



Cornell University  
ILR School

Cornell University ILR School  
**DigitalCommons@ILR**

---

Michael Westfall Writings

Kheel Center for Labor-Management  
Documentation & Archives

---

6-1982

## Technology... Curse or Promise?"

Michael Westfall

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/westfall>

Thank you for downloading an article from DigitalCommons@ILR.

**Support this valuable resource today!**

---

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation & Archives at DigitalCommons@ILR. It has been accepted for inclusion in Michael Westfall Writings by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@ILR. For more information, please contact [catherwood-dig@cornell.edu](mailto:catherwood-dig@cornell.edu).

If you have a disability and are having trouble accessing information on this website or need materials in an alternate format, contact [web-accessibility@cornell.edu](mailto:web-accessibility@cornell.edu) for assistance.

---

## Technology... Curse or Promise?"

### Abstract

This article is part of the collection of writings of Mike (Marshall) Westfall, retired autoworker from General Motors in Flint, Michigan (1964-1994) and activist critic of the auto industry restructuring that led to devastating job losses. It originally appeared online in *The Westfall Papers*.  
[<http://michaelwestfall.tripod.com/id75.html>, accessed 12/14/2011]

# Technology.. Curse or Promise ?

NEWS LETTER

By MIKE WESTFALL, CHAIRMAN  
JUNE 1982

---

We are entering the dawn of a new age in industry and new technologies are revolutionizing every sector of our production and office economy.

Productivity is rising in our nation as we replace old equipment with the latest computer controlled systems.

In the near future up to 70% of all vehicle assembly facilities will utilize automated inspection systems, 45 % of the direct labor in small component assembly and 20 % of the direct labor in vehicle final assembly will be replaced through programmable automated devices. Thousands of welders and painters and material handlers in our nation's factories will be replaced with machines.

We must be concerned with all sectors of our workforce including the low seniority, medium seniority, and high seniority worker, as each group has unique problems.

As technology increases to enter the workplace the remaining jobs will become more and more skilled . The older worker will find it much more difficult to accept this change and enter the area of reeducation.

We must be looking for ideas to lesson this burden for older workers. One of the most obvious is a voluntary earlier retirement financed by a special profit sharing or tax derived from this new technology. This earlier retirement is a major part of the C.E.R.P. program.

A voluntary earlier retirement program for these higher seniority older workers would save many of the younger seniority workers jobs by voluntarily easing out the older workers.

Workers and our communities must benefit from rather than become victims of new technology which is one part of the new corporate restructuring strategies.

The medium and low seniority worker must have training available to them to guarantee them and their families a secure future.

What about the future of our children? We must not wait for someone else to give them a sense of direction.

Most of today's shop workers had fathers and grandfathers that were factory workers.

When they reached working age they knew that there would be a secure living wage job available to them in the auto industry.

Today the situation is totally different and unless our children are made aware very early of the importance of education and the learning of a skill we could be bringing up a generation with earning potential much less then ours.

The UAW could organize high school guidance conferences designed to educate high school councilors as to what direction to give to their students on future occupations.

Our unions need to create a staff of speakers to make presentations to our high schools and colleges.

Television could also play an important part in the technology equation.

The UAW has applied for a license for a Flint area television channel. This channel could show live coverage of technology conferences and have debates on all of the issues pertaining to technology.

Technology will touch every worker in our society and any regular technology program on this situation would surely be popular and educational.

The auto industries are creating a new age in manufacturing and an age with fewer employees in their system from concept to finished product..

The new products these companies produce will be designed and engineered by computer aided machines and will be produced on an automated factory floor step by step.

When these automated factories are integrated with their computerized systems for planning, engineering, design, assembly, material flow, production management and scheduling just how many of our jobs will be eliminated in the process?

How will our community tax bases hold up?

What about our community services including police, fire, schools?

The auto industry is not just any industry in this country. One out of every 7 American jobs is auto related and the auto industry is our nation's "largest" employer. Our economy and our communities depend on it. It will be a sad day if we do not address this corporate restructuring away of America's better paying jobs and become a nation of much lower paid restaurant cooks and store clerks. It could happen and it could happen in our lifetime because these powerful companies are marching in lockstep to do just that.

These are vital questions and are they really being addressed or are they being passed over in the hope that fate will treat the working people and their communities fairly.

Well, we only have to look at Flint or Detroit to see hundreds of thousands of our brothers and sisters jobs slotted for export, downsizing or a robot.

The speed and degree with which this new technology is installed will determine how quickly our jobs will be sliced.

As a union of working people we have an obligation to be examining where we are and where we are going.

Now there are some very important questions that need to be answered.

So what needs to be done, who is responsible for getting it done and what should they do?

We need in depth studies to accurately forecast technological impact in advance and we need laws protecting communities against the mass introduction of automation without concern.

We need contractual protection in our union contracts and government protection from those who govern us.

Now, who is responsible and what can they do?

One group that is responsible is industry. Corporations must realize that if people can't find a job paying a decent livable wage that they can't but the company's products.

Corporations must be made to realize that industry does not exist for management alone and it is a privilege to do business in this or any other country and with this privilege there must be certain social responsibilities.

Social responsibilities which include considering impact on workers and communities when companies decide to move plants and make major dislocations and social responsibilities in the form of human rights when they deal with workers in other countries. All too many of our American based multi nationals are willing to exploit foreign workers with low pay and inhuman working conditions because foreign governments allow it. This practice may not be lawfully wrong but it is morally wrong and instead of being exploiters of their fellow human beings these multi nationals should be setting examples for foreign governments. These practices need to be exposed and advertised and that is one thing our growing group is doing.

Government officials must be held accountable and become educated to the importance of the technology issue. Our society is based on decent paying jobs. Laws must be passed which penalize corporations that deliberately make large segments of our manufacturing workforce unemployed due to their corporate restructuring without concern for the workers or communities that made them great.

Frank C. Pierson, economic professor at Swarthmore College, says that most jobs that require simple mechanical skills are being transferred from the United States to other developing countries where the wages are lower.

There is a general consensus that education is the key to a living wage in this new technological generation in which we live.

Judith kayser, manager of C.P.C. Statistical Services, said that job placements on the bachelor's level in engineering will be up 12% this year, on the master's level they will be up 32 % and up 37% at the doctoral level. In the non technical or unskilled category there was only a 5% increase in hiring between 1980 and 1981.

The society of manufacturing and engineers stated that automation combined with robotics and computerization is bringing a different breed of worker to the plant floor.

50% of the workforce in automated plants will be technicians and engineers.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics recently predicted that by 1990, 80% of the available jobs will require post secondary training of some kind.

Of Those jobs, 80% will necessitate something other than a traditional [liberal arts] college education.

We must instill into our children an awareness of the community and an intellectual restlessness that spurs them to continued learning.

The good paying unskilled blue collar jobs of today are quickly disappearing and being replaced with the highly skilled jobs of tomorrow.

In conclusion, we are not going to stop technology, nor should we.

Technology throughout the decades has brought a much higher standard of living to us all and there is not one person reading this newsletter that doesn't want this standard of living to improve even further.

**If we face these questions today in a socially responsible way then our auto industry and steel industry and manufacturing industries which have made our standard of living what it is and become the symbol of our strength will all have more not fewer jobs in the year 2000.**

**If we face these problems today we will have a much brighter legacy for our next generation workers but if we don't then these jobs will evaporate and the next generation will be handcuffed to a high tax base that our generation created and a nation of underpaid employment opportunities because we did not protect our decent paying job base. The victims will be our children.**

<http://westfallmike.tripod.com>

