

Special Issue on Workers and Obsolescence

Aaron Benanav and Lori Flores

Syracuse University and Stony Brook University

In recent years, the question of what labor—and which laborers—will be deemed obsolete in the near future has hung over our heads and even manifested in the motions and routines of our daily lives. When we use the self-checkout lanes in stores, engage with ATM or banking kiosks, and silently order food on touch-screen machines or smartphones, we might wonder what happened to the people who used to work those jobs. Customer service call center workers are being noticeably replaced by chat-bots. Taxi and truck drivers are frequently warned about the advent of self-driving vehicles. In fields, orchards, and vineyards, experiments to replace farmworkers with drones or robot pickers and planters are tentative but ongoing.¹ Alex Rivera's 2008 sci-fi film *Sleep Dealer*, in which growers use robots in the US while workers in Mexico manipulate the robots' motions, plays on the fantasy of employing migrant labor while making migration itself obsolete.

While it might feel particularly pronounced now, worker obsolescence is not a contemporary phenomenon; history reveals many episodes of workers losing their jobs to technological and economic “modernization” from the early 19th century onwards. In fact, the intensity of job churn, or of new occupations coming into existence as older occupations disappear, was likely faster in past eras of technological change as compared to the present.² Agricultural work evaporated with the coming of threshers and harvesters; typesetters and newspaper printers were automated out of existence; elevator and switchboard operators faded away; and longshoremen's working rhythms changed dramatically with global containerization. The pieces in this special issue cover different geographical areas and time periods and bring together many different research fields.³ These articles feature histories of technology, of labor and workplace struggles, of the global economy, of neoliberalism, of unions and their adaptation to changing conditions, of immigration, and of racism both in work and among workers. The articles feature a mixture of methods, too: archival, interview-based, literary analysis, and so on.

Myths of Obsolescence

Several threads run through the texts. First, there is the history of the *myth* of obsolescence, which has been used time and again to threaten workers with impending replacement and to discourage them from organizing to improve their current conditions. Work supposedly destined for obsolescence—in meatpacking, on assembly lines, and in taxi services—usually does not disappear as promised, even if it changes shape in significant ways. In other words, the implementation of new technologies often results in job losses, but more rarely in the wholesale destruction of job categories. The myth of

automation then serves as a screen, or a trick, which is intended to demoralize people and to convince them not to fight for better wages or for a greater degree of control over how new technologies are implemented in workplaces.

Eileen Boris's "Never Obsolete: Private Household Workers and The Transformation of Domestic Work" explores the "ideology of obsolescence" in the case of paid household labor. In the middle decades of the twentieth century, commentators claimed that new household technologies, including washing machines, dishwashers, and vacuums, would render hired help obsolete. Predictions to that effect dampened enthusiasm for labor-law reform, which had routinely excluded domestic workers from job protections in most countries. The number of household servants did decline in the latter half of the twentieth century, but domestic service itself failed to disappear. In fact, as levels of economic inequality rose in the 1980s and 1990s—alongside women's labor force participation rates—the number of domestic servants increased in many countries. Organizing efforts finally resulted in an International Labor Organization (ILO) convention concerning the rights of domestic workers but not until 2011. Boris argues that discourses of obsolescence played a major role in slowing these efforts down.

Jason Resnikoff's "The Myth of Black Obsolescence" traces a similar, mythic history, in this case of racist claims that African Americans were the ones who would soon find their labor rendered technologically obsolete. Black obsolescence was supposed to free white America from its race problem, that is, its dependence on degraded Black labor. The question of where Black laborers would go, once they were no longer needed, was hotly and ominously debated. It is certainly true that Black workers were excluded from skilled jobs and relegated to the hardest and most dangerous tasks in every era of American history. Technologists described their work as unskilled, routine, and essentially mindless—and thus easily automatable (Resnikoff provocatively argues that periodically recurring discourses of Black obsolescence provided the basis for broader automation discourses). In reality, while mechanization did transform the tasks Black people performed, for example in meatpacking and on factory floors, this work never disappeared. Fighting to improve working conditions was therefore all the more important.

Edward Brudney's "Every time, they took more from us': Privatization and Telecommunications Workers in Rural Argentina, 1969–2000" shows that neoliberal discourses relied on a similar set of false promises as compared to automation discourses. Privatization was supposed to provide immense benefits to consumers, in part by ignoring the needs and input of workers as mere obstacles on the road to modernization. Brudney's article begins with a poignant anecdote of Telefónica workers watching as the machinery they had worked with for decades was thrown out of office windows and onto scrap heaps. Contrary to studies that examine the effects of privatization and neoliberalism with an aerial view on the global, national, or even city scale, Brudney zooms in closer to analyze how individuals who had built their lives, careers, and personal pride around working for a national company felt—literally—disconnected from their expertise and labor. Workers' previous expertise went unrecognized, and efforts to retrain them for system changes were not undertaken. As it turned out, disconnection also came to characterize the company's relationship with its customers, who began experiencing long wait times and shoddy repairs

when they could no longer rely on the less “modern” and “efficient” but previously much more invested Telefónica employees.

