

The Electronic Revolution and the New Class of the Structurally Unemployed

By Nelson Peery / National Organizing Committee

Speaking at this conference on high technology is no small accomplishment for a person who, in his youth, worked with a horse and a plow. But perhaps only a person who has done such work has seen enough changes in the economy to visualize what the current ongoing historic changes in this economy mean for our social future.

Along with that horse and plow of my youth, I had a grandfather who was full of pat country phrases. One of his favorites that I've learned to appreciate was, "A heap see and few know." As I watch the political sycophants of big business carrying out the charade that they call grappling with the social destruction around us, I often think of Grandpa. Why does a city decline? "The obvious reason is the growing lack of community pride." Teenage pregnancy? "The youth have lost their morality." Narcotics? "The criminal element is out of control." This pandering to the most backward section of society could work while people were stunned by the socioeconomic catastrophe around us and while they were believing the malarkey coming from those they thought were friends and protectors.

Perhaps history will record that Newt Gingrich was the best thing that ever happened to the poor of this country. When they get more of the same advice from those they know who are their enemy, then perhaps awakening is possible. In this sense, I would like to skip a description of the millions of homeless, the tens of millions of jobless, the acres of burned out neighborhoods, the slaughter of our youth, the in-your-face looting of the public treasury, the decline of education, and the threatening complete elimination of social services. The important thing is to understand why this is happening and what the political results are bound to be.

When and why did government grow big with their alphabet programs, and when and why did it suddenly need to shed itself of these programs? The major tasks of government is to create the social programs and policies that allow the economy to function. For example, when the government was the instrument of the farmers, that government did the things necessary to protect and expand the farm. The Indians were cleared from the fertile lands, slavery was protected and extended, shipping lanes for export were cleared and frontiers expanded.

As the farm gave way to industry, the government transformed itself into a committee to take care of the new needs of industry. At that point government began to grow. Industry needed literate workers, so the school system expanded under a Secretary of Education. The army needed healthy young men to fight wars brought on by industrial expansion, so a school lunch program was initiated. As industry got big, a Department of Housing and Urban Development provided order to the chaotic, burgeoning cities it created. As industry and the workers moved outward, a Department of Transportation brought order to the transportation chaos. In other words, government became big government in order to serve the needs of industry as it became big industry. The workers were kept relatively healthy and the unemployed were warehoused in such a manner as to keep them available for work with each industrial expansion.

Now the rub. New means of production changed the game. Not only are expanding sections of the working class superfluous to production, but the new mode of high-tech production no longer needs a reserve army of unemployed. Nor does it need healthy young men for an infantry war. As industry

gave way to the new electronic means of production, it downsized. The government necessarily had to follow suit.

If we knew the consequences of our actions, we probably wouldn't get out of bed in the morning. The scientists pursuing their craft could hardly visualize what the engineers would do with the marvels they had created. The engineers as they applied the marvels of science to the workplace probably never understood the effects it would have on the capitalist system. Nor did the capitalists, in their scramble for the market and its profits, realize the effects they were having on history.

The Structurally Unemployed as a New Economic Category

As the applications of these new scientific marvels to the workplace expanded, a new economic category, the structurally unemployed, was created. Some 150 years ago, Marx and Engels coined the term "the reserve army of the unemployed." This was the industrial reserve to be thrown into the battle for production as the need arose. The structurally unemployed were something different. They were a new, growing, permanently unemployed sector created by the new emerging economic foundations.

Robotics entered industry at the lowest and simplest level. Its first victims were the unskilled and semi-skilled workers. For historic as well as racist reasons, the black workers were concentrated there. The widespread liquidation of the blacks in the industrial workforce was looked upon as another brutal act of American racism. It was difficult to see the effects of robotics on the white unskilled and semi-skilled workers. They were scattered throughout the general white population and especially in the suburbs. The African-Americans were concentrated in a relatively small urban area, and the percentage of black laborers to the total African-American population was higher than that of white laborers to the white population.

The consequent creation of the ghetto the black, permanently destitute, rotting inner core of the formerly central working class area of the city was accepted as simply the result of racist economic policies of capitalist industry. The economists, their inquiry tainted with racist ideology, unable to understand the difference between a reserve army of the unemployed created by industrial capitalism and the structural, permanent, joblessness created by robotics, came up with the term "underclass." This term actually was a derivative or perhaps a takeoff from the Marxist term "lumpen proletariat" or beneath the working class.

What are the origins of that term? Within the political shell but outside the economic relations of feudalism, new economic classes, the bourgeoisie and the modern working class, were created from the serfs. Some of these ex-serfs did not make it into either of the new classes. They formed what Marx referred to as a lumpen proletariat. This social flotsam, created at the beginnings of an industrial capitalism, existed as best it could on the periphery of society until the system finally absorbed them.

Those who coined the term "underclass" perhaps thought this was a group unable to keep up, and once falling behind and supported by welfare, consciously accepting an existence outside the capitalist relations of employer and employee. Perhaps they saw them as something akin to the lumpen proletariat of the beginnings of industrial capitalism.

Racism allowed for this term to be quickly and widely accepted. From the battlements once provided by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, from the oak paneled sanctuaries of the universities, it must have seemed that a sub-class of blacks reliant on welfare had lost the work ethic. Worse, they were creating a subculture of immorality and criminality in the midst of a great expansion of wealth and productivity.

A more concrete look will show different things. First, that the new productive equipment was polarizing wealth and poverty as never before. Absolute wealth in the form of 120 billionaires and absolute poverty in the form of homelessness are new to our country. The second polarization was the increase in production accompanied by an increase of unemployment and joblessness.

