

**MICROELECTRONICS:
CAPITALIST TECHNOLOGY AND
THE WORKING CLASS**

CSE Microelectronics Group
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It is no longer news that microelectronics can cause enormous job losses, although most organisations fail to agree about exactly when and how many. Less firmly placed in the popular imagination are the likely consequences for the organisation of the waged work that is left after the devastation of the 'chip', or the reasons for the introduction of new technology. So it is particularly welcome to see the publication of a book which attempts to answer just those questions, while avoiding the trap of divorcing technology from a broader political understanding of the workings of capitalism.

Microelectronics: Capitalist Technology and the Working Class by the Conference of

Socialist Economists' Microelectronics Group, is not only looking at the issue of 'who benefits' from the technology in terms of whether the working class can win shorter working hours instead of losing jobs, but also how computerisation can be developed to upgrade the content of work, rather than simultaneously deskilling and refining managerial control over it.

The CSE Group has set itself an ambitious task, with chapters covering the technology itself, its application in the office, banking, the state and different methods of manufacturing, and the question of alternative design. Writing collectively is hard enough when the focus is very particular, given this sort of range it was inevitable that the book should read at times contradictorily. The 'cement' that was constructed to hold the thing together can be found in the preface: 'Capital needs to regain command over the labour process and to increase productivity in order to raise profits; technology plays a key role in this process.'

There are dangers in tracing each application of microelectronics to a management attempt to increase control and productivity. Not because that analysis is widely off the mark, but rather that it can act to encourage a recurring desire of socialists to view managerial strategy as having a coherence and credibility it often doesn't. Similarly it can lead us to slide over contradictions and divisions within the workforce.

The CSE Microelectronics Group avoids the most frequent distortion found in left analysis — that of ignoring sexual divisions. There is an excellent discussion of how patriarchal relations in the office have helped to shore up the personalised, servicing role of women workers. This is presented as a stumbling block in managerial plans to rationalise the office and intensify the labour of its workers.

It is only by the forced separation of secretary and boss — something both sides may object to — that management dreams of an electronic office could become reality. And an onslaught on the feminine subculture in the office, through an attempt to deprive women of the social side to their waged labour, could easily backfire. Increased productivity may be bought at the price of a rebellious workforce. As Audrey Wise has said in recognition of women having a greater militancy in the work situation over conditions as opposed to wages: 'women put up a struggle to stay human'. Women being less socialised into seeing themselves as wage earners above all else, often provide male trade unionists with a justification for their judgement of women as uninterested in union matters. Yet it is precisely women's

refusal to accept the rules of the game, or even their ignorance of what the parameters of collective bargaining usually are, which may produce the space for questions of control to be raised.

This can only be a contradictory process — that space has to be constructed, rather than it being ready and waiting. This book ends on the brave note of arguing in relation to the question of design of systems: 'Micro-electronics can control a piece of equipment independently of other machines . . . work could be made much more democratic, less centralised and less hierarchical . . . It is possible to *negotiate* over the type of skills and job control at each of these levels in the hierarchy, so as to remove most of the hierarchy itself.' The book was published too quickly to deal with the trade union response so far to technological innovation, but evidence shows that trade unions are more likely to be attempting to defend the *status quo* and hold onto what jobs they can. Challenging the skill and power hierarchy, particularly given that this is so based on gender divisions — something the labour movement can hardly claim immunity from — is indeed a formidable task.

Given the book places skills and control as central issues, it is a pity that there is some ambiguity in relation to trade union involvement with alternative design. The chapter on FIAT for instance seems to argue it is dangerous for trade union officials to play an active role in the introduction of new technologies because it can lead them into taking on a management perspective while dividing them from the shop floor: 'Union officials developed a new language of 'technicalese' that separated them and their concerns from shop floor workers . . . The only reason that FIAT introduced this automation was in order to break trade union control in the plants.' (p91) Yet at other points it is argued that the design and implementation of microelectronic based systems cannot be left up to software houses or managers. On the

whole the book tends to skip over the question of how alternative designs can be developed and used while avoiding the 'co-option' or defeat of trade unions and the workers they are presumed to represent.

However these discussions are controversial ones and more research and debate needs to take place for appropriate strategies to be developed. It would be less than materialist to imagine that such a prompt publication could provide a definitive

analysis. It is heartening, given the importance of the problems it raises, that the book is proving popular — there is already a reprint and an intended second edition. Reaching a wide audience has obviously been a priority for the group, as the book is written in a clear and accessible style. Its popularity will presumably encourage the group to continue its work, something we can all feel enthusiastic about.

Eileen Phillips

Lawrence & Wishart wish to apologise to Angela Clifford and the Irish Communist Organisation for not acknowledging her copyright for three items appearing in the volume *Ireland and the Irish Question: History of Ireland, Notes for the History of Ireland*, and *Notes for the Preface to a Collection of Irish Songs* first published in 1965 by the Irish Communist Group in a pamphlet *F. Engels: History of Ireland* and subsequently republished by the Irish Communist Organisation in 1965 and 1970.

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