

WEST VIRGINIA REPORTS ON BOOK DISCUSSIONS

April 21, 1955

Dear Weaver:

Thought I would send you the report of last night's meeting, instead of through Rorty, since it was on the book, and there were some things that would have really warmed the cockles of your heart.

First of all, it was a meeting in the Run, at the home of the Negro couple who have been coming around more and more (they were very close last year, right after the split and then drifted away for some time). They have a blind son who has become quite interested, and attended even when they didn't. They had gotten in a store-house of eats and drinks, to have refreshments afterwards, which they thought they might make some money on for the paper for us, if the crowd was large enough. It wasn't -- there were only seven of us. And though they were disappointed that more didn't come, we weren't. It really meant a great deal, I think, that they had it, and had gone to such trouble to plan everything.

Andy had prepared a presentation on the last chapter. Only one other miner, Leo (a white miner you may have met before) came. But as soon as Andy started, he interrupted with his ideas--and from then on, Andy's "planned presentation" was considerably altered. It proceeded as a back and forth discussion, but as Andy said, he got in every point he had been going to make, since everything came up naturally:

(At point where Andy raised the question what kind of labor)
Leo: If a boss is on your neck all the time, he's going to be on your nerves. You've got to watch the machine. But as far as operating the machine, a man can work that system out himself. And when a man gets into certain circumstances, he can't stand no more. He can fix it so it will go, or quit. So the company isn't gaining a thing by doing that. They still do it, but it's a man's principle that counts. If you let them do it... You take my job or your job in the mines. If you let them breathe down your neck, something is going to happen -- something will go wrong. But if you don't pay them any mind, like my boss who says I want this done, or that done -- I'll do what I can and that's all you can take it or leave. He'll go away and leave you alone. If you see fit that you should do something, you go ahead and do it. If you don't lay down on it. That's the way I look at it.

(At the point where Andy said "You have to look at what the workers are doing, and from there you get the ideas of where the society is going, Leo interrupted:)

But it's also the man himself that causes all this. Some men in there just break their necks. There's a fear of their jobs, for one thing. And their own conscience bothers them. If a man used his brains, he'd do what he could, and if they weren't satisfied, he'd smash it down. But there are so many who will do what

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management says, even if they kill themselves. If we could only get them the knowledge and the fighting spirit

Both Leo and Pete were insistent with the idea that the men are killing themselves with automation and doing what the company wants. And that you have to teach them it's wrong. But though it was the "old union man's" concept that the young ones don't know the score, yet what they kept hammering at over and over was HOW. How to get the men to stand together and stop it. How to get the paper over, How to get others reading, How to get others to meetings, etc., etc.

One other thing impressed me, that everyone (including the son who seldom speaks, but thinks plenty) spoke--and with feeling. Toward the end, Betty asked: "I've not read up on history. Who was this guy Marx?" Andy answered, and then I asked to read some passages from Marx (which they had discussed in the course of the discussion and which sounded like Marx himself, though in different words, of course.) I read from the chapter on Machines. Everyone was listening and nodding at certain parts--I wish you could have been there to see it. And then the tape became a muddle--everyone began to talk at once--so "today-ish" those quotations were! Pete's remarks especially you would have loved:

PETE: I've listened to you discussing that book and that fellow Marx. I can't word it like him, but I know exactly the meaning of it. You go into any industry and work 8 hours for so-called pay. But in the 8 hours that man makes enough off you to cut your throat. He's just drilling your life away, generation by generation. When that generation dies out, he's got a young one coming in. We poor working people are keeping them, such as, Montgomery Ward, Consolidated Coal Co., or any big concern. They aren't going to get broke, because we're going to make enough profits for them to keep grinding us down, generation after generation. It don't matter how smart you are. You may think you're smart, but you're nothing. That book absolutely tells you all that. And we can't make them enuf money fast enough. It's "Hurry up, let's get this here, loading machine's coming. Or here comes that boss and all that kind of stuff. Seniority doesn't mean a thing. They have no classification, it's something new. They gave six free dinners over at the Hotel. I told them, you think they gave you a free dinner--they ought to have kicked your bucket.

Novella: I haven't had any experience in life at all, and I've never worked. But from what I hear and observe, the thing I think people have to learn is that when they think if they do everything for the boss, or whoever's in charge, they think the boss will do them a favor. If they ever learn that the boss isn't going to do anything for them, then they can break out of their fear. They think they're going to get something extra--so they go back and tell

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on others -- but when they get sick or something those bosses aren't going to do a thing.

Pete: You know, I laid there this morning about a quarter after six. I looked out the window, and the snow was falling. I said to myself, "You just got to get up there and go, whether you feel like it or not." I just said it to myself. I didn't even speak it to my wife. I just said to myself: "Now you call that a free man? You got to go. You either got to go or tell the reason why. Or tell a lie or something, ain't you? And if you don't go, that man's going to mark it down on your slip. He's going to tell you, "We're depending on you." It's as good as telling me, if you don't be there, I'll get somebody in your place. He don't care how I feel.

Leo: If we could show some of these people the way life should be lived, then you've got a great thing. But that's going to be a hard job. You read that book, maybe thousands of others won't. I'm not talking again it. The thing is how to get it into their heads that that that man shouldn't control them; they should control him. How and where and when do you show that?

Afterwards we had our "party", and discussed the convention. They were all being very concrete about their plans and sound very much as if they will all come. Then Pete mentioned that he was disappointed, because he thought we would be able to make some money. And pulled out a buck and turned it over to me for the paper, for the evening. Pete and Batty each got up and got a buck, too. And Leo pulled out a buck as well. Dick made a public announcement that he was waiting for his check, and would have some money for the paper as soon as it came.

