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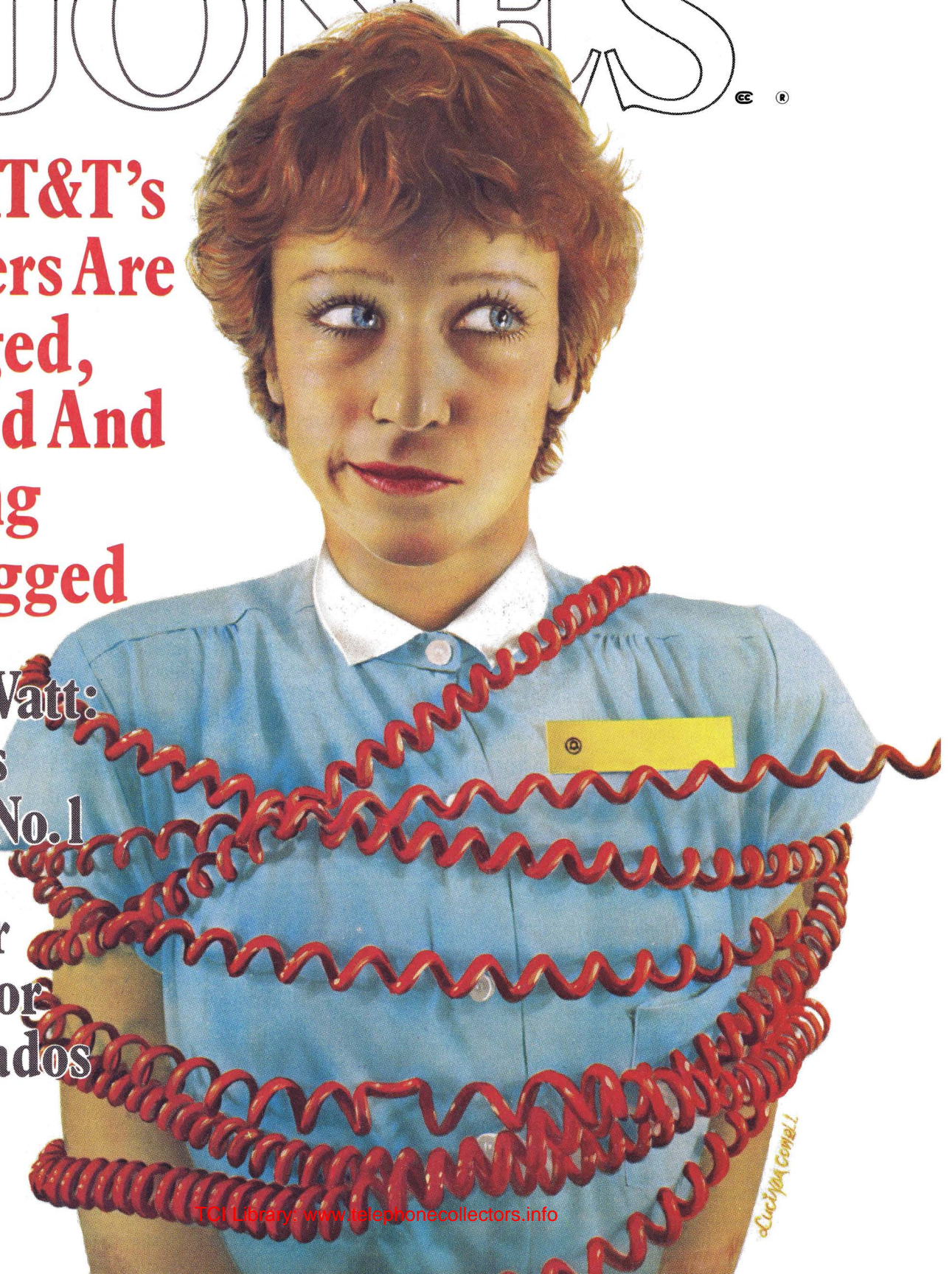
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**How AT&T's
Workers Are
Drugged,
Bugged And
Coming
Unplugged**

■ **James Watt:
Nature's
Enemy No. 1**

■ **Summer
Camp For
Corporados**



*Strung Out At The Phone Company:
How AT&T's Workers Are*

DRUGGED, BUGGED & UNPLUGGED

BY ROBERT HOWARD

THEY COME IN brown glass bottles with the Bell insignia on the front. They are called "greenies" or, sometimes, "Bell Telephone aspirin." By most accounts, they are buffered analgesic tablets, a combination of aspirin and caffeine; and they are a fixture in Bell System offices across the nation. When your energy is low and your AWT (average working time per call) is high, pop a greenie to get yourself through the day. "If you say *greenies*," says Ann Steslicke, an employee at



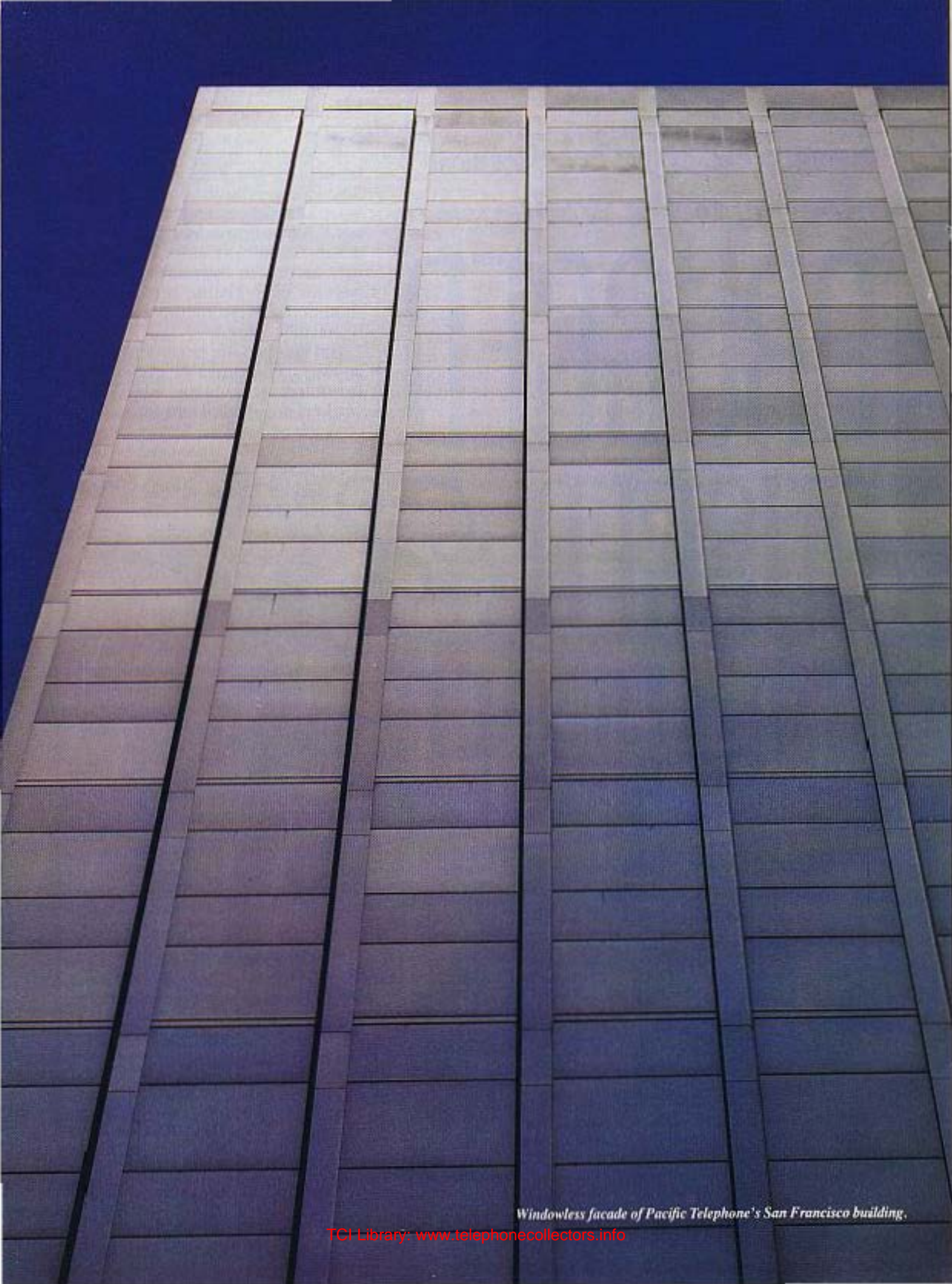
Michigan Bell, "operators know what you mean."

