By Charley Richardson

WORKING ALONE
The Erosion of Solidarity in Today's Workplace

WORKING TOGETHER: A PERSONAL EXAMPLE

Years ago I worked as a shipfitter (a heavy steel fabricator) at a shipyard outside of Philadelphia. The non-standard, craft nature of the job, the frequent need to work in groups, the many built-in stopping points within the work process (waiting for materials, tools, or assistance from other crafts), the integrated nature of the work process (working with other crafts), and the significantly lower supervision of the night shift all contributed to a high degree of social interaction and social connection.

One night, a crane operator was suspended for refusing to make an unsafe lift. Our steward told us about the situation and implied that he would not be unhappy if we dropped our tools and walked out.

A discussion ensued within our crew over what to do. After a while one of the older workers, Dan, said that he didn't know what the rest of us were doing, but he was walking out. At that point the discussion changed for all of us. The question of whether to walk out over the suspension was transformed into a question of whether we could let Dan walk out alone. The transformation of the question clarified the answer. There was no looking back, there was no further debate. We all walked out with Dan.

The tight connections among us that grew out of our work process created a wildcat strike that helped to protect our workplace health and safety, while strengthening our union. The connection to the steward and the union was strong enough to get us to discuss taking action. The connection to Dan was strong enough to get us to act collectively and walk out.

INTRODUCTION

SOLIDARITY FORMS THE BEDROCK OF THE LABOR movement, but there is remarkably little discussion of it—what it really is, where it comes from, and how to build it. A successful labor movement depends on solidarity that is more than just an abstraction printed on plaques and in mission statements and extolled in songs at the end of meetings. Solidarity, in its practicality and concreteness, is at the core of unionism and collective power, and it is critical to any successful struggle for the improvement of working people's lives.

Solidarity has always faced significant challenges in the form of racism, sexism, and other "isms" of division that penetrate into the workplace. Management initiatives such as two-tier wage and benefit systems, and productivity/safety/merit bonuses—particularly when combined with the ideologies of competition and individualism—serve to further undermine solidarity.

Today, solidarity faces new and largely unacknowledged challenges that are aimed at its very seedbeds—the workplace and the work process. Management is engaged in a concerted (and largely successful) effort to change work processes in ways that undermine the creation of connections and networks in the workplace, rendering those seedbeds incapable of nurturing the bumper crop of solidarity that is necessary to build a thriving movement.

As a result of new technologies and the reorganization of work (including speed-up, downsizing, standardization, and job combination, as well as formal restructuring programs such as lean, kaizen, Six Sigma, and the Toyota Production System) workers are increasingly working alone, isolated from their co-workers. This isolation, in turn, hinders the formation of "dense networks of interconnection" which are critical to the transformation from individual to community that serves as the basis for workplace-based collective action—what we would call organic solidarity and what others may call social capital.[1]

The discussion in this article is based on three fundamental tenets:

- Solidarity is, at its core, dependent on robust, personal, and deep networks of connections among workers;
- These connections are generally created in the course of regular interaction at the workplace and within the work process;

As a result of new technologies and the reorganization of work, workers are increasingly working alone.

- New technologies and innovations with respect to the organization of work—fueled by management's interest in changing work processes to enhance their productivity, profitability, and control—are creating a workplace experience that increasingly fails to provide opportunities for social networking and the development of strong social connections among workers.

SOLIDARITY AND WORK

WORKERS WHO SPEND EIGHT OR MORE HOURS together, five or more days a week under commonly imposed conditions will generally find both the opportunity and the need for interaction. Their shared experiences (of accomplishments and oppressions) create a sense of connection, mutual support, and collectivity.

As a shipfitter in the 1970s and 1980s, I bummed cigarettes, talked sports, complained (about the cold, the welding smoke, and the bosses), and exchanged social support with co-workers with whom I spent more waking time than with my family. I relied on co-workers to help me out, give me advice, and cover for me. Together we created, we suffered, we produced, we complained, and we accomplished. These interactions tied us together as we faced common conditions, struggles, and oppressions. The walkout described at the beginning of this article was a wildcat of workplace connections—we walked out to support Dan, though we ultimately won improved health and safety conditions, while increasing the respect for union power.

Even in nonunion workplaces, the role of social interaction-created collectivity is critical to maintaining or improving workplace conditions. Rate-busters, for example, have historically been "disciplined" through informal pressures, both positive and negative, to conform to collective norms. A lack of regular interaction and social dependence hampers a sense of community and decreases the likelihood of normative pressures that can collectively benefit the workforce. Peer pressure cannot be effectively applied in a workplace where interaction has been eliminated.

