

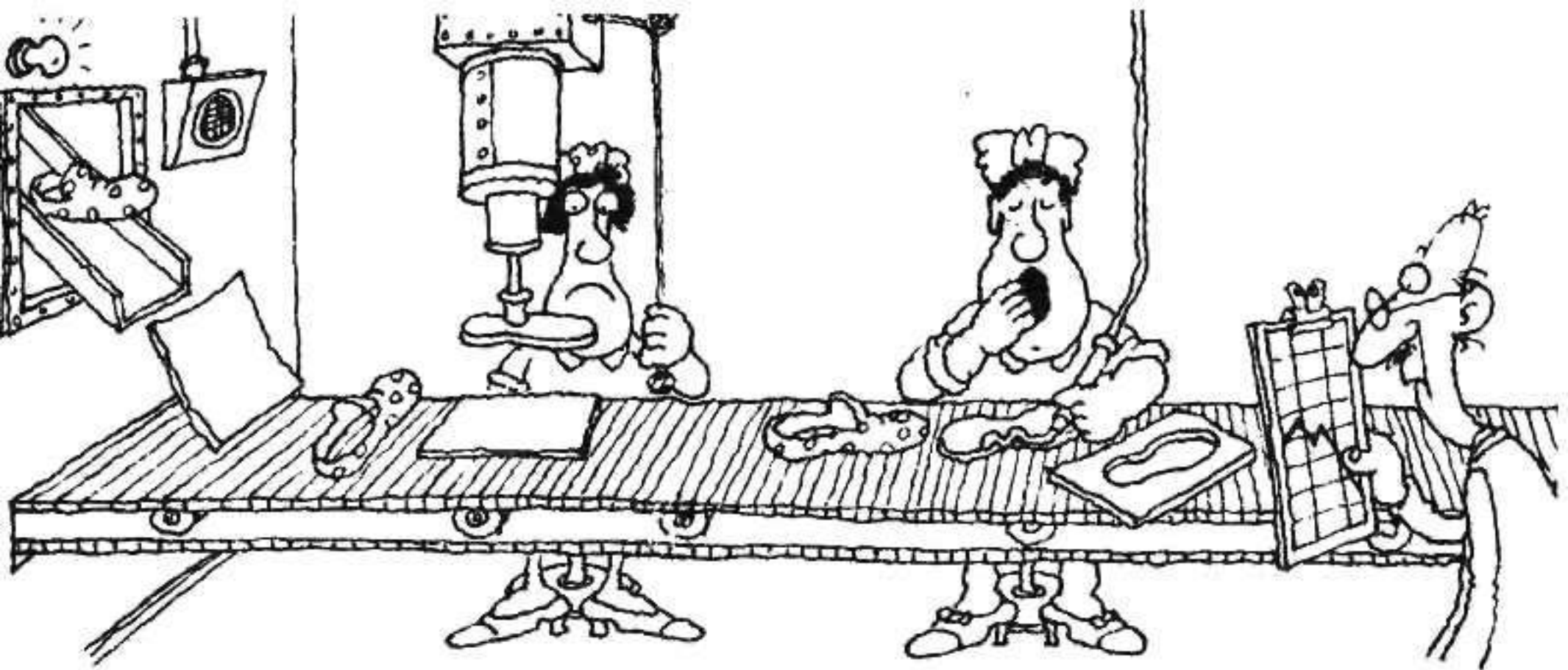
WORKERS & MENTAL HEALTH

Critical Health intends raising the issue of mental health in subsequent issues. To initiate discussion, we offer some ideas on mental health and its relationship to the working class in South Africa. Comment on the article will be welcomed; please send to P.O. Box 2313, Johannesburg.

Many people are called "mad" or "schizophrenic" or "mentally confused" by the medical establishment (the last label is the most common psychiatric diagnosis at Baragwanath Hospital in Soweto). There is a tendency to believe that such people suffer from some kind of sickness. We are told that some people, particularly workers, blacks and women, are somehow physically predisposed to "mental illness" in the same way that some people are vulnerable to T.B. We are also led to believe that, given the right cure - eg. drugs or institutionalization - the problem will disappear.

Recent research has shown, however, that just as T.B. is related to poverty and inadequate social services, and heart attacks occur almost totally amongst the affluent, so "mental illness" is a response to the social conditions under which we are forced to live. There is an increasingly strong view amongst mental health workers that what is called "mental illness" is often caused by a system of making profit for the few, and is not a sickness.

Workers, because of the particular conditions of their oppression, experience a great deal of mental suffering and breakdown. They spend most of their lives doing repetitive jobs in bad conditions for poor wages. This they do to produce goods which they will seldom enjoy using. Both inside and outside the workplace they are isolated from each other. For example, trade unions face a tough battle against the racial divisions of apartheid as they struggle for better working and living conditions for their members. The unemployed face boredom, frustration and a constant battle to survive. In addition, pass laws and harassment create general stress for all.



BORING JOBS DRIVE PEOPLE MAD

Mental health workers are realising more and more that as long as they view mental suffering in isolation, divorced from its social causes, they continue to blame individuals for social and political injustices. In so doing, they protect the interests of the apartheid society that oppresses us.

WORKERS' RIGHTS LAW OF ITALY (1974)

- + Workers have the right to meet during working hours.
- + Workers have the right to protection against victimisation.
- + Doctors paid by employers have no power in the factory. These doctors are not allowed to give doctor's certificates for sick leave. Certificates are given by state health service.
- + Workers have the right to call in any experts they want to help them solve their problems.
- + Workers have a right to set up union health services in every factory.