

Unionism and Taylorism

Labor cooperation with the “modernization” of production

John Zerzan

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Tay-lor-ism n. 1. The scientific management of industrial operations. 2. The systematic reduction of work within a given industrial operation to separate, distinct, routinized tasks devoid of policy decisions. Each aspect is measured and timed for its highest efficiency. 3. The system of such developed by Frederick Taylor in the late 1880s.

In 1973 David Jenkins, in one of the many recent works on the “revolt against work” phenomenon, observed that “The impression has begun to get about that the Industrial Revolution is not going to work out after all.” [1] In light of the profound malaise of blue and white collar workers brought out so stunningly in Studs Terkel’s *Working*, for example, the decline of output per worker since early 1973, and increasing signs of a pervasive anti-union sentiment complementing anti-management restiveness, Jenkins’ remark does not, after all, seem so shocking. The 1973 Health, Education and Welfare report, *Work In America*, remarked, in a similar vein, that “absenteeism, wild-cat strikes, turnover, and industrial sabotage (have) become an increasingly significant part of the cost of doing business.” [2]

In using the last quote, from the HEW report, I was influenced not only by its succinct accuracy and the “high level” nature of the source, but by its placement in the report within a section called, “The Anachronism of Taylorism.” Owing to the many misunderstandings about the scientific management’s historical role—including its relevance to the current crisis in industrial relations—much that is basic to our industrial society is not seen for what it is. The genesis of Taylorism, or scientific management, and the developing relationship of this system to trade unionism are especially crucial, and I hope to illuminate these areas.

As Frederick Taylor was engaged in his pioneering efforts at the Midvale Steel Company, in the 1880s, several members of the American Society of Mechanical Engineers (ASME) were likewise interested in the problems of labor management. The development of capitalism was meeting sharp resistance from the growing ranks of labor, desirous of a sense of work integrity and craftsmanship.

ASME member William Partridge spoke to the Society in 1887 of the crisis in industrial relations. “More than one hundred years ago, France found herself in a condition not unlike that which is prevailing today.”

Continuing his reference to the French Revolution, he underlined the urgency of efforts to resolve “the labor problem.” “It is a question which has great interest to us whether 1898 will mark a period of equally disastrous uprisings with us. Certainly there are some things in the history of labor and capital which make it seem almost probable.”

Task management, or scientific management as it came to be called, began taking shape in the eighties as the way to break the workers’ threatening resistance. The heart of this approach, which Peter Brucker has called the most effective idea of the past century, is the systematic reduction of work into discrete, routinized tasks, totally separated from any policy decisions about the job.

Control of Technical Knowledge

Taylor realized that employees exert vital influence because they possess the crucial talents needed in any productive process. As he put it in his *Principles of Scientific Management*, “foremen and superintendents know, better than anyone else, that their own knowledge and personal skill falls far short of the combined knowledge and dexterity of all the workmen under them.” [3]

If Robert Hoxie understood the point, that “this unique possession of craft knowledge and craft skill on the part of a body of wage workers, that is, their possession of these things and the employer’s ignorance of them” is the key to worker strength on the job, management experts, like Taylor, knew just what had to be done to break that strength.

For capitalism to be firmly in control, it must monopolize the information and techniques of output as surely as it controls the rest of the means of production. The worker must only be permitted to perform certain narrow, specific actions as planned by management. “For one of the most important general principles of Taylor’s system was that the man who did the work could not derive or fully understand its science,” as Samuel Haber accurately observed.

Naturally it was beneficial to publicly promote scientific management as geared directly to problems of price and productivity, though its motivating concern was with the control of production itself. In fact, capital’s problem was less and less one of productivity at this time, as Edwin Perkins points out, and Siegfried Giedion’s comparison of American and German industry shows that Germany’s greater reliance on worker skill was cheaper than the American tendency to mechanize. [4]

C. Bertrand Thompson made, in effect, the same point in 1917 when he remarked on the absence of a competitive pressure behind firms employing scientific management, “for the reason that most of them now using it stand in a quasi-monopoly position in which there is no necessity to reduce their prices...” Thus the introduction of Taylorism may be seen as primarily a social and even political response, rather than a matter of economics or technology.

