

Conference on Union Response to New Technology

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A group of some seventy union research staff and university labor educators gathered under the auspices of the Penn State University Department of Labor Studies to encourage research on the implications of computer and micro-technology for unions and workers. Originally, conference organizers Donald Kennedy of Penn State and Charles Craypo of Notre Dame had also intended to include presentations on changing corporate structures and public policy, but given the importance and complexity of the problems presented by changing technology, they decided to exclude the other problems in the hope that they can be dealt with in future meetings.

Participants who prepared formal papers came from the AFL-CIO, the research staffs of seven unions, the George Meany Center for Labor Studies, and three universities. A number of other universities and unions sent representatives. The formal papers, for the most part analytical, stressed the challenges confronting unions, although the impact of new technology on worker power, health and safety, and quality of work life also received considerable attention. While it became clear that the impact differed across industries, there was general agreement that left unchecked, the new technology has the potential for increased management control, further fragmentation of jobs, widespread de-skilling of workers, increased use of the secondary labor market, and decentralization of production. Projections on job loss ranged from optimistic to bleak, with one speaker quoting from a European study which predicts a job reduction of 15% to 30% in the finance industry by 1990.

There was some debate as to just how different this new technological revolution was from the "industrial revolution," and whether, therefore, one could anticipate an upsurge of unionism among white collar and technical workers corresponding to the organization of the mass-production industries in the thirties. Several participants pointed out that the impact will be more pervasive—massively affecting offices as well as factories—and that it will occur with much greater velocity. It was also noted that, unlike the automation scare of the fifties, the imple-

mentation of this new generation of sophisticated technology is taking place in a declining economy.

Much of the discussion centered around appropriate union strategies and ways in which labor educators can help equip workers to meet the challenge. While everyone agreed that unions must employ the whole range of economic and political tactics, there was some difference of opinion on where the emphasis should lie. Several participants, most notably those from the Machinists and Graphic Arts Unions, described successful responses based on collective bargaining and vigilant contract administration. Others, such as the UAW representative, stressed the primacy of political action.

Although the problems received more attention than the solutions, the response to the conference among the participants was extremely positive. Fortunately, Penn State's Labor Studies Department plans to publish the proceedings in paperback in the spring of 1982. Copies can be ordered from Donald Kennedy, Department of Labor Studies, 901 Liberal Arts Tower, University Park, PA 16802.