All in all, it was a fine evening, so far as Andy and I felt. But the best was still to come. (Then came the announcement that Dick and Joy joined. At the same time Hunt had also included a description of their first meeting on the book where she had made the presentation, I were present, including Bill from Fairmount. It was held formally at The Shack.)

One incident in particular I must pass on to you. On Friday when I was summarizing the purpose of our discussions I wanted to make two points: one, that on the basis of the discussion and "criticism" of the draft, sections might be revised, but, two, it was not a matter of revising the ideas, rather it was a matter of study of the book as a total philosophy and presentation of our body of ideas. The only thing was that I never got to explain the importance of the ideas as representing "us" -- before I interrupted me at the word, "criticize". He the miner broke right in -- in loud protest. He said, "What do you mean criticize? That means you don't agree, doesn't it? It seems to me that we shouldn't come to criticize the book. We have to read it to see what's in it and come to understand it, not to criticize it!" He was so absolutely right that I really had to stop for breath."

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Andy: Introduces topic, with idea of surplus-value. Continuous miner. Guy on suction said if it ran all the time, no man could take it. Man-killer. What automation means, taking more and more out of a person as a human being, and giving him less and less. Become part of a machine, instead of a thinking person. Drive for engineers - world over. Conflict. Idea that you have to be for Russia or America. Not true, it's a question of the ordinary working people. Question that's being asked is What kind of labor.

Leo: If a boss is on your neck all the time, he's going to be on your nerves. You've got to watch the machine. But as far as operating the machine, a man can work that system out himself. And when a man gets into certain circumstances he can't stand no more. He can fix it so it will go, or quit. So the company isn't gaining a thing by doing that. They still do it, but it's a man's principle that counts. If you let them do it. You take my job or your job in the mines. If you let them breathe down your neck, something's going to happen - something will go wrong. But if you don't pay them any mind, like my boss who says I want this done, or that done - I'll do what I can and that's all, you can take it or leave. He'll go away and leave you alone. If you see fit that you should do something, you go ahead and do it. If you don't, lay down on it. That's the way I look at it.

Andy: That's the whole point. Out of all this, from theory to practice, and from practice to get the ideas..... civilization has reached a point where you have to look at what the workers are doing, and from there you get the ideas of where the society is going.

Leo: But it's also the man himself that causes all this. Some men in there just break their necks. There's a fear of their jobs, for one thing. And their own conscious bothers them. If a man used his brains, he'd do what he could, and if they weren't satisfied, he'd smash it down.

Andy: In the 49 50 strike, no one could say what was going to happen until the men took it into their own hands. But when the men started to move, they moved fast. The same thing with the CIO

Leo: But there are so many who will do what management says, even if they kill themselves. If we could only get them the knowledge and the fighting spirit. I think the trouble with labor today, is that we're just too jealous of one another...

Andy: The last contract was negotiated on the basis of 10 tons per man. That's over the whole nation. In other words, if an operator can get 10 tons per man per shift, he could make what he wanted. On the continuous miner you have 6 men. One day they set the national record over here, 86 cars, and those cars will hold about 14 tons. The company says they hold 10-

let's estimate it for illustration at 12. That's ~~XXX~~ 1032 tons for 6 men. Or 172 tons per man. That's more than 17 times what the national average was based on. For that each man got \$21., for the company each man made \$638. We say we get coal at least for \$4.90, it was produced at a cost of 25 cents per ton. You can imagine how with automation, the men were speeded up to get that. And in the process you destroy him.

Pete: Last average was 66 ~~XXXXXX~~ cars per shift.

Leo: And how many men were laid off for that? Used to have 17, 18, 19 men. Now cut down to put 12 or 13 men out of work.

Pete: And it will keep on and on. They just don't have any where for you. The company don't want you.

Andy: The company says it will all work out all right.....

Betty: It will work out all right. Men will be dropping dead.

Pete: Seniority doesn't mean a thing. They have no classification; it's something new.

Leo: That's why men are killing themselves. That's the fear that they have in them. They don't care about themselves or their fellow-men.

Pete: They gave six free dinners over at the Hotel. I told them, you think they gave you a free dinner - they ought to have packed your bucket.

Some more back and forth. Andy: They do a lot of things they don't want to do. Everyday they go in there they don't want to, they have to in order to live. That's what people are questioning: Is this all that life is?

Leo: The main thing is how to figure out how to stop it.

Pete: You know, I laid there this morning about quarter after six. I looked out the window, and the snow was falling. I said to myself, You just got to get up there and go, whether you feel like it or not. I just said it to myself. I didn't even speak it to my wife. I just said to myself, Now you call that a free man. Now you got to go. You either got to go or tell the reason why. Or tell a lie or something, ain't you? And if you don't go, that man's going to mark it down on your slip. He's going to tell you, "We are depending on you." It's as good as telling me, If you don't be there, I'll get somebody in your place. He don't care how I feel. You call that free?

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Andy: Circumstances are making men face themselves with sober senses..... workers repeat many of the phrases of the ruling class.....

Led: Just like years ago when we were fighting for the union. Just like I tell a lot of these young boys. You have to get some fear into them to hold back on this machinery.

Led: On these Colmols, they have to wear this gas apparatus, over their nose and mouth, for the dust. How long is it going to last?

Betty: They ought to have the District go in and inhale some of that dust.

Led: Same as the Negro. ...When you prove your point ... same with the colmol. You've got to show your backbone. But HOW?

Life is what you make it. You can make it a wonderful thing.

I don't care how much you write or how much we print, sometimes you have to take a ballbat and beat it into their brains.

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