

WHITE COLLAR BLUES

By RICHARD LEWIS

WHILE the bright showers of confetti, torn newspaper and ticker tape were flooding America's streets in celebration of victory over Japan, millions of pay envelopes were being stuffed with little slips of pink paper reading, "Effective blank date your services are no longer required."

Reconversion cutbacks were on. Within a few days layoffs were being tabulated in the millions. The impact was severe enough not only to send millions of war workers home without work but also to result in layoffs, somewhat less severe, of workers in civilian industries. Uncertainty and fear arose in the minds of workers whose jobs were not immediately threatened. What would happen to their pay with millions of unemployed on the labor market?

In the general uncertainty and fear the white collar workers fully share. If anything, they are a little more jittery, as security and status were major factors in their choice of white collar jobs in the first place. Financially they are ill-prepared to meet any extended unemployment, since they were able to save little, if anything, out of their inadequate wartime earnings. And the older white collar people recall their prolonged unemployment and the drastic cuts of the post-1929 depression.

Obviously, the white collar and professional workers cannot expect big business, even its more "progressive" sections, to fight for full employment and higher living standards. They must look to themselves and to the labor movement, which has consistently fought for a program of providing jobs and higher living standards for all Americans. The services and professions, in which the bulk of the salaried employes work, are dependent on the general level of the national economy for their activity. They tend to contract more sharply than basic or consumer industries in periods of depression. You can cut out your doctor or dentist and you certainly don't make bank deposits when you're out of work, but you still have to buy food and clothing, even if the amount and quality are lower.

Conversely, the greatest opportunities for the services and professions are created in an economy of full employment and abundance. The war provided unparalleled opportunities to America's scientists, professionals and technical workers for creative work and funda-

mental research. The war years brought a host of new discoveries and inventions, the most sensational of which was the splitting of the atom. Joblessness and declining production would mean that these talents of the nation's professionals would be largely unused.

The white collar workers in industrial plants are experiencing the same severe layoffs as the production workers. At the Pressed Steel Car Co. Chicago plant, cutbacks in tank production brought a uniform sixty percent cut in the plant and the office. A few white collar departments are sometimes spared. In the Buffalo office of Curtiss Wright, the plants and offices were completely shut down, but clerks needed to take inventory and technicians needed for work on peacetime products were kept. Other salaried employes, particularly those working on production records, received layoff slips. As a payroll clerk in a communications equipment plant put it: "On Monday I make up payrolls for the plant workers who get laid off and on Tuesday I make up my own final pay envelope."

The white collar workers in federal employment also face drastic cuts, with projected reduction in government payrolls from 3,000,000 to less than 1,000,000.

The bulk of America's clerical and professional workers are employed in the service fields—insurance, banking, publishing, recreation, health and welfare agencies, business and professional services—industries which were faced with labor or material shortages during the war and could expand considerably during the peace. However, unless the mounting unemployment and falling purchasing power are quickly halted, these industries will contract instead of expand.

The reports now coming in on the effects of the earlier V-E Day cutbacks verify this prediction. Retail and amusement industries employing large numbers of white collar employes are already reacting to the drop in employment. Sales fell off sharply in Detroit and Michigan cities following the recent cutbacks. The *Film Daily* of June 11 reports that "business (movie attendance) was off approximately twenty-five percent in St. Louis . . . because of curtailment and suspension of war materials manufacturing."

"Sales of insurance in the Buffalo,

N. Y. area," according to the *National Underwriter* of June 15, 1945, "appear to have sagged in the latter part of May because of war industries cutbacks." The insurance business, which is a sensitive reflector of the rise and fall of wage and salary income, cannot escape widespread lapses and surrenders if unemployment and wage depressions continue. At the bottom of the 1932 depression, lapses totaled \$28,000,000 as against only \$8,000,000 in 1943 and surrender totals were \$14,000,000 in contrast to \$4,000,000 for the same years.

Contraction of the so-called white-collar industries will likely mean unemployment on an even larger scale than will be experienced by industrial workers. Among the returning war veterans will be some 2,000,000 white collar workers. In addition, many thousands of white collar workers who went into production jobs during the war want to go back to their old jobs.

In a recent survey by the New York State Labor Department, which showed that eighty-two percent of all women now working want to continue after the war, sixteen percent said they wanted to change jobs. Most of them wanted and were trained for office work, professional or semi-professional jobs.

Two groups to whom the war provided new job opportunities in clerical and professional fields—women and Negroes—are being severely hit by lay-



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offs and downgrading. The retention and expansion of the newly won job rights of these two groups, and particularly of the Negro workers, are key issues in the fight for broader job opportunities for all white collar workers. During the war women got their first chance to work as bank tellers, insurance agents, engineering aides and in many other "restricted" occupations. In addition, many jobs in which women could break through only occasionally were opened wide to them during the war labor shortages. Secretaries who for years did all the work for editors managed to get promotions to editorial jobs. Women scientists and technicians who had virtually no opportunities to practice outside of college laboratories were welcomed in industrial plants. A sharp increase in unemployment means a reversal of these opportunities. Women are already being downgraded. They will be displaced, not by the men returning from the war or from other jobs, but by the contracting job opportunities.