Regularly shared experiences are critical to building solidarity and collective action in three key ways:

- Social interaction in the workplace builds co-workers' commitment to one another. Even minor forms of social interaction raise the likelihood that people will stand up for or take care of each other;
- Common experiences, both positive and negative, make collective reaction more likely. If people collectively experience both oppressive work processes and the positive experiences of creativity, they are more likely to react collectively; and
- Social interaction provides opportunities for creating and enforcing norms through both positive and negative reinforcement.

MANAGEMENT'S NEW AGENDA, AND ITS IMPACT ON SOCIAL NETWORKS

MANAGEMENT IS ENGAGED IN A PLANNED AND strategic effort to change the work process in order to meet their own goals. As a result, (regardless of intent) the workplace's capacity to serve as an incubator for informal social interactions, dense social networks, and overall solidarity is diminishing. Rapid technological advances and the restructuring of work have transformed most workplaces—a trend that is likely to accelerate in the coming years. The destruction of social interaction and common experience within the work process is problematic for the labor movement, and for any movement that depends on collective action by working people.

There are eight workplace trends that have most directly contributed to the increasing isolation and the destruction of social networking. These are not isolated trends; they are

deeply embedded within the work process, often overlapping and enabling each other.

1. Workplace Downsizing Through Automation, Speed-Up, and Distributed Work

At the three shipyards where I worked, between 1,000 and 4,000 workers were brought together each day. The opportunities for social interaction (in the parking lot, at the time clock, and within the work process itself) were abundant and didn't require significant effort on anyone's part—they just happened. Both inside and outside of the workplace (in gathering spots like coffee shops, lunch spots, and bars) social connections were formed.

In large workplaces across the country, shared space—physical, temporal, and experiential—created millions of opportunities for informal interaction and network building. The sheer numbers of people supported and encouraged both direct and indirect social networks. The Ford River Rouge plant in Dearborn, Michigan, employed 100,000 people in the mid 1930s—approximately twice the entire current United Auto Workers workforce employed by the Ford Motor Company. Steel mills routinely employed 10,000 or more workers as recently as the 1970s.

Direct productivity measures such as automation and speed-up have led to a significant downsizing of workplaces without a reduction in output. At the same time—facilitated by improvements in transportation, communication, and control technologies—work processes have been broken up and distributed to multiple sites, further reducing the number of workers in any single location, thereby minimizing the volume of informal interaction.

Parts production in the auto industry, and modular or off-site construction are clear examples of this trend. Call centers and other electronically-enabled workplaces are based on distributing work around the globe to match cost, skill, language, or time zone requirements. First, second, and third shifts may no longer be under the same roof, or even in the same country. Mental health care workers who used to work in large institutions are now often scattered in halfway houses, residential centers, or home care settings where they may only interact with one or two other workers.

2. Restructuring/Intensification/ Standardization of Work

Over the last several decades, management has studiously intensified and standardized work processes, often through formal reorganization schemes such as continuous improvement, Six Sigma, kaizen, Lean, 5S, and the Toyota Production System. Originally designed for manufacturing worksites, these programs are now used in all sectors including health care, construction, and government.[2]

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more formal work restructuring initiatives, eliminates informal interaction and social networking by reducing or removing the inci-

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dences of downtime or reduced work intensity. Labeled "waste" or "non value-added" time in management speak, it is precisely these lower intensity periods that have traditionally afforded opportunites for informal worker-to-worker interaction.

Ironically, many formal restructuring programs operate by forming "teams" to "involve" workers and harvest worker knowledge. But instead of providing a platform for independent informal interaction, these teams are a controlled form of social networking designed to intensify work in ways that limit the informal social interaction that is so critical to solidarity development.

3. Job Combination

Multi-skilling, multi-tasking, and flexibility have become popular buzzwords within the current reorganization parlance. The rising trend of merging job duties, which used to simply be called job combination, reduces opportunities for worker interaction in two key ways. First, communication that is an inherent part of the work process (and the informal interaction that accompanies it) declines when one person takes on multiple tasks. Yesteryear's traditional division of labor had yielded rich opportunities for social interaction and network building. Asking someone to cut a piece of steel, put down a weld, or make a crane lift created an opportunity to talk to them about the latest ballgame or outrage at work.

Job combination also eliminates "inefficiencies" or breaks in the work flow which have provided opportunities for informal interaction. Waiting for someone else to weld a part or make a lift creates a space for conversation among co-workers. But such opportunities for

interaction, both within and around the work process, disappear when one person does many jobs.

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4. Increased Monitoring

Workforce monitoring is growing. With technologies like Global Positioning Systems (GPS), proximity readers, swipe cards, video surveillance, biometric readers, and computer monitoring, there are few jobs that are not subject to some form of electronic monitoring (and many of those that aren't soon will be). When electronic monitoring is not possible or practical, so-called visual controls (and other techniques designed to make any deviation from standard immediately apparent) are often employed. Thus, workers are always expected to be "on" (and on stage).