Concerning its effect, Robert Hoxie noted in 1915 that “the whole scheme of scientific management, especially the gathering up and systematization of the knowledge formerly the possession of the workmen, tends enormously to add to the strength of capitalism.”

The proponents of the new regimentation sought to invest it with an aura of impartiality, to evoke a theoretical legitimacy useful to capitalism as a whole. [5] Mary Follett of the Taylor Society, for example, claimed that with scientific management, “authority is derived from function” and thus “has little to do with hierarchy of position as such.” Typical pronouncements claimed that it embodied “a new kind of authority which stemmed from the unveiling of scientific law,” and that it substitutes joint obedience of employers and workers for obedience to personal authority.” The time-study man, measuring and manipulating the worker with his stopwatch, relies on “unimpeachable data.”

Despite these efforts for the Taylorist approach, the public rapidly derived a very malignant view of the subject. As the Taylor society admitted with surprising candor, scientific management became known as “the degradation of workmen into obedient oxen under the direction of a small body of experts—into men debarred from creative participation in their work.” [6]

The public’s very accurate impression of scientific management practice finds its source in the contempt in which Taylor and his followers held workers. Referring to his experience at Bethlehem Steel, Taylor described the iron handler he encountered as stupid, phlegmatic, and ox-like. [7] H.L. Gantt, one of Taylor’s leading disciples, spoke of implementing the task system as “the standard method of teaching and training children.” As “the worker became an object in Taylor’s hands,” in Jacques Ellul’s phrase, it follows that he was seen as an animal or child by the Taylorites. Another part of the justification was Taylor’s concept of the “economic man,” that a worker’s real motivation is money and nothing else.

Despite the attempts to downgrade their subjects and discount their motivations, the scientific management tracts and guidelines are full of admonitions to proceed slowly, due to the workers’ resistance. It was regularly repeated, in fact, that several years are needed to get control of a plant on the scientific management plane. [8] The Taylor Society warned employers to expect strikes and sabotage, to proceed with cunning so as to infiltrate under false appearances, and to expect opposition at every step. [9] The struggle has been clearly over work and the

progressive attempts to debase it. [10] The fight to control it has been the heart of the contest, as manifested in such articles as “Who’s Boss in your Shop?” from the August 1917 *Bulletin* of the Taylor Society. In fact, the first effort of Taylor to lay out his theory, in “A Piece-Rate System” (1895) underlines the fact that the problem to be solved is the antagonism between workers and employers.

Although a survey of management and personnel journals [11] makes it clear that scientific management is the foundation of work organization today, our everyday experiences of work bring the point home with painful clarity. Control assumed “unprecedented dimensions” with Taylor to use Harry Braverman’s assessment, and it has engendered a serious stage of opposition today which is calling work as we know it (wage labor) into question. Through the recent work of Harry Braverman, Stephen Marglin, and others, we now see the social/political control essence of Taylorism. What is less understood, however, is the nature of the fight between workers and controllers, and the role of unionism in that—continuing—fight.

Taylorism’s Support: Union vs. Worker

From the two standard works on the subject, Jean Trepp McKelvey’s *AFL Attitudes Toward Production* and Milton Nadworny’s *Scientific Management and the Unions*, has emerged the thesis that organized labor switched from a hostile attitude toward Taylorism before World War I, to a warmly receptive one thereafter. The evidence shows this judgment to be mistaken, the error stemming from the perennial confusion of union attitude with rank and file attitude. It would be much more accurate to say that workers seem to have opposed scientific management all along, while the unions gave only a brief show of opposition and have never really been against it.

