COPYRIGHT / USAGE

Material on this site may be quoted or reproduced for personal and educational purposes without prior permission, provided appropriate credit is given. Any commercial use of this material is prohibited without prior permission from The Special Collections Department - Langsdale Library, University of Baltimore. Commercial requests for use of the transcript or related documentation must be submitted in writing to the address below.

When crediting the use of portions from this site or materials within that are copyrighted by us please use the citation: Used with permission of the University of Baltimore.

If you have any requests or questions regarding the use of the transcript or supporting documents, please contact us:
Langsdale Library
Special Collections Department
1420 Maryland Avenue
Baltimore, MD 21201-5779
http://archives.ubalt.edu
ELIZABETH BELL

Kay Lawal

I am a machine operator at Toppers Company. I sign in, go change my clothes, my job is very dirty, oil and grease. My job in particular, I am not only an operator but I am an adjuster...I adjust my own machine. My machine takes the piston rings and I put them in a loading cup and I place that up against the machine and the machine takes the piston rings and just files down the outer diameter of the ring smooth. No there are not a lot of women there, most of the women at Toppers are inspectors and they work in the final inspection area or are food board inspectors—inspection program that they have there. There aren't as many women machine operators but that is beginning to change and I believe that there aren't any other adjusters. Except for myself and there may be one other on the night shift. There are very few that are adjusters. I imagine that it is just many years of just not promoting women. It is more mechanical and it requires a little bit more training and the archaic views that women aren't mechanically inclined.

I came in there with a lot of mechanical background so I imagine that that is part of it.

When I first came to the job I didn't have a lot of trouble as a female. I think that they hired me as an experiment. The original job that I was hired for was alot of heavy work and no woman had ever done the job that I was doing. It was a group operator job so that meant that I was trained for four or five different kinds of machines, or operations. Each operation doing something different. The BTC unit is a very fast moving, heavy, hard job. You are on your feet the eight hours running almost. You are running 10-12 machines with somebody else and your object is to keep it all going all the time. Except at lunchtime 15 minutes on you lunch. Yeah. Then there was another part of the job which was lowering, loading conveyor belts to the grinding machine. That was a very fast job. There was one machine, 42 inch grinder which grinds the sides of the larger rings, sometimes you would have rings that weight five pounds a piece and I am short, so I would have to lift the rings up to about shoulder level and keep up with the machine at the same time. Men would line up and watch me work when ever I had to work the 42 inch. They couldn't believe that a woman could keep up with the 42 and do all the heavy lifting. I think hiring me for that position was kind of an experiment on the company's part to see if a woman with my qualifications could do heavy work in the future.

Problems, endless problems. Machinery that I work with is about world war II vintage, so you are always fixing broken down machines. Parts aren't available you improvise a lot. If the machines go down your production goes down and
you can't make a bonus if the machines are down. You can't catch up. It is real boring work for the most part. I haven't encountered... that is another thing production jobs are fairly boring. I found if I can't be an adjuster I get real bored so I have been pretty lucky to get jobs where I have been doing partial adjustments set ups and things like that. It is real hot in the summer; all they've got is fans. It can be 115 degrees near the machines. All the fans do is blow the hot air around. Fumes are pretty bad in some areas. Different areas of the plant have different problems. In our area we work with Nanthalene or Naptha which is mixed with the parphen wax and that is a Cancer causer—Napthalene. Cancer causing agent. We have to rinse the rings in it. Have to wear gloves to do that but that doesn't keep it from splashing you. In the summer and you are wearing gloves and an apron and any number of other things to keep safer or cleaner it is just too hot. In the winter it is pretty good. In some areas it is pretty drafty and in others it the heat stays around. There are a lot of accidents and they are not big accidents like in the steel mill where people loose their lives but they are enough. Hands being mangled and fingers cut off, slivers falling, back injuries from lifting too much. You know the shifts are wearing, you get two 12 minute breaks and 15 minutes for lunch and the work is hard and what makes it hard is this big production, you have to keep ahead and you have to produce so much. Not piece work but the company comes down on you if you aren't producing 100%. So, accidents happen because of that partially.

The company will have you believe that quality is the most important thing. We are a machine shop, so we use micrometers to measure different parts of the piston ring. So you have to work within so many thousands of an inch. Some, usually it is plus or minus a thousands of an inch or plus or minus (that's better) five thousands of an inch. At least at my operation. On the other side of the street where they make shifts they can not have any error at all—any thousands of a inch. Play. It is, you get really torn. The machine is operating really well and that is great because then you can produce a lot and you can produce good work. It is a real pain when the machine isn't operating very well and you are down a lot. You can get, the company can come down on you for bad work too.

I mean there is a whole process for the company to come down on you because the union is there. There is still a certain amount of leverage that the company has. If they really like you then they won't say anything. But if they don't then they will say that you are really messing up a lot. You foreman can call you in the office and give you an oral warning that you are doing bad work or that you are not producing enough or whatever he feels like doing that day.

Conduct, so, and then from the oral warning, comes the written warning as the
the from the written warning you get three days off and then five days off and then you get fired. It is such a long drawn out process that it is hard to get fired. I don't think that the average worker has a positive image of themselves. I think that the average worker doesn't like his job. Now, I am on a leave of absence because I had a tonsillectomy but I am not looking forward to going back. I like the money, the money is really good. Whenever you have a union shop in an area, when a union can be strong and get the good wage. The adjuster on my line really hate his job. He has been there for awhile and I don't think, you can not be a Coppers Co. employee unless, maybe a forman but I think the foremen hate it as much as we do, maybe in higher management or an engineer or a machinist, possibly but machineists are not real happy either. But it is really, I don't think that they feel good about their work and that doesn't help contribute to a positive image to yourselves. I like to produce things well. Most of my co workers like to produce good work, but with this heavy driving production it doesn't help and if you foreman is a jerk you might as well forget it.

