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LABOR STATISTICS and CLASS STRUGGLE

By Marc Linder
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Preface

Unlike scholarly perception of the administrative process, which high jurisprudential authority has characterized as “no more conservative or liberal than the elevator in the Senate Office Building,” economists at times have candidly given voice to popular suspicions about the neutrality of statistics: “The selection of a particular index out of several, or even the question of which prices to include . . . is part of the political power struggle.”

Such skepticism toward the political origins, design, collection, and uses of economic data is in part based on the insight that counting methods embody assumptions about the objects of enumeration. In spite of this burgeoning epistemological awareness, economists and historians have devoted little attention to tracing the ideologies underlying individual statistical series. Even where scholars have succeeded in peeling off the imperial raiments that methodologically shroud venerable and seemingly straightforward data, they have often failed to penetrate beyond explanations that focus on bureaucratic inertia.

The following exemplary social histories of statistical politics deal with two series that reflect core aspects of the antagonistic relationship between labor and capital. The first, unit labor costs, captures, albeit distortedly, the income-related outcome of struggles over exploitation. The second, workplace deaths, sheds light on the fatal costs imposed by the process of extraction of surplus from workers. Whereas the history of the enumeration of industrial fatalities has largely been one of malignant neglect, the course of unit labor costs has been ideologically much more complex and contentious.

Gail Hollander, John Houghton, Harry Magdoff, Andrew Morriss, Victor Perlo, and Larry Zacharias incisively criticized the manuscript; Morriss generated the graphs; and Magdoff, Perlo, and Jürgen Kuczynski generously furnished background information.
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