

# Drug Tests

## Work's Next Insult

Fifth Estate Collective

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The recent clamor by employers for mandatory drug testing of workers threatens to add yet another humiliating dimension to wage labor. Both private and governmental concerns have expressed strong support for the idea, and it was recently given a boost by a report from the President's Commission on Organized Crime which recommended a national program which would subject most working Americans to urinalysis tests.

In Detroit, Mayor Coleman Young endorsed the suggestion for city employees as did the massive General Motors corporation.

This drug witch hunt should be seen clearly as psychological warfare on the part of employers against a work force already reeling under constant attack from capitalist austerity programs. Rather than intending to solve job-related drug problems, the testing programs are meant to demonstrate to workers that they are things purchased by their employers who may do with them as they choose. Such programs are intended to further terrorize and demoralize those in the work force who are involved in general resistance to capitalist work patterns, or fighting wage cuts, lay-offs, and concessions.

And if being forced to pee into a bottle by some stupid supervisor isn't indignity enough, it turns out that the vaunted drug testing technology is so prone to error as to make it almost useless as an accurate indication of drug use. Error rates of 20% on individual machines are not uncommon, and one study by the American Medical Association showed that labs connected with government contracts were incorrect up to 100% of the time!

Further, the machines, which read urine metabolites for drug traces, are unable to distinguish between illegal substances and many prescription medications, over-the-counter remedies (including some cough syrups and decongestants) or even elements of skin pigmentation from darker skinned people. These so-called "false positive" results have already led to the discharge of numerous people, and perhaps unknown thousands have been refused employment because their tests incorrectly indicated drug use. Also, the tests are not safe from sabotage in the form of specimen switching. Two career Army officers who swear in a lawsuit that they never used drugs in their lives came up positive on tests related to promotions they sought and claim they were done in by vengeful enlisted men who administered the tests (what a pity!).

If these tests are allowed to become a permanent part of the job market, there is every reason to expect that they will be extended into other areas. For instance, people could be required to be tested before receiving state or federal benefits such as unemployment compensation, welfare or even Social Security.

Capitalist wage work amounts to a complete surrender of one's creative powers when labor is purchased as a commodity for use in production. That period of 40 hours a week is dead time; it belongs formally to capital, but the illusion remains that our off-hours are "free-time"—free from capital's dictates. Rather, that period of our lives is where consumption of commodities and leisure takes place simply mirroring wage work. With the advent of widespread drug testing, that relationship becomes even clearer; you smoke marijuana at a party on Saturday and you will pay the consequences on Monday morning after a piss test.

Although there is tremendous opposition to these tests from almost all workers, many unions and civil liberties groups, those from whom the tests are demanded—prospective job seekers or isolated workers in low-paying industries—are often faced with the choice of either submitting or losing their livelihood.

The testing machines can be foiled, however. A double handful of salt or a capful of common household ammonia dumped into your urine sample will send the machine haywire and show a “drug-free” read-out regardless of your actual condition. This will occur since the machine will not even recognize the specimen as urine and register a “0.000” count of urine metabolites.

All of us have differing views on the propriety of drug usage, but should realize their prohibition by the state has always been used as a weapon of suppression against minorities, political dissidents and non-conformists. This latest technological wrinkle simply will increase the reign of terror already present in the workplace and must be fought. The battle lines have always been clear: capital wants our minds and our bodies 24 hours a day.

Fuck work before it fucks you.

# fifth Estate

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