

F.E. EMERY
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for The Scanner

Our parents had a dream. They wanted a free-standing house in a garden suburb, a roomy car and two, preferably three kids. Within the house they wanted the works – tele, fridge, wall-to-wall, etc. For the kids they wanted a freedom to develop that they had rarely had, and they wanted college.

A great many parents achieved that dream in the decades following World War Two. They achieved that dream because it was solidly based on the social contract between labour and capital that painfully emerged in the post-depression years 1935-50. That new norm of social consumption was part of the price that had to be paid for the restoration of profitability to capital. In turn that norm, and the wide diffusion of easy credit and social claims such as unemployment benefits, scholarships, social security, family benefits, fuelled the longest period of sustained economic growth that we have ever experienced.

Just about all of that is gone now.

To understand. Why, we need to look more closely at the terms of the old social contract. In return for the new standards of consumption and shorter working week labour agreed to respect the managerial prerogatives to decide exactly how, when, where and with whom work was performed. Management used those prerogatives to introduce more rigorous forms of ‘man-management’ and to automate skilled work. There was nothing much new about management’s solution: that was how they restored profitability after the major economic depressions of the 1830’s and 1890’s.

There is a major difference, this time around.

The difference was dramatically highlighted in 1972-3.g.m. pushed fractionation of work to the extreme at their new assembly plant at Lordstown. Their young, rural, weed-smoking employees shut them down. In Kalmar, Sweden, Volvo brought into production a car assembly plant that dispensed with the conveyor line and relied on the efforts of self-managing groups of workers; they achieved levels of quality control and productivity that were unheard of in the European car industry. By 1974 G.M. were introducing the Volvo ideas into their old Tarrytown assembly plant.

In a survey of the Australian work-force that I did for the government in 1973 we found just what G.M. and Volvo had found. The new generation of workers, the baby boom generation, wanted no part of the old social contract. They refused to accept the ‘divided life’. They see no acceptable dichotomy between private and social values and have no intention of denying their real selves on the job. They are educated and they know they are no more stupid than their supervisor so they want to

be heard, listened to, and their views respected. They have got enough learning and self-respect to demand that their work should provide more learning and more development of their capabilities. They do not respect the age old strategy of living to minimize negative affect: they want to minimize positive affect.

This baby boom generation now fills the 20 to 40 year age section of the work force – the same age group that forcibly brought the C.I.O into existence with the sit-ins and strikes of 1935-50. Any new social contract between labour and capital will have to be negotiated with this generation.

What do these people want in return for restoring profitability to capital? Maybe they will not want to make such a deal? Maybe, but let us stick with what is already cooking.

It seems clear, at least to me, that we are NOT talking about something like “full employment, thirty-five hour week, five weeks annual leave”. In other words, we are not talking to the needs of this generation if we simply update the Full Employment Act that were passed in Washington, London and other Western capitals in 1946. If we are going to address the needs of this generation we are going to have to talk in terms of the sort of things addressed by the new Norwegian Work Environment Law. That law does for the psychological requirements that individuals have of their work what the Wagner Act (1937?) did for their civil rights to unionize. The law establishes the social demand that a capitalist must design the production of a product or service in such a way that it helps the employees to grow on the job, enables them to contribute to the process of production and ensures them of a supportive social environment. For some thirty years I have been involved in redesigning work places for white-collar, blue-collar, professional and managerial people. In none of these cases, not in any culture, have I found it impossible to move toward the social norms the Norwegians have laid down.

There is an even broader way of looking at the premises of a new social contract- the one with the baby boom generation. I think that they want the freedom of movement and the dignity that went with the medieval craftsman or journeyman, and the social security that went with the old guilds. They do not want full employment; they do not want the security of seniority and career structures with corporations or government bodies; and they do not want to wait till their sixties to do their own thing. If that means portability of pensions, learning coupons national insurance minimum guaranteed wage then so be it. And, now that the ‘family wage’ has gone down the drain with the old social contract, the new ‘New Deal’ will have to be sexless, colorless and ageless – it will just have to be human.
