

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 22, 1995

De-Jobbing

By Don Oldenburg
Washington Post Staff Writer

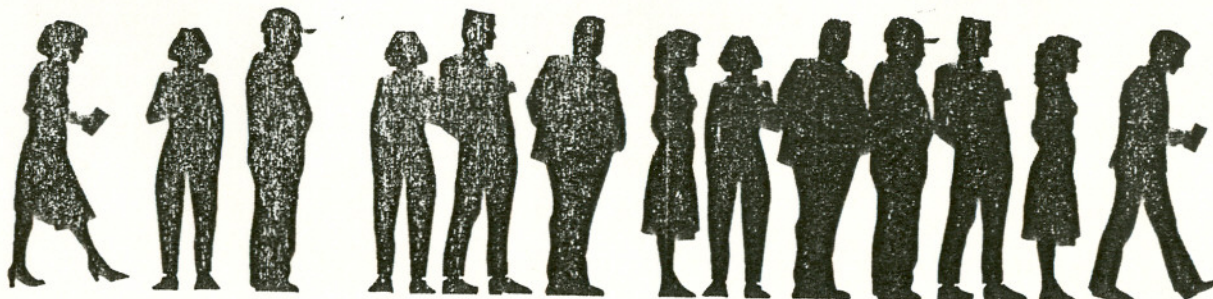
Imagine a Brave New Work World in which unemployment is so rampant that more than a third of the adult population of Americans can't find a job and millions of others have stopped looking. Another third works only part-time, or at temporary or dead-end jobs. Meanwhile, the number of those still holding full-time positions steadily diminishes, their wages depressed because of the premium placed simply on having a job.

Warnings are starting to come fast and furious about just such a global dilemma in the not-so-distant future. For most Americans who cut their wage-earning teeth on a traditional 9-to-5 workday, with base pay and benefits, promotions, a career path, and a pension at age 65, the prospect of a world without jobs is frightening.

"People need to start thinking about a jobless future," insists Stanley Aronowitz, professor of sociology at the City University of New York graduate center in Manhattan. "I think it is urgent."

Coauthor with William DiFazio of "The Jobless Future: Sci-Tech and the Dogma of Work" (University of Minnesota Press, \$25), Aronowitz says that in February the International Labor Organization reported worldwide unemployment and underemployment to be between 850 million and 1 billion. He attributes rising unemployment to economic stagnation coupled with revolutionary technological change that has fostered workplace trends such as downsizing, re-engineering, with part-time jobs, temporary jobs and job-sharing replacing full-time work: "All of these trends are hitting the global labor market in a very hard way."

In practically every employment sector in the United States, the numbers of jobs either have declined or will decline into the next century, according to Aronowitz and other analysts studying the workplace shakedown. "We're going to see the steady and inevitable decline in mass labor over the next five decades," confirms Jeremy Rifkin, president of the Washington-based Foundation on Economic Trends, and author of "The End of Work: The Decline of the Global Labor Force and the Dawn of the Post-Market Era" (Putnam, 1995, \$25).



THE WASHINGTON POST

In the 1950s, for instance, 33 percent of the U.S. work force was blue collar. Today, it's down to 17 percent, says Rifkin, not because those jobs went overseas, but because they went out of existence. By the year 2025, he says, the blue collar work force won't exist.

Other job sectors are endangered as well. "Companies are eliminating layer after layer of management," says Rifkin. "If you are in wholesale or in retail and your job isn't already eliminated, it will be. By the end of the decade, one out of three American workers will be temps."

Naysayers attack Rifkin and Aronowitz's jobless premise by pointing to jobs the private and high-tech sectors are creating, or suggesting that the U.S. economy will surely

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adapt to the computer-driven Information Age. "Unemployment stats went down slightly last month," counters Rifkin to show the flaw in that thinking. "But it was all temp jobs."

One work sector will survive. The knowledge elite or information elite, consisting of engineers, scientists, computer programmers, entertainers, among others, will become the top 20 percent that holds full-time jobs; the bottom 80 percent will struggle to get into the knowledge sector and most will slip into the underclass, creating a two-tiered job market and a society of have's and have-not's.

"We're really seeing a fundamental transformation in the nature of work," says Rifkin. "And it's the best-kept secret in the country."

Some experts, such as California business consultant William Bridges, laud the "de-jobbing" of America into a freelance- and outsource-based open market in which

people find ways to employ themselves. In his new book "JobShift: How to Prosper in a Workplace Without Jobs" (Addison Wesley: \$22), Bridges predicts: "By the year 2020 . . . we'll look back on jobs the way people look back on the family farm: a nice way of life that doesn't meet today's needs."

Aronowitz doesn't think the worker-as-independent-contractor scenario answers the question: What do you do with millions of people whose jobs are no longer needed? "The trend that you are an individual and a rolling stone so get out there and fend for yourself is unrealistic," he says.

What is realistic? Rifkin and Aronowitz concur that the first step toward blunting the cutting edge of the jobless future is to reduce the standard work week without reducing pay. "You have a smaller work force working time-and-a-half to exhaustion while the rest of the work force is temp, part time or looking for jobs," says Rifkin. "We need to find a way to share the work. A 30-hour work week could have tremendous potential."

Much more controversial is the larger remedy. Rifkin and Aronowitz both foresee the likelihood of guaranteed incomes. Aronowitz expects it will take shape similar to the socialized societies of Sweden, Germany and France, where a minimum income and standard of living are maintained via high taxes. Instead of massive welfare, Rifkin prefers millions of future unemployed and underemployed Americans be retrained and paid government-issued income vouchers for hours they work in the nonprofit sector rebuilding the infrastructure of society.

Rifkin and Aronowitz know their proposals face seemingly insurmountable resistance. Political opposition, they believe, will yield to public outrage and pressure as more people are forced from their jobs; corporations will rethink the social contract because a jobless society means a marketplace with few buyers.

"There is a way to make it work for everyone," says Rifkin. "If we don't all share in it . . . we're going to have social disintegration."