

Working for the Company

by John Wanna

Should you want to know how one notorious company disciplines its workforce, not just through savage workplace control but also across the entire ambit of dehumanised social relations, then this modest book will have a dramatic impact on you. It is probable that the book only scratches the surface of B.H.P.'s sordid industrial relations policies at Whyalla. Yet in scratching the surface it shocks every nerve in the readers body. This is not simply the response of out-of-touch academics; many blue collar workers will be sardonically disturbed. The book should be given the widest publicity, not least of all in Whyalla itself. Read this book before B.H.P. attempts to suppress it as they have successfully done in the past with other forthright studies on the company.

Roy Kriegler worked at the shipyards himself and has first-hand knowledge of much of what he describes. His workplace experience and the relationships he was able to forge with many of the interviewees helped the author to establish a rapport with the Whyalla workers. The interviewees are quite open and frank, often describing their experiences in minute detail. This would have been impossible had Kriegler not been seen as 'one of them'. Best of all, in the book's presentation Kriegler allows the workers involved to give their own extraordinary accounts and to tell it the way it was, according to their everyday experience. In lengthy but fascinating interviewee narrations Kriegler accumulates a stunning indictment of B.H.P.'s 'treacherous' treatment of their shipyard workforce in the late 'seventies. He demonstrates in no uncertain way that industrial legislation and protection in South Australia is a charade when a monopoly company is involved. He provides evidence time after time that blue collar industrial apartheid at Whyalla can be seen neither as a result of B.H.P.'s ignorance nor negligence, but instead as an intended consequence of conscious managerial designs. These designs achieve a frightening level of fruition when the company also 'owns' the town, its public service departments, its doctors, lawyers, police; where it has the unions in its pocket and through personal channels controls the only newspaper.

Kriegler documents B.H.P.'s two-faced, corrupt dealings with the State government over such forces of production as: mineral leases, industrial terrain, water supplies, employee housing, taxation exemptions and transportation provisions. Yet the book's most interesting facet is the detailed discussion of the labour process in action. In this one company town the usual freedom afforded to labour (to work or starve) is a stark, dictatorial rule of everyday survival. One employee described the work at the shipyards in terms of 'as near to being in jail as anything I've ever seen anywhere'. In B.H.P.'s Whyalla, fraud, standover tactics, corruption, the perpetration of highly dangerous job requirements, devious compensation manipulation by management, the rigging of industrial accident statistics, and the deceitful cover-ups concerning deadly operations on the job (eg. sawing asbestos sheets without protection); these features are all too common. They are not the exception to the rule.

If workers were stick they were often sacked or given the opportunity to enjoy their annual holiday leave for 3 weeks until they were 'fit enough' according to the company doctor to resume work. If they died the company owned the only cemetery and controlled the funeral merchants; inevitably it was the company that buried them. At work industrial diseases and deadly hazards were wantonly ignored. Indeed, should an employee die as a result of the working conditions, B.H.P. characteristically recorded such cases as the 'termination of employment' and only rarely as the result of fatal accidents or industrial diseases. The company record was to be kept clean at any cost. In one joiners' shop after one man died of 'pains in the chest' (later found to be asbestosis) others sought medical examinations; but, for seven months the company doctor refused to communicate the results of these to the joiners involved. Of the fifty to sixty joiners half had asbestosis and lung deterioration. In another case a truck hub mounting exploded nearly killing an experienced mechanic. At the ensuing compensation court case the company trotted out witness after witness in a construction of consistent lies in order to 'prove' individual negligence not company liability. Each witness suspiciously received promotions around the time of their appearance in court.

In Kriegler's study there are no sacred cows. The unions attract deserved criticism for their inertia and their kow-towing to the company. But given the nature of B.H.P. and the conditions of the working environment at Whyalla it is not surprising that trade unions appear merely as social clubs. In the highly differentiated workforce support for the union movement was not readily forthcoming. The division of the workforce together with the multi ethnic background and post-war (anti-Stalinist and displaced persons) immigration have contributed towards mitigating any serious establishment of militancy. As Kriegler points out this historical fragmentation was satisfactory both to the company and the union hierarchies.

As a study of shop floor politics Working For the Company compares favourably with the works of Theo Nichols, Huw Beynon and Peter Armstrong (see: Working For Ford - 1973, Workers Divided - 1976, and Living With Capitalism - 1977). Here the debate is not so much about instrumental attitudes versus class consciousness but about the conditioning of capitalistic values on the workforce. In the everyday confrontation with capitalistic values workers express complex and contradictory responses while neither affirming nor denying (Nichols) its principles. Few workers are zealous proponents of the 'merits' of capitalism; most are simply resigned in the absence of practical and achievable alternatives. As Kriegler's book demonstrates, whether or not workers see capitalism as 'natural' and 'inevitable', for most it is a matter of more or less muddling through. In the divided workforce workers often cannot rely on the support or comradeship of their fellow workers. Kriegler's study together with the above collections confront one of the central questions of social change in the contemporary period: namely, to what extent can worker solidarity be developed within an increasingly divided and controlled labour process and what is the particular nature of such solidarity.

After reading this book others have some idea of the working conditions at B.H.P.'s new closed Whyalla shipyards. In short the message woven through this timely study is that the law of the company had become predominant to such an extent that it was virtually a fact of life. Moreover, the company is shown to have been prepared to go to any lengths to keep the company's record clean. The question certain to be posed in reading the book is how much was Kriegler unable to find out; what in other words were the real depths of what Working For The Company meant.

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