

Make Technology Work For—Not Against—Us

Labor Notes

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The stress and pressure to work faster in a modern call center, said a CWA local president at the recent Labor Notes Conference, goes so far that workers are sometimes forbidden to say please or thank you because it takes too long.

This intensity is created by technologies that continuously monitor workers, limit their interaction with both co-workers and clients, and de-skill the workforce through mind-numbing standardization.

A member of the Massachusetts Nurses Association told workshop participants about electronic medical records, tele-medicine (remote-control health care), and employee monitoring systems cascading into workplaces, in part due to more than \$19 billion from the federal stimulus. The monitoring includes a system of active badges that tracks nurses wherever they go in the hospital.

And from a UPS driver we heard about telematics, a system that combines data from the driver's handheld computer, GPS, and more than 200 sensors mounted on the truck, used to track workers throughout their day and increase their workload.

These are common experiences across widely different industries. Unfortunately, also common across sectors is unions' failure to take on the technologies management is introducing.

New technologies can affect the number of jobs, the skills needed, training issues, monitoring, pace of work, intensity of work, control over the work process, and even the ability to do our work well. Nurses, for example, complain that electronic medical records are interfering with direct patient contact ("we're looking at the screen instead of the patient") and often don't easily provide the information that nurses need to give the best care quickly.

Few of our contracts have language on technology that gives the union clear rights. In fact, management usually uses the management rights clause when introducing new technologies, which they think gives them a free hand.

WE DO HAVE RIGHTS

So what do we need to know?

We do have rights: At least in workplaces covered by the National Labor Relations Act or similar state laws, management rights clauses do not take away our right to bargain, during the life of the contract, over the impacts of new technologies on "mandatory subjects of bargaining," including job descriptions, training, workload, and health and safety.

But we need to take the initiative because our rights disappear if we don't demand to bargain as soon as we know about the new technologies and their potential impacts.

It's about power: Most new technologies, as used in the workplace, tip power toward management. If we accept that change without challenge, technologies will continue to be designed and implemented in ways that hurt workers.

We need to change how we think about technology: The feeling that there is nothing you can do about technology is very strong. We've been told that technology is "progress," that it preserves competitiveness and therefore jobs, and that it is simply inevitable. These myths make it difficult to rally folks for a fight.

ON THE MENU: WORKERS

In reality, technology could do the opposite of what it does to workers now. It could be implemented in ways that improve health and safety, make our jobs easier, and upgrade skills, all while improving productivity.

But, since this is capitalism, this will not happen if our voices are excluded from the discussion. Instead, technology will be used against us.

We need to take action: If you're not at the table, you'll be on the menu. The good news is that we have plenty of opportunities for action. Stewards and other shop floor leaders can:

- 1. Catch up:** Examine the impacts new technologies have had or may have on the workforce and the union. If technology is not easy for you to get your head around, find someone else in the local who understands it or wants to learn. This can be a way to turn more people into activists.

2. Educate: Use the experience within your local or others to educate members about the impacts and begin discussing a union campaign to bargain over technology. Contact the university-based labor program in your area, if there is one, to get help.

Remember, you don't have to understand all the details about how the technology works, just how it could be used in your workplace. Calling a special union meeting to have a discussion with, and to learn from, the members can be a great way to create involvement and put the company on notice.

3. Organize: Set up a technology committee to monitor tech changes, research their impacts, and represent the union in discussions. This committee should talk with members from different departments and classifications to hear about changes that might be coming down the pike.

Tell members to keep an eye open for new wires being installed, vendors coming in, machines or workstations being moved. The committee can then gather information on the new technologies identified, help develop information requests and bargaining demands to submit to management, and put together an organizing and bargaining plan.

4. Bargain: Always put in a formal demand to bargain as soon as the union discovers a potential new technology, along with an information request. Then build a campaign in support.

You won't always get everything you want, but you can soften the blow, bring new skilled work into the bargaining unit, and lay the basis for more struggle in the future.

At a United Auto Workers workplace in the Boston area, for example, management was purchasing a new metal-cutting machine and wanted to talk to the union only about how many other jobs the operator would be doing while also working this machine.

By learning about the machine and the ease of programming it, the union committee members were able to overcome their fear of technology (a huge step forward) and shift the conversation: they wanted the programming jobs in the bargaining unit. They didn't succeed, but their shift in focus allowed them to win other gains and strengthen the union at the same time.

Fighting management-controlled technology can create a real discussion about control over our jobs and a challenge to the dogma of management rights that is so destructive to the labor movement.

Labor educator Charley Richardson advises union members on dealing with technology. To get sample information requests regarding specific new technologies, write to richardson.charley@gmail.com.