

Working More Now But Enjoying it Less?

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In a recent issue of Harvard Business Review there is a report on discontent among American workers, which had been privately prepared for a number of corporations by Opinion Research Corporation (ORC), an outfit that helps employers get more work out of their employees. According to the report, their findings were based on studies conducted since the fifties among approximately 150,000 managerial, clerical, and hourly employees in 159 firms in 18 different industries. The study found that workers today are much more unhappy and bored with their jobs, than at any time in the past twenty years.

Here are some of their findings:

- Only 21 percent of “hourly” workers say that the company is a better place to work than it was when they started there,
- Only 17 percent of clerical and hourly workers say that the company “does a good or very good job of being fair in its dealings with them,” compared to 33 percent of hourly workers and 67 percent of clericals in the late fifties,
- Only 36 percent say that the “company treats them with respect”
- Only 21 percent say that the “company does a good or very good job of doing something about the employee’s problems and complaints.”

These percentages have continually fallen over the last 20 years, the study shows. “With the exception of their pay, non-management employees are dissatisfied with almost every aspect of their working life,” the study concludes. And they also point out: “Worker dissatisfaction is even more significant when put in the context of the general public’s growing dismay with what is perceived to be concentrated economic power.”

What is the reality behind these statistics?

The satisfaction that a person feels with their work partly depends on how much control that person has. When a person has more freedom, can use more initiative and skill, and do more varied tasks, the job is more interesting. Control is also related to safety. For a decade the coal miners, for example, have struggled to gain rights for their safety committees and the right to walk off of jobs they consider unsafe. This is a question of control.

Loss of Job Control an Issue in Shipyard Strike

Job satisfaction and worker’s control over work — these two things are related. This is shown by a look at the issues that led to the recent organizing effort among the 17,000 workers at the Newport News Shipbuilding Co. in Virginia. The workers at the shipyard were in the news earlier this year when they were on strike for two months for union recognition.

When the shipyard was bought by the Tenneco conglomerate, the company moved to re-organize the work to gain a tighter, more centralized control over the operation of the yard. The result: loss of job control for workers, a feeling of being “driven,” and rising discontent.

To gain more control over the workforce, Tenneco tripled the number of supervisors. Says Bob Elkins, a machinist, recently on strike: “They’re operating with so many managers that they’re not getting the work. If they cut back their foremen, they’d get a third more work done. Now

that you've got more management, you've got more buddy-buddy decisions. A supervisor takes care of his friends."

Also, Tenneco centralized control over workplace operations in a single department, which has control over the shipyard and supercedes supervisor's authority in making day-to-day decisions. Foremen were turned into pushers, lacking any flexibility in dealing with people but required to get out production or else.

By centralizing control and introducing more autocratic management, companies are making people more dissatisfied, as the ORC study points out: "If organizational realities, such as more and more hierarchical levels, increased impersonalization, and decreased individual control over one's work continues as they have in the past, companies will be fostering even more alienation on behalf of their employees."

Elkins felt that a source of problems was the Tenneco bosses' removal of control over work from the skilled workers. Instead of having machines run by machinists with years of training, the trend is towards automated "Numerical Control" (NC) machines guided by pre-programmed tapes and run by operators trained in a few months.

Instead of having the operation of a metalworking machine — the speeds, cuts, feeds, etc. — controlled manually by a skilled machinist, the idea of automated NC machines is to have all of the required operations pre-programmed on to a tape or punch-card, as determined by the engineering and planning part of management. The NC machine is then supposed to automatically produce the part, with no discretion or initiative left to the operator. The industry has hoped that these machines could then be run by unskilled machine tenders — at a lower rate of pay than machinists.

The machinists at Newport News are now under direct supervisory control for all their activities and they are required to follow detailed step-by-step instructions on the "idiot sheets" sent down by the planning department.

"They take it out of the machinists' hands, and tell him how to do it," Elkins explained. "It's actually a hindrance. You used to look at the drawing and make the piece. Now you got to read through each instruction and ask the superintendent each step. Then you change it to how it should have been done in the first place. When they tell you everything to do, it slows you down. They've taken all the challenge out of it. I just go in to draw my money. That's the way with everyone in the shipyard. They treat you like a child, you act like a child, and Tenneco treats us like children. It shows up later in high costs, low quality, and dissatisfaction among people. For the experience and knowledge I have they don't give any recognition. You don't get paid for thinking now. They don't want you to think."

