

“Call Centers and the Postal Service: Looking at The Future of Work in Massachusetts”

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The Spirit stood among the graves, and pointed down to One. [Scrooge] advanced towards it trembling. The Phantom was exactly as it had been, but he dreaded that he saw new meaning in its solemn shape.

"Before I draw nearer to that stone to which you point," said Scrooge, "answer me one question. Are these the shadows of the things that Will be, or are they shadows of things that May be, only?"

Still the Ghost pointed downward to the grave by which it stood.

"Men's courses will foreshadow certain ends, to which, if persevered in, they must lead," said Scrooge. "But if the courses be departed from, the ends will change. Say it is thus with what you show me."

A Christmas Carol: Stave 4: The Last of the Spirits, by Charles Dickens, 1843

While macro studies of the changing nature of economic sectors and the jobs that result are critical to efforts to develop effective policy approaches and union strategies for understanding and impacting the future of work, it is also necessary to understand, from the inside out, the nature of changes that are now taking place within workplaces across all economic sectors. Understanding the future of work as employers are seeking to create and sustain it requires analysis and understanding of the specific goals pursued as management restructures work, as well as the strategies and tools they adopt to achieve these goals. It also requires evaluation and analysis of the particular impacts on the workforce and on the possibilities for collective leverage of the restructuring of work. Finally, it is critical to understand the struggle between managements' efforts to reorganize work and the inherent barriers within the work process to the realization of these goals – barriers that may provide the workforce, through

collective action, with points of leverage necessary to exerting control over the workplace, over the work process and therefore over their futures.

Management is currently working to overcome the barriers that stand in their way as they seek to restructure work to meet their goals. New technologies are one key enabling force allowing this restructuring process to move forward. Case studies of workplaces that focus on how technologies are being used in conjunction with work restructuring initiatives to fundamentally change the work process and the relation of the workforce to the work process can make important contributions to understanding current and intended changes, can help point to targets for action and provide support for the development of union strategies for gaining more control over the future of work.

In this paper, we look at two workplaces, call centers and the Postal Service. These two workplaces contain examples of the full range of changes that are taking place in work processes, including robotics and automation; digitalization/computerization; outsourcing, contracting out and offshoring; use of part-time and temporary workers and others. In particular, the call center is the workplace where the digitalization of work has facilitated the elimination of barriers to management's external control over the work process and to the intensification of work. It is where management has, in many ways, been able to create their vision of the ideal workplace. Looking at call centers can therefore provide a window into understanding the directions for the future of work that management is pursuing through technological change and connected work restructuring efforts in other sectors. In the Postal Service, we can see the largely successful attempts by management to overcome the physical barriers to the restructuring of work (they can't yet digitalize the physical letter) and to create a workplace where the workforce is

minimized, where work is intensified and controlled and where the work is ultimately made increasingly portable or transferable.

In both call centers and the Postal Service, management has moved a long way toward achieving the figurative goal that Jack Welch (former CEO of General Electric) set of putting his factories on barges and towing them around the world to the countries or locations that provide the lowest wages, least regulation and weakest labor movements. Moving work in this way requires developing means for simplifying and standardizing work processes and separating the work from the incumbent workforce. The automaters at the call centers and the Postal Service have used all the tools of technology to standardize the work process and eliminate jobs, monitor the workforce, move information and work onto computers, and transfer the work at will – creating in electronic form Jack Welch’s barges – barges that in this case are not limited to ports-of-call on bodies of water. Management has also used the full range of work restructuring approaches, including the use of temporary and part-time workers, the combining of jobs across classifications and the outsourcing of work to other areas and other countries.

Studying call centers and the Postal Service can give significant insight into the vision for the future of work that grows out of the processes of technological change and work restructuring that are currently being implemented in workplaces in all sectors of the economy, and can provide a template for examining the work process and the process of change in other sectors.

Since 2000, we have presented and participated in a series of workshops, training sessions and focus groups throughout the United States with members of the Utility Workers Union of America (UWUA), the United Steelworkers of America (USWA) and the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) who work in call centers. The focus of these sessions

was on the changes in technology, work organization and management policies that are taking place in call centers and their impacts on the members and the union. We have also reviewed the literature on changes in the call center industry.

In our research on the Postal Service, we combined a review of literature, analysis of public testimony by Union and industry leaders and review of Postal Service documents, with a focus group with postal workers from Central Massachusetts as well as with interviews with Postal union leaders from Central Massachusetts and the New England Region. We have also toured Postal facilities and reviewed video presentations on automation in the Postal Service.

