Appendix 9

What to fight for

There are two mistaken reactions to the new technology that are widely found. One we have already dealt with - the claim that technology as such is a good thing, which will make "Britain" more competitive and everyone better off. Those who hold this view believe any discussion on the new technology is closed before it starts by the assertion: "We're not Luddites, are we?" They forget that the Luddites were a group of workers suffering from miserably low wages and facing a destruction of their jobs by new working methods. Their attempts to fight back by destroying machines may not have been successful (although they did succeed in holding down a bigger army than the Duke of Wellington had in the same years to fight his war against the French in Spain). But the result of their failure was not something good. It was grinding desperate poverty for hundreds of thousands of people, enduring for a whole generation.

The second approach is to be struck dumb with horror at what the technology can do. People think of all the jobs it can take over, all the workers it can throw on to the dole, and feel impotent in the face of it. They would like to fight it - indeed, often they are opposed to the very idea of new technology - but feel that the task is just too great. They forget that the new technology cannot be introduced in one go, overnight, but will be introduced piecemeal over many years in most industries. Above all, they forget that it is very rarely indeed that new technology can be introduced without some cooperation from the existing workforce.

Even in the US newspaper industry, where the new technology was often brought in by using scabs to do the work of skilled compositors, this was only possible because other sections of the old workforce (those on the presses) continued to work normally. In the same way, the Civil Service cannot introduce word processors without some cooperation from existing typists; local government cannot transfer all information currently in old-style filing cabinets to discs or magnetic tape without the help of those who understand the present filing systems; robots
cannot be introduced on one part of the assembly line unless workers on other parts of the assembly line are prepared to work with them.

Workers of one sort or another have the power to impede the introduction of the new technology. The employing class cannot work it without us.

Does that mean we should simply say "No" to the new technology? The flat "No" to technology comes from some of the most far-sighted rank-and-file trade unionists. They see that the technology means a loss of jobs and a loss of control over the work process. It is a far healthier attitude than that of those union officials who talk of "union control", meaning the selling of jobs for money.

Nevertheless, the flat "No" is a gospel of despair. It means that instead of going on to the offensive and showing fellow workers how advances in technology could really be used to create a world without poverty and toil, if only society were run differently, we are stuck on the defensive, defending the unpleasant and often outrageous working conditions that exist at present. This is not an attitude that is going to unite different sorts of workers for a fight over new technology that will stretch over many years.

Every time management introduces new technology they claim to their workers that it is going to make work easier, as well as more productive. It is necessary to argue against these claims, especially since the technology is nearly always designed to make people work harder and to increase managerial control. But those arguments will often not be accepted by people who have the "glories" of the technology pumped into their brains by slick management brochures and fast talking reps from the computer companies. Unfortunately, there are many, many workers who do not immediately recognize management's interests as the opposite of their own. They will easily fall for the management's line, especially in those cases when the new technology does in fact get rid of some unpleasant tasks (even though it may well replace these by other equally unpleasant ones).

If we simply say to our fellow workers: "We don't want" their attitude may well be: "Well, your peculiar desire for unpleasant tasks is not going to stop the rest of us opting for something which is clearly going to make our jobs easier." The new technology will be brought into use, jobs will be destroyed, managerial control increased - and then if later we are seen by the other workers to be correct, it may well be too late.

It is important to remember that the first area to be hit really hard by the new technology (after the print) will be office work, and that most offices have very weak levels
of trade union organization. Even in the Civil service and local government, many of the typists are non-union temps. It is going to be very difficult to get these workers to say a flat "No" to a special payment for operating a machine that does not seem that different from an electric typewriter.

Our response has to start from the same suspicion of the way the new technology is being used that motivates those who simply say "No". We are on the same side as the Luddites, not against them. But we cannot give the impression we are against technology as such. We are for it, provided it is used to enable human beings to create more wealth and to lead happier, freer, fuller lives. After all, it is technology that enables us to envisage the coming reality of the age-old dream of a society without misery and drudgery.

What we are against is the use of new technology to destroy jobs and to make the remaining jobs more repetitive and more subject to control from above. What we are challenging is not technology but the control over technology by managements committed to profit making.

When the employers say that technology will make life easier for the workers, we have to show other workers that they are lying. We have to say, in effect: "OK, prove it. Guarantee us in advance that there will be no reduction in the total workforce; show us in advance that our working conditions are going to improve by cutting the working week; give us a written agreement now that our individual work loads will not increase. Until you do that, we will not work the new technology".

To get this argument across it will be necessary to draw up a list of demands, adapted to the particular needs of each industrial and office situation.

The sorts of things that have to be argued for are:

- **Blocking of new technology.** Until you get a guarantee that any saving in worktime will be translated into a gain, you say no.

- **Shorter working week.** This should not be a demand to be half-sacrificed in negotiations, as wage demands invariably are. Its fulfilment should be a precondition for acceptance of the new technology at all. After all, if you knew that a new machine would cause a fatal injury to one worker in four, you would not work it. In the same way, you should refuse to work any machinery until management guarantee that it will not destroy the jobs of one worker in four.

- **No reduction in the total workforce.** Some groups of workers have already begun to fight for this demand. For instance, in Post Office telecommunications, where in the past workers
accepted the destruction of whole jobs with new technology, they are faced with introduction of new equipment, called MOST, into exchanges which will destroy an average of one job per exchange; they are now saying they will not allow the introduction of MOST unless there is a guarantee that the workforce in the exchanges remains as at present.

Again in the Charity Commission of the Civil Service, management introduced an IBM machine without a VDU, claiming it was not a word processor. They also claimed it would not cause any redundancies. So union activists argued to (1) accept introduction of the machine if there were not redundancies, (2) demand special allowances for working it, (3) after a given period to block the machine if there was reduction in the total workforce.