Turning first to the union attitudes toward Taylorism in the pre-War period, we find anything but concerted opposition. In 1895, for example, upon the occasion of Taylor’s first presentation of his ideas to the American Society of Mechanical Engineers, John A. Penton, ex-president of the Brotherhood of Machine Molders, was in attendance and joined the discussion of Taylor’s paper. This former union official, speaking “as a workman,” was more lavish in his praise than any of the others; urging that the paper be put into the hands of every employer and employee, he termed it “perhaps the most remarkable thing of its kind I ever heard in my life. I can sympathize with every word. His paper, I think, is a landmark in the field of political economy.” [12]

In 1907, David Van Alstyne of the American Locomotive Company secured an agreement with the molders’ and blacksmiths’ union for the introduction of Taylorism into the company’s U.S. and Canada shops. Though the molders and blacksmiths were thus prevented from fighting the degrading methods, the unorganized machinists in Pittsburgh walked out, “seething” with anger. [13]

Professor John Commons provided the cardinal reason for the unions’ absence of hostility to Taylorism in a 1906 issue of *The Outlook* magazine: “... the unions have generally come to the point of confining their attention to wages—that is, to distribution—leaving to employers the question of production.” [14] If either McKelvey or Nadworny had examined collective bargaining agreements reached prior to World War I, [15] they would have most likely discovered the “management’s rights” clause vests the sole right to set work methods, job design, assignments, etc. with management and is of fundamental importance in understanding why unionism was incapable of hostility to scientific management or any other kind of management system. It is easy to see why, when Taylorism became a public issue in 1911, AFL officials could not have found historical grounds for opposition. [16] Thus when Nadworny mentions the arrangement made between Plimpton Press and the Typographical Union in 1914, whereby the union agreed to accept scientific management in return for closed shop recognition, or the arrangement between the New York garment industry and the International Ladies Garment Workers’ Union in 1916, involving the same exchange we are not at all dealing with aberrations.

In fact, the idea began spreading well before the war that unionization, with its standard “management’s rights” clause contracts, was the best approach for fitting the Taylorism yoke on the workers. The efficacy of this “trojan horse” tactic of union mediation led Harvard Professor C. Bertrand Thompson, in a book published in 1917, to prescribe industrial unionism over the AFL’s craft unionism as the best way to secure the Taylor system in industry. Describing “one plant where scientific management was fully developed and in complete operation, the management has itself authorized and aided the organization of its employees,” Thompson went so far as to urge recognition of

the Industrial Workers of the World, to secure “the necessary unanimity of action” in linking all the workers, not only the skilled ones, to Taylorism. [17]

The ostensibly radical IWW might seem an unlikely candidate for the job of Taylorizing the workers, but actually several Wobbly spokesmen saw in scientific management much of value toward stabilizing and rationalizing production “after the Revolution.” And from the rest of the American Left, many another sympathetic voice could be heard, such as that of left-wing Socialist, Algie Simons. Enthusiasm for the system seemed to cut across ideological lines.

Lenin’s support of Taylorism is well known, while John Spargo, an American Socialist, denounced everything about the Bolshevik Revolution save Lenin’s adoption of scientific management. [18] Henry L. Gantt, on the other hand, a conservative Taylor disciple, admired the Leninist dictatorship, especially of course, its Taylorist component. And Morris L. Cooke, a liberal Taylorite, of whom it was said in 1915 that “no one has done more to broaden the scope of scientific management,” was one of the first spokesmen to publicly urge the Taylor Society to realize in unionism its natural partner. He became in the 1930s a prominent CIO advocate.

While the official union and radical spokesmen for the workers were finding no fault with scientific management, the workers were acting on their own against it. An attempt to introduce Taylorism at the huge Rock Island government arsenal in 1908 was defeated by the intense opposition it aroused. It is interesting that these “unorganized” workmen appealed not to a union for help, but confronted the setting of piece rates and the division of tasks by themselves and immediately demanded that the methods be discontinued.

Likewise, the beginnings of Taylorism at the Frankfort arsenal were defeated by the hostility of the “unorganized” employees there in 1910 and 1911. In October 1914, the 3,000 garment workers of Sonnenborn and Company in Baltimore walked out spontaneously upon hearing that Taylorism was to be installed. [19] These examples could be multiplied ad infinitum. What may be of at least as much value is a more detailed look at a particular plant’s experience.

