Issue 74

Computers and the Workplace

Will the widespread use of computers of various kinds eliminate the need for central offices?

Workers whose jobs are done entirely on computers might just as well have their terminals at home, tied into the company's central computer by a telephone link.

Think of the effects on our big cities if workers could do just that: fewer commuters; more relaxed rush-hour traffic; a decline in office real estate, including the need for big central-city skyscrapers; an accelerated destruction of farmland as suburban commuters move farther out into the country; households in which the breadwinner is home all day long; the isolation from gossip and office politics; and the loss of a sense of community with fellow workers.

Will we find that the human need for society is so strong that these dispersals will be resisted?

Given the advantages and disadvantages, would you choose to spend your working life at such a "home work station"?

The athletes at many Olympic events could perhaps perform better without leaving home. There, timed and measured electronically, their performance could be communicated immediately to central headquarters, complete with pictures, from all over the world, eliminating immense expense and controversy. Would this be desirable?

(See "Automation Costs Jobs," p. 125.)

Think about this . . . *If a woman has a legal obligation to provide prenatal care for her child, how can she at the same time have the right to abort the fetus?*

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.)