

Surrendering the Shop Floor Means Surrendering the Future:

Jack Welsh, 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 Welsh's dream of infinitely mobile factories is one in which the incumbent workforce has been made irrelevant to the production process - where workers have little or no local 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 Welsh's vision is becoming a reality as advances in technology and work organization allow management to take increasing control over work processes and ultimately to put work on "electronic barges" (through a combination of computerization and telecommunications) – moving it around the world at will. The failure of unions to effectively take on the restructuring of the workplace is a disaster for the future of the workforce.

New technologies and new forms of work organization are flooding into our workplaces. From global positioning systems that are being installed in mobile equipment and trucks to monitor drivers, to electronic medical records and hospital information systems in health care that are replacing workers and centralizing control, to lean production, six sigma and other restructuring programs that are used to standardize and intensify work, no sector of the economy escapes ongoing change.

These changes are having devastating impacts on the conditions faced by workers. In particular, stress, repetitive strain injuries and other manifestations of intensified work processes and ongoing monitoring are taking their toll on the workforce.

But perhaps more importantly, these changes are taking a toll on 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 and knowledge, they eliminate the opportunities for building solidarity through ongoing interaction in the workplace, and they contribute to a loss of faith in the union as a true voice for the future. A vicious spiral is created as workers lose their connection to collective voice and turn to individual solutions and to disaffection. The disempowered workplace teaches disempowerment, individualism and defeatism to workers.

De-skilling

Despite high skill, high wage promises, 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

techniques use kaizen events and other forms of employee involvement to harvest worker knowledge and build it into the processes of production and service delivery, standardizing and intensifying work.

Loss of solidarity

Critical skills are well recognized as a source of union/worker strength. But with changing work and advances technology, a new workplace is created where the development and sustenance of solidarity becomes increasingly difficult.

With technology allowing management to spread work processes around the world, the construction of solidarity among the workers who in the past would have been in a single location, becomes increasingly difficult.

Within the workplace, direct human-to-human communication is diminished, as workers are increasingly monitored and work is computerized and intensified. 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 information in the workplace. Meanwhile, automated communication funneled through computer systems is limiting and controlling the nature of worker interaction.

Other forms of work restructuring such as “flexible” schedules, new shift patterns, mandatory overtime and temporary/contract arrangements are even making social interaction difficult even outside of work. Shift change, historically a critical time for socializing and sharing the experiences of work has diminished in significance as fewer workers change shift at the same time, more workers (in part because of long hours of work) are in a hurry to get home 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 through in-truck terminals, service drivers in utility companies are being allowed to “home garage” company vans. For these workers, the single significant opportunity for social interaction among peers and collectivization of experience is eliminated.

Failure by unions to take action on work restructuring and technological change means surrendering core sources of union power, but in particular it means surrendering core sources of power that allow workers to exert power and feel solidaristic in the course of their working day.

Union Response

But why isn't there more of a reaction when management makes changes that will have such profound impacts on the members and on the internal leverage the members have with 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 rights 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 is setting the stage for defeat in the future.

Loss of Faith

As one local union president in Minnesota who was facing an Electronic Medical Records system in the hospital and clinic system 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 they had been taught over and over that the contract is everything – that things that aren’t 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. In the best of situations, we are reduced from bargaining the future to bargaining the terms of the funeral.

The surrender of the work process and the shop floor teaches non-struggle and defeatism to working people on a daily basis. Workers learn through experience that there is little they can do to control their lives at work - as they are monitored, analyzed and robotized. They then take this lesson of disempowerment – identified as apathy – with them as they decline to engage in the larger struggles to define the future of society and instead seek individual solutions to their problems (new jobs, jobs in management, individual educational opportunities, drugs, etc.).

A downward spiral for collective voice is created, with its beginnings firmly rooted in the surrender of the shop floor and the core work process and with its end in a loss of faith in the union.

A framework of continuous bargaining over change, of inserting the voice and interests of the workforce and workers in general into every decision about new technologies and the restructuring of work is critical to the future of unions and the future of working people.

Unions need to treat every discussion between labor and management as bargaining, no matter 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.

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.

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