

# The Reader's Digest

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Check inflation at the source!

## Unskilled Workers: \$214 a Month

By Albert J. Engel\* . . . Member of Congress from Michigan

WE ARE making war on inflation everywhere except at the spot where it starts. It starts at the point where the government pours money into the cash drawer of the makers of war goods. If not checked there, it will be extremely difficult to check elsewhere.

I am a member of the House committee which looks after War Department appropriations. I believe it to be my duty not merely to provide funds for this war but to see what is being done with them. To find out why a 30-ton tank costs \$90,000 and a 105-mm. gun costs \$21,000, I have visited 47 war plants, interviewing personnel and inspecting books.

What I saw has made it abundantly clear to me why our war is costing so much and why inflation is on the march. The story of inflation is to be found in the payrolls of our war factories. The figures I use here are not figures I got from a fellow who got them from another fellow. I have certified copies of the actual payrolls.

When you look at a payroll you see names, wages and occupations — welders, drillers, filers, assemblers, and so on. This looks like highly

skilled labor. But when you go into the plant and see and talk with the people at the drills and machines, you find out that a lot of it is not skilled at all. Workers who are really skilled should get high wages; but in our war plants excessive wages are being paid to people with little or no skill.

Many plants have training courses where they turn a housewife or a youthful cornhusker into a welder or driller or even an "electrician" in a couple of weeks or a month. Here is an advertisement which has been put into many newspapers by the U. S. Employment Service — government-operated — and which tells its own story. It is topped by the picture of a beautiful girl. Then follows:

This is Louise Blank, Badge No.—, who won beauty contests before the war. Now she is helping to win the war by welding on Liberty ships in the Richmond shipyards. Changing over from a housewife to a welder has left her smile intact.

Then comes the meat in the coconut:

You can do what Louise is doing! We will train you to weld and pay you at the rate of \$214 a month *during the short training period*. Soon you'll be equipped with knowledge

\* Mr. Engel is donating the payment he received for this article to army welfare purposes.



## UNSKILLED WORKERS: \$214 A MONTH

that will win you pay up to \$270 a month.

Is it hard work? Can a frail woman handle a heavy welding torch? Another government ad shows a smiling girl in evening clothes, who says:

I find my work no harder than a good day's housekeeping. My welding torch weighs only one pound. I earn \$270 a month. There's a job like that waiting for you.

If she or he works on the swing (or early night) shift there is a 10 percent wage increase; on the graveyard or late night shift the addition is 15 percent. Translated into weekly earnings this means that an 18-year-old girl just out of high school or a grocery clerk can get \$49.28 a week while learning and then soon earn \$62.30 regular weekly pay, \$68.50 on the swing shift or \$71.69 on the graveyard shift. Wages suitable for highly skilled artisans who have spent years learning their trades are being paid to people for work which they can do after a few weeks' training on a one-purpose machine tool.

Machine-gun assembler! That sounds like a very skilled occupation. But a buck private in a machine-gun outfit must know how to knock down and reassemble a machine gun to the smallest part — *and do it blindfolded*. Pay: \$50 a month, board and lodging. But here in a war plant a man gets from \$4700 to \$8741 a year for the same work — minus the risk. If Lieutenant General Brehon Somervell who heads the whole sup-

ply division of the army, were to throw up his job and take to gun assembling, he could get a pay raise of \$241. He gets only \$8500.

These rates, so far as I can learn, are not union rates. I found plants paying twice the union rates. I asked about this. I was told those rates were "obsolete."

In one plant I took the names of 25 filers on machine guns. These men are now getting from \$4200 to \$8004 a year. I compared their earnings in 1941 and 1942. In 1941 they earned collectively \$87,000. In 1942 they got \$171,000 — just about double. I found similar conditions elsewhere.

Totally unskilled workers are also getting fat pay checks. One elderly gentleman told me, "I am 67 years old. I was a pensioner at 40 bucks a month. Now I am a sweeper in the factory at 40 bucks a week. Easy money, eh?" In one plant I found two elevator men getting more than \$60 a week. A janitor in one plant was getting \$61 a week — more than some of the lower-bracket engineers. Another advertisement of the U. S. Employment Service reads: "Dishwashers, waiters and kitchen men. Wages \$250 a month, board and lodging. Olympic Commissary."

There is no special skill required of a stock chaser. It is the kind of work for which industrial plants pay from \$25 to \$35 a week. Yet I found stock chasers getting \$201 a month with \$283 overtime. *Total: \$484 a month — \$5808 a year.* I found another plant where the average pay

of the whole plant is \$5100 a year with big Christmas bonuses in addition.

All this not only adds to the cost of the war, but it is bad for morale. The people who work in these war plants at these high wages live next door to people who still hold down jobs in civilian plants at very little above the old levels. What is going on in the minds of people who are getting the old wages, now frozen? In the mind, for instance, of a girl getting \$18 or \$25 in a store while one of her former fellow saleswomen gets \$67 a week?

The mistake we made was to let wages get outrageously out of balance before we froze them. For instance, the 15 nonoperating railroad and steamship brotherhoods—clerks, station and express employees—say bitterly that they have gotten no raise at all since the war, that their wages are frozen at prewar levels and they have agreed not to strike. Our government gets piously

indignant at coal miners who must work hard at a highly skilled and dangerous occupation to earn \$40 a week while that same government offers \$250 a month, board and lodging to dishwashers, and pays girls \$55.80 a week to learn how to mend shoes at a government arsenal. The government cannot create these wide differences in wages and expect the people to like it.

The flood of excessive wages in our war plants is creating a vast excess of purchasing power, putting a pressure on prices which OPA seems powerless to control. This results in inflation. At the same time, excessive costs force the government to engage in excessive borrowing, which is also inflationary. This situation is extremely dangerous.

The Administration and the leaders in business and in labor must rise to the heights of the highest courage, bring the whole menacing spiral to a halt, and then seek as quickly as possible to revise it.