

Section Two

WHAT IS THE CONTEXT OF WORK TODAY?

2.1 AN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE OF WORK AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF OUR ECONOMIC SYSTEM

In order to understand issues relating to work and unemployment, it is useful to examine the evolution of work as it is known today, and its function, significance and meaning to people over time, particularly since the Industrial Revolution.

With the Industrial Revolution came a fundamental change in the economy, an expansion in markets and trade, and the need for greater productivity. This resulted in the intensification of labour, increased mechanisation, the exploitation of more powerful energy sources, and the move from rural communities to towns. This brought about marked social change.

The factory separated work from the home and diminished the time spent with family and in the community. The profit motive assumed a dominant role in the thinking of employers. The employers had control of the means of production, and the worker exchanged his or her labour for wages. Thus work and wages became synonymous.

The twentieth century has seen the introduction of the assembly line, scientific management techniques, and increasing automation, especially via computerisation. The rise of the large corporate entity has divorced ownership from the control of production. This has led to the removal of many people from the decision-making process, often resulting in feelings of powerlessness and dissatisfaction.

Also the twentieth century has seen the evolution of an impersonal triad: work gives wages gives consumables. The media and advertising world continually confirm that we 'are' what we 'have'. This aspect has become increasingly significant for large sections of our society.

Resources for Further Study

Jones, Barry, *Sleepers Wake! Technology and the Future of Work*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1989

Wilkes, John (ed), *The Future of Work*, George Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1981.

2.2 THE NATURE OF THE WORKFORCE TODAY

Our society today has been described as moving through a 'post-industrial' phase to a 'post-service' society.²⁷

The post-industrial era saw a decline in employment using machinery which was designed to save time and labour, and an increase in employment in the service sector, which concentrates on time-absorbing tasks (eg leisure).

The increase of microtechnology uses less labour, capital, and resources. There has also been an increase in information processing, which has led to a growing gap between the 'information rich' and the 'information poor'. The post-service society brings an increased computerisation of personalised services (eg banks).

Work continues to be the cause of many deaths, diseases and illnesses because of unsafe practices, often ignored because of the pursuit of profits. Increased specialisation has provided job satisfaction for some, and boring, tedious and dehumanising work for others. It is difficult for many to see directly the 'fruits of their labours'. Work has become an end in itself, rather than a means. Materialism is a major motive for work.

The nature of today's workforce differs from other times in history in the following ways:

- * greater formal participation by women in paid employment;
- * higher overall workforce participation rates;
- * the abolition of child labour;
- * longer periods of 'retirement' due to longer life expectancies and earlier retirement ages;
- * a decline in the average working week from 52 hours (in 1910) to 38 hours;
- * a more highly educated and skilled workforce is required;
- * more changes in occupation during a person's working life.²⁸

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²⁷ Jones, Barry, *Sleepers Wake! Technology and the future of work*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1989

²⁸ Ibid.

2.3 THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN WORK AND WAGES

In our society work is generally regarded as paid work, ie employment. There are rigid distinctions drawn between paid employment and other productive or useful activities. What effect does this have?

- * We relate work to compensation and value, ie work is reduced to a commodity, something that one does or does not have.
- * The emphasis on financial or material reward, has undermined other human values in work; for example, creativity and relationships with others.
- * The worker's value lies mainly in one's capacity to perform work and produce profit.
- * Success is measured in monetary terms.
- * What one does is more important, and receives more status, than what one is.
- * Paid work has assumed a dominance — a priority that obscures alternatives.
- * Payment often becomes all important, irrespective of the purpose, meaning or nature of the work; for example, child-rearing activities at home are considered inferior to the same paid activities performed in a child care centre.
- * There is an explicit or implicit treatment of paid work as the only means of satisfying some personal needs.

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FOR DISCUSSION

1. How can ingrained attitudes to work be changed?
2. What are some other ways of measuring success (apart from monetary gains)? (see the example of Paul, 3.c.5 - 3.c.7)
3. In what ways can the church help to give appropriate recognition to unpaid employment? Begin this discussion by looking at the problems faced by some of the church's own unpaid employees.
4. Is there an expectation of church workers that they should work 'out of love', that is for longer hours or for considerably less than equivalent workers elsewhere?
5. Does finance dictate the work of the church, or do the needs dictate the finance?

2.4 TRADE UNIONISM

Trade unions developed during the nineteenth century in response to the process of industrialisation and some of the negative consequences that this had for workers. Professor Brian Griffiths notes the distinction between combinations which used the collective power of the work force to change real wages and conditions, and friendly societies which developed a system of welfare services among members through cooperative effort.²⁹

Both Professor Griffiths and Professor Helmut Thielicke³⁰ note the legitimate development of trade unions in the nineteenth century in response to the poor conditions experienced by workers including:

- * the growth of local monopolies;
- * unsafe working conditions;
- * use of physical violence by employers;
- * total dependency of the work-force on the owners of the factories.

However, both warn against the abuse of power, which can occur on the side both of the employer and of trade union organisations. Two examples cited are:

- * the use of monopoly power through compulsory unionism or closed shops;
- * the threat of using the strike weapon.

While these examples relate to unions, there may also be abuses by employers, such as:

- * blatant exploitation of workers by employers interested only in profits;
- * denial of human rights, such as the right to strike or the right of free association.

