

SOCIAL CLASS

FED UP: SECRETARIES IN ACADEMIA

We are secretaries in one of the hippest departments of that radical and hip school, the University of California at Berkeley. To many students and some other secretaries our office looks like a "liberated area." There is no front counter barricading off the work area. Students, dogs and faculty wander in and out. The secretaries seem to control what is going on and do not seem easily intimidated. They wear pants and have posters above their desks. A conservative faculty member once complained that the office looked more like the office of an underground newspaper than a University office. But the liberated image does not change the nature of our work -- boring, painful, degrading.

The women in our office have consciously tried to achieve worker's control, and we've tried to wage that struggle collectively. After each small gain from collective action or resistance, the basic structure of the situation always closed suffocatingly around us. We found out that behind the easy friendliness between faculty and secretaries existed a master-servant relationship, we found out there was no way to institutionalize change within a structure where we had no decisionmaking power, we found within ourselves an anger that we'd anesthetized ourselves to in other "more oppressive" offices.

We have found that liberal reforms are not enough. As we have slowly and painfully learned that we can never be "happy" in a situation in which we have no power, many of the pretenses in our relationship with the faculty have fallen away. Since those pretenses, always buttressed by submissive gestures on the part of the secretary, are central to the pleasure of maintaining a clerical corps, much of the game has been called. The danger of any myth of equality is that the lower orders will take it seriously and will reach a conclusion that they do indeed deserve equality and that they are in fact made and kept subservient.

As in most jobs available to women in this society, the role of a secretary is the role of a servant. When she works in the University, she is provided as a service to the faculty or administration. Along with square feet of office space and number of bookcases, amount of secretarial servant-time is a status symbol for the professor or administrator.

Secretarial work can be divided roughly into two categories: tasks that save time for the master and tasks that bolster the prestige of the master and maintain status boundaries between master and servant. Being paid very little to perform alienating tasks that save someone else's very well paid (and more enjoyably spent) time is bad enough. Worse yet, much of our work falls into the second category: boundary maintenance rituals. A few examples: pushing the buttons on a self-service Xerox machine while the faculty member stands by waiting for his copy to be handed to him; having a faculty member return a letter which you have typed and he has signed so that you can fold and put it in its envelope for him while he stands in front of your desk; being bugged on the intercom by an administrator who gives you a phone number which you are to dial while he waits at his desk. You dial the number, state the formula: "One moment, Mr. Administrator would like to speak to you," place the call on hold, buzz the administrator on the intercom and tell him that his call is ready. (Some administrators are not even able to pick up the receiver by themselves and the complete secretary is expected to hand him the receiver after dialing the number.)

Secretaries have often been particularly conned as workers by the pretense that they are not servants, by being called white collar workers, by being forced to dress as if they spent their day in leisure and

by having been socialized to identify themselves primarily by some other role (e.g., wife, pre-wife, student, or student-wife). Secretaries, socialized as women to please men and to internalize the goals and desires of men, are particularly vulnerable to identifying with the policies and aims of the men they work for more than with their own interests and needs. This absence of class consciousness, absence of women's consciousness and the illusory sense of privilege vis a vis other workers has contributed in the past to the lack of unionization and struggle on the part of secretaries. When rising women's consciousness and rising workers' consciousness cause this line of internalized control to break down, when the masters' orders are no longer automatically accepted as rational and reasonable requests and when the masters perceive that they are not admired and loved as they previously believed, all hell breaks loose. When supervising secretaries no longer can or no longer want to maintain perfect order, the man himself appears. As internal and external controls break down, the difference between the tyrannical master and liberal master begins to break down. The tyrant, faced with rebellious servants, perceives an adversary situation in which he must coerce, or in the case of extreme collective pressure, negotiate back to a situation more comfortable for him. The liberal perceives the same situation but first tries for manipulation or cooptation.

In our office we deal mainly with liberals. In the minds of our faculty and administration we are ingrates, malcontent extremists, who do not realize how permissive they have been with us and how lucky we are. That means for example that instead of the protracted and degrading battle for the "privilege" of wearing pants that women in many campus offices have had to wage, we were "permitted" to wear pants with very little opposition. It means that we (who are confined to one place for the same 8 hours every day) are permitted (by people who have an extraordinarily flexible work schedule) to use vacation time or compensatory time (instead of being docked or fired) if we are late. It means that as a result of continuous collective struggle we still have behind our desks some posters which reflect a political viewpoint not entirely pleasing to some of our faculty, and as yet we have not been fired for this impertinence. It means that we are tolerated if we should digress from business conversations into more personal exchanges either with each other or with students. It means that if the work load is slow, we are permitted to read the newspaper at our desks. If the work load is very heavy as it is for the first 3 or 4 weeks of each quarter and we work without coffee breaks and halfway through lunch, as well as evenings and weekends and find ourselves running from typewriter to mimeo machine to telephone to pre-enrollment room, we are rewarded for those exhausting, nerve-wracking unbroken days with an approving pat on the head and a new standard of work output against which our work behavior during the rest of the quarter is measured and found wanting.

We have struggled for each of these small "privileges" that make working in our office a slight improvement over being clamped to a headset in a vast, windowless cavern of Bank of America's main dictaphone pool. The victories represented by these "privileges" are small in comparison to the amount of time, effort, emotional energy and risk that they cost. Yet we are blandly told "we have been very permissive," and the statement is galling but true. When our self-respect is so threatened that we risk our jobs to push back by a fraction of an inch the limits of what they can demand of us, we do not win recognition of rights. Rather, we win an expanded permissiveness which can be retracted at any moment.

