

# The Revolution in the Office

By Earl R. Browder

**H**UMAN life is a changing thing. Among the many changes of the past hundred years or so, none has been more complete than that of offices, and office work. Machinery, the great transformer, has been busy in the office, to a degree almost, if not quite, than it has been at work in the shops. Social and political life has been made over into something quite new, so far as outward forms are concerned, and the life of the office workers has kept pace.

How great the change has been is hard to realize. But we get some small idea of it, if we go to our bookshelf (or to that of a friend, as the writer had to do), and dig up one of the old favorite books, to read again the description of an office in the year 1780. I have picked up a book by Charles Dickens, and read of the office of Tellson's Bank, by Temple Bar, London.

## The Office of Yesterday and Today

"It was very small, very dark, very ugly, very incommodious . . . the partners in the House were proud of its smallness, proud of its darkness, proud of its smallness, proud of its incommodiousness. They were even boastful of its eminence in those particulars, and were fired by an express conviction that, if it were less objectionable, it would be less respectable . . .

"Thus it had come to pass, that Tellson's was the triumphant perfection of inconvenience. After bursting open a door of idiotic obstinacy with a weak rattle in its throat, you fell into Tellson's down two steps, and came to your senses in a miserable little shop, with two little counters, where the oldest of men made your check shake as if the wind rustled it, while they examined the signature by the dingiest of windows, which were always under a show-bath of mud from Fleet street, and which were made the dingier by their own iron bars proper and the heavy shadow of Temple Bar. If your business necessitated your seeing "the House," you were put into a species of Condemned Hold at the back, where you meditated on a misspent life, until the House came with its hands in its pockets, and you could hardly blink at it in the dismal twilight."

An obvious caricature, you say. Granted. We do not need to insist upon the superlatives of Dickens. A caricature is an exaggeration, but no one, so far as I know, has accused Dickens of creating something which did not exist at all. Recalling that the quill still flourished in those not so far-off days, and that the steel pen was still to come into use, and the brightest picture

possible of the typical office of our great-grandfathers will seem quite primitive.

The particular stimulus which caused the writer to dig up this description of Tellson's Bank office came when, recently, he had occasion to drop into the counting room of a large modern bank. There, in a large, well lighted room, were 30 or 40 machines, with electric motors, going at top speed, filling the room with burr, click, and hum, and the atmosphere of a small factory. Attending each machine was a young man, model of sartorial art, engaged with intense concentration in summing up the day's business of many millions of dollars. Here was a battery of adding machines, totaling the transactions of the various departments; there was an array of book-keeping machines, swiftly and mechanically segregating the items and posting them to individual ledger accounts.

Passing into a private office, one waited while the cashier completed a letter which he was registering on a Dictaphone. No crude stenographer present, to interfere with the privacy of the interview. Yes, there was a stenographer elsewhere in the office, if wanted, as one could tell from the sight of a Stenotype Machine at another desk. Just outside the office door, was a spruce young lad, feeding letters into a machine, which turned them out sealed and stamped in a jiffy. The paper which I was carrying needed the signature of a man in another part of the building; but no boy was called to send it. It was dropped into a pneumatic tube, and with a whirr and click was back in a moment with the necessary endorsement. The people in the office moved with a jerky, mechanical precision, and went through standardized motions as if they were used to doing the same thing over and over again, thousands of times a day. The whole effect of the place was that of a cross between a modern machine shop and a sterilized, disinfected hospital or toilet room.

Quite an extreme contrast with Tellson's Bank! Perhaps all offices today are not like it, just as all offices in 1780 were not like Tellson's. But both are typical of their times, and the contrast tells the story of a revolution of methods of industry as a whole.

## The Office Workers

What of the human stuff which lives its life in these contrasted environments? Has it changed as these outward forms have done?

The office worker of 1780, according to Dick-

en's sample at Tellson's, was a miserable being. "Cramped in all kinds of dim cupboards and hutches at Tellson's, the oldest of men carried on the business gravely. When they took a young man into Tellson's London house they hid him somewhere till he was old. They kept him in a dark place, like a cheese until he had the full Tellson flavor and blue-mould upon him. Then only was he permitted to be seen, spectacularly poring over large books, and casting his breeches and gaiters into the general weight of the establishment."

