

LABORnotes

Viewpoint

Surrendering the Shop Floor Means Surrendering the Future

by Charley Richardson
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Jack Welch, former CEO of General Electric, is famous for having said that if he had his way, he would put his factories on barges and drag them around the world, in search of the lowest wages and least regulation.

Jack Welch's dream of infinitely mobile factories is one in which the workforce has been made irrelevant—where workers have little or no control over the production process, have become replaceable cogs in a management-controlled machine, and have lost key sources of leverage.

In many ways Jack Welch's vision is becoming a reality, as advances in technology and work organization allow management to take increasing control over work processes and ultimately put work on “electronic barges” (through a combination of computerization and telecommunications)—moving it around the world at will. The failure of unions to take on the restructuring of the workplace is a disaster for workers' future.

New technologies and new ways of organizing work are flooding into our workplaces. From global positioning systems installed in trucks to monitor drivers, to electronic medical records and hospital information systems that are replacing health care workers and centralizing control, to lean production and other programs that standardize and intensify work, no sector of the economy escapes change.

Management's workplace offensive is devastating workers' conditions. Stress, repetitive strain injuries, and other manifestations of intensified work processes and ongoing monitoring are taking their toll.

But perhaps more importantly, these changes are undercutting the sources of worker leverage and power that are embedded in and grow out of the work process. The changes undercut access to and control over critical skills, they eliminate the opportunities to build solidarity through interaction in the workplace, and they contribute to a loss of faith in the union as a voice for the future.

DE-SKILLING

Despite promises of high skills and high wages, most workers will tell you that with computerization and work restructuring, their jobs are becoming less skilled and they are becoming more replaceable.

Computers gather information on how the job is done, and then use that information to standardize and control the work process. Automated teller machines lead to automated check-in at the airport and automated check-out at the supermarket, with fewer workers doing more work controlled by more machines

Lean production techniques use kaizen (continuous improvement) and other forms of employee involvement to harvest workers' knowledge and build it into the processes of production and service delivery, thus standardizing and intensifying work.

LOSS OF SOLIDARITY

Critical skills are well recognized as a source of union and worker strength. But with changing work and advances in technology, a new workplace is created where sustaining solidarity becomes increasingly difficult. As workers are increasingly monitored and work is computerized and intensified, direct human-to-human communication is diminished.

A robot used in office settings to deliver mail replaces a person who was often a key source of interconnectivity and an important distributor of workplace information. Automated communication funneled through computer systems is limiting and controlling the nature of worker interaction.

“Flexible” schedules, new shift patterns, mandatory overtime, and temporary/contract arrangements are making social interaction difficult even outside of work. Shift change—historically a critical time for socializing and sharing work—has diminished in significance as fewer workers change shift at the same time, more workers are in a hurry to get home (in part because of long hours of work), and workers are simply too tired to relax at the end of the “day.”

Technology has a role to play in this arena as well. Because of automated dispatch technology in the trucking industry, service drivers in utility companies are being allowed to “home garage” company vans. For these workers, the single significant opportunity for interacting with peers and sharing experience is eliminated.

Unions' failure to take action on work restructuring and technological change means surrendering core sources of union strength that allow workers to exert power and feel solidarity in the course of their working day.

LACK OF RESPONSE

Why isn't there more of a reaction when management makes changes that have such profound impacts on union members and on their leverage against management? Why aren't unions more concerned and prepared? Why don't they have a strategy?

The surrender of the "shop floor"—of decisions about work—to management is a disaster for working people and for the future of collective action.

Labor's focus on periodic contract bargaining and ongoing contract enforcement, combined with an acceptance of management's right to introduce new technologies and restructure work, are out of synch with the reality of ongoing change in the workplace. Conceding today's decisions about work process and technology sets the stage for defeat in the future.

One local union president, who was facing an Electronic Medical Records system in the hospital she represents, said: "The members are really being taught that they should just put up with it, that there is nothing that the union can do."

This despite the de-skilling, monitoring, job disruption, and job loss that will result. She said that members had been taught over and over that things not settled by the contract are up to management. And the result is that "the members are losing faith in the union because we aren't winning the big battles."

When members call the union with their concerns about restructured work and technological displacement, their question is, "What should I do?" Unions often respond with information about re-training and bumping procedures, and a large dose of, "We're not sure."

The members are not asking, "What are we going to do?", and the union is not prepared to change the question into an opportunity for organizing and struggle.

CONTINUOUS BARGAINING

A framework of "continuous bargaining" is critical to the future of unions and working people. This means inserting the voice and interests of workers into every decision about new technologies and the restructuring of work.

Unions need to treat every discussion between labor and management as bargaining, whether it is called a team meeting, a problem-solving session, or a steering committee meeting. The union should insist on being notified about every kind of change in the way work is done, in advance, and insist on discussing the specifics.

According to the NLRB, the union has the right to bargain over any change in wages, hours, and conditions of employment unless there is a "clear and unmistakable" waiver of that right in the contract.

BARGAIN OVER IMPACT OF CHANGE

Even where management has the right to make a change (such as implementing a new technology), the union has the right to bargain over the impact of that change. But these rights exist only if the union takes action and demands bargaining.

Unions can use formal information requests as a way to monitor the implementation of new technologies, educate and communicate with members, and bargain over technological change.

For unions to win in the future, they must begin using such tactics to reclaim the shop floor.

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