

WOMEN & THE NEW TECHNOLOGY

What's all the fuss about women and the new technology and what does it have to do with ME? Well, even though computers have been around for years, the high cost prohibited its introduction into all aspects of our lives. Now, the silicone chip has been developed and the technology that used to fill a building now fits on a fingernail and is a fraction of the cost. The new technology could be useful to us--it could relieve us of the boring elements of our jobs, our work in the home and allow us the time to explore our more creative selves. Unfortunately, the people in control are not concerned with our quality of life, only with how to reduce the cost of employing us.

Employers now have within their reach a cheap way to replace workers--machines that don't talk back. Of course, machines need humans to push the buttons so we won't be eliminated--yet. However, one study shows that at least three Canadians out of ten lost their jobs as a result of technological change between 1961 and 1974. It's estimated that by 1990, 2.5 million workers will be unemployed. Many of the workers will be women in secretarial and clerical jobs in offices, banks, retail stores, schools and factories.

The new technology will completely revolutionize women's work in the home too. Soon computers will be introduced into our homes so that we can bank, shop and go to the movies all with the flick of a wrist. For housewives, the machines will eliminate the chores of bill paying and shopping. But other effects will include greater isolation in our homes and the introduction of piece work putting women under pressure to earn money in the home while at the same time carrying on the other household duties of cleaning and child care. Constant use of the machines will affect our and our children's health. Also, with rising women's unemployment resulting from the new technology, our choices about when and how to work become narrower.

Just as serious are the effects of the technology on our health. Computers are still relatively expensive and interest on loans to pay for them is high so employers introduce shift work to get as much work out of the machine as possible.

Shiftwork has disastrous effects on our health and disrupts our lives. Some women prefer shiftwork as a solution to childcare problems but it would be more to the point if society took responsibility for childcare by providing quality centres for children.



Health Protection for Operators of VDUs

Our jobs become more stressful as computers monitor the amount of work done and employers then put pressure on us to speed up. Some employers only pay for the amount of work done not for the amount of time put in causing even more tension on the job.

More and more evidence is forthcoming on radiation poisoning as a result of emissions of low levels of non-ionizing radiation causing birth defects and cataracts. Other health problems reported by visual display unit (VDU) operators are visual and mental fatigue, headaches, dizziness, loss of appetite, indigestion, insomnia, depression, irritability, nervousness and eyestrain caused by flicker and glare on the VDUs.

WHAT CAN WE DO?

We must make a concerted effort to resist the introduction of computers into our workplaces and homes until we have the means to be sure they make our lives better, instead of threatening our health, job security and life choices.

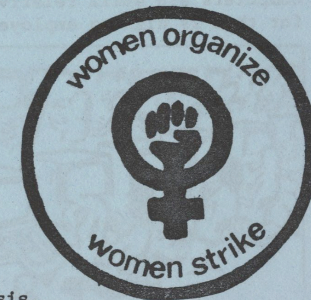
Many unions demand clauses in their contracts providing for job protection, advance warning of the introduction of new machines as well as safe working conditions (proper lighting and ventilation, comfortable work stations, adequate breaks). We must also demand the right to refuse to work on the machines without loss of employment. (Bell Canada workers recently won the right for pregnant women to refuse to operate a VDU so it can be done.) It is not unreasonable to expect our unions to make these demands--its our health and our future.

Where we are not in a union, we may have greater success with an employer if we discuss the issue with our co-workers and confront the employer together. This may be risky however for the employer may respond by firing "complaining" women especially in a time of high unemployment. Outside support can be useful; many groups are committed to providing such support, e.g. women's groups, other unions.

As housewives we can protect our future and support other workers by refusing poor quality machinery for use in the home and by being wary of offers of poorly paid employment in the home. By discussing the issue with our friends and neighbors we can make demands for good pay and quality machines without health hazards.

Our health and future right to work are at stake--act now!

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Information from: United Working Women, Kinesis,
Upstream, In Struggle, CUPE