CALL CENTERS

In many ways, the call center can be seen as the embodiment of a management view of the future of the workplace and the future of work. Because work flows in and out of the workplace, and is internally routed, in digital form, the inherent barriers to control over and shaping of the work process that exist in most sectors are removed. Work in the call center is consequently increasingly standardized, continuously monitored and intensified.

The core systems of work in call centers aim at increasing control over the workforce, intensifying work and eliminating jobs, and making the work increasingly portable. Already call center work, because it relies on advanced telecommunications and the capacity to transfer phone calls instantly to any location in the world, is highly portable. The use of technologies to control the work process has made it more so.

The basic systems of automation in the call center as identified through our discussions with call center workers and through a review of the literature are:

- Automated Response Systems: Voice Recognition Systems, Voice Response Units or Robotic Call Handling.

A key technological initiative in call centers is the effort to handle as many calls as possible without human intervention. Technological systems designed to accomplish this goal range from touchtone response to voice recognition. These systems fully handle an increasing percentage of calls at a greatly reduced cost, and gather initial information from customers to facilitate the most efficient and effective routing of calls that will end up with a human operator.

- Automated Call Distribution Systems

These systems are designed to instantaneously route calls to the appropriate call center worker, based on a wide array of criteria including the caller's telephone number (identifying high value customers or specific geography), the number called (different numbers are used to identify the purpose or status of the caller) or information gathered by an automated call answering system (account number, purpose of call, etc.). These systems ensure that calls are instantaneously routed to an available agent, that the appropriate information is available to the agent, and that agents do not spend time without a call to handle.

- Computer database and information systems

In order to process customer requests, call center agents need access to customer account information, billing and payment information and information about services being offered or work being performed. The use of computer databases and computerized information systems allow the specific information that is needed to be instantly available to the agent, regardless of where the agent is physically located.

- Monitoring

Monitoring takes two forms – ongoing electronic monitoring that provides both individualized and composite data on call length, downtime, response times, etc. and human monitoring – the ability of a supervisor to listen in on an agent as they speak with a customer.

- Optimization Analysis

Information gathered by Automated Call Distribution systems and by call monitoring systems allows for the analysis and reporting of statistics on call volume, rate of response, lost calls, length of calls, etc. This in turn allows for ongoing revision of staffing levels, response scripts and automation protocols.

- Virtual Call Centers

Although we did not specifically examine this development for this study, one trend that is worth noting and further study is Virtual Call Centers. The term virtual refers to the fact that the workforce is not in a single location but does their work from home. The computer and telecommunications links create the “center”, making the geographical distance among workers irrelevant to the work system, although the isolation of the workforce remains highly significant for the possibilities of unionization or collective action.

Although automation in the call center is focused on the core work processes, we also saw evidence of automation of auxiliary tasks. While we were in a call center doing a training/focus group with a group of call center workers, a loud beeping in the hall caught our attention. It turned out to be a robot that was delivering mail to various departments throughout the multi-story building that housed this unionized call center. The mail room clerk whose job had been to carry the mail to all of the different departments in the call center had been replaced by a robot.

Changes in the Work Process Enabled by Technology

The changes in technology in the call centers outlined above enable changes in the work process that in turn have significant impacts on the workforce. In call centers, the main changes in the work process are intensification of work through the automated distribution of calls and through ongoing analysis of the most efficient ways to respond to customers, control of the work process through scripting and monitoring and changes in work scheduling that result from management analysis of workload fluctuations and required staffing levels. The perfect outcome for management is to have only the right (minimal) number of workers on the clock at any given moment, with all of the workers working all of the time.

A key change in the work process that is enabled by the technologies described above is outsourcing. The call center itself is in fact the product of an internal outsourcing process that separated customer service and interaction from the rest of the “production” process. This separation has allowed intense analysis and restructuring (standardization) of the customer interaction leading to automation, division of work, intensification, and ultimately to more outsourcing.

Even McDonald’s is now in the process of outsourcing its drive-thru intake – moving it to a call center – arguing that having the intake separated from the “production” will improve the quality of the order-taking and increase efficiency. Once a call center work process is created and the work is simplified and optimized, the work can be easily moved to anywhere in the world and can readily moved outside the organization. The work process is embodied in the software, scripts, and telecommunications links, all of which are easily transferred from place to place.

A recent trend in outsourcing is moving the work to the customer. The customer is

actually trained to do their own work. They interact with the computers either through a web connection or through the use of robotic call-answering systems that allow an increasing percentage of the calls to be handled without any human intervention whatsoever. We have seen this trend most powerfully in banking with the introduction of ATM's and more recently with self check-in at airline counters and in self-checkout in retail stores.