In Detroit, the greenies used to be kept by the drinking fountain. "Now," says Steslicke, "the supervisor keeps them and you have to ask." According to Marge Sansom, a San Leandro, California, directory assistance operator, greenies became less visible after "consumption got to something like 200 to 300 pills a day."

But greenies are becoming passé anyway. The drugs of preference for more and more telephone workers are alcohol and tranquilizers such as Valium. Service representatives "use tranquilizers like crazy," says a New Jersey service representative. "People are on them constantly." A survey conducted by the Connecticut Union of Telephone Workers of more than 200 service representatives at Southern New England Telephone found that 37.2 percent were taking tranquilizers or other nerve medicine, 39.3 percent had increased their consumption of alcohol since starting on the job and 12.3 percent were using both—a potentially lethal combination.

AT&T officials admit that drug abuse and alcoholism exist in the Bell System. The company's media relations department puts it another way: "We're really not unlike society in general." Employees at AT&T Long Lines offices in New York City disagree. They say that the company actually encourages drug use through its medical department.

"The company indiscriminately prescribes drugs to its employees," says Donald Collins, who five years ago established a counseling referral program at Local 1150 of the Communications Workers of America. He and his colleague, Bill McIntyre, describe case after case in which Long Lines employees received from company



Windowless facade of Pacific Telephone's San Francisco building.

medical personnel small quantities of prescription drugs without any written prescription. "In the event there is no prescription, there is no proof," says McIntyre. "I really believe that the company understands this."

One day in 1979, New York operator Fran Gutowski went to the company medical office complaining of menstrual cramps. She was given three yellow envelopes filled with Valium, Darvon and Lomotil. "They hand them out like candy," says Gutowski. "You don't even have to ask for them. And it's the nurses who give the stuff away, not even the doctors." Feeling like "they were trying to make a junkie out of me," Gutowski flushed the drugs down the toilet.

Maggie Coleman is a communications technician at another Manhattan Long Lines facility. She has received both codeine and motrin, a mild analgesic, from medical department nurses. "You never get to see a doctor unless you insist," says Coleman. "The nurses give you all kinds of drugs without prescriptions."

Other workers tell similar stories: of receiving Valium, codeine and other drugs, usually directly from nurses, always in small envelopes. Sometimes the name of the drug and the recommended dosage are written on the packet; sometimes they are not. One worker received an envelope of pills "with nothing written on it, just like a nickel bag of pot."

Of course, the dispensing of prescription drugs by company medical personnel is not in itself illegal. AT&T medical offices are licensed by the federal government and regulated by state law; legally, they are treated as doctors' offices. Company doctors may purchase and distribute controlled substances as long as they dispense them properly and keep detailed records of who received the drugs and for what reason.

However, there are at least two ways in which the alleged practices at the New York City Long Lines offices may be illegal. According to New York state law, controlled substances such as prescription drugs must be dispensed in a "suitable and durable container"—either a glass or plastic vial—

and must be marked with an orange label bearing the name and address of the user, the name and address of the doctor prescribing the drug, the name of the drug itself and its recommended dosage and a warning, either in bold-face or upper-case letters, reading "CONTROLLED SUBSTANCE, DANGEROUS UNLESS USED AS DIRECTED." Drugs that are passed out in envelopes, says Lynn Stote of the New York State Bureau of Narcotics Enforcement, are "not

One worker received an unmarked envelope of pills—"just like a nickel bag of pot." Another employee, just out of the hospital after a bout with alcoholism, was prescribed Valium for her nerves.

properly dispensed." Moreover, while nurses may administer drugs when delegated to do so by a physician, they may do so only in specific cases, not as a general practice.

When first confronted with the charges made by Long Lines employees, Kurt Ardis, a labor relations supervisor for AT&T Long Lines, called them "thoroughly unbelievable." In a telephone interview Ardis said, "I'm really surprised at these allegations. I've never seen any medical doctor at Long Lines prescribe a prescription drug. These drugs simply aren't prescribed by company medical people. There has not been widespread dispensing of valium or other drugs. It simply doesn't go on."

But after checking with Dr. Dorothea Johnson, corporate medical director for Long Lines, Ardis called back to say that Johnson "wasn't as surprised as I was." According to Johnson, there may have been occasions when company doctors have dispensed drugs to Long Lines em-

ployees, but such instances are "few and far between, infrequent and certainly not widespread."

Reports by operators, however, not only suggest that illegal dispensing procedures are common, they also indicate substantial professional incompetence. For example, an employee just out of the hospital after a bout with alcoholism was prescribed Valium for her nerves. Only after the union complained did the medical department agree to mark its records to make sure that workers with histories of alcoholism or drug abuse never received Valium again.

Pat Harrison, an employee in Long Lines administration, was given codeine by a company nurse for a serious ear infection. She came back the next day dizzy and nauseous, only to be told that it appeared she was allergic to the drug. The nurse told her supervisor that Harrison would feel that way "until the drug gets out of her system," but that she could go back to work. The supervisor thought differently and escorted Harrison home in a cab. "Medical's whole idea is to get you back to work," Harrison said. "The funny thing about it, after they sent me home, they docked me and said it wasn't a valid sickness."

