

Transformation as Usual?

The meanings of a changing labour process for
Indiana aluminium workers

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Abstract ■ The present era of 'flexible accumulation' and crisis is widely seen to have engendered distinctive changes in the labour process. The analysis presented here explores the ways in which these transformations are experienced and absorbed by hourly wage workers at an aluminium plant in the United States. Of particular interest are the distinct meanings the workers attach to different managerial innovations; thus, the reordering of shift arrangements provokes worker response (and union action) that is quite different from the reaction inspired by the introduction of cooperative worker-management teams at the plant. Using classical Marxian analytical categories, it may be said that the current regimen of workplace control involves some combination of absolute and relative surplus value strategies. By disaggregating this mix of strategies, these workers' narratives help cast some light on the currently raging debate about whether or not we are living in an age of globalization and epochal change.

Keywords ■ capitalism ■ globalization ■ labour ■ management ■ Marxian economics ■ unions ■ United States

Ethnography as a method has much to contribute to our understanding of the ways in which the recent period of capitalist restructuring has transformed the labour process and refashioned labour politics. This article offers a view of how global shifts in the character of work are experienced in one location by analyzing a series of conversations with hourly wage workers at an Alcoa (Aluminium Company of America) manufacturing facility in southern Indiana. The discussion will focus on certain management practices that were being instituted at the time – allegedly to enhance the company's competitiveness in the world market – which were the source of a great deal of concern to Alcoa employees. The two managerial innovations that were debated most frequently by the workers were: first, the decision to generalize the application of the drop/rotating shift throughout the plant (so far, these work schedules had been in effect in a few departments), and the new constellation of workplace relationships that accompanied the introduction of the 'Total Quality Control' system.

The Alcoa plant in Indiana produces giant coils of metal which are then

shipped to the company's customers for use in the manufacture of aluminium beverage cans. It is a unionized workplace, and the workers that I spoke to fit the picture of what remains of traditional organized labour in this country: mostly white, mostly male, employed by a transnational corporation to carry out heavy industrial work based on classic Fordist techniques of production, increasingly driven against the wall in an era of de-industrialization and anti-union legislation.

The analysis presented here will consider the perceptions of these workers regarding the changes in their work lives, and the kinds of assumptions that underlie these perceptions. Based as it is on these narratives rather than on any examination of macroeconomic data regarding the processes they were referring to, the article cannot make claims about the significance or direction of the transformations in present-day capitalism. Thus, the ethnographic means employed here may not resolve the issue of whether or not these transformations can legitimately be termed 'globalization', a question that is insistently being debated among a section of the American Left (Du Boff and Herman, 1997; Henwood, 1997; Piven and Cloward, 1998a, 1998b; Sivanandan, 1997; Tabb, 1997a, 1997b; Wood, 1996, 1997a, 1997b, 1997c, 1998). However, such a perspective makes it possible to learn something about how particular dimensions of change are experienced and to speculate about why they might be so experienced. The assumptions and perceptions contained in these workers' narratives lead on to everyday resistances or everyday accommodations: historical change, it must be remembered, is attributable not only to large-scale processes, but is also coloured by such subaltern decisions.

The Alcoa workers usually managed to ground their discussion of these two managerial innovations within an understanding of the historical relationship between themselves and 'corporate America'. Their analysis of this relationship will emerge as we begin to look at their narratives. Before delving into these, however, it might be useful to review some of the premises of the literature on the changing character of labour control (Braverman, 1974; Burawoy, 1979a, 1979b; Edwards, 1979; Gutman, 1977; Montgomery, 1979, 1987). The social organization of the labour process in the United States is generally understood to have been shaped by the changing course of American capitalism in the 20th century. Most labour historians agree that the larger dynamics of the system – such as the rise of the large corporation, the growth of unions, periodic capitalist crises and the intervention of the state – have affected the nature of class struggle, and hence of workplace hierarchy.

