

Thoughts on Lean/High Performance
By Charley Richardson

The issue of job security is obviously critical for unions in the manufacturing sector.

It is also clear that manufacturing firms will be making changes in technology and work organization to remain competitive and that, in fact, a firm that is not making changes is probably a firm that is on the verge of shutting down.

Despite the above, it is important to recognize that Lean is a management program, designed to increase profitability and increase management control over the work process. Some have called it Taylorism on steroids because of its focus on standardizing work and on determining the “one best way” to do any job. The two critical factors that distinguish lean from classic Taylorism are the emphasis on “continuous improvement” and the mechanisms for engaging the workforce and “harvesting” their specific knowledge of the work process.

Unions facing Lean programs need to recognize that Lean, through the processes of standardization, simplification and documentation (creating detailed standard operating procedures), makes work significantly more moveable (less tied to geography and to the incumbent workforce) and decreases the inherent leverage of the union.

Lean workplaces carry great risks of stress, repetitive strain injuries and conflict among workers. The intensification of work means that minor wait times, downtimes and/or what we call micro-breaks are relentlessly removed from the work process. Thus, integrated recovery time is eliminated even as the wear and tear on workers’ limbs and joints, and on their psyche, is increased. The removal of so-called “non value-added” time can be very destructive for the workforce.

In addition to the above, most lean programs come with a heavy ideological content that has two significant impacts on the workforce and their connection to the union:

The ideologies of competitiveness, productivity and profitability can push out or displace important union values such as solidarity.

The use of teams and small group problem solving can “hijack the collective”, replacing union solidarity with loyalty to the team.

An alternative approach is to acknowledge that management is making changes in technology and in the work process, often following a lean model -- and to prepare the union to bargain over changes as they occur. The purpose is not to prevent change, but to make sure that the concerns of the members and the union are part of the discussion, and part of the discussion from a position of strength (we are not just jumping on board management’s train after the tracks have been laid and the route chosen). Effectively bargaining over change (what we call continuous bargaining) requires education and

preparation, and it takes the union in a different, union-building, member-involving and activist direction.

There is no doubt that training on Lean needs to be made available to local unions and staff. The training should be directed at a full understanding of Lean, of the dangers of Lean for a union and of strategies that the union can develop and initiate to respond to management's Lean initiatives.

The idea of "Lean mobilization" or similar ideas that some unions have developed run the danger of creating a great deal of confusion in the ranks. Many of our locals and members have already experienced the downsides of lean and will be angry and/or disheartened at a union initiative with Lean as its centerpiece. And using this terminology will make it very difficult for unions to perform independent analysis of the lean programs they are facing. Again, the bottom line is that Lean is a management system that serves the interests of management, not those of the workforce and the unions representing them.

What is needed is an independent and separate union activity around Lean, and other forms of work restructuring, that prepares the union for dealing with management about Lean.