

I once watched the assembly line at a Caterpillar Tractor plant, and it seemed to me that this was a rather gay place. The "Satanic mill" belonged on another planet; here, by contrast, was light and dramatic activity. No one was in a great lather. One man on the line remarked, "Oh, we gabble a lot and have a good time." A man in Personnel told me, "Most of the men on the line are there because they want to be, I have no doubt. Maybe all. They say you can get into the swing of it."

I know the name of a young milling-machine hand in a tool plant who turns out 15,000 small parts a week. It would drive me into dementia, a deadly job. But this fellow slips his brain into neutral, so to speak, snaps on the radio at his bench, and there is his valley of contentment, his green pasture. He has been there for years, though he has been offered a transfer. He owns a bigger and slicker convertible than any officer of the company.

"Chains" That Do Not Bind

Few men are fastened to the assembly line with chains, chains of iron, gold, or duty, according to the sentiment at Plant X, the auto assembly plant studied by Charles Walker and Robert Guest of Yale and reported in their book, *The Man on the Assembly Line*. Men

do know how to move. Up or out. The authors of the study noted that the quit rate for the line was higher than for other departments.

It is true that the Horatio Alger Thruway from file clerk to president is not as open as it once was. To create a modern factory, organize its teamwork, and run its production requires much education, high ability, and special training. But a booming industry is always starved for talent; hence, most companies offer their employees training opportunities and any lad with a wee drap of ambition will find himself moving without straining a button.

The three million include few who repeat one operation day after long day, as did Charlie Chaplin in *Modern Times*. Walker and Guest found that only 32 per cent of the men on the line at Plant X performed a single operation. Moreover, there were some, like the repairmen, who were highly skilled. Peter Drucker — one of capitalism's deep, scientific worriers on this personnel subject — has said that monotony is not a problem in a modern plant. He also has written that, even on the line, the American factory furnishes the worker with "status and function" to an astonishing degree.

The truth is, the "rabble theory" — the theory which energizes all

totalitarianism and which still appears alive elsewhere in the world — is rare in the American front office today. Long ago, the production boss liked to talk of the factory hand as a part of the machine: "Give him enough money to get drunk on Saturday night, and no responsibility, and there you have the whole book of industrial relations." Such arrogance, we know now, is folly, triple-crowned. The wage-fighting buccaneer of business is no longer admired. The early communists never dreamed that this change of heart and understanding could happen. But it has happened — and affected all of us from housewife to mine foreman, from jockey to newsland's copy reader. That is why Marx's egregious proletariolatry appears so idiotic, so antique, in American eyes.

A man can speak up in the factory as on any other job, and the most exalted ears will hear — sometimes. A worker for great Cadillac or Ford is a man of dignity and substance and can pose with a man's proper self-esteem as he spins genial yarns over a Hamtramck bar. Some actually exaggerate the pressure on the assembly line and brag that they enjoy the excitement of keeping up the pace. The last thing the "poor wretch" asks for is your pity — except on income tax day. He bears

no more kinship to the peasant or proletarian of Soviet myth than he does to one of Khrushchev's gorillas.

A Backward Look at the Guilds

We can find a useful comparison here if we match our manufacturing times against the great time of the guilds. Some utopians talk as though the workers of olden times were all sculptors of Gothic cathedrals or talented silversmiths and argue that the modern age has degenerated these great artists into the poor robot who can accomplish little more, between sweats, than swallow a mug of beer in a toast to Walter Reuther. Somehow, we must find our way back to those golden days of yore, they urge.

But who, in truth, were these guildsmen? When the reek of the Middle Ages began to clear from men's minds, nearly all Europe was agricultural and feudal; the common man was a slave, owned as much by his land as by his lord. A few commoners worked for the lords directly, and for once in history, the wage and servant problems were under control. In the year 1300 A.D., for example, a maid at Forncett Manor in England received a 100 per cent boost in wages, from one shilling to two shillings *a year*. Clearly, the lord of Forncett did not want to burden