

SPEECH GIVEN TO THE UNION'S COMMITTEE ON AUTOMATION AND REPRODUCTION

by Fred Ferguson

The problem with reproduction...is that it's indefensible.

No rational person can defend a system which forces the employer to pay to have type set that will never see the page of a newspaper and consequently never earn him a dime.

On the other hand, in a time of rapidly rising unemployment, coupled with an ever-increasing flood of newly-developed automated equipment, I am opposed to giving it up without iron-clad guarantees for the security of the members of this union.

That security would have to provide for the maintenance of our ranks at at least our present strength. For if the employers are allowed to use attrition to pave the way for automation -- we face only the bleak prospect of an ever-shrinking membership, with a corresponding loss of power with which to negotiate.

The situation in our own shop alone is enough cause for worry.

The work force since the 1st of January 1970 has suffered a 7% loss.

While the Hand side showed a loss of slightly more than 5%, the machine side, which is bearing the main brunt of the introduction of automated equipment, shows a loss of slightly more than 10%.

All of this of course is before the introduction of "second generation" Photons, which promise even more drastic cuts.

So the problem facing us is not "the disposition of reproduction" ...it is what to do about automation.

The failure to see the problem in this way, and to merely "trade off" reproduction for some fringe benefit that would probably accrue to us in the normal course of events anyway, would be, in my opinion, tragic.

We must establish, once and for all, that, we are entitled to a share in the savings from automation.

We must establish that automation will be used for the good of all mankind, and not to merely increase the already sizable fortunes of greedy employers.

STRUCTURAL AND CYCLICAL UNEMPLOYMENT

The first thing we must do if we are to talk about automation and unemployment is to define what kinds of unemployment we are faced with.

There is of course the cyclical or seasonal unemployment that we have suffered within this trade for the last hundred or so years. The fat Decembers and lean Februarys that we have coped with by sharing the work with our unemployed brothers via the union slip-board and sub system.

Now, however, we are faced with a new and much more serious type of unemployment, caused by automation, called structural unemployment. This type is permanent because it is structured or built into the employers work flow.

The proposal I wish to make to the committee, and eventually to the contract drafting committee is known as the Sliding Scale of Hours, and while the idea was first introduced by the United Auto Workers some 25 years ago, I feel that with some modification it is applicable to our situation.

The Sliding Scale works very simply on the following premise: That when the employers find it necessary to reduce the work force because of either cyclical fluctuations in the economy or because of the introduction of automated equipment, rather than a lay-off, a reduction in the total number of man-hours takes place.

For instance, if the employer claimed he had a surplus of 175 man-hours per week, instead of laying off 5 men, he would reduce the work week of the entire 350 man crew by 30 minutes.

There are any number of ways the details for this can be worked out once the principle is established.

For instance, the company at the beginning of each quarter could be required to state their man-power requirements for the following three months. The union would make the appropriate adjustments in the work week and it would remain that way for the balance of the quarter.

Overtime would of course be paid for anything over the ordinary end of the shift.

The obvious question the employer is going to raise here is "does the sliding scale slide both ways?" In other words, can the work week go up as well as down?

The answer is that whether it slides up depends on why it went down in the first place.

All reductions for structural changes in the work force must be permanent as our share in the savings realized from automation.

If on the other hand the adjustment was made because of seasonal or cyclical changes in the economy, these would of course be allowed readjusted back up.

Naturally the present 35 hour week would be imposed as an absolute ceiling beyond which no further increases would be allowed.

And in subsequent contracts, as the ceiling were negotiated lower and lower, even these changes would become permanent.

We have never been in greater danger from automation. Even the introduction of the lynotype pales by comparison to equipment now on the market and in the experimental stage. It is now possible to code information on magnetic tape while the reporter is typing his "hard copy." This is then flashed on a TV screen for editing by the editor. After this it is fed automatically to a computer that punches a justified tape which is then fed to a phototypesetter that sets 8 columns of type simultaneously. An entire page! Thus eliminating not only the operator but also the proof-reader, and the hand man.

The time to tackle this threat is now! Now while we are at our maximum strength, highest wages and greatest resources. Not five or ten years from now when it will be too late!

If we are going to trade off reproduction, let's get something that will replace it not merely eliminate it!