

## Support for Hong Kong Dockers – Protest at BMA - Work and Technology

### MUA Queensland Branch and the IDC Supports Hong Kong Dockers

OVER THE EASTER long weekend Queensland Branch Organiser – Paul Petersen, Jordi Aragunde - (lead co coordinator of the IDC) and I, met with the leadership and rank and file activists of the Hong Kong Dockers. This report encompasses two meetings we held.

The first meeting we held was with the leadership of the Hong Dockers consisting of Loy and Carlos from the Hong Kong Dockers and Lee Cheuk Yan who is General Secretary of the Hong Kong Confederation of Unions who took time from an incredibly busy schedule to meet with us.

I opened the meeting and introduced Paul and Jordi to our Hong Kong Comrades and how we were here to give them whatever assistance we could in their efforts to organise Dockworkers in one of the major container ports of the world.

Loy and Carlos gave us an understanding of the strikes which had taken place and how they had resulted in some significant improvement in salaries, particularly at Hutchison (the dominant port operator) but working conditions were extremely harsh, intense and exploitative.

Comrade Yan, of the Hong Kong Confederation is a man of a very keen intellect. He outlined some previous problems they had with other so called 'international union' bodies in transport, promising the world and delivering less than nothing.

Fellow Worker Jordi explained the structure of the IDC, about how we were a flat structured, non-bureaucratic organisation that was 110 000 rank and file members strong and growing.

Both Paul Petersen and I pressed that our Branch of the MUA and the IDC were all about finding what resources the Hong Kong Dockers needed to be able to keep fighting and organising.

The meeting ended after a lot of discussion, and decided that before the next Zone co-ordinators meeting to be held in Brisbane in November we would meet again in Hong Kong with concrete proposals of what we could do and what the Dockers of Hong Kong need.

The second major meeting of our Hong Kong visit occurred the next day (Easter Monday) at the union offices of the Hong Kong Confederation of Unions office that kindly allow the Dockers to organise out of.

At this meeting, we met Dockers from the Port of Hong Kong employed by sub-contractors as Hutchison (except for 50% of their crane operators employ all their Stevedoring through a 3rd party (ie sub-contractor). The conditions of the workforce have been seriously eroded and exploitation hugely intensified since 1995, when Li Ka Shing (owner of Hutchison) purchased the Stevedoring arm. Here are a few examples:

1. Truck drivers that move containers between Hutchison terminals in Hong Kong work 12-14 hour days with NO BREAK. They average 60+ hour week!
2. Portainer Drivers work 12 hours a day but as key personnel they are given 15 minute break each 12 hour shift.
3. Leaving the best for last, lashers working for Hutchison work in 4 men gangs and work 24 hour shifts. That's right, 24 hours. During that time they may be able to steal a couple of hours here and there but their conditions of work are brutal.



L to R - Paul Petersen, Jordi Aragunde, Bob Carnegie

Hutchison loom over the Hong Kong Docks like a malevolent eagle eyeing off any danger to its super profits. They can be described only as a brutal fiefdom in their most profitable area.

The Hong Kong Dockers have asked for our assistance, not for better pay but critically for better health and safety on the job.

It's up to us in Queensland and Dockers around the world to force Hutchison to abide by fundamental workplace health and safety issues.

## Successful Protest at BMA



*The Queensland Branch was engaged in a protest at BMA on Tuesday 26 April 2017. This is the leaflet we made which explains our struggle.*

## Work and Technology

*A great mate and comrade of the Queensland Branch, Labour Historian, Jeff Rickertt has written an extremely interesting article on Technology and Work. I hope members find it of interest. This is a very detailed article which is why it is important we have published it in full. Bob Carnegie*

## Work, Technology and the Future – Jeff Rickertt

23/04/2017 26/04/2017 by The Cloudland Collective

**Work, Technology and the Future: A Review of *Why the Future is Workless* by Tim Dunlop (NewSouth Publishing, 2016).**

THE RAPID DEVELOPMENT of artificial intelligence, 3D printing and robotics – the so-called Fourth Industrial Revolution – has many people worried that humanity might be entering an age of permanent joblessness. Even Bill Gates is concerned. What will happen, he asks, when we ‘cross the threshold of job-replacement of certain activities all ... at once?’ Whole classes of work may disappear at the same time: including ‘warehouse work, driving, clean up.’ Gates wants to tax robots to pay for the cost of re-training unemployed workers.[1]

There is no doubt that a massive re-shaping of work is happening. In January 2016 the World Economic Forum reported on the findings of its survey of Chief Human Resource Officers and other senior executives of leading global employers, representing more than 13 million employees across nine broad industry sectors in 15 major developed and emerging economies. ‘It is clear from the data,’ the WEF reported, ‘that momentous change is underway.’[2] In the short-time, the prospects for a spike in technology-induced unemployment is startling. While the survey’s respondents expected strong employment growth in jobs in ‘architecture, engineering, computers and mathematics, they predicted declines in manufacturing and production jobs and in office and administrative roles.’[3] Extrapolating from the survey responses, the WEF concluded that in the five years from 2015 to 2020 around 4.8 million office and administrative jobs would fall victim to automation, and 1.6 million manufacturing and production jobs.[4] The growth areas would be far too small to absorb the job losses from other parts of the labour market.[5]

