

Work Poems / Poésie du Travail

Volume 8-9, 1981

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/llt8_9wp01

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Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

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Cite this document

(1981). Work Poems / Poésie du Travail. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 8-9, 277-284.

WORK POEMS/POÉSIE DU TRAVAIL

Surplus Value Poem

All day, metal curls up from the drill
or bends and falls from the shears
onto the cement floor. Grit from the files,
the sawn-off ends of bars
rivets that failed, washers,
and even sawdust that someone tracked in
from another department
lies underfoot. When we're parts short
or otherwise have to look busy
or in any case before the last hooter
somebody grabs a broom and gathers
what we have discarded
into a pile, then onto
an old piece of cardboard
and into a waste can.

Then

if it's the end of the day
we take off our coveralls,
go wash up
and spend the last minutes of the shift
peering from our area out at the time clock,
to make sure no one from another department
gets there ahead of us.
Suddenly somebody with the acutest of senses
of the inner workings of a clock
starts the dash, and a half-second later
when the hooter resounds
there's already a long line,
everyone urging those in front
to hurry it up, while a few deals get proposed

*I got coffee for you yesterday.
So punch out for me today, will you?
and resolved Screw off, or
accepted Okay, but tomorrow
you punch out for me.*

Then the clock efficiently stamps our cards
like the good bureaucrat it is.
And meanwhile the next shift is coming in.
And the PA is busy trying to redeem itself
for the past eight hours, and now insists
there is another world out there, announcing
*Phone calls for Ken Smith, for Johnny Kurchak,
Archie Pierce.* The PA follows you
to the parking lot, and if it's anyone we know
there's a certain amount of kidding *Hey, it's your wife,
Billy. She must have found out.*

Then the tangle of cars
at the lot gate, and the next second
you're heading home. Whether you made production
or not, whether it all went smoothly
or not, it's done for another day
and anyway it wasn't your fault
and even if it was
there's nothing you can do about it now.

In the plant
the guys from Maintenance carry the waste cans
out to the yard
and empty them into the bins: the shavings and
scraps from fabrication and assembly,
plus the worn ribbons and botched papers
from the office. At this moment,
as the next shift starts,
the security guards
drift over to stand by the bins.
For the trucks that arrive to pick up
what fell away from each hour we worked
have armored sides.
As these move out of the plant
and along the avenues, the police
keep a casual eye on them, ready at any sign of trouble
to speed to their aid. For the trucks
pull in not at the junkyards,
but at a bank

and when they leave from there
 they haul only thin white envelopes
 to be delivered
 at the homes of certain men
 from the executive offices, and those of other people
 who never go near the plant.
 Something taken out of the hours we work
 they cherish; what we throw away
 and never miss
 makes them rich. The money they get
 is like another deduction
 on our cheque each Friday,
 one that isn't listed
 so we don't complain.

But it keeps us
 what we are.

Tom Wayman

spout deck

black liquor ran orange
 down the cast iron spouts.
 molten
 hissing and spitting
 burning my clothes
 as i lanced the glowing orifices
 to maintain the synthetic
 lava flow.

we were all green
 boiler and crew.

going to work the next day
 i saw the hole
 where my relief had been
 blown through the wall.
 but i couldn't
 no matter how hard i looked
 find the mark across the road
 on the concrete wall
 where, they said
 he hit.

bernard hobby

Boiler Lancer

It's three o'clock.
I can't tell night from day
but it doesn't matter
in the lancers' shack.

There was a time
lancers went out with banners and bugles
to face the enemy.
But this is 1981,
my lance an air-pipe hissing
and my banner a paycheck
every other Thursday
and I can't hear bugles
(or anything else,
through my earplugs)

as I drive my lance rapping
across the flaming rows of tubes
like *cleaning pipes on some encrusted organ*
within the doors of #2 Slag Boiler.
And my enemy?
(I think about that
sometimes
when I am not lancing.)

The other lancers sleep.
My red eyes sweep the floor
and drill into the door
across the room, the one
that you can see was painted
orange before it was blue
and green before it was orange.

It has a ragged scar
where a thousand careless
angry lancer boots have kicked
their way out of this disgusting
shack full of idle bullshit
and old newspapers.

It's three o'clock
we've read it all
and said it all
(I think about the enemy
but he is not here)

In a few hours
I'll go home
to the world.

John Morton

Slime Warning

The alarm bell
pulls him
grumbling from his daydream.