When Frederick Taylor first published his ideas regarding scientific management at the start of the century, many American capitalists immediately tried to impose these routines on industrial workers. Scientific management proceeded by fragmenting work tasks to their simplest component parts and then assigning them to different workers to perform over and over again, paced according to unrelenting standards set by time-and-motion

studies. The resultant 'separation of conception from execution' (Braverman, 1974) led to the erosion of workers' traditional crafts skills and knowledge, and Taylorist supervision frequently generated fierce worker resistance. Corporations quickly learnt that hierarchical forms of labour control were ineffective if they were seen to be purely repressive; for instance, much before Taylorism, the Pullman strike of 1894 was seen to be directly related to the degree of control enjoyed by foremen over workers, in addition to wage issues. This led to the birth of the era of welfare capitalism, whereby betterment programmes were initiated by several major corporations while the needs of workers for the reduction of Taylorite work speed-up and reasonable supervision remained unmet. Thus, in 1914, Ford experimented with the \$5, eight-hour day for his assembly-line workers, while Rockefeller, after the Ludlow clashes between miners and the National Guard that took place in the same year, tinkered with 'industrial democracy', offering wage guarantees and fringe benefits, and rigidly defined grievance and appeals procedures. Fordism and Taylorism were not always strictly conjoined: it has been noted that scientific management was frequently eschewed by companies since it would have been at odds with the impression of welfarism that they were trying hard to project (Edwards, 1979). The Human Relations school was the true theoretical counterpart to this form of capitalist practice, with its themes of workplace harmony and cooperation.

The efficacy of company unions and welfare capitalism plummeted during the harsh decade of the 1930s, as corporations were forced to renege on their promises of relatively high wages and job security. As labour activism grew, there was a shift towards more structural forms of control, where 'rather than being exercised openly by the foreman, or supervisor, power was made invisible in the structure of work' (Edwards, 1979: 110). This could take the previously tried form of technical control, where the control mechanism was embedded in the technological structure of the firm, as in the widespread application of continuous-flow production. It could also manifest itself, however, as bureaucratic control: the 'managerial revolution' of the modern corporation. Fully honed only in the post-Second World War era, bureaucratic control establishes company policy as the basis for control, defines career trajectories for workers and management cadres, and institutionalizes the exercise of hierarchical power within the corporation.

Although particular strategies of labour control are associated with specific time periods, corporations have always used a mix of the approaches known at the time. Successive strategies may be tried and discarded, but they often leave a lasting imprint upon managerial practice. The workers' narratives presented in this article are centred around two managerial innovations which bear an unmistakable resemblance to bureaucratic control. As we shall see, however, there are also elements of older, atavistic forms of labour control that can be discerned in both new policies.

At the Alcoa plant in question, nearly 4000 employees come to work in three different shifts to keep the plant functioning 24 hours a day all through the year. A change in work schedules that has provoked much discussion among Alcoa workers has been the extension of the drop shift (also called the rotating shift) to various departments throughout the plant. The introduction of the drop shift prolongs the working day for the affected workers by eliminating the idea of the work week. Without a work week, the category of overtime work has been done away with, along with the possibility of overtime pay.

The new system works in the following manner: most Alcoa workers now go to work for 12 hours at a time, instead of the 8-hour 'straight' shifts of the past. Previously, there was a sharp distinction between the work week and the weekend, established as a result of past union struggles for a five-day week. The weekend was an off-duty 'own' time for the workers, and as such, commanded a higher price than the ordinary work week in the form of overtime compensation. This is no longer the case: workers are paid the same fixed wage for whatever day of the week they are scheduled to come in to work. Although the number of actual hours they work per month has not increased at all, the elimination of the work week substantially increases the number of work hours at regular pay that the company now has at its disposal. Finally, these 12-hour shifts that may span any of the seven days of the week are clumped together in a manner such that each worker is periodically left with a substantial block of 'off' days. The company has had to come up with a rather complicated arrangement of shift duration and rotating pattern in order to avoid violating various legal stipulations relating to maximum number of working hours, overtime payments and payments of night differentials.

An Alcoa employee explained his new working hours to me in the following manner:

I work four days, then off two; four, and then off three; four, and off seven. Every month you get seven straight days off. You work 12 hours out of 24 hours, you work 12 days out of 24. If you work a whole year, you only work six months.

Although it is by no means the universal reaction to these changes, they are usually experienced by the affected workers as unfair working conditions. One of the most vehement critics of the drop shift at Alcoa expressed his opposition to the new system in these terms:

They're taking away the Monday-through-Friday jobs and putting the guys on some kind of an alternate shift, to where they work all night. I have a theory about this.

