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EDITORIAL OBSERVER

What Studs Terkel's 'Working' Says About Worker Malaise Today

By ADAM COHEN

Babe Secoli, a supermarket checker for nearly 30 years, is proud of her dexterity in moving items along the conveyor belt. If asked, she will do a little dance, showing how she hits the keys on the cash register with one hand, pushes the food along with the other and intermittently whacks the conveyor-belt button with her hip. She knows what everything costs — the price list on the register is, she says, only "for the part-time girls." Almost everything amuses her, especially the rich ladies who drop in to shoplift meat. "I'm a couple of days away," she says, "I'm very lonesome for this place."

Ms. Secoli's is one of the dozens of throaty, acerbic voices in "Working," Studs Terkel's oral history of working life, which was published 30 years ago this spring. When it appeared, "Working" was a revelation, a window on the thoughts of Americans who were rarely heard from: hospital aides, skycaps, gravediggers. Many of the interviews follow a similar, surprising trajectory, beginning with mundane workplace details but quickly moving on to existential thoughts. Even for the lowliest laborers, Mr. Terkel found, work was a search, sometimes successful, sometimes not, "for daily meaning as well as daily bread."

The oral histories in "Working" are wistful dispatches from a distant era. The early 1970's were the waning days of the old economy, when modern management practices and computers were just beginning to transform the American workplace. In the last 30 years, productivity has soared, but job satisfaction has plummeted. It is hard to read "Working" without thinking about what has gone wrong in the workplace.

Mr. Terkel's ragtag collection of little-guy monologues was a runaway best seller. Part of its appeal was the unusual, occasionally illicit glimpses it offered into the ways of the world. "If you work nights and it's real quiet, I don't think there's an operator who hasn't listened in on calls," a switchboard operator says. "The night goes faster." A gas-meter reader tells of the codes meter men put on customer cards when there was an attractive woman in the house.

Mr. Terkel's interlocutors also offer deeper insights. A parking lot attendant holds forth on why working people are better tippers than Cadillac drivers. A prostitute reflects that she was "the kind of hustler who received money for favors granted," not the kind who "signs a lifetime contract for her trick," or who "carefully reads women's magazines and learns what it is proper to give for each date, depending on how much . . . [he] spends on her."

It is striking how many of Mr. Terkel's subjects have found the meaning he says they are looking for. "Obviously I don't make much money," a bookbinder says, but she still loves repairing old books because "a book is a life." A gravedigger recalls how impressed a visiting sewer digger was with his neat lines and square edges. "A human body is goin' into this grave," he says proudly. "That's why you need skill when you're gonna dig a grave."

There are disgruntled workers in "Working," who feel caged in by their jobs, but many others exult in their ability to demonstrate their competence, to show off their personality and to perform. "When I put the plate

down, you don't hear a sound," a waitress says. "If I drop a fork, there is a certain way I pick it up. I know they can see how delicately I do it. I'm on stage."

The 1970's were a slower age, and much of the workers' pleasure in their jobs is related to the less-demanding time clock. A hospital billing agent can take time off from dunning patients to look in on a man whose leg was amputated, who has no one to care for him. "If he's going to live in a third-floor flat and he doesn't have anybody home, this bothers me," she says. A stewardess says she is supposed to spend a half-hour on a Boston to Los Angeles flight socializing with passengers.

Three decades later, we are caught up in what a recent book dubbed "The New Ruthless Economy." High tech and new management styles put workers on what the author Simon Head calls "digital assembly lines" with little room for creativity or independent thought. As much as 4 percent of the work force is now employed in call centers, reading canned scripts and being supervised with methods known as "management by stress." Doctors defer to managed-care administrators and practice speed medicine: in 1997, they spent an average of eight minutes talking to a patient, less than half the time they spent a decade earlier.

It is much the same in other fields. There have been substantial productivity gains. But those gains have not found their way to paychecks. In a recent two-and-a-half-year period, corporate profits surged 87 percent, while wages rose just 4.5 percent. Not surprisingly, a study last fall by the Conference Board found that less than 49 percent of workers were satisfied with their jobs, down from 59 percent in 1995.

When "Working" was written, these trends were just visible on the horizon. A neighborhood druggist laments "the corner drugstore, that's kinda fadin' now," because little shops like his can't compete. "Most of us, like the assembly line worker, have jobs that are too small for our spirit," an editor says. "Jobs are not big enough for people."

When America begins to pay attention to its unhappy work force — and eventually, it must — "Working" will still provide important insights, with its path-breaking exploration of what Mr. Terkel described as "the extraordinary dreams of ordinary people."