

...And Now for the Electronic Sweatshop

What happens when home workers and management can't agree on technology?

There are days when Carol Van Helvoort feels as though she's working in an electronic sweatshop. Unfortunately, that sweatshop is her apartment.

Van Helvoort works at home on a computer terminal processing orders for pizza delivery franchise Pizza Pizza Ltd. of Toronto, and she finds it isolating. "I end up not going out at all most days," she says.

But Van Helvoort is not a typical home worker. In fact, she's a member of the only electronic home-worker union in North America, Local 175-633 of the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW). Along with other union members, Van Helvoort argues that she should be able to use her terminal to communicate with co-workers. But Pizza Pizza doesn't want the terminals used for any purpose other than processing orders.

Can a company dictate what an employee working at home does with its equipment during personal time? Don't look to the labor laws for much help, either in Canada or the U.S. "A 'yes' is not a given," says John Hornbeck, assistant general counsel of the National Labor Relations Board in Washington.

Van Helvoort's predicament, ironically, arises from a strike launched by her union in late 1992, after the UFCW learned that Pizza Pizza had replaced most of its 150 unionized order takers with non-union, self-employed home workers, saving itself about C\$4 an hour per employee. "It was a joke," says Gord Slater, an order-taker since 1990. "Every day when we came to work, there were fewer of us."

In August 1992, the company informed the remaining workers that the room they worked in would be closed, supposedly because there wasn't enough work for them. The union found out about the use of the independent home workers and went on strike.

The dispute was resolved a year later. Van Helvoort and 25 others agreed to work from home as unionized employees for the much lower wage of C\$7 an hour, or 1% of gross sales plus 10 cents per call, whichever is higher in a given week. Pizza Pizza retained the right to use independents and now employs 75 non-union home order takers.

Van Helvoort feels she won the war but lost the peace. Aside from her unhappiness about working at home, she thinks her situation undermines the union. "If someone needs me immediately to discuss a problem, I can't be reached," she says. "I want other home workers to know there's somebody to help."

Whether permission to communicate with other employees will be granted is an open question. Though Van Helvoort believes that a loophole in her contract permits it, she still wants to work out an agreement with Pizza Pizza. The UFCW is trying to arrange a meeting with management. "We will encourage the company to allow workers to use the terminals to access a bulletin board or network," says Bill Richardson, the UFCW representative in charge of dealing with Pizza Pizza.

How far will the union go to defend what it sees as a right to communicate? Will the outcome create a precedent for the private use of corporate equipment in the home?

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