I used to make a great living working Monday through Friday. When I wanted to make extra money – to go to Florida, Disney World, to trade cars or buy a new refrigerator – I could work weekends. That option was always there. I had a great life, made good money. I done things that upper middle-class people done, the guys that could go to Florida and stay in a big motel. Hell, I could go anywhere. I made good enough money to do that.

Okay. Alcoa sends you all this literature saying you're an Alcoan and we're glad to have you in the Alcoa family and all that stuff. See, this brainwash type thing. Then they put you on these drop shifts. You're working the weekend. You get one weekend a month off.

You don't go to your family reunions no more. Because you've got to work that weekend. Society's not going to plan everything around one weekend. The whole American society of playing is on the weekend. All your major baseball games, basketball games, football games is on the weekend. You have your weddings on the weekend, you have your family reunions on the weekend, you have your fish fries down at the river on the weekend. Everything is geared around the weekend in American society.

It gets to the point where your friends and people don't ask you no more, because you're working. They call and say Donnie you want to come to the fish fry this weekend? Man, I can't, I've got to work this weekend. It gets to the point – and it's happened to us – it gets to the point that they quit asking you, because you keep turning them down.

So what do you do? Alcoa's got you. What do you turn to when that happens? You turn to Alcoa; it's your whole life. And I really think these people sit back and think about things like that. If they can get you married to Alcoa, you are going to be a happy Alcoan. You're sold to them, you know.

He is raising two separate issues here: in the first place, the small degree of control that the individual Alcoa employee may have had over the amount of income that they could expect to make has been lost. This has clearly been a serious financial loss for many workers. The second issue is potentially more complicated and ambiguous, hinging on ideas of the relationship between work time and leisure time, and ultimately on the perception of time itself.¹ Thus, for exactly the same reasons that he condemns the drop shift, it could conceivably hold a great deal of appeal for many other Alcoa employees. As this same worker admits:

You work a whole year, you get six months off. That's what people are looking at. If you throw in your vacation time – and most guys get about five weeks off – you're only going to work four months and three weeks. That's what most people are looking at.

Judging from the collective response of the workers at this plant, that in fact, was not what most people were looking at. The actions taken by the union against these work schedules seem to imply that the majority of Alcoa workers were opposed to these shift changes. At the previous contract negotiations, there had been a bitter three-month strike. All other issues were resolved in a month and a half, but the union voted to stay on strike against the generalized application of drop shifts at the plant for another six weeks before giving up. Nearly every worker I spoke to predicted that the drop shift would be a key issue at the next contract talks.

The only individuals I met who seemed to regard the drop shift appreciatively were those who had never experienced the luxury of a five-day work week (in a very few departments at the plant, workers had always been scheduled to work for regular pay over weekends). One worker who had

spent many years doing the hot and arduous work of setting metal in the plant's potrooms felt that he had benefited from the wider application of the drop shift.

Most of them people was on straight shifts. For years and years, some people worked seven days a week for a whole year at a time and they made a lot of dollars. Then they cut a lot of overtime out, they put them on drop shifts, which . . . it created more jobs too, which is good. Like the department I'm in now, they created rotating shifts in it, and it created jobs that got me into that department. Which, if it wasn't for rotating shift, I wouldn't have been here, you know.

He went on to say, however, that some of these other workers had their incomes slashed by as much as \$8,000 to \$10,000 per year with the introduction of the drop shift, and that he could well understand their opposition to it. It is probably safe to say that, on the whole, individual workers' attitudes on the rotating shift were dictated by its immediate impact on their own lives, and that this impact was a financially adverse one for the majority of Alcoa employees.

In the language of Marxian political economy, the reorganization of shift arrangements that has been adopted at this plant may be best conceptualized as the latest move in the history of the attempts to increase absolute surplus value. This basically is a matter of extending the working day relative to the wage required to guarantee working-class reproduction.² This was done during the first Industrial Revolution by increasing the number of hours that factory workers would have to work each day. As described in the chapter on the length of the working day in *Capital*, this was an important site for struggle in the 19th century; and ultimately, social limits were set that would determine just how far such a process could go (Marx, 1977). A few decades later, the speed-up that accompanied the establishment of Fordist techniques also effectively led to the prolongation of the working day. Again, it was resisted; there were phenomenally high turnover rates at the places where this was instituted (Braverman, 1974). Gramsci's discussion of the 'psycho-physical reorientation' of European workers that was required by the processes of Fordism and Americanism points to the resistance to these techniques when they were transported to Europe (Gramsci, 1971). At Alcoa, without a work week, overtime work becomes obsolete, not to mention overtime pay. For the corporation, this negation of the idea of the work week does represent a surge in absolute surplus value. Again, the new policy becomes a site for battle: in much the same way that earlier attempts to step up the absolute surplus value had been greeted by workers in the past, the workers at Alcoa seemed determined to challenge these changes.

