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National Technology Report

Michael Westfall

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National Technology Report

Abstract

This article is part of the collection of writings of Mike (Marshall) Westfall, retired autoworker from General Motors in Flint, Michigan (1964-1994) and activist critic of the auto industry restructuring that led to devastating job losses. It originally appeared online in *The Westfall Papers*.

[<http://michaelwestfall.tripod.com/id73.html>, accessed 12/14/2011]

National Technology Report

U.A.W. National C.E.R.P. Chairman

Mike Westfall

June 1981

The auto companies are putting up the largest smoke screen in automotive history. They are feverishly trying to cover up the fact that they are eliminating as many of our jobs as possible through technology, downsizing, and the World Car.

Industry does not exist for management alone and they are applying technology in an anti-social way. Top priority for our union is the saving of jobs. C.E.R.P. was designed for this purpose and not at the expense of losing our competitive edge with international competition. New technology does not mean that our union must decline, or that its power and influence must diminish, but rather our union can offer a new opportunity to achieve a better standard of living.

Tuesday, April 28, Dave Lustig and I went to the Society of Manufacturing and Engineering show at Cobo Hall in Detroit. We saw many of the smart tools that will replace our jobs. They had laser inspection, pick and place robots, automatic self-feeding drills, and hundreds of other people-replacing computer controlled smart tools.

The main theme of this show was to show all of the auto company big shots how to replace their blue-collar workers with steel collar workers.

At this show it was disclosed that G.M. has decided to build its own robots. All of the robot producers are building to capacity and still cannot satisfy G.M.'s appetite for metal collar worker replacements. G.M. is installing robots in their plants throughout the world for a variety of jobs including welding, painting, machine loading, die casting, transferring parts, palletizing, inspecting and assembly.

When you start studying robotics and micro-automation you find that there are many areas that have already been developed fully man-free. We can write off paint and cab shops. In the very near future we will have a totally man-free paint system including the elimination of our sanders and sealer people in our plants. The paint will be water base and applied automatically with electrostatic spray systems.

Our cab shops are obsolete. We have what is considered rigid automation. What will soon replace it is called the Robo gate system. It is a modular flexible type that will eliminate just about all workers in our cab shops.

Optical robot inspectors are now a reality and they are even developing one with four legs that will walk. We will soon see the progressive elimination of human inspection in our plant.

High rise material systems at each plant could be totally man-free. This storage system could be interfaced with what is called the Car-Trac system. This is simply a computerized material feeding line running alongside the assembly line and automatically dumping into the bins of each job whatever nuts, bolts, bulbs or material is needed.

The dump cars on this feeder line will be computer controlled and automatically return to the front storage system for automatic refilling for the next job down the line. Our line feeders, cycle workers and drivers are soon to experience a drastic cut in their numbers.

No one is safe, not even sanitation. There is on the horizon a rolling multi-cubed sweeper vehicle that glides up and down the well-traveled aisles removing dirt accumulated during the busy day's activity.

The on-board motion sensors allow the robot to avoid workers or obstacles in its path. As the robot approaches a waste basket it will stop, measure, align its body sensors to a pre-programmed position and two metallic arms will empty the refuse container into the on-board waste storage bin.

With task completed, the internal vacuum re-activates and the robot continues on its way. When its sensors confirm that its refuse bin is full the robot halts its program, evaluates its present position and then proceeds to a programmed area where the refuse is transferred to a large stationary bin. These robots do not require lighting, as they carry their own infrared sensors in their search for floor residue and rely on sonics to determine the location of waste containers.

There are hundreds of applications for these different smart tools and if you think they can't take your job - you are wrong.

The auto companies have little sense of social responsibility, their objective is to make huge amounts of money, and if it's at the workers expense, then so be it.

Because of the profit motivation of the auto companies, we have come to an uncomfortable accommodation. Progress cannot be stopped, but workers must not suffer and they should share in the new wealth. We must insist that any new technology applied in our plants be shaped equally between management and the Union.

If we bargain intelligently, technology has the potential of making gains out of the losses brought about by the World Car and downsizing. It can be developed in such a way that it eliminates undesirable work, utilizes the creative energies of workers, shortens the workweek, allows for earlier retirement, and affords normal attrition.

We must resist using technology for speed-ups, breaking of work rules, union busting, and using it for robot-like control over workers.

How many of you reading this have been laid off beyond call back rights? If you worked in Japan, Germany, Australia, or many other countries and were replaced by a robot or for any other reason you would not lose your job. You don't lose your job over technology in these countries.

How many more will get the ax permanently? How many of you will be forced to leave this state for employment? How will you support your family on five dollars an hour with no benefits when accustomed to ten dollars an hour plus tremendous benefits? And you older people, what are your children going to do for a job?

We know that G.M. expects to produce 75 cars per hour at its new S-Car plant with only 750 direct labor employees - that's one car produced per hour for every 10 employees. It is logical that G.M. expects the same comparison manpower ratios in all of its plants.

If you apply these ratios to our existing plants which run 60 jobs per hour you end up with only 600 direct labor employees per shift or 1200 workers for two shifts in plants which now have 3200 workers for two shifts. While it may take some time for all of this to happen and the total resulting impact is at this time unknown you can see that the possibilities are shocking.

My committee is dedicated to bringing about drastic changes in our upcoming contracts.

If you do nothing, you will be doing exactly what the companies want you to do. They are out to eliminate your job and if you don't face that fact you are only deceiving yourself.

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