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Creating a new world of work

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A history of achievement

For free labour unions, improving the quality of working life is a daily, constant responsibility. Economic benefits such as higher wages or income and job security receive the publicity that goes with collective bargaining crises, but ensuring a decent workplace, enlarging the rights of workers on the job, creating greater job satisfaction, achieving for the worker the self-respect and fulfilment worthy of a human being command the attention of union leaders to an equal extent.

In November 1973 the American Assembly, Columbia University, brought together a representative group of prominent figures from management, labour, government and the academic world in a conference to discuss the changing world of work. An excerpt from its carefully prepared statement reads as follows:

> Unions have since their inception been seeking to "humanize" work. The current ideas of improving the quality of working life are basically an extension of this long-range goal. Unions have primarily sought and have achieved significant economic gains and have substantially increased job security. This should not obscure their long-term struggle for improvement in the quality of working life. . . .[2]

During the dark days of the great depression of the 1930s, the turbulent rise of industrial unionism in the United States was directed not only towards improving the workers' standard of living but, perhaps even more importantly, towards correcting intolerable conditions of work, blunting the authoritarianism of management and ensuring the worker a measure of dignity and self-respect on the job.

Just to read some modern labour contracts (collective agreements) concluded in the United States is to become acquainted with a long list of workers' rights [3] on matters which before the advent of the unions were determined unilaterally by management. Thus lay-off and recall used to be matters for arbitrary decision by management, whereas today detailed seniority rules

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[1] Vice-President, International Union, United Automobile, Aerospace and Agricultural Implement Workers of America (UAW).

[2] Report of the 43rd American Assembly held at Arden House, Harriman, New York, 1-4 November 1973.

[3] Not all the rights listed here are specified in all contracts in the United States.

ensure fair treatment. In the past, again, a worker had to seek the foreman's favour in order to transfer to a more desirable job. Nowadays, transfer rights are specified in the labour contract. In pre-union days workers had no rights with regard to promotion. Practically every labour contract now contains detailed rules governing promotion opportunities. There are also provisions ensuring fair labour practices and prohibiting discrimination: labour contracts contained these provisions years before society decided on the need for legislation.

Furthermore, labour contracts protect against unfair disciplinary measures and dismissal. They contain extensive rules governing workers' rights with regard to production standards and the pace of work, and provide for paid rest breaks during working hours. There is protection against excessive overtime, but equal opportunity to work available overtime is also stipulated. Other provisions proscribe the contracting out of work where it would adversely affect the workers' job security. Nowadays, workers have the right to move with their jobs when work is transferred to another plant owned by the same company. They can also indicate shift preference and have rights with regard to the establishment of shift hours. They are entitled to leave of absence during periods of illness, or in order to improve their education, or to serve the community on a full-time basis. Protective clothing and equipment are provided by management free of charge.

Through their representatives, workers participate in the regulation of health and safety in the plant. In general it can be said that, as a result of union demands and shop-floor bargaining, tangible improvements in working conditions are made every day.

Not only have these and many other rights been gained, but their application is checked by representatives elected by the workers themselves. In addition, there is generally a grievance procedure, including final and binding arbitration, which provides an orderly basis for the resolution of disputes with management over the meaning, intent and implementation of the contract.

The persistence of authoritarianism

This by no means exhausts the list of workers' rights protected by contractual provisions. Despite this progress, however, life at work continues to be largely dominated by the employer, and the employee has only a limited opportunity to participate in the taking of decisions concerning his job, and even less in the management of the enterprise. Workers have to struggle constantly to be heard, to influence decisions affecting their welfare and to participate in the decision-making process that affects their working life. Even with all the contractual provisions which have fundamentally altered the employer-employee relationship, the fact is that management retains authority over the methods, means and processes of production, relegating the worker substantially to the role of a machine-minding robot.

