

## On the Sidewalks of New York

### 23. On the Line

As the summer wore on I began to realize that I was getting a new perspective on my ministry. First, the work/study experience was an invaluable way of learning. We were dealing with the real issues people faced in everyday living. We were forced to reflect, as we came together for discussion, on how the churches' ministry related to people's work life. Second, the situation was a unique occasion for me. We were sharing thoughts and discussing the kind of people I had grown up with. It also brought me up short. I suddenly realized how middle class I had become. Four years at Wooster had had its impact. Education in a Midwestern context had insulated me from the realities of the urban working class.

As I took off for work each morning I began to get a closer look at the life my father spent working in a factory. At Wooster I had associated myself ideologically with his struggles, but now for a brief moment I was getting inside his daily experience. It was true for all the eighteen of us that summer. We were for the first time taking working people seriously, even those of us who had grown up in working class families. The people were real people, not sociological case studies or a quantitative labor statistic. My ideology was taking on a new shape. I began to see my ministry in a different light.

Marshal Scott had made arrangements for our group to take their supper at the Northside Y.M.C.A. It was a rare moment when we were all together at the same time, especially for those of our number who worked on the night shift. When we gathered for supper, it was one of the few times we had to socialize with one another. Our conversations would turn to what had happened on the job that day. The first stories were about the kind of work we were doing and the people we worked with.

We all had difficulty knowing how to identify ourselves. We agreed that we would stick by the ground rule: we would avoid telling our fellow-workers we were seminarians. To reveal who we were would immediately prejudice

their relations with us. We told them that we were students working for the summer. There were the usual questions about what we were studying and where our studies would take us. We came up with a wide range of graduate programs we were doing, some of them very imaginative.

Early in the program our stories from our work often took a humorous bent. We quickly discovered the various ways that people "goofed off" on the job. As we got into July our work became more of a grind; there was less joking about "goofing off." Some of the "goofing off" we soon discovered was unavoidable. Many of the problems were centered in poor work place management. Like time spent just looking for tools to do the assigned job. Workers on one shift would hide tools from the next shift, so that they would have easier access to them when they came back to work the next day. One of our group told us he had spent half the work day tracking down the tools he was supposed to use.

Or time wasted in waiting for a machine to be repaired. For most of us the tempo of our work was tied to our assigned machine. When the machine broke down, and it often did, there was not much to do but wait. The splice bar line, which was a simple operation, had its peculiar foibles. Usually the chain belt went down or the stamping press malfunctioned. One afternoon in late summer we were sitting around waiting for the line to get back in operation and the shop superintendent showed up looking annoyed. I asked him: "How come the company doesn't get this line fixed so we don't waste so much time?" He gave me a dark look: "Because they consider this a losing operation and they write it off against profits."

As time went on we all had our stories about the foremen on our jobs. The foreman was always the key to whether a job was bearable. In places where the foreman knew his job and had the confidence of the men, the work moved smoothly. This was true in plants which had been unionized. Workers were more open in their relationship to the foreman. They knew they had the protection of the union. Very often the foreman had the authority to move men around on jobs. If a worker had a rough time one day, the foreman could move him to an easier assignment another day. This made for better relationships between foreman and workers on the line. In

plants where the foreman lacked the ability to work well with the men, the relationships often broke down into a game between foreman and workers. The workers would see how little they could do and get away with it.

Then in our evening group we would turn to talking about the culture of factory life. Gambling was an important side of the culture. Where work is monotonous and every day seems the same as the next, workers look for some breakthrough. They build up expectations that maybe tomorrow will be better. This was true with gambling. One day I became aware of a worker passing through our shop whom I had seen on several other occasions. He was not part of the splice bar contingent, so I paid attention to his movement. He would come through at the same time everyday. He had a small pad and would stop to talk to men along the way and then write something on his pad. One morning break I asked one of my co-workers who our wanderer was. "He's our number's agent," was the answer. "On his break he collects the numbers we're playing for the day."

I knew about the number's racket. Leonard's, the candy store and news shop on my block in New York, was the center for taking numbers. The number's racket was the worker's hope of picking up a few extra bucks. It was a nickel, dime and quarter and sometimes a dollar gamble. People who worked with numbers everyday often would be the most prone to make bets. The guys on our line would use the number of the splice bars we turned out the day before. One of my friends played the numbers off the railroad cars on which we were loading the splice bars. The winnings were never very big, but it added excitement to our shop if someone won. The numbers racket made millions for those who controlled it.

Our work experience was becoming a part of our lives. We became more and more engrossed in the people we were working with. At break time on the job, the stories would always be the same. They were about the job, about the foreman, about women, about baseball. The subjects were rotated with regularity. A chill would come over the group when word came down about some accident in one of the shops. In a steel mill the accidents were often life impairing. Sometimes they were fatal. If the person was known, and he usually was, the talk would quiet down and a pensiveness would take over.

