

14 Charles Lane
New York, N.Y. 10014

June 13, 1977

TO NATIONAL COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Dear Comrades,

Attached for your information is some correspondence concerning the Militant article, "One Night in a Tube Plant."

Comradely,

Mary Alice Waters
Mary-Alice Waters
SWP National Office

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14 Charles Lane
New York, New York 10014

June 1, 1977

Helen Scheer
Minneapolis, Minnesota

Dear Helen:

After receiving your letter of May 26 about Debby's piece on conditions of work in a Milwaukee tube plant (Militant Vol. 41/No. 19, May 20), I reread it. She originally submitted it as a much shorter piece about her last night in a mill prior to taking a new job as an apprentice machinist. The first draft left out all the details of what happened at work, but it told about her arrival and departure. So I wrote to her and asked what happened. She then wrote the part about changing the piercer rolls, "the hardest, the most dangerous, the most dreaded job." As you can see, I must accept some responsibility for this article even though my only contribution was to give encouragement.

There has been criticism of it, somewhat different from yours. I am enclosing a letter from Andy to Garrett Brown in Chicago which explains our considerations in publishing the article in the first place.

Similar articles about hazardous conditions of work occasionally appear in the capitalist press. A young man who grew up in a coal mining district recently wrote a piece about his first job underground. It was published in the N.Y. Times Magazine. He had gone to school to learn to write, and unable to earn a living writing had gone back to work in the mines. So his account was not by an "average miner", but it--like Debby's--was an accurate account of what the work is like.

The last time that we published such an article that I can remember was the one by a telephone operator. It was in the ISR, Militant magazine section. It was different from Debby's article in that the conditions at the telephone company seemed to be the result of company policy whereas the conditions that Debby described are accepted by most people as a natural part of the job.

I think an article of this kind is interesting and should be provocative, especially when well done. What interested me most about Debby's piece was the things she told about the workers and management, "Big Mike" (there's one on almost every job), and Chuck, "one of the few people in the machine shop who isn't related to a foreman," and the "Three nervous foremen..." I liked the way she told about how the foremen drove away on their battery-powered scooters--just before the job was finally wrapped up. They will do it every time. This is to avoid responsibility for any last-minute mistake.

We have no reason to ignore the hazards of industrial work, and I am sure most of these jobs can and will be made safer and cleaner. In my opinion it would be good to get some responses to this in the letters column, but we will have to wait and see what comes in.

Your first objection to the article had not occurred to me. I hadn't noticed anything in it that was critical of the union. It is true that unions ought to be doing more about these conditions--especially the steel union--and all the union publications show some awareness of the problem. The officials deplore it and say how they are going to get management to do something about safety. I don't think workers generally accept factory conditions as they presently exist, and I know they try in many ways to change them. In Debby's experience, she had little to report on this side of the matter.

I agree with you that we should run some accounts of how workers protect themselves and each other on the job, but that is another story and will have to be reported at another time. Not every article needs to say everything, nor does it need to be a "line" article. (I am not advocating that we should run stuff that is counter to our objectives, and I don't think the article in question was that.)

We cannot prepare our comrades for industrial jobs by the kind of articles we run in the paper from time to time on the conditions of factory work. Comrades seek work in industry because they are convinced it is politically necessary. It is true, as you say, that factory work has some rewards and satisfactions. Not all jobs are like the one Debby described. And not all workers have the same attitude toward such jobs. Some will see such a job as a challenge and take satisfaction in doing it well.

I completely agree with your final point. We don't need a lot of "hard luck" stories by women workers. Our women comrades will soon have many good things to report about their work on the job and in the union, I am sure of that.

Comradely,

s/ Frank

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Minneapolis, Mn
May 26, 1977

Dear Frank,

I don't think we should print an article like "One Night in a Tube Plant." You can only conclude that a steel job is so dirty and dangerous that it should be avoided at all costs and that a steel plant is no place for a women. That is not what we are telling comrades and it is not what we want to say in the Militant--and besides that, although there is a little truth in it, it is far from the whole truth.

This article is indicative of two possible problems:

1. A lack of union consciousness, not seeing the union as our organization, especially at the shop level; having no expectations or confidence in the union, feeling powerless, helpless... and the next thing is cynicism. We don't want anything like that in the paper, especially from a steelworker.

The unions have degenerated alot but it is still better than no union; if for no other reason the pay is better, and there are other benefits. I don't think comrades appreciate union organization as opposed to the humiliating conditions of having no rights at all.