Picture the production worker employed in a typical factory. He leaves for work between 5 and 6 a.m., arrives at the factory, walks to his clock card, punches in and then proceeds to his work station. He has been told precisely what his task is, a task which has been broken down into several specific elements of work. He is instructed as to the order in which these work elements are to be performed, what tools to use, where his material is stacked, and within what time-span he must perform his task. He is allotted a specific area in which to do it. It must be performed over and over again, each cycle within a fixed time established by stopwatch. His behaviour is governed by an array of shop rules. Should he violate any of these instructions or rules he is subject to disciplinary measures. He is constantly under the watchful eye of supervisors, often even when he goes to the bathroom and during breaks. In moving assembly-line operations he cannot leave his work station until a relief worker is available to take over his job. After eight hours of this kind of repetitive work he leaves for home only to contemplate the next dreary day ahead of him.

Contrast this with his life outside. In a democratic society he is a citizen with broad rights of decision. With his vote he can help determine who his leaders will be, and turn them out of office as well. As a family man and a member of his community he participates in innumerable decisions affecting the life and the well-being of himself, his family, his fellow citizens and neighbours. In a large sense, he is master of his fate.

Introducing democracy at the workplace

Surely, then, the time has come for a society anchored in democratic principles to ensure that each individual at his place of work enjoys a measure of the dignity, self-respect and freedom which are his as a citizen. In his capacity as a worker he should be afforded an opportunity for self-expression and participation in the decisions that shape the quality of his working life.

In recent years increasing attention has been given to the contradiction between autocratic rule at the workplace and democratic rights in society. Whatever their motivation—for example increasing absenteeism, high labour turnover, declining product quality, the revolt of a younger, better-educated workforce against oppressive authority, etc.—more and more managements are coming to realise that life at work must change. In the words of a former Chairman of General Motors: " We must improve working conditions and take boredom out of routine jobs. . . . We must increase an employe's satisfaction with his job, heighten pride of workmanship and, as far as feasible, involve the employe personally in decisions that relate directly to his job." [1]

Dozens of experiments and projects are being carried out with a view to finding answers to this problem both in Western Europe and in the United States. Each is unique in its own way, whether established by law, as in the case

[1] Richard M. Gerstenberg in a speech at the Tax Foundation Dinner, New York, 6 December 1972.

of worker representation on corporate supervisory boards in certain countries, or unilaterally initiated by management, or conceived and implemented jointly and voluntarily by management and the unions. Most of the ideas applied to worker participation in the decision-making process in the United States are borrowed from Western Europe, especially Sweden and Norway. As always happens with borrowed innovations, however, they are being adapted to their new milieu and are acquiring a character of their own. By way of example, let us consider three cases.

American workers at Saab-Scania

In 1974 a worker exchange programme was undertaken under the auspices of Cornell University whereby six UAW members employed in automobile engine assembly plants in the United States went to work at the Saab-Scania facility in Soedertaelje, Sweden. The primary purpose of the visit was to obtain first-hand experience of a new system of assembly which Saab-Scania had inaugurated some years earlier. Under this system a team of workers is responsible for the assembly of an entire automobile engine. All the workers are trained to perform all the operations required and assume their assignments in accordance with group decisions. This is in marked contrast to the production-line type of operation usual in engine assembly work, where workers are given a specific assignment involving a few rather simple tasks which they then perform repetitively and in prescribed sequence for the full eight-hour shift.

The American workers were briefed before leaving for Sweden and again after their arrival. They learned about the culture of the country and the differences in life-style which they were to experience. The Scania engine assembly system was explained to them. Altogether the programme lasted four weeks, although the first week and a half had to be devoted essentially to briefings, training and learning the job. Normally, the training period alone lasts from five to six weeks.

The reports written upon their return indicated that, while deeply impressed with the excellence of the working conditions and the life-style in Sweden, most of the American workers were not altogether pleased with their work experience, although one worker in particular found that teamwork assembly was much more to her liking than the assembly-line operations to which she was accustomed in the United States. While the preparation of the American workers for their visit left something to be desired, and their subsequent report indicated that Saab was not fully prepared for their arrival, nevertheless the experience gained was on the whole both valuable and gratifying. In subsequent private interviews upon their return home, it became evident that much of their criticism of the Saab-Scania assembly operation related to one important point, namely that management took the initial policy decisions to change the work system and determined how the job was to be engineered, while the workers simply followed a basic format with a certain latitude to

rotate assignments in assembling the entire engine. They also felt the work pace was faster than that to which they were accustomed. Despite monthly union-management working committee meetings, it seemed to the American workers that the programme was imposed from the top down, with the engineers and production supervisors making the ultimate decisions on the job design itself.

