FROM: Phyllis Schlafly

68 FAIRMOUNT, ALTON, ILLINOIS 62002 / (618) 462-5415

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COMPARABLE WORTH CHEATS BLUE COLLAR WORKERS

"Comparable Worth" is the concept of getting a government functionary to decide what jobs are "worth," and then forcing employers to pay wages based on that opinion. But "worth" is in the eye of the beholder, so the game plan is always to rig the system so that the evaluators are persons who share your own biases about job "worth."

Evaluators are usually professional or white-collar people who have little or no first-hand experience with the hard, grimy, unpleasant work which makes our economy function. As a result, the typical job evaluation is skewed to give lots of "points" for diplomas and other paper credentials, but very few points for adverse working conditions, physical effort and bodily risk.

The typical job evaluation system allows only 2 to 3 percent of the points for physical factors. The 97 to 98 percent goes for mental or intangible factors. I made my own personal survey, asking blue-collar men to describe some of the physical aspects of their jobs that they feel exceed 2 or 3 percent of what their jobs are all about. Here are some answers in their own words.

Carpenter Foreman: "Severe back injuries from falling, straining, lifting. Breathing insulation fibers. Injuries from working in refinery work. Developing asbestosis. Hearing impairment from working near noisy machinery and equipment. Hernias. Loss of fingers. Knee injuries."

Automobile Technician: "Lung damage from asbestos-laden brake dust. Ear damage from high decibel noises created by air tools. Cancer from skin contact with gasoline and used engine oil. Liver damage from breathing vapors of gasoline and solvents. Lead poisoning from leaded gasoline. Headaches from high concentrations of carbon monoxide. I have suffered bodily injury from a hot coolant hose bursting, from a refrigerant line breaking, from a fire from a backfiring carburetor, from drive belts and fan clutches breaking loose and becoming deadly projectiles, and from shop equipment and tools breaking under stress."

Chemist at a coal-fired utility plant: "Constant exposure to very high voltage electrical areas. Working with hazardous chemicals: acids, caustics, carcinogens. Working in coal-related areas of high dust concentration."

Equipment Operator in a steel mill: "I operate a centerless grinder (a finishing operation) in a steel mill. I get paid well, but I do a job that a lot of college folks probably wouldn't do. Loud noise (I have to wear ear plugs), heat and cold (I don't have heating or air conditioning), and weight (I constantly deal with 5,000-pound bundles, some people in the mill deal with 20 tons). I am standing all the time. My fingers are constantly taking abuse (splinters, bruises, blood and water blisters, and I even broke off the tip of one finger)."

Equipment Operator: "I operate heavy equipment which is dangerous. I work around barges which contain extremely dangerous chemicals."

Auto Body and Fender Worker: "The shops are always terribly hot in summer (never air conditioned), and cold in winter because garage doors are open for cars to go in and out. The exhaust fumes from the painting area can be quite unhealthy. The shops are generally dirty, dusty, dark and unhealthy places to work in."

Airline Mechanic: "I work around jet aircraft which are dangerous if you don't watch out. One can easily wind up seriously hurt. The chemicals and fluids used in servicing the aircraft are also very harmful."

Electrical Supervisor: "I work in petro-chemical construction, around areas that contain dangerous chemicals and poison gases under high pressures. The structures are dangerous and the equipment very heavy. We work with high voltages that have the potential to injure or kill. Jobs are often short. I have been on 16 jobs for three different companies in four years. There is no guarantee of more work once a specific job is finished. Workers aren't kept on the payroll between jobs. Relocation is frequent and often expensive."

Security Guard: "I ain't got no diploma, but I've been trained for my job and have lots of responsibility. My job is a lot more dangerous than a nurse or especially a school teacher. We have women as guards but they can't really perform in crises."

No one is qualified to be a job evaluator unless he or she has actually worked in the real world and learned at first hand that physical discomforts, dangers and duties are why blue-collar jobs often pay more than inside jobs that require paper credentials.