Impacts of Changes in Technology and Work Organization on the Workforce

All of these changes in technology and resultant work reorganization are taking a toll on the workforce in call centers. A survey conducted in 2002 with 784 call center workers who work for public utilities across the United States found that almost three quarters of those surveyed reported that their pace of work had "increased" or "increased dramatically" over the past year; almost one-half reported that staffing was "inadequate": or "extremely inadequate"; one-third reported their stress level to be at a "ten" (on a scale from one to ten, with ten being the highest; the overall average stress level was 7.9); one third reported that stress was affecting them both physically and emotionally; and forty percent reported that stress affected their work performance "often" or "regularly". Among the specific conditions that these workers linked with their jobs in the call centers were: fatigue, irritability, inability to relax, headaches, backaches and high blood pressure. The most significant factors contributing to stress included demanding customers, time pressures, monitoring and pressure to complete calls. [Luce and Juravich, 2002]

In fall, 2003 we helped develop a smaller-scale survey of workers in one call center in the Boston area that 46 workers responded to. The survey found that eighty-seven percent of respondents were experiencing stress on their jobs, and fifty-four percent said that stress on the

job had in fact increased over the last year. Major causes of stress according to this group included constant monitoring, work overload, changing work policies, time pressures, not enough people to do the work, and pressure to come to work when sick (or when a family member they care for was sick).

Call center workers who participated in focus groups and training sessions we conducted spoke about a myriad of specific problems ranging from threats of discipline if they are caught saying “please” or “thank you” to a customer (speaking outside the scripts), to threats of discipline for failing to attempt to make a sale to each and every customer – even an elderly person who is calling to say they are unable to pay their bill that month. Monitoring allows such threats of discipline to become realities. Call center workers described their daily “nightmare” work situations where management was tracking the overall number and timing of their calls, and monitoring their use of scripts. Many described the overall dehumanization of the job and how they felt like a machine, not a person, engaged in a race with no finish line.

During a number of the training sessions we asked workers to complete a “life map.” To do this, workers first think about the stress they experience from their jobs; and then think about how this stress from work is affecting their life *outside* of work. They are then given a piece of paper and a flip chart marker, and asked to draw one way in which stress from their jobs is affecting their life outside of work – and then post their pictures on a wall. The composite picture was always moving and profound. Workers drew family dinner tables with an empty chair and told about how, even when they are there with their families, they are really “not there.” They drew themselves coming home and yelling at family members. They drew themselves unable to fall asleep. They drew themselves self-medicating to make it through an evening, or another day at work. They drew pictures of sadness and depression; of withdrawal; of isolation; of despair.

After passing the box of tissues, we summed up that how their jobs were organized and restructured was not only taking a toll at work – it was taking a huge toll on their lives outside of work.

Several of these training sessions were attended by both call center workers and “outside” (or “physical”) workers – those who install and repair equipment, climb into manholes, etc. Because of the gender segregation of many jobs, most of the call center workers were women; most of the outside workers were men. Several hours into these training sessions, following the life mapping activity, the outside workers felt compelled to share their newfound understanding of call center work. Many gave unprompted testimonials that began, “I always thought you call center workers had it easy – working inside, in air conditioning, sitting down, just talking on the phone.... I never knew.... I never understood...This is just terrible!...I don’t think I could ever do your job! We need to do something about this.” In particular, they pointed to the loss of control over work experienced by the call center workers.

When participants summed up the impacts on the workforce of call center work, impacts included increased stress (and resultant physical and emotional manifestations), increased feelings of isolation, increased feelings of powerlessness, increased irritability and tension including with co-workers, increased fear of discipline, increased feelings of job insecurity, and decreased faith in the union to be able to make things better. Work with high demand, low control, and lack of social support has been clearly identified as the most stressful. [Karasek,] The call center is a cookbook recipe for stress, stress that can lead to, among other things, cardiovascular disease. One International Union that represents call center workers as well as outside/physical workers, had traditionally focused their health and safety efforts on preventing workplace deaths among the outside workers. Through discussions with call center workers,

leaders in the union began questioning how much illness and death was also resulting from the stress of the electronic sweatshop – the call center.

