Editor’s Page

Guest Editorial by Fred Mittag

A Brief History of Work

For artisans, work was good during the Middle Ages. At 14, a boy might proudly be apprenticed to a master craftsman. By 21, he was called a journeyman, and finally became a master. They belonged to trade guilds, to which they paid dues. They took a lot of pride in their work.

A cobbler did everything, beginning with the leather and measuring his client’s foot. When the boots were made, he could hold them up and look, knowing they were 100% his creation. The

cobbler worked from his own home and had freedom in managing his time. Such trades were called "cottage industries."

In 1733, there were a series of inventions, beginning in the textile industry, and then broadening to the invention of steam power and other machines. These machines replaced hand-manufacturing techniques. No longer could a worker look at a piece of finished work and call it his own. Mass production replaced cottage industries. Quality was lost, but goods became available to more people.

People displaced by the new machines came to the towns to work in the factories. They submitted to bosses and the clock, no longer free to choose their own hours. They no longer had their home gardens and became dependent on money for their survival. History calls this sea change the Industrial Revolution.

Thousands of people lost work with the invention of a new machine. The streets of London filled with destitute and hopeless people drinking cheap gin. The new machines were dangerous and when a worker lost his arm – too bad, he was out of work. As wages went down, children worked, in competition with grown men, chained to their machines. Charles Dickens knew something about these conditions.

Building factories required more money than any individual had. So groups pooled their money, with each one having stock in the company; then they hired a manager. The way the manager made the stockholders happy was to generate maximum production at minimum cost in labor. Unlike a master, his wife, and his live-in apprentice, a corporation was a cold and impersonal arrangement.

In 1914, in Ludlow, Colorado, 1,200 coal miners went on strike to win the right to organize. The Colorado National Guard attacked their shantytown and burned it to the ground. Two women and 11 children burned to death. Nineteen people died.

After the Ludlow Massacre, President Woodrow Wilson signed the Clayton Act, prohibiting the prosecution of union members. Twenty years later, Franklin Roosevelt signed the National Labor Relations Act that protected the right to organize.

Only 400 Americans now own more wealth than half of all Americans ***combined*** – unbelievable, but true. Work is out-sourced to India and wages have stagnated for many years. Tax responsibility has shifted from the very rich down to workers. Americans now compete with labor from Chinese prisons.

Republican governors are busy with union busting, against President Obama's feeble protest. Governor Walker in Wisconsin is beholden to the Koch brothers, as was proved by a prank telephone call that he eagerly accepted. Unregulated capitalism becomes a cold-blooded Behemoth.