

Shelve with: Western Assembly on Changing World of Work C.1

Remarks of

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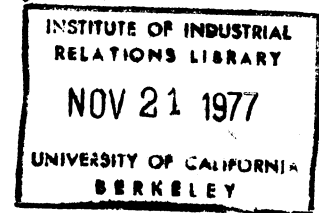
Western Assembly on the Changing World of Work

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A LABOR VIEWPOINT



Having been given the job of presenting labor's appraisal of the "changing world of work," I am happy to say that I think this is certainly one area in which there is a reasonably harmonious "labor point of view." If we in the labor movement sometimes appear unmoved by the "sound and fury" created in this discussion, it is because we are simultaneously amused and annoyed with the way in which this topic has now become fashionable. To us, changing the world of work is the very reason for our existence, and we feel that we have scarcely been given the credit due for the blood we have shed in its cause.

Real understanding of this subject requires an examination of the fundamental objections to industrial employment (and keypunch rooms and typing pools are included in this discussion). If we honestly want to evaluate what progress has been made, how it has been made, and what the prospects are for the future, we must go back to first principles.

To begin with, let us remember that the phrase "worker alienation" was not invented yesterday. It originated in the 19th century when it was first appreciated that workers had become merely employees and that in the process they had lost control over the conditions and nature of their work. Rapid changes in technique and in organization of production quickly made it apparent that the particular kind of technological progress encouraged by the new system would systematically downgrade the skill and initiative required of the individual worker; this would inevitably erode society's regard for workers as individuals, a fact that was patently obvious to workers at the time. Today most of us take employee status for granted but we must remember that when the factory system was first introduced, factory employment was taken up usually only as a last resort.

When the profit motive became the principal investment criterion, a special toll was exacted from workers subjected to the discipline of the "most productive techniques."

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Adam Smith, describing the human and social costs of the division of labor, characterized the effect thus:

"The man whose whole life is spent in performing a few simple operations . . . has no occasion to exert his understanding, or to exercise his invention in finding out expedients for removing difficulties which never occur. He naturally loses, therefore, the habit of such exertion. . . . The torpor of his mind renders him, not only incapable of relishing or bearing a part in any rational conversation, but of conceiving any generous, noble, or tender sentiment, and consequently of forming any just judgment concerning many even of the ordinary duties of private life. . . . The uniformity of his stationary life . . . corrupts even the activity of his body, and renders him incapable of exerting his strength with vigour and perseverance, in any other employment than that to which he has been bred. His dexterity at his own particular trade seems, in this manner, to be acquired at the expence of his intellectual, social and martial virtues. . . ."

I do not repeat this here as an accurate picture of the average working man today, but the fact that workers today have more character, imagination and humanity than Adam Smith attributed to the workers of his day is more a testimony to the strength of the human spirit than to the progress we have made in changing the world of work.

Unfortunately, many of the fundamental relationships between a man and his work established at the beginning of the industrial revolution persist today; the world of work has regretfully changed much less than we would like. To mention just a few:

Working hours are fixed by management: the worker who attempts to take unpaid time off will lose his job.

Basic pay is in most cases still inadequate.

Income security for the worker, especially in the United States is tied to the particular job. If management is incompetent and the firm folds or the plant runs down, the worker suffers through no fault of his own.

Finally, working people have little control over the physical conditions in which they work: it is the employer who builds and chooses plant design and

technology and who makes the initial decision as to what proportion of the resources under his control to allocate to health and safety. These choices are still based on the calculus of private profitability -- costs borne by workers, such as ill health or reduced life expectancy, are irrelevant to these decisions.

Let us now look at what progress has been made toward ameliorating these fundamentally undesirable features and at how that progress has been accomplished.

Through collective bargaining, over the years the labor movement has proven its willingness to sacrifice additional pay for longer vacations, additional holidays, rest periods, etc. But we are not complacent: the element of sacrifice is still there and will be there as long as workers are not satisfied that their incomes are adequate.

Workers today are dissatisfied with their pay not merely because their wants have increased: even according to official statistics, the average non-supervisory worker does not earn enough to provide an urban family of four with a standard of living equal to that set by the lowest of the so-called "adequate" budgets computed by the Bureau of Labor Statistics. In addition, when a worker's wife goes out to work (or vice versa) to compensate for this inadequacy, the family usually is being doubly burdened, since our society provides scarcely any facilities for child care.

With respect to a worker's control over his or her "overall standard of living," we must bear in mind that the U. S. is unique in the inadequacy of public provisions for health, pensions, disability insurance, etc. Contrary to labor's preferences, these are now job-related: when we haven't been able to get legislation to provide public benefits we have bargained hard with employers to get them to provide such benefits for our members as a second-best solution. The result has been that more and more aspects of a worker's "true standard of living" are provided in fringe benefits. The worker's total wellbeing is more and more tied to his or her particular job and length of service. Thus the penalties for changing jobs or losing a job weigh more heavily: the "opportunity cost" of working part-time or trying to change jobs has increased enormously.