Longer term, the trend is likely to accelerate. Fanuc, the world’s largest industrial robot manufacturer, is currently trialling robots that train themselves to do new tasks. After eight hours of practice, one robot trained itself to take objects out of one box and put them in another. Eight robots working together and sharing information achieved the same outcome in just one hour.[6] Some mines are already using driverless haul trucks and shovels. Driverless trains take the ore to port.[7] Indian mining giant Adani boasts that its proposed Carmichael coalmine in Central Queensland, which both Labor and Liberal spruik as a jobs bonanza, will be an automated



**ANTI UNION, ANTI WORKER,  
ANTI AUSSIE SEAFARER  
“MUA demonstrating today outside  
BMA’s office demanding”**

Partnerships were not designed to destroy working people’s conditions of employment.

On July 1<sup>st</sup> 2016 BMA engaged the anti union towage operator Rivtow to destroy 45 years of industrial agreements and peace at the Hay Point Terminal.

We are protesting today demanding BMA use their contractual power to have these ‘SHAM partnerships replaced with employer employee relations governed under the conditions of the Fair Work Act.

Secondly, we are protesting today about BMA’s role in the destruction of Australia’s merchant fleet. BMA is the largest coking coal exporter in the world. Its profits over the decades has been in the 10’s of billions of dollars.

Currently hundreds of vessels that export Australian Coal, dug by Australian mines, transported by Australian train drivers, loaded by Australian terminal operators, NOT ONE **OUNCE** of the coal is exported in an Australian merchant ship employing Australian seafarers. They ship their coal on vessels using exploited foreign seafarers! BMA should hang their heads in shame.

Huge companies such as BMA have a corporate and social responsibility and that includes employing some Aussies ships, flying the Red Ensign and employing tax paying Australian seafarers.

It’s a national disgrace and we need the Australian public to support us in our campaign for justice.

Please contact Bob Carnegie 0439 478 996

operation from pit to port. Uber and Google are working on driverless cars.

Industrial manufacturers are turning to 3D printing, mostly for creating prototypes, but in some cases for production.[8] The aviation industry in China uses 3D printers to produce components for planes. Alcoa is printing titanium fuselage parts for Airbus.[9] In Shanghai there is a 3D printer (featured on Youtube) that can print out 10 houses in 24 hours. Meanwhile, in Amberg, Germany, a Siemens factory which manufactures programmable logic controllers (PLCs) for automating industrial machines and processes, accepts orders from its customers, creates a virtual model of the product, schedules production time on machines, organises automated carts to move the components from one area to another and assembles the parts into a completed PLC, all without any human intervention. Of the 12 million PLCs produced each year at the Amberg plant, less than 0.001 per cent are defective.[10] In Japan, a world leader in robotics, the government predicts that 15 million manufacturing jobs will be replaced by robots by 2025.[11]

Even financial traders are probably doomed by new sophisticated algorithms making sound trading decisions at exceptional speed. The principle, writes Herbert, Dhayalan and Scott, 'is that the robot doesn't have to be better than the best trader, it just has to be as least as good as the average but it can do things cheaper and quicker and without getting fatigued or needing holidays.'[12] This thinking has widespread application. A robotic mason named SAM100 can lay up to 1200 bricks a day without requiring a lunch break.[13] In a coffee bar recently opened in San Francisco, a robotic arm makes the flat whites and lattes.[14] The Coffee Club corporation in Australia must surely be asking, why pay baristas Sunday penalty rates at all when a robot can do the job?

The debate about the future of work has pitched pessimists against optimists. The optimists argue that historically, new technology has both destroyed and created new roles, and there is no reason to think that the new crop of machines will be any different. The Fourth Industrial Revolution, they contend, will produce many jobs that we can't even begin to imagine yet. The pessimists respond that it is dangerous to assume the future will follow the patterns of the past, especially when evidence is mounting that not just some but the majority of current roles are already disappearing or under threat. The pessimists, in turn, are divided between social democrats who see no acceptable alternative to a goal of full employment within the parameters of capitalism, and commentators from the more astute sections of the right, fretting that unsolvable mass unemployment may well threaten capitalism's very survival. Both groups concur that the potential for social breakdown is real and frightening. By and large, of course, they are referring to the future. Neither pessimists

nor optimists seem to recognise that a workless world is already a dystopian nightmare for tens of millions stuck in the informal economies of the world's mega-cities and the deindustrialised zones of the OECD.

### **Workless at Last!**

Australian author Tim Dunlop's book *Why the Future is Workless* is one of the latest radical contributions to the work and technology discussion.[15] Dunlop approaches the topic as an anti-capitalist. He agrees with the pessimists that the future is likely to be workless but openly welcomes the prospect. 'The idea at the heart of this book', Dunlop states (p.5), 'is that a future without work is potentially a good thing'. Not only would it mean an end to the more demeaning, repetitive and arduous roles, it would potentially remove all labour from the sphere of economic necessity, where it has been embedded throughout history. Rather than a means to an end, labour in general could become like hobbies and pastimes are now, an activity entered into freely for the sheer stimulation, pleasure and well-being it engenders. The voluntary exercise and development of one's talents, whether mental or physical, in solitude or in cooperation with others, would provide its own rewards.

