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Lean, mean and dangerous

Solidarity Federation

Spring 1998

Quality has become the tantra of managers everywhere. Quality is the buzzword that masks relentless, increasingly rapid capitalist 'restructuring' on a global scale.

This is especially apparent in the vehicle making industry. The "Quality Revolution" began with the "Toyota" or "lean" system of production, and then spread like a cancer that unions have been unable to stop. And it is in the same sector that QS-9000 is now aggressively being implemented.

QS-9000 is based upon ISO-9000's international quality standards, which date back to 1987 and have been adopted in over a hundred countries. ISO-9000 incorporated central features of the lean system. Indeed, its proponents boldly proclaim that its standards "were established to help companies improve operating efficiency and productivity and reduce the costs of inconsistent quality". Insofar as the pursuit of continuous improvement is a fundamental feature of ISO-9000, it raises the spectre of never-ending relentless restructuring and scrutiny of job productivity.

ISO-9000 is particularly ominous because it is a vehicle for standardisation. Standardisation means bosses expect workers

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to adhere rigorously to corporate “best practices” in carrying out their job responsibilities. This, in turn, means that workers must adhere to meticulously documented sets of procedures designed to optimise the efficiency of work processes and profits, all in the name of striving for “quality”. It also means everyone is measured and monitored, and information on productivity, compliance, etc. can be maintained to allow easy decisions to be made when the next ‘restructuring’ comes. Boat-rockers are out first.

ISO-9000, like the lean system, implicitly assumes that workers and bosses have identical interests and goals and that these interests and goals are those of the corporation. This is apparent in the way that under ISO-9000 standards “Everyone is expected to be a quality control manager.” Workers and bosses are accordingly expected to be focused in the same direction. Variance or deviation have no place in this monolithic framework.

QS-9000, like ISO-9000 before it, incorporates key features of the lean system. It harmonises the quality systems of the U.S. Big Three automakers with additional input from other truck manufacturers, in order to firmly entrench and further develop the direction of the quality systems throughout the industry and its suppliers. QS-9000 stipulates that “a continuous improvement philosophy shall be fully deployed throughout the supplier’s organisation”. Consistent with this, QS-9000 emphasises “teamwork” and “employee involvement”. It envisions workers belonging to cross-functional or multidisciplinary teams where every worker can do the job of every other worker on the team (for ‘flexibility’ purposes).

Workers are encouraged to take part in the development of job instructions and the formulation of company procedures and policies; QS-9000 envisions workers becoming “process improvers”. This means workers are expected to help our bosses discover which parts of our jobs are “non-value added”.

Needless to say, quality systems generally do not seem to improve quality of work or quality of health and safety provision – or quality of worker wages. Indeed, quality systems may actually overshadow the health and safety provisions in place, replacing them with more emphasis on new quality paperpurchase systems.

In short, QS-9000 means that our bosses will not only expect but will **require** us to help find ways to standardise and intensify the work process in order to get us to do much more. QS-9000, like ISO-9000, seeks to continuously increase the rate of exploitation of our labour and continuously improve corporate profits.