Finally, there is the case of the Long Lines employee who was prescribed Valium for a year and a half by a company medical doctor. Then, when his work performance began to deteriorate because of his dependence on the drug, he was threatened with demotion. "Our opinion was that they were building a case to get rid of him," says Don Collins. Fortunately, this time there was a written prescription, signed by a company doctor. When Collins and McIntyre presented it to management, the company backed down. "They wanted to indict him as a junkie," says McIntyre, "and we were indicting them as the pusher."

There is, to be blunt, a stress epidemic at AT&T. A four-month investigation by *Mother Jones* has revealed that incessant oversupervision, automatic computer monitoring, elaborate productivity indexes and petty management rules have made job-related stress pervasive at the 23 operating companies of

Photography by Michael Jay

the Bell System.

And whether they receive tranquilizers from their own doctor or from their employer, more and more telephone workers have turned to drugs to put the lid on that stress. The situation has gotten so bad that even Ma Bell is concerned. A recent corporation-wide work relationship survey found that nearly half of the 50,000 respondents—from the lowliest operator to the highest-level manager—felt that stress on the job is worse than ever before.

In last year's Bell System contract, the company and the three major unions in the telecommunications industry joined together to establish a "quality of work life" committee to remedy job-related stress. Company and union officials are in general

agreement about its causes. They point to traditional heavy-handed management practices and to new pressures generated by technological changes and increased phone company competition because of industry deregulation.

But the causes of stress go deep. They are built into the ways American corporations try to manipulate work. Just as in the Hawthorne experiments at Western Electric in the 1920s, AT&T is again taking the lead. America's largest private employer is pioneering sophisticated strategies to ensure the corporate control of work.

For the one million men and women of the Bell System, the familiar slogan "Reach out and touch someone" has taken on a new, more sinister meaning. No longer does the corpora-

tion merely touch them at work. It touches them at home. It reaches into their private lives. And sometimes, as the case of Duane Salsberry suggests, it can nearly drive them crazy as well. Such cases show that *stress epidemic* is not just an empty phrase.

For 23 years Salsberry had worked as an installer at Bell of Pennsylvania, until he fell from a ladder, injuring his knee, and was transferred to a repair service clerk post. Late one February afternoon in 1979, less than four weeks after he started his new job, Salsberry "cracked." He was the only clerk on duty; he had four customers on hold. He was frantically searching for their repair tickets (which, in some perverse visitation of bad luck, all seemed to be lost) when

HOW MA BELL BULLIED WASHINGTON & ROBBED YOU

Ma Bell squeezes its customers as well as its employees. Last year, you paid AT&T a whopping \$3.3 billion that was listed on your phone bill as federal taxes. But Ma Bell turned over only \$566 million to the federal government. The remaining \$2.7 billion was the subsidy, your involuntary contribution to the relentless growth of the phone company. The history of this subsidy shows just how AT&T also manipulates government and rides roughshod over those judges and officials who challenge it.

Business subsidies began in the mid-'50s, when Congress passed a handy tax break known as "accelerated depreciation." Accelerated depreciation means a company can take large deductions (and pay lower taxes) on a new business asset in the first several years after investment and take smaller deductions later on, instead of claiming the same deduction each year (a process called "straight-line depreciation").

Public utilities list federal tax payments as an expense when applying to their state regulatory agencies for rate increases. In other words, customers pay the cost of those federal taxes. At the same time, for purposes of *taxpaying* to the Internal Revenue Service (IRS), they can take accelerated depreciation—and *keep the difference*. This profitable kind of double-entry accounting is called "normalization."

In 1962, another boon came along. Congress enacted the "investment tax credit" for utilities, which allowed them to deduct directly from their tax bill a substantial percent of the price of new equipment and facilities. Again the utilities pretended, for rate-setting purposes, that they had received only a small part of this tax credit.

In 1960, the California Public Utilities Commission (PUC), acting on behalf of consumers, found the practice of normalization unconscionable. It ordered all public utilities in California to "flow-through" the tax savings to customers. The PUC said, in effect, that since the utilities were paying a dollar less in taxes, they had to charge the customer a dollar less in rates.

Most utilities in California were already using accelerated depreciation and had complied with the PUC flow-through order. But Pacific Telephone chose not to flow through any savings to customers. Instead, it decided simply not to take

advantage of the new, tax-saving accounting method and to stick with the old straight-line method, reasoning that it could not pass on savings it never realized. This meant that Pac Tel was paying hundreds of millions of dollars in unnecessary taxes, then charging its customers for those high tax payments.

The PUC was incensed. Decades earlier, the Supreme Court had ruled that utilities have an obligation to minimize expenses, including taxes. In 1968, the PUC counterattacked: it reduced phone rates to the level they would have been if Pac Tel had followed the PUC's instructions to take the tax breaks.

In the next few years, the lower phone rates mandated by the PUC reduced Pac Tel's revenues by millions of dollars. And so, in 1969, AT&T reached out to strangle the PUC by long-distance—from Washington, D.C.

Obliging members of the House Ways and Means Committee (under the impression that it was the federal government, not the taxpayer, that was losing money) added two paragraphs to the 1969 Tax Reform Act to say that if, prior to 1969, a utility was taking accelerated depreciation and flowing-through the savings (i.e., nearly all California utilities), it could continue to do so. But if a company wasn't flowing-through prior to 1969 (i.e., all 23 Bell companies), it could take the tax break only if it "normalized." Because this contorted language insured that AT&T would get its maximum subsidy, the entire law became known as the Bell Benevolent Bill.

Two Treasury undersecretaries—Charles Walker and Edwin Cohen—were the principal witnesses on behalf of the Bell bill during the 1969 congressional hearings. Later, the Office of Tax Analysis would call their testimony "a mistake: Treasury wasn't losing millions of dollars annually, as the undersecretaries had testified; Congress just didn't understand what was going on."

When *Mother Jones* contacted Walker's office recently, we were told that Walker "wasn't the expert during the '69 congressional testimony. Edwin Cohen was the expert." Well, AT&T regards Walker as an expert: between 1976 and 1979, AT&T paid him about \$313,500 in consulting fees. And in 1980, as AT&T's registered lobbyist on Capitol Hill, he collected another \$110,000. As for Edwin Cohen, he's now a partner in the Washington, D.C., law firm of Covington & Burling. In

he heard the insistent ring of a fifth call and "just went berserk."

He began to shake uncontrollably and feel faint. The blinking lights before his eyes blurred, then disappeared entirely as everything went black. For a moment he thought he was going blind. When his eyesight returned, he got up, left his desk and, the phone still ringing in his ears, stumbled in a daze to the service center lounge. "Then," says Salsberry, "all I could do was cry."

