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# Organized Labor's Attitude Toward Machinery

BY PAUL KLAPPER, PH.D.

## PART III

### III

#### The Labor Union Members' Attitude

It is very important that we keep apart the attitude that a union takes toward a particular trade policy from that adopted by the individual. The two are often dissimilar, not because the organization does not expect each one of its members to make his actions and practices square with the policy determined upon in general assembly, but simply for the reason that an individual's action in a body is one thing, and when alone, another. Social action is always more or less impersonal and gives rise to a general policy to be applied to a class of cases, to remedy a type of grievance, and not any one's particular case or specific grievance. Individual action is generally personal; it is usually a reaction to a particular situation. Despite the efforts of organized labor to the contrary, the individual member's attitude toward machinery was not too friendly, and often bordered on the hostile. The machine was the sole cause of his misery; it displaced him, robbed him of his skilled craft, made his work irregular, his living precarious, and forced his wife and children to become his fellow breadwinners. The machine was cruelty and heartlessness incarnate to every artisan in such a position. Hence we can readily see that the personal attitude toward machinery was only a reaction to the grievance the worker had against it. The action of the union had a deterring effect, it is true,—but it had little else. The worker had numberless chances to manifest his true feelings for the machine every hour of the day. While the modern worker, controlled by the union, does not rise in revolt, and engage in rioting, burning, and pillaging factories and machinery, he nevertheless has means less destructive but clearly indicative of his inimical attitude toward mechanical labor-saving innovations. The proof that those means have been used we may group under four heads:

1. The advice of labor leaders to union members indicates clearly that the men are not showing a friendly attitude. The

lessons of their councils are always admonitions to bring out the highest potentialities of these machines, to show a willingness to work them, to believe in their possibilities, and not to ridicule the assertions, however extravagant, made by the inventor or his agents.

At the 38th Convention of the Typographical Union, a complaint was made that the printers were reluctant about taking up new processes. The general representative assembly passed a resolution urging members of subordinate unions "to learn to operate machines wherever in use." At the convention of the Glass Bottle Blowers' Association in 1904, a general resolution was passed which declared in part that the rapid changes in the last few years together with predictions of the wonderful innovations to come should not be considered idle boasts—"for it is now, to us, a question of self-preservation. If any members are displaced by machines, they should operate the machines. This proposition is so clear and so just that any departure from it is a violation of the purposes and objects for which we are organized."

President Rowe of the American Flint Glass Workers' Union in his address to the 1907 Convention said: "We must profit by experience in treating improved machinery. If the machine is a success it is our duty to accord its controllers equitable treatment in the operation of the machine. If the machine is not a commercial success, its owners will soon discover that fact and set it aside to rust."

The same Convention passed resolutions urging each union to take up the question of automatic machinery at its meetings, "for the purposes (1) of educating our members to the expectations of these machines" and (2) "that machinery should receive the best reception at their hands."

President Martin Fox of the Iron Moulders' Union said to his delegates, "The union moulder will never be given all the necessary opportunities unless he is willing to do justice to the machines,—to their possibilities,—and show a willingness to conscientiously assist in their development." (1903 Convention.)

2. The workmen often threw every conceivable obstacle in the way of the successful operation of new machinery. The first machines are made more or less experimental and need a sympathetic rather than an unfriendly attitude, in order successfully to bring out every latent possibility. The union member often

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worked in the latter rather than in the former spirit. Adjustments are more or less imperfect, gearings not as fine as they should be, and mechanisms are ultra delicate in the early forms of the machines. The workers did what they could to throw these machines out of gear, upset the fine adjustments and break the fragile parts. The machinists were kept busy repairing and patching, and the worker waited idly for his next chance to prove that the machines were unsuccessful and that machinery in his craft was impossible.

The case of Josiah Warren and the printing press is typical. He was an ardent communist who lived in New Harmony. It was his great desire to write communistic literature to prove the practicability of his scheme. In order to print these at little cost and in the shortest possible time, he set to work devising a printing press worked on a cylinder instead of on a flat surface. For nine years he toiled, and in 1840 succeeded in producing the first rolling press in America. Its superiority over the other presses and its success were obvious even to a layman. The "Southwestern Sentinel" was the first paper in the world to be printed from a continuous sheet by Warren's press, and it boasted of unusual cheapness and good quality of work. The workmen saw its possibilities, and began working havoc with it in the manner we noted above. The press being as fragile as glass was constantly out of gear, and was kept in the repair shop more than in the press-room. In utter disgust at this maliciousness Warren removed his machine, smashed it with a sledgehammer and consigned its parts to the junk shop and to the furnace. Men familiar with every branch of printing assert that this action set typographical progress back a number of years. Warren had plates for this press which rivalled those turned out by the modern stereotyping and lithographing processes. He discarded the old wooden plates and unsightly cuts, and produced work comparable to the moderately skilled products of to-day. Without his press these innovations could not be introduced. (Lockwood's *New Harmony*, chap. 21.)