In this case, it would have been better to have got a written management guarantee of no cut in the total workforce in advance.

The demand for no reduction in the total workforce does not just mean no redundancies, it also means:

No voluntary redundancies. Management must not be allowed to lure unsuspecting workers with the offer of apparently large sums of money. Every job that goes through voluntary redundancy is another job no longer available for the unemployed - including the unemployed children of existing workers who have just left school. The sums of money provided to those who accept voluntary redundancy may seem big - but they will not seem all that large after a long period on the dole.

And remember, the working lives of those left behind in the factory or office are likely to become more tedious.

No "natural wastage", the filling of every post that is made vacant when people leave. "Natural wastage" is an even better option for management than voluntary redundancy. They do not have to fork out any money to get it. Once they decide they want to run down a particular section, it is easy for them to do so if there is a natural wastage agreement that prevents a filling of vacancies as people leave. For instance, management can simply put the most unpleasant of their supervisors in charge of it, and make life so miserable that people are glad to get out. Or they can hold down wages and deny promotion within the section, again encouraging people to look for better jobs elsewhere.

No blurring of old demarcation lines. This is an old trick by which the management get workers to accept a reduction in the workforce. For instance, they install a word processor and tell typists that it means no reduction in their number. But what the word processor will do, through its "floppy disc", is destroy the jobs of filing clerks. If the typists are going to keep their jobs, it will be because
they are going to have their time taken up even more than before hitting keys, not only for typing but also for ensuring the fulfilment by the machine of filing tasks.

In the same way, the most advanced versions of the new technology in the print mean not only that journalists and tel-ad personnel take over the jobs of compositors; they also mean the destruction of jobs for office workers who invoice firms and check up on their credit, since the computer does these jobs automatically.

Only a cut in the working day which keeps the whole workforce intact, not just those directly working the new machines, can stop the wholesale destruction of jobs.

The involvement in discussions of all workers affected by technological changes, indirectly as well as directly. A device that might make the job of one worker easier can make more difficult the job of the worker next to him or her in the work process. For example, a word processor increases the speed at which material is typed; it is likely therefore to increase the speed at which someone who feeds work to the typist is expected to work. In the same way, the most unfortunate person in a factory may not be the individual who presses a button to start and stop a robot, but the next worker along who is expected to keep up with the robot's speed. The new technology will revolutionize the work of everyone in a particular workplace. Every group of workers must have the right to discuss and veto the introduction of detrimental work practices.

A written guarantee from management that they will not introduce new technology without the prior agreement of the union membership. There is story after story of new devices simply appearing one day in the office or on the factory floor, without any warning. In one Civil Service office, for example, it was purely by accident that union activists found a computer terminal being worked as a word processor by a non-union superintendent.

Written management guarantees that management will not use the new machines to get information on the work speed or accuracy of individual workers, that is that they will not use them as electronic time and motion men. The written guarantee by itself will not stop management trying to do so. But it will mean that even the least trade union conscious worker knows in advance that management should not be doing that, and will feel some commitment to support any worker who is picked upon on the basis of data from computer. At the same time, rank-and-file activists should establish contacts with the members of other unions who are working the computers to make sure that management is not breaking its agreement.
Full health-and-safety precautions and no increase in mental strain.
Management always assumes with any new machine or material that it is safe until it is proved otherwise. Look how they lied about asbestos for so many years. Our assumption should be the opposite - we should not take any risks with the health and safety of ourselves or our fellow workers.

That means:

(1) As a minimum a fifteen-minute break for every hour on a VDU and no more than 180 minutes a day on VDU work.

(2) Regular safety checks, at management expense, but with trade union nominated doctors.

(3) Management to pay for any special clothing or equipment workers need to work new machines (such as special glasses to work on VDUs).

(4) A guarantee against the sacking of anyone because their health or their eyesight does not allow them to work on the new technology.

(5) The workers involved to have the right to veto work on equipment which they think is unsafe or which causes too much mental strain.

No increase in shift working. The new technology is coming in so fast that a machine that costs £1000 today may cost only £500 in a couple of years' time. Management will therefore try to recover the cost of the machine as quickly as possible, so as to be able to invest in still newer technology in the not too distant future. That means they will try to impose shift working simply in order to increase their own profitability. But for workers that means being forced to lead a miserable social life, to suffer from increased mental stress, and to suffer a host of minor health disorders (stomach upsets and so on).

No victimization of workers who cannot adjust to the new technology. Many older workers may find difficulty in adjusting to the work involved with the new technology. As the official NUJ report on the new technology notes:

Agreements in other industries have specified that no one over a certain age (forty and forty-five usually) may use VDUs. Apart from the health aspect, a well documented fact of age is the slowing down in reaction from visual signals to manual response. So the journalist as technician must be young, and have good vision, so working and potential journalists could find themselves excluded from the industry for reasons quite unconnected with journalistic ability.

What applies to journalists also applies to typists in the Civil Service, local government and so on. We must resist
any attempt to throw people out of work just because they are too old (at forty) to adjust to a new machine.

Final decisions to be taken by rank-and-file workers involved, not simply by branch officials or by conveners. Union branch officials and conveners who do not work on the shop or office floor will often be tempted to buy off jobs for wage increases. At the same time, it is not possible to wage a successful fight against management's plans for the new technology unless the whole of the rank and file are involved. In the last resort, it is they who will have to black machines and so on.

Experience shows that explaining the dangers posed by management use of the new technology can get workers involved in the union who have previously been at best possible members. Precisely because their jobs and their working lives are threatened they can become more militant over the issues than old-established union activists.

Decisions over whether mental strain is increasing, or over whether workers over forty are being pressurized to leave should be taken by those who know the truth - those whose lives are being hit by the change in the work process.