

Working-Class Hierarchies in a Steel Factory (c. 1880)

Abstract

While the growth of a working-class consciousness resulted in common demands vis-à-vis the propertied classes, solidarity among workers did not always extend to everyday life. This account of worker interactions at a steel factory (c. 1880) shows that skilled workers felt superior to unskilled or day laborers. In the following excerpt, a master fitter uses this distinction to get his men paid ahead of a group of molders.

Source

As molders and day laborers, we were the most despised workers in the factory; and the fitters and others who felt superior mockingly called us “pot bakers” and referred to the brickworks as the “pot bakery,” but that was about all they knew about it. And when payday came along, wages were distributed in the porter’s shack, which everyone had to pass. This always happened after the end of the workday. As a rule, at six o’clock sharp the cashier already had the money ready in the little room of the shack, and any master arriving with his people would step up to the door and report to the cashier. After that, the payout proceeded quickly, because the money for each worker was already counted out and wrapped in the pay slip, and each little packet was marked in big letters with the name of the respective recipient. So then, the cashier would step to the door where the master stood, grab a bunch of packets from the appropriate box, and call out the name on the first packet. As soon as that person called “here,” the cashier gave the packet to the master, who handed it over to the recipient, but if no one called “here,” the cashier put the packet back into the box. It once happened that we arrived for payment at just the right time, for one master and his people had just been processed. So we all entered the porter’s shack and our master stepped up to the door and reported; the cashier got the money box ready and the bookkeeper sitting behind the table pulled out our list. But before the cashier had started the payout, the chief master of the mechanical workshop appeared with his people, forced his way to the door, and pushed our master aside. When the latter resisted a bit, he asked him proudly: “Does the brickworks take precedence over the mechanical workshop?” And that was enough for our master to step aside, and we had to leave the shack again so that the fitters could enter.

Source: Karl Fischer, *Denkwürdigkeiten und Erinnerungen eines Arbeiters*, edited and introduced by Paul Göhre. Leipzig, 1903, pp. 312–13; reprinted in Gerhard A. Ritter and Jürgen Kocka, eds., *Deutsche Sozialgeschichte 1870–1914. Dokumente und Skizzen*, 3rd ed. Munich: C. H. Beck, 1982, pp. 161–62.

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