The National Glass Budget of May, 1903, tells us of the trouble in Allegheny. Many experiments were being conducted on new machines, but as both glass unions monopolized the labor of the town, it was found necessary to build a separate experimental shop, and engage non-union help in order

to be assured of honest co-operation on the part of the workmen.

Mr. Fry, President of the National Glass Company, testifying before the Industrial Commission in 1901, said that it was usual to find the early forms of the machines killed by the union men; in nine cases out of ten, they were worked so as to make them a failure. It was common to find that a machine that did not prove successful in a union shop turned out to be quite the reverse when transferred to a non-union factory. His testimony was not refuted by the labor representatives. In answer to a request for a concrete instance, he cited the Rochester Tumbler Company. He gave the company's figures and showed that they used the same machinery as other glass tumbler factories, but they made greater profit than any other concern of proportionate size and equally progressive methods because the labor was non-union. (Vol. VII, p. 165.) But he added: "To-day (1901) the union men have increased in wisdom on this point. At the time of the first conference the leaders seemed to have recognized that automatic machinery had come to stay, and the president of the union said to his men: 'It is our interest, and our duty to our employers to do the very best we can with improved machinery.'"

The complaint that the American employer of union labor registers is found verbatim in the grievances which the British factory owners, similarly placed, are arguing. The Shoe and Leather Record (2/19/1892) contains the following wail: "It is true that their objection does not take the form of direct refusal to run the machines. Experience has taught the union a more efficacious way of marshalling their forces of opposition. To say openly that labor saving appliances were objected to, would be to estrange public sympathy, without which trade unionism finds it impossible to live. So other methods are adopted. The work done by machines is belittled; it is urged that no saving of labor is effected by their use. The men working the machines exercise all their ingenuity in making machine work as expensive as hand work. There exists among workmen what amounts to a tacit understanding that only so much work shall be done in a certain time, and no matter what machines are introduced, the men conspire to prevent any saving to be effected by their use."

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3. From facts and figures we gather that union workmen, despite warnings and advice to the contrary from their organization and their leaders, have arbitrarily decreased the spread of the machines and set a maximum limit to their daily output which was far below the capabilities of these machines. This has been implied indirectly in the charges that were made above, but we find direct evidence of these facts. E. H. Mumford, an authority on the manufacturing processes in the iron moulding industry, told the employers at a meeting of the Foundrymen's Association in August, 1900, that the basic machine problem was that the moulder will not do as large a day's work as the unskilled worker on the same machines. He admitted that President Fox of the Iron Moulders' Union was sincere in his utterances and his advice to his men, "to bring out the best possibilities of the machines," but the problem is beyond union control. Such figures as the following, obtained by studying the output in a typical shop, are a sad indication of the attitude taken by the individual.

COMPARATIVE OUTPUT OF MOULDER AND UNSKILLED LABORER ON MOULDING MACHINE

WORKER	Average No. of Flasks	Average Daily Wages	Average Cost per Flask
Union moulder.....	65	\$2.75	\$.04
Unskilled machine operator.....	160	2.40	.01½

"To become a successful machine tender the moulder must forswear his craft and strengthen his back." To escape this doom the moulders foolishly kept up their hostile tactics until they were threatened with displacement.

W. J. Keep, Superintendent of the Michigan Stove Works, said in an interview for the Iron Moulders' Journal (Vol. XXXIX, No. 2, p. 104): "There is no objection to the employment of union men on the machines, if they will work them to the best advantage, but they often discourage their use by pretending to use them." He, too, charges openly that the moulders are guilty of reducing the speed or curtailing the machine's product.

4. That the manual and skilled workmen indulged in the

practices which we have noted, can be seen from the attitude which the agents of the machine companies have taken toward the employment of union men. When the United Shoe Machine Company fitted up a factory with their machinery, the officers invariably counselled the employment of non-union men. They were jealous of the success of these mechanisms and in order to guarantee the control of the machines by sympathetic workers, the officers advised as we just noted. Many machine companies contracted to install machinery on the condition that for the initial period, the employer give them a final voice in matters relating to the choice of the working corps.

