

Cyanide for Lunch

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DETROIT, MICH.

ONCE again the unpredictable Henry Ford has done it. With the dramatic suddenness characteristic of America's greatest showman, he has announced through his advertising agents, N. P. Ayers and Company, the return of the Ford Motor Company to the \$6-a-day basic wage—incontestably the highest minimum rate now in effect in large-scale industry the country over. Columns of space have been devoted to it, hundreds of editorials have analyzed and praised it, leading figures of industry, finance and labor have given it their stamp of approval but, as yet, the voice of the Ford worker has not been heard on the matter.

I am a Ford worker and I write from the workers' standpoint, but every assertion I shall make is buttressed by facts and figures and is susceptible of proof. The truth about Ford is that despite the myth of high wages and the recent raise to \$6 a day, the Ford Motor Company pays on the average *lower wages* than any other large unit of the industry in the Michigan area; that by means of increased speed-up and the dismissal of several thousand men the Ford Motor Company has actually *decreased* its wage fund in many departments since the introduction of the \$6-a-day wage, while maintaining production at former levels; that graft and corruption, ranging from petty blackmailing of the men by foremen and the almost open bartering of jobs, to the theft of thousands of dollars worth of material and labor by department heads and higher officials, is a commonplace in the great River Rouge plant; that the most elementary safety rules and regulations are daily and flagrantly violated in the Rouge plant, sometimes with fatal consequences, in the terrific drive for more production; that during the whole period of the N.R.A. the Ford Motor Company knowingly and continuously violated Section 7-A by the discharge and blacklisting of all known or suspected members of the American Federation of Labor and more radical working-class organizations; that the Ford Motor Company not only maintains the most efficient professional labor-spy service in the world, but that it systematically endeavors to corrupt weaker elements among the workers in order that they may spy on their fellow workers on the belt; that the whole labor policy of the Ford Motor Company is predicated on this one idea—above all the worker must be made to *fear* his employer.

ON June 3, there was to open in Detroit a coroner's inquest on the death by poison of a worker in the Ford plant. The facts behind this inquest may well serve us as a starting point. Briefly, they are as follows:

At four o'clock on the morning of April 1, the workers in the huge dim-lit Motor Building of the Ford plant shut off their machines, the maze of endless conveyors slowed to a halt and the men on the midnight shift flopped down on the oily floor for the fifteen minutes allowed them to wolf their lunch. They had no time to waste. Swiftly they rubbed what oil and dirt they could from their hands and hurriedly they tore open their paper lunch sacks. Some few, who carried no lunch to work, walked over to buy a sandwich or two from the lunch wagon that had been trundled into the shop a few minutes before. No one washed his hands that night or any other night; with fifteen minutes in which to eat and prepare for another four-hour grind at the belt there is no time to wash. Suddenly a worker rose from the floor with a hoarse scream, his face distorted with agony and white foam on his lips. He staggered a few feet and collapsed. While his shop mates gathered around him his writhing body stiffened. He was dead. Another worker screamed and fell. They took him to the hospital on the run and they saved his life. There was no mystery about the seizures. Both men were victims of cyanide poisoning. Traces of sodium cyanide were found in their sandwiches.

Some twenty-four hours later the Detroit press carried its first stories on the tragedy, obviously re-writes of a Ford press statement. The Free Press declared that a three-cornered investigation conducted by "Assistant Prosecutor John A. Mowatt, assistants of Harry Bennett, head of the Ford service department, and Carl A. Brooks, chief of police of Dearborn, was under way." And further that "A theory advanced by the investigators was that the act might have been committed by persons bent on sabotage." What persons? Obviously Reds or union members. This was "theory" number 1.

To substantiate it, The News of April 2 stated that, "Police were calling on drug stores near the plant to learn if any poison of the kind found in the sandwiches had been purchased or stolen recently."

On the same day the local union of the American Federation of Labor in the Ford plant issued a handbill exposing for the first time that literally tons of sodium cyanide used in the case-hardening of certain steel parts were scattered indiscriminately throughout the Motor Building where the poisoned men worked. On April 3 the press carried similar news and the combined Ford and police investigation of drug stores to find the source of the poison was dropped with a dull thud.

With monotonous regularity a new "theory" made its appearance on April 4 in The Times under this seven-column head "POISON VIC-

TIM'S BROTHER GRILLED." Murder was now declared to lie at the bottom of the business. Simultaneously, The Times reported the police investigating the death by poison of a stray dog some fifteen miles from the Ford plant in the apparent expectation that it would throw some light on the matter.

"Theory" number 4 arrived on schedule, April 5. "Carl A. Brooks, Dearborn police chief, said officers would investigate to determine if Sherry might have committed suicide," declared The Free Press.

And on April 6, the Ford Motor Company, with the helpful aid of the Dearborn police, brought forth its final "theory." "Two detectives of the Dearborn police department left for Elizabeth, N.J., last night where they have been ordered to investigate Sherry's past life and to question Mrs. Jacob Bashal, an aunt. Mrs. Bashal is beneficiary of several insurance policies carried by Sherry, Chief Carl A. Brooks of Dearborn said, and Sherry had lived at her home for several years." (Detroit Times.)

