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THE NEW TECHNOLOGY: HOW LABOR SHOULD RESPOND

Ed. Note: This article is the second in a two-part series on new technologies by Charles Jeszeck, Research Director of the California State Federation of Labor. This article is excerpted from Mr. Jeszeck's remarks at a recent conference on "Reaganomics" sponsored by the Center for Labor Research and Education.

The new technology currently being developed and implemented poses many threats to American workers. It can erode union membership and bargaining power, create more dangerous working conditions and greater workloads, and for many workers, lead to a more alienating job life. The new automation represents a radical alteration of the terrain over which workers and management have traditionally confronted each other, an alteration which will have important consequences for the relative bargaining power of both sides.

How should organized labor respond to these challenges? Labor should immediately begin to formulate a comprehensive response to automation which should, at the least, include the following five elements:

Research: For workers and unions to respond effectively to the microelectronic revolution, they must first understand how management plans to apply the new technology within a specific industry, company or plant. Unions must bargain to receive information from corporate research and development units working on automation, since firms usually know well in advance what jobs or departments they will try to automate. Companies should be urged to provide unions with information they have from trade journals, equipment manufacturers, conferences, exhibitions, and other sources on technological advances affecting their industry or their products or production processes.

Education: Even if unions can gain access to such information, they will have to be able to analyze and understand it. This means that unions will have to educate both leaders and members on the new technology and how it can be utilized to serve workers. Such education could be provided in different ways. Unions could set up national or regional technology institutes, which could perform independent research, evaluate corporate technology policies and decisions, critique them from a pro-worker perspective, and suggest alternatives. Such institutes could develop and administer education programs for local leaders, shop stewards, and the rank and file. They could also train engineering personnel who could help workers respond to plant or department wide technological changes.

Such rank and file education programs cannot be overemphasized. They are crucial if workers are to respond effectively to paternalistic corporate programs such as "quality circles." And they are crucial if labor is to respond effectively to the inherent pro-management bias in the choice of new technologies and other workplace innovations. Indeed, such education and research programs are already being developed by European unions, especially in the United Kingdom.

Collective Bargaining: Ideally, the next step after research and education would be for unions to gain direct input into actual corporate investment decisions involving technological change. Where this is difficult to achieve, unions should at least demand reduced workweeks at higher compensation levels--through proposals

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY
BERKELEY, CA 94720
(415) 642-0323

CENTER FOR LABOR RESEARCH AND EDUCATION
INSTITUTE OF INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS



like "thirty hours work for forty hours pay"--to insure that workers get their fair share of the new technology's fruits of productivity. Unions should also demand full compensation and retraining benefit programs for workers displaced by technological change, in order to prevent financial stress and to assure reemployment for each affected worker.

Britain's Trade Union Congress, which is their national labor federation, has developed model contract provisions on new technology that could provide an example to American unions. Some of the ideas suggested by the TUC include: full consultation with the union before any decision is made to purchase new equipment; safeguards against excessive managerial control or employer misuse of computer generated data; and additional safeguards against new health and safety hazards generated by new technology.

Obviously, workers everywhere will face major struggles trying to get such provisions into contracts, but it is absolutely essential that unions begin to raise these issues during collective bargaining negotiations.

Legislation: Given the Reagan administration's policy of allowing U.S. technological innovation and "industrial revitalization" to occur through an unfettered market mechanism, workers will have to depend primarily on themselves and their unions for protection in the workplace. However, given the uneven outcomes of collective bargaining and the vagaries of the market, organized labor will also have to fight in the political arena--not only to protect displaced workers, but also to upgrade and modernize existing labor standards and health and safety standards which affect all workers.

A "technological bill of rights" might be introduced at both federal and state levels to establish minimum standards for working conditions like hours, breaks, workloads, job stress, etc.--especially in workplaces affected by rapid technological change. Such standards could be enforced by existing agencies like OSHA or the state labor commissions. For example, standards governing workloads on video display terminals could be devised for more effective worker protection. Legislation could also mandate technical research with strong worker input, to help unions respond more effectively to changing workplace technologies.

Organizing the Unorganized: Given the dramatic changes in occupational composition that will occur, unions are going to have to make a major effort to organize nonunion white collar workers in the private sector. It is these workers who currently face the greatest challenges from the new automation, and have the least protection. Yet to succeed at this endeavor, organized labor is going to have to become more responsive to the needs of women workers and to feminist issues in general. Indeed, if the major private sector unions of today are going to exist intact twenty years from now they are going to have to make issues like childcare, comparable worth and sexual harassment key bargaining and legislative objectives. Unions will also have to organize the designers, technicians, and professionals who will develop and operate the sophisticated new machinery, both to protect bargaining unit work and to ensure that they will be sensitized to the concerns of organized labor.

The new technology poses a threat to American workers--but also an opportunity. A creative response by the labor movement--by researching the new technology, educating its members, raising these issues at the bargaining table, pressing for protective legislation, and organizing the unorganized--holds the promise of transforming this threat into an advance in the quality of life in America's workplaces.

- Charles Jeszeck

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