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A Socialist Labor Party Statement—

Here Today and Gone Tomorrow

The Plight of America's Temporary Workers

From the capitalist's point of view, temps have the characteristics of a very desirable employee. A "temp" is a person who works for an agency that "rents" his or her services to companies on a temporary basis, for time periods ranging from a few hours to several months.

Financially Vulnerable

First and foremost in importance to the capitalist, these workers are financially insecure. This is true whether they perform "white collar" work in offices or "blue collar" work in factories. Because of their need for money, they take just about any job at almost any pay, willingly do unpleasant work, work very hard, and don't complain or argue. And, as an added bonus, they disappear when the job is done.

Why are temps in such need for money? One reason for the economic insecurity is the low rate of pay these workers receive. The agencies that send out workers on temporary assignments keep from 40 to 50 percent of the money the contracting company pays for the worker's services. That doesn't leave much money for the worker. Another reason for financial insecurity is that the worker doesn't know when the current job will end.

Some people, in some fields, can contract to work for a specified period of time. These people have a good estimate about the length of their jobs, barring unforeseen events. Should some change of circumstance occur, however, these people are naturally the first to be kicked out the door. They are disposable and they know it.

Other people, both blue-collar and white-collar workers, are sent to a company to work as long as they are both needed and wanted. If the company they are serving needs the labor but doesn't like the laborer, that worker will be sent away and another person will be inserted. If the labor is not needed, no amount of respect or affection will keep the temp employed. Sometimes they get advance warning that the assignment is coming to an end, and sometimes they do not. They never know if they will be earning money tomorrow.

Blue-Collar Temps

Perhaps the group of people with the most insecurity are those that work as day laborers in blue-collar positions. They report to the offices of the employing agent early in the morning, and they stand there with hat in hand and hope that on this day enough factories need enough fill-in

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people to give them a day's work and a day's wages. Sometimes these assignments last two or three days, but the usual length of work is one day.

These day laborers, when they do manage to get a day's work, usually get paid close to minimum wage. In exchange for this meager amount of money, they are assigned to the worst jobs in the shop, they are often physically separated from the rest of the work crew, management personnel frequently "forget" to relieve them for breaks, and they sometimes serve as scapegoats to be blamed for anything that goes wrong.

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And no matter how good a job they do, there is absolutely no assurance that they will find work the next day. So the next morning they again show up at the door of the employing agent, and again stand with hat in hand and hope for a day's work so they can get at least one more day's wages. These people are in no position to be independent.

Capitalists benefit from the fact that temps are so frequently emotionally traumatized. This damage results from a steady flow of blows to self-esteem. They suffer through too many new jobs with too little training, too many abruptly terminated work assignments, too many periods of mourning because of separation from coworkers they became fond of. Feelings of self-worth are beaten down by this process. Many workers find it difficult to fend off self-blame and some temps eventually feel like failures. This attitude on the part of workers is very beneficial to companies because self-blame eliminates

resistance to being pushed around and makes the worker quite docile.

Another characteristic of temps that capitalists like is their loneliness. Day laborers have the greatest risk of loneliness because they are frequently in a place for so short a time that they have no chance to make acquaintance with their coworkers, let alone friends.

Workers who have longer assignments have more opportunities to get to know the people they work with and to form relationships with these people. But when the assignments are terminated, the relationships are usually terminated as well.

Many temporary workers withdraw into themselves and quit making friends at work because they don't want to face the loss of friends at the end of the assignment. This withdrawal, of course, only reinforces their isolation. The lonely, withdrawn temporary worker doesn't form attachments with coworkers, doesn't contribute to worker solidarity, doesn't stir up trouble.

The final irony of the joke that capitalism plays on these workers is the fact that the temps typically don't get to enjoy the goods and services they help produce. They work in banks as part of the crew that keeps track of pension funds when they have no company-paid pensions and cannot afford to save for retirement themselves. They work in garment shops, helping to make or ship garments they don't have the money to buy. They help produce parts that go into new automobiles that cost as much as the temporary worker makes in two or three years. They work in hospitals, assisting physicians who

would not give them medical treatment regardless of need because they have neither health insurance nor money. The capitalists that use their labor pay them a little bit, sell the products for their true worth and pocket the difference as profits.

How Capitalists Benefit

Utilizing temporary workers is very good for the individual capitalist that uses their services. Temps are paid less per hour than permanent employees, and are frequently more productive. They are easy to acquire, easy to get rid of, easy to replace. Fluctuations in production can be covered with a minimum of expense and trouble. Labor relations are simply not an issue, as management can get away with doing just about anything to the temporary worker, short of actual physical assault. These workers can't strike, unions won't help them and the NLRB doesn't care about them.

Utilizing temporary workers is also good for the capitalist class as a whole. Temps help keep permanent employees "in their place" by serving as an example for other workers as to how bad life could be for them if they don't serve their masters well. Using temporary employees keeps labor costs down directly, because they don't have to be supported during periods of re-

duced production demands. They also keep labor costs down indirectly, because they accept low wages and give capitalists leverage in resisting pressures to pay higher wages for their permanent employees.

Fighting Back

Temporary workers know they are used, abused and exploited. But they usually feel that they can't do anything about the situation. This is not true. They can do things other than passively accepting anything the capitalist system dishes out to them. They can understand what is happening to them. They can talk with their coworkers about what is happening to all of them. They can communicate with like-minded people in the Socialist Labor Party, and get comfort and companionship from the association. They can join people who are trying to get rid of the whole system that is based on use and abuse of the entire working class. They can contribute to the building of a world based on dignity and cooperation instead of domination and exploitation.

If they will do these things, then temporary workers can then look forward to a world where their children and grandchildren will never have to know how it feels to go through all of this in order to earn a living.