The four-volume Report of the Committee of Inquiry into Technological Change in Australia — the Myers’ Report — has fallen like the proverbial lead balloon on the Australian public. Apart from some starry-eyed newspaper editorials, the Report has been widely criticised from many different sources. Ian Reinecke, in the Financial Review, attacked it for its “bureaucratic solutions” to the problems of new technology. Computerworld, the foremost journal for computer personnel, accurately criticised it for its failure to deal with the problem of unemployment. But there’s little surprise in this. Much of the Myers’ Report reads like propaganda from the Department of Productivity (which provided key members of the Committee’s Secretariat).

Bureaucratic Solutions

In one of its thirty recommendations, the report proposes that a Bureau of the Working Environment be set up to “assist in the improvement of the quality of working life for all Australians”. And where will this bureau be located? You’ve guessed it — in the Department of Productivity. This recommendation expresses the dominant theme of the report: new technology is good for everybody in the long run because it promotes economic growth and development (capitalist development). However, to remove the roadblocks of fear and opposition, the workers will be given a sugar-coating on the bitter pill. The report recommends that a Technology Awareness Program be established, and administered by the Department of Productivity. Several other well-established bodies will be involved in this, including the Bureau of Industry Economics and the Bureau of Labour Market Research.

These particular recommendations should be seen as part of a widening campaign to sell the virtues of capitalism to Australian workers. If Myers’ Technology Awareness
Program is anything like the propaganda turned out by the Productivity Promotion Council of Australia (also linked to the Department of Productivity) it will be a chorus of praise for the virtues of private enterprise and the free market economy. It is essential that workers show resistance to this rising tide of militant business ideology through union and rank-and-file action determined to challenge the employers' monopoly on deciding when and where new technologies will be introduced.

Unemployment

The Myers' Report offers no fair or viable solutions to the problems of unemployment. As with all complex issues the report deals with, when the problem gets tough it declines to think seriously about the most appropriate solution. It draws a distinction between unemployment caused directly by technological change and unemployment of a more pervasive kind, related to the economic structural aspects of the current recession. The report is virtually silent on how the unemployment problem in Australia is related to international capital flows or how "technology transfer" (global commercialisation) is significant in explaining technology-induced unemployment. It says nothing of the influence over the Australian economy that massive foreign capital penetration has given the multinational corporations.

The report recommends a "social safety net" to deal with the problem of people made redundant through technological change. It offers a sliding scale of benefits under a temporary income maintenance scheme to "persons retrenched through no fault of their own". They would receive, for a fixed period after retrenchment, a fixed proportion of their weekly earnings which might vary from one month's benefit for persons employed by the same employer for three to five years, to six months' benefit for persons who were so employed for 10 years or more. Presumably, if you were employed by the same employer for less than three years, you'll get nothing at all. This will obviously have a harsh and discriminatory effect on many workers, particularly women, migrants, and youth who are much more likely to change jobs or to be employed intermittently than most older, male workers. Also, will the workers on Myers' safety-net benefit be seen merely as the upper class in the ranks of the "dole bludgers"?

Who benefits?

Despite the report's inadequate proposals to deal with redundancies, the committee has also failed to acknowledge, in any serious way, that the benefits of new technology will be distributed unequally. Myers naively assumes that these "benefits" will automatically flow to all in the community. This is never true! Its major beneficiaries will be large private companies; its victims will be retrenched workers and the unemployed and unemployable. As for workers lucky enough to be employed, they will pay the costs of new technology through their taxes, in two ways — first, through effective subsidies paid to private companies investing in new technology, and secondly, through paying the costs of the social safety net provisions for those workers made redundant by new technology.

Myers' social safety net is, quite literally, full of holes. No safety net could be devised which could cope with the more intractable long-term problem of lost employment opportunities and jobless growth. It is well known that most labour displacement occurring through technological change in Australia takes the form of natural wastage or attrition. And new technologies make it possible for firms to expand production without the creation of new jobs.

If Myers' social safety net is, as Laurie Carmichael rightly called it, a "sugar-coated pill" to help people swallow technological change and managerial prerogative over those changes, then the report offers other sweeteners. A number of key recommendations are addressed to what the committee sees as a problem with unions, particularly smaller craft-based unions, hindering technological change through a "craft mentality" and creating impediments to change through demarcation disputes. For these reasons, Myers wants full steam ahead with union amalgamations. It is even suggested that (another) government body be set up, a union amalgamation assistance unit, to cover the costs to unions of "... materials, legal advice and temporary
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administrative staff necessary to handle the amalgamation."

