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A World Without Work? [Review of the Books *The End of Work* and *The Jobless Future*]

Abstract
[Excerpt] These two books take different routes to the same conclusion: This Time It's For Real. The end of work is now upon us, and the jobless future beckons. This was portended in the past--by the development of steam-powered machinery, then electrical power, then by mid-twentieth century automation reflected in numerically-controlled machine tools, and even by the first and second generations of computers--but never realized as new outlets for employment took shape. Those days are done now. Advanced computers and software are bringing into being what Jeremy Rifkin calls a "near-workerless economy."

Keywords
technology, labor market, globalization, labor movement, automation

Disciplines
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Comments
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The End of Work

By Jeremy Rifkin, Tarcher/Putnam, 1995, 350 pgs, $24.95.

The Jobless Future

By Stanley Aronowitz and William DiFazio, University of Minnesota Press, 1994, 393 pgs. $24.95.

These two books take different routes to the same conclusion: This Time It's For Real. The end of work is now upon us, and the jobless future beckons. This was portended in the past--by the development of steam-powered machinery, then electrical power, then by mid-twentieth century automation reflected in numerically-controlled machine tools, and even by the first and second generations of computers--but never realized as new outlets for employment took shape. Those days are done now. Advanced computers and software are bringing into being what Jeremy Rifkin calls a "near-workerless economy."

Rifkin makes the point in his usual pamphleteering style, in the best sense, that is--one that speaks to ordinary people and rallies them to action. He throws the reader one hard-hitting fact after another: A robot melon picker can 'smell" when a fruit is ripe for taking. A human bank teller can handle 200 transactions a day; an automated teller 2,000 a day.

Rifkin alternates his evidence with arousing argument. "The death of the global labor force is being internalized by millions of workers who experience their own individual deaths, daily, at the hands of profit-driven employers," he says. "They become expendable, then irrelevant, and finally invisible in the new high-tech world of global commerce and trade." For Rifkin, the choice is between "a safe haven or a terrible abyss," between "a death sentence for civilization" or "a rebirth of the human spirit."

Rifkin finds his grist in the droppings of the daily business press reporting the latest "downsizing" move by a profitable multinational company or the newest technological innovation that will displace an entire stratum of service sector employees. Aronowitz and DiFazio find theirs, by contrast, in the nuggets of Adler, Althusser, Arendt and Aristotle--just to take the A's. Aronowitz, a professor at the City University of New York, and DiFazio, a professor of sociology at St. John's

University in New York, cast their analysis in a deep academic style. ("While the Frankfurt school's Critical Theory shares McDermott's alarm .. Long before Michel Foucault disseminated the idea ... "). At the same time, though, they weave contemporary cultural criticism into their argument, comparing the messages of the films Do The Right Thing, Working Girl and Last Exit to Brooklyn for what they say about class and identity politics.

Both books stress the polarization underway in advanced industrial societies. Rifkin suggests that a relatively small, elite "knowledge class" of highly trained symbolic analysts are joining I wealthy owners and executives in a new aristocracy. Among this group he includes scientists, engineers, software analysts, biotechnology researchers, public relations specialists, lawyers, investment bankers, management consultants, financial and tax consultants, architects, strategic planners, marketing specialists, film producers and editors, art directors, publishers, writers, editors and journalists. Rifkin puts this group at 20 percent of the workforce.

The rest, the vast majority of workers, are being shoved to the margins of the economy. They are losing their grip on the service jobs that were supposed to be their salvation. Unless something is done, the "workerless society" will be marked by mass unemployment, widespread desperation and social upheaval.

Aronowitz and DiFazio go even farther than Rifkin in evaluating how far the "declining middle" will sag. Many of Rifkin's "elite" 20 percent are themselves being marginalized by new uses of technology and the imperatives of profitseeking, cost-cutting management in a competitive global economy (or by budget-constrained managers in the non-profit and government sectors).