About three evenings during the week the seminarians would gather for discussions. It was the nature of our jobs that never during the summer were we ever all together at one time. One evening just as we were beginning our discussion, one of our members arrived from his work to take his place with us. Marshal stopped in the middle of his sentence and remarked: " I want you to know that this is the first time this summer that everybody is here at the same time."

"Oh, no it isn't," came a voice from a man closest to the door as he arose from his seat. "I'm on the night shift tonight, and I'm leaving." The humor of the situation did not distract us from understanding what industrial work does to family and community life.

Marshal had prepared an outline of lectures and discussions on the American industrial experience in which he was challenging us to reassess the impact which the rapid growth of cities and the wholesale industrialization of a society was having on the American view of life. Throughout the summer he provided the basic outline of industrial development: the background of U.S. industrialization; the American industrial revolution; a summary of U.S. urban growth; the story of U.S. immigration; an analysis of our American industrial society; a summary of U.S. labor union history; the place of religion in U.S. industrial society; the needs of urban workers; a Christian philosophy of industrial relations; and what Protestants are doing.

At crucial points during the summer Marshal would invite a guest lecturer to add the dynamic of personality to our discussions. We got the steel worker's side on contract negotiations from a leader in the United Steel Workerks of America (USW). We visited the U.S.W. headquarters in downtown Pittsburgh to get a feel for the history of the union. This was balanced off with lectures from executives in several steel manufacturing companies: Stoner-Mudge, Inc., Guilbert Steel Company and a visit to the offices of the steel giant, the Carnegie-Illinois Steel Corporation, that is, U.S. Steel.

We also paid a visit to the rectory of Fr. Charles Rice, a Roman Catholic priest who was listed in the public press as a "labor priest." The Roman Catholic

Church, with its large population of blue collar workers, had seen the rise of a special group of priests whose task it was to stay close to the industrial working class and their unions. Fr. Rice was among the best known of the labor priests. He was also, like many of his brother priests, vigilant in his warding off Communist control of union locals. The "labor priests" had, in fact, organized labor schools for training union men to spot Communist tactics and strategies in local union meetings and to counter them.

At all points Marshal was concerned that we deepen our understanding of the mutuality of labor and management in the "peaceful" development of American industry. This was the basis of his own philosophy. He became Dean of The Presbyterian Institute of Industrial Relations (PIIR) in order to pursue this line of reasoning. In the 1930s, prior to World War II, the struggles of industrial workers to organize in steel, in autos, and in other parts of the manufacturing sector had been met with strong and oftentimes brutal resistance from management. The winning of the war had required cooperation between labor and management. It was this spirit of cooperation which had become the central theme in the report on "The Church and Industrial Relations" to the 156th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, USA which met in Chicago in 1944. One of the recommendations of the report was that the Presbyterian Church, USA take part in the post-war effort to encourage labor- management cooperation and to prepare church leadership to take part in this new post-war era. One practical outcome of the report was the creation of The Presbyterian Institute of Industrial Relations in 1945. When Marshal Scott was called to become Dean of PIIR, he accepted the task of bringing the church's leadership abreast of these changes in the U.S.

As the summer drew to a close and our discussions of our experience deepened, we came to realize the uniqueness of our position. Some of us had already gone through a sea change in our perspective. We were convinced that in whatever ministries we were engaged our understanding of the church's responsibility in industrial society was transformed. Our day to day experiences on the job had added a reality to the kind of issues which had to be dealt with if the church was to have any effective role among industrial workers. This, of course, was the point that Marshal Scott had been making through this experimental summer program. It was this reality which the

Presbyterian Church had not taken into account in its ministry within an industrializing America. It was also one of the reasons the Presbyterian Church's ministry had been so ineffective among industrial workers.

Marshal's mission was to turn that situation around and to prepare a generation of seminarians for ministering among people affected by the changes wrought by the process of industrialization. There was an added dimension to the issue for some of us. We were aware of the significance of the new industrial society being born with all its technological innovations, but we were also concerned that the issue of justice was not lost in the process. We could get excited about being in the stream of major changes taking place in the U.S. and global economy, but we had worked beside men and women who were being affected by those changes. The ministry of the church was not to an abstract industrial society but to real people doing the work in that society.

This was brought home to me forcefully one of my last days on the job at the Edgar Thompson Works. Over the summer one of my fellow workers had persisted in asking me what I was really studying. I had avoided giving him any direct answer, except that I was a history major and would probably teach history. In the last week, the issue came up again. He was more persistent this time. I decided since this was my last week, I would finally tell him that I was studying to become a minister. He took this as a great triumph, that he had finally gotten me to come clean.

On the next to last day on the job, we were all outside on our break. The language was as it always was, punctuated liberally with profanity. One of our hardworking brothers was reciting his exploits with his usual vulgar eloquence. Whereupon my confidant jumped in, "Hey, Charlie, you better be careful, we got a preacher-to-be in our midst. You'll be getting yourself a one way ticket to hell."

Charlie stopped dead in his tracks. He looked around the crowd of grinning co-workers: "Hell! I already know hell!" he said pointing back into the furnaces on which he worked. "I've been living in hell for the last twenty years, and it can't be any worse than in there."