

Working at the Navy Yard

by Susan B. Anthony II

MY FIRST NIGHT on the midnight shift at the Washington Navy Yard, I met Esther, a fellow ordnance worker, who ran the machine next to mine. Dreading the changeover from swing shift to “graveyard,” I asked Esther’s advice on the best hours for eating and sleeping after 8 a.m.

“When do you go to bed?” I asked.

“Bed!” exclaimed Esther, a swarthy woman of about 35. “I haven’t slept in a bed for five months.”

Esther, the mother of five children, then told me the seemingly unbelievable schedule she has followed for the five months she has been working on ordnance to pad her husband’s daily wage of \$4.83, made as a trucker on the railroad.

“I have to run out of here to catch my bus at 8:10 in the morning so I can get home right after he leaves for work,” said Esther. “I see that the three older kids are dressed OK for school and have had something to eat. Then I feed the little ones. Tommy is four and Mary is almost three. I feed myself and wash the dishes, straighten up the house, wash if I have to and take the kids out with me to buy groceries. Then I give the little ones lunch and make some sandwiches for the kids that go to school.

“After lunch I try to get some sleep—not in bed though—I just sit in a big chair in the living room and prop my feet up. Have you ever tried getting to sleep and staying asleep while watching two little kids tear the house apart?”

I could only look at Esther’s tired face and wonder how many more months she could continue on such a regime. Next month, Tommy will go to half-day kindergarten. There are no nursery schools in the neighborhood for Mary, however, and the only one near the navy yard has a waiting list of 40 children.

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Two nights after my talk with Esther, I came in at midnight and found her the center of a buzzing, indignant group of women workers.

“Esther’s house almost caught fire this morning,” explained Louise excitedly. “The new ruling that we have to take our coats all the way down to the ladies’ room at the far end of the shop instead of hanging them in here, made Esther lose her bus. When she got home the kids were fooling with the gas stove and a towel had already caught fire.”

The master mechanic, head of the shop, had decreed that we must take a ten-minute round-trip walk to hang up our coats. This meant that women workers had to get to work ten minutes earlier and were delayed ten minutes afterwards.

“Why can’t we have lockers right up here near the elevator, like most of the men?” protested one of women.

This led to a petition asking for conveniently located lockers which we planned to get all the women in the shop to sign and then present to the master mechanic. Only four of us had a chance to sign it, however, before a personnel man on his daily check-up rounds, picked it up and turned it over to the master mechanic. We four were called on the carpet.

“Your request for lockers is ridiculous and will never be granted,” he said. “Don’t ever let me hear another word of this.”

Two of the women who had signed were immediately transferred from our room. I was threatened with disciplinary action and was asked to explain my conduct in writing. I did explain. I protested the women’s lack of representation on any grievance body. For our locker gripe was the least of our grievances. Working at the navy yard is like working in a completely open shop, since women are not members of the main union at the plant—the International Association of Machinists, AFL. We therefore had no shop steward, no grievance committee, no representation on union bodies and, least of all, no benefits of equal pay, promotion policies or other standards that a union contract would ensure.

Take our wages, for example. Though research for my book* had shown stories of high pay for women workers to

*●out of the Kitchen—Into the War (New York: Stephen Daye, Inc.).

be an utter myth, I had no idea, until I became a war worker myself, how *low* wages actually were. When my skimpy little paycheck of \$23 a week came to me, I wondered how on earth I could ever live on that in wartime Washington if I were forced to pay my own room, board, transportation, doctors' bills and other necessities out of it. Then I would look around the shop and wonder how the married women and mothers—the majority there—could support their children and parents as well as themselves on these wages.

Navy-yard women start at \$4.65 a day, which, with time and one-half for the sixth day, is \$29.64 a week. Deduct the 20-percent withholding tax, and you find that we luxuriate on \$23 a week. The highest-paid woman on production in our shop receives \$6.95 a day, a peak she has attained after two years at the yard. Men get as high as \$22 a day. The same low wages for beginning women workers prevail at most of the other eight navy yards in the country. Welders, however, and others who get preemployment training are better paid. Welders at one yard receive \$1.14 an hour. The wages of mechanics-learners, which is the classification we came under at the Washington yard and in which many women start at other yards, begin at 57 or 58 cents an hour.

Not only do the women start at a low wage—they stay at it. At the Washington yard and at the other navy yards in the East and West, there are no automatic raises. Miriam, who had been in the yard for eighteen months, said to me:

“At this place, it ain't what you know—it's who you know.”

Raises were accorded on some indeterminate basis. Promotions to supervisory jobs seem to be unknown not only at Washington but elsewhere in navy yards. I could discover no women foremen, no women job instructors, or “snappers”—the lowest rank in the supervisory hierarchy. Up to last fall, I had heard of only three women “snappers” working at all navy yards. Others may have been promoted since then, but the going is slow.

Equal pay and promotions for women are one of the government standards of employment supported in writing by the Navy Department and seven other federal agencies. The navy yards themselves seem to be unaware of the fact; nor do

they observe other standards adhered to on paper by the Department.