Far from a doomsday scenario, Dunlop considers mass technological unemployment to be an opportunity for workers to break free from their dependence on capital. He calls it the postwork position. At its most extreme, he argues (p.193):

'The postwork position calls for full unemployment to be adopted as a policy, and it insists that the ability of humans to flourish lies in a world in which technology – robots, artificial intelligence and the rest of it – takes over most of the productive work of society, leaving actual human beings free to pursue other activities. It says that we need to stop thinking in terms of making work more tolerable, better paid, or more generally available and, instead, rethink the centrality of work to our claims for a good life.'

One of the strengths of Dunlop's argument is his rejection of technological determinism. Although he is convinced that there is an unstoppable trend away from full employment rather than towards it, he is adamant that what this means for the unemployed is not pre-determined. A jobless world might mean mass poverty and misery or it might herald the dawn of human emancipation. The outcome, he insists, will be decided by political struggle. His postwork position is offered less as a theoretical future possibility than as a political project to be fought for here and now.

For Dunlop, a guaranteed universal basic income (UBI), paid to everyone irrespective of employment and wealth status, is the mechanism by which the postwork project would transform mass unemployment from a curse to a source of liberation. He stresses that what he means by a universal basic income is radically different from the simplified social welfare schemes favoured by the right, where the main objectives are to reduce

bureaucratic costs and coerce the unemployed into low-paying insecure jobs or precarious hand-to-mouth forms of self-employment. On the contrary, Dunlop's concept of a UBI holds that it should be 'universal, unconditional and sufficient' (p.175) to support a person comfortably outside the labour market. It is a startling proposal. For most of us, work – paid labour – is so ingrained as the model of how social wealth is, or ought to be, allocated, we forget that the production and distribution of wealth are not one and the same thing. Dunlop reminds us that other models of social allocation are both possible and necessary. He writes (pp.175-6):

'If technology does cause rising and sustained unemployment, it follows that the only way to maintain a vaguely functional first-world democracy is to bring into existence some scheme that redistributes wealth independently of paid employment. Basic income is that scheme. Equally it follows that if technology causes rising and sustained unemployment and we don't introduce a [Universal Basic Income], then we are dooming ourselves to massive societal dysfunction where a small band of elites will prosper and most everyone else will live hand-to-mouth in the most obscene version of what is often called trickle-down economics.'

The pressing question, he contends (p.176), is 'not whether the robots will take our jobs but what sort of society we want to live in.'

There is much to commend in Dunlop's radical take on the work and technology debate, not least the contention that the future does not necessarily belong to the rich and powerful. With organisation, determination, courage, a clear objective and an effective strategy, workers and the workless can determine their own destiny in opposition to the best laid plans of the robot owners. Dunlop is right that how technology affects us economically and socially is a political matter. We need a politics of resistance, a plan to make the robots work for humanity.

Dunlop's book raises two fundamental questions. The first is the empirical issue of whether or not we are in fact facing a technology-induced jobs Armageddon. From our current vantage point, of course, it is impossible to know. Work is certainly changing dramatically but we should be cautious about bold pronouncements of the demise of employment. Despite countless predictions by socialists over the past 200 years that capitalism itself was in its death throes, the system chugs on, sick and perpetually in crisis but alive and more dangerous than ever. One of the reasons it lingers is that it continually finds new ways of turning human wants and desires into profit. Even if machines could produce and distribute all the physical goods we need and deliver all the physical care we require – a situation still far away – humans manifest an infinite range of psychological and social needs which can be satisfied in an infinite range of ways, most of which are beyond the capability of even the most advanced machines around today. While it is said to be true that elderly residents of nursing homes have perked

up in the company of androids, it is unlikely that clever robots will replace sentient emotional and facilitative labour any time soon.

The pessimists' case is therefore probably overstated. But the merit of Dunlop's book does not actually stand or fall on this question. In a sense, it is unfortunate that he has so heavily tied his analysis to the pessimists' position. For as Dunlop himself explains, the technology debate is simply the manifestation of a deeper problem about the alienating and unequal way social wealth is produced and distributed under capitalism. It is the capitalist artifice of work and its allocation through the market that is at the root of our anxiety and discontent. Unless a fundamental social reorganisation occurs, this problem will continue to plague us even if the pessimists' worst case scenario fails to materialise in the foreseeable future. Our jobs might not be automated wholesale but so long as social tasks are bundled into waged jobs in the first place, technology will continue to make our lives uncertain and insecure.

If work rather than machinery is the enemy, an anti-work or postwork politics is indeed necessary, just as Marx and the revolutionary wing of socialism always argued. The real point of Dunlop's exegesis is that we have now reached a stage of technological development where we can be freed from much of the labour required to meet our material needs. Postwork politics, for so long limited by our lack of means, has now entered the realm of the possible.