Theories of sabotage, suicide, murder. They are all here, but not one statement of the police or the company and not one story appearing in the local press from start to finish even hinted at the possibility that Louis Sherry met his death because of inadequate safety devices or improper handling of the deadly chemical sodium cyanide in the production process in the Ford plant itself.

SO MUCH for the "theories" of the Ford Motor Company. Now for a few facts. First, sodium cyanide is in daily use in the Ford plant in not less than twenty departments. It is commonly stacked against the sides of cyanide furnaces or left beside them in open 200-pound drums. It is accessible to thousands of employes at all times. Second, this chemical is so dangerous that enough to kill a man or a half-dozen men can be picked up under one's fingernails while handling it. Third, the men working in cyanide are not always equipped with respirators and on occasion have been denied them when they asked for them. They are not provided with impenetrable working clothes. They are not provided with dust-proof lockers (or indeed lockers of any kind) in which to protect their street clothing from cyanide dust which may be deposited on them and carried home. Fourth, in the department of the Motor Building where the poisoned men worked, and in other departments in this building using cyanide, there are insufficient washing facilities and *there is no hot water*. Fifth, the men in several of these departments are allowed only fifteen minutes for lunch on one shift and twenty minutes on the other. They have no time to clean up. Sixth, both Sherry and

Wicker, the other poison victim, while not themselves working directly with cyanide, worked within a few yards of open drums of the deadly stuff. Moreover, the records of the Ford hospital show that Sherry had been treated on at least two occasions before the night he met his death for what the records term "food poisoning."

These are not merely opinions. They are attested facts culled from a confidential report of inspectors sent into the Ford plant by the Michigan State Department of Labor and Industry, at the insistence of the Ford local union of the American Federation of Labor, immediately following the poisoning. I quote excerpts directly from the report (a report, incidentally, never before made public):

Motor Building. The cyanide solution is piped from an elevator tank . . . and is run down from an open pipe into six tumblers at such distance as to cause the solution to splash, causing a serious eye hazard as they are about six feet from the floor and the employees were not wearing goggles.

Motor Building: Inspected Dept. 498. In this department there are four heat-treat furnaces. At this location the cyanide is stored in a metal receptacle out of which the cyanide is taken and placed in crucibles by means of a hand shovel. Around the metal receptacle were five full cyanide cans. *On one of these cans an employe was seated eating his lunch.* [My emphasis, T. J.] A washroom with facilities for twelve persons is

about fifty feet distant. [There are over 150 men in this department who may use the above described washing facilities, T. J.]

We next inspected Dept. 6510, the split-bushing dept; in this department the employe who met his death from cyanide poisoning was employed. There is no cyanide used or stored in this department. Department 6510 is in the same building as Dept. 498 [described above, T. J.] . . . and an aisle about twenty-five feet wide separates the two departments.

Department 728 was next inspected. In this department there are seventy-one furnaces. The cyanide in this department is not stored, being indiscriminately piled on the floor adjacent to the furnaces. . . . There is a lunch period of fifteen minutes in this department and employes select any convenient spot to eat lunch.

B. Building—Dept. 13. There are forty-one cyanide furnaces in this department. *Lunches in open stock bins were noticed about ten feet from furnaces.* Approximately one peck of cyanide was on a metal shelf near the furnace, so as to be handy for use, some of the cyanide had fallen to the floor. [It might as easily have fallen on someone's lunch! T. J.] Washing facilities are similar to other departments; there was no hot water at the time we visited the department.

Motor Building—Dept. 2455. Cyanide is handled in this department by means of a hand shovel direct from can which always leaves the partially filled can accessible. *About eight men were eating lunch approximately fifteen feet away from cyanide furnaces.*

And finally this gem:

Mr. Smith, Safety Engineer, [of the Ford

Motor Company, T. J.] in a conversation with both inspectors relative to the men eating lunches near the cyanide said that the employes could eat their lunches away from the cyanide or wash their hands if they wished; there being no rule to stop them. He admitted the practice of eating in any convenient place. His general attitude is that the men are familiar with cyanide and know how to handle it and that the condition around the cyanide is as good as it is practical to make it.

SUCH is the viewpoint of the Ford Motor Company. That this viewpoint is shared not only by local police, but by the Michigan State Legislature as well, is indicated by the fact that during the height of the insistent campaign of the Ford Local Union to secure a public investigation of the poisonings, the Legislature for the sixth consecutive time acted adversely on a bill designated to place occupational diseases on equal footing with industrial accidents under the Workmens' Compensation Act. What action, if any, will be taken by the authorities following the sensational disclosures certain to result from the coroner's inquest starting June 3, remains to be seen. Meanwhile, the union, through widely distributed handbills and the word-of-mouth agitation of its members in the plant is working hard, and as far as one can judge, with considerable success, to expose the more obviously dangerous conditions in the Ford plant.