Finally, in our attempts to get improvements in physical working conditions, we have found that even elementary remedial steps such as putting safety guards on dangerous machinery, providing adequate protective clothing, scouring slippery floors, etc., are usually taken only when they can be shown to coincide with higher profits and productivity. Where there is a conflict between productivity and improvement, the struggle is long and bitter. The difficulties of this struggle have shown that collective bargaining is not always an adequate tool. Thus the labor movement has also had to fight for legislation: to rouse public opinion to impose legal sanctions on employers who might otherwise view their labor force as mere grist for the industrial mills.

Legislation alone is not always adequate. In spite of our having worked hard to get the Occupational Safety and Health Act passed, the employers' lobby managed to limit funding for enforcement. Consequently, employers' observance of the law has been spotty. Therefore, in UAW's recent negotiations we have successfully bargained for access to the information an employer is required to submit to OSHA inspectors and for the right to monitor an employer's compliance with the law. We have also got the employers to pay the workers responsible for this monitoring for the time they spend on health and safety work. Thus we are constantly moving back and forth between government action and independent collective bargaining to exert pressure for progress wherever we can.

Up to now our efforts have had to take place in conflict situations. Conflicts are bound to arise when management unilaterally decides what is its province. In addition there is often a fundamental conflict of interest between profits and workers' welfare. Part of this struggle over the allocation of company revenue arises from the double standard applied in the allocation decision. Workers are keenly sensitive to the fact that management has one approach to its own comfort and another when it considers what is "good enough for the workers." For example, when it comes to furnishing offices and boardrooms the expense is considered a fixed-cost overhead. When it comes to providing lockers or clean dining areas for workers, the effect on productivity must first be calculated. This double standard cannot be tolerated any longer.

Workers and their union representatives claim the right to a decent life on the job even if this has to be paid for out of profits. As long ago as 1966, the tripartite (labor, government, business) National Commission on Technology, Automation and Economic Progress appointed by an act of Congress, recognized that such a reallocation of resources was justified. The Commission advised that:

"... if productivity in the past has been oriented to the increase in the amounts of goods, some of its savings in the future can be utilized to bring a greater satisfaction in work for the individual ... " (p. 90)

(Only two of the business members of the Commission dissented from this statement.)

Unfortunately, employers by and large get interested in workers' well-being on the job only when it can be shown that this will raise profits, or in full-employment situations such as in Scandinavia when employers are forced to compete for workers. When the priorities of labor and management conflict, the struggle is inevitably bitter regardless of the intrinsic merits of the workers' case. To give just one example: in 1961 we had to go on strike just to assure that assembly line workers could in fact take advantage of the relief time to which they theoretically were entitled. Yet management fought us because complying with our demand meant increased costs from hiring additional relief workers. What was the reaction of those responsible for influencing public opinion? The press ridiculed us. Time magazine contemptuously christened it "The Toilet Strike" and described it as "an outbreak of autumnal madness." Today that same press declares its commitment to the now-fashionable cause of job enrichment. This is how cynicism and alienation in the labor movement is nurtured. It is not too hard to see why the labor movement thinks that too much of what has been written about "job quality" has ignored or downgraded labor's efforts.

These struggles continue -- these problems are not simply part of the "bad old days": we had considerable difficulty getting Ford to accept the limited overtime agreement won from Chrysler. International Harvester, which had had voluntary overtime in its contract for years, tried very strenuously to get a degree of compulsion, and this was a major factor in leading to a strike there.

To take another example, we have found that labor's interest in better product quality and design is consistently ignored and instead anathema has been heaped on workers' heads: they are accused of being the first to lose that Great American Work Ethic. Let me also take this opportunity to set this record straight.

The UAW, for example, has consistently urged U.S. auto firms to compete with foreign cars on price, design and quality both on the domestic market and overseas. John DeLorean's (former GM Vice-President and Group Executive in charge of all GM car and truck divisions in North America) recent like-minded statements on the subject are the first indication of a similar viewpoint on the management side -- and he spoke up publicly only after he had left GM. As we see it, such price and quality competition would hold out not only the possibility of a positive contribution by the auto industry toward easing balance-of-payments problems but also possibilities for more jobs and more satisfying jobs for auto workers. Unfortunately, the American auto industry has traditionally pursued very different policies: workers on the line have on occasion been forced to install defective parts against their will. Workers have also constantly had to resist management's attempts to increase the work pace, an attempt that if successful would, among other things, guarantee shoddy workmanship; there are physical and mental limits to how many tasks a man can perform per hour, hour after hour. Workers do like to take pride in what they produce but management policies such as these make it difficult. Why should workers allow themselves to be demoralized by management's insatiable lust for profit? Yet workers are constantly being put in the position of having to defend themselves and their work from management's corrosive influence. This is one reason why we have fought hard to maintain the right to strike even while contracts are in effect over increases in work pace or in the number of tasks a worker must perform.