The second fundamental question, then, is whether or not Dunlop's position provides a postwar politics fit for the task? Has Dunlop formulated the task adequately? Does the minimum income plan stack up? To answer these questions we must delve deeper into the fraught relationship between workers and the tools of work. How did it come to be that machines continually confront us as threats rather than opportunities? This is an historical question and unravelling it requires a short excursion through our deep past.

### **A Brief History of Tools**

Ever since our ancestors began fashioning sticks into hunting instruments and rocks into axes and grindstones, humans have been thinking up and creating tools and methods to lighten the burden of toil associated with meeting their needs. This higher cognitive capacity is a defining feature of our kind. While it's true that bees lead sophisticated communal lives, they don't generally invent new ways of going about their business. Apes know how to crack nuts with rocks but even given the right materials they are unlikely to build a nutcracker. Humans are not so constrained. We can see fungi and imagine penicillin. We can also discover how to split an atom and imagine a firestorm over Hiroshima. For better or worse we have demonstrated a capacity to realise what we conceive. Our sociability has further assisted our tool making. The development of language, especially in inscribed forms, has allowed us to pass on technical

knowledge and create machines and methods that improve productive capacity by deploying the power of cooperative effort (the sailing ship, the steam engine, the generation and distribution of electricity, the factory, telephony, the computer).

Each new breakthrough in productive capacity has created new conditions which make possible new discoveries, new knowledge and new applications. These conditions, or preconditions, are both technical and social. As clever as Larry Page and Sergey Brin undoubtedly are at algorithms, their maths genius alone did not lead them to the idea of Google. For that development they needed a world of universal or near universal access to electricity, the computer chip and telephony. They also needed the impetus of production and commerce integrated on a truly global scale, where the ever-increasing speed and scale of capital circulation called for universal and instant access to information.

In tracing the history of technological advance, the general level of science and industry cannot be treated separately from the way our societies are organised to produce what we require. If we can say that the steam engine 'produced' industrial capitalism, it is equally true to say that industrial capitalism and its drive for raw materials and markets made possible the development of the steam locomotive, the steam ship and their associated transport infrastructures. Militarised competition between blocs of capital organised into nation states has been a further catalyst for new machines.

Though humanity has not benefitted from the invention of nuclear submarines or V2 rockets, other innovations, such as radar, have been more benign. Empire rivalry also gave us tinned food, originally developed to sustain naval crews over long voyages.

Technological innovation both precipitates and springs from continuous social reorganisation. Until agricultural land was parcelled into holdings larger than the family plot, no-one thought to invent the tractor. Once invented, however, tractors became a rationale for even greater concentration of land ownership. Where social intercourse is for the most part limited to finite networks within the boundaries of the clan or district, one does not need Facebook to keep well-informed and in touch. As Facebook becomes available, on the other hand, it invariably adds a new social dynamic to tightly bounded communities, loosening the bonds of traditional authority.

While we can say that technology expresses humanity's desire to minimise necessary labour, this is true only in the abstract. The claim assumes that humanity has always been a collective subject – a 'we' – comprising a multitude of individual humans of equal agency, equally controlling their destinies. This was a dubious proposition even before the rise of class society. In early human groups, the physically strong invariably dominated the weak. Equality declined appreciably once increases in human productivity created a volume of

material goods in excess of the immediate needs of the group.

This development allowed a section of the population to be freed from the necessity to labour themselves, laying the basis for the physically dominant to appropriate what they needed from those who remained productive. Class society was born. From that point onwards and despite subsequent technologically-driven improvements in productivity, part of every toiler's working day has been spent producing involuntarily for the benefit of someone else. In slave societies, the tools and the very bodies of the toilers were owned by members of the appropriating class. Under European feudalism, peasants could own or control the necessary equipment and even some land but were compelled by force and custom to contribute a portion of their output to the local aristocracy and the church.

Capitalists liberated the toilers from bondage to any one lord or master but in the process stripped them of ownership of all means of production, leaving them no choice other than to sell their one remaining resource, their capacity to work – their labour power – in exchange for the wage-equivalent of the means to live. Toilers were legally free to work for any employer and but were not free to work for none.

Once hired, a worker now laboured with employers' technology on employers' time. Calculated as an hourly average over the total working day, the wage paid to the employee appeared to compensate him or her in full for their toil. In truth, it was a sum expressing only the monetary value of the goods and services required to keep the toiler and her or his dependents functioning at a certain material and social standard. Value produced each day in excess of this necessary labour time legally belonged to the employer. This was indeed a new twist on an old swindle. As Ellen Meiksons Wood has pointed out, under capitalism, for the first time in history the expropriation of surplus labour from the toilers was integrated into the heart of the production process itself.[16] Workers were (and are) robbed on the job, every day.