For the next six months, Salsberry was off work and on the edge of a total nervous breakdown. He took Valium for his nerves and Sinequan, a major antipsychotic, for his depression. He contemplated suicide. He suffered from fuguelike states—once, driving in a trance until suddenly he found

himself on the freeway in the middle of Ohio; another time, disappearing just before his parents' 60th wedding anniversary party and wandering nearly 30 miles on foot.

Salsberry's breakdown was no isolated case. It was only one episode in a nine-month stress epidemic at the Bell Telephone Service Center in Washington, Pennsylvania. From February to November 1979, five employees—one-quarter of the center's work force—were forced off the job by work-related psychiatric disorders.

Corporate executives could not dismiss the Washington breakdowns as just another case of mass (read "female") hysteria. Only one of the five victims was a woman. Four were over 40 years old with no history of psychiatric problems. All five were

seasoned veterans with more than 20 years' service each in the Bell System.

Duane Salsberry cracked simply because of the unremitting pressure of his job. He handled calls from customers reporting malfunctioning telephone equipment. Each call had to be answered within 20 seconds of the first ring; after the first 15 seconds, an alarm would sound. "They called it a 'birdie,'" says Salsberry, "but I called it a 'howler.' When that thing started ringing, you knew it."

As calls streamed into the office, Salsberry would put customers on hold in order to answer each call within the 20-second limit. Then, he would search for the repair tickets filed in a massive bin behind his desk. But he had one eye always on the second hand of the clock so he could return to

1978 alone, the firm collected \$306,129 in fees from AT&T.

To date, the Bell bill has cumulatively supplied AT&T with a \$15 billion subsidy. No wonder a decade-long court battle began within one year after the bill's passage.

The city of San Francisco—later joined by Los Angeles and San Diego—protested to the California Supreme Court, where the justices ruled that the phantom taxes Pac Tel was collecting from customers represented "unreasonable costs." Furthermore, the court found that Pac Tel had been "imprudent" and "obstinate" in not taking the tax breaks prior to the 1969 Bell bill. The court directed the PUC to find a device for sharing Pac Tel's new wealth with its nouveau poor customers, pointing out that, although in theory such subsidies were tax deferrals, in practice utilities were spending money on equipment and offices that generated new tax deferrals larger than the ones that had to be paid off.

In response, the PUC told Pac Tel (in 1977) that it could keep most of the subsidy if a portion went to customers in the form of lower phone bills. The PUC ordered Pac Tel to adopt this method, but said the phone company could hold on to the whole subsidy until the compromise was settled in court.

Pac Tel and AT&T then argued in court that sharing the subsidy was a form of flow-through and, thus, in violation of the 1969 Bell bill requirement.

Pac Tel sent the IRS a letter containing six pages of reasons why the company felt sharing the money with consumers meant breaking the law. Not surprisingly, shortly after Pac Tel denounced itself, the IRS obligingly wrote back that the company would indeed be violating the Bell bill's eligibility requirements. Even so, the California Supreme Court rejected Pac Tel's ineligibility argument. Pac Tel appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court, who refused the request.

Armed with the IRS letter—which didn't have the force of law and in fact contradicted the legal history of the case—AT&T delayed by using every judicial appeal available. It lost in a federal district court and was shut out 3-0 in the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals. In an earlier litigation, between 1971 and 1975, it was clobbered in the California Supreme Court 7-0, 7-0 and 7-0. On a fourth sally to the state High Court, the justices simply refused to hear the phone company.

In the United States Supreme Court, AT&T and Pac Tel lost

their petition for judicial review. Twice the court refused to delay the PUC subsidy-sharing order.

No court—and few individual judges—believed AT&T's case to be just or its purpose reasonable. Yet AT&T continued to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars in legal fees, all of which were eventually paid by its customers. It clogged up the legal system for a decade to pursue a case it could not possibly win. In the meantime, AT&T shifted to "hardball" tactics. The company announced publicly that it wouldn't invest in Pac Tel "until the climate of regulation improves in California." One Wall Street broker said, "It was the kiss of death: if AT&T wouldn't invest in Pac Tel, nobody would."

While awaiting the final Supreme Court decision (which denied Pac Tel a rehearing), a Pac Tel executive vice president told his managers in a closed-circuit TV broadcast: "We have alternative plans if, in fact, the rehearing process does not produce the results we would like."

The alternative plan was a bill drafted by Representative John Rousselot (R.-Calif.) with a little help from his friends at Covington & Burling, one of AT&T's Washington law firms. Rousselot's bill forgives Pac Tel any past tax liability and reiterates the 1969 Bell bill provisions that prohibit flow-through tax benefits to ratepayers. Rousselot knows that Pac Tel has twice been cleared by the Internal Revenue Service of the same practice for which it is now going to be forgiven. Although a self-proclaimed fiscal conservative, Rousselot also knows that his bill will cost Californians a substantial increase in phone rates. But Rousselot indicates that his primary concern is with Pacific Telephone's immediate problems. The company's bond rating is so low it must pay premium interest to sell its paper. AT&T's latest customer survey shows that Pac Tel's operations were perceived to be worse than any other AT&T company across the nation in the last couple of years.

At this writing, the House Ways and Means Committee is considering Rousselot's bill. By the time you read this report, Congress may have passed the legislation and permanently institutionalized AT&T's annual subsidy.

—Frank Feldinger



each waiting customer at least once every 60 seconds, as required, in an endless round of "Hello, may I help you? . . . please hold . . . still checking," until he had forgotten which call was which.

As if that weren't bad enough, Salsberry's supervisor was often listening in. At any deviation from proper procedure, the supervisor might plug in on a special line that only the clerk could hear. So as a customer complained about "no dial tone" in one ear, Salsberry's supervisor might be shouting indignantly "You can't ask that!" in the other. For the first time in his 23 years with the Bell System, Salsberry received an unsatisfactory performance rating—along with 90 percent of the other workers at the Washington Service Center.

Duane Salsberry's conviction that job pressures and management practices caused his breakdown has since been confirmed by an outside expert. In a special study of the Washington Service Center stress epidemic, Dr. Leonard DeRogatis, director of the division of medical psychology at the Phipps Clinic of Johns Hopkins University, placed the blame on the "arrogance, brutishness and disrespect" of office supervisory personnel. Salsberry and two of his coworkers are using the DeRogatis report in a unique workers' compensation claim against Bell of Pennsylvania.

The Washington Service Center is a small, relatively backward facility. In the brand-new Centralized Repair Service Bureaus that are sprouting up throughout the Bell System, the techniques of work-force control are considerably more refined. Nearly 50 repair service clerks sit in groups of four, their eyes glued to the cathode flicker of jet-black video display terminals. Gone is the howler of the Washington office. In its place, a color television displays a bar graph with the office's "speed of answer" record for the day. Here, the clerks have only eight seconds to answer the electronic beep signaling another customer on the line—a 12-second speed-up over the Washington office. A supervisor rushes forward to explain the new system. What he says holds true for workers throughout the Bell System. "These girls are merely an interface between the customer and the computer."