In spite of all the differences between those who were affected by the new work schedules and those who were not, there was noticeably greater clarity and agreement among workers on the subject of the drop shift as compared to the ambivalence they expressed towards the company-sponsored Total Quality Control (TQC) system. The TQC system involved the

setting up of a number of cooperative teams comprising management and blue-collar workers which were to be responsible for operations in their part of the plant. Workers were to share ideas about improving shop-floor performance with their management team-mates, and it was thought that a certain amount of workplace conflict would be resolved at the level of the team instead of requiring standard union-mediated grievance processes. A good deal of emphasis was placed on courteous and respectful behaviour between team-mates. Constant improvement in the quality of production was held up as the ultimate goal of the cooperative teams. Observers have noted that the 'team concept' – the general term for such schemes, used in the American auto industry where this form of labour control was first introduced (Parker and Slaughter, 1988) – displaces unions by fostering the illusion of worker participation in management. The Alcoa workers' collective response to the proposal was positive; the union, in fact, voted to accept the system while I was conducting these interviews. Individual workers' responses, however, seemed far less clear.

The TQC system at Alcoa seems designed to fit in with the classic descriptions of the 'just-in-time' production techniques that are seen by many writers to be replacing the earlier Fordist phase of capitalism. To recapitulate David Harvey's description of the production process that characterizes this transition:³ there is a shift away from the uniformity and standardization of the Fordist era, and towards flexible and small-batch production of a variety of product types (Harvey, 1989). In contrast to the large inventory holdings of the past, production is undertaken in limited quantities on a 'just-in-time' basis, and quality control becomes part of the process. The immediate detection and rectification of errors prevents the loss of production time that was common under the cumbersome older system of maintaining huge buffer stocks that concealed defects and errors until the last stages. Instead of the earlier emphasis on cost reduction through wage control, the new production process tries to cut costs by incorporating learning-by-doing in long-term planning. In terms of the labour process, this translates into an emphasis on 'on the job' learning and workers' co-responsibility, in place of the earlier stress on discipline and vertical hierarchy. Alcoa's TQC system is clearly a form of workplace control that is aimed at adapting to these new conditions.

In their pioneering study of the team concept, Parker and Slaughter list a number of features that characterize this style of industrial management (Parker and Slaughter, 1988; see also Parker and Slaughter, 1994). One of the basic moves made in a team concept contract is to establish the interchangeability of workers and the abolition of job classifications, which undermines the hard-won principle of seniority as the basis for advancement and transfer within a production unit. Also, every step of every job is defined in detail, and the smallest component portion of each job is assigned to each worker. This is the familiar strategy termed 'deskilling' by Braverman, which gives management greater control over the way jobs are

done (Braverman, 1974). Deskilling was an essential component of the first round of Taylorism; and the team concept represents an intensified form of Taylorism, different only in that corporations are now able to obtain union cooperation in the use of this method of labour control (Parker and Slaughter, 1988). The rhetoric of management-worker teamwork, ostensibly over issues of quality and safety, creates the conditions for workers to participate in increasing their own workload. Again, within these joint worker-management teams, workers may find themselves saddled with responsibility for jobs previously done by supervisors, without a concomitant increase in authority. The real casualty in this new set of workplace relationships is the process of collective bargaining. As the labour force slides in the direction of enterprise unionism, the union may begin to conceive of itself as a partner of management.

When asked what they thought about the TQC system, workers' responses varied greatly.

I see nothin' wrong with it. I know a lot of your hardnosed union people, they're a hundred percent against it. I think it's good thing if company and union talk together, they might be able to talk things out a bit. I see nothin' wrong with it. I think it's a good opportunity.

