INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

RJB-19
Rules

846 Broadway - Lot #49
Saugus, Mass. 01905
May 13, 1974

Mr. Richard H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
535 Fifth Avenue
New York, New York 10017

Dear Mr. Nolte:

Western Electric, at Merrimack Valley, employs more than 10,000 people. The company could not, it believes, operate with any sort of efficiency without establishing rules. Along with pamphlets on medical coverage, life insurance, and tuition payment plans, a new worker is given a pamphlet on rules. The pamphlet begins with these words, "When a great number of people are working together certain rules and regulations are necessary so that the business of the Company can be conducted in an orderly manner and the welfare of employees protected. These rules are founded on common sense and the principles of good citizenship."

Richard Balzer is an Institute Fellow exploring the effects of social and economic change on lower-middle-class America.

In the five months that I worked at Western Electric I was to learn a great deal about the rules, and workers' reactions to them. Probably no one thing affects the shop worker at Western more than the time clock. The time clock gives the company precise ways to mark the beginning of the day, lunch, and the end of the day. It is an efficient way of handling large groups of people.

The day I began work our supervisor, Jack,[1] called me and another new worker, Joel, to his desk. He talked about safety and about absenteeism. He talked about what the company expected of us. One thing the company expected, he told us, was our getting to work on time. "I expect you to be at your benches ready to work at 6:30," he said. "If I were you, I'd plan to arrive ten or fifteen minutes early so as not to get caught up in the last minute rush." Jack also explained that we would clock out at 3:00 and he expected us to be in our work area till then. "One last thing," Jack said, "there are two plant-wide ten minute breaks. I expect you back in your seat and ready to work when the bell marking the end of the break sounds."

Wanting to get off on the right foot, I tried to be in the shop a good ten or fifteen minutes before the 6:30 A.M. starting time, even though it meant I had to get up at 5:15. I was amazed that no matter how early I seemed to arrive a good number of people were already sitting around enjoying an early morning cup of coffee or a smoke. A few people habitually cut it close. One fellow in our shop was never more than a minute early.

The first time I saw someone come in late, the girl next to me said, "You know, they won't pay you for punching in early, and they won't pay you if you decide to stay an extra ten minutes late to finish a board, but just do like Jan did, punch in a minute late, and you'll see that minute missing in your paycheck." Repeated lateness can cost you more than money from your paycheck; it can lead to a union notice, and it is sufficient reason to be terminated.

I remember the first time I was late. About two months after I began work my alarm didn't go off one morning, and when I woke up it was 6:00 instead of 5:15. I panicked, let out one "Oh shit", hurried through brushing my teeth, and slipping on my clothes, and was out the door in less than five minutes. I grabbed some bread and ate it on the way, pushing the car over the speed limit, an eye on the rear view mirror for a policeman, and my heart pounding. It usually takes me thirty minutes to drive to the plant, so I was almost certain I'd be late, but I drove like a crazy man, rolled into the parking lot at 6:27 and raced into the plant. Since you aren't allowed to run, I was reduced to a laughable form of quick walking. Somewhat out of breath, I reached for my time card only to discover that someone had punched me in. Later in the day a woman told me she had punched me in. She said, "I figured you'd get here. The company won't miss the money and you can watch out for me."

1. All names have been changed

In my brief experience, punching someone else's card in the morning or at the end of the day was very rare. However, it is done with some frequency around lunch time, especially by people who choose to eat in the work area and not in the cafeteria. Since people often eat in groups, while one person is going upstairs to the cafeteria for drinks or dessert, the other will punch both people out.

The next time I got up late, I was not so fortunate. I rushed like mad again, but this time I was about five minutes late. I clocked in and went to my seat, thinking it was amazing that I had gotten in so close to the bell. Our supervisor came by my bench and said, "Glad you could make it in today."

I related my anger at our supervisor's remark to an older worker. He shook his head in disbelief and said, "Look, they aren't going to pay you for rushing. If you're late, you're late. I figure the couple of times I'm late, I'm not going to kill myself. Hell, I've been here 18 years and they aren't giving out any medals. I just take my time, make my breakfast, and come in late."

Just as punching in too late is against the rules, so leaving too early is against the rules. People begin cleaning up about five minutes to 3:00. Their workplace cleaned up, their tools put away, they edge toward the back of the room to the time clock. By 2:59 a majority of the people are lined up at the clock, their cards poised in their hands, waiting for the three o'clock bell. As the three o'clock bell rings, cards fly into the time clock and are placed in their slots, and people are off on a mad dash to their waiting cars.