The case of Taylorism at the U.S. arsenal at Watertown, Mass. in 1911, wrongly termed in 1917 the only instance of real union opposition to Taylorism, clearly demonstrates the need for not confusing union with workers, “organized” or not. If this is as close as unions came in practice to opposing the new system, it is very safe to say that they did not oppose it at all.

When the ideas of Taylorizing Watertown first arose in 1908, Taylor warned that the government managers must have the complete system. “Anything short of this leaves such a large part of the game in the hands of the workmen that it becomes largely a matter of whim or caprice on their part as to whether they will allow you to have any real results or not.” [20]

Hugh Aitken, in his excellent study of the Watertown situation, is correct that control of the entire work environment was at issue and that no move by Taylor and his associates “was merely technological or administrative.”

It is clear that Taylor himself mistook the quiescence of the AFL unions, who represented various arsenal workers, for passivity on the part of the employees. He counseled a Watertown manager in 1910 “not to bother too much about what the AFL write (sic) concerning our system,” and in March 1911, just before the strike, again tried to allay any management fears of worker resistance by pooh-poohing any AFL correspondence which might be received in the future. [21] He knew the unions wouldn’t seriously interfere; his elitism prevented a clear appraisal of worker attitudes.

When the time-study man Merrick openly timed foundry workers with a stopwatch, action was immediately forthcoming. Though union members, they did not call the union, but instead drew up a petition demanding the cessation of any further Taylorist intrusions, and being rebuffed, walked out.

Joseph Cooney, a molder in the foundry, testified early in 1912 to the Congressional committee examining Taylor’s system, that there had been no contact between the workers and any union official and that the strike had been completely spontaneous. [22] Other testimony made it clear, furthermore, that workers’ resentment was fueled by the anti-workmanship aspects of Taylorism. Issac Godstray and Alexander Crawford, for example, spoke of the pressures to slight their work and reduce their level of craftsmanship.

Though an overwhelming majority of Watertown employees questioned by a consultant (hired by a group of workers) felt that the unions had no interest in agitating against scientific management, [23] the International Association of Machinists (IAM) publicly proclaimed union opposition to the system shortly after the 1911 strike.

Because this public opposition by the IAM in 1911 is practically the sole evidence supporting the thesis of pre-War union hostility to Taylorism, [24] it deserves a closer look.

In 1909, as McKelvey notes, the initial features of scientific management were installed at Watertown without the slightest protest from the unions, including the IAM. [25] At about this time, the National League of Government Employees began to make inroads on the IAM, due to the dissatisfaction of the latter group's members. The rival organization had drawn away many members by the time of the 1911 strike, [26] and the IAM was thus forced to make a show of opposition if it wished to retain its hold among the workers.

In a similar fashion, the International Molders' Union had to give grudging support to a strike of Boston molders in the same year; the strike had occurred without so much as informing the local union. The union leaders involved frequently made statements showing their actual support of Taylorism, and a careful reading of the 1911 AFL convention record, also cited as evidence of anti-Taylorism by the unions, shows that Samuel Gompers avoided directly attacking the new work system in any substantial way.

Burt Alpert's judgment that the "basis of modern trade unionism is its role in bargaining away the right of the worker to exercise control over the quality of his or her work" could have easily been reached via a study of the betrayal of the workers to Taylorism. G.T.W. Patrick's dictum that "a mere increase of wages will never redeem the evils of the industrial system" also seems to be to the point here.

The 1920s, which saw the not-unrelated phenomena of unionism's public embrace of scientific management and the falling away of union membership, was a victorious period for Taylorism. The age of the consumer was begun, out of the systematic destruction of much of the last autonomy of the producer.

