

When one of the emperors of ancient Rome was offered some labour saving device he is said to have rejected it saying “what am I going to get my slaves to do instead?”. This mind-set still persists to-day. Life, at least for the lower classes, is meant to be about filling the non-sleeping hours with paid “work”. Anyone not so engaged is said to be “unemployed”.

As far as I can see, there are two major factors we have to thank, if thank is the word, for this imposition which came about with the coming of industrial society. The first is ideological; it is summed up in the slogan which says that the devil will find work for idle hands to do. For some strange reason this old saw doesn't apparently hold for the rich who can fulfil their obligations to society by engaging in lavish spending and riotous living. The origin of this belief may lie in Judaeo-Christian religion, but it has now become almost universal as part of the greed which dominates the industrial life-style.

Another given reason is that having everyone working is “good for the economy”. Given that by the term “economy” they mean the power of the rich, this claim certainly has the ring of truth. As Karl Marx and others suggested, capitalist wealth is based on the surplus derived from the labour of those employed by the capitalist, clearly if there is no labour there is no surplus, and the size of the surplus is related to the amount of labour performed. It is strange that those who deny the reality of Marx's theory should apparently base their behaviour totally on it.

The acquisition of wealth is a permanent aspect of Judaeo-Christian systems nowadays, and perhaps it always really was, no matter what pretences were put forward.

We can see that the very notion of unemployment can only exist in a class society, because it presupposes the need for all except the rich to be employed. We can also see that this need is determined by the standards set down by the ruling class, and its intensity and duration, called the working day, is also determined by the standards of the capitalist. The actual details of the duration and intensity of the work situation then depends on the interaction between workers and employers. This, in the old parlance, used to be called the class struggle.

I am sorry to have gone back to first principles in discussing employment and unemployment. This, however, is necessary to deal with the illusions nowadays rampant after the spin merchants of the bosses have done their best to distort the reality which really ought to be obvious to anyone who is compelled (aren't we all?) to exist within the system. To go on...

In the early days of capitalism workers were, by and large, only able to extract a bare living as the fruit of their labour. Exceptions were highly skilled workers, workers with special abilities either manual or mental, and workers whose organisations were able to carve out exceptional conditions for their members. On the other hand, most of these organisations are now absorbed into the system and this gives the system the chance of persuading workers that they are better off looking after themselves individually (which nowadays they often are).

My first job in Australia was with Radio Corporation in South Melbourne. My pay was less than one pound for a 44 hour week, less than what was needed to rent a room for two weeks, as a junior labourer. One of my most vivid memories is a newspaper cutting displayed on the firm's noticeboard reporting a court case in which the

law had caught up with a miscreant Radio Corporation fellow worker who had been caught with a handful of the electronic components which we were assembling into domestic radio sets. He had probably picked them up off the floor. Their value would have been negligible.

I cannot remember what his punishment was, apart from the instant sack. What I do remember were the remarks by the magistrate quoted in the newspaper report. Referring to the economic conditions at the time, the end of the worst of the 1929 depression, he thundered: "IT IS UNBELIEVABLE THAT IN THESE DAYS A WORKER SHOULD BITE THE HAND THAT FEEDS HIM!!"

This was nearly 70 years ago. To-day, with another depression looming, we have a minister of a so-called Labor government, one belonging to the so-called left faction, telling workers that if they insist on maintaining their living standards the bosses will simply sack them. Furthermore, we are always reminded that the robots will take over. At the back of all these threats is the underlying assumption that workers are only holding down jobs by the good graces of bosses, good graces which can be turned off instantly if these recalcitrant workers play up.

I, and thousands of other workers of the past and present, have what we have understood all our working lives: An understanding that workers aren't in their jobs by the grace of god or the grace of the bosses; they are there because they are the foundation of society which could not continue without them.

Let's look at the reality. Today's industrial wages are minimal, seldom exceeding 5% of overall product costs. This is true whether the job is operating a monstrous mining machine or whether it is serving customers in a supermarket.

Conversely, if workers in any industry could be sacked without detriment to the business, this would have happened already, probably years ago. As an example, today's forestry industry employs less than a fifth of their number of sixty years ago, despite a vastly increased output due to mechanisation. Yet politicians of every hue, and of course timber bosses, are telling us that the environmentally horrific wood-butchering going on is to save the jobs in the forestry industry. Next time you hear a politician or executive tell us that "we are all in this together" look at their pay-cheque if you can, not your own.

What is the lesson from this? As economic conditions worsen, look neither to the behaviour of the bosses nor the demands of the workers for the reasons, although these aspects are worth examining. Nor look at the money being thrown at the banks and other financial institutions, in the vain hope that these excesses are remedies or even intended to be remedies.

Of course, there is no such intention. It would be bizarre if a class of employers which hitherto has made the reduction of labour in their product a matter of faith rather than necessity were to suddenly reverse their ideology. The only approach that is known to work, at least partially, is that pursued by Roosevelt during the last depression, consisting of catching up with the shortcomings in infrastructure. This, although talked about, is hardly likely to happen while privatisation is the catch-cry.

Remember that most of the horrendous debts which we are now asked to pay off never even existed except on paper. What we are witnessing is not some glitch in the capitalist system, but one of its normal aspects.

The worst aspect of the present situation is that our environmental disaster is now being largely forgotten or, worse still, being exacerbated. What we need is a revolution and we need it now, before it is too late. If only!