The American workers explained that they were accustomed to a strong and immediate union presence on the shop floor ready to challenge unfair treatment by management representatives. At Saab-Scania they felt that management was even more authoritative than in the United States, with the boss-worker relationship more pronounced. The consensus appeared to be that the group assembly concept, with workers having the freedom to decide such matters as job assignment and the operational procedures to be used, is on the whole more satisfying than the repetitive, monotonous assembly-line operation customary in the United States, and would be even more so if the work pace were less unrelenting and if the union's presence were felt more strongly and persistently on the shop floor.

The UAW-Harman International Work Improvement Programme

What the UAW learned about successes and failures in this field both at Saab-Scania and at other factories in Norway and Sweden helped it in developing quality of working life programmes in collaboration with managements in the United States. The programme currently being undertaken at Harman Industries International in Bolivar, Tennessee, by the UAW and the company is a case in point. A major difference in approach is noticeable at Harman International in that decisions are taken jointly by workers and management on the shop floor. No decisions are imposed from above, and the union is directly involved in all aspects of the programme both on the job and in the meeting room.

The original idea of initiating a programme to improve the quality of working life at this factory grew out of top-level discussions between the UAW and the President of Harman International. Nevertheless, the scheme itself is operated entirely by those on the spot, with some third party assistance as explained below.

Early in the discussions the parties signed a special memorandum—a " shelter agreement "—which emphasises the human rather than the productivity factor. Among other things it stipulates that:

> The purpose of the joint management-labor Work Improvement Program is to make work better and more satisfying for all employes, salaried and hourly, while maintaining the necessary productivity for job security. The purpose is not to increase productivity. . . .

The agreement contains guarantees which prohibit increasing the work pace or eliminating jobs by reason of the programme.

The Director of the Harvard Project on Technology, Work and Character, a psychologist by profession, agreed to direct and supervise the programme.

He assigned staff to work on site guiding the programme in close daily contact with the workers and their local union leaders on the one hand and the local management on the other.

After the programme had been explained to the workers at a mass meeting in the plant, they voted in favour of its introduction. A working committee was formed consisting of five members appointed by management and five by the local union. This committee initiates projects within the framework of the programme and provides over-all guidance. At first, groups of workers volunteered to take part in experiments in three departments. As these proved successful, other workers insisted on the programme being applied to them also, and today the entire plant is participating.

Fundamental to the programme is the promotion of democratic principles at the workplace, as spelt out in a letter the UAW sent to all members of the local union at Bolivar:

> We are taking this opportunity to discuss with you the nature and purpose of the experiments currently under way at your plant to improve the quality of worklife.
>
> First of all, what do we mean by a program " to improve the quality of worklife "? Isn't the union doing this all the time by negotiating higher wages and benefits and by concluding seniority, shift preference, transfer agreements and establishing many other rights for workers? Of course we are, for, as far as the UAW is concerned, advancing your standard of living and assuring more job security and rights in the plant are the hallmark of our union's effort and activity.
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> But there is more involved in improving the quality of worklife. We are at that point in time where workers should have more to say about their job and how it should be run. They should participate in a meaningful way in making decisions about the job and the workplace—decisions which in the past were made pretty much exclusively by management.
>
> That's what the new program at your plant is all about—to set up a system in which workers make decisions affecting their jobs and workplace.
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> Workers must not be automatons doing just as they are told and having no opportunity to make determinations of their own.... They must not be simply extensions of the machine or the assembly line; they must exercise some control over how they work. In the final analysis they must have the right to the dignity and self-respect on the job that they exercise outside the plant as citizens and human beings.