With the invaluable aid of the unions, a healthy share of the content of work lives had been removed. James Rorty saw the lack of militancy and initiative from workers in the early 1930s as stemming directly from their lack of understanding of the technological processes to which they were enslaved. [27]

The re-awakening of the struggle for a life of quality and meaning in the 1970s is informed with the knowledge that work itself is the issue. [28]

Note [in the FE's November 1976 print edition]: "Taylorism and Unionism" is extensively footnoted, however the footnotes are deleted here for space considerations. They are available from author Zerzan at Upshot, Box 40256, San Francisco, CA 94140

Endnotes

Note for Web edition: The print version of this article did not include notes. The notes added here are from *Elements of Refusal: Essays by John Zerzan* (Left Bank Books, Seattle: Anticopyright 1988), in which the article is titled "Taylorism and Unionism."

1. David Jenkins, *Job Power: Blue and White Collar Democracy* (Baltimore, 1974), p. 9.
2. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, *Work in America* (Cambridge, Mass., 1973), p. 19.
3. Frederick W. Taylor, *Principles of Scientific Management* (New York, 1911), p. 32.
4. Siegfried Giedion, *Mechanization Takes Command* (New York, 1948), p. 38. C. Bertrand Thompson made the same point in 1917 when he pointed out the absence of competitive pressure behind firms employing scientific management, "for the reason that most of them now using it stand in a quasi-monopoly position in which there is no necessity to reduce their prices." See his *The Theory and Practice of Scientific Management* (Boston, 1917), pp. 88–89.
5. Mary Follett of the Taylor Society, for example, claimed that with scientific management, "authority is derived from function" and thus "has little to do with hierarchy of position as such." [See Taylor Society, H.S. Person, Editor, *Scientific Management in American Industry* (New York, 1929), p. 436.] Typical pronouncements claimed that it embodied "a new kind of authority which stemmed from the unveiling of scientific law." [See Samuel Haber, *Efficiency and Uplift* (Chicago, 1964), p. 25.] and that it substituted joint obedience of employers and workers "to fact and law for obedience to personal authority." [See Robert Franklin Hoxie, *Scientific Management and Labor* (New York, 1915), p. 9.] The time-study man, measuring and manipulating the worker with his stopwatch, relies on "unimpeachable data." [Horace D. Drury, *Scientific Management* (New York, 1915), p. 59.]