The barriers against Negro workers in white collar jobs—and to a somewhat lesser extent against Jews and other minority groups—were notorious before the war. Although the Negro people make up ten percent of America's population, they held less than one percent of its clerical and professional jobs and most of these in Negro owned firms or in Negro communities. During the war many Negro workers were hired and trained for white collar jobs in government service and were able to get some clerical and professional jobs in private industry. There are no available figures on the amount of expansion, but one good index is the growth of the CIO United Office and Professional Workers' Negro membership, which increased over 500 percent during the war years while the union's total membership rose a little over 200 percent. These Negro white collar workers, like those in production jobs, are down at the bottom of seniority lists and will be among the first to be laid off.

The white collar unions must put up a determined fight against job discrimination on racial, religious or sex lines. A permanent FEPC will be of great help, but these rights must be fought for on the office level, too.

The earnings of white collar workers have begun to drop. Salaries and wages have been in a steady decline since V-E Day through elimination of overtime pay, downgrading, halting of merit and progression increases and similar methods. And NWLB policies in recent years have encouraged this wage-cutting. During the war, white collar



Pen sketches by Edith Miller.

salary structures had overcome the severe cuts of the depression years, although salary increases are still insufficient to meet rising living costs; moreover, the rise in white collar earnings was less than that of any other section of the population.

Even with most white collar workers securing some increases in their salaries during the war, at least 2,000,000 white collar workers earned less than \$26 per week. Now salary rates are in danger of being again reduced to even less than 1929 levels.

As part of labor's fight to insure greater purchasing power to American workers, the white collar workers must fight not only to retain but to increase the salaries they got during the war.

TO SOLVE the problems of the white collar workers the general program of the CIO for reconversion will have to be realized: the raising of wages, the passage of the Murray full employment bill, the establishment of the Pepper sixty-five-cent minimum wage, etc. About 2,000,000 white collar workers at present earn below sixty-five cents an hour. The organized white collar workers must solve their problems by relying more upon themselves, but they must also join in labor's general battle for jobs and higher pay to strengthen the fight for their own security and the improvement of their living standards. The inclusion of employes of non-profit enterprises in social legislation is a special concern for office and professional workers, many of whom are in that category.

Meeting the needs of white collar workers also requires special measures to cope with their peculiar situation. If the white collar worker is to buy his share of the things this country will have to produce to achieve 60,000,000 jobs, more drastic measures than moderate wage increases are imperative to raise their purchasing power. Consequently the collective bargaining program for which the UOPWA will work includes: (1) General wage increases to the total of a fifty percent rise over the figures of 1941; (2) A shortened work week; (3) Minimum salaries of thirty dollars a week for a thirty-five-hour week; (4) Fair classifications of the jobs performed by white collar workers, with proper systems of promotion, automatic and merit increases; (5) Better job protection and adequate severance pay; (6) The inclusion in contracts of such benefits as insurance and increased vacations with pay.

Special problems arise out of the reconversion crisis descending on us with such speed which involve the very jobs of the workers in these fields. Insurance agents, for example, may face a sharp rise in lapses in insurance which will double the pressure on the individual agent at the very moment he will be working under the most adverse conditions. Insurance agents have a particular stake in the success of the progressive program to minimize the general crisis of cutbacks and layoffs and need to insure themselves from managerial pressure. Social service workers likewise face an unprecedented increase in case loads from the negligible planning for the current emergency and must also put up a special fight to win proper compensation for their work and reasonable working conditions. Moreover, thousands of trained social workers have left the field for better pay elsewhere; wage increases become imperative to insure an adequate number of workers as well as to provide decent pay for those who have remained on their jobs.

To accomplish these things is a matter not only of setting up the requisite organizational apparatus within the white collar unions. The growth of the white collar unions becomes an imperative for this period. Professional organizations and associations also need to be drawn closer to the trade union movement to solve their common problems. Through those powerful instruments of organized labor—collective bargaining and political action—the white collar workers can wage an effective battle for jobs and higher living standards for themselves and all Americans.

SHORE LEAVE IN ODESSA

By JACK LASKER

VICTORY and Liberty ships were unloading when we pulled into Odessa harbor a week after V-E Day with a lend-lease cargo of industrial equipment and food. The stevedores, mostly Bessarabians, came aboard and began to work the cargo—some were women, some Red Army veterans. The port had been totally destroyed, but it was now working hard. On the docks I saw crates of American goods piled high. The stevedores were slow discharging the cargo and had put a few cranes out of commission by unskilled handling—a matter of which some of the men on my ship were critical—but the experienced stevedores had been absorbed by the Red Army, and the port was now being operated by an inexperienced work gang.

