

W.E.R.G.

RSN readers may have seen reports during the ASLEF dispute of a broadsheet of research results on the health effects of flexible rostering. Here is an introduction to the group that produced the broadsheet, and (reprographics permitting) the broadsheet itself.

The Working Environment Research Group (WERG) was recently formed by members of Bradford University who have an active interest in technical research that is of use to the labour movement. The Group is multi-disciplinary, drawing on the expertise of specialists in computer science, ergonomics, statistics, psychology, and industrial relations.

Members of WERG have been involved in Stress at Work studies among Leeds busworkers and Bradford printworkers. We have investigated the problems which union lay officials have in obtaining adequate health and safety information on dangerous substances. Recently WERG published a report on European evidence of the health hazards of irregular shift working for ASLEF and a broadsheet summarising this was published by BSSRS (reproduced in this RSN).
thanks to WERG & BSSRS A major area of activity is the impact of new technology. This has included research into automation in the confectionery industry, an analysis of the tacograph, and an assessment of microelectronics in banking, insurance and finance. Each of these projects has been undertaken in conjunction with trade unions at all levels.

An extensive programme of research into new technology in coal mining is likely to occupy WERG for several years. Research began in 1979 into MINOS (Mine Operating System), a new central computer system for the control of all colliery operations. Information on this has been published and presented to groups of miners on NUM courses. An interim report on the system and an assessment of its impact has been prepared for the NUM Executive. This report documents the NCB's progress towards automation and outlines the deskilling, work intensification and job losses that are implied. The NCB have clearly adopted a particular systems design which maximises management control, deskills the work of craftsmen and faceworkers, and subjects miners

to closer supervision at work than has formerly been possible. This is most extreme at the coal face where a management information system known as FIDO (Face Information Digested Online, or the 'watchdog' as it is dubbed by WERG) is equivalent to a sophisticated tacograph for faceworkers. Over 50 per cent of the industry's jobs are at risk from technological unemployment if MINOS goes ahead and traditional hours of work are maintained; the figure will be higher if the NCB succeeds in introducing new shift working arrangements. As with the move to power loading in the 1960s, the NUM is caught in a pincer movement of declining demand and technological change introduced to increase productivity and enable NCB coal to maintain or extend its share of total UK energy demand.

In proposals to the NUM Executive, WERG has offered to extend this research into technical alternatives, particularly in the overall systems design philosophy, that will preserve existing skills and avoid work intensification. By organising technology in a democratic, worker-centred fashion, the range and quality of skills can be increased and work hazards reduced. This consideration of alternatives will follow from a continuation of the pilot study and the development of a new technology teaching package for miners.

Following the defeat of ASLEF, the NUM is liable to be drawn into a confrontation over job losses and the outcome of this struggle will be as significant for the whole labour movement as the coal lockout of 1926.

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