In fact, the 'hardnosed union people' did not come across as being a hundred percent against TQC. It seemed to me that Alcoa workers, regardless of their relationship to the union, tried to make sense of these new management practices (and particularly of TQC) before a discursive backdrop of external threat to their employers and themselves. There was a distinct tendency to identify their own best interests with the continued competitiveness of the company in the world market, and workers often expressed the opinion that any objections to the compromises and austerities demanded by Alcoa in these tough times were basically shortsighted. 'There is nothing to be gained', in the words of one strong union supporter, 'by attacking the company when it is down.' These sentiments were voiced with considerably greater frequency and assurance when talking about TQC rather than the drop shift; perhaps because the drop shift was recognized more readily as an instance of stepped-up exploitation.

Discussions of TQC appeared to revolve around an immobilizingly powerful conception of what has come to be labelled 'globalization' in both academic and media contexts. If by globalization, we mean an 'emphasis on runaway shops and the threat of low wage production venues in the Third World to American workers' (Tabb, 1997a: 21), it was an idea that surfaced repeatedly as workers tried to unravel the meaning of these innovations in labour control. Again, the notion of 'Japan' frequently set the terms for the Alcoa workers' discussions of TQC. I think it would be hard to identify an individual who did not voice their concern about Japanese competition to me at one point or another. As illustrated by the following quote from one of the workers, the anxiety seems focused on several distinct world regions.

Germany, we're going to have a juggernaut here. Those people are pretty mechanically minded, they're pretty industrious. United Europe, to me, is where . . . I'm just wondering what's going to come out of united Europe. Are we going to go down another notch or two, or something like that? Where're we going with our markets and everything? Who's going to need the cans, y'know?

A union official, even as he ruminated over the significance of international capitalist competition in the formation of new strategies of labour control such as TQC, lapsed repeatedly into TQC-speak, perhaps as an overflow from the company's own literature on TQC⁴ which also makes its case against the backdrop of the threat of foreign competition. After recounting the saga of the fall of the house of American labour from the time that President Ronald Reagan first assumed office and broke the back of the air traffic controllers' strike, he went on to say:

Companies really enjoyed that success for a number of years, not realizing that what was happening at the time when they was being so greedy and not putting together a quality product, be it the motor companies, or aluminum, or anywhere. What they didn't realize was that foreign countries was eating their lunch by making a good quality product.

The upshot of his analysis seems to be that American corporations have not been terribly far-thinking in recent times and that it is now up to the labouring classes to bail them out.

I think today the government and the corporations has put the country in a sad shape. But rather than set and just worry about that, working class people today – as always, it's fell back on their shoulders also . . . What I see from the job I do now is that we no longer can afford to think we have a continuous battle between the union and the company, daily, fighting. What we're goin' to have to do is we're going to have to realize that, as workers, we're going to have to make a quality product and make sure, to protect our jobs, that the companies really care about quality themselves. It's very competitive, and we're all going to have to operate a little bit different. Or our children . . . our children's not going to have any future at all in this country.

As in many conversations about TQC with Alcoa workers, ambivalence strikes unexpectedly, and this union official suddenly shows himself to be unconvinced by his own earlier arguments about the importance of building quality products. Lamenting the death of working-class radicalism, he portrays TQC as company policy that the union is powerless to resist.

One of the reasons that I think you have to play the cards you're dealt today, as a labor leader, is because the dream of attacking government officials that's not out for the American people, working-class people, and attacking the companies, that dream will not come true until people, I'm afraid, reach rock bottom . . . I have travelled some and I've spent my hours in the field hollering solidarity and trying to get the labour movement to really get on the move, but it's very hard today to get people to give you even five minutes of their time after work to talk about things we need to do for our children and for ourselves.

So we're going to have to hit rock bottom. Until then it's back again, you play the cards that's dealt.

From within a local union that had clearly endorsed the TQC system, I heard doubts expressed over and over again. One worker worried that TQC would ultimately lead to Taylorite work speed-up: 'I'm very reluctant at times for these teams to do stuff. Maybe we'll get things too strenuous.' As Parker and Slaughter have demonstrated, using case studies of industrial plants from all over the United States, such fears are far from groundless (Parker and Slaughter, 1988, 1994).

Yet another worker voiced the most poignant fear of all, the fear that despite steadfast worker efforts to conform to these new management practices, the corporations will still desert the American working class and take their jobs overseas.