Impacts of the Changes in Technology and Work Organization on the Union

During focus groups, workshops and training sessions we also gathered participants' ideas about how the changes in technology and work organization were affecting the union. Common responses included: fewer members due to downsizing, less dues coming in, more grievances due to increased discipline, work overload among union stewards and officers, inability to focus on the “bigger picture” because of the need to focus on the increased grievances and arbitrations, loss of treasury due to arbitrations, loss of solidarity as members are pitted against members, and fewer members being available or interested in participating in the union.

Participants in all of these programs reported a concern that the changes taking place in the call center workplace – and the negative impacts on both the workforce and the union - are beyond the ability of the union, as currently organized both internally and within the workplace, to halt or control. Participants said that unless the union was able to get a handle on this situation, they only saw things getting worse as new work processes are created that further control the workforce, eliminate jobs while intensifying work and heightening job insecurity because of the increased portability of the work.

POSTAL SERVICE

Several months ago, we received a letter in the mail that was addressed to someone on the other side of town. We did what most people would have done –

we wrote “delivered to the wrong address” on it and put it back into a mailbox. Two days later the letter came back. So we tried once again – writing this time in larger letters. Two days later the letter returned to us.

Our mistaken assumption was that after the letter re-entered the mail stream, a person was actually going to look at the front of the envelope and make sure that it was sorted to the correct delivery point. At a minimum, we assumed, the optical character readers that are now central to the mail sorting process would re-read the address on the letter and re-sort the letter to its correct final destination.

We had failed to take into account the barcode that had been printed at the bottom of the letter the first time it was sorted. The automated processes of the post office ignored the actual address, ignored our additional information and continued to route the letter to our house based on the barcode alone. When we crossed out the barcode and returned the letter to the post office, we never saw it again.

The postal service, over the last several years, has embarked on a concerted effort to automate jobs; to disconnect the transfer and control of information from the sorting and transportation of the physical letters and packages; and to cut back on the workforce, in particular the full-time, permanent workforce. The main restructuring and technological change efforts of the Postal Service have been focused on the core processes of sorting and mail handling. Early efforts were aimed at integrating workers into a mechanized mail flow (integrating them into the machine) through the use of Letter Sorting Machines (LSM's) which automated the physical handling of letters in the sorting processes while maintaining reliance on humans to read addresses and signal the machine which bin to sort the letter into. The next major step was the introduction of increasingly sophisticated Optical Character Readers which are now the center of the effort to remove workers from the sorting process and to decrease reliance on

human skill. Having created a core automated process in the sorting function, the Postal Service has also turned its attention to automation in the retail side and in the labor intensive but difficult to automate delivery process.

Unlike the call center which was in fact a product of computer and telecommunications technologies, the Postal Service is faced with automating an existing physical process without fundamentally changing the end result – the delivery of a physical letter. The automation process depends on creating an information flow that can take advantage of the advanced capabilities of computers and telecommunications by separating the information from its primary repository – the address on the letter – so that it can be manipulated in digital form. The initial focus was on automating the core sorting process and setting up the automated product flow, followed by increasing sophistication of data-gathering and manipulation and later attention to the non-standard elements within the system that were more difficult to automate.

In November of 1965, the Post Office installed the first high-speed optical character reader into service in the Detroit Post Office. Optical character readers replace the need for a human to read and interpret the information contained in the address on a letter or package. While the capacities of the first-generation machines were limited (this one was connected to an MPLSM (multi-position letter sorting machine) frame and read the only the city/state/ZIP Code line of typed addresses to sort letters to one of the 277 pockets), the future of letter sorting was being created. At first, only the initial sort was automated, and each subsequent handling of the letter required that the address be read again.

By the end of 1984, however, 252 OCRs were installed in 118 major mail processing centers across the country. Today multiline optical character readers (MLOCRs) read the entire address on an envelope, spray a barcode on the envelope, and then sort it at the rate of more than

nine per second. The barcode eliminates the need to re-read the address during later sorting processes (see story at the beginning of this section) as it is easily readable by relatively simpler technology. Wide area barcode readers can read the barcode virtually anywhere on a letter. Advanced facer-canceller systems automatically place the mail in proper alignment (all facing in the same direction) and cancel the postage.

In the early days of the OCR machines, the main emphasis was on processing mail with machine-imprinted (typed) addresses. Secondary systems were established to handle mail that could not be processed automatically without disrupting the main flow of mail.

Letter mail with addresses that were handwritten or otherwise not machine-readable were initially processed manually or by a letter sorting machine. At this point, the Remote Video Encoding system or remote barcoding system (RBCS), are used to keep the vast majority of mail in the primary automated mail-stream. When MLOCRs cannot read an address, they spray an identifying code on the back of the envelope and take a video image of the front of the envelope. Operators at a data entry site, which may be distant from the mail processing facility, read the address on a video screen and enter the information needed by the computer. The results are transmitted back to a barcode sorter which sprays the correct barcode on the front of the envelope.

