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Working Alone: Protecting and Building Solidarity in the Workplace of the Future

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Acknowledgements

About the Author

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Working Together: A Personal Example

Years ago I worked as a heavy steel fabricator at a shipyard outside Philadelphia. I was on the third shift doing a job that had yet to be significantly Taylorized—broken down, de-skilled and standardized—that required significant communication and coordination with others. The non-standard, craft nature of the job; the need to work in groups on many aspects of the job; the many built-in stopping points within the work process: for example while waiting for materials, tools or assistance from other crafts; the integrated nature of the work process which required working with other crafts like welders, burners, riggers, crane operators; and the significantly lower supervision of the night shift all contributed to a high degree of social interaction and social connection at work. We spent time together, we worked together, we knew what was going on for other people in the department, if the boss was being a jerk, we all knew, and we took care of each other at work and outside. It was not uncommon for us to go to each other's houses after work in the morning, to help each other with major projects like moving, to spend time with each other's families, and to go to the bar on Friday mornings for a few drinks.

One night the second shift shop steward, a crane operator, was suspended and sent home for refusing to make an unsafe lift (a lift, by the way, that would never be allowed under current safety regulations). The third shift steward told us what was going on and while he did not tell us what to do, he certainly implied that we should consider dropping tools and walking out over the suspension.

A discussion ensued within our crew over what to do. After a while, Dan, one of the older workers, said that he didn't know what the rest of us were doing but he was walking out. At that point the discussion changed for all of us. The question of whether or not to walk out over the suspension had been transformed into a question of whether or not we would let Dan walk out alone and place his job in significant jeopardy. The transformation of the question clarified the answer. There was no looking back, there was no further debate. We all walked out with Dan.

When we got to the street, we sat down on the sidewalk and spent several hours discussing right and wrong, and figuring out the strategies needed to make our action successful and, frankly, to keep our jobs.

The tight connections among us, the social interaction and social networks, created a wildcat strike that was a concrete manifestation of "an injury to one is an injury to all." The connection to the steward and the union was strong enough to get us to discuss taking action. The connection to Dan was strong enough to get us to walk out, to act collectively.

Solidarity and Work

At a time when labor leaders and activists are struggling to figure out how to organize and activate working people, how to exert power over increasingly large and powerful corporations and even how to survive, questions of solidarity and collective action become critical. What is it that moves people to collective action, and what can be done to help build that action? While there are many factors that need to be understood and analyzed, a key issue is the changing nature of the workplace itself and the critical role that the workplace has traditionally played in creating the collective story—the collective experience—that is the basis for social connections and collective action among working people.

Despite the fact that solidarity is a defining value for the labor movement, there is remarkably little discussion about it within the movement—what it really is, where it comes from, and how to build it. A successful labor movement depends on solidarity being more than an abstraction printed on plaques or in mission statements and extolled in songs at the end of meetings. Solidarity, practical and concrete, is at the core of unionism and collective power; it is critical to the success of struggles to improve the lives of working people.

The workplace is a core site for collective experience, learning and power for working people. It is where they most directly feel the impact of the economy, and it is where they have the potential, through collective action, to influence the powerful economic players and forces that dominate their lives. As one writer described it:

> *The technological and managerial transformation of work and employment, along with the related transformation of labor markets, is the central means by which most people experience and are affected by broader economic changes. This is not to deny that people's experiences as consumers and their political, cultural and social interactions are not also dramatically affected by these economic changes – they clearly are. Nonetheless, paid employment (including self-employment) is the primary means of survival for the vast majority of the population and remains a primary arena of social interaction and human experience. Understanding the dramatic changes in work, employment, and the structure of labor*

markets is thus critical to the understanding of the broader implications of these dramatic economic changes for people at all levels of society.[1]

Workers who spend eight or more hours together five or more days a week under imposed conditions find both opportunity and need for interaction and are provided with a shared experience of both accomplishment and "oppression" that create a feeling of community through mechanisms of information, interaction, common experience, common challenge, and mutual support. As a shipfitter working in shipyards in the 1970's and 1980's, I bummed cigarettes, talked sports, complained about the cold, the welding smoke and the bosses, as well as provided social support to co-workers with whom I spent more waking time than I did with my family. I relied on co-workers to help me out, give me advice, and to cover for me. Together we created, we suffered, we produced, we complained, and we accomplished. These interactions tied us together as friends and co-workers facing common conditions, common struggles, and common oppression. The "health and safety" walkout described at the beginning of this paper was a wildcat strike rooted in workplace connections—we walked out to support Dan, though what we won was improved health and safety conditions and increased respect for the power of the union.

