

Automation in the Nation

by SYDNEY MAYERS

ONE cannot help but feel a sincere sympathy for the individual worker who finds himself superseded by a machine. His problem is personal, poignant, and immediate; and his need for prompt sustenance precludes his taking a detached view of the situation. To him, understandably, the machine is a monster which has seized his job, curtailed his income, and threatened his very existence. It is difficult to convince him that industrial automation is a commendable example of scientific and economic progress.

In a way, 'twas ever thus. Historically, the introduction of just about every labor-saving device known has resulted in a painful period of adjustment for affected wage-earners. Innovations such as mechanical looms, electric linotypers, electronic calculators, coin-operated dispensers, and self-service elevators have supplanted countless providers of human brain and brawn. All these economically displaced persons had to find new jobs, many had to learn new skills, and some probably never regained the status they once enjoyed.

Yet, with appropriate feeling for the individual sufferer, when one objectively observes the numerous upheavals brought about by new contrivances, it becomes evident that, in the long run, the machine has in fact benefited the great body of productive labor. Notwithstanding its worrisome effect on those adversely concerned, automation generally has vastly increased man's power to produce goods and render services. Thanks to the machine, the aggregate amount of eco-

nomie wealth and services available multiplies constantly, thus providing more for all to share. Particularly, since wages can come only from production, any improvement that enhances productive power offers a larger portion for division among workers.

Automation is not the enemy of labor, but (at least potentially) its best friend. Labor's greatest strides have come about through the use of increasingly efficient capital, of which automation has become an important attribute. Actually, the true "enemies" of labor are those phenomena which restrict production and promote unjust distribution, e.g.: taxes, tariffs, monopolies, repressive laws, and (most of all) the private appropriation of the use-value of land. It is these deterrents to production and trade which shackle the worker and mulct him of his honest earnings.

Since it adds immeasurably to his productive power, and to the source of his wages, the laborer should welcome and encourage automation. But he should also be aware that, as has always happened, the increased production realized from newly adopted labor-saving methods will ultimately find its way into the pockets of private landowners, in the form of rising land-rent. Automation, like free trade, in itself is a beneficial aid to production. As such, it certainly ought to be fostered. But only the abolition of the private collection of the rent of land will make certain that the benefits involved will go to the real producers of wealth, and not to those who "only stand and wait" for their unearned increment.

We Americans have every reason to be proud. We started federal government from nothing and have worked ourselves up to \$315 billion less than nothing. No other country in the world ever accomplished such a feat.

MARCH, 1965

7