As in previous social systems, capitalism was founded on the imperative of providing for a ruling group whose members did not perform necessary labour themselves. But the rulers' struggle to maintain their privileges took on a new complexion and intensity under capitalism. Just as expropriation was brought into the production process, so too the rivalry between different members of the ruling group was settled to a greater extent than ever on the battleground of productivity. The survival of each capitalist enterprise came to depend on its ability to expand surplus value at a higher rate and quantity than every other enterprise in the same field. Consequently, while no capitalist worth his or her salt personally went without, most of the surplus value, realised as money profit through the sale of the goods and services produced, had to be reinvested in new and better

productive capacity. Unless the enterprise continually found ways to sell its products at artificially inflated prices or produce items cheaper than its competitors, it lost market share and eventually perished or was taken over.

This lent a dynamic edge to the system. Though capitalist firms have historically been reluctant to invest in research and development themselves, they have always exhibited a willingness to adopt technological advances pioneered elsewhere.[17] New technology has played a big part in capitalists' efforts to maintain the upper hand over both labour and each other. More efficient machines reduce the time required to earn the wage equivalent of the socially-defined necessities of life, thus increasing the proportion of labour time going into surplus value when the duration of the working day remains unchanged. This in turn reduces the labour required. Steam-powered looms cheapened the cost of textiles and clothes for everyone. But they also infamously destroyed the livelihoods of handloom weavers. One hundred boys and girls operating power looms could produce the equivalent amount of cloth in one week as 2000 skilled manual weavers. Thousands were plunged into starvation.

Similarly, in the 1960s containerisation massively reduced shipping costs, placing cheaper goods within financial reach of workers everywhere. Yet the benefits were not evenly shared. OECD manufacturing jobs disappeared as manufacturing companies, now able to discount shipping as a significant cost factor, began moving their operations to where labour was cheaper. According to *The Economist*, containers 'boosted globalisation more than all the trade agreements in the past 50 years put together.'[18] The other group to lose were wharfies. In 1965 dock labour could move 1.7 tonnes of cargo per hour; five years later they were loading 30 tonnes in an hour. This huge leap in productivity led to mass redundancy. While global shipping volumes increased by 600 per cent from 1950 to 1973, the number of registered longshoremen on America's East Coast dropped by over two-thirds. In the UK, the number of dockworkers fell from over 70,000 to under 10,000 between the early 1960s and the late 80s.[19]

Under capitalism, then, workers have a distorted relationship with technology. Rather than a resource to liberate us from the labour necessary for our material and social sustenance, freeing up time for us to indulge our passion for dancing, wood-carving, Hegelian philosophy and re-runs of *Faulty Towers*, rather than unencumbered and free instruments for augmenting our existing abilities, new workplace technology confronts us instead as a source of anxiety, a threat to our very means of survival. This will always be so while we rely principally on a wage to make ends meet and capitalists deploy labour-replacing technology principally to boost profit.

Organised labour's orthodox response to this dilemma has been to pursue full employment, supplemented by a welfare state funded by progressive taxation and income from state enterprises. The modern Labor Party's neo-liberal version is private sector jobs growth above a rather flimsy ('targetted') social safety net. 'Jobs, jobs, jobs', is Labor's mantra, insists Bill Shorten. It matters not if the jobs are insecure, degrading, mind-numbing or inherently dangerous, or that they are in industries that damage the planet, produce war machines or put some of our most creative minds to work convincing the rest of us to buy crap from this capitalist rather than that one. At the end of the working week, it's not the job that matters, it's the pay.

In practice, except in periods of deep economic crisis such as the Great Depression, Labor both old and new has relied mainly on capitalism's own dynamic to generate new sources of employment, even as old sectors and occupations disappeared. Over the long term, this strategy has worked. While new technology has destroyed jobs, it has also created new opportunities. As trains and cars gained popularity, stable hands, farriers, saddlers, carriage makers and horse shit collectors were replaced by navvies, fettleers, auto workers, oil drillers, refinery workers and engine mechanics. The telephone put telegraphers out of work and created telemarketers and call centre operators. Computers replaced spreadsheet clerks with analysts, programmers and systems administrators. There is usually, of course, a disjuncture between old and new. For the individuals made redundant, the consequences can be catastrophic, even fatal. It is typically others who pick up the new jobs.

### **Regaining Our Plundered Powers**

In a nutshell, the problem is that through a long historical process involving countless bitter struggles between producers and appropriators, the former have lost control of the machinery of production and distribution. The machines are owned by capitalists. Although still mere instruments of labour, their use value is now subordinated to the task of producing items with exchange value. They exist as functioning machines only insofar as they are capital, discrete aggregations of past labour privately controlled and brought together with living labour to produce yet more capital. When they cease to perform this function (during periods of overproduction or when superseded, for example) they are discarded, regardless of how useful they might still be. Conversely, when they improve productivity by minimising the necessary input of living labour, they are deployed extensively at the cost of employment opportunities for workers. This lack of control by workers over the machinery of work has left them estranged from the labour experience and condemned to a perpetual state of uncertainty.