2. Although steel is a priority, not everybody--men as well as women--are suited for steel work. We have to pay some attention to individuals, and recognize differences in people. There are other union jobs.... Comrades should not have to go to work hating it so much, being scared, anticipating accidents--that is a pre-condition for an accident.

Also, to the extent possible, comrades should be prepared for factory conditions--dirt, grease, oil, water, heat, cold, noise, etc. The object is not to shock or discourage people but to be helpful, as well as realistic. There are compensations for working in industry, and the Militant should reflect a positive attitude.

Finally, I don't think every hard-luck story we have should come from women. It tends to bolster some reactionary ideas like "a man's job" and "a women's place...."

The trend toward getting people in the field to write about their experience is good for the Militant. Such stories are not only informative and popular, but can be very effective in making a point. That is why they should have something positive to say... and not come across like Night in a Tube Plant.

We are making some headway here in Mpls.--slowly, I grant you. Have a Steel Committee of Bill O., Charlie, Marc S. (recently from Houston) and the party organizers, Ilona and Gillian to

take hold of the work--jobs, Militant sales, Forums, education, etc. and Iron Range contacts. We are learning our way around up there with each trip and recently got 25 subs in addition to sales of the paper.

Comradely,

s/ Helen Scheer

14 Charles Lane
New York, N.Y. 10014

May 24, 1977

Garrett Brown
Chicago

Dear Garrett,

I've thought more about the Debby Deegan article since you raised your objections to it. And the more I think about it the more I'm convinced we were correct to run it, and should run other articles like it in the future. Your criticisms, as I understand them, are first that it sounds like the Militant speaks only for a bunch of student radicals who are just getting into the plants and are appalled at getting their hands dirty. Second, that it won't "impress" workers who already know about these conditions and probably take them for granted.

I think the first objection takes a rather narrow view of what's going on in the labor force. Thousands of young workers are today getting jobs in basic industry for the first time. Many of them may be radicalized, but only a small minority are radicals entering the plants to do political work. The overwhelming majority are there to make a living. This includes a growing number of young women who are breaking into basic industry because they can make two or more times the wages they could as a secretary, waitress, clerk, etc. Debby is a member of the SWP, but I would be very surprised if her reactions are not shared by thousands of other young women workers who are in similar positions.

As a matter of fact, Debby comes to the job not from a campus but from a background of low-paying, "women's jobs-- just like so many thousands of other new workers. The main difference is that she articulates her feelings--rather well, in my opinion.

I think she makes a lot of interesting observations-- the physical and psychological cruelty of the turns system and not knowing your schedule; how the foreman is related to most of the workers in the machine shop, and his attitude toward somebody who is not part of the family; the way the company medical system blocks an injured worker from going home; the variety of daily indignities and unsafe conditions, including simple things like a leaky roof that represent flagrant company negligence for the sake of a few bucks.

Garrett...2

As young workers come in, the companies naturally try to mold them into a subservient work force. The work has to be dirty, hot, and dangerous. It's always been this way and couldn't be any different. Don't complain, you punk--aren't you tough enough to take it? And a certain number of more experienced workers (partly because of the attitudes they develop out of self-defense about conditions they don't see any way to change) will join in pushing these company-inspired attitudes.

So eventually you get used to it. Maybe even come to take it for granted. It probably does take a fresh eye to see how oppressive a lot of these work conditions are. That's been true, I would think, for as long as reformers or muckrakers of any kind have been writing about factory conditions. But those conditions are oppressive and dangerous, and they are still worth publicizing. The Militant is certainly in the camp of those who think the conditions Debby describes are scandalous, not those who think it's just something they have to accept.

Of course, there is a distinction between how you have to operate as a political individual on the job and what you can say in the Militant. That's just tactical sense. Our comrades are exemplary workers, not slackers and whiners. They can't raise a fuss over everything every day in the plant. They pick and choose as a political decision exactly what to fight about. But there's no reason in the Militant not to spell out exactly what we think of the job.

In doing so we're not trying to "impress" anybody--least of all older workers who accept present conditions in the plants as the natural order of things. We do want to write what will ring true to the workers, especially those we aim to recruit. Which means precisely the new, young workers--especially women and minorities--who are liable to be angry and scared by what they go through.

We're not too interested in somebody who reads a story like Debby's and says, "That just shows these women can't take it. They shouldn't be in here." We're very interested in young women who read it and think, "That's right. This really is a horseshit job and ought to be a lot better."