They want us to be involved in these team projects. Yet they're doing everything in the world, as far as I'm concerned, to hurt me . . . You know the football coach Lou Holtz out at Notre Dame, and they put a film on, you know, and he's a very good motivator, I like what he does. I enjoyed it, I did, but I said hell you're showing this to the wrong man, don't show it to me. Show it to these guys that's making these deals overseas. Don't show it to me; I'm ready. Get the commitment from them people.

It may be useful to conceive of this form of labour control as an attempt to raise relative surplus value, which is achieved not by the prolongation of labour time at a fixed wage level, nor by a reduction in wages, but through the intensification of a constant quantity of labour (or labour time). From Alcoa's standpoint, TQC represented an effort to raise labour productivity, unlike the drop shift, which was a circuitous strategy for reducing the wage-bill for the corporation. I think a case could be made that TQC inspired greater ambivalence among Alcoa workers because it was a relative surplus value issue, and as such, a less clear cut matter than the rotating shift. After all, it is far more possible to assign a money value to the losses that were imposed upon workers by the generalized application of the drop shift throughout the plant. For workers, the implications of the TQC system, and indeed, it might be argued, of any other relative surplus value strategy, would be much harder to read. As a result, collective worker response to new relative surplus value strategies may not always be as clearly hostile as it has historically tended to be towards new programmes for increasing absolute surplus value. Thus it is that the seemingly abstract analytical categories of *Capital* may play a direct role in advancing our understandings of worker consciousness.

This may well be a rather more fruitful expectation of Marxian theoretical constructs than it is to look to them for predictions regarding the actual historical twists and bends of the capitalist mode of production. Marx was convinced, for instance, that absolute surplus value, which consists of

more or less naked exploitation, would soon have to give way to relative surplus value. However, absolute surplus value is once again available to capital at the end of the 20th century: it is characteristic of flexible accumulation that it recombines absolute and relative surplus value strategies for procuring profit (Harvey, 1989).

Many accounts of the history of changes in workplace control tend to see the history of the transformations of the labour process as somehow separate from the dynamic of the capitalist mode of production (Turchetto, 1991). Without a theory of capitalist crisis to propel them forward, such historical narratives tend to remain descriptive at best, or else they slide into other forms of causal explanation to account for successive forms of labour control. The most common explanation offered by Alcoa workers for the changes that they have seen over the course of their working lives is a descriptive, even fatalistic one: that the pendulum of history has just swung the other way. Thus:

If everybody do their fair share, the company will still take advantage of the whole thing, so you need the union there to balance it out. But you can't balance too far either. I'd say one time the union probably went too far, they had too much control. But now the company got too much control.

A line of explanation that is often adopted by default, Turchetto maintains, is an easy kind of techno-determinism, which sees each new form of workplace control as being associated with changes in productive technology. The Alcoa workers' discussion of the drop shift seems to suggest that even at a given level of technology, it is still possible for producers to use a new workplace control technique to expand absolute surplus value. Both the change in shift patterns, and the adoption of Total Quality Control (which *is*, on the other hand, associated with technological change, viz. those developments that have made just-in-time production possible) are best understood in the context of the transitions that capitalism is undergoing, within the United States and elsewhere.

As these findings demonstrate, there is a clear political and theoretical need to make sense of the directions taken by late 20th-century capitalism. A somewhat acrimonious debate has recently broken out over whether or not we are living in a time of epochal change, and whether or not 'globalization' represents an entirely new phenomenon (Du Boff and Herman, 1997; Henwood, 1997; Piven and Cloward, 1998a, 1998b; Sivanandan, 1997; Tabb, 1997a, 1997b; Wood, 1996, 1997a, 1997b, 1997c, 1998). Those who view 'globalization' as an alarming new epoch of capitalism are sometimes apt to take recourse to straightforward determinisms. Thus A. Sivanandan writes, 'If "the handmill gives you society with the feudal lord and the steam mill gives you society with the industrial capitalist", the microchip gives you society with the global capitalist' (Sivanandan, 1997: 20).