One Bell computer that every operator knows only too well is the Force Administration Data System, or FADS. Every 15 minutes of the day, in operator offices across the country, computer terminals near supervisors' desks print out a complete productivity record for the office as a whole. In a ragged, staccato tempo, these Quarter-Hour Summaries tell how many operators were on the board, how many calls they handled, the average

working time per call, the number of late answers (calls kept waiting for more than ten seconds), even the average reaction time—how long before an operator responds to the beep that signals another incoming call.

To get the productivity record of an individual employee is almost as easy. A supervisor merely keys the employee's number into the computer; within seconds it prints out that employee's performance for the day. In some offices, these daily records are kept in a black book, prominently displayed on a stand near the door to the office, accessible to supervisors and operators alike.

The average working time in operator offices ranges from 27 to 37 seconds per call. For up to two and a half hours at a time, operators handle call after call without a break. When the office's average working time gets high or when the blinking lights of the call-waiting board flash on, supervisors fan out among the rows of operators in a well-choreographed effort to speed up the pace. Operators hurry to disconnect, often so fast that their ritual "Have a happy day" is clipped in mid-sentence.

Every 15 minutes, supervisors scramble to fill out a form listing how many operators were on the board, including whether the total was over or under the level projected by FADS. Because FADS monitors

THE LIMITS OF AT&T'S MANAGEMENT BY TERROR

AT&T is not a company that is afraid to ask for what it wants, and the still-growing \$125 billion behemoth appears to want everything it can get. Since its inception nearly a century ago, the largest company on earth has enjoyed an almost absolute control of its market and it has strived to attain a similar control of its employees.

Shortly after the turn of the century, AT&T adopted the then-popular "scientific management" method of corporate organization, a system designed by Frederick Winslow Taylor to generate maximum production from a minimum of employees. Although Bell labeled its version of scientific management "functional organization," the basic tenets were Taylor's.

Convinced that most employees deliberately concealed the actual speed at which they were able to perform, Taylor proposed strict separation of mental and manual labor, with each manual task reduced to a series of simple repetitive components and each component assigned to an individual worker. Taylor insisted that each task be consistently timed and its speed controlled entirely by management. After more than seven decades of timing and management control, the Bell System employs roughly three supervisors for every worker.

AT&T's functional organization not only rendered Bell employees victims of whimsical work speedup, it made daily routine almost unbearably tedious. So tedious, according to University of California professor of social sciences Stanley Aronowitz, that the workers' first instinct is to leave. "But because the Bell System pay is good and the benefits are good," Aronowitz says, "people stay around a long time. The result is that they go bananas."

Aronowitz sees Bell's obsession with work units, quotas and observation as symptomatic of a major ideological bent that distinguishes AT&T from much of the rest of the communications industry. "There are basically two styles of management," Aronowitz explains. "One is paternalism, in which the employer emphasizes togetherness and tries to persuade the employees; the other is authoritarianism, or terror. Bell uses the terror approach."

Unlike the modern high-tech segment of the communications industry, AT&T has to reckon with two unions. Approximately 450,000 of the Bell System's one million employees are affiliated with the Communications Workers of America; another 100,000 belong to the International Brotherhood of

work-force levels every 15 minutes, supervisors also know immediately whether any operator is late in arriving at work or in returning from lunch or break. Latenesses and absences are duly recorded. The forms are sent to the Centralized Administration Group (CAG), the brain of every operator office. There, the information is tabulated and added to the ongoing record of office performance, a record that never stops accumulating, every 15 minutes, 24 hours a day.

The goal of this vast technological web is maximum work-force flexibility; Bell wants to make sure that the optimum number of operators or service representatives or repair service clerks are scheduled for any particular moment of the day. Too few workers obviously poses a problem; the quality and speed of service suffers. But so does too many; labor costs rise. "You don't want to provide too good service," one CAG manager explained. "Customers might get used to it and come to expect it all the time."

The computerized crusade for work-force flexibility also disrupts workers' expectations, particularly the expectation that they can control their own lives. Fran Gutowski is 23 years old; she has been a telephone operator, like her mother before her, since she was 16. Gutowski works at the New York City International Operating Center (IOC), where she is one of

some 750 operators—93 percent of them women, the majority black—who handle an average of 24,000 calls per day to the 78 countries still inaccessible by direct dialing.

In the seven years she has worked at the New York IOC, Gutowski has

The Bell System's technological controls are supplemented by what employees call the "potty policy." Telephone workers have to ask permission before they can go to the bathroom.

been bounced three times from one work shift to the next like an errant tennis ball. Two years ago, Gutowski finally accumulated enough seniority to work during her preferred shift, in the daytime. But last November, as a result of a new, more intricately computerized scheduling system, she was forced back on nights.

When Gutowski heard about this

most recent change, she says, "it really blew my mind." Once again, she had to totally rearrange the routines of her life. "I felt like they were just using me. I just felt violated." But Gutowski, single and childless, has it easy compared to the women with husbands and families or those who are the sole supporters of small children.

Before the improved computerization, about 50 percent of the operators at the New York IOC were guaranteed a "basic tour," the same hours every day for each scheduling period. Now, only 35 percent of the work force gets this security. "Before, you could get some order in your life," says Anne Walden, vice president for traffic at Communications Workers Local 1150, which represents IOC operators. "But they want workers flexible, like puppets. They want them dangling around every day."

The most advanced technology in the world, however, has yet to find a way to schedule workers' bodily functions to match the needs of the business. The Bell System's technological controls are supplemented, therefore, by what employees call the "potty policy." Procedures vary from office to office, but the principle remains the same. Telephone workers across the country have to ask permission before they can go to the bathroom.

At the New York IOC, they call

—Continued on page 54

Electrical Workers (IBEW), which organized Bell employees in Boston as early as 1912. With exceptions in a few locals, however, neither union is known for its militancy.

Higher-tech communications companies often require a more highly skilled worker, one who is more difficult to replace than the task-oriented workers at Bell. Consequently, Aronowitz says, high-tech employers tend to choose the more subtle and less offensive means of worker manipulation that characterize the paternalistic style of management.

Aronowitz believes that Bell's choice of authoritarianism over paternalism is, ultimately, less practical than ideological. "It's not even a question of economics," says Aronowitz. "The terror approach does not make more money. It's a question of ideology. The company is saying 'We are in control.'"

Since the beginning of this century the Bell System's work force has been predominantly female. (Today the company is about 52 percent female.) Yet in 1975 the New England Telephone company lobbied for legislation in Massachusetts that would have released companies in the state from having to pay maternity leave benefits.