"Numerical Control" for Control Over Workforce

The NC machines that Bob Elkins had to deal with illustrate a long-term trend. Throughout this century there has been a tendency of corporations to re-organize industry by breaking down work down into small steps, with as many of these steps as possible requiring little or no skill. A single person is then assigned to do just one simple task over and over. Instead of teams of workers making a whole car, for example, you have auto assembly lines where each person does just one thing repeatedly. The idea is to remove thinking and initiative and decision-making out of the hands of the workforce as much as possible, concentrating it in the hands of management. An

executive of General Electric candidly explained G.E.'s enthusiasm for NC machines: "Look, with [non-NC systems] the control remains with the machinist — control of feeds, speeds, number of cuts, output; with NC there is a shift of control to management. Management is no longer dependent on the operator and can thus optimize the use of their machines. With NC, control over the process is placed firmly in the hands of management — and why shouldn't we have it?"

There isn't any reason in the technology itself why the people who design and edit the programs have to be different people from the people who run the machines. It was just a question of management splitting up these two parts of the process to gain more control. They wanted to take all of the thinking and decision-making in the process and put it in their own hands.

Check out the cash registers at McDonald's. There is a tab for each food item, not numbers. Management doesn't even want to be dependent on a person's ability to count. Also they want to make sure the workers don't under-charge somebody. The bosses want to leave as little room for decisions or initiative on the part of the workforce as possible.

Is it any wonder the ORC report finds growing job dissatisfaction?

Centralizing control over production doesn't happen due to the personal quirks of certain management persons. If workers have more control, they might organize work in ways more suitable to themselves and it would be harder to impose a speed up — a situation that might reduce the owner's profits in the long run. Capitalist corporations centralize control to squeeze as much production as possible out of their investment. If a particular person in management isn't willing to do this, he or she won't last long.

Cheapening Labor

Control is only one goal that companies have in breaking down work into unskilled routines that a person is assigned to doing over and over; it also lowers labor costs because unskilled labor costs less since it is more plentiful.

The re-organization of work in the Standard gas station chain in the western states shows how this works. Your scribe worked in that chain for six years in the sixties and, at that time, the re-organization had not yet taken place. Each employee did all the varied tasks in running the station — from pumping gas to doing lube jobs to replacing U-joints. Everyone was put through an initial training program to teach us how to do the various tasks. One thing that kept the job from being a total bore was the variety. The "inside" tasks, working on the cars, involved somewhat more skill and occasionally presented a challenge — dealing with the peculiarities of some weird model or finding out what was wrong or whatever. Everyone had an opportunity to do this work because the tasks were rotated.

But Standard changed the operation by dividing the workforce into two groups: a group of "inside" workers, doing the more interesting work, and a group of pump block attendants, who were confined to pumping gas. The "inside" people were paid \$4.70 an hour. Since everyone had formerly done the work, this would have been the rate of pay of the whole workforce on the old system. But the pumpblock group were paid only \$2.70 an hour, since this was unskilled work. In other words, half the workforce got a \$2 per hour pay cut — and that means more profits for Standard. But, as some of my former workmates told me, the new system was hated. Who'd prefer to be confined in the low-paid, dead-end, boring job of filling tanks and sniffing gas fumes all day?

“Business Unionism” Inadequate

But the American labor movement has rarely challenged the way management develops technology or organizes work because conventional American “business unionism” has had the attitude that you shouldn’t challenge the way management runs the shop. As a result, the unions tend to limit their concern to wages, fringes, and the like. But, as one NC operator has argued: “The introduction of automation means that our skills are being downgraded and instead of having the prospect of moving up to a more interesting job, we now have the prospect of unemployment or a dead-end job. [But] there are alternatives that the union can explore. We have to establish the position that the fruits of technological change can be divided up — some to the workers, not all to management, as is the case today. We must demand that the machinist rise with the complexity of the machine. Thus, rather than dividing his job up, the machinist should be trained to program and repair his new equipment — a task well within the grasp of most people in the industry. Demands such as these strike at the heart of most management prerogative clauses which are in many collective bargaining contracts. Thus, to deal with automation effectively, one has to strike at another prime ingredient of business unionism: the idea of ‘let management run the business.’ The introduction of NC equipment makes it imperative that we fight such ideas.”