From Marx onwards, the revolutionary wing of the socialist movement has placed this issue of control – or the lack of it – at the centre of its program. Stripped of our tools, forced to sell our creative powers to a boss, we

lose sovereignty over even our basic physical and mental capacities for the duration of each working week. As Terry Eagleton has put it, 'One of the goals of socialism ... is to return to the body its plundered powers...' [20] For socialists, liberation from wage labour and capitalism requires the producing class – the workers – to expropriate the expropriators, to seize back control of productive capacity and bring it under the direct democratic control of society at large. Only then will all the equipment, techniques and systems of production revert to their role as simple tools, where they will either serve in 'the free realisation of [our] sensory and spiritual powers as enjoyable ends in themselves', or as means to liberate us altogether from the more inherently unpleasant, mundane and dangerous roles. [21]

### **The Shortcomings of Dunlop's Postwork Politics**

It is on this question of control that Dunlop's postwork position falls short. Faced with generalised technological redundancy, we should, argues Dunlop (p.208), seek 'to take control of this process, to embrace it as a form of liberation'. Notice that it is the 'process' of labour replacement, not the machines, that we should aspire to control. What he is really referring to here are the consequences of labour replacement, the process by which humans are plunged into poverty and misery by machines destroying their means of income. This subtle analytical move allows Dunlop to conceptualise his project as a transformation purely in the realm of distribution – the 'distributionist model' (p.202) he calls it at one point. Once this shift is made, automated production in its current social form ceases to be a problem. It is simply something that happens, a benign humming machine in the background, operating without input from the ex-working majority. Indeed, in Dunlop's account, production in a postwork world often appears to take on a life of its own, devoid of *any* human input. Take, for instance, his formulation in the following passage. The postwork position, he writes (p.206):

'is a long-term strategy for moving consciously and meaningfully towards a future where work in the form of paid employment is no longer central, and where the wealth generated by the increasing productivity enabled by various forms of technological advancement is distributed democratically, not simply on the basis of market power.'

The market is de-fanged by democracy, whereas wealth generation continues on its merry way, untouched by any human intervention, somehow 'enabled' by technology. The language of technological determinism which Dunlop rightly criticises elsewhere in the book quietly reappears here as a means to demarcate production as a realm beyond the scope of political struggle.

As conceptualised in *Why the Future is Workless*, then, the postwork project would have us forgo the struggle for mastery of the robots, opting instead to circumvent capitalism's work conundrum by effectively leaving capitalism to the capitalists. Humanity's working masses

would develop new ways of living outside and parallel to a world of automated production.

To access the productivity benefits of automation and artificial intelligence without actually controlling the machines, such a society would require an interface between consumers and the world of capitalist production. This is where the minimum income scheme comes in. This is where the 'process' is controlled. Presumably the income would be paid by the state from taxes on the corporations running the robots. This income would allow people to purchase what they needed from the goods and services offered by the capitalists. If a person wanted a higher standard of material comfort than allowed for by the minimum income they would have to find an employer with a wage paying job on offer.

Economically and politically, this plan cannot liberate us. With no surplus value from living labour to appropriate, corporations that manufacture the robots or own the intellectual property in the technology design will rely for their profits on selling or licensing (a form of rent-taking) their wares to other capitalists at prices higher than the technology's value. This inflated capital cost is transferred to the consumer goods produced by the technology. Although the technology allows the second group of capitalists to make large volumes of consumer goods at a low unit cost, they too must rely on selling their goods above value to realise a profit. But the market for these goods will be limited by the fixed and modest incomes of the UBI-dependent buyers. The problem is compounded by the fact that this consumer income derives not from new value produced by new expenditure of labour power but from a tax on capital. Consumption is maintained or expanded only at the expense of the rate of profit or through an increase in personal debt. There is no doubt that this system would be better for the majority than the dog-eat-dog neoliberal alternative, but it would still be prone to the kinds of economic crises that plague our lives now.

Politically, the postwork position presupposes a state that can impose the minimum income scheme on capitalists, and increase the rate of tax on capital if the postwork majority deems it warranted. For Dunlop, this task is eminently possible. It is primarily a matter of 'reimagining the role of the state,' of 'recognising that the state is able to shape the circumstances where events and technologies unfold, and that being able to influence governments therefore is central to any version of a better future.' (p.208)

Influencing governments is one thing; governments imposing the popular political will on capitalism is quite another. Every capitalist would of course be happy for every other capitalist to pay more to boost consumption; none, however, is ever keen to contribute themselves. As Kevin Rudd discovered when he attempted a modest minerals resources rent tax, no state under capitalism can simply legislate over the top of corporate interests without serious resistance, even when the legislation

serves to benefit capital as a whole. Faced with a proposal as radical as Dunlop's version of the basic income scheme, the corporate blowback would be cyclonic.

Dunlop offers no suggestions on how corporate resistance could be countered. His silence on this fundamental strategic point reveals either a deep naivety about the existing state as a potential force for radical transformation, or a refusal to confront the political implications of his own program. In his defence one could argue he is simply putting the case for a UBI scheme as a way to stimulate debate, without concern for the strategic finer points. But he himself recognises that his intervention is thoroughly political. If our future is, as Dunlop rightly claims, a matter of politics, it matters a lot what the politics are. To propose that we can embrace worklessness while relying on existing state institutions to extract what we need from capitalist production is a strategic choice. It just so happens that the strategy is deeply flawed. In Dunlop's postwork future, we might escape the alienation of waged work into a life of free labour, but we would face either a primitive hand-to-mouth existence or a life still dominated by the crisis-prone and destructive tendencies of capitalism.