The ripe-cheese aspect of the Tellson book-keeper is, of course, sufficiently in contrast with the present snappy, flashy, peppy office clerk. Change, change, no doubt, has writ heavy on this scroll. But Dickens gave us no light upon the soul beneath the heavy exterior of Tellson's creatures. We have to turn to another book-keeper in Dickensland, to see, touch, and taste of the eternal spirit of the office-worker, the unchanging and undying soul of the bookkeeper. The name of this immortal office clerk, this epitome of the book-keeper through the ages, is Uriah Heep.

"Me, Master Copperfield?" said Uriah. "Oh, no! I'm a very umble person."

'It was no fancy of mine about his hands, I observed; for he frequently ground the palms against each other, as if to squeeze them dry and warm, besides often wiping them, in a stealthy way, on his pocket-handkerchief.'

"I am well aware that I am the umblest person going," said Uriah Heep modestly; "let the other be where he may. My mother is likewise a very umble person. We live in an umble abode, Master Copperfield, but have much to be thankful for. My father's former calling was umble. He was a sexton."

At last we are on solid ground! Here is something stable, unchanging like the rock of ages. Uriah Heep is not dead; he is immortal. He can be seen in any city, in almost any office, still umble, still thankful. Sometimes, indeed, he takes the form of the other sex, and is called Pollyanna. He is ever present and everlasting. He is the office worker.

Far be it from the writer to slander those unfortunates who are condemned to spend their lives in an office. Himself spent many, the best, years of youth and young manhood there. He knew many another in the same unholy calling who, like himself, were strangers there, seeking always for a way out to— anything. He speaks not of the accidental office worker, the one who, from force of circumstance, finds himself trapped there for a time. No, he speaks of the type, the natural office worker, the one who, from choice

and fitness, finds a career in this unblest sphere. Such a person is Uriah Heep, immortal.

### Even Uriah Heep Changes Today

Immortal, we said. But such a term is not strictly true. The revolution in the office has been working its alchemy. In spite of Uriah, and in spite of Uriah's boss (who is another story, deserving separate treatment), the *machine* is marching forward with iron feet: slowly but surely its transforming power enters, and the radium of its energy plays upon the soul of Uriah Heep, the office clerk. Under this influence, Uriah is gradually but certainly being remade. He is becoming a real human being, a proletarian. This is how it is being done:

The change in the office which has wrought the greatest transformation in the worker, has been higher organization and greater numbers. The old bookkeeper was almost a self-sufficient working unit. This is no longer so. The modern worker is a cog in the office machine. The office cannot run until each man is at his place, for one depends from moment to moment upon the other. The division of labor in a modern office rivals that in a Ford auto factory. Every hour of work impresses upon the young man today, that he amounts to little at all except as part of the great machine. Together with this, goes the growth in numbers. The general office man, handling the entire accounting process and general correspondence, is of little account. His numbers are small, and his influence is smaller. No one pays any attention to him. The field is dominated by highly organized, minutely divided, offices of trustified industry, gathering from tens to hundreds under the same roof in the same integral organization.

With this new condition, office workers play a more and more important economic role. The office has become a nerve center, regulating the every action of the industrial machinery from moment to moment. Always a strategic point, it now becomes as vital to business as the solar plexus is to the body. The entire reflex action, the normal physiological processes of the body of industry, are stimulated and regulated by the office. More than any other phase of the industrial process, the office is vital. Cut off the office and the industry withers and dies. A general strike of office workers would create more consternation in a day than a strike of the miners for three months.

Under these modern conditions of the machine-made office, the office worker has become a proletarian, so far as social position and interests are concerned. But his soul, the soul of Uriah Heep, has stubbornly resisted the forces of change, and only in this generation can we see the beginnings

of a change therein. A working-class understanding and spirit, is gradually being created by the continuous and steady play of these modern conditions upon the humble office worker of tradition.

