

Packard Workers Faced Social Alienation

So long as the American economic system is committed to producing winners, it must also take the consequences of having losers.

Some of the consequences of being a loser are detailed in a new book, "Economic Failure: Alienation, and Extremism", published by the University of Michigan Press.

The book focuses on the experiences of more than 300 Packard Motor Car Co. employees after the Detroit plant closed in 1956.

It is the work of Michael Aiken, sociologist at the University of Wisconsin; Louis A. Ferraro, research director of the Institute of Labor and Industrial Relations, and associate professor of social work, University of Michigan; and Wayne State University; and Harold L. Sheppard, social scientist at the W.E. Upjohn Institute.

WITH RAPID technology and economic changes continuously reshaping the nature of work, the plight of the Packard employees could be that of any American worker today or tomorrow," the authors point out.

"Their experiences reflect problems and issues faced by American society in the 1960s: economic failure, social alienation, social participation, and political extremism."

The loss of work is viewed as weakening the individual's social and emotional link to main social currents. The authors say job displacement may

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A job at Packard was regarded as a career by the Poles, Slavs, Italians, Germans, and Negroes who went to work for the company in the early years, the authors found.

At the time of the shutdown in June 1956, some 49 per cent of the Packard workers had 26 years or more service with the company. Even before unionization, the company had

gone out of its way to offer advantages to its workers--including above average pay, separation pay, insurance plans, informal seniority. Many employees felt "bereaved" by the news of the shutdown.

When the study was begun in 1957, a total of 260 respondents had averaged slightly more than 10 months of joblessness. Only 45 per cent of the sample was actually re-employed at the time.

The close link between finding a job and the extent of social participation is important, the authors note. "To withdraw from contact with friends and relatives is to reduce one's opportunities for reemployment." The results of such social alienation are detailed in the book's analysis.

1. Depletion of financial resources and reduced contact with relatives or friends because the worker cannot reciprocate his social obligations.

2. Temporary or permanent loss of social relationships in the work situation that have provided effective support and functional aid.

3. Loss of contact with one of the primary social institutions, the labor union, through which the worker gains a sense of competence or influence in the control of his environment.

4. Erosion of a useful work role that has given the individual a sense of social identity.

5. Redistribution of wage-earning responsibilities within the family, which may result in a drastic readjustment of role expectations and behavior of the family members.

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EMPLOYMENT. INSECURITY tends to be reflected in a wide range of a worker's activities and relationships, the authors emphasize.

"If a worker's experiences have been bad and if he blames the American political and social institutions for his plight, it may be difficult for him to continue to believe that life is worthwhile or that these institutions are viable," the book states.

The Packard workers had lost what many of them referred to again and again in the study as "a good place to work."

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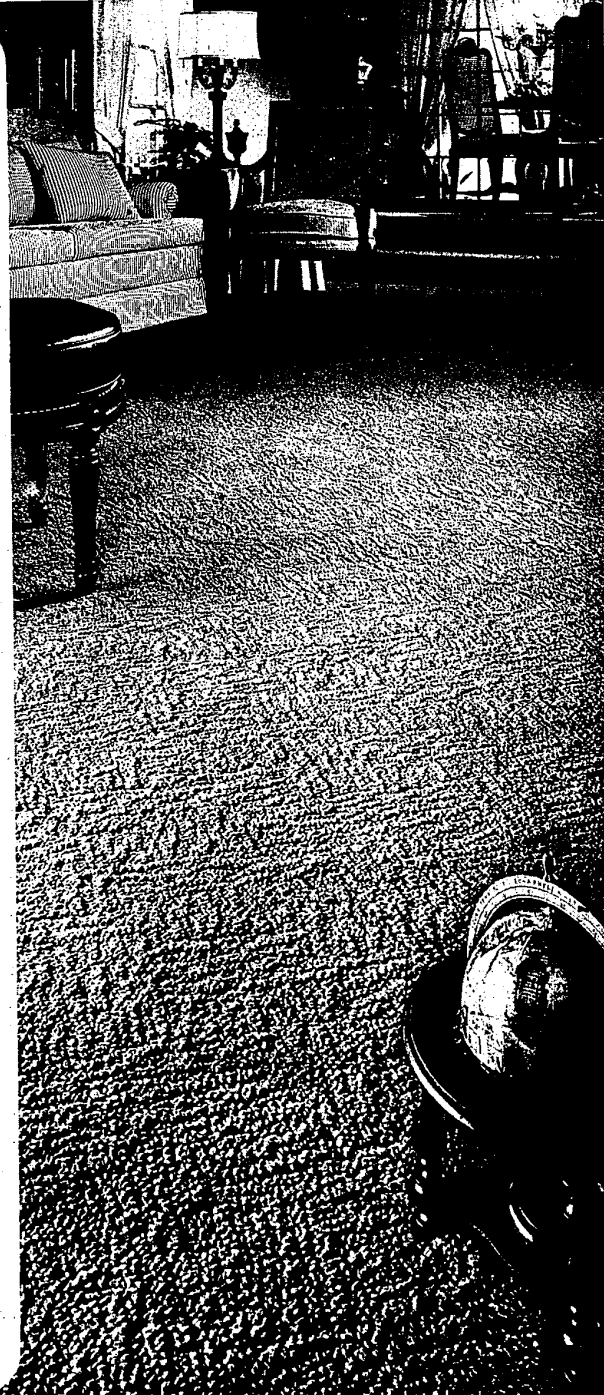
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