

The Changing Workplace: A Challenge for Organizers

In utilities, service van drivers are allowed to take their vans home at night. They receive their dispatch list on an in-truck terminal and they are monitored by a GPS transponder that tracks the location of the van. The workers, therefore, don't know each other, don't feel the connections that are a key basis for collective organizing and are hard to reach out to because they are never or rarely together in one place.

In large office buildings, mail-delivery robots, capable of riding elevators and finding their way through long corridors and locked doors, have eliminated the social connection among departments and offices that was provided by the daily rounds of the "mailroom guy."

In construction, modularization and off-site work are changing the face of the industry. Essentially all of the concrete for the recently built Salt Lake City library was cast in Mexico and shipped by truck to the site for installation. The geographic limitations that used to support construction organizing are being undermined, the "community of interest" among the workers on a building is being dismantled and the insecurity created by management's ability to move the work makes organizing more difficult.

These are only a few examples of the ways that management is reorganizing work processes to give them more control and that increase their profitability. These efforts, embodied in the introduction of new technologies and work restructuring programs, have changed the workplace, and will continue to change the workplace, in ways that organizers need to understand and factor into their organizing strategies.

The key trends that characterize the changing workplace include:

- Standardization/De-Skilling
- Intensification/Lean
- Multi-Skilling/Job Combination/Flexibility
- Automation/New Technologies
- Monitoring and
- Outsourcing/Moving Work

Each of these trends has an impact on the willingness and ability of workers to organize.

Standardized work and de-skilling have the dual impact of making workers feel disempowered (I can't really control my life at work) and of making workers increasingly replaceable (plug and play workers).

Intensified, flexed and monitored workplaces leave little time or space for social interaction and developing the social ties that are critical to organizing groups of workers.

Flexible and long schedules make it more difficult for workers to socialize before and after work and to therefore create the collective that is the basis for organizing.

Automation and new technologies control workers, eliminate jobs, cut down on social interaction and make work moveable. Fear of job loss becomes a significant barrier to organizing as jobs that are automated and digitalized become easier to eliminate or move.

Outsourcing and moving work both make workers insecure and distribute work in ways that make “community of interest” difficult to create and find.

The changing workplace is also contributing to a loss of hope – a feeling that there is nothing that workers can do to control their lives at work and that a union can’t really make a difference in their world. When people see the forces of technological change and work restructuring as inevitable and all-powerful, when they are increasingly isolated in their work, they begin to look for individual solutions to their problems rather than seeking out collective solutions that seem to be a fantasy of a bygone era. When they look around and ask, “What has the union done to protect workers from the ravages of the changing workplace?” they are not all that impressed with the answers they come up with.

No sector is immune from these effects. Understaffing in hospitals means that workers don’t have time to talk to each other. Increasing automation in manufacturing means that workers are more isolated at their workstations. Computerized communication in many sectors means that workers aren’t “chatting” with each other and aren’t getting to know each other directly. In fact, the next person on the digital “assembly line” may well be in another building, another state, or even another country. The shared experience of work that is so important to building a collective voice is lost in a digital haze.

Meanwhile, continuous monitoring, enabled by computerized devices ranging from PC’s to Global Positioning Systems (GPS) to radio frequency id tags (RFID), means that workers who in the past could “wander” during the workday and thereby maintain contact with a broad group of workers are tethered. As workers are monitored, the risk associated with informal interaction with co-workers is increased. As work is leaned out and sped up in the drive for efficiency, the opportunities for interaction are driven out of the work day. As the work process is increasingly computerized, communication becomes more structured and less human. The water cooler has become a place to get water and quickly return to ones all-seeing computer or has disappeared altogether, replaced by bottles of water at the workstation.

The bottom line is that in every industry we need to be looking at the changes and making control over the future a part of our bargaining and organizing programs. While organizers can’t change the union’s whole approach, they can evaluate the changes that are going on in the workplaces they are trying to organize, they can adjust strategies to accommodate these changes, and they can speak to the changes as they develop their campaigns.