A survey carried out at the beginning of the programme by means of a questionnaire and in-depth personal interviews generated considerable discussion among the workers and caused them to think over problems they encountered at work. Much of the programme's orientation stems from the results of these in-depth interviews, which the interviewers described as follows:

> We interviewed a sample of 60 workers using a questionnaire with both open-ended and multiple choice questions. The interview lasted four hours and asked about work, values, life goals, physical and emotional problems. This included asking for material that could be used for psycho-analytical interpretation of character, such as dreams and family relationships, as well as questions relating to feelings about authority. These interviews were subsequently analyzed in terms of character traits, leading first to a summary of traits shared by the majority of the factory workers (the social character) and second, to subgroups, representing the different character types.

The programme is now well under way, though it is not without its problems and there are still certain difficulties to be overcome. It may not of course violate the terms of the labour contract, but there is inevitably some overlapping. These problems are resolved on an ad hoc basis as they arise, on the clear understanding that matters involving collective bargaining are referred to the bargaining process and not the Work Improvement Programme. The main thing, however, is that the workers and their union are part of the decision-making process on the shop floor. This is an effective expansion of democratic principles at the workplace.

Workers involved in the experiment may use their own discretion in solving problems related to their jobs. The programme allows them to accumulate earned time, and this enables them to leave work early after completing their production assignment. Partly so as to make constructive use of the time thus earned, they have decided democratically to establish a " school " in which they study various subjects of their choice, including welding, time study, sewing and even business subjects such as accounting and pricing.

It is most important to note that this is not simply a job enrichment scheme in which production experts and engineers determine how jobs may be redesigned and enlarged and the workers merely follow instructions as they have done traditionally. The workers at Bolivar may and often do decide to enlarge their jobs, but that is their decision and they have the right to change it. The object of the programme is to develop a system in which workers exercise a democratic right to take decisions regarding job design and layout, tools to be used, methods of production, etc. A point has now been reached where, after another year or so of outside assistance, the parties should be able to " go it alone ". The social scientists will then leave the scene. It is to be hoped that the knowledge gained in the Bolivar experiment will enable them to initiate similar projects elsewhere.

Management gains from such a project in various ways, none of which is abhorrent to the workers or the union. Absenteeism and labour turnover decline. Product quality improves. The collective bargaining relationship develops into a more rational understanding of the other's problems. Workers' complaints are fewer and are resolved on the shop floor without the need to process them further. Moreover, the Bolivar management indicates that the programme has already measurably improved the attitude and effectiveness of management staff, a major factor in the over-all improvement in the operation and administration of the plant.

The union and the workers gain by having more say in the management of the workplace without fear of putting themselves at a disadvantage as to either production requirements or job security. Work satisfaction is enhanced, and they also enjoy tangible rewards such as more free time and the educational programme mentioned above.

Admittedly it is too early to speak of success or failure in achieving the ultimate goals. Nevertheless, it can truly be said that so far the programme is

proving its value. Management remains committed to it and the workers have reaffirmed their support by once again voting in its favour.

The UAW-General Motors Quality of Worklife Programme

Another approach is that adopted by the UAW and the General Motors Corporation in the United States. During the 1973 national contract negotiations with General Motors the UAW submitted a proposal whereby both sides would make a concerted effort to discuss, develop and implement programmes for improving the quality of working life. In concluding the negotiations, General Motors sent the UAW a letter confirming its agreement to this idea.

The agreement drawn up between the parties particularly noted that they shared the belief that activity designed to improve the quality of working life would be to the advantage of the worker, the corporation and the consumer. A UAW-GM National Committee to Improve the Quality of Worklife was established with responsibility for overviewing the entire programme. Among its tasks is the development of joint experiments and projects in this field with a view to enhancing worker participation in the decision-making process on the job. The Committee's functions are very broadly defined, leaving the parties considerable latitude to determine the direction their efforts will take. This is a wise approach, since they are entering a new and unexplored area of labour-management relations in the American automobile industry.

The basic issues involved in the adversarial relationship between management and labour remain largely unaffected, however. Collective bargaining continues to play a vital part, but projects to improve the quality of working life help to create a climate in which cool reason and judgement replace anger and emotion in working out solutions to controversial problems. They therefore have a beneficial effect on the total collective bargaining relationship.