From the entire history of our struggles we must conclude that we cannot liberate ourselves from want and capitalism without usurping control of the principal resources of production and bringing them under popular governance. And we cannot settle this issue in our favour by relying on the existing state, no matter how it might be reimagined. Kevin Rudd's defeat is hardly the most spectacular example of a regime falling foul of corporate interests. From Allende in Chile, to Chavez in Venezuela and Tsipras in Greece, we have seen what the political, economic and military forces of capitalism are capable of if governments threaten the prerogatives of the profit-makers. The liberal democratic state as a set of institutions, moreover, is totally ill-designed for extending popular control to productive assets. It serves in fact to maintain the fiction that politics and the economy are separate spheres and that democracy's only legitimate domain is parliament and a populace constituted as voting citizens. Even when economic enterprises are state-run, workers within the enterprise have no direct role in decision-making. At most, they might win the right to be consulted about a limited range of operational matters, and even then, only after management has set the agenda.

To challenge capitalist interests in any fundamental fashion, therefore, we would need to build mass extra-parliamentary movements which can support themselves in a material sense while they struggle to form new institutions that can prevail over capitalist power. A movement of the jobless or a movement based on refusing work, while welcome, would lack the necessary organisational coherence, material means to sustain itself and political trajectory to take up the issue of control at

the sites of production and distribution. Paradoxically, only a movement drawing on the material resources and still-considerable industrial power of employed workers could deliver on the promise of the postwork program. The strategic withdrawal of labour and the determined occupation by workers and their allies of the places of employment and corporate decision-making will challenge employers' power far more effectively than will a general refusal to be employed. If employed workers managed to build such a movement, it is possible that employers would support a universal basic income as an alternative to losing everything. But in that situation, why would we want to settle for merely taxing them?

### **Fighting for Jobs, Fighting for Control**

While a universal basic income is problematic as an anti-capitalist solution to technological unemployment, the concept is still valuable. It is useful as a demand to ameliorate the effects of unemployment within capitalism, irrespective of the causes. Conducted at a national or preferably transnational level, such a campaign could unite workers against the global wage race to the bottom, and counter the rise of nationalism and racism by drawing attention to the systemic causes of income insecurity. As Dunlop and others have argued, the demand for a UBI also highlights the fact that most of the essential work of social reproduction is performed in the home without pay, predominantly by women. A campaign for a UBI thus has the potential to unite paid and unpaid workers and challenge deeply ingrained sexist divisions of labour.

Beyond serving these important goals, and perhaps most fundamentally, a radically-formulated UBI campaign would pose an ideological challenge to the 'common sense' notion that remunerated service to a boss – a 'fair day's work for a fair day's pay' – is a primary measure of human worth and the ultimate goal of organised labour. As Dunlop points out, the very concept of the UBI allows us to imagine an alternative to the straitjacket of waged work.

Such a campaign, however, would have to be conducted on a broad scale alongside, rather than as an alternative to, local struggles over technological threats to jobs. So long as wages are workers' primary means of leading a comfortable life, they have every right to defend themselves against technological redundancy. No worker facing unemployment should be expected to pin their hopes on the success of a UBI campaign.

How we defend ourselves against technological unemployment in the here and now is a pressing strategic question. Outright refusal to allow new machines has rarely been successful. Despite the rightwing mythology, the Luddites who broke machinery in the 1810s to protect their livelihoods were neither mindless nor without hope. They were determined fighters for their way of life. But the odds were against them and they lost. Labour history ever since has been punctuated by similar defeats. In the 1930s, absolute opposition by the New South Wales

meatworkers' union to the first version of the chain system of meat processing ended in a rout. Fifty years later Britain's Fleet Street print unions refused to negotiate with Murdoch over new printing technology and were eventually locked out when a new plant was opened at Wapping in East London. Outside the gates, they had no hope of influencing the terms under which the new machines were introduced. Around the same time, telephonists in Australia fought militantly against automatic telephone exchanges but were eventually swept aside. Ironically, the staunch resistance of these workers simply confirmed for Telecom managers that the role of managing would be so much easier without belligerent self-aware humans operating the switchboards.

In some instances, such as with the case of the telephonists, new technology represents a zero-sum game; the machines automate everything, leaving no place for flesh and blood labour. In most cases, however, new machines replace some workers but not all. The erosion of jobs tends to be incremental. And seldom does it happen without warning. Unions usually have time to plan and mobilise. Rather than opposing the machines outright, they should campaign for the productivity benefits to be shared and negative consequences minimised. Such campaigns would in fact complement a broader political struggle for a UBI because with each local skirmish, pressure would increase on employers to look to the state to socialise the compensation costs of settling workers' claims.