Other systems for dealing with non-standard mail include the Postal Automated Redirection System (PARS) which is designed to identify most of the roughly 4 to 6 billion pieces of "Undeliverable as Addressed" (UAA) letter mail that is handled annually. At the first machine handling, the correct address is identified and the mail is redirected automatically to the current, correct destination. PARS will also use OCRs to process the 43 million change of

address (COA) forms the USPS gets each year, integrating the information directly into the digital databases that are accessed by the system.

While letters constitute approximately 70% of United States mail and have therefore been the main focus of automation initiatives, the Postal Service has recently turned its attention toward processing flats (larger pieces of mail that are sorted without being bent). Automated Flat Sorting Machines (AFSM) bring the same automatic capabilities used with the MLOCR's to the sorting of flats and other non-standard mail.

Having set the automation process on track in the core sorting processes (the central part of the Postal Service's production process) and while continuing both to improve the accuracy and speed of automated sorting and to increase the automation in supporting processes such as mail tray handling where robotic systems are increasingly used, the Postal Service has turned its attention to the more difficult to automate processes at the beginning and end of the overall process – the retail side and the delivery side.

The major new technology in the Post Offices themselves is the POS (Point of Service) ONE, the automated cash register and data terminal. The POS ONE provides a fully integrated network for accounting, marketing, payroll and sales. It consolidates all of the transactions, including credit and debit card authorization and processing, into a single machine that is centrally connected. The POS ONE system provides instantly updated information on services as well as automating the processing of transactions and tracking postal employees on a regular basis.

Automated Postal Centers are the Postal Service's version of ATM's or automated checkout counters. They allow postal customers with debit and credit cards to do 80 percent of the tasks they would normally do at a counter with a clerk, including weighing and mailing

packages at any class, buying insurance and delivery confirmation, and ZIP code lookup. These Postal “kiosks” can be placed in postal lobbies or other areas where they could be available 24 hours a day. The following description is from the IBM website (<http://www-1.ibm.com/kiosk/government.html>):

“Postal customers can now have 24/7 access to basic postal services without waiting in lines, while allowing postal workers to concentrate on more complex transactions. The APC's are networked to the IBM retail point-of-sale back-end system for transaction handling and are remotely monitored by the US Postal Service for replenishing consumables, proactively dispatching maintenance and security, using IBM's Kiosk Manager software. This approach to equipment service has dramatically reduced replenishment costs versus the traditional approach to scheduled service visits.”

The APC's will automatically notify a human when they are in need of supplies and service, cutting maintenance costs and facilitating the outsourcing of maintenance functions.

Delivery Point Packaging (DPP) will consolidate both letters and flats into a single, individually wrapped, “delivery point package”. When fully implemented, DPP will reduce the amount of time the carrier spends in the office preparing the mail for delivery and will reduce the time for each individual delivery, which will “allow” the carrier to service more delivery points on any given day. Delivery times will be reduced as separation of mail is eliminated and handling is simplified at each stop on the delivery route. While this technology is still in the

research and development phase, it is expected to have a full launch in 2006 or 2007. The Postal Service estimates gross savings in the delivery function of \$2.8 billion from DPP.

Changes in the Work Process Enabled by Technology:

Essentially every aspect of the work process in the Postal Service has been affected by the changes in technology that have been implemented over the last few decades. These impacts will clearly increase as the capabilities of the technology are expanded and as an increasing portion of the postal workflow is integrated into the automated systems.

The main internal change in the work process overall is the reduction of manual work and the reduction of crew size for the work that remains. In other words, there are fewer people, doing more work and doing it in greater isolation. As we will discuss below, this places the workforce in a stressful environment without the social interaction and support that has been shown to reduce the impacts of stress on the job. Overall, the workforce that has not been eliminated has been integrated into the larger postal machine – the automated flow of work that has reduced the human workers to footnotes. This has also facilitated increased use of temporary employees to fill in the gaps.