The first days I was in the plant I joined the rushing throngs. I lined up near the time clock, punched out as soon as I could, and made for the exit, nearly running till I hit the cement on the other side of the guard post. Then I began to run to my car, opened the windows to let the summer heat out, started the engine and made for the exit. I never seemed able to beat the bumper to bumper traffic, and it was always a good fifteen minutes before I left the lot, by which time my arm pits were sweat stained.

In less than a week I decided to bring in a book or magazine and read for a while before going out to the parking lot. Nevertheless, most people hurry out of the plant as quickly as they can. Many people have resorted to running in an attempt to beat the rush. The running has led to occassional accidents and the company, which has long had a rule against running in the plant, decided to more strictly enforce it.

The company began its crackdown on running by sending a memorandum around restating the rule. It then sent photographers around to document running, and finally posted supervisors along the corriders to act as monitors.

The new enforcement stopped people from running in the plant. However, instead of running, a variety of quick walking techniques have developed. With the supervisors standing in the corriders, people slow down until they pass the guard stations. Once people are in the parking lot, their feet start moving more and more quickly and the walk turns into a run.

The only other way to avoid the rush is to leave early. If you leave early and clock out properly, you lose money, so occassionally a worker will leave a few minutes early and ask another worker to clock him out. I remember one woman in our area nervously waiting for the three o'clock bell. She wanted to get home to see her new grandchild and she didn't want to fight the crowd, so she asked me if I might punch her out. I said "sure", and five minutes before three she began walking to the exit near her car.

The bell which rings to start the day, to mark lunch, and to end the day, also rings marking the beginning and the end of the day's two ten minute breaks. The first break is in the morning from 9:00 to 9:10, and the other is in the afternoon from 1:30 to 1:40. During these official breaks the rules pertaining to smoking are relaxed and one can smoke in designated areas. You are supposed to be in your seat by the end of the break. Hypothetically, this means you'd have to begin to move toward your chair before the bell announcing the end of the break. In practice, people don't begin moving back to their work areas until the bell has rung. Some supervisors are very strict about starting work as soon as the break is over, others aren't. Jack's reaction depended upon how production was going and his mood. Generally, he didn't bother you as long as you returned to your work area promptly when the bell rang. However, on occassion, if you were a little late, you might find him hovering over your bench waiting for you. He rarely said anything at these times, he just looked at you with stern disapproval.

The time clock restricts personal movement by reducing the day to periods in which things are allowed and not allowed. It routinizes the day, regimenting personal needs to meet the workings of a bell.

The time clock undoubtedly reduces working time lost due to people coming in late, and leaving early. Its presence and the rules that surround it, however, create a good deal of hostility among workers. As one woman told me, "In here we don't ask for whom the bell tolls, but for what. The bell tells us when to smoke, when to eat, when to start work, and when to stop." Another woman told me, "They've got the clock, and we're forced to live by the clock and their rules." One way many workers react to the ever present time clock is to figure out ways to "beat" the clock, to remove at least part of an occassional day from the clock's control.

The company sets aside forty minutes during the day for a person to take care of personal matters such as going to the bathroom, or going to the vending machines. Twenty of these forty minutes are taken up by the two ten minute breaks. So one is theoretically left with twenty minutes during the day to take care of personal matters.

A sense of how free you are to use that time is greatly influenced by the supervisor's attitude. Several women told me that they had worked for bosses where they were afraid to get up. They said they almost had to ask permission to go to the bathroom. I remember one day at lunch one of the fellows said, "There's a guy in our shop watching us all the time. He's supposed to be watching our production and figuring out why it's so low. That S.O.B. has got it so we have to even sign out when we're going to the crapper."

Our supervisor wasn't like that. You were pretty free to go to the bathroom or vending machines whenever you wanted. Nevertheless, most supervisors don't like to see people unoccupied, so if you are finished with a job, or restless, and can't find something to do to occupy your hands, the bathroom is the place to go. The bathroom, one quickly discovers, is more than a place to take care of biological needs. It serves different functions.

Many people use the bathroom as a place to read a morning paper, or, like me, a small book or magazine. Some people baldly carry their newspapers in a back pocket, others carry things more surreptitiously. There was one man I watched for a week, who slipped his newspaper under his shirt each day before going to the bathroom. I knew a woman who would carry small magazines, movie magazines, in her purse. I carried my paperbacks in a back pocket.

