

## **View Sidelight: The Shift in Measurement of the Future**

by Charley Richardson  
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Jack Welch, former CEO of General Electric, is famous for having said that if he had his way, he would put his factories on barges and drag them around the world, in search of the lowest wages and least regulation.

Jack Welch's dream of infinitely mobile factories is one in which the workforce has been made irrelevant—where workers have little or no control over the production process, have become replaceable cogs in a management-controlled machine, and have lost key sources of leverage.

In many ways Jack Welch's vision is becoming a reality, as advances in technology and work organization allow management to take increasing control over work processes and ultimately put work on "electronic barges" (through a combination of computerization and telecommunications)—moving it around the world at will. The failure of unions to take on the restructuring of the workplace is a disaster for workers' future.

New technologies and new ways of organizi

## DE-SKILLING

Despite promises of high skills and high wages, most workers will tell you that with computerization and work restructuring, their jobs are becoming less skilled and they are becoming more replaceable.

Computers gather information on how the job is done, and then use that information to standardize and control the work process. Automated teller machines lead to automated

## LACK OF RESPONSE

Why isn't there more of a reaction when management makes changes that have such profound impacts on union members and on their leverage against management? Why aren't unions more concerned and prepared? Why don't they have a strategy?

The surrender of the "shop floor"—of decisions about work—to management is a disaster for working people and for the future of collective action.

Labor's focus on periodic contract bargaining and ongoing contract enforcement, combined with an acceptance of management's right to introduce new technologies and restructure work, are out of synch with the reality of ongoing change in the workplace. Conceding today's decisions about work process and technology sets the stage for defeat in the future.

One local union president, who was facing an Electronic Medical Records system in the hospital she represents, said: "The members are really being taught that they should just put up with it, that there is nothing that the union can do."

This despite the de-skilling, monitoring, job disruption, and job loss that will result. She said that members had been taught over and over that things not settled by the contract are up to management. And the result is that "the members are losing faith in the union because we aren't winning the big battles."

When members call the union with their concerns about restructured work and technological displacement, their question is, "What should I do?" Unions often respond with information about re-training and bumping procedures, and a large dose of, "We're not sure."

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