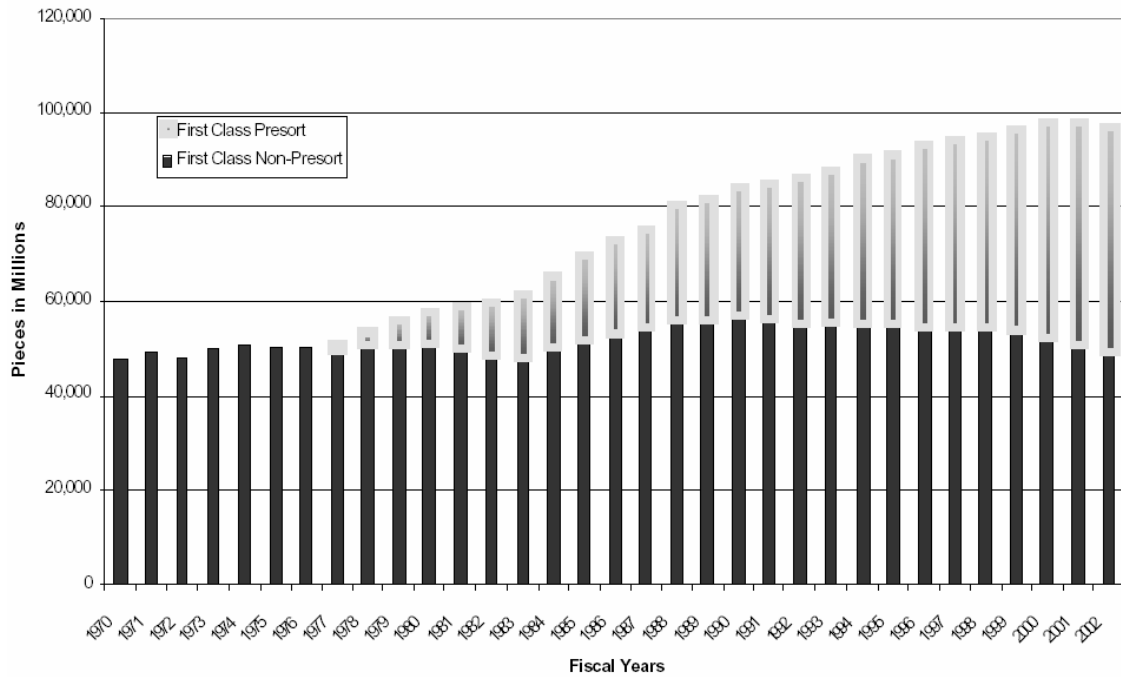
The other major trend in the post office that is enabled by changes in technology is the outsourcing of work. This is done directly through the use, for example, of outsourced call centers and the hiring of delivery and freight companies to transport mail. It is also done indirectly through what is euphemistically called “worksharing”. Discount prices for pre-sorted and barcoded mail, combined with the availability of MLOCR and other sorting technology, has in fact created a whole new industry – the presort mail industry. Discounted rates are applied based on the level of sort, with the highest level of discount achieved when an eleven-digit,

delivery point barcode is applied to each piece of mail. This in turns allows the Postal Service to easily sequence the mail into its automated mail stream for sorting and delivery.

Presort companies, once mainly local firms, are forming national chains and spending millions on new equipment. Postal Services, Inc., a Pitney Bowes subsidiary, is creating a national network by buying up mailing companies across the country. Member firms of the National Association of Presort Mailers, as of April 2003, sorted over "...100 million pieces of mail daily in over 100 cities or about 30 billion pieces of First-Class Mail annually" [Sudhir Aggarwal, April 4, 2003.] Firms which handle large volumes of mail, such as insurance companies and credit card companies, are also setting up their own pre-sort operations. As the PreSort industry grows and along with its technological capabilities and political clout, there will be increasing pressure on the Postal Service to increase the levels of discounts which will in turn lead to further outsourcing of work. Proposals have already been made by the PreSort industry for private mailboxes to collect letter mail, in particular at peak seasons (thus reducing the pressure on the Postal Service).

The growth of presort can be seen in the chart below. Essentially all of the growth in first class mail since 1977 has been accounted for by the increase in presorted mail:

FIRST-CLASS LETTERS AND SEALED PARCEL VOLUME



Impacts on the Workforce

The impacts on the workforce of the changes in technology, as described by participants in our focus groups and the APWU union leaders we spoke with, include job insecurity and job loss, speedup, social disruption (lousy schedules), stress and social isolation in the workplace.