The bathroom is also the place where an important but infrequently enforced rule is broken. Smoking is restricted to certain areas and to certain times of day. Basically you are allowed to smoke only during the two breaks and lunch. There are a lot of heavy smokers working in the plant and the bathroom is the place where many break the no smoking rule. The day I began work another new worker asked a third worker, John, if there was any place where you take an occasional smoke.

"I might as well tell you because you'll find out soon enough," John said. "Although it's not allowed, you can get away with it. Most of us smoke in the bathroom. It's hell," he said, "if you're a chain smoker, but if you're a once an hour smoker, you can do fine."

Therefore, the bathroom is often filled. I can't speak with any authority about the women's bathrooms, but in the men's bathrooms, there are times during the day when you are in big trouble if you need a stall. You have to wait, listening to the rustling of paper, and watching smoke roll over the closed stall door.

Like the rule against smoking, there are other rules which the company has which it chooses either to enforce selectively or not strictly. Two rules that come to mind are those against taking collections and against selling things in the plant.

There is a rule that states that there are to be no collections made in the plant. The rationale for this is that if collections were allowed many people who otherwise might not give would feel some social pressure. So the company restricts plant-wide collections. Aside from the United Fund, which is aided by management in its effort to collect in the plant, plant-wide collections are restricted to very rare emergencies. If this weren't the case the plant would probably be overwhelmed by daily collections. In a plant where there are 10,000 people it would be a rare day in which someone didn't have a family tragedy.

Yet within the small work groups, collections are permitted. There are collections for going away parties, and for serious illnesses or deaths in a worker's family. Often cards acknowledging the collections are posted in the work area.

Just as the rule against collections is selectively enforced, the rule against selling things in the plant is not effectively enforced. Again, the existence of the rule makes sense. If there weren't a rule, there would be a thousand and one things sold in the plant, from toiletries to insurance. People are aware of the rule, but they break it. In the area where I worked, there were two businesses.

One woman sold ties which her sister hand made. They were very popular and sold for $3.50. On the front of the tie you could have a name inscribed in reflection, creating a nice pattern. On the back, you could have a hand-painted picture of your spouse, or girlfriend, in a bikini or the buff. It was, as I said, a popular item.

The other business I watched was a used golf ball business. One of the younger workers in our group went golf ball hunting with a couple of his buddies. They would tour the water traps of golf courses around Massachusetts, Vermont, and New Hampshire and retrieve errant balls.

In July Joel began bringing in small bags of balls. He would sell the best for 3 for $2.00, others for as low as 3 for $1.00. The word spread quickly, and soon Joel was being visited by men from all over the shop.

There are some rules that the company feels strongly about and tries to enforce. These rules include drinking in the plant, taking drugs, and gambling. Being caught drinking or using drugs on company property can lead to immediate suspension. The company is aware that although these rules are strictly enforced, some of the company's employees do have drinking and drug problems. A counseling service has been established to deal with those who admit to the problem. Strong rules here keep violations down. Nevertheless, people laughingly talk about those workers who, after lunch, like to take a stroll through the parking lot.

Being caught gambling can also lead to immediate dismissal. The kind of gambling the company is most concerned about is the numbers, and other racket-connected gambling. The company is aware that such a large captive population is attractive to racketeers. The company says it wants to protect workers against gambling above their limits. From what I could see, gambling seemed under control.

That doesn't mean that no gambling goes on. For the most part however, it is limited to small bets. For a period of three weeks, three of us had a dime bet at each break on who could throw their cigarette butt into the receptacle. The winner took the pot. The one woman who played with us was a consistent winner. After a series of amazing shots, she collected her pot and said, "Well, I've been here long enough to be good at this."

There's a lot of card playing during lunch. Supposedly money is not to change hands. It does, but not openly. The gambling restriction seems to keep the betting down.

Most workers I've talked to realize the need for rules. However, a number see some of the rules that the company has, and the way they are employed, as oppressive. One day Jean, who usually seems very relaxed about the rules, told me, "There are too many rules here. It's just like being in school. There's one place to smoke, one place to do this, and one place to do that. If you get out of your seat to talk to someone, you're breaking a rule."

Another day someone was reprimanded for breaking a rule and during the afternoon break we got into a conversation about rules. Mary said, "You know, things are changing; the kids won't stand for the stuff that we take. If Jack gives me a look I'm back in my seat immediately. But not Diane; he can look at her all he wants and she'll take her time. It isn't that I want to go back to my seat, it's just that when I was brought up we were taught to follow what your boss or father said, and no questions. The kids now are different. They aren't afraid like we were."