Even in non-union workplaces, the role of a social interaction-supported collective is critical in maintaining acceptable workplace conditions. Rate-busters in particular have historically been "disciplined" through informal pressures, positive and negative, to conform to collective norms. Lack of regular interaction and of social dependence weakens the community feelings that collectively benefit working people. Peer pressure around community norms, simply put, cannot be effectively applied in a workplace where interaction has been diminished or eliminated.

Shared experience is the foundation for building solidarity and for inspiring collective action in three key ways:

- Social interaction in the workplace builds commitment among co-workers. Even minor forms of social interaction raise the likelihood that people will take care of each other or stand up for each other.

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[1] Benner, Chris. 2002. *Work in the New Economy: Flexible Labor Markets in Silicon Valley*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell Publishers. page 2.

- Common experience builds the likelihood of collective reaction. If people collectively experience the creativity along with the oppression of the work process they are more likely to react in solidarity.

- Social interaction provides opportunities for creating and enforcing norms through positive as well as negative reinforcement.

However, as work is restructured and reorganized and as new technologies are introduced, workplaces and work processes are undergoing significant changes which limit workers' shared experience. These changes are occurring in every industry and in practically all workplaces and can be expected to not only continue but to accelerate going into the future. These changes are affecting and in fact diminishing the collective experience and, in doing so, undermining the very basis for solidarity and collective action.

Solidarity has always faced significant challenges in the form of racism, sexism and other divisive "isms" that penetrate workplaces. Other socially constructed mechanisms such as two tier wage or benefit systems, department-wide or team-based productivity or "safety" bonuses and the ideologies of competitiveness and individualism further undermine solidarity.

But today solidarity is facing new and largely unacknowledged challenges that are aimed at its core source: the workplace and the work process. Management is engaged in a concerted and largely successful effort to change work processes in ways that undermine the creation of connections and networks in the workplace that are key to building solidarity among working people. In industries and sectors across the economy, management-initiated changes in work processes are undercutting informal interaction, isolating workers from each other, and thereby undermining solidarity and weakening the potential for collective voice and collective action.

Because of the introduction of new technologies and the reorganization of work often through formal restructuring programs like Lean, Kaizen, Six Sigma, Toyota Production System, etc., workers are increasingly **"working alone,"** isolated from their co-workers. This isolation undermines the formation of dense networks of interconnection which are critical to the

transformation from individual to community and are the basis for collective action in the workplace and indeed in society as a whole.

This paper is based on several tenets:

1. Solidarity is, at its core, dependent on a strong, personal, and deep network of connections among workers.
2. These connections are created in the course of regular interaction connected with the workplace and the work process.
3. The workplace is a critical arena for collective input because it is through work that the economic situation and quality of life of the vast majority of people is determined.
4. The workplace has historically been the greatest arena of social interaction across race and gender lines. Despite the problems of racism and sexism in the workplace, it has also been an arena for cross-gender and cross-race interaction and collective struggle whose loss would be significant.
5. Lessons learned at work about social interaction and collective action can be transferred into other areas of life. Those who experience solidarity in the workplace are more apt to transfer these feelings of connection into other areas of their lives.

Management's Plan for Changing Work and its Impact on Social Networks

A critical problem for the labor movement, or for any movement built on collective action by working people, is being created by the destruction of social interactions and common experience within the work process. Rapid technological change and work restructuring are a reality in most workplaces and can only be expected to continue and accelerate. As a result of these changes in technology and work organization that management is introducing, people are increasingly isolated from their co-workers. These changes and the isolation they create need to be seen as an assault on solidarity. One could say that management is engaged in a concerted effort to limit the workplace as an incubator for informal social interactions and the resulting social networks.

I have identified eight key workplace trends that are directly contributing to increasing individual isolation and the destruction of social networking. While I separate these for discussion purposes and to more effectively examine their impact on social networking and solidarity, these are not isolated trends. They are deeply connected within the work process and within the wide range of changes that are being implemented in both technology and work organization.