In 1898, the Texan delegate at the 44th Convention of the International Typographical Union presented a resolution which declared that since the agents of the Linotype Machine Company were selling linotypes to printers on condition that they be allowed to supply non-union female and male operators, the International Typographical Union "should take such measures as will thwart the above agency in its nefarious and detrimental efforts to injure the craft at large." The answer of the agents was to the effect that if the "printers had individually done their duty by the new typesetting machines, there would be no need now of any such practices on our part to assure ourselves of successful and honest operation of the machines."

The Typographical Journal (3/1/1894) reports that in January and February of 1894, the "Pittsburg Leader" installed thirteen Mergenthaler linotype machines, and set the old men to work on them. In the middle of the latter month the men attained a rate of 4,000 ems per hour, a speed equal, if not in excess, of the average rate of that day, despite the predictions of the Mergenthaler agents and their attempts to induce the Typothetæ to get outside help. The Journal says that this ought to be a good example, and an incentive to other workmen to try to keep themselves in the new positions. "The real tragedy of the matter is to find not only the old men displaced, but even denied an opportunity to show that they can qualify as well as anybody for the job. The agents are against the union operators for fear that the latter will not work hard enough on the machines. The printers have learned their lesson—they are too wise not to be alive to the force of competition, and go in to do as well as the next man, especially the non-union men."

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Mr. Thompson, Secretary of the National Glass Company of the United States, testified before the United States Industrial Commission that the non-union flint glass shops succeeded as they did, because of the efficiency of the work on new and improved machinery. Labor union members would never show such results; that is why the manufacturer of the machines counsel non-unionizing of the shops. "But," he adds, "labor unions are changing radically on this question." Mr. Thompson, after all his dealings with the American Flint Glass Workers' Union should have known that the labor union policy has not changed radically; it did not need a radical change, but the attitude of the individual worker is changing radically.

The same holds true of the iron moulders. In 1899, the *Iron Moulders' Journal* asked, "Does the skilled artisan make a better machine operator than the unskilled worker?" A symposium was conducted, and answers solicited from the ranks of the employing classes. A typical answer from this source ran—"There is no question but that a moulder can make a moulding machine pay better than a laborer, for there are abundant instances when the labor is the kind that needs the judgment of a trained mind." (*Iron Moulders' Journal*, August 1899, p. 506).

At the Convention of the National Founders Association, in November, 1905, the question came up, "How can we obtain the best results with the moulding machines?" The answer drafted by the Committee advises, "Begin with, and keep the machine moulds in the hands of your unskilled help. By that is meant to keep it from the journeyman mechanic, who, you will find, has too much to unlearn to be in thorough sympathy with, and to obtain the best results from, the moulding machines."

This answer is only a crystallization of the sentiments and opinions expressed at a previous convention in 1901. There, too, the same question was asked, and an expression of individual conviction was called for. There was a decided sentiment against the skilled mechanic. Few of the men present believed that in complicated work the skilled moulder should be employed, as a matter of cash profit. All emphasized that the union moulders must change their attitudes and personal conduct in working the machines, and must learn not to put an unjustifiable limit on the machines' output.



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E. H. Mumford, the leading expert in the various processes of iron moulding gives it as his observation of years of varied experience that, "Moulders, as soon as they realize the possibilities of these machines, take an unfriendly attitude—i. e. work unwillingly, slacken the pace, and ostracize those who do the opposite. The manufacturers of these machines always send their own operators for the first two weeks in order to show what the willing worker can do." We need not discredit this statement in the least, although it does come from what the laborer would call "the ranks of the enemy." Editor Black, of the *Iron Moulders' Journal*, the union's official organ, said editorially: "The officers of the union in every instance advise the workers to bring out the best possibilities of these machines. We realize that inborn prejudice may induce workmen to act unreasonably at times when these machines are introduced, but during the last ten years the moulders have received an education which has demonstrated to them the folly of such a position, and I am glad to say that this foolish policy is the exception rather than the rule. We can well look forward to the time when the demand for skilled moulders will be less, and feeling as we do that there is a class of moulders who would make excellent machine operators, we are anxious to reserve for them, if possible, the opportunity to operate these machines."

We have seen that organized labor is very much in the condition suggested by the old proverb of the horse who can be led to the water, but not all the force of mankind can make him drink. The union plans a reception of these machines, decides on a position, advise and counsels, but the result is an abstract policy. During the transition stage, all the difficulties and hardships that machinery brings are very intense and highly magnified. The workers dare not take an open stand in their unions—each man therefore tries to even his personal score with the machine. This personal animosity and hostility are not long a very serious factor for, as in all other matters, so, too, in the field of industry, time is the great healer and soother.