The next day I went ashore for the first time. I felt good all over as my feet touched Soviet soil. I headed for the gate and saw American-made trucks carrying cargo from my ship. Hardy American jeeps sped by. On the white walls of the port buildings—some of which were in ruins—I saw slogans: "GLORY TO COMRADE STALIN," "LONG LIVE THE MIGHTY SOVIET UNION THAT SAVED CIVILIZATION IN EUROPE AND WON THE VICTORY OVER THE FASCIST INVADER," and others.

Outside the customs house which adjoins the sentry gate stood a brightly colored bulletin board which listed the names and records of the best stevedores. "LONG LIVE THE HEROES OF SOCIALIST LABOR WHO FIGHT THE BATTLE OF PRODUCTION," said one slogan. Nearby a group of laborers were intently poring over the columns of *Pravda* and *Bolshevik Banner* posted on bulletin boards.

At the gate I presented my seaman's papers. The friendly guard said "Okey dokey." Outside I walked up the cobblestoned streets and two flights of stone stairs and I was in Odessa itself.

Gutted and bullet-ridden buildings testified to Odessa's ordeal. Neat piles of limestone blocks, of which Odessa's buildings are constructed, were on the sidewalk adjoining wrecked buildings. Rumanian and German prisoners were clearing away crumbled masonry. The Pushkin Museum, where Russia's great poet worked, was in ruins. However, the opera house, one of the Soviet Union's most beautiful buildings, had

been de-mined and saved by the Red Army. On Pastyera Street I noticed a ruined limestone building whose fire-escape had remained unscathed amid the general destruction. Atop the first-story facade a sculptured stone head looked out upon the street, its features contorted in agony. It was as though the sculptor, foreseeing Odessa's trial by fire, had chiseled it into these cold features.

Odessa had escaped the total destruction of a Sevastopol or Novorossisk. As I walked along its wide streets lined with fragrant acacia and chestnut trees I sometimes forgot that war had not long ago engulfed this beautiful city on the Black Sea. Rooks cawed in the tree tops. Blue swallows whirled along the sidewalks, then darted away. Loudspeakers high on corner lamp poles and in the parks poured forth Viennese waltzes, operatic arias and symphonic music from the local radio station, now rebuilt: walking to music was a buoyant thing.

Soldiers and militiamen of both sexes—some bearing tommyguns and rifles—walked the city's streets. These husky, serious, often crippled warriors had stood against and turned back the Nazi tide. Many wore medals for the defense of Odessa, Stalingrad and Sevastopol. Some wore the Order of the Red Star.

I stepped into a government-operated food shop. Customers were buying, among other things, American foodstuffs. On the shelves I saw Swift's "Prem," Kraft's cheese in large cans, Oscar Mayer's "Pork and Sausage" and Armour's "Treat"; also dehydrated eggs in various colored boxes. There were fresh eggs too. Price lists were conspicuously posted.

I was curious to know how the people had lived during the occupation. I went to the International Club (VOKS) the following day and met the manager, Gregory Medvinsky, a veteran of Stalingrad and other battles who had been wounded many times. He gladly answered my questions in good English. The Rumanians, he said, had liquidated all Soviet institutions when they took over in October 1941. They instituted a reign of terror against Jews, Communists and Partisans. During the two-and-a-half-year occupation they slaughtered more than 250,000 persons in the Odessa area.

Rumanian businessmen had imported many commodities, including such luxury goods as silk stockings, from Rumania and told the people, "You can become capitalists. We have nothing against it." Speculation, bribery and corruption were rife. By these means the Rumanians tried to develop a corps of supporters among the population and had had some success. A few collaborators lived well, but the general standard of living was very low.

WHEN the Red Army liberated Odessa in April 1944, the government allowed privately owned shops to remain open to help provide for the people's needs. However, the government opened up stores in competition. Mr. Medvinsky remarked that the high prices I found in a government-operated jewelry shop acted as an inflation safety valve where people could spend hoarded rubles. Prices of necessities under the rationing system were low.

Russians hoped for a large harvest this fall, he continued, which would provide a greater abundance of commodities in the government stores at lowered prices and would put privately owned food and other shops out of business.

I remarked that this sounded like the NEP (New Economic Policy) period of the twenties. It was, he said, but the big difference was that now—unlike then—there was a collective farm base to turn to.

I asked about the complaints of some Americans that militiamen had stopped them and asked their female companions for their identification cards, and sometimes took the girl away. Medvinsky explained that during the occupation prostitution had been revived and the Soviet authorities were making sure that its last vestiges were being eliminated. It should not be thought, he continued, that the municipal authorities object to Soviet girls speaking to and enjoying the company of Americans.

In fact the International Club held dances Saturday nights for foreign merchant ship officers and Tuesday nights for crew members. The hostesses were English-speaking university students. They knew the names of many states and often could mimic the accents found there. A few knew more American songs than the Americans them

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