6. Taylor Society, op. cit., p. 46.
7. Taylor, *Principles*, op. cit., p. 59. H.L. Gantt, one of Taylor's leading disciples, spoke of implementing the task system as "the standard method of teaching and training children." [See his *Wages and Profits* (New York, 1919), p. 122.] Since "the worker became an object in Taylor's hands," in Jacques Ellul's phrase, it follows easily that he would be seen as an animal or a child by the Taylorites. Another part of the justification was Taylor's notion of the "economic man," that a worker's real motivation is money and nothing else. [See Sudhir Kakar, *Frederick Taylor: A Study in Personality and Innovation* (Cambridge, Mass., 1970) p. 99.]
8. Hugh G.J. Aitken, *Taylorism at Watertown Arsenal* (Cambridge, Mass., 1960) pp. 112, 137, 140, 158, 161, for example.
9. Taylor Society, op. cit., pp. 447, 450, 453.
10. That the fight to control work was the heart of the contest can be seen in such articles as "Who's Boss in Your Shop?" from the August, 1917 *Bulletin* of the Taylor Society. In fact, the first effort of Taylor to lay out his theory, in "A Piece-Rate System" (1895) underlines the fact that the problem to be solved is the antagonism between workers and employers. [See Frederick W. Taylor, "A Piece Rate System," *Transactions of the American Society of Mechanical Engineers* (New York, A.S.M.E., 1895), pp. 891-898.]
11. See, for example, H. Jack Schapiro and Mahmoud A. Wahba's "Frederick W. Taylor-62 years later," *Personnel Journal*, August 1974, which argues that the "economic man" model, in which money is the prime motivator, still (sic) obtains.
12. Taylor, "A Piece-Rate System," op. cit. (Discussion: Mr. John A. Penton), pp. 888-9.
13. Drury, op. cit., p. 187; Milton Nadworny, *Scientific Management and the Unions* (Cambridge, Mass., 1955), pp. 27-28.
14. John R. Commons, "Restrictions by Trade Unions," *The Outlook*, October, 1906.
15. Surveying the notes and bibliography sections of McKelvey's and Nadworny's books on the subject, we find that McKelvey looked at only two contracts (signed in 1925 and 1930) and that Nadworny examined none.
16. Haber, op. cit., p. 67.
17. Thompson, op. cit., p. 96 and p. 155.
18. Henry L. Gantt, a conservative Taylor disciple, admired the Leninist dictatorship, especially, of course, its Taylorist component. And Morris L. Cooke, a liberal Taylorite, of whom it was said in 1915 that "no one has done more to broaden the scope of scientific management," was one of the first spokesmen to publicly urge the Taylor Society to recognize its natural partner in unionism. Cooke, not surprisingly, became in the 1930s a prominent CIO advocate. [See Drury, op. cit., p. 153.]
19. Matthew Josephson, *Sidney Hillman* (Garden City, N.Y., 1952), pp. 111-112.
20. Taylor Papers, "Taylor or Ruggles." February 17, 1908.
21. Hugh G.J. Aitken, *Taylorism at Watertown Arsenal* (Cambridge, Mass., 1960), pp. 67-68.
22. "Hearings Before Social Committee of the House of Representatives to Investigate the Taylor and Other Systems of Shop Management Under the Authority of House Resolution 90." Vol. I, p. 230. Other testimony made it clear, furthermore, that workers resentment was fueled by the anti-workmanship aspects of Taylorism. Isaac Goostray and Alexander Crawford, for example, spoke of the pressures to slight their work and reduce their level of craftsmanship.
23. Aitken, op. cit., pp. 223-224.
24. For example, Haber, op. cit., declares that organized labor was solidly against scientific management during this period (p. 66), but only cites IAM statements (pp. 67-69) to support this view.
25. Jean Trepp McKelvey, *AFL Attitudes Towards Production* (Ithaca, 1952), p. 16.
26. Aitken, op. cit., pp. 183-184.
27. Richard H. Pells, *Radical Visions and American Dreams* (New York, 1973), p. 200.
28. Whereas Irving Bernstein's *The Lean Years: A History of the American Worker, 1920-1933* (New York, 1960) spoke of the 1920s "sharp reversal in the AFL's historic opposition to scientific management," more recent efforts repeat the same error. James R. Green's *The World of the Worker* (New York, 1980) quotes Bernstein to the same general point (p. 127), also citing McKelvey and Nadworny. Daniel Nelson's *Frederick W Taylor and the Rise of Scientific Management* (Madison, 1980) likewise repeats the myth of a pre-War "confrontation between scientific management and labor"

(p. 164) which turned into truce and then collaboration during the 1920s (p. 202). *Management and Ideology: The Legacy of the International Scientific Management*, by Judith A. Merkle (Berkeley, 1980), also makes this error (pp. 8, 29) without bothering to mention Nadworny in the text or bibliography. This suggests that the mistaken thesis of union opposition to Taylorism has become an axiom. With Peter F. Meiksin's "Scientific Management and Class Relations", in Vol. 13 No. 2 (March 1984) *Theory and Society*, error on this topic takes a quantum leap. On page 184: "the A.F. of L. was one of the earliest opponents of scientific management, and, while observers disagree as to the extent of worker resistance, it seems clear that Taylorism did provoke at least some strikes." Unionism is thus elevated even a bit higher yet, while rank-and-file antagonism is all but liquidated—an achievement which dispenses with the need for evidence. Sad to say, even Harry Braverman's excellent *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1974) falls into this kind of distortion; although the work admittedly does not deal with workers' struggles, his sole reference to anti-Taylorism (p. 136) is his judgment that Scientific Management "raised a storm of opposition among the trade unions during the early part of this century."

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