

Unstable future for work

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Rifkin says economic strife can be averted in 30 hours

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Modern technology in the information age is sending the global work force into a downward spiral of unemployment and poor economies.

And community is the only solution.

Author Jeremy Rifkin warned about 1,000 people in Northern Arizona University's Ardrey Auditorium about the repercussions he believes technology could have on workers in the 21st century.

Rifkin, the president of the Foundation on Economic Trends in Washington, D.C., has written 13 books. His latest, "The End of Work: The Decline of the Global Labor Force and the Dawn of the Post-Market Era," discusses the rapid increase in the use of mechanical technology for jobs previously held by human beings. Many of the jobs being taken by technology are not coming back, Rifkin said.

"The number-one issue on the minds of every person on this planet is, 'Will there be a place for me? Will my labor be valued in this new global information-age economy?'" he said.

Rifkin said the United States has a real unemployment rate of about 14 percent. While the nation's unemployment rate has been hovering a bit over 5 percent over the last several months, that statistic only includes people who are out of work and seeking employment. People who've given up on finding a job aren't included.

According to Rifkin's calculations, around 6 million men aren't working and aren't looking for work.

"We call them missing men," he said. "They are no longer part of the economy and we have no idea what they are doing."

The United States was primarily a country of blue-collar jobs in the 1960s, Rifkin said. But with the increasing use of machines instead of humans, less than 2 percent of the global working world is expected to be in the blue-collar field by 2020, he said.

Today, less than 17 percent of workers worldwide are in factories.

"But we are still the number-one manufacturing power in the world," he said. "We are just doing it with less people and more machines."

Seventy-five percent of industrial jobs can be performed cheaper and more efficiently by machines, Rifkin said.

"We are already at the cusp of a tremendous technology revolution that will change our way of life," he said. "In the industrial age, we had machines replace physical brawn and in the information age, we have intelligent machines replacing the mental capability of millions of people."

Unlike the industrial age, which depended on a vast work force, the jobs out there today are targeted at a small amount of qualified

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workers, he said.

"The industrial age ended slave labor. The information age will end mass-wage labor," Rifkin said.

It is this lack of mass-wage labor that is strangling capitalism and world economies, he said.

"It is not the Steven Forbese who keep capitalism alive. It is millions of workers around the world and their retirement funds and their pension funds," Rifkin said.

These worker-based funds currently hold a value of about \$8 trillion and comprise 72 percent of all the savings in the country, he said.

"They are worth more than all the assets in the U.S. banking system," Rifkin said.

Rifkin believes employers realize fewer workers means fewer consumers, which kills profitability and the economy.

"I now have some cause for hope that employers and managers will want to come to the table and rethink the social contract," he said.

But people can force employers to change by demanding shorter work weeks without seeing their paychecks crunched, he said.

Parents and grandparents of the upcoming and possibly unemployed generation are a perfect example of how social pressure to change can work, Rifkin said.

"They organized, they unionized, they politicized, they pressed the government and management and they cut the work week to 40 hours," he said. A typical work week in the 1930s was about 60 hours, he said.