He is the Control Operator,
must get up to press
the override button
and restore the peace
such as it is
in the Furnace Control Room:

the Top 40 repeating
itself endlessly
over quiet thunder.

The alarm bell again.
Get up.
Push the button.

The operator curses.
He always says
he should have a long stick
to push the button from his chair.
(But there are limits
in the Furnace Control Room.)

It is only
the slimes tank
overflowing.

John Morton

The Academy

The open door of Baler No. 1 is pig iron,
ten feet long, a foot
thick, weighs maybe half
a ton. It blocks the area
from view. We pause there

and rap. About a shop meeting.
 About striking
 unless we get at least
 50 cents. About
 the rats we work for.
 Ben calls it
 "The *academia*, the place
 where we intellectuals submit
 and discuss
 our ideas."

Roger Taus

Factory Time

The day divides neatly into four parts
 marked off by the breaks. The first quarter
 is a full two hours, 7:30 to 9:30, but that's okay
 in theory, because I'm supposed to be fresh, but in fact
 after some evenings it's a long first two hours.
 Then, a ten-minute break. Which is good
 another way, too: the second quarter
 thus has ten minutes knocked off, 9:40 to 11:30
 which is only 110 minutes, or
 to put it another way, if I look at my watch
 and it says 11:10
 I can cheer up because if I had still been in the first quarter
 and had worked for 90 minutes there would be
 30 minutes to go, but now there is only
 20. If it had been the first quarter, I could expect
 the same feeling at 9 o'clock as here I have
 when it is already ten minutes after 11.

Then it's lunch: a stretch, and maybe a little walk around.
 And at 12 sharp the endless quarter begins: a full two afternoon hours. And it's
 only the start
 of the afternoon. Nothing to hope for the whole time.
 Come to think of it, today
 is probably only Tuesday. Or worse, Monday,
 with the week barely begun and the day
 only just half over, four hours down
 and 36 to go this week
 (if the foreman doesn't come padding by about 3
 some afternoon and ask us all to work overtime).

Now while I'm trying to get through this early Tuesday afternoon
 maybe this is a good place to say
 Wednesday, Thursday and Friday have their personalities too.
 As a matter of fact, Wednesday after lunch
 I could be almost happy
 because when that 12 noon hooter blast goes
 the week is precisely and officially half over.
 All downhill from here: Thursday, as you know
 is the day before Friday
 which means a little celebrating Thursday night
 — perhaps a few rounds in the pub after supper —
 won't do me any harm. If I don't get much sleep
 Thursday night, so what? I can sleep in Saturday.
 And Friday right after lunch Mike the foreman appears
 with the long cheques dripping out of his hands
 and he is so polite to each of us as he passes them over
 just like they taught him in foreman school.
 After that, not too much gets done.
 People go away into a corner and add and subtract like crazy
 trying to catch the Company in a mistake
 or figuring out what incredible percentage the government
 has taken this week, or what the money will actually mean in terms of savings
 or payments — and me, too.

But wait. It's still Tuesday afternoon.
 And only the first half of that: all the minutes
 until 2 — which comes at last
 and everyone drops what they are doing
 if they hadn't already begun drifting toward
 their lunchboxes, or edging between the parts-racks
 in the direction of the caterer's carts
 which always appear a few minutes before the hooter
 and may be taken on good authority as incontrovertible proof
 that 2 o'clock is actually going to arrive.

And this last ten minute break of the day
 is when I finally empty my lunchbox and the thermos inside
 and put the now lightweight container back on its shelf
 and dive into the day's fourth quarter; only 110 minutes.
 Also, 20 to 30 minutes before the end I stop
 and push a broom around, or just fiddle with something or maybe fill up vari-
 ous parts-trays with washers
 and bolts, or talk to the partsman, climb out of my
 coveralls, and generally slack off.
 Until the 4 p.m. hooter of hooters

when I dash to the timeclock, a little shoving and pushing in line, and I'm done. Whew.

But even when I quit the numbers of the minutes and hours from this shift stick with me: I can look at a clock some morning months afterwards, and see it is 20 minutes to 9 — that is, if I'm ever out of bed that early — and the automatic computer in my head starts to type out: *20 minutes to 9, that means 30 minutes to work after 9; you are 50 minutes from the break; 50 minutes of work, and it is only morning, and it is only Monday, you poor dumb bastard . . .*

And that's how it goes, round the clock, until a new time from another job bores its way into my brain.

Tom Wayman

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