The system works as follows. After full and careful consideration, the National Committee may decide to undertake a project in a particular plant. Apart from taking this decision and giving over-all direction, the Committee leaves the actual initiation and implementation of the project to the local management and the local union, while nevertheless continuing to offer its assistance as needed. Representatives of General Motors and of the National GM Department of the UAW visit the factory. In discussing with the local union shop committee the possibility of initiating a project the UAW representatives simply point out directions which might be taken and urge acceptance of the idea. Similarly, the Corporation representatives try to convince the local plant manager, who in turn must try to reduce the resistance of his superintendents and foremen. Being unfamiliar with this kind of innovative effort, both local management and the local union may have reservations about implementing the idea. Foremen, for instance, may view participation by the worker in the decision-making process as an erosion of their authority. It is of course very difficult to overcome habits of mind which have grown up over long periods during which foremen regarded workers as subservient to their

orders. For their part, the local union and the workers are in many instances so accustomed to the adversarial relationship in which the supervisor makes decisions and the worker and his union contest them that they are reluctant to engage in an experiment which requires participation in the decision-making process on an equal basis.

Thus the first task of the National Committee's corporation and union representatives is to brush away the cobwebs of habit and tradition so that new approaches to old problems can be tried out. In some cases it may be desirable to undertake an employee opinion survey in a particular factory in order to identify and throw light on problems which are ripe for a solution.

When a project is initiated it may involve only a small number of volunteers who, after appropriate briefing, decide that they would like to participate. In some instances it may be desirable for an industrial psychologist to work with this group in order to create a suitable climate for the kind of worker participation it is proposed to institute. This implies working with supervisors as well as shop-floor workers, helping them to become better acquainted with one another, to understand one another's personalities and idiosyncrasies and at the same time to develop a sense of co-operation, as equals, in devising new ways of relating to one another and to the tasks which must be performed. The union committee man follows the development of the project closely and involves himself directly.

It is obviously too early to gauge the final result of this joint effort precisely. This is the first time in the United States that a major corporation and a major union have agreed to undertake a far-reaching endeavour of this type on a nation-wide basis. The first steps are naturally halting and cautious. A considerable amount of trial and testing will be necessary, for no one has all the answers and no two industrial situations are identical. If the programme is successful, however, it could begin to alter intrinsically the shop-worn system of management-worker relations that has prevailed up to now and the philosophy underlying the concept of " scientific management ". It could enhance the dignity of the worker on his job, involve him significantly in the decision-making process, increase opportunities for heightened job satisfaction, and generally initiate a movement towards greater democratisation of the workplace.

This, of course, is the most optimistic view. Only time will tell whether it is justified. One thing is clear, namely that if the parties will embrace new concepts of worker participation seriously and affirmatively, the ingenuity of man in developing new and exciting approaches could well lead to a new and exciting quality of working life. Our modern technology is engineered by human beings and it can therefore be engineered to meet human needs.

Scepticism and progress

The joint union-management programmes at Harman International and at General Motors are only two among many aimed at improving the quality of

working life in the United States. Frequently they have their origin in on-going experimentation in Western Europe. Increasing interest in the movement makes it certain that it will continue to grow and develop in one form or another.

However, scepticism in both management and labour circles results in a " show me " attitude and a reluctance to embark on projects of this sort. Resistance on the part of management seems to stem from fear of an erosion of authority and a long and comfortable marriage to " scientific management " principles. Unions express concern that such programmes are wolves in sheep's clothing, a gimmick to decoy the workers away from their loyalty to the union and make them even more pliant to the will of management. In the author's judgement, circumstances will cause this resistance to diminish in time. Through their unions the workers have already drastically reduced the traditional, autocratic type of managerial control over the worker and the workplace. The concept of workers' rights in the decision-making process has taken root. It will flower.

In the United States the thrust to improve the quality of working life will manifest itself in direct participation by workers in managing their jobs. Perhaps, in later years, it will spread to participation in managing the enterprise. The incontrovertible fact is that the democratic values of society—based on participation in the decision-making process—will be extended to the place of work. Democratising work is an idea whose time has come.