This argument has been vigorously attacked by analysts who subscribe to the so-called '*Monthly Review* position' (Piven and Cloward, 1998a: 11). William Tabb, for example, contests the very idea of 'globalization' by quoting a passage from *The Communist Manifesto*, which describes very similar processes in the capitalism of 150 years ago:

The bourgeoisie has through its exploitation of the world-market given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country . . . In place of the old local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency, we have intercourse in every direction, universal interdependence of nations . . . In a word, it creates a world after its own image. (cited in Tabb, 1997a: 23)

Doug Henwood makes a similar point:

Capitalism is fundamentally still the same beast that Ricardo and Marx described – a rudely expansive, ceaselessly innovative system (whose innovations are only of the sort that increase profits, it must be noted), and one based on a fundamental hostility of the classes and a brutally destructive appropriation of nature. The detailed realizations of those fundamental principles vary over time and space, but the fundamentals are still with us. (Henwood, 1997: 30)

These writers explain their hostility to the notion of 'globalization' by pointing to the demoralizing consequences for labour organizing in the United States of an exaggerated notion of capital flight from this country. The discussions over TQC at the Alcoa plant certainly seem to bear this out. There is no denying that the American labour movement would behave very differently if it believed that international trade and capital movements have not, in fact, massively altered the competitive situation for American corporations.⁵ At the same time, it is also necessary – strategically as much as theoretically – to discuss the particularities of the phase of flexible accumulation. For instance, an industrial strike becomes a much stronger weapon in the era of just-in-time production (Parker and Slaughter, 1988). Since there are not inventories to cushion the company against losses, it becomes easier for striking unions to negotiate a favourable settlement more quickly. By focusing exclusively on the continuities in capitalism over the decades, however, the *Monthly Review* approach runs the risk of overlooking significant new concatenations of change. As of this writing, Wood, Henwood and Tabb have largely refrained from addressing the issue of the distinctiveness of present-day capitalism.

The theoretical armature that has been assembled around these workers' accounts – absolute and relative surplus value, technological shifts or lack thereof – is not meant to make a case for or against epochal change. What the description of the combination of absolute and relative surplus strategies and their impact on these industrial workers might do is to remind us that there is much that is new and much that is familiar about late 20th-century capitalism, and we disregard either one or the other at our peril.

Notes

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- 1 A suggestive line of speculation, à la E.P. Thompson, opened up by some of these interviews (but not pursued here) regards the manner of internalization of the newly fashioned mode of time-discipline that is entailed by this change in work shifts (Thompson, 1993).
- 2 According to Marx, the working day is composed of two components: necessary labour time, which is the amount of work that needs to be done to create enough value to ensure working-class reproduction, and surplus labour time, which is the work done over and above necessary labour time that translates into profit for the capitalist. 'I call that surplus-value which is produced by the lengthening of the working day, *absolute surplus-value*. In contrast to this, I call that surplus-value which arises from the curtailment of the necessary labour-time, and from the corresponding alteration in the respective lengths of the two components of the working day, *relative surplus-value*' (Marx, 1977: 432). Capital will try to increase absolute surplus value by increasing the number of hours of work or by reducing wages, while relative surplus value may be increased by undertaking measures to increase labour productivity.
- 3 It is a useful first step to disentangle the superficially similar and often conflated approaches to industrial change of this variety, viz. flexible specialization, regulation theory and other variants of post-Fordism (Hirst and Zeitlin, 1991).
- 4 Consider the following passage, for instance, taken from a quarterly publication produced by the Public Relations department at this plant: 'we've seen and heard about Japanese companies that not only produce flawless products, but can rapidly adapt their production operations to sudden changes in the needs of customers. These companies do this not with robots, or by massive retrofitting of their plants. The Japanese are able to ride the sea changes of the marketplace because as a people, they have fully committed themselves – from the executive suite to the shop floor – to the continuous improvement of their processes. In other words, they've succeeded at creating a complete TQC culture.
'We are working to bring about the same kind of cultural change at Warrick and throughout Alcoa. The world we're entering, as we begin our second century, is characterized by intense competition and rapid change. We must meet the challenge of this new world through a constant effort to improve our processes' (Public Relations, Alcoa, 1989: 27).
- 5 There has been a steady build-up of evidence over the last few years that indicates that the dimensions of capital flight and market shrinkage due to external competition in the United States have been greatly overestimated in mainstream accounts (Gordon, 1988; Hirst and Thompson, 1996; Zevin, 1992). The *Monthly Review* debate has, of course, further expanded this body of evidence.

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