A few minutes before my first lunch on the day shift, I saw a woman, crouching almost double, come over to a bucket of dirty water used for cooling tools. She glanced furtively through the glass partitions separating our room from the rest of the shop and then stooped quickly and washed her hands in the filthy water.

“We aren’t allowed to go out to the ladies’ room and wash our hands before lunch—so this is the only water in the room and at least I can get some of the grease off my hands before I eat. If one of the bosses catches you washing you get docked and suspended,” she explained, while keeping an eye out for the bosses.

Following most of the women workers, I quickly adapted myself to eating sandwiches held between grimy hands. I also had to learn to gulp down lunch in 15 minutes. The yard gave us 20 minutes for lunch, but at least five minutes were gone by the time you had raced and waited at the understaffed canteen for cold, watery chocolate milk or cola drinks (no coffee except on the midnight shift). The government standard of 30-minute lunch periods, hot lunches and a decent place to eat them is ignored by the Washington yard, which is nearer being the rule than the exception. Four out of seven yards in the nation give workers lunch periods of less than 30 minutes—15 in one yard, 20 in two and 25 in a fourth. In the other three yards, the lunch period, which is on the workers’ own time, is 30, 40 and 45 minutes, respectively. Some of these other yards have hot lunches served from mobile or stationary canteens. We had to choose between cold sandwiches bought from the yard and cold sandwiches which we brought with us.

Another standard neglected by yard officials was the 15-minute rest period, morning and afternoon, advocated for women workers. I don’t think many of us at the Washington yard missed these breathing spells, however. The fact was that although the work in our room was physically hard and required standing almost eight hours at a stretch in some cases (such as mine), there was such a slowdown, stemming from the top, that no one hurried. When I first caught on to my

particular job, I began working at my normal speed, which is fast. The woman next to me said to me in a blasé tone:

“Don’t break your neck working so fast—no one else does and the bosses won’t like you any better for it.”

Later a boss actually warned me:

“Take it easy; there’s no rush. If you finish that there won’t be anything else for you to do for a while.”

On day shift we were kept fairly busy. The swing shift, from four to midnight, was the slowest. Workers stood around obviously idle for want of work, and would look alert only when a naval officer came by. The workers accepted the slowdown along with the bosses. When I asked one man the cause of it, he replied:

“Oh, it’s red tape. The stuff we need in this shop is laying around in another shop and the orders to send it over here are tied up somewhere else.”

I do not know whether workers at the other navy yards need rest periods more than those at Washington. Only two out of seven yards reporting have said that their women get formal rest periods, and in one of these, rests were given in the machine shop alone. In the other, women in the sail loft were given a rest period of 10 minutes every two hours. Rest periods for women, just like convenient lunch facilities for all workers, seem to be considered luxuries by yard officials.

At the Washington yard the lack of formal rest periods could not be attributed to the rush of work. Nor could one attribute it to a shortage of workers or overvaluation of the workers’ time. I had mistakenly thought before going to work at the yard that minutes were precious in production. Once on the job, personnel officers and posters proclaimed the need for punctuality and perfect attendance. I was naturally surprised to learn after one day’s work that the main method of disciplining these “precious” workers was to lay them off for as much as a week at a time.

Bertha, who took two or three days without permission to be with her sailor husband who was shipping out for a long time, was laid off for an entire week as a penalty. If you were one minute late in the morning, you were made to stand idle

for one hour and be docked accordingly. If you forgot to tag in upon arrival at work or at lunch time, after three offenses you were laid off for a day.

There were other penalties besides being laid off, I learned when I was on the midnight shift. I saw Miriam, who had held the day shift for months, standing at a machine one night and asked her why she had changed from day work.

"You can bet your life I didn't change because I wanted to. The boss told me today at the end of my shift that I had to come in tonight."

Miriam had just married a soldier. She had accumulated one week's annual leave so she could take her honeymoon when her husband got his furlough. Before her vacation began, however, she took a day's sick leave. When she put in a slip for her vacation, the personnel officer, who had previously promised her the week off, told her:

"You don't get that week's leave now. Taking that day off when you were sick means that you can't take the week."

Miriam decided she would go ahead and take her honeymoon as planned. The result was that her first day back on the job she was forced to work 16 hours, 8 on the day shift and 8 on midnight. She was being punished by assignment to midnight for two weeks.

"Why do you stand for it?" I asked.

"I need the money, that's why," she replied simply.

That was the attitude of most of the women whom I met at the yard. They would stand for practically anything—five months without sleeping in a bed, a solid year on the graveyard shift so as to be home with the kids during the day, the double job, indigestible lunches, long hours and no promise of a future after the war—all for miserably low wages. The longer I worked side by side with them, the more I admired their endurance—but the more I seethed to see them organized in a union that would help solve their problems. And the more I saw the necessity for really planned production, planned community service, labor-utilization inspectors, labor-management committees that function and are recognized, and a program to educate the workers about the issues of the war abroad and at home. I admired the patience of the

women who stuck by their jobs, day after day, though it was obvious that their usefulness to the war effort was cut in half by the very working conditions which they endured.

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