Older Workers Not Wanted in Mass-Production Industries, Survey Shows

Older workers, when thrown out of their customary jobs, find it almost impossible to gain a foothold even in such relatively new mass-production industries as radio manufacturing. Conversely, such industries offer the greatest market for the labor of young, relatively unskilled workers. This is one of the salient facts presented in a monograph entitled "The Labor Force of the Philadelphia Radio Industry in 1936", prepared by the National Research Project of the Works Progress Administration and made public today by Administrator Harry L. Hopkins.

Radio manufacturing is a relatively new but important industry in Philadelphia, the report points out, achieving a position among the top ten during a period of the last fifteen years. This industry was chosen as an example of the type of mass-production industry which has reached maturity during the depression. The majority of workers engaged in the production of radio receiving sets perform routine, "assembly line" operations which can be mastered within a period varying from a week to a month. In consequence, young, inexperienced workers are hired. One fifth of the total labor force in 1936 had had no gainful occupation prior to work in the radio industry, and the average age of radio workers in Philadelphia in 1936 was approximately four and one-half years below the average for all workers in the city.
"The outstanding fact developed by the study," Corrington Gill, Assistant Administrator in charge of research, says in his letter of transmittal, "is that although the growth of this new industry in Philadelphia has undoubtedly afforded employment opportunities for some workers who were displaced from older and declining industries in the area, it was only the younger workers who were absorbed.

"This fact becomes more significant when it is realized that the major establishments in the radio manufacturing industry are not new but have existed in the area for a long period of years as producers either of musical instruments, storage batteries, or ignition equipment. It was found that, in spite of this, only one-eighth of the labor force in 1936 consisted of workers who had been employed by these plants prior to their introduction of radio manufacture, and that this group was concentrated in the skilled occupations."

Regarding workers drawn from other industries into the manufacture of radios, the report states that: "Even in those instances in which the industry found it necessary to employ skilled workers, such as machinists and cabinet-makers, it was only the younger workers in those skilled occupations who were absorbed."

As to the comparative degree of skills between former and present occupations, the report makes the following observation: "A comparison of the grade of skill in pre-radio employment relative to that of present or last employment in the radio industry reveals that over half the workers were engaged in work of the same grade of skill on both jobs. Of those who changed their grade of skill, the majority either lowered it or transferred from a non-production occupation, such as clerical or sales work, to a production occupation."
The report is issued in a 102-page booklet with numerous charts and illustrations and with an appendix of statistical tables. It was prepared by Gladys L. Palmer and Ada M. Stoflet as one in a series of studies conducted by the Works Progress Administration's National Research Project directed by David Weintraub and Irving Kaplan. The Industrial Research Department of the University of Pennsylvania cooperated in this study.