**The Dawn Of Social Revolution**

If asked to name the most revolutionary portent in social life today, the writer would point to the fact that office workers are beginning to organize into unions—into labor unions affiliated to the hod carriers, the garment workers, the printers, and the whole world of labor. The beginning is pitifully small in America, it is true, but progress is surely being made. Out of the couple of million or so of commercial office workers, there are at least 5,000 to 8,000 organized, and tens of thousands of railway clerks are united in the same union with the freight handlers. Who can overestimate the vast chasm bridged, the tremendous leap in social evolution, that is witnessed in this fact. In Europe progress is even more rapid. Great unions of office workers exist in Germany, Czhecho-Slovakia, Italy, England, and other countries. The Berlin office workers organization is one of the most

revolutionary in Germany. Throughout Europe they are joining the vanguard of the workers.

The primeval slime of the Uriah Heeps is beginning to stir with the spark of life of working-class consciousness, weak as yet but gaining strength with every passing hour. Between the office clerk of the time of Dickens, and the same person today, there is all the difference between the *amoeba* and the *pithecanthropous*, or ape-man. And such a marvelous evolution, in such a short time, gives us the definite assurance that this spiritual "hairy ape" of the modern office worker is assuredly going to continue his progress. He is going to go onward and upward, proceeding firmly up the ladder of evolution, until he blossoms forth as a real human being, a proletarian, a union man with a solid organization of his own.

All hail this budding marvel of progress! Nature is grand indeed! On that fair day when we welcome the class-conscious, revolutionary International Union of Office Workers, affiliated to the Red Trade Union International, voting for a general strike of all capitalist industry and the setting up of the Workers' Republic, then we will say, "The task is done. Old Mother Nature, you can do no more."

**THE MACHINIST GRAND LODGE ELECTION**

**T**HE final vote in the late Machinist Union election was:

WM. H. JOHNSON..... 41,837  
 WM. ROSS KNUDSON.. 14,598

This was the first attempt in any A. F. of L. union to test the real revolutionary strength. Knudsen solicited and received only the votes of those standing on the class struggle, unconditional surrender of Capitalism and Affiliation with the Red Trades Union International.

Knudsen's vote was 26% of the total and as the total vote was about one third of the membership it is safe to say that 45,000 members in the I. A. of M. stand with Knudsen and his ideas.

In fact the strength is even greater if one analyzes the election. The total vote cast in the progressive lodges was about 15% to 20% of the local membership while in the conservative locals (for some well founded reasons) the vote, was from 75% to 100% of the membership. In fact 23 lodges voted from 150% to 260% over their membership and this being too raw their vote was thrown out. To give an illustration:—

Lodge No.	members	Ballots
Findlay, Ohio .....	1393	4 104
Woburn, Mass .....	1243	3 61
Jamestown, N. Y... ..	566	12 97

Lawrence, Mass.....	172	16	64
Laconia, N. H.....	1326	27	153
Haverhill, Mass.....	1208	27	38
Cincinnati, Ohio.....	1042	29	168
Hartford, Conn.....	606	35	50
Lowell, Mass.....	745	46	81
Stamford, Conn.....	1054	69	81
Philadelphia, Pa....	816	55	67
Indianapolis, Ind....	910	140	155
Schenectady, N. Y... .	646	215	277
Lowell, Mass.....	138	284	454

Others could be given but they must be saved for evidence. Knudsen, of course received no vote in these lodges and someone's hard work went for nothing.

In fact, jokingly, after the election many were bragging about their sore wrists due to an over exertion in marking ballots. What many are asking and which seems a puzzle, is how did the lodges with small membership get so many ballots? And furthermore how are those that did cast their vote in regular form in these thrown out lodges going to have their votes recorded?

But tomorrow belongs to those that really represent the historic rising class and with their rise all these mishaps of today will disappear. Tomorrow belongs to the real progressives and such action as took place in the recent Machinist Union election will only cause real men to work that much harder for a real Labor Movement.