Trend 1: Downsizing

In large workplaces across the country, shared space—physical, temporal and experiential—created millions of opportunities for informal interaction and network building. These numbers supported the development of potentially powerful direct and indirect social networks. At the three shipyards where I worked in the 1970's and 1980's, between one and four thousand workers were brought together each day. The opportunities for social interaction in the parking lot, at the time clock, and in the work process were immense and didn't require significant effort on anyone's part; they just happened. Inside and outside the workplace, in gathering spots like coffee shops, lunch spots, and bars, social connections were built among workers.

However, since the 1980's, direct productivity changes such as automation and speed-up have allowed significant downsizing of workplaces without a reduction in output. Although precise numbers for large establishments are hard to come by because the category of "over 1,000" is not further broken down by the statisticians, we know from the experience of industries like steel and auto that the very large plants with over 5,000 workers that once dotted the landscape are now rare. The Ford River Rouge plant in Dearborn, MI, employed 100,000 people in the mid 1930's, twice the entire current United Auto Workers (UAW) workforce employed by Ford. Steel mills that employed tens of thousands of workers in the 1970's employ hundreds today. In Massachusetts, General Electric and AT&T each had locations employing several thousand workers. Today, the AT&T plant is closed, and employment at General Electric in Lynn, Massachusetts has dropped below 3,000.

At the same time, facilitated by improvements in transportation, communication and control technologies, work processes have been broken up and distributed to multiple sites, further reducing the number of workers gathered together in any single location. The distribution of

parts production in auto manufacturing to many different suppliers, and modular construction techniques which move much of the work off of the construction site, are examples of this trend. In call centers, a first shift operation somewhere in the U.S. might be followed by a second shift in Ireland and a third shift in India, leading to a smaller workforce in each of the three locations. Mental health care workers who used to work in large institutions now often work in halfway houses, residential centers, or home care settings where they may only interact with one or two other workers.

Trend 2: Restructuring

Over the last several decades, management has introduced a wide array of reorganization schemes, such as continuous improvement, Six Sigma, Kaizen, Lean, 5S, and the Toyota Production System, which are designed to increase efficiency and transfer control over work processes from the workforce to management. The intensification of work through these restructuring initiatives, along with understaffing, severely diminishes social networking opportunities.

A central aspect of many restructuring programs is in fact the elimination of so-called "waste" or "non value-added" time. These targets for elimination include moments of lesser intensity within the work process, moments when informal worker-to-worker interaction more easily occurs. Although originally introduced in manufacturing, these restructuring programs have found their way into all sectors. The Toyota Production System, for example, is being used to intensify work in healthcare and lean techniques have been adapted by management in the public sector.[2]

In addition to the isolation that grows from an intensified work process, management has, in many restructuring programs, introduced a "team-building" aspect that leads to social connections that are created, controlled, and manipulated by management and are therefore not a positive base for building workforce solidarity.

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[2] See for example the Pittsburgh Regional Health Initiative website (http://www.prhi.org/about_mission.php) which advertises use of the Toyota Production System model: "Using the Toyota Production System as a model, PRHI developed a quality improvement method for clinical settings known as Perfecting Patient Care."

Trend 3: Job Combination

Merging job duties so that one person does many jobs is a common aspect of many work restructuring programs and reduces opportunities for interaction among workers within the work process. Communication needed for the work process yielded many opportunities for informal social interaction and network building. Before corporate demands for "multi-skilling," "multi-tasking," and job "flexibility" to eliminate "inefficiencies" at work sites prevailed, asking a coworker to cut a piece of steel, put down a weld or make a crane lift, created time to talk about the ball game or the latest outrage at work. In addition, the use of different workers for different tasks created downtime (waiting for the other worker to accomplish their task), which allowed for additional interaction among workers. When a single worker is forced to do many jobs, the social interaction is eliminated.

Job combination has another important impact that needs to be better understood and evaluated. In the shipyard there was notable racial isolation by department and job classification. My interaction with welders meant that I was often working with an African-American. In my department, which was mostly white, I would otherwise have had little direct, positive interaction with people of other races. Through the need to ask others to perform tasks I could not do, I had more interaction and a closer relationship with African-Americans than at any other time in my life. I carpooled, went to picnics and parties and developed connections in ways that have not existed since. This experience gave me a chance to break out of the white community where people of other races were often seen as an "enemy" to be avoided.

Trend 4: Monitoring

Monitoring of the workforce is increasing exponentially and greatly diminishes opportunities for social networking. With technologies like