The lack of recognition of labor's long-standing efforts and contributions to hard-won progress in changing the world of work is keenly felt, but we persevere nonetheless. We were concerned with these issues long before the

press developed the Lordstown strike into a journalistic fad. To give just one example of the breadth of our appreciation of the problem, I would like to cite part of the resolution of our 1966 Convention:

"People at work do not check their humanity at the plant door. The cold calculus of efficiency must be mitigated by consideration for the workers as human beings. The work pace must leave them enough energy at the end of the day to enjoy their time at home with their families. The environment in which they perform their labors must be as clean, as healthy, and as pleasant as it is possible to make it. The attitudes toward workers of those having managerial responsibility must conform to the democratic concept of the worth and dignity of every individual. Jobs must be adapted to the physical and mental needs of people and not vice versa. Ingenuity must be devoted to counteracting and reversing the tendency of an advancing technology to deprive work of its creative and rewarding content. Imaginative new ways must be found to enable workers to participate democratically in decisions affecting the nature of their work."

We are still committed to these principles not only for our own members but for all working people. Although many of the benefits we have won now extend to unorganized labor as well, the historical record will show that when significant progress toward these goals has been made, it has been the organized workers who have been the initiators and fighters. Our struggles in the past mean that we know from experience what it takes to progress: the amount of suffering and bitterness the labor movement has incurred in this struggle should not be underestimated.

But putting bitterness aside for the moment, what prospects do we see for changing the world of work in the future?

Any realistic approach must give due attention to an age-old employee point of view that sees work as an unpleasant necessity: the less time spent on the job, the better. There will always be some jobs from which monotony or discomfort cannot be eliminated and in these cases we may have to respect the desire to do as little of that kind of work as possible. However, we in the labor movement also have positive ideas and we seek support from other groups in our efforts to improve working conditions.

We have learned that progress requires struggle: thus the first order of business in "changing the world of work" is establishing priorities. Although on occasion our past attempts to remedy the basics have been criticized for being too narrow-minded or petty, we hope that is now behind us. Secondly, in setting priorities, both for legislative action and for influencing public opinion (as well as in collective bargaining), due respect should be paid to what rank-and-file employees see as their best interest. We also recognize the importance of an interchange between professionals and ordinary working people and we hope the former will come to understand the sources of some of the mistrust for their proposals expressed occasionally by the latter.

At the moment, we very much hope and expect that the agreements between the UAW and several major companies providing for joint committees on improving the work environment and job enrichment will establish a pattern for the future. In the past, we have frequently reminded management that any unilateral attempt by them to introduce so-called job enrichment programs is bound to be met with suspicion and to be resisted by workers because of management's history of putting profits first. These recent agreements give us equal participation in program development. It will help us in our attempts to ensure that innovations do not conflict with workers' interests. We expect that this in turn will aid successful implementation of any programs the committee selects.

Although recommended by the Automation Commission back in 1966, we still think there is an urgent need for basic research into production technology that takes account of the "human" factor and not merely the "labor" factor of production.

We would like to be able to get in on the ground floor: to encourage basic research in production technology that will have built-in pollution control, more rewarding job content, and reasonable work pace. This is not a pious hope. There are examples of management involving workers in the early design stages of the new plant they were to work in.

Recently, I was invited by management and the UAW local union involved to visit the new Detroit area plant of Borg & Beck, a division of Borg-Warner Corporation. The machining plant is air-conditioned. When I inquired if the air-conditioning was required for the product, I was told: no, for the people.

Before the plant was built, a scale model was made, including layout of the product lines. Workers were brought in groups to inspect the model and invited to make criticisms and suggestions. As a result of this many worthwhile changes were made.

The Company vice-president urged me to visit with each worker in the plant. This I did and found they were uniformly proud of their Union and their Company.

But then I came across one worker who shut off his machine and scowled. "I suppose everybody is telling you this is a good place to work," he said. As a matter of fact, they are, was my reply. What's your problem? "Well," he said, "they used to tell me I earned my living with the sweat of my brow and now the s. o. b. 's have taken that away from me." With that, the scowl disappeared and a broad smile lit up his face.

Now that was a brand new plant. But I also visited the Borg & Beck plant in Chicago, which was an old plant well within the city. Obviously, it was not in the same condition as the Detroit plant, but the spirit of the people was the same. When I entered the plant, workers from all over the plant moved to the entrance way and held up a banner sign welcoming me. Then one of their number conducted them in the singing of our Union song, "Solidarity." When that was over, he turned to the Company vice-president, who had once been manager of that plant, and told him -- "Rudy, if you had a Company song, we'd have sung that too."

The important point is that mutual respect is the first essential ingredient in tackling the problem.

Management can always find that workers can contribute useful suggestions that improve the efficiency of the operation and make a worker's life on the job easier. But again these are the cases where there is harmony of goals rather than conflict.

Finally, we hope that those in a position to influence public opinion will now support us in our efforts to build upon the noneconomic gains won in recent collective bargaining agreements.