In response to Bell's lobbying efforts, 9 to 5 (the office workers organization), along with a local chapter of the IBEW, convinced the Massachusetts Department of Utilities to rule

that the telephone company could not use money collected from telephone service to lobby against women's rights. In the end, the legislation that had been endorsed by New England Telephone was defeated. According to Ed Geary, business manager for IBEW Local 2222, located in a suburb of Boston, "Other than providing what the government has required, AT&T has done nothing to make life easier for the female."

Telephone employees are responding, however. In *The Phone Book: Working At The Bell*, Joan Newman Kuyek bases her description of the Bell System on two and half years' experience as a service representative for Bell Canada. Kuyek writes: "In most jobs at Bell today, there is little interest in doing work well. Errors are common . . . it is difficult to separate pressure to produce from negative attitudes toward the company."

After 70 years of speedup and surveillance, Frederick Winslow Taylor's paranoid premises of worker dissatisfaction and non-cooperation have become a reality. At the Bell System they can tell you that they were right all along. Everything is under control.

—Art Jahnke



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Ricardo repeats as we pass billboards announcing slogans of the right-wing party. A few moneychangers still parade near the Intercontinental Hotel as we pass by. "We call them 'coyotes,'" Ricardo tells me. "We let them change their black-market money. For now. We're very generous."

Their tiny house is hot from the heat of the day. Everyone greets the next-door neighbor seated on the patio. Ricardo's commanding officer hasn't arrived yet. We tell about the beauty of the lake. The neighbor says it was hot in Managua. "A group of men had a shoot-out near Masaya with the militia," he reports. "We heard it on the radio half an hour ago. Some ten or twelve ex-guardia, drunk or something. Some of them were killed; a couple escaped. I don't have all the details."

I feel numbness in my jaw.

"Yeah," says Ricardo. "I'm not surprised. We're too generous, but I don't know what the hell else we can be."

Nancy embraces him, a tear escaping

from her eye. Maria Rosa makes coffee for me.

A jeep followed by a car pulls up, and a man with a submachine gun jumps out and greets Ricardo and Antonio. "The *commandante* is here." A small man, maybe two or three years older than Ricardo, crawls out of the car behind the jeep. A bodyguard with an AK-47 crawls out with him. Ricardo and he embrace.

"You look worried," says Maria Rosa to me. "What's the matter?"

Nancy smiles to me. Ricardo brushes his hair, calmly removes his Gallil rifle from the hook in his bedroom. He kisses Nancy. He shakes my hand, reminds me to send him the books I've promised and heads toward the jeep. "I won't forget," I shout, "and take good care of my niece." The jeep pulls away. I don't think he's heard what I've said. But words haven't been too important all day. I go back inside the house. I think about the word *generosity* and drink my coffee. □

Strung Out At The Phone Company

—continued from page 45

them "run-outs." Operators call their supervisor and are put on a waiting list. Sometimes the wait is as long as an hour. When your turn finally arrives, don't dally. A supervisor is timing your bathroom visit.

At the Detroit, Michigan, operator office, they are known as "emergency reliefs." A wooden plaque next to the door is green on one side, red on the other. If the green is up, you can leave the room, but make sure to turn the marker to red so no one else follows until you return.

At the directory assistance office in San Leandro, California, the term is the "minute system." Operators place a cardboard figure (one swears it looks just like a dunce cap) on top of their machines and wait their turns for bathroom privileges. If it's an emergency, an operator can place two "dunce caps" on top and leave immediately, avoiding often long waits. But the operator has to sign out for an emergency break, and if too many emergencies pile up that operator may be asked for a doctor's note explaining his or her unreasonable

bathroom needs. Each operator is allowed only five minutes per day.

The potty policy is only part of a more extensive Bell System management practice. Whether it's the having to ask permission to go to the bathroom, or the being constantly monitored and supervised, adults are systematically treated like children. It is a time-honored way to convince them of their powerlessness, to get them to assent to management's close control of work. "After a while, you think they are your mother and father and you have to do what they say," says Michael Travali, a service representative who works for New Jersey Bell. "It's like you're not on a job at all; it's like you're in kindergarten."

Perhaps the most sophisticated version of this practice is AT&T's absence control program. While the details of absence control vary from company to company, New Jersey Bell provides a relatively typical example. Three absences over a six-month period or two disabilities (absences of eight days or more) in two years, and a worker qualifies for absence control. There are four steps to the program—three progres-

sively more-serious warnings, then a final warning known as "job in jeopardy." Any more absences and you are liable for dismissal.

Don't be fooled by the seeming clarity of this step system. Telephone workers everywhere agree that the fundamental characteristic of absence control is its arbitrariness. Some employees are bumped directly from Step 1 to Step 4. Others may linger at the final warning for years, never knowing when absence control will strike next, this time with finality. Still others can go for months with a perfect attendance record only to find that they are still on absence control. "They have complete control," says Andrea Snegroff, a former operator who is now a Long Lines communications technician. "It's not like you know where you are at a given time or how long it will take to get off."

And then there is the intrusiveness of the company's absence policy. If you call in sick, you can expect a return call from your supervisor, who is just checking if you are at home in bed. A truly solicitous supervisor may even take a cab and show up at your front door. When Fran Gutowski was 17, she and three fellow workers were in a car accident. Gutowski spent a week in the hospital in traction. On the first day she was able to get out of bed, two supervisors showed up on a "social visit." Their flowers were nice, says Gutowski, but considering that her three coworkers had been fired during the week for their poor absence records, she "got very upset." They left quickly, but kept in touch by phone, even after Gutowski had returned home to recuperate. "They used to call my doctor and he would hang up on them. At home, they were calling me sometimes two and three times a day." Gutowski's mother finally told them to leave her daughter alone.

Techniques like potty policy and absence control bring workers face to face with their powerlessness and induce a profound sense of resignation. "I can remember what it was like getting off a train five minutes late in the morning and all the anxiety in that," says one telephone worker. "You were afraid you were going to lose your job."

"You get all nervous when you think you're going to be late after break," says another. This palpable fear of being trapped in a vast system that is overwhelming, untouchable, beyond

change, brings on a kind of dispossession. It is also the fundamental cause of stress. "They manipulate people's lives," says Fran Gutowski. "I'm not my own person when I work for them."

Dr. Michael Lerner is a clinical psychologist and director of the Institute for Labor and Mental Health in Oakland, California, one of the few worker-oriented stress centers in the country. Of the several hundred people who participate in the institute's occupational stress groups each year, nearly half are telephone workers. Lerner has repeatedly seen the psychological damage that lies behind stress symptoms like chronic stomach disorders and hypertension.