This kind of monitoring limits workers' ability to take advantage of micro-breaks or downtime. Monitored workers are less able and less likely to "stop and talk" with co-workers. Proximity to another worker or changes in pace are tracked, often in real time. Truck drivers in open-pit mines with GPS in their trucks report that if they stop for even a short period of

time (particularly if they stop near another piece of mobile equipment), they are warned via radio to get moving. This burden is felt by workers ranging from nurses with active badges

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(lovingly called Nurse Lo-Jack), to teachers (whose every move may be videotaped and whose emails may be subject to management review).

5. Digitalization

Computerization, combined with advanced communication technologies, has drastically limited direct worker-to-worker interaction. These forms of technology have enabled automation-based downsizing, the dispersion of work, and increased management control over the form and content of communication. With digitalization, equipment operators (and others) can be isolated in control rooms, at home, or in other remote locations, limiting or eliminating interaction outside of formal work channels.

Digitalization has been used to formalize and standardize the work-based communications that once provided rich social networking opportunities. With Electronic Medical Records (EMR) in health care, for example, the handoffs at shift change are being transferred to the computer and away from face

time. In the university setting, creating a purchase order once involved direct phone communication. With the introduction of PeopleSoft and other overarching software systems, purchase orders are created online and communication disappears. Calling someone from a different office to ask for work-related information can often lead to informal interaction and information exchange. Walking to another office provides additional opportunities for informal connections with others along the way. Using a computer to carry out a procedure or to get information from company databases creates interaction with no one.

Computer automation can also limit networking opportunities by eliminating work that had allowed social interaction. Letter carriers at the Postal Service, who once spent a significant portion of their day in the office with others as they manually sorted the mail for delivery, now spend most of the workday out on the street, thanks to automated sorting.

It is indeed ironic that enhancements in communication and information-sharing technologies, that are touted for their ability to bring the world together, should play such a significant role in the destruction of informal interaction and social connection. The information revolution's impact in the workplace creates, as one worker put it, "a lot more communication and a lot less interaction." Innovative uses of digital technologies may help to connect large numbers of people. But the same technologies often undercut valuable opportunities for regular, direct, and informal workplace interactions that are critical to solidarity development.

6. Changing Schedules

Shift change has always been an opportunity for significant social interaction—at the coffee shop or the bar, or simply during the walk to the parking lot or bus stop. These pre-and post-shift interactions contribute greatly to strengthening and expanding the social webs beyond one's immediate work group. These interactions, already threatened by downsizing, homework, home garaging, and distributed work, are also now affected by changes in work schedules.

The once common eight-hour, stable shift operation (that admittedly never existed for many) is rapidly disappearing. Twelve-hour shifts, rotating shifts, part-time work, split shifts, staggered shifts, irregular shifts, and forced overtime are all part of the new workplace. As a result, the shift change provides much less of an opportunity for social interaction. As staggered start and finish times, and mandatory unscheduled overtime arrangements become more common, even carpools, a significant opportunity for building social connections, become increasingly difficult to arrange.

Inside the workplace, a decline in commonly scheduled breaks also undermines informal interaction. In the health care industry, for example, workers report "fitting breaks in whenever they can," meaning that they often don't get breaks, almost always spending the breaks they do get alone.

7. Use of Contractors and Temps

Contracting out is a common feature of today's workplace. Both off-site and on-site contracting are significant threats to social networking

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as organizational, administrative, geographic, and other barriers to informal interaction are erected.

Off-site contracting or outsourcing (moving the work to another location or to another

organization) clearly contributes to the downsizing described above and reduces the opportunities for interaction among workers who are part of the same work process but may not be in the same location. Telemedicine, for example, is a significant trend which allows for the transfer of health care work to outside, off-site institutions.

But even on-site contracting impacts social interaction and the common experience of the work process. Different bosses, working conditions, schedules, and work rules all stand in the way of social networking. In addition, interaction between the incumbent workforce and the contract employees/temps is often strained, as the contract employees are perceived as "the other" and blamed for job loss among the incumbents.

8. Reduction or Elimination of Networking Jobs

Many workplaces have historically relied on networking jobs (such as mail room clerks, expediters, tool room clerks, and copy machine operators) to facilitate communication, provide services across organizational or geographic boundaries, and help with handoffs throughout the production/service processes.

Interacting with people in different departments and geographic areas, workers in networking jobs must communicate with others in order to fulfill their roles, often operating under relatively limited supervision. As they facilitate the work process, these workers also serve as informal networking links among departments and other workers.

