

Layoff: big pay for no work

I first became suspicious of automobile executives when I went to work for one of the Big 3 20 long years ago.

The corporation paid me a reasonable wage for a high school graduate to make charts for executives at the Plymouth plant on Lynch Road in Detroit.

Every few days I would take updated production figures and make new charts giving graphic depictions of production and quality control trends.

I became well aware after a time that none of the executives I was making the charts for paid the slightest attention to the charts and I wondered why I should go on making charts for people who did not look at them, or why the company should pay me for doing so.

The company, in the throes of one of its downturns, solved my dilemma by laying off me and several other thousand other workers. I drew unemployment compensation amounting to about one third of my salary.

And one night last week, ten decades later, I sat listening to an auto worker named Sam (a pseudonym imposed by me) explain to me how the system now works.

I have been wondering for some time how the auto industry got into a predicament whereby it pays line workers \$13 an hour and pays another \$7 or \$8 for their fringe benefits to make overpriced cars which don't sell and then has to start borrowing money guaranteed by taxpayers and to start demanding that line workers start trading some of their benefits for some supposed future security.

SAM'S ACCOUNT of his own travails at the Ford Motor Co. definitely gives me some insight. Now that there have been some concessions and big plans made to introduce six new models over the next 18 months, Sam said that things have been gearing up.

He is now working seven days a week making \$11.00 a week, he explained. He liked it better, however, when he was laid off making \$400 a week. Which was for many months during the past year.

Before he got laid off and back when he wasn't working overtime, Sam was working a regular shift and making \$500 a week.

But when he was making \$500 a week, he was making \$100 in taxes. Just before he got laid off, he was injured, so he was put on workers comp. His unemployment comp was \$197 a week and he got another \$200 a week from workers comp. Under the old rules, which changed in January, he could collect both.

ON THE layoff before the last one, he collected unemployment comp and supplemental unemployment com-

pensation and the two amounted to some \$400 a week on which he paid no taxes. Now, Sam asked, "Isn't not working and collecting \$400 a week while paying no taxes better than working and making \$500 a week and paying \$100 a week in taxes?" Sam's logic was irrefutable.

Of course, Sam said, he had to pay back into the SUB fund, at \$30 a week, when he was back working. "But do I care?" he asks jocularly. "I had the money all that time, interest free. I spent all summer fishing and having a good time."

Sam said he definitely doesn't like working seven days, however, so he usually doesn't. He works on the weekends at time-and-a-half and double time, but takes off a day during the week when he only loses regular time pay for not coming in.

I am beginning to think that the same executives who could not bother reading my charts two decades ago have for the past few years been planning the auto palins' work schedules and negotiating auto workers' pay and benefit packages.



Bob Wisler

overheard over coffee

Some of the targets of the Educational Research Analysts Inc., a conservative organization interested in censoring materials used in public schools, include:

Time, Newsweek and U.S. News and World Report magazines, filmstrips dealing with drug and sex education, "The Grapes of Wrath," "Travels with Babar," all of Shakespeare's works, all but one of Mark Twain's works, and the American Heritage Dictionary.

Zounds. What would the Bard say. Perhaps, he would borrow from his own "King Henry VI."

Suspicion always haunts the guilty mind; the thief doth fear each bush an officer.

discover Michigan

Did you know that of Michigan's 83 counties, more than one-third, 31, have names which are Indian words or derivatives of Indian words. For example, Leelanau — in the beautiful Leelanau peninsula — means "delight of an life." The county was organized in 1853. Shiawassee is an Indian word meaning "river that twists about." It apparently refers to a stretch of the Shiawassee River. This county was organized in 1837.

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comment

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Old Economic Building

Don't revere U-M relic

The old Economics Building will be torn down by the University of Michigan. But there will be no tears from this alumnus.

Despite the Christmas Eve arson, the Econ Building could have been saved and renovated. That, however, would have cost more than just tearing it down and putting up a new building.

On campus, there was a considerable wailing and gnashing of teeth from the preservationists. Econ is one of the three oldest buildings on campus, ranking with the president's house and the Observatory. Built in 1855 in the administration of Henry Tappan, it was the first college building in the country devoted entirely to the teaching of chemistry.

Chemistry moved out in 1909, and since then the economics department has been its principal tenant. The blackened bulk stands near the center of the Diag, with the Graduate Library and the UGLI (Undergraduate Library) towering over it.



Tim Richard

THE ECON Building turned 100 years old when I was on campus, but I can't recall anyone's getting excited about it.

I used to try to get a window seat during spring semesters because then you could smell the lilacs. The bushes were old and tall, and their scent was heavy after a spring rain.

Otherwise, the Econ Building, as a piece of architecture, was undistinguished. It was just an old building.

Not that there weren't exciting things going on inside.

Economics in those days was the king of the social sciences. Our parents remembered the Great Depression, even if we students hadn't. The post-war recovery was going strong, and our society was creating something called "suburbia."

The curriculum was extremely tough, and economics attracted some of the best minds on campus, though I

won't profess to be in the top ranks. The mumbo-jumbo of sociology, with its class antagonisms, still wasn't a drawing card.

THE MINDS which were on tap were awe-inspiring.

Kenneth Boulding, probably the finest scholar I have ever come across, would throw out more fresh ideas and new ways of looking at the world in a single hour than most college professors spewed out in a year. He taught agricultural policy not in the vacuum of statistics but in the broad wash of human affairs.

Gardner Ackley was chairman of the department and teaching macroeconomic theory. We even read John Maynard Keynes in that course, reputed to be the toughest on campus. Ackley would later be chairman of the president's Council of Economic Advisers and ambassador to Italy.

Already a legend, William Haber taught labor economics. Here was a man who had drafted some of the pioneer workers comp legislation in the country teaching undergraduates. He would later be dean of the Lit School.

SHARING THE social security course with him was Wilbur Cohen, later to be secretary of Health, Education and Welfare. After a stint in the State Department, Sam Hayes taught the course on developing nations. My term paper was on the revolutions in Iran.

Graduating as a raw 20-year-old, I was dimly aware I had been in the presence of first-class scholars, devoted teachers and potent public policy makers. It would take a few years in the outside world before I fully appreciated them.

The point is that they didn't need a 19th century Economics Building to make learning an adventure. They would have been mind-benders teaching in a barn or in the most antiseptic air-conditioned building imaginable.

The Economics Building itself? Tear the sad ruin down and be done with it.

But I will miss the spring afternoons and the heavy scent of lilacs.

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