The Underclass' as a New Class

More important, a concrete look will show that the so-called underclass is, in fact, a new class. History shows us that each qualitatively new means of production creates a new class. Previously, each new class has been the owners or operators of the new equipment. This new class, created by robotics, is not simply driven out of industry, it is driven out of bourgeois society. There is a historic parallel.

It might be noted here that Marx made a little historical or perhaps semantic error naming the industrial working class the "proletariat." The Roman proletariat, once a working class, was driven from the workplace by the introduction of slavery. They ended up absolutely destitute and outside of Roman society. They were fed by the state and in exchange produced babies who would grow up to be soldiers. The proletariat did not and could not work because they could not compete with the labor of slaves. The comparison is clear. We are witnessing the creation of a real, if modern, proletariat.

Further, and perhaps more importantly, it should be noted that in history, no system has ever been overthrown by an internal class. The feudal system was overthrown by the classes outside the system, not by the serfs. The concept of class struggle has been convoluted to express the struggle for reform which is the only possible social struggle between two classes internal to society. Class struggle begins when qualitatively new means of production bring about an economic revolution and the economic revolution forces a social revolution. The struggle of the old, reactionary classes inside society against the new class outside society over who is going to create the new social order is the class struggle.

The social system is under attack as the electronic revolution destroys its economic underpinning. This underpinning is value created by the expenditure of human labor. In proportion to the use of robotics, the new system becomes more productive and more unable to distribute that production. The modern proletariat has no choice but to join with the robot in the final assault against the existing social and economic order. We are not facing a recurrence of the Egyptian or ancient Chinese collapse of civilization. On the contrary, we stand at the end of pre-history. Wageless production cannot be distributed with money. The contradiction between the modes of production and exchange has reached its limits. Production without wages inevitably results in distribution without money. This objective economic demand will sweep aside any subjective or political system that cannot conform to it.

Communism moves from this subjective arena of the political and ideological into the realm of the objective

The Decisive Role of Consciousness

Since there are no concrete economic connections between today and tomorrow, consciousness plays the decisive role in this coming revolution. We must consciously fight for the future. Blind rage against the ongoing destruction of life will not change it. This future will not evolve automatically as did the rosy dawn of capitalism.

How will the movement acquire this decisive consciousness? As with all changes of quality, it must be introduced from the outside. An organization must be built for the specific purpose of bringing this

consciousness to this new class and not only to the new class. Since we are entering a social revolution, this message must be taken out to all of society. Filling our future with a content made possible by the marvelous new means of production depends entirely on the leadership of an organization of visionaries capable of arousing and enthusing the masses.

Philosophers of ancient Greece declared that their slave system was necessary in order to allow another class of people leisure time to create the culture and education necessary to uplift society. Economic and social contradictions within their system brought human slavery to an end. Today, in the robot, we have an efficient and willing producer capable of freeing up the totality of humanity so that they may fully commit themselves to the age-old struggle for a cultured, orderly and peaceful life.

Does it take much genius to see that the social and moral ills of our time are the results of controlled scarcity? Does it take genius to understand that abundance, which today is the cause of starvation and misery, will be the foundation for tomorrow's leap into a new and orderly society? Does it take genius to see that privilege and all its hateful ideologies can only be and will be overcome by unfettered abundance?

Visionaries, unlike dreamers, proceed from the real world. Any person who has been forced onto the streets by the private use of robotics cannot help but visualize the possible world wherein robotics is used for the benefit of society rather than by individuals whose only interest is profit. Yesteryear's dreamers were the destitute, the exploited, the downtrodden. The visionaries were the owners of the new mechanical means of production. Today the world stands on its feet. The visionaries are those who have been driven from the factory and from society by those who own the more efficient electronic means of production. They visualize their social liberation, the happy prosperous future if only they could collectively own and direct the instruments of production that are destroying them. The dreamers are those wallowing in increasingly valueless wealth, still believing that wageless production can be circulated with money.

Humanity stands at its historic juncture. Can we, who understand today, visualize tomorrow with enough clarity to accept the historic responsibilities of visionaries and revolutionaries? I think so. Humanity has never failed to make reality from possibilities created by each great advance in the means of production. This time there is no alternative to stepping across that nodal line and seizing tomorrow.

I don't think anybody here can doubt that we are in the midst of an economic revolution, and I don't think any of us can doubt that every economic revolution has compelled a social revolution to take place. We have a different view of the process of history than we had 10 or 15 years ago.

What's going to happen as this society is being torn down? The ills of our society are the results of social destruction. They are not causing social destruction. A new society is going to have to be built that conforms to the new economic realities.

A society is a unity of production and distribution. There is no other reason to have a society. The point that we've got to grapple with, the thing that we've got to come to grips with, is what kind of society is going to be built on the basis of this new technology?

Newt Gingrich is on the loose. He represents a certain outlook. At the end of that outlook is an electronic fascism to control the mass of people. The other side of it is that we have got to do something to take back our country, and the only way we can do it is to create a communal or, if you

choose, a communist, society based upon these new means of production which produce without wages and so therefore they cannot distribute with money. The money is going to have to go out of existence.

Lastly, I just want to say this. These people are not playing. They intend to clamp a fascist dictatorship on this country because the poor are beginning to come together, little by little. There is a new ideology arising in America, an ideology that is very primitive, but an ideology nonetheless. It's the ideology of them and us, of rich and poor. And Los Angeles 1992 was only a wake up call in this respect. We have got to get our act together and take care of ourselves and take care of America. I think enough of this country to believe it should be saved and I know it cannot be saved except by revolution.

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