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A Socialist Labor Party Statement—

Technology & Job Loss

What Workers Can Do About It

Computers, cell phones and the Internet are just a few of the technological marvels created over the last few decades that have brought tremendous changes into our lives. Now we can communicate with our families, friends and coworkers from anywhere at anytime just by picking up a cell phone or connecting to the Internet.

These and other new “consumer” technologies unquestionably have eased the lives of millions of people in many ways. New technology, however, has not been restricted to consumer items. Industry also has seen its share of advances with effects that have devastated the lives of millions of workers.

The ‘Downside’

There is no secret about who and what is responsible for the “downside” of modern technology. Capitalism has turned these technological marvels into so many means of destroying jobs, increasing the exploitation of human labor and amassing profits.

That should not surprise us much. That is how capitalism works, and how it has always worked. Indeed, it would be impossible for capitalism to survive if it stopped introducing labor-displacing technology into the workplace. “Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance

of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones,” as Karl Marx and Frederick Engels explained in the *Communist Manifesto* more than 150 years ago.

Capitalists have no choice in the matter. They must seek out every method of reducing the costs involved in producing commodities. The introduction of new technology into production reduces the amount of labor needed and lowers the cost of production, thereby increasing profits.

Increasing profits and holding wages down is what counts, for capitalists. For millions of workers, however, new technology in the workplace leads only to harder work—except for the millions more tossed onto the streets and into joblessness. That, however, is not what concerns the enterprising capitalist.

Forgotten Promise

Not so long ago capitalists and their lickspittles in politics, the universities and the media promised that automation would bring better jobs, better pay and better lives to all Americans. Now they tell us we are not competitive enough, which is just a longer word for what they used to say about the American workers—they are “lazy.” However,

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American labor is still the most productive on earth, despite millions of us being unemployed or channeled into useless or even antisocial occupations. Capitalism wastes human labor with the same abandon that it squanders our natural resources and fouls our environment.

Eliminating Workers

Labor-displacing technology is becoming more evident even in our everyday lives. Self-service grocery checkout lanes are replacing clerks, ATM machines are replacing bank tellers and automated airline kiosks are replacing ticket agents. The driving force behind these technological advances is the elimination labor. You know it, we know it and the ruling class that “earns” its living by destroying yours knows it too. Here is a bit of the evidence straight from capitalism’s “newspaper of record,” *The New York Times*:

“Eager to save money on labor costs, businesses are stepping up the pace of automation. Nearly 13,000 self-checkout systems will have been installed in American retail stores like Kroger and Home Depot by the end of this year, more than double the number in 2001, according to the market research firm IDC. Delta Air Lines spent millions of dollars this year to line 81 airports with chest-high automated kiosks: 22 million of its passengers—40 percent of the total—checked in by touch-screen this year, up from 350,000 in 2001.” (Nov. 17, 2003)

The benefits for the firms that use these machines are plain—a

machine does not require a wage, it never calls in sick and it does not need health insurance or a pension. A machine would certainly never organize with its mechanical brethren for better working conditions.

So, where does this leave you and your neighbors who may also be replaced by these technological wonders?

“To begin with,” as Kirkpatrick Sale, author of several books on technology, wrote, “it is indisputable that automation has eliminated vast numbers of jobs across all sectors of the economy in all industrial nations, maybe 35 million of them in the last decade. The example of the United States, still the leading economic power in the world, is revealing. From 1988 to 1994 the number of jobs lost was estimated to be 6.5 million, far higher than in any other postwar period, and fully 85 percent of them are thought to be permanently lost to machines and overseas transfers. Automation is held to be responsible for the loss of half a million manufacturing jobs every year in this period and close to 3 million in the decade before—the completely automated factory is only a few quarters away—but it has also begun to make deep cuts into service jobs and seems likely to make its biggest future impact there.”

‘Retraining’

Worse, no one seems to know what to do with the workers displaced. The propaganda about retraining displaced workers to service and support the very tech-

nologies that replaced them was only that, propaganda! It was only a diversion from the truth to lead workers off the scent. Millions of workers did retrain, but the training was either outmoded by the time they finished with it or the jobs never materialized. Now high-tech firms dump workers as fast as any auto plant or steel mill ever did. Many “retrained” workers displaced by technology end up in low-paying or part-time jobs or with no jobs at all.

Profits First, People Last

Why is it that these great advances in technology, which could be made to benefit the working class, is instead ruining lives and creating a massive problem that seems to have no remedy? The answer is simple: capitalism utilizes this technology to increase profits. Today, the capitalist class that owns and controls this technology has only one view in mind: to cut costs and swell the bottom line. They could not care less what detrimental effect the profit motive has on society so long as profits are rolling in. Besides, who is there to stop them?

Your Power

Well, you, to start with; then there are millions in the same leaky boat you are. The American working class has the power, but changing society takes some knowledge and training, just like any other job.

It is obvious that current trends are leading the working class further into poverty and destitution.

Workers, however, can avert this by recognizing that they constitute a class with mutual interests of survival and well-being and whose interests are in conflict with those of the capitalist class. Accordingly, they must unite to abolish the social relationships that bind them to a life of misery and economic servitude.

They must unite to establish a socialist society where the means of social production are collectively owned and operated for the social good, thus allowing advances in technology to be used to reduce the burden on those that do the work and not to kick people out on the street with no means to support themselves. In a socialist society, mechanization and technological advances will simply mean less arduous toil and a shorter workday—and the benefits will accrue to all of society, not just a wealthy few.

The Socialist Labor Party calls upon the working class to take the first steps toward this goal by organizing their strength economically and politically. On the economic field workers must build new economic organizations to include all workers, employed or unemployed, young and old, blue collar or white collar, with the goal of collectively taking, holding and operating the industries and services for the benefit of all. On the political field, workers must organize to challenge the capitalist form of government and to institute a new form of government based on social ownership and economic democracy.