

Those Whining Owners (12/22/97)

And the 1997 Award for World Class Whining goes to ... (drum roll please):
French Business People! Yeah (wild applause here)!

You might have gotten the impression (from whining American business people) that working people, especially single mothers, are lazy. However, even the greatest of America's so-called Welfare Queens can't hold a candle to the laziness, complaining, and just down right anti-social, unproductive behavior of the people who run French business.

It turns out the French government decided to end 1997 with a gift to the people of France – a shortened workweek. And then the whining started, and immediately reached a high shrill.

Its not bad enough that the people who own business have to sponge off the labor of others, when the going gets tough they just buckle down and complain. Wouldn't it be reasonable for the rest of us to expect a little bit of self-sacrifice and even hard work out of the people who amass the most wealth?

France, as you might already know, has a long-standing problem with unemployment, one of the highest rates in Europe. In spite of this, French workers and their unions have generally done a reasonable job of staking out their fair share – a 36-hour workweek, five weeks of vacation. All of this should fill American workers with envy, but that's what you get from a Communist led union movement – which may be a reality here again soon. So, the new Prime Minister, who is from the Socialist Party, decided that the way to cut unemployment is to shorten the workweek – to spread the work around.

The whining started when the French business establishment did a little math and discovered that they might have to share a small percentage of the profits with the people who actually do the work (gasp of surprise here). The whiners might end up raking in slightly less profit, at least in the short term (which is all they seem to care about anyway). The government, which is not quite as progressive as it seems, is offering a series of tax breaks allegedly to help with a reorganization of labor so that productivity can simultaneously be improved.

In the end, French business will get a stronger domestic market – because more workers will have money to buy things. French workers will get jobs; with the standard benefits they have won over the years. It is a win-win situation, except for the fact that in the short term profit rates may have to be sacrificed for long-term growth.

And herein lies the rub. The reason Marx said that capitalism would eventually fail is because the structures of the system seem to require a level of greed which prevents those afflicted from making long term investments in the economy. The French solution to unemployment is the only reasonable approach. But any approach to dealing with unemployment, there or here or anywhere, will have some impact on the profits made by the owners. And they really hate to share the wealth. At times sharing can even drive them to a murderous rage. Such are the laws of capitalism.

Sadly, for the French, the influences of a global market in which workers command the stunning sum of up to 13 whole cents per hour – as in Haiti – means that French manufacturing may decide that it is better to move their operations to the Third World. This should be familiar to anyone in America who works for a living. But the long-term cost of this strategy is a flat domestic consumer market. As the father of

American capitalism, Henry Ford, once remarked, if autoworkers are paid enough to afford cars then the company will be able to sell cars.

This is sage advice for anyone concerned about the long term. The fact of the matter is that business is concerned with the short term. Narrow mind, self centered, short-term greed has become standard operating procedure in Late Capitalism.

The real solution for the French, and for the rest of us, is for all of us – in every country – to adopt French labor standards: the new 32 hour work week, five weeks of vacation per year, raises for inflation, health care, and free education. If the whole world did this we would all be fine. But someone would have to pay, and the people like Bill Gates just can't be satisfied with houses that cost millions of dollars, they need the ones that cost tens of millions.

Economies can be structured to meet the needs of everyone, or they can be structured to satisfy the greed of the wealthy few. But economies cannot be structured to do both – you have to choose.

Workers or owners? Tiny minority or vast majority? Whose needs should the economy serve?