The combination of automation and worksharing arrangements has led to a decline in postal work hours of 11 million in the year 2000, 23 million in 2001 and 77 million in 2002, for a cumulative total of 111 million annual work hours or 62,960 FTE's. The career complement of the Postal Service has declined by 10,533 in 2000, 11,685 in 2001 and 22,963 in 2002 for a total drop of 45,181 in three years (from 798,000 in 1999). In the period from 1971 when the postal automation program was in its beginning stages to 2002, the number of Delivery Points has

grown by 72%, and mail volume has grown by 133%. The number of employees, on the other hand, has grown by only 17%. [Briefing]

The job reduction plans for Fiscal Year 2005 are outlined in a memo creatively named: “Automation Impacts Update – Capturing Savings Through Downsizing Utilizing the Collective Bargaining Agreement” The automation planned for Fiscal 2005 includes:

- Advanced Facer Canceller System Optical Character Reader Enhancement Multi-Line Optical Character Reader Replacement which will reduce manual handling and eliminate 1,896 positions.
- Automated Package Processing System which will eliminate both machine and manual handling positions with an average fte “savings” of 21.5 per machine and a ripple effect as the replace machines are moved to other locations which are currently operating manually.
- Flats Remote Encoding System which will reduce keyer hours.
- PARS which, as described earlier, will automate processing of UAA mail and will affect the processing, delivery, and customer service workforce with “savings” estimated at 2.8 million work hours.
- Flat Sorting Machine Automation – Automated Tray Handling System which will automatically sweep full trays from the AFSM and eliminate 1 to 2 clerk sweeper positions on approximately 350 AFSM’s.
- Improvements to the Remote Bar Code Read and Consolidation of Remote Encoding Centers will reduce the demand for remote encoding as automation rates increase. Reductions of 1600 clerks and maintenance workers are projected.

So first and foremost, the Postal Service is a place where jobs are at risk due to a crushing tide of automation. Workers in our focus groups described a workplace full of insecurity – with people always asking “Have you heard anything?” and always looking over their shoulders. Survival strategies within the new automated environment lead the workers to think constantly about the machine, about how it is counting the work that they do and about the best strategy for making the numbers look good.

Those involved in the core sorting process look back on their time at the Letter Sorting Machines, which have been described as modern day torture devices because of the relentless machine pacing of the sorting process, with envy. One of the APWU members who participated in a focus group discussion of new technology and the restructuring of work expressed his frustration with the automation of work saying that the “machine has the better jobs.” The workers have become slaves to the machine, which constantly demands that letters are loaded on one end and unloaded at the other. It is a “very intense job,” the operator is always running to make sure that the machine is taken care of, having little or no control over the work process.

APWU members spoke in particular of the isolation of the job. When they worked on the MPLSM (multiposition letter sorting machine) there was a team of 15-18 people who worked together to get the job done, tended to bond as a group and support each other. “Maybe there was safety in numbers with the LSM’s,” one member said. But on the MLOCR, he worked on one end of the machine loading letters while his co-worker worked on the other end unloading. The physical isolation was reinforced and intensified by the difficulty of moving around (he worked in a very tight physical space) and the noise which prevented or at a minimum inhibited conversation. “You feel a need to declare your humanity and say, ‘I am a person’” was the response of one former MLOCR operator.

As pointed out earlier, the automation and consequent intensification of the work process enabled a change in schedules that focus group participants spent a great deal of time talking about. In March of 2004 the USPS stopped processing mail during the day and moved processing to tour 3 (afternoon shift). According to focus group participants, this was happening all across the country.

According to one clerk affected by the schedule change: “I was out of my mind, I was talking to the dog.” He went on to say that “you can put up with almost anything at work if your schedule allows you to have a life outside of work.” But the combination of his job and his schedule was wreaking havoc on life both at work and at home.

Workers are caught in the classic squeeze as they try to figure out what to do about management’s plans. As one worker said: “I don’t have anything against change that will keep us in business,” but the changes that are keeping the Postal Service in business are eliminating jobs and putting Postal Workers “out of business.”

The combination of job reduction and speed-up is being achieved on the retail side with the use of the POS ONE system to “optimize” scheduling so that there are exactly the “right number” of employees on the job at a given time. The POS ONE monitors employees and analyzes the customer demand, creating an ability to break down the work and schedule employees into ever smaller segments of peak demand – raising the specter of split shifts for full-time employees or increased use of temporary or part-time employees to cover times of peak demand.

While the implementation of Delivery Point Packaging is still in the future, it is clear that this change will force carriers onto the street for more hours of the day by automating the final

sort process, it will speed-up the delivery of mail, and it will make it easier to use temporary or part-time workers or to contract out the delivery process.