The report is clearly unhappy with the existence of small craft-based unions, and one of its recommendations proposes that unions should be allowed to be registered only when they represent 2,000 or more members, and a union whose numbers fall below 1,500 should have to "show cause" why it should not be deregistered. This proposal strikes at the democratic rights of workers to be represented by unions as they see fit, and on their own terms. No similar proposals are made to ask employers to "show cause" if their corporate empire is too large (or small?), whether their interests are too narrow, or if their profits are huge or if they cannot exist without taxpayers' generous subsidies (a form of social welfare paid to capitalist enterprises).

Amalgamations

A major implication of these proposals on union amalgamation is the likely growth of union bureaucracies, and their consequent remoteness from the interests of the rank and file. But perhaps this is what Myers really wants — officials skilled in the bargaining routines and legalisms of arbitration where people at the top talk to other people at the top. Col Cooper of the ATEA has referred to this prospect recently, though it apparently never crossed the mind of the union movement's representative on the Myers Committee, Bill Mansfield (also of the ATEA). The tendency to propose bureaucratic solutions to the vexed problems of power and conflict appears in many places throughout the report. The assumption is always made that workers will respond favorably to technological change, if they are not led astray by "deviant" rank-and-file opposition. Even the Trade Union Training Authority (TUTA) is to share in the invidious task of "emphasising the capacity of the union movement to study and respond to technological change, through training trade unionists involved in representing employees during the process of "change".

Who Decides?

If the Myers Committee sees the process of technological change as an inevitable one (and nothing it says suggests otherwise), then how should the very first recommendation in the report be interpreted? It says that "the Government should sponsor a test case before the Commonwealth Conciliation and Arbitration Commission with a view to setting minimum standards to be observed by management — on notification, provision of information, and consultation when technological change is to occur". The recommendation does not suggest at what point this notification, etc. should occur. Is it to be at the stage where management first "contemplates" the introduction of new technology? The wider context of the report seems to suggest that it will be more than adequate for management to notify employees, not when decisions on whether the introduction of some new technology should go ahead, but when it will go ahead. The implication is that at no stage should workers, and others directly affected by any proposed changes in the work process, be given the right to decide if the changes are in their interests.

"Free" Enterprise

Many of the report's recommendations relate directly to the particular interests of private companies. There is a recommendation that provision be made for the making of loans to companies which could be interest-free and would be repayable in the case of projects that were successful and profitable. Ultimately, the cost of an unsuccessful venture would be borne by the taxpayers. In any event, the capacity of firms to understate their profits would make the provisions open to manipulation. Also, who decides what is a "successful" venture, or what particular ventures should get priority on loan funds? The report offers no suggestion on appropriate guidelines. Would a company producing electronic space games for milk bars have priority over another company using less of the new technology but producing more socially useful goods?

The report speaks of funding research which is "in the public interest", so long as the projects involved have entered "a commercial development phase". This offers nothing to non-commercial ventures which have an important role in developing alternative technologies for mainly non-commercial purposes. For example, APACE,
a non-profit organisation in New South Wales, is currently researching and developing technologies which will increase the self-sufficiency of people in rural communities. But they will get no comfort from the Myers Report where technology is viewed as useful only in the context of capitalist enterprise.

The report points to the need for a more generous investment allowance scheme in the form of attractive depreciation deductions, so that newer technologies may be acquired by firms at the earliest possible date. This is likely to exacerbate the problem of technological redundancy. The committee, in a fashion typical of its approach to similar questions, feels that productivity improvement provides a firm basis for sustained employment. And well it might be, if the new technology were the same as the old and if we didn’t have structural unemployment. The committee’s consistent optimism hardly answered the arguments in the submission made by the peak union councils of ACTU, CAGEO, and ACSPA which said:

.... While the encouragement of firms to invest in plant and equipment may yield some long-term benefits to the Australian economy, the short-term effects have been disastrous. By reducing the relative cost of capital at times of high unemployment, the Australian government has worsened the situation. The increase in investment in plant and equipment which took place after 1975 has undoubtedly worsened unemployment in Australia. This is a positive encouragement to replace men with machines.

Who Suffers?

The report says that the groups in the Australian community which suffer worst from technological change are — women, young people, immigrants, and the aged. Each of these groups gets a brief mention in the report, though it is noticeable that none are given direct representation on any of the many committees which Myers proposes to deal with problems of the “work environment”. Consequently, there is no good reason to expect that their special interests would be given special consideration.

