

Old Class Grudges

When I was growing up, tales of union abuses were legendary. One that remained deeply etched was the requirement that diesel locomotives have, in addition to a driver, a fireman, whose duties were none, but whose position was a holdover from the steam engines which required a person to stoke the fire. There were other controversial figures such as the person on construction sites whose only job was to assure that all deliveries to the site were made by union labor. These people made good money, regardless of skills or efficiency in carrying out whatever duties they may have had. Such historic memories appear to have left a residual bitterness in large numbers of what we could call the professional disciplines, or simply the white-collar classes. Such people frequently had no such luxuries. They had to learn skills and compete for jobs and perform to gain increases in salary. Often their salaries and benefits were inferior to those union workers whose benefits were obtained through collective bargaining. The residue of this can be seen today in the negotiations of GM in their efforts to downsize. They're offering large severance packages to get rid of union workers who had major job guarantees built into their contracts. At the same time salaried workers are being let go with a handshake and a tip. Millions of ex-union workers across the country, whose well-paid jobs have vanished along with any realistic hope for similar jobs, are bitter and disillusioned. Certainly the vast numbers of white-collar workers who now find themselves "redundant" can be no less bitter. Indeed, as the number of good union jobs is in freefall and the industrial base of the USA is shriveling, there is amazingly little concern or sympathy for the ravaged communities. Decades of legislation to protect workers in the workplace are being undone by moving the jobs to places where there is no similar protection and little better than slave wages. Nobody seems to care. We're hooked on all the cheap stuff at Wal-Mart.

On the racial front, the grudges are perhaps even more widespread. Blacks are bitter over centuries of maltreatment, and now seeing Hispanics move ahead of them in some places, many are developing some new ethnic grudges. The underemployed whites, described above, have seen some blacks move up the economic ladder with the help of programs such as Affirmative Action, and now that their own economic possibilities are compromised, are turning bitter, if not actively racist.

The employment ship is sinking and most of the passengers are fighting with each other and voting their grudges rather than addressing the problems affecting them all. CNBC and Fox bombard us with a steady stream of propaganda telling us how wonderful the economy is doing, while median incomes drop and corporate profits rise. CEO salaries and benefits, which a couple of decades back ran to something like 40 times average employee incomes, have risen to 300 or 400 times worker pay. Health care costs are rising

rapidly and vastly exceed those of any other industrialized country, while indices such as infant mortality rates place the US as one of the better 3rd world countries. Again, the old grudges and demons persist. We grew up hearing of the evils of socialized medicine, so any talk of a rational solution is shunted out of political discourse.

Just as some people have health insurance and some do not, some people have pensions, and some do not. Many executives, to improve their bottom line or invite a government bailout, are looting corporate pension plans. If your corporate pension is intact then God bless you. You're all right Jack but those other people are the problem. If you have a private pension, then people without them are irresponsible wastrels. If you worked for a big company, then those with government pensions, or jobs for that matter, are just living off the government dole. Perhaps it's time we stop the envy and the grudges and try to fix what needs to be fixed. American democracy worked because there were educational and job opportunities for all and the disparities in wealth among citizens remained largely within the limits of social mobility. Today there is less social mobility in the US than in most of the developed world, education is increasingly a perk for the wealthy, and health care is seen as a luxury, or better, a status symbol, proportional in its efficacy to one's economic status.

The other day I read an article about Richard Rogers, the architect who, with Renzo Piano, designed the Pompidou Center in Paris a few decades ago. He's currently working on a revision of the Javits Center in NYC, among other things, and he's widely regarded as one of the world's best architects. He has a large office in London, with hundreds of architects. He mentioned that his office has a written constitution stating that no principal shall receive a salary greater than six times the average architect's salary in the office. Having worked in large architectural offices myself, that sounds reasonable. Rogers may be good, even great, but he doesn't do it alone, and he has the intelligence and decency to understand that. A little more of his spirit would go far to bring the US out of the ugly situation that it finds itself in now. But then again, he's English, and he rides a bicycle to work. We have the Lee Raymond role model to contend with.