Struggles for Control

Other articles in this special issue focus less on the myths, threats, and promises of job obsolescence and more on histories of workers’ mass actions in response to layoffs. In powerful rebuttals to claims that they were obsolete, workers often went on strike and some even took over and self-managed abandoned factories. In “Racialized Obsolescence: Multinational Corporations, Labor Conflict, and the Closure of the Imperial Typewriter Company in Britain, 1974–1975” **Matthew Myers** explores a 14-week strike at Leicester’s Imperial Typewriter Company, after which the company rapidly closed. Arguing that it was the workers’ action that led to the shuttering, rather than the obsolescence of typewriters themselves, Myers contends the company could not tolerate the puncturing of the racialized, hierarchical structures that managers used to intimidate vulnerable workers. Imperial’s decision to transfer its production to other countries served as “the typewriting on the wall”: other companies and industries began to engage in similar union-busting and outsourcing tactics during the 1970s. The author argues a diverse but racially divided British working class was unable to organize sufficiently strong and united collective action against this global restructuring of labor, which also included an uptick in the use of guest workers. Racial tensions continue to cut through the working class, shaping differences in the experience of technological threats as well as pathways to and limits on class unity.

In “Mechanical Harvesting, Globalization, and the Fate of Citrus Farmworkers in Florida and São Paulo, 1965–1985,” **Terrell Orr** examines a case in which agricultural firms used and then abandoned threats of mechanization to quell workers’ discontent. During the 1960s, Florida’s citrus industry seemed poised to shift to mechanization and displace thousands of Black and white farmworkers who had been striking for better conditions. Yet by the 1980s, the industry had abandoned mechanization and oranges remained hand-picked. Orr offers three reasons why mechanization did not come to fruition. The machines themselves had design flaws and were prone to breakdowns; Florida growers had already been outpaced by orange-juice competitors in Brazil, where wages were much lower; and finally and most importantly, employers in the US South began to hire vulnerable migrant workers from Mexico, Guatemala, and Haiti and pay them substandard wages. Of course, farmworkers’ bodies break down as much as (if not more than) machines, but Florida growers simply banked on a bottomless reservoir of cheap foreign labor. With transnational research, Orr shows how citrus workers in both Florida and Brazil struggled against similar deprivations but were ultimately defeated—not by the use of new machines, but rather by exploiting divisions among workers.

Finally, using interviews with former workers as part of his source base, **Sérgio Dias Branco** examines a historical episode in which workers not only went on strike, but also took over an abandoned company and ran it, for many years, as a worker-owned firm. “Resistance and Resilience: ‘The Nothing Factory’ and the Workers’ Self-Management of Fateleva” uses Pedro Pinho’s 2017 partially fictionalized film

A Fábrica de Nada to open a discussion of a real, historical worker action in Portugal. Fortis Ascensores (later Fateleva) was a subsidiary of the US-based Otis Elevator Company before workers made moves to take over the company in the course of Portugal's Carnation Revolution. The film focuses on the conflict with managers at the time of the workers' takeover of a plant, which the film fictionally transposes from the revolutionary ferment of the mid-1970s to the global financial crisis of 2008/9. The film has less to say about the self-management of the firm after the takeover. In the 1990s, worker-managers had to take defensive maneuvers to remain operational in the face of European market integration. Then, in the 2000s, the company fell prey to a wave of industry-wide consolidation.

Myers, Orr, and Branco describe how episodes of and rationales for workers' militancy were confounded in the face of plant closures, globalization, industrial restructuring, and deindustrialization. Plant closures are often blamed on obsolescence; the reality is typically more complicated. Factories often "run away" from workers' militancy at home and towards less organized, less protected, and cheaper labor abroad. Yet over the past 40 years, the process of industrial relocation and restructuring continued unabated even as workers' militancy—measured by work days lost to strikes—sharply declined.

Workers without Work

A last set of articles focuses on what happens when work disappears and workers are forced to adapt to new and more uncertain environments. Since they typically lack savings or access to other forms of (profit- or rent-based) income, most workers need to work in order to live. When the jobs on which they had previously relied for wages disappear, workers have no choice but to find new ways to sell their labor or its simple products to make ends meet. That often means taking low-wage, temporary, and/or dangerous jobs, for which workers shoulder a greater burden of the associated risks of accidents, injury, or loss of employment. Insofar as they have passed laws attenuating labor protections—or have failed to institute these protections in the first place—governments in many countries have contributed to the expansion of precarious work.

