



## Automation is Coming, and Unions Must be Vigilant

*Remarks by Jan Simpson*

*National President*

*Canadian Union of Postal Workers*

*Launch of "[Bargaining Tech: Strategies for Shaping Technological Change to Benefit Workers](#)"*

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I think this paper will be used by trade unionists for many years – maybe even decades - as a manual about how to approach issues of new technology. I think the title of the paper is especially important and relevant. Not only do we need to use collective bargaining to *protect* our members – we need to develop strategies to shape tech change to *benefit* our members. New technology should result in better and safer working conditions, and workers should receive a share of the productivity increases in the form of increased wages and improved benefits. I want to say I agree with your conclusion that “the final impact on workers depends on whose interests and priorities shape technology and its application”.

Today I would like to take a few minutes to share with you CUPW’s experience and basic principles respecting the introduction of technological change, and the impact on workers and the community.

In the 1970s the production process in postal service was completely transformed from manual sortation to mechanized sort.

In 1975 CUPW organized bargaining around the slogan “This is the year for postal workers to share in the benefits of automation.”

There was also a 42-day strike in 1975; the result was Article 29 which provided:

- A broad definition of tech change;
- Provisions for notice including effects on workers;
- A process of negotiation based on the principle there shall be no adverse effects on workers (29.02). I am glad you referenced this aspect in your paper (on page 50 and 51) as I believe it is one of the most important provisions in our collective agreement;
- We also negotiated a process of third-party arbitration if there was no agreement;
- Full job security, retraining and relocation allowances.

Our approach to tech change also included the following principles:

- All health and safety hazards would be identified and addressed: including noise and dust levels, night work, weight limits, and repetitive strain injuries (addressed through hourly coder breaks and rotation of duties).
- Ensure technology is not used to violate the privacy of workers or impose overburdening or speed-up. In 1980 we negotiated a prohibition of individual work measures, and in 1981 we negotiated protections from the use of surveillance cameras for disciplinary purposes.
- Ensure the work was performed by our members with full-time jobs, through provisions that maximize the number of full-time positions. Part-time jobs should only be used for part-time work requirements. In 1992 we negotiated a national ratio guaranteeing the percentage of full-time jobs.
- Share in the benefits of automation: we were not successful on that issue in 1975. So in 1978 we attempted to negotiate a shorter workday with no loss in pay, but were legislated back to work. In 1980 we were successful in reducing the work day by 30 minutes with no loss in pay (through a paid meal period). We also introduced 6 and 7 weeks annual vacation in the collective agreement. In 1984 we negotiated pre-retirement leave and additional paid holidays for night workers.
- Contract-in work wherever possible: we have been successful in contracting-in plant maintenance work and vehicle maintenance. Also, in 2003 we negotiated the contracting-in of parcel delivery – which had been contracted out during the previous Conservative government.
- Where possible find ways of using technology to benefit workers. We also took the approach that the benefits of automation should be shared with the public through increased postal services. In 1984 we negotiated, and included in our collective agreement, provisions for opening new post offices, and sales of new postal-related products at the wickets. In 1992 we negotiated a special joint committee (Appendix T) which has a fund which enables us to conduct pilot projects providing new services or contracting in work. Today we are addressing issues such as expansion of financial services at postal counters, and the potential for a new service where people could arrange for letter carriers to check-in on seniors and other people who live alone.

As many of you know in 2013 the Harper government announced that Canada Post would be the first postal administration in the world to stop all residential mail delivery, replacing door-to-door delivery with community mailboxes. Together with allies from the labour movement and seniors' organizations, and with the support of the NDP and the Green Party, we successfully fought back and stopped the conversions to community mailboxes. From our experience in this struggle, we realized that we needed to develop and present a comprehensive vision for a green and service-oriented postal service: one that would not only be a leader in the fight against climate change, but also provide postal banking, services to the elderly and high-speed internet in areas that currently lack these essential services.

To promote this vision, we are now working with our sister union (the Canadian Postmasters and Assistants Association, CPAA), LEAP, and other allies to build a campaign called ***Delivering Community Power***. Today we have 8 coordinators working full-time to promote this vision.

Already more than 1000 municipalities have adopted resolutions supporting postal banking and expansion of other services.

I would also like to say a few words about the use of technology and gig workers in the delivery sector. Last year in Ontario we won a decision at the Ontario Labour Relations Board that ruled that even though gig workers in the delivery sector bring their own cars and bikes in order to work, the app they use is the primary tool for work and is a tool of the employer. This enabled us to win employee status and collective bargaining rights for these workers. We have seen that in other countries, such as Norway, couriers have successfully fought for and won collective agreements that provide for flexible schedules that some workers want, as well as stability, benefits and rights.

Throughout our history we have believed that if employers are to have the right to introduce new technology which changes the work process during the life of the collective agreement, they must negotiate the introduction accepting the following principles:

- All adverse effects must be identified and eliminated;
- Full-time job opportunities must be maximized;
- Health and safety should be improved;
- There must be protections from overburdening and infringements on privacy;
- Workers and communities should share in the benefits of the changes.