Joanne said, "I'll tell you. The kids have made the company change. Ten years ago if you were your pants a little too tight or your dress too short, they'd send you home. But the kids started squawking and now there really isn't a dress code."

Ruth looked at me and said, "Ten years ago they would have fired you for wearing long hair, but kids won't cut their hair for the company any more." Joanne added, "I think it had to do with the Vietnam war. After the war things started changing in here."

The bell marking the end of the afternoon break sounded, and as we headed back to our seats Howie said to me, "They don't have any walls in some of my kid's classes. It's one of those experiments, they let them make their own schedules. You think he's going to put up with the kind of rules they have around here after that?"

Probably not. As the schools change, as the structure of the family changes, and as patterns of socialization change, so will factories. The company has already been affected by the demands of younger workers for looser structures. As those demands continue, more changes will probably be made.

There is a need for restrictive rules in a factory like Western Electric, just at there is a need for such rules in a public school, because a majority of the people are not engaged in activities by choice.

It is an unfortunate situation, but one of which the company is aware. People who come to work generally come because of economic need, not because of any great interest in the job they perform. Of the places they could work, Western Electric is obviously one of the best. As Ann told me, "I bitch a lot about this place, but I'll tell you there isn't another place that I'd rather work. If you've ever been in the shoe shops, or the rubber plants, this place is like heaven. Why, the women in here don't wear cotton dresses like in other places I've worked. In here people are dressed well enough to go out dancing after they're done working."

Comparatively, Western Electric is certainly a good place to work. Nevertheless, many people are not doing jobs that interest them. The company, aware of this, has set up an intricate set of rules to minimize distraction, and maintain a high production schedule. In such a system there are bound to be tensions between the company's needs and the individual's needs.

By setting the rules, the company helps foster an atmosphere of we and they. The company is the all powerful source of authority, and it becomes they. The workers, needing to live within the structure the company sets, becomes we. This duality is constantly felt, and expresses itself in a variety of ways.

For example, a new worker is usually shown the "ropes" by other workers. This includes being shown or told about rules and ways to break them. This information helps build a sense of solidarity among workers.

That is why the breaking of a rule represents more than the simple disregarding of an order. It often serves such other functions as allowing a worker to express some sense of personal control over his environment, as well as demonstrating and promoting solidarity with other workers.

One of the clearest examples of the multi-faceted nature of rule breaking is the no smoking rule. When I mention that the rule is disregarded, and that people smoke freely in the bathroom, outsiders generally giggle and then suggest that if the company cared about the workers they would set up reading and smoking areas.

Perhaps, but if they did so without trying to understand why people smoke in the bathroom, they would be missing the point. Somehow, smoking in the bathroom bestows a sense of safety, of being away from the supervisor's eye for a few minutes. The worker has not only found a place to smoke, but, and possibly more importantly, a place which has not been designated by the company. Since one often feels that much if not all of what one does, one does in places designated by the company, as the company wishes it to be done, finding ways to express personal freedom from this institutional regimentation are important.

The solidarity in this forbidden area is not to be violated. Once I was in the bathroom when a supervisor walked in; everyone felt ill at ease, and the supervisor quickly left without saying anything about the smoking.

When the day is so structured, being able to do something illegal can become very satisfying.

Within certain limits, the breaking of rules is not very disruptive of the company. It is incredible, in fact, how infrequently major breaches of rules occur within the plant. If the company chose to enforce all of

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its rules strictly, I think workers would react in more negative ways toward their work. I think people can only be pushed so far. To have restrictive rules which to a limited extent can be broken allows a necessary escape valve.

No large institution could function without rules. Many of the company's rules are widely accepted, and seem to cause little resentment. Rules against drinking and drugs, against collections, and against selling, cause few problems. That is because they are rules which are not directly related to the work situation. A worker is constantly confronted by these rules, and it is inevitable that many of these rules cause deep resentment.

By establishing so many work related rules, the company is tacitly admitting that it believes that without such rules the work that it needs to accomplish would not be done. It coaxes production along not only with a monetary reward system, but by severely limiting personal initiative and choice during the working day. It tells the worker not only what to do, but what not to do, and when not to do it.

It is impossible for the worker not to react to these restrictions. Americans, in general, tend to be very sensitive to encroachments on their individual freedom. Yet no other segment of the working population has its day so closely regulated and watched as the blue collar worker. Perhaps this is one reason why blue collar work is ascribed relatively low status in our society.

A delicate balance exists between the company's need to keep order and maintain high production and the workers' needs not to feel powerless and impotent. The need to break rules will remain as long as workers exercise little control over their immediate environment.

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