Rifkin, Aronowitz and DiFazio call for both a reduction of working hours and a radical redefinition of work. But their prescriptions are based on different analyses. Rifkin agrees with the view that new technology is the perpetrator of the "end of work." He calls for a massive shift of employment to a "third sector" of community-based voluntary associations serving social needs. Accompanying such a movement would be a shift in consciousness toward a new definition of what constitutes productivity, efficiency, use and value in society.

Work in the third sector would be supported by a social wage" generated by defense spending cuts and new taxes. Regrettably, though, Rifkin joins much of corporate America in calling for a Value Added Tax, a tax built into each stage of the production, distribution and retailing cycle and reflected in the price paid by consumers, as the tax source for the social wage. He acknowledges that a VAT is a regressive tax that hit, low-income people hardest, but proposes excluding basic

necessities. But this just reduces the taxable base, yielding inadequate revenue or the purpose envisioned.

Aronowitz and DiFazio set their proposals in a wider-ranging context. Like Rifkin, they recommend a 30-hour work week with no cut in pay, pointing to efforts by the labor movement in Germany to achieve a shorter work week both through legislation affecting workers generally, and in collective bargaining with companies such as Volkswagen. However, the victory of the German trade unions in gaining a shorter work week, celebrated by Aronowitz and DiFazio as an example of what can be done, is under enormous pressure for reversal as major companies announce new plans to relocate production overseas.

Aronowitz and DiFazio also target the defense budget as a main source of funding for socially useful work. As a tax source to support new social programs, however, they would do it the old-fashioned way: through a more progressive income tax. They would also promote specific policies that affect the "declining middle," such as measures to regulate capital flight by U.S. companies to preserve employment or to compensate affected workers and communities, expanded child care programs, higher education opportunities, public works projects, international trade union organizing and collective bargaining, and environmental protection. In their most visionary mode, they advocate eradicating the distinction between work and "idleness" through shared-work programs to "bridge the gulf between knowledge-based labor and manual and clerical work."

In their prescriptive final passages, both volumes address environmental issues, but as an afterthought. What they have to say is fine, as far as it goes. Rifkin calls the move to third sector employment, where the purpose of work is service and advocacy rather than efficiency, production and profit, an antidote to the materialism that has brought "rapacious consumption of the earth" in the form of global warming, ozone depletion, mass deforestation, spreading deserts, and extinction of species.

Aronowitz and DiFazio suggest a new research agenda focusing on direct current, solar and wind energy to replace alternating current and fossil-based fuel sources. They also call for small-scale, ecologically sound production modes. At the same time, they sound an alarm against "those who will not address issues of social justice and economic equality." These, they insist, should "keep quiet about ecological disaster, for to expect that the vast majority of people will sacrifice their living standards to preserve the spotted owl without provision for the means of life is either naive or blatantly class biased."

Neither of these books solves a deeper problem echoed by this last reference to the ecology. To expect that the vast majority of people will sacrifice their living standards

for a shorter work week, or for psychically satisfying work in low-paid third sector employment, or to eradicate the distinction between work and idleness, is to also run the risk of being charged with naivete or class bias.

Both books are filled with important information, insights and interpretation. But a reader might still be unconvinced that we are facing "the end of work" or a "jobless future." History suggests otherwise, and current experience suggests that there is still plenty of work to be done and plenty of people wanting to work.

The key issues for working people are still those that have always been with us: improving wages, hours, working conditions, job security, social benefits. Workers protect themselves in these matters through trade union and political struggle.

The fact that the labor movement is in retreat, or that the Right is on the offensive politically, is no reason to substitute for those struggles a willing turn toward a shared genteel poverty that I find implicit in these volumes.

These books are important contributions to our understanding of the great forces at work in the new global economy, even if one disagrees with their basic premise. Trade unionists, environmentalists and anyone else engaged in social movements should buy, bundle, pass around and discuss these books. Together, they speak to the activist and the intellectual in every serious social justice advocate.