

WORK IN '1984', FIGHT AGAINST WORK IN '1984'
by Andreas Kuehnast (TRAFIK-collective)

In the past years the libertarian left has concentrated its efforts on the new social movements. Political activities at the working places have mostly been shelved, mainly because of the weakness of the militant left. This has been a lack I think, as the production sector is not just one of the main supports of state-capitalist system but also has got a great influence on our life. We therefore should occupy ourselves more with it in the future.

In this lecture I will try to take a look into future, a future that is already evolving, and to describe the alteration of work. Based on this I will then try to explore the chances and possibilities of work struggles under the new conditions of work, the conditions of work after the 'electronic revolution'.

The 'electronic revolution'

Today we experience an upheaval of production-technology similar to the 'Industrial Revolution' with its change of production by the invention of the steam engine, the mechanical loom, the Bessemer-furnace etc or the twenties with the introduction of assembly line manufacture, the far-reaching rationalizations made possible by Taylorisation and the invention of internal combustion engines, the electric motor and synthetic chemicals.

These two revolutions of technology had for the first time enabled men to transfer human capabilities to appliances created by men. 'Industrial Revolution' made possible the taking over of simple motions by machines; the technological revolution of the twenties enabled machines to take over entire complexes of motions.

This taking over of human abilities intensified in the fifties and lead to a further split-up of activities, de-qualification and a hierarchization of work. Due to the lack of time I want to give just one example: the manufacture of crank cases in automobile plants. Just twenty years ago individual machines were used for this, machines that had to be operated by fully qualified skilled workers. Later production was changed to semi-transfer production thereby transferring numerous activities to machines, splitting-up work into preparation, execution and control and hierarchizing it. Since the start of 'electronic revolution' full-transfer-production has been introduced, limiting the workers activities to supervision, maintenance and a few simple manipulations. Thus work is transferred more and more to machines and it is just a matter of time when even the simple manipulations will be taken over by roboters. The control of production will then be done from a few control-platforms or from offices and the plant would thus be fully 'electronized'.

This development is not just taking place in the automobile industry but also in the entire mechanical engineering. And the influence of the new electronic technology is felt in other areas too: in the plastics industry(industrial roboter), the electrical industry(NC-manufacture), the steel and chemical industry(process-control and -regulation). The greatest influences of 'electronic revolution' will though be in the offices and in trade where the entire system of communication is converted. Scientists expect the 'electronic revolution' to change fifty percent (!) of all working places.

'Electronization' makes it possible to ultimately transfer many human abilities to machines. The new developments in the electronics field have enabled machines to take over even complicated activities, a fact that had been thought to be impossible just some years ago. Human activities could therefore finally be limited to supervision, maintenance and to those spheres incorporating a large degree of flexibility(e.g. crafts) and creativity(e.g. engineering, science).

The new classes

This development does not only affect work but also the existence and composition of classes. The operation of the new electronic machines needs highly skilled workers, it needs 'techno-bureaucrats'. Only they have got the ability to operate the new kybernetic plants and thus form the privileged class of 'electronic society'.

Far below them the 'mass-workers' take over those activities that can not

be transferred to computers and roboters due to their inflexibility and cost (e.g. simple assembly work).

Japan gives an example of how this society could look like: Beside numerous highly technologized plants with a privileged class of 'techno-bureaucrats' there are a lot of small factories working as suppliers for the large plants and in which the workers have got bad working conditions and low wages. These small factories with their simple and flexible way of production close the deficiencies of automatization. The workers in these plants are the 'mass-workers' of 'electronic society'.

Beside these two new classes a class of skilled workers will continue to exist in the service field. Thus 'electronic society' will not have one unified class of workers, as it had been forecast e.g. by Marx and Engels. This fact has to be considered when we try to explore the influence of the new classes on the work struggles.

The ideological cement of 'electronic age'

A hierarchic society can just exist as long as it is supported by a large ^{part} of the population. Bourgeoisie will therefore continue to produce the ideology necessary to maintain the existing system. An ideology expressing that anyone is on his/her appropriate place in social hierarchy. They will therefore try to play off the different classes against each other in the future as well as they did in the past. To do so they use two elements: the fear to descend in social hierarchy and the hope to rise in it. Bourgeoisie will therefore try to disguise the power objectively held by the 'techno-bureaucrats' due to their monopoly of controlling production. Should this fail they will use the possibility of taking away privileges from them or push them down into the class of 'mas-workers'. The 'mass-workers' will be tied into social hierarchy by the possibility of either entering the class of 'techno-bureaucrats' or to be pushed down into the class of unemployed.

As long as bourgeoisie succeeds in producing the ideology to maintain the system there will be no significant changes. Or, to put it differently: Only if we succeed in enlarging the holes in bourgeois ideology it will be possible to engage in activities at the working places in a way that is not just defending the status quo.

New ways of work struggle

If we intend to interfere with the run of history at the working places we need to adapt our ways of struggle to the changing forms of work and society. In the past years strikes in the industrialized countries have been limited mostly to a withdrawal of capacity for work. This kind of work struggle is becoming more and more ineffective as with the spreading of electronization the number of people able to obstruct or stop production is rapidly decreasing. This has become obvious again during the latest strikes in the german printing industry: Though the printers were on strike the newspapers were delivered. This was made possible by engaging a few strike-breakers able to operate the complicated printing machines and a lot of editors and employees taking the position of the 'mass-workers'. But even in highly technologized plants there is the possibility of stopping production: Computers are very prone to sabotage and often it is sufficient to just 'go slow' to obstruct or even stop production. A fact that has clearly been shown by the 'go-slows' of the airports workers directing the flights. Even these strikes have sometimes not been successful they have nevertheless shown the possibilities of strikes at the working places.

It must be considered that the 'techno-bureaucrats' are tied to the system by their privileged position and that they will therefore just try to extend their position by such strikes. Only the 'mass-workers' will be able to threaten the system. Until now they have though not become a threat as most of them are still hoping to ascend in social hierarchy. But as the economical crisis is deepening this hope is increasingly vanishing and this could become a starting point.

New technologies and libertarian society

Up to now I have tried to describe the development of technology and the change of work resulting from it. To conclude I now want to describe shortly the possibilities of using the new technologies in a future libertarian society.

Even the cybernetized plants of tomorrow are extremely centralized and hier-

archized this does not mean that their technology could not be used in a different, a libertarian way. I think that it is possible to transfer production to decentralized factories with a highly automatized but yet flexible way of production. These factories would be on a 'human scale', i.e. they could be managed by the workers themselves. By their horizontal structure these factories would reunite manual labour and brain-work, deciding and executing work.

But this should not deceive us about the fact that the new technologies must be radically restructured to make them usable in a libertarian society.

To close I want to say that the 'electronic revolution' contains dangers and chances and only if we succeed in by-passing the dangers we will be able to use the chances.