

Do You Remember Soylent Green?

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DO YOU REMEMBER SOYLENT GREEN? This timeless movie starring Charlton Heston depicted seniors making a choice to die with dignity aided by assisted suicide. In 1973, the concept of assisted suicide was just beginning to emerge. The '70s were a time when young Americans challenged the values of prior generations. Sex and sin were okay and indulged among friends and strangers. Wife swapping and other risky behaviors were tolerated. The '70s also introduced integration of the work force in America, when women and minorities, black and brown workers gained entry to a white male dominated world. Values continue to shift.

Recently, some American corporations pursuing profit have challenged the value of experience and loyalty provided by their senior employees. A question emerges, "Can policy be leveraged to protect older women and minority employees (like it has for white men) by using a case of reverse discrimination?" What would happen if a group of senior workers presented a case that claimed reverse discrimination by a corporation that displaces seniors for younger workers, on grounds that their employer/employee contracts were breeched because their replacements were less expensive? At first glance, the '70s were supposed to represent freedom for women and inclusion of minorities. Two generations later, the 21st Century has evolved into the removal of older workers; anyone over thirty is threatened. The struggle with discrimination is submerged beneath the fear of job loss.

The more things change, the more they stay the same. In 1963, Congress received a Civil Rights Bill authored by President Kennedy to deal with discrimination in employment, education, public accommodations and voting. In 2009, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission still struggles with the employment of Hispanic Americans who are often discriminated against by others, including those in some protected groups. At second glance over the past 40 years, looking at the progress or vision from the '70s when corporations opened doors to new ways to view and manage ethics, discrimination and harassment, things are not much better under the surface. Seniors are still being forced into retirement too early, too often. Consultants who now deliver harassment training in corporate environments are challenged to walk a thin line of acceptance by their corporate clients and protecting the rights of the employees who depend on their educating them on their rights.

Employees are trained to take their concerns to their employers i.e. to supervisors, HR, or diversity officers who are also on the payroll. This is the primary reason why women and minority seniors do not report harassment, and fear loss of their retirement and other benefits. In fact workers, especially seniors, do not feel protected by the law or the courts. Like the judicial system, corporations are tainted by political decisions that skim the surface of the law, ethics and fairness based on a party's dictates. In a microcosm of our society, we can examine the complexities our seniors face daily. Senior perks are challenged by younger employees as preferential. Seniors are often eradicated from the workforce and placed into senior camps (senior complexes) to protect them or otherwise exploit them.

They are laid off or fired because they are felt to be too expensive, after investing years of opportunity costs toward the corporate bottom line. Was the '70s a prophetic view of our society today? Age discrimination affects women, blacks, white men and Hispanic seniors alike. After age 30, a career can end abruptly without any justification except the bottom line. Only one step remains to bring the prophetic Soylent Green to life, which is to have the senior finish the cycle of corporate disenfranchisement by agreeing to assisted suicide, decreasing their retirement costs.



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