Norwegian Union Fights for Control Over Technology

The possibilities of worker control can be seen from a look at the “trade union participation project” of the Norwegian Iron and Metal Workers Union at the government-owned weapons factory in Kongsberg. The Kongsberg plant recently introduced the latest type of NC machines, Computerized Numerical Control (CNC). CNC machines come with a built-in mini-computer, made feasible by the introduction of micro-processors. These computer units allow info from a number of tapes to be stored in the machine and allow editing and changes in the tapes right on the shop floor. If a machine operated by tape has to be corrected by the manual intervention of the machinists — as is often the case — the computer automatically “corrects” the tape for future use, and on some models programs for complicated contours on metal parts can be made right at the machine on a keyboard console. This new technology makes it possible for workers on the shop floor to regain control over the work. The machine operators could not only edit tapes but make their own programs from scratch.

However, this potential hasn’t yet been realized here in the USA. At the big General Electric plant in Lynn, Massachusetts, for example, the computers on the new CNC machines remain locked and only management is allowed to edit tapes. Managers simply don’t want the workers to gain more control over the operation.

But at the Kongsberg plant the machinists normally do all of the editing of the programs, according to their own ideas of safety, efficiency, quality and convenience. They add or subtract operations, or alter the whole sequence, to suit themselves. All of the machine operators are trained in programming, and there is a cooperative spirit between the programmers and the machinists. As one programmer said: “The operator knows best; he’s the one who has to actually make the part and is more intimately familiar with the particular safety and convenience factors; also he usually knows best how to optimize the program for his machine.” This situation came

about, not because Kongsberg has a more “enlightened” management, but because as the fruit of a struggle waged by the union.

When the Iron and Metal Workers Union was first faced with the problem of new computer-based technology, they hired a computer outfit, without collaboration with management, to do research for them. After explaining the new technology to some of the unionists, a number of pamphlets were produced, written by and for shop stewards, and a new position was set up in the union — the “data shop steward.” The data steward is responsible for keeping up with technical developments and looking over all new management proposals with a critical eye. Another union person is also assigned to keep an eye on the data steward, to make sure he doesn’t become too much of a “technical man,” that is, out of touch with rank and file feelings.

The whole purpose of this “union participation project” is not to carry out some “job enrichment” scheme introduced by the higher-ups, nor is it based on some idea of “harmonious cooperation” with management. The purpose is to struggle as effectively as possible for control over technology and information. Whenever the bosses try to introduce a new computer-based production scheme, the union assumes — from past experience — that it will contain some scheme for gaining more management control, and it is the business of the data shop steward and the union to identify any aspects of the proposal that might restrict the workers’ freedom or control in the shop or lead to more management monitoring of their work. Once these aspects are identified, the union organizes a fight to force a “redesign” of the new system to get rid of the aspects that aren’t in the workers interest.

However, even in the Norwegian situation, the initiative and resources for the design and introduction of technology still remain in the hands of management. Ultimately, the character of the technology that is developed will depend on who controls it and what goals they have. The anti-nuclear power movement has impressed on us the idea that there are many different alternative technologies, such as different ways of producing electricity or home-heating.

Workers’ Self-Management for a Pro-Worker Technology

It is just a myth to believe that the present trend in the organization of work and workplace technology — with the job dissatisfaction and industrial injuries and illnesses it creates — is “inevitable.” There is no reason that production has to be broken down into unskilled routines, with one person doing the same thing over and over. There are many different possible ways in which industrial technology could be developed and some are going to be better suited than others to the health, freedom, and satisfaction of the workforce. But until the workers have in their own hands the complete power to manage industry, technology will be developed in ways that aren’t in the interests of working people. If the distinction between “labor” and “management” were gotten rid of and the rank and file in the shops managed production and made decisions democratically on the basis of the principle of “one person, one vote,” then people could see to it that technological change serves the goals of the workers, not the goals of corporate or bureaucratic bosses.

Since job dissatisfaction seems to depend on the amount of freedom and control people have on the job, a real solution to the problem of people finding work boring, alienating and unhealthy lies in workers having the power to manage industry themselves. “Nationalization” of industry wouldn’t be a solution to the problem because a government management would be also cen-

tralize control and squeeze out production, without regard to the interests of the workforce. If technical expertise is needed on some question, the workforce can seek out technical advice. But bosses aren't needed.

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