In particular, the report is extremely weak in the way it deals with the problems of women in the workforce, despite the excellent submissions it received on the problems affecting working women. Typically, the report refers to these submissions, but those which express anything less than guarded optimism about technological change are quietly forgotten. Although the report recognises the differences in male and female employment patterns and opportunities, when it discusses (by way of example) the displacement of women telephonists by automatic exchanges, it seems to suggest that the problems would be much the same if the telephonists were males! The difference in the “cultural mandates” imposed on men and women make it clear that women in general simply don’t have the same freedom to choose new jobs in new areas in the same way as men.

But to have a bet both ways, Myers suggests that the special problems facing women can best be overcome in the long run through education. Education provides a convenient fall-back position for the committee, since it enables it to look good while avoiding any serious thought as to how education can “call forth” jobs. It shifts the problems on to institutions that cannot solve them.

The committee’s remarks on migrants comprise one half-page, and include the profound observation that “those who speak English are more likely to get a higher status job than those who don’t....” Similar insight is found in the brief remarks on youth, and on older workers: “the young are thought to be more adaptable to and accommodating of change, and more at home with computerised machinery”. Of course, as any manager knows, younger workers who lack the hard experiences of employment are more likely to do what they are told. But all is not bleak for older workers because we are told that other managers “prefer older workers on the grounds that they are ‘people we can trust’.” !!!!

Perhaps the high point of Myers’ critical insight is found on page 107 of the report where it is said that “those already in employment are better placed to preserve
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their advantage than those seeking employment or re-employment, and those in employment for the longer periods are able to transfer the impact (of labor-displacing technology) to those employed for shorter periods". Thus does Myers turn platitudes into sweeping proclamations.

It is clear that the Myers Committee gave little thought to issues of equality. Given its fixation on burgeoning economic growth, the report actually calls for a widening of income inequality by proposing the "broadbanding" of skill classifications. This would mean that workers categorised at different levels of skill could not claim wage increases which would put them in an income band appropriate to those with higher skills. Consistent with this, the report is strong in its attacks on those narrow wage differentials which it believes have affected the supply of skilled tradesmen in industry. Once again, a sweetener is proposed, in the form of a high-wage "carrot" for the highly skilled (but a stick for the unskilled).

The proposals on broadbanding skills sounds unusually naive, given the realities of industrial relations in Australia. The committee clearly wasn't concerned that its proposals on union amalgamations might be in conflict with its support for widening wage differentials. On one hand, workers are to be unified under broad industry-based unions, but on the other, they are to be divided by insisting on widening wage differentials.

Opposition to the Report

Fortunately, more and more unions are beginning to respond in a highly critical way to the Myers Committee Report. At a recent public meeting in Sydney, representatives of 17 different unions carried a resolution which condemned the report on a number of grounds. In particular, the resolution condemned the report for ignoring the substantial problems that the rapid expansion of micro-electronic technology is creating for existing and future generations of workers. It also said that the report failed to put forward effective strategies for controlling the social impact of the new technology.

It should be clear that the Myers Report has failed in the task it was set by the Fraser government: "to examine, report and make recommendations on the process of technological change in Australian industry in order to maximise economic, social and other benefits and minimise any possible adverse consequences". Given the economic and political circumstances in which the committee was given its brief, its failure was only to be expected.

Over all, the Myers Committee has treated technological change in isolation from the social system in which it operates. Its muddled use of mechanistic and pluralist assumptions leaves it completely unable to deal with fundamental questions of power in a class-divided society. Throughout the report, one senses the committee's discomfort at even thinking about the meaning of conflict. The questions it asked, and the answers it gives, lack any awareness that technological change is fundamentally a political question. Myers merely wants us to be nice to each other, so that everything will work out fine.

Technology can be a liberating force, or it can be a source of grievous social problems. All technologies have implications for control — both in terms of its design and in the way technology is used in a particular work organisation. The history of capitalism shows many examples where the choice of a particular technology has meant not only higher profits but an increasing level of control over the workforce. This is perhaps the most significant sense in which it can be said that all technologies have a political dimension.

The long-term response of workers to technological change should be to use technology for the production of socially useful goods and services where production is for need, not for private profit. This approach is already being demonstrated with some success in the activities of workers' organisations like those at the Lucas Aerospace company in England. However, the immediate task for workers in Australia is to challenge the monopoly of control by management on technology and all other matters in the workplace. More and more, people are beginning to show an impatience with the view that they should have no say in workplace decisions which affect their daily lives. Only their committed action can roll back Myers' ideological offensive on behalf of capital.