In that vein, **Phil Neel's** "Broken Circle - Premature Deindustrialization, Chinese Capital Exports, and the Stumbling Development of a New Industrial Territorial Complex in Tanzania" considers what happens when work not only disappears, but fails to appear in the first place. Many readers will find it surprising to learn that the Chinese economy has been deindustrializing for a decade. In other words, the share of the Chinese workforce employed in manufacturing is shrinking. Where are factories running to now? Some analysts point to East Africa as a likely location for low-wage manufacturing and assembly labor. However, Neel shows that, while levels of industrial production are increasing in East African countries like Tanzania, industrial employment has failed to expand. The result—in a pattern repeated across much of the world—is that most workers remain stuck in insecure employment in the country's vast informal sector. How can workers adapt and fight for improved conditions in the absence of stable work?

Finding answers has been made more difficult insofar as the disappearance of work has also weakened the very organizations that purport to represent workers'

interests. As employment has changed in the face of both globalization and technological change, labor unions have done a better job protecting existing members than in adding new members to union rolls. The result has been to sharpen cleavages between “insiders” and “outsiders,” that is, workers with strong job protections and high wages as against workers with few protections and low wages.⁴ For a while, this strategy helped unions retain their legitimacy. However, as insiders have shrunk relative to outsiders, unions have increasingly faced broader crises of legitimacy. Such crises are all the more stark in environments in which politicians come to see labor unions as obstacles to competitiveness-enhancing labor market reforms and industrial restructurings.

Emilio Caja’s “Evolving or disappearing? Italian trade unions in the 2010s” deals with this topic through the lens of Italian trade unions, which were once highly militant organizations. Now, they face the same problems as unions in many other countries: declining unionization rates, and the abandonment of large sections of the workforce to precarious work, resulting in a loss of legitimacy. Facing these conditions, Italian unions joined a wider political alliance in support of a universal basic income. As Caja explains based on interviews with trade union activists, the unions saw support for UBI as a way to extend protections to people for whom work-based protections did not reach. However, in line with their commitment to work as a form of social integration, these same unions ended up supporting work activation as a condition of receiving the basic income (thus requiring people to try to get jobs in order to receive income support). In a country without minimum wage laws, these contradictory demands seemed to imply, directly, that precarious employment would spread across more of the workforce.

Conclusion

A special issue of *ILWCH* on the history of workers and obsolescence can, by its nature, only cover a small portion of topics within this variegated framework. We would have liked to include additional articles examining past times and places where workers organized and won a greater degree of control over the implementation of technologies in the workplace. Examples might have been found in the automobile industries in Sweden and Germany during the 1960s and 1970s.

We also would have wanted to include more histories of workers’ efforts to stop new technologies from being used to evade previously-won labor protections and rights. A pertinent, contemporary example would be the struggle of drivers and delivery workers to force rideshare platforms to treat their workers as employees rather than independent contractors. What are the historical precedents? At the same time, we might have emphasized contexts in which workers have fought not against, but rather in favor of the adoption of new technologies. Today, some workers’ organizations have joined climate-justice coalitions pushing for the adoption of green energy technologies in the context of just transitions. Again, what are the historical precedents?

At the same time, we feel the need to emphasize certain lacunae within this special issue, which was produced during the Coronavirus pandemic. Perhaps influenced by the pandemic’s effects on what were already highly unequal divisions of household labor and care work, some of our previously-selected women contributors could

not meet the timelines of this issue. The unfortunate result is gender disparity among our article authors, as well as an over-representation of Europe and Latin America as compared to Africa and Asia. The ILWCH editors, however, have tried to restore balance in gender representation by supplementing this special issue with a number of freestanding articles privileging women scholars' work.

Despite these limitations, we hope the texts in this issue will inspire thought and be a resource for scholars working on laborers and obsolescence in history and related social science fields.

Notes

1. Roman Moore Gerety, "Code Season: Farming Approaches an Inflection Point," *MIT Technology Review* Vol. 124 No. 1 (Jan/Feb 2021), 50-57.
2. Robert Atkinson and John Wu, "False Alarmism: Technological Disruption and the US Labor Market, 1850–2015," Information Technology and Innovation Foundation, 2017, <https://itif.org/publications/2017/05/08/false-alarmism-technological-disruption-and-us-labor-market-1850-2015/>.
3. However, see the conclusion, below, on regrettable omissions.
4. See Patrick Emmenegger, Silja Häusermann, Bruno Palier, and Martin Seeleib-Kaiser, eds. *The age of dualization: The changing face of inequality in deindustrializing societies*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.