"Every single one of these telephone workers' moves is completely regulated," says Lerner. "They are constantly engaged in a false presentation of the self which has the form of human contact with none of the content." Fixed to a continuous treadmill of fragmentary, isolating contacts with the outside world, they develop "a tremendous sense of insecurity about their ability to connect with another human

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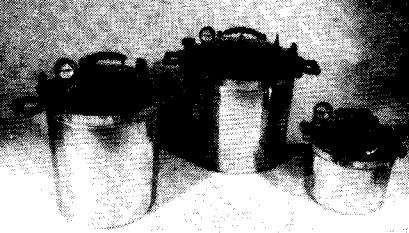
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being." At their worst, the psychological costs of stress become disabling.

From the moment she began working as a service representative for Southwestern Bell in 1969, Margaret Weir was one of the stalwarts of the Austin, Texas, business office. Her attendance record was nearly perfect. She found her job challenging and satisfying. Praised for her intelligence and flexibility and advised by her supervisors that she was "management material," Weir was given sole responsibility for the important University of Texas and city of Austin accounts.

But after some five years of taking customer orders, answering questions and tracking down delinquent bills, Weir began to realize that something was going wrong. In part, it was the constant pressure of productivity indexes. Workers were so harried that they simply didn't have the time to provide the service they had been trained to give. In part, it was the unending modifications in office procedures. One Saturday, Weir and her fellow service representatives were summoned to a motel outside Austin for an eight-hour marathon training session to learn a complicated new rate structure scheduled to go into effect on Monday. "After a while, it seemed like every day you would come to work and something would be different from what it was before," Weir says. "You couldn't absorb all the changes."

But what got to Weir the most was the fact that she kept getting more and more work. "It almost seems that if you do your job right, they just give you more to do." In addition to her two special accounts, Weir was expected to handle her share of the regular calls coming into the business office. When she asked for a "closed position," just her major accounts that she could work on full-time, her immediate supervisors were sympathetic but said it was beyond them. "Somewhere on up the line, it couldn't be done," Weir says. Her request was denied; she never learned by whom.

By the summer of 1975, the job that had held such promise for Margaret Weir had become an overwhelming obsession. "It would get into your blood. I had to just pull myself together at the beginning of every day. I'd break the day into little pieces just to try to get through until my morning break or lunch. Then I would go home and just

be really depressed and cry a lot. On weekends, I didn't want to do anything. All I would do is think about my job."

Weir didn't tell her fellow service representatives how she was feeling. She thought she was suffering alone. "I guess I was kind of embarrassed it was getting to me," she says. "I felt like I was failing." But this only increased her anxiety. "I worried about breaking down at work because nobody knew what I was going through. I wanted to do the job right—for them, but also for me. I didn't want to screw up."

Weir could not keep up the act. In the summer of 1975, her doctor wrote her a prescription for Valium and put her on stress disability. Two weeks later, she was back at work; she thought she could handle it and for a while she did. But a year and a half later, in early 1977, Weir was out on stress disability again, this time taking Elavil and Mellaril, two major antidepressants. On her first day back after this second, more serious, breakdown, Weir voluntarily downgraded herself to a lower-paying clerical position in order to escape the customer contact pressures of the Austin business office.

According to Michael Lerner, most workers react to stress as Margaret Weir did. They blame themselves. "Workers recognize they're facing stress," says Lerner. "Nevertheless, they see it as their own inability to function according to the norms established by the company. They feel they are individually failing to live up." Even today, four years later, Weir, who now works full-time for the Communications Workers of America, finds it hard to blame management. What she remembers is her supervisors' concern. "They couldn't have been more considerate," she says. "They're in the same boat you are."

This seamless quality of the corporation's control of work—the fact that it resides in no specific manager, that it is everywhere, is one reason that stress, instead of becoming a motivating force for change, simply serves to reinforce the system that caused the problem in the first place.

While the stresses in the Bell System have not incited a widespread workers' revolt, they have provoked company introspection, which has led to a self-proclaimed revolution. With the kind of fanfare usually reserved for a change in regime, the Bell System recently inaugurated a highly visible change in man-

agement style. The new order is known as Quality of Work Life—or, in the acronym-infested world of AT&T, simply QWL.

The new commitment to quality of work life is a direct response to deteriorating worker morale. In a surprising display of corporate self-criticism, AT&T's Work Relationships Unit warned last year that "the *central* problem is the way we manage people. . . . Our people talk frequently today about our management style as devoid of trust." One month later, AT&T Chairman Charles Brown sent a memo to Bell company presidents urging them to embrace the principles of QWL, even "where they cause waves." And in the new Bell System contract signed last August, the corporation and the three telephone worker unions negotiated a joint labor-management Working Conditions and Service Quality Improvement Committee to put these principles into practice. Since then, QWL coordinators have begun to spread the good news throughout the Bell System.

Alan Adler is one such messenger. Dressed in stylish blue blazer and gray flannel pants, every hair in place, his moustache trim, he is the furthest thing from what telephone company old-timers used to call the "Bell-shaped" manager. Formerly with the public relations department of Michigan Bell, Adler now has become a "kind of lead facilitator" in the campaign for quality of work life.

In tones more suggestive of religious conversion than mere change in corporate policy, Adler explains, "QWL is different from anything we've ever undertaken before. It is a philosophical process that over the next 12 to 15 years will totally change the way we manage the business." In the past, he continues, "many of our managers [have felt] that their jobs were to control, to police, to provide surveillance. What you got was levels of managers who were checkers checking up on still other checkers."

QWL is designed to change all that. It is nothing less than a metamorphosis of management to match the changing tenor of the times. "We see changing values in the workplace," says Adler. "People want more out of their job. They want influence over the decisions made on their behalf."

With a flurry of references to Japanese quality circles, matrix management and a host of other popular new

theories, Adler comes to the heart of AT&T's new style: "We are working with a theory of empowerment. The more power you give to your subordinates, the more powerful you are." And then, with the P.R. man's flair for the provocative phrase, he adds, "It could even be construed as a very socialistic way of doing business."

Alan Adler may think that QWL is the most revolutionary idea to hit the Bell System since direct-dialing, but in fact, AT&T has been experimenting with one form of participation or another for at least 15 years. In the mid-1960s, AT&T executive Robert Ford designed the best-known of these forays into participatory management, the Work Itself experiments. In a book outlining his results, entitled *Motivation Through the Work Itself*, Ford described a management style in which the basic approach is "to load people with responsibility."

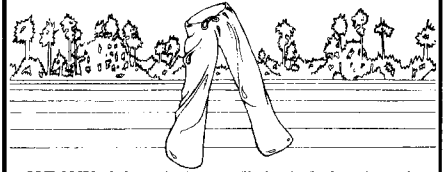
Ford discovered that when you load workers with responsibility, you can replace authoritarian techniques—productivity indexes and the like—with far more effective internal controls. "Previously," he wrote, "the service index represented outside pressures rather than a means for knowing internally whether one is competent." But the participants in the Work Itself experiments "say that they feel pressure from *themselves* (a deep feeling of responsibility) to get the work out quickly and correctly."