Of course, if our facts are wrong or if the story otherwise doesn't hold up as accurate--that's a valid criticism. But nobody has yet pointed out any such factual errors to me.

Garrett...3

The only reason I'm taking the time to write about a story that's long gone now is that it does bear on what we do in the future. I'm anxious to get more material into the Militant exposing job conditions, discrimination, safety hazards, and so on. Material written by workers. Debby is the first comrade in the steel industry (although she's not in the USWA) to write such a piece, and I think she's set a good example.

You mentioned we have comrades in Chicago who are far more experienced and know more about plant conditions. Great-- I'd like nothing better than to get stories ~~from~~ them about what they and their co-workers think about conditions on the job and in the union. Every comrade would write from a somewhat different slant, a different experience. Many would say more than Debby did about what should be done, rather than just what's wrong. Many could write about discussions and struggles in the plant to improve conditions. We need all of that.

The point, as far as I'm concerned, is to get the process started. That's the direction I'd like to see the Militant move in (along with continuing all the types of steel coverage we now have, of course), and I'm eager to hear what the comrades in the fraction there think. With that in mind, please feel free to show this letter around to other comrades in Chicago.

Comradely,

s/ Andy

The first woman in the plant since World War II describes 'the most dangerous, the most dreaded job.'

By Debby Deegan

MILWAUKEE—Three, two, one. The miles tick down.

The parking lot is marked off into different areas: "First Shift," "Second Shift," "Third Shift," "Women." "Women" means office workers.

"Hi, Debby." A friendly greeting from a second-shift millworker going home.

Uncertainty. Tonight at lunch (3:00 a.m.) I will find out if I have Saturday and Sunday nights off. We're scheduled for three nights off each month, but management has until Thursday "noon" to decide which ones.

Uncertainty, too, as to what jobs I'll get tonight. As part of a machine repair crew in this tube mill, I get sent out on different jobs all over the plant.

I glance at the huge fifty-by-eighty-by-twenty-foot furnace to make sure its doors are closed. If they're open, it means I may be sent into the thick asbestos-lined chambers all night and choke all the next day on the fibers.

Since I was hired in December—the first woman in the plant since World War II—the company has hired three more women.

In the locker room we exchange the latest news: "I slept six hours today!" Two of the women have children at home to take care of in addition to the breakneck work schedule.

By the time I'm changed into my workclothes, I'm all dirty. Just putting on my boots, a quarter-inch thick with grease, is enough to make my hands black.

I finish tying my shoelaces, put in my ear plugs, adjust my yellow hard hat; find my flashlight, wrench, pliers, and safety glasses; make sure I have enough coffee change to last until lunch; and make my way down the wooden stairs.

I walk past the flashing red "safety" light. My nose adjusts to the "burned Rice Krispies" smell of two shifts of unventilated mill, and I enter the machine shop.

There, the atmosphere is less friendly. As the first woman ever in this "male turf" there is 25 percent hostility, 25 percent neutrality, and 50 percent acceptance. I make my way to

the far end of the row, where the younger men stand while the older journeymen sit on the counter near their tool boxes.

11:00 p.m.

11:00 p.m. The bell rings.

Suspense mounts. Who will get what job? The general foreman doles out jobs to the welders and riggers (mechanics who do the heaviest lifting with cranes and hoists). The machine shop foreman comes around with pink slips and assigns a job and partner to each machinist.

Everyone knows that the piercer rolls must be changed tonight. This is the hardest, the most dangerous, the most dreaded job. The function of each roll is to pierce a hole in both ends of red-hot steel bar stock, weighing about 1,000 pounds. This will turn a bar into a tube. The rolls must be set at exactly the right angle or the mill cannot run.

Dennis, the union steward, and I have been assigned this job. Everyone else breathes a sigh of relief. Like me, Dennis is thirty. I like working with him: he's cool and steady.

We get two clean pairs of gloves and load up our cart with tools: two sledgehammers, two babbitt hammers, a pail of kerosene, two twenty-four-inch wrenches, a screw jack, lots of rags.

As a helper, part of my job is to push the truck full of tools. We trudge toward the weld shop.

We roll by Furnace 28, a reheating furnace that is left running twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. The twenty-foot-long rolls in this furnace must be changed while it's running, which means they come out red hot. Boiling hot water, used to cool the rolls, hisses and spits out at us as we pass.

We continue along past the Manischmere (nicknamed "many smear") Mill. My first night on the job I crawled headfirst under this mill tightening bolts. On this job you wear rags under your helmet like an Arabian horseman, to keep the grease from getting in your hair.