Campaign demands should be designed to limit job loss, minimise the suffering of workers left unemployed, improve the pay, hours and conditions of remaining workers, and strengthen the union's bargaining position. Measures could include:

- Limiting redundancies by reducing hours of work without loss of pay.
- Improving pay to match the improved productivity.
- Removing the blight of casualisation by negotiating permanency for all remaining employees.
- Extending union coverage to any new or reclassified roles.
- Strengthening and extending provisions requiring employers to consult unions over operational change.
- Prohibiting the use of technology for surveillance and performance monitoring of workers.
- For those who wish to leave, redundancy payouts with substantial funding for re-training, and wages and employer superannuation contributions maintained until retirement.
- Employers to meet relocation costs for workers moving to new jobs or training opportunities.

- Higher corporate taxes to fund an expansion of state investment in green energy and other socially-useful industries, where workers made redundant elsewhere are given employment priority.

For a union movement in the doldrums, these are bold demands. Yet in another sense, they are the stuff of traditional labour struggle, mere grist to the mill of conventional trade unionism. It is precisely in this combination of conventionality and boldness, this convergence of the reasonable and the far-reaching, that these demands have the potential to revitalise unionism, reshaping it as both an effective means of defence and a movement that allows us to see beyond the battleground of capitalism. Behind every such demand and every such campaign lies a fundamental question: Why is it that tools which can benefit all of humanity are employed primarily in the service of profit? Behind this, an even more important question: Does it have to be so? Revolutionary socialists have long said no. The wage labour system was not the starting point of history and need not be its end. It was the magnificent Joe Strummer who reminded us that the future is unwritten. It is up to the anti-capitalist Left to keep this message alive.

Writing our own future requires an incisive understanding of the past and present. Marx made the point that 'it took both time and experience before the workpeople learnt to distinguish between machinery and its employment by capital, and to direct their attacks, not against the material instruments of production, but against the mode in which they are used.'<sup>[22]</sup> Each generation must learn this afresh. To stop the Fourth Industrial Revolution throwing millions more into permanent poverty, to unlock the full human potential of the robots and AI tools, workers must again find a way to direct their attacks against the mode in which these machines are used. As we take up this challenge, we can only speculate on what might happen, while fighting as hard as we can to make things happen the way we want them to. But one thing is certain. Leaving the machines in the hands of capitalists indefinitely will be a disaster for us and the planet.

[1] Quoted in *The Australian Financial Review*, 27 February 2017, p. 19.

[2] World Economic Forum, 'The Future of Jobs: Employment, Skills and Workforce Strategy for the Fourth Industrial Revolution', January 2016, p. 10.

[3] WEF, 'The Future of Jobs', p. 11.

[4] WEF, 'The Future of Jobs', p. 15.

[5] WEF, 'The Future of Jobs', p. 14.

[6] Tyler Gaskill, 'Do Androids Dream of Quality?', *Quality Progress*, June 2016, p. 11.

[7] R.E. Cook, 'Providing Value through Automation in the Mineral Processing Industry', *Mining Engineering*, November 2015, p. 38.

- [8] T.X. Hammes, 'Will Technological Convergence Reverse Globalization?', *Strategic Forum*, National Defence University, July 2016, p. 4.
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- [11] Robert Bogue, 'What Future for Humans in Assembly?', *Assembly Automation*, Vol. 34, No. 4, 2015, p. 308.
- [12] Ian Herbert, Aravindhan Dhayalan and Andy Scott, 'The Future of Professional Work: Will You be Replaced or Will You be Sitting Next to a Robot?', *Management Services*, Summer 2016, p. 24.
- [13] <https://www.domain.com.au/news/the-future-of-construction-bricklaying-robot-sam100s-wall-building-prowess-20170317-gv0e42/>.
- [14] *The Australian Financial Review*, 27 February 2017.
- [15] Other radical contributors include Nick Srnicek & Alex Williams, *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work*, revised edn (London: Verso, 2016); Paul Mason, *PostCapitalism: A Guide to Our Future* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2016); Peter Frase, *Four Futures: Life After Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2016); Guy Rundle, *A Revolution in the Making: 3D Printing, Robots and the Future* (South Melbourne: Affirm Press, 2014).
- [16] Ellen Meiksons Wood, *Democracy Against Capitalism: Renewing Historical Materialism* (London: Verso, 1995), pp. 41-2.
- [17] Even in the era of neoliberalism, many technological breakthroughs have in fact been pioneered by publicly-funded state agencies. See Mariana Mazzucato, *The Entrepreneurial State: Debunking Public vs Private Myths in Risk and Innovation* (London: Anthem, 2013).
- [18] 'Why Have Containers Boosted Trade So Much?', *The Economist*, 22 May 2013.
- [19] John Tomlinson, 'History and Impact of the Intermodal Shipping Container', [http://www.johntomlinson.com/docs/history\\_and\\_impact\\_of\\_shipping\\_container.pdf](http://www.johntomlinson.com/docs/history_and_impact_of_shipping_container.pdf).
- [20] Terry Eagleton, *Materialism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), p. 80.
- [21] Eagleton, *Materialism*, p. 76.
- [22] Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume 1* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1954), p. 404.

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