Recently, a temporary administrator attempted to make up for the

over-permissiveness of the permanent administrator by whipping us into shape (toilet training as it were) as his present for the rest of the faculty. We discovered we had no institutionalized recourse against his whims, no reference to precedent. We had to fight him, incident by incident, from scratch as if we had never struggled before. Precisely because we did not have the power to institutionalize any of the gains we thought we had made, we could only exercise the power of collective resistance. Like children, we could only dig our heels in and say "no". And indeed by their grudging permissiveness, they seem to regard us as children. The children must be given work piecemeal, they must be supervised closely and in most offices they must even be told what to wear. But if the children prove intractable about some particular thing, if the children refuse, for instance, to remove their ratty little posters and threaten to cause a scene, maybe it's better to let the subject drop for a while until they've become attached to another teddy bear. The idea that secretaries should consider the principle of free speech as applying to them is both offensive and laughable. It is offensive to allow the posters to remain. It is laughable that "the girls" should be so attached to them.

But they will punish us for their few lapses in child-control by finding new orders to dispense, new humiliations to inflict. If, for instance, the permissive and liberal administrator should walk into the office one sunny morning and find that his staff has decided to work by the light which streams through the windows rather than the harsh glare of fluorescent lights, he may stomp across the room stating firmly: "I want the lights on" and snap on the lights. He then retires to his own private office which he keeps pleasantly lit by sunlight most of the time. Not realizing the seriousness of the situation, the secretaries switch the light off again. A few minutes later, the permissive administrator bolts from his private office, strides angrily to the light switch, evincing all the danger signals of a parent whose children have "gone too far" and states loudly, "This does not look like a business office. I intend that this light stay on. There will be no discussion. It stays on."

In such confrontations, the administrator merely looks foolish. A secretary on the other hand, must risk the sudden termination of her means of livelihood each time she decides to resist or refuse any one of the numerous humiliations which occur each day. Not only is there risk involved, but if a secretary allows herself to notice even half the insults she endures, she will be suffering from extreme adrenal exhaustion by noon. Raised consciousness brings raw nerve endings and as we have allowed ourselves to notice and react to more and more incidents, we find ourselves almost continually in an exhausting state of rage. And that rage is often impossible to act out. For example we spoke of the risk of being fired. This risk is lessened when an individual firing means a collective resignation (we all quit), but the knowledge that one participates collectively also means that the individual becomes more hesitant to move on some issue which might be perceived as particularly galling to her but not as much so to the rest of the staff. Or: it is as degrading to fight some humiliations as it is to endure them. Imagine a glorious denouement over lights, over folding an envelope, over dialing a number. Imagine not fighting. Choke on your rage and the "pettiness" of the issue.

What makes it particularly difficult to handle all this anger is that we are always in public. Ironically, the very conditions that make our work situation more human--a loose, casual, open office--means that we work with complete lack of privacy. The only time we can meet together

with any semblance of privacy is at noon when we can use the meeting room. And even then, as often as not, we are interrupted by a faculty member strolling casually through our meeting. He would never walk through a meeting of faculty, a seminar, or a meeting of students, but he considers our meeting unworthy of the same courtesy or he simply fails to perceive us as a meeting (just a group of "the girls" eating lunch together). And if we can't meet in private, we can hardly work out a common strategy.

Another problem that our constant public exposure poses is that we are very noticeable when we aren't at our desks, and the faculty want their servants visible at all times. If our work should take us anywhere out of the main office (to the mimeo machine for example), we are assumed to be on some endless break.

Secretaries are not allowed simply to sit and think, or sit and talk together to figure out some (work) problem or procedure. They are allowed to write memos, answer correspondence, compose informational handouts, arrange new filing systems, be the repository of countless pieces of crucial information without which the office could not maintain itself, but they are not allowed to think about any of those things. If a secretary should find herself mentally composing a letter without having first placed her fingers firmly on the typewriter keys and adopted an expression of intense readiness to type, she will also find that she is being watched disapprovingly by some faculty member who has been observing his servant-children for signs of idleness. If a secretary should decide to do all the work on her desk at breakneck speed so that she can spend a leisurely half-hour reading the newspaper, she will be glared at disapprovingly and often asked if she "has nothing to do". A secretary is not evaluated by the amount or quality of the work she does so much as by her ability to look respectful, bland, and moderately busy at all times.

At this point, our mood is schizophrenic. We feel both strong and powerless. Individually and as a group we have grown surly, mean, raucous, and uppity. We also feel hopelessly crazy most of the time. Realization that the craziness is socially induced does not make us feel any more sane. Realization that we can change only bits and pieces of the insane conditions in which we are forced to earn our living makes us more surly, mean, raucous, and uppity. If we sometimes feel that the difficulties of working collectively are not worth the gains we make, we also sometimes feel that the process of organizing ourselves, of dealing with the problems of collective action, is the only non-alienating work that we do. By our own actions toward ripping away the super-structure, we have been put up against the wall of the basic contradictions of our jobs, and we sometimes wish we were back in a steno pool living from coffee break to coffee break, putting the job out of our minds at 5 p.m. But we also know that along with third world and women students in our department, we have put the faculty up against the wall of the contradictions of their own liberalism.

We have not been generous in this article toward our faculty and administrators and they would no doubt say we exaggerate, distort -- that we are even biased. Damn straight we are biased. We have been understanding their problems, the conflicts of their roles for years. For years we have sympathized with the pressures they face. We have always been biased. We have simply become biased on our own behalf.

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