Computerization and the rationalization of production have eliminated many of these networking jobs. Computers now track parts in the shipyard, and workers navigate a computer system instead of their physical space. In many office buildings, robots are delivering mail, replacing the "mail room guy" who had once served as an important source of informal information flow.

WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE: REBUILDING A MOVEMENT

ALTHOUGH THE DISCUSSION OF NEW TECHNOLO-gies and work restructuring often focuses on the manufacturing sector, the eight trends identified above affect workers and work processes in *all* sectors and industries. This is a crisis of epic proportions, playing out in nearly every workplace in the U.S. and around the world. It is a crisis that has, for the most part, been ignored by a U.S. labor movement that has lost its focus on and connection to the workplace and the work process.

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In order to protect organic solidarity as a force that can truly serve as the core of a revitalized labor movement, attention needs to be given to at least four areas:

1. **Acknowledging and understanding how work is changing and how these changes impact the creation of solidarity.** The labor movement needs to think deeply about solidarity in its most basic forms. There needs to be further analysis of how solidarity is impacted by the trends discussed herein, as well as the effects of other significant societal forces.

2. **Evaluating the full impact of new technology and work reorganization measures on social interaction, social networking, and solidarity potential.** Unions give insufficient attention to the workplace and the work process. Multiple factors, including overly broad acceptance of management rights, have led many if not most unions to surrender the work process to management. But even when changes in the work process are confronted, the analytical focus is generally on job loss, wage protection, health and safety, and disciplinary concerns. Solidarity impacts are rarely taken into account. In one case of home garaging, a strong and activist local union paid close attention to the system's potential impact on its members, but the question of solidarity did not make it onto the union's radar screen. In another case of failed solidarity impact analysis, management's suggestion of split lunches to reduce cafeteria crowding was accepted by a local union without any meaningful discussion about what effect this action would have on member solidarity.

3. **Bargaining over changes with solidarity in mind.** When faced with changes in technology and work organization, unions must formulate demands aimed to defend social interaction within the work process and/or that create alternative mechanisms for solidarity growth. Some changes should be aggressively opposed (due to their inherent bent toward isolation), while the social impact of other changes can be mitigated through the bargaining process.

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Unions must engage in more creative thinking in order to craft specific demands that will help protect social networking in the face of evolving technology and work reorganization. In the home garaging context, proposals to protect the collective might have included a monthly or weekly meeting (on paid time) where members would have an opportunity to network and where the union would have an opportunity to communicate with the members as a group.

Winning these demands will require education and active membership involvement. Unions are likely to discover that building a campaign against social isolation at work is, in and of itself, a solidarity-building exercise.

4. **Creating internal union mechanisms for solidarity building.** Concerted solidarity-

building initiatives, including programs that bring members together for informal interaction, are increasingly necessary as the workplace's solidarity-building mechanisms are quickly eroding.

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Long ago, the Harvard Union of Clerical and Technical Workers organized itself on a model of social unionism that emphasized the need to create connections among a workforce that had limited interaction within the work process. Today, there are growing numbers of unions that represent home health aides and others who work in isolation, and they are working toward the implementation of innovative strategies designed to ease the forging of personal connections. Their approaches

should be reviewed, adapted, and applied in workplaces where isolation is increasing as a result of technological change and work restructuring. As they fight to protect informal interaction in the workplace, unions must also develop independent mechanisms of interaction outside of the workplace.

Regular, direct, and informal workplace interaction, in the context of a common experience of work and oppression, is critical to the development of the organic solidarity among working people that provides a robust basis for collective action. Changes in technology and reorganization of work processes are undermining this interaction and common experience, creating a new class of isolated workers. This budding (and largely unrecognized) phenomenon of working alone challenges the very heart of collective action and unionism. The labor movement, and all those who care about the collective voice of the working-class, must acknowledge this problem and develop creative strategies for protecting informal interaction at work and for building solidarity within the new reality of working alone. ∎

Notes

1. *See* Robert Putnam, www.bowling alone.org, emphasis added. Social capital theorists describe the dense networks of interaction that, over time, create a collective identity, collective interest, and collective action:

Social capital refers to those stocks of social trust, norms, and networks that people can draw upon to solve common problems . . . **the denser these networks, the more likely that members of a community will cooperate for mutual benefit** . . . .

Broader identities and **solidarity** *are encouraged by* **social networks that help translate an "I" mentality into a "we" mentality.**

2. *See*, for example, the Pittsburgh Regional Health Initiative (PRHI) website (http://www.prhi.org/about_mission.php) which advertises use of the Toyota Production System model: "Using the Toyota Production System as a model, PRHI developed a quality improvement method for clinical settings known as Perfecting Patient Care."