

Issue 75

Automation Costs Jobs

Research at some American colleges and universities is leading to the development of labor-saving machinery for use on farms. In recent years, huge machines that harvest crops have eliminated tens of thousands of jobs and have contributed to the growth of ever-larger corporate farms and the elimination of small farmers.

Research in other laboratories has led to the development of the transistor and then the microchip, which in computers has automated factories and offices and eliminated innumerable jobs.

Robots are being used more and more in manufacturing industries (e.g., automobiles and refrigerators), both in the U.S. and abroad. Unfortunately, they too replace people and, therefore, cost jobs. But highly automated plants raise productivity, thus offsetting cheaper labor costs in other countries. Their untiring precision makes possible a uniformly high quality of product that is economically competitive in world markets.

Such developments as these raise the specter of what has been called "jobless economic growth."

Would you be willing to take a job developing a machine or a device that you knew would, if successful, put people out of work? For example, how about a robot to drive farm machinery?

What if the displaced worker were a member of your own family?

If you had been a member of the California legislature when a bill came before it to suspend state support for research and development of agricultural labor-saving machinery because their use would destroy farm workers' jobs, how would you have voted? (The measure failed.)

(See "Computers and the Workplace," p, 124.)