Impacts on the Union

Both postal employees and Union leaders spoke to us with a certain level of resignation about the future, a feeling that nothing could be done about the forces of technological change and work reorganization that were overwhelming the work process in the Postal Service. One of the clerks said “Thank god for the union” as he spoke about how bad things would be if the Postal Service wasn’t unionized. On the other hand, he pointed out that they hadn’t had a decent raise for years and that “They’re (management) running the show, making the big changes.” The future is uncertain at best. So a common theme, even among union leaders, was a loss of faith in the union’s ability to deal with the larger changes that are occurring, combined in many cases with a hope that the union can just keep the work around long enough for “me” to retire.

The Central Massachusetts Local of APWU, the main union for workers in the Post Offices and in the Processing Centers, currently has 800 members (with 1,100 in the bargaining unit) down from 1,000 members in 1993 (with 1,400-1,500 in the bargaining unit). The President of the local spoke about the impacts on the union - including the loss of members, and the loss of dues revenue. He said that the day-to-day problems that they have to deal with are increasing, even as they have little or no control over the big decisions that are being made. He pointed to the delivery point packages and the Automated Postal Centers as significant threats going into the future.

He also spoke about how the changes that are taking place are “killing solidarity”. When there were 18 people working on a MPLSM, they stuck together but, as he said, “not so much

anymore.” When only two people are working on a MLOCR and they are isolated from each other, the organic solidarity of shared work experience simply doesn’t develop. He pointed out that a major impact of automation is that “people don’t talk with each other and don’t work together.” “On the MPLSM, where people worked as a team, if you had 10 people united, they could move the other 8. If you had 16 dues payers on a team, they would get the other 2 to join.” He expressed a significant level of despair, pointing out that the clerks who he represents have the jobs that are easiest to eliminate.* He described the lack of control he faces and the lack of a strategy to overcome it: “As we deal with automation (accommodate to it), it is slowly killing us.” He went on to say: “There’s not much you can do, they are contracting out as much as they can and the amount that they can contract out is increasing daily.”

Conclusion

The two cases discussed above provide important clues to the direction of automation and work restructuring in a wide range of industries in both the public and private sectors. They give us critical insights into management models for the workplace of the future. They also provide important warnings about the difficulties that unions have, as currently configured, in finding effective ways to intervene in work restructuring and technological change in order to protect the members, protect the union and protect the future.

We found that unions have been largely ineffective at impacting or controlling the introduction of new technologies and forms of work organization that are damaging both their

* The reality is that the clerk jobs are “easier to eliminate” because they have been the subject of an extremely intense research and development program costing hundreds of millions of dollars over many decades. They are easier to eliminate because they were targeted for elimination through technological change. They were targeted precisely because they were the core of the “production process” that management didn’t control. This insight is important for examining and evaluating the directions of technological change in other sectors.

members and the union. Work is being increasingly automated, the remaining jobs are highly structured and controlled, they are increasingly intensified and the workers in those jobs are increasingly isolated from one another. Unions have been, in general, relegated to standing on the sidelines, watching the changes taking place and at best making sure that the workforce is “fairly” treated as their worklives at work are dehumanized and dismantled. Summing up workers’ and union leaders’ sentiments: Management is making all of the big decisions and accommodation to the changes that management is choosing to implement is slowly killing off the membership and the union.

Evidence of a larger strategy for taking back the shop floor, rebuilding solidarity where it is being dismantled and instilling hope for the future in the members and the union is difficult to find. While attention within the labor movement has rightfully gone to the fight against corporate globalization, too little attention has gone to the “shop floor” changes that are also destroying workers, jobs, industries and unions and that are in fact enabling factors within the globalization trends.

The forces of technological change and work restructuring that we have described in call centers and in the Postal Service can be found operating in practically every sector of the economy. From automated check-out counters in retail, to Global Positioning Systems in transportation to electronic medical records and nurse-bots in health care, new technologies are being implemented that allow the digitalization of knowledge and information in forms that management can easily manipulate and control, and then in turn use to control the work process and the workers therein. At the same time, work restructuring efforts, some enabled by technology and others the product of Lean Production, Six Sigma, Continuous Improvement,

Kaizen, and other pure reorganization initiatives, are seeking to standardize work, lean out the work process, eliminate jobs and make work increasingly moveable.

Characterizing the future of work as embodied in work restructuring and technological change initiatives is an important first step toward creating public policy and bargaining approaches that will protect the workforce and maintain the possibilities of collective voice. In particular there is a need to align the bargaining process to the rapid pace of change – allowing unions to engage in “continuous bargaining” over change – taking back some control over the bigger decisions that are creating the future of work and the future for workers.

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