The potential consequences of the abuse of power could include:

- a) increased real wages for trade union members at the expense of other workers;
- b) restricted practices and ability to veto industrial change may lead to low productivity and overstaffing;
- c) increasing real wages may lead to higher unemployment;
- d) the use of picketing with intimidation and violence may be a threat to personal freedom.

While unions in the nineteenth century developed in response to needs existing then, the twentieth century brings new and different challenges for unions. They still have an important role in protecting the rights of some workers who are vulnerable and powerless. Some current concerns include:

- * The level of injuries, which result from unsafe work environments, is still unacceptably high.
- * Workers such as out-workers in the clothing industry have had difficulty obtaining a just wage for their labours;.
- * Demeaning work continues to exist in many areas.

Unions are also playing an important role in the restructuring of industry, which is seen as necessary to improve the competitiveness of Australian products.

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²⁹ Griffiths, B, *Morality and the Marketplace*, 1989, p 14.

³⁰ Thielicke, H, *Theological Ethics*, Vol 2, 1969, p 216.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. Should a Christian be a union member?
2. Should he or she participate in industrial action?
3. What sort of issues should union members be addressing?
4. How should the union movement be viewed in a time of high unemployment?
5. How should people relate to union members who are victimised because of their stance in support of fellow workers?

Resource For Further Study

Callus, Morehead, Gully and Buchanan, 'Industrial Relations at Work', *The Australian Workplace Industrial Relations Survey*, AGPS, Canberra, 1991. See chapters 3-6.

Deery, C & Plowman, D, *Australian Industrial Relations*, Magraw Hill, 1991.

Williams, Claire & Thorpe W, *Beyond Industrial Sociology*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1992.

Williams, Claire & Thorpe, W, *Blue, White & Pink Collar Workers in Australia*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1988.

2.5 THE IMPACT OF POLITICAL SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC STRUCTURES

It is difficult to separate the role of political and economic structures and their influence on work and unemployment in today's society.

While the process of industrialisation has provided benefits, it has also created problems for our society. Karl Marx has been one of the most prominent people in history to draw attention to the poor conditions experienced by the working classes as a result of the process of industrialisation.

Various political and economic structures have developed to cope with the process of industrialisation, the most common being capitalism and socialism or communism. None of these systems have been particularly successful in alleviating the problems caused by industrialisation, such as:

- * the undermining of traditional family and social structures in favour of individualism;
- * material values and pleasure being emphasised at the expense of deeper human values;

- * the use of scarce energy, water and mineral resources which are required for large scale development, and the environmental contamination which results from such development.³¹

Some writers argue that it is the process of industrialisation itself and the desire to accumulate wealth which is a problem, not the political structures which have developed to cope with it.³² They believe that God has provided the resources that are needed by the world population, and the distribution of these is the issue, with the rich and powerful gaining more than their fair share. There is also concern for the restoration of resources and maintenance of an ecological balance.

Another writer argues that both capitalism and Marxism are extreme economic and political systems that have failed because of a lack of morality in the way they operate.³³ Griffiths believes that the operation of a free market is an efficient means of distributing scarce resources, but that this must be done within a moral framework. (He cites Old Testament property laws as an example). He believes that there is a biblical mandate for private ownership of property and the use of the market to determine a fair price for goods and services, within the constraints of a moral code.

Politicians in today's society face difficult decisions in balancing the issues of inflation, unemployment, international competitiveness and interest rates.

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³¹ *Evangelical Catechism*, Augsburg, Minn, 1982. Chapter 20 'Work and Rest', pp 319-

338.

³² Ibid.

³³ Griffiths, B, op cit.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. How can individuals have an influence on decision making at a local, state or national level?
 - What does it mean to raise a Christian voice in the community?
 - What are some of the different ways this can be done?
 - Can Christians work together with other groups to achieve their goal? (See also Section 4.2)
2. What influences your vote?
3. Dr Wolf Wolfensberger describes contemporary Western society as one focused on 'materialism', 'individualism', 'hedonism', 'utilitarianism'. What do these terms mean, and what effect do they have on our lives?
4. Our modern era is characterised, not by guilt, but by a disintegration of moral consciousness, and loss of a spiritual centre (Dr W Hulme). How do we develop and maintain a 'moral consciousness' and a 'spiritual centre'?

5. William Diehl says: 'Christians are in a society in which the superhuman power of competition prevails. We cannot escape it. We must live with it, but we must also learn how not to be dominated and enslaved by it. We do need to ask some questions.' Discuss.
6. 'In a society ruled by the power of competition, to what degree do Christians participate? Where do we draw the line for ourselves and our children? Is competition affecting our society in undesirable ways? If so, do we boycott parts of it, or try to change it?'

Resources for Further Study

Altmann, Walter, *Luther and Liberation*, Fortress Press, Minn, 1987.

Davies, H and Gosling D (eds), *Will the Future Work?* World Council of Churches, Geneva, 1986.

Jones, Barry, *Sleepers Wake!* Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1989. Chapters 1-4.

Naisbitt & Aburdene, *Megatrends 2000*, Sidgwick & Jackson, London, 1988.

Wolfensberger, W, Lecture on *Universal Issues in Human Services*, Melbourne, 1989.