

# Motor City Labor News

## Hostess Cake

### Fifth Estate Collective

1971

Motor City Labor News is a regular feature of the *Fifth Estate*. In this column we want to provide a space for people from different parts of the Detroit labor scene to exchange their experiences—experiences of the struggle to gain control over the rate and conditions of work, as well as experiences of the fight to regain control over their unions, where these have gotten bogged down in bureaucracy.

We want this column to develop in such a way that it covers service workers as well as factory workers, women as well as men, and black workers as well as white workers. In the end, the column will become what you make it—if you've got some news that you want run, give us a call at 831-6000 or drop by our office at 4403 Second (corner of Second and Canfield).

We urge readers of this column to take advantage of the services that The Fifth Estate offers. We have a speakers' bureau, which furnishes speakers on such topics as the War in Indochina, Socialism in countries like Cuba and North Vietnam, the Middle East, Women's Liberation, etc. We also coordinate the speakers' bureau with films. Call us at 831-6800 for more information.

The next time you eat a Hostess cupcake, think about the women who made it. Your cream-filled goodie was made by women who work in 110 degree heat for 12 to 17 hours a day, standing continuously on cement floors and not allowed even to sit down. All together, in one week, the average employee of the Hostess Cake Company in Detroit works 67 hours a week.

Most working people are on the job 40 hours a week, 8 hours a day. In Michigan there is a law that women cannot work more than 54 hours a week. The Hostess Cake Division of ITT's (International Telephone and Telegraph Co.) Continental Baking Company certainly is breaking the law, but has been protected by the Michigan Labor Department.

The Department has refused to enforce the law for over a year, supposedly because the Civil Rights Act passed in December 1969, demands equal conditions and opportunities for both women and men. The reasoning is that if men can be forced to work long hours overtime, then women should too—a backwards way of protecting people's rights and improving their lives!

Last October 10, women who work for the Hostess Cake Co. filed a suit to force the Michigan Labor Department to enforce the state labor law (Act 285 P.A. 1909) instituting the 54 hour maximum work week for women. Most of the 10 women are mothers and many are sole heads of families. Several suffer from phlebitis, a circulatory disease aggravated by continuous standing on cement floors. Twice they have gone to the Labor Department to stop their employers' violation of the state law and have been denied because the national Civil Rights Act made the maximum hour limitation for women no longer valid. Big businesses have turned the Civil Rights Act around so now it protects companies, not people. And women continue to be exploited labor, so business can make its profits.

A working woman is in a bad position from the start in this country. It is assumed that she has some man around who is the "breadwinner" for her and her children. Therefore, she is working just as a hobby or to earn a little money on the side—perhaps to buy a TV or a dishwasher—and doesn't mind being paid less than a "regular"

worker or fired without notice. In Detroit today many women have to work because their husbands are laid off and unemployment checks are not enough for a family to live on.

A few middle-class women may work with that attitude of “extra money,” but the majority of women are working out of necessity. Often they alone support their families; or their husbands can’t get a job; or the husband is paid very little, Yet working women are continually paid less for the same work; have no child-care centers; and pay out a third of their paychecks for babysitters. They get fired if they become pregnant; must work long hours in unsafe, unhealthy conditions; and (even less than men) rarely find unions that will fight for their needs.

Today big businesses are using new Civil Rights laws demanding equal treatment for all people to repeal any laws protecting women. Working women oppose the phony “equal rights amendment” for women because they knew it would also be used to take away the little legal protection they had. At this point, equal rights for women means equality of mistreatment and exploitation.

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Fifth Estate #126, March 4-17, 1971

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