Thus, the chief aim of job redesign is to cultivate these internal pressures, to shape the goals of the individual so they are compatible with what Ford termed "corporate purpose." Far from diminishing corporate power, participatory techniques increase it because they "give . . . management . . . more *real* control over the job even though there is less *detail* control over people."

What Ford describes is a subtle form of manipulation. It plays on and exploits the natural desire of most people to do a good job. However, as Margaret Weir, the former service representative at Southwestern Bell, discovered, being loaded with responsibility means little more than being loaded with more work.

"You're almost your own worst enemy," says Weir. "You put yourself under a lot of pressure. They play up to your ego. They tell you how good you are, how flexible and versatile, real

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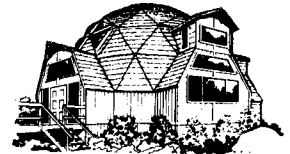
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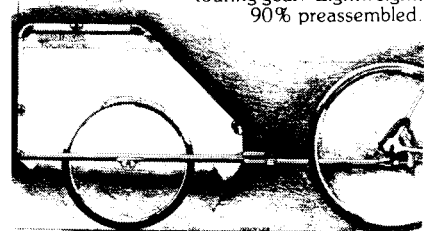
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Will the instituting of quality of work life mean that workers will be free of external techniques like run-outs, absence control or computer monitoring? New York Long Lines manager Kurt Ardis says, "Perhaps they will find it is a matter of people learning to control themselves, voluntary restrictions, if you will." And despite Alan Adler's slightly shocking suggestion that QWL is the first step down the road to socialism, he quickly reassures: "That doesn't mean giving the inmates the run of the institution." Quality of work life at AT&T will probably be little more than a sophisticated version of the traditional "good cop," who, with a kind word and a pat on the back, takes over the interrogation after the "bad cop" is through.

If QWL programs are to have any real meaning for workers, the telephone industry unions will have to provide the initiative. Unless the programs speak directly to the sense of powerlessness that many telephone workers feel, they are unlikely to ameliorate the causes and effects of stress. Unfortunately, both the company's and the unions' approach so far have been entirely from the top down. As long as this remains true, Bell System employees will continue to view QWL with the same skepticism they have expressed toward 15 years of so-called participatory management. "Quality of work life to me," says Bill McIntyre, counselor at Local 1150, "sounds like what Valium is to the patient."

If you ask the operators at the New York City IOC when they felt most in control of their working lives, they describe an event sanctioned neither by the company nor by their international union—a three-day wildcat strike right before Christmas 1979. No ordinary walkout, the Christmas strike was a rank-and-file protest against workplace stress. During the year preceding the strike, the 1,000-operator force had been cut through attrition and firings to 850. Suspensions and dismissals were mounting; oversupervision grew more severe. "They were monitoring us constantly," says Andrea Snegroff, who was the head of Local 1150's traffic section at the time of the strike. "It was driving us up the wall."

In September, the new computer was introduced and immediately made a mess of office scheduling. Some operators were assigned breaks only 45 minutes after the start of their tour; others had to wait five hours for lunch. Veterans with 20 years' seniority were forced to work Saturdays. Throughout the fall, scheduling consistently violated seniority and other contract provisions. "They couldn't even get people's paychecks right," says Snegroff.

Then, on December 14, Catherine Daily, a 62-year-old operator who had worked at the New York IOC since she was 26, died of a heart attack that many of her coworkers thought was job-related. A few days before, Daily had been suspended for the first time in her 36 years with the telephone company; she had briefly "plugged out" her position while filling out a repair ticket. When she returned to work the next day, she was nervous and upset; she complained that her supervisor was watching her every move. When Daily died, she was only a few weeks from retirement.

Fran Gutowski heard about Daily's death while at work. For her and other operators, it was the final straw. "I loved Catherine; she was like a grandmother. Many of the operators were upset because they knew her and saw her be harassed. I broke up. I was hysterical, crying."

One week later, the cauldron of stress boiled over. Nearly three-quarters of the office's 850 operators walked off the job. From December 21 to December 23, a picket line blocked the main entrance to the IOC building on Avenue of the Americas. There were never less than 30 pickets there. At night, when the day workers were joined by the more militant operators of the night tour, the number would swell to about 200. A coffin was set up at the building entrance; its epitaph read "Job Pressures Are Killing Our Members." Workers handed out leaflets to the milling crowd of curious Christmas shoppers and lower-Manhattan office workers. They staged mock mourning rituals before the coffin, complete with crying and wailing. And from six in the morning until two at night, the chant of "Ma Bell Kills" rent the freezing winter air.

Meanwhile, the Local 1150 union hall three blocks away on Broadway became the focus of a new-found community that operators had never experi-

enced on the job. Union members ran a day-care center to watch after operators' children so mothers could walk the picket line. When evening came, instead of going home, day-shift workers went to the union hall for a quick dinner and then returned to the nonstop demonstration in the street.

"For the first time, I saw people stick together like they never had before," says Gutowski. "They slept there; they ate there. They lived there for three days. People got close. They stuck up for each other, protected each other."

Desperate to end the walkout before the heavy long-distance traffic of Christmas Eve, AT&T went to court. On December 23, the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of New York issued an injunction ordering striking operators back to work. "It was a very emotional time," says Andrea Snegroff. "Everybody was crying. We didn't want to go back." But union leaders were hesitant to defy the injunction. Instead, they urged their members to return to work, but "not like meek little lambs." So, on the day before Christmas, the operators of the New York IOC returned sporting stickers reading

"Forced by the Feds."

In a court-negotiated agreement, Long Lines officials promised not to discipline most of the workers who participated in the Christmas strike. However, the entire executive board of Local 1150 was suspended for 20 days and placed on "final warning."

The job pressures that inspired the strike still exist. The work force has declined to around 750. And IOC operators say that, despite union claims that last year was "the year of the operator," their new contract with the Bell System does not really address the central causes of stress.

But to dismiss the Christmas strike as a failure would be to misunderstand what it meant to those who participated in it. For a brief moment, IOC operators felt their anger and their strength. For a few days, they were able to say no to a corrosive way of working that had always commanded their assent.

Robert Howard is a contributing editor of Working Papers. He has written for The New Republic, In These Times and other publications.

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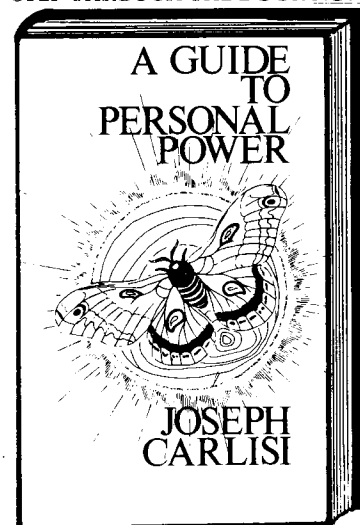
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