What could be done? Well, thirty hour work we without a cut in pay would be great. Yeah, shorter weeks, I don't, the more control someone has over me or their lives and their jobs the better they feel about it. I really feel that, You see, I don't feel that very many changes CAN be made the way things are set up now. There's the company and the company has these people that don't do any work, who dictate down to the person on the line what they are supposed to do and they have no concept on what reality in the shop is. That is an irritation. I know co workers—you get these specs, spec sheets that specify how each ring is to be made. Well, that is all nice and fine up there they are making these things up on paper but once it gets down to the shop and you are working with the archaic machines, it just doesn't work that way. Machines wear out and material wears out and it just is not reality. So if workers had more imput into how something is produced, they would probably take more pride in their work. They would or if they didn't feel like their ideas wouldn't be stolen from them by the company. I mean any idea that comes from somebody on the floor can be taken by the company and you don't get a bonus for your idea so why bother? Why bother? There is no incentive. Most of the time, that people have good ideas— they are not listened to anyway. It is frustrating. It is like we are not intelligent or we can't see what is going on. This is real irritating.

I belong to the INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF MACHINIST AND AERO SPACE WORKERS. Sounds good. (laugh) Well, there is no doubt that the presence of the union in our shop makes a difference how we are treated as human beings. Our wages, benefits, I mean those are the main things. You don't feel
"You want to say something to me, let me call my shop steward." You don't have to take abuse. It isn't as effective as it could be for a lot of reasons. Well, the major...we just went through an election an we will have to see what happens now...the people that we just elected are younger and more radical people mor in touch with the shop and more recent years than past administrations...so some of it is effective, and some present of the union doesn't work anymore, he or she that does union work loses touch with the day to day worker. Selling out is the big problem. Union leadership often gets scared and gets more conservative than you will find the average person, average workers doesn't want a strike and to not work you know. Sometimes I have felt that the union hasn't worked in our best interest all the time. They are willing to let things slide that are important. I think the first point is being out of touch with what the average union person wants...that is the major problem. Not trying to get people to come to union meetings. Not being real open about what they are doing with our union dues or grievances a lack of education, trying to educated the union membership about what the union can do for us. Somany people have been disappointed and gotten cynical about what the union is. A lot of people talk about the union as company, company union. That is ridiculous because the Machinists is not a company union. It is a large national. It is just a matter of trying to instill a certain amount of optimism about on the part of the average person that they can have input into this particular organization and that this organization main --remains specifically for them, for us. To argue our case.

I don't think that foreign trade has anything to do with lack of employment. I have asked that question to quite a few people and there is a lot of differences, especially to the auto workers. There is a certain amount of it that does cause unemployment here but we have to keep in mind that who employs us, it is not Japanese companies, they are american companies and they make the decisions on what is going to be made in factories. The GM plant here, if they would have switched over to smaller cars earlier then there would be a certain amount of competition. The auto manufacturer in this country decided that they weren't going to do that for one reason or anothe or, who knows what goes through their minds. Maybe they thought that they would earn more money by making big cars in the shorter period of time. They don't suffer any losses anyway even if they don't have a profit. they always just write it off. So it, it is really not the Japanese
The Japanese workers work too under similar conditions that we do and they are no the problem... the American companies are the problems. The head of the corporations are the problems here. They hire and fire us. They are the ones that lay us off. I don't have any feelings about that one way or another. It is our economic system that needs to have people laid off all the time.

It is a way of stirring up all the BUY AMERICAN thing this nationalism, this patriotic b ad one that a friend was telling me that he had a friend that worked at one of the GM plants. One of the workers came in driving a Toyota and they got one of the machines and smashed it into a pulp. It is really amazing but the got it on tape. They say it actually happened.

Government in this country wants to get people in this country riled up. They are using Japan to do it. It keeps the workers divided. Then they regret the Japanese Americans on the line with them and then they start getting up set about the person with the accident on the line too—taking somebody's job.

The person—get mad at women for taking jobs and get mad at blacks for taking jobs it goes right down the line. It keeps them from thinking of the fact that workers are exploited all over the world. There is a commonality with the people on the line all over the world, rather than the lines in just America.

Oh yeah, there is room for me to advance. I am young because I had some education I have also shown that I work. I am not so sure that it is there for the young black worker, I am not sure that it is there for most of the women. I have just been fortunate enough to they seem to want to advance me. We will wait till so sort of advancement into management, although that is not what I am wanting, but there is a little room for me to move up into another kind of adjuster's job.

I think that for the most part that the awareness of the national issues, of the racism and the sexism and things like that on the job. I have found that it is mostly young workers and mostly the minority workers that have some conscientiousness about what is going on. There are some exception I would not say that the average young white worker talks very much, thinks very much or notices very much how the young black worker is not getting promoted or is being given a harder time about things. I don't think that there is a broad awareness and that is part of what the unions should be doing, making us more aware. Often time I would say that my coworkers tend to get into more trouble with the company because they are willing to say, "This is shit. You know, you don't give it to me" that kind of thing. Where as white workers are still willing to bend a little more and they don't get as much anyway to start with. It is just old attitudes.