

Ageism

Some weeks ago Radio Four broadcast a phone-in about ageism in the workplace. The subject was topical with the media at the time, several people having cited examples of how they had been turned down for a job in favour of someone younger. Consequently it was felt that employers, intent on the training (or otherwise) of younger people, whom they see as being more likely to offer them years of service, were unjust and deliberately excluded older people from employment.

In response people have come forward to declare that not only is the older person more alert than the younger person but will often possess more staying power. Now I'm sure employers everywhere will be delighted to hear some members of the working class demonstrating their willingness to be exploited, often at the expense of other workers of other ages who may not have that same urge to prove either their outstanding alertness or their indefatigable staying power. And yes, I am only too aware that the members of the working class must present themselves as attractively as possible—otherwise no money, no bread. Neither do I in any way underestimate the anguish felt by those who seek to find work and discover that age is against them. Still I cannot but hope that one day people might wake up to the fact that they are treated as only commodities, and that they are given work to do (at the right price and as long as they have what capitalism requires) even though other workers must be rejected.

So instead of entering into the debate (like lambs to the slaughter) about whether or not because one is over thirty or forty or fifty, one is all washed up, or alternatively, one is alert with much staying power, it might be more to the point if it was realised that no matter how wonderfully fitted we may be to do capitalism's work for it, there will always be, nonetheless, people of whatever age whose services will not be required. In any case the logic of the kind of reasoning which says who should have jobs and who should not, does tend to suggest that if one is female, slim and considered to be "pretty" then one might very well be a better bet to be employed as a shop assistant or a secretary, than, say, a fatter woman with a wart at the end of her nose. Capitalism has always preferred us to sort it out among ourselves; it makes the system's job so much easier.

It is not a happy experience witnessing one's fellow humans vying with each other as to whom is the most employable—the young, the old, the smart, the scruffy, and so on, in the race to be exploited. And I wonder why it does not seem to have occurred to more people that simply being human makes us natural assets to one another. That some of us may be good at this and others of us may be good at that. What more ideal situation could we have in existence for a new world where age doesn't have to come into it because our contribution is valuable and no price be set upon it?.

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