Once in the weld shop, we set our tools down and begin setting up the

piercer roll.

The first part of the job involves heating up the knuckle so it will expand and fit over the end of the roll where it keeps the bearings from slipping. The knuckle must be heated for an hour. We strike a match to paper towels, turn on the gas and air, and light torches on either side of the knuckle.

12:30 a.m.

At 12:30 we begin the process of getting the knuckle on the roll. This involves split-second timing. At Dennis's signal, I turn off my torch and push the button to move the crane that is holding the knuckle. The knuckle slides halfway on and Dennis starts swinging. I grab the other sledgehammer and we pound in unison. The hot knuckle feels like it's burning through my asbestos gloves.

The knuckle is stuck. Dennis's hand is burned. I wait for him to get back from the nurse.

While I'm waiting, my foreman comes to ask me if I "want" to work the weekend.

I play dumb: "Do I have to?"

He explains that I don't have the proper attitude: I should look at this as an opportunity to make extra money. I tell him thank you, but no. He says he'll see what he can do.

I feel angry and helpless. This is supposed to be my weekend off and I've planned to sleep. But, as the least senior person, I have to work if there aren't enough people scheduled or if a more senior person wants off.

More than angry, I'm worried. Dennis must be hurt badly.

Dennis comes back with his hand bandaged. He asked to go home, but the nurse told him to get his foreman's permission. The foreman has refused.

3:00 a.m.

On the way to lunch, I run into my foreman. He tells me I'm off this weekend.

I crawl up the stairs to the women's locker room and recoup my forces for the rest of the night. The roof is leaking and my stale bologna sandwich gets soaked.

After lunch I return to the weld shop to find that Chuck has replaced Denis.

Chuck is my favorite person to work with. He's twenty-five and comes from a logging town in northern Wisconsin. His dream is to buy a trailer and return there someday.

He has spent two of the twelve months he's worked here in the hospital. His hard hat didn't protect him from a tube that fell and hit him in the temple. One of the few people in the machine shop who isn't related to a foreman, Chuck was almost kicked out of the shop by the general foreman for not being "skilled" enough.

We are both wringing wet from sweat and the rain coming down through the roof. Chuck smokes constantly as we prepare the roll for installation.

4:30 a.m.

By 4:30 a.m. the roll is ready. "Big Mike" is sent to help. Because of his size, no one picks on Big Mike. I roll the truck to the mill while Mike and Chuck accompany the two motor forklifts with the roll.

This has become a rush job. Three mill setup workers have been sent to help. From here on, I will have to listen carefully to instructions and not get in the way.

Chuck sends me underneath the mill with a screw jack. The setup crew hoists the roll into midair and brings it into position.

Chuck shows me where to insert the screw jack, and I start pumping. It is still hot under the mill, which has been running all night.

I don't see any rats, but I hold my nose against the smell of decomposed rats in the rancid grease. My boots squash in the grease and water. I try not to slip.

6:00 a.m.

My job is done. The jack is securely in place.

Three nervous foremen have come to watch us. If our job isn't done, we'll have to work overtime. It's almost 6:00 a.m., time for the mill to start. Assured that the job is almost done, the foremen in their white hats drive off in their battery-powered scooters.

The millworkers in their orange hats are ready to start. We get out of the way fast, throw our tools on the truck, and watch the mill start up with a big rumble.

It's like a giant earthquake. The ground shudders. Ten-foot logs of steel are rolled by a conveyor into the furnace. They emerge one by one along a conveyor until they reach the piercer rolls where they are pierced at each end until the right-sized hole is made.

Each tube is then rolled down a fifty-foot incline and conveyed in and out of various machines until the inside and outside walls are the right thickness and diameter. The tubes roll downhill at lightning speed: all you can see is green flames. Sparks shoot out everywhere and sizzle as they hit puddles of water.

Tired, wet, and hot, Mike, Chuck, and I truck back to the machine shop. We don't talk, but share a close silence: we've gotten through the night unharmed. Light shines through the green and turquoise windows in the ceiling high above.

6:30 a.m.

6:30 a.m. Relief. The night is over.

It has been raining all night and the roof is leaking buckets of water.

On my way to the locker room I pass a medical unit and see a millworker with a badly blistered arm. He slipped and fell on a green-hot tube.

I got my two nights off, but not without a fight with my foreman.

I didn't have to work on any cranes sixty feet over the mill, where a wrong move can put you in touch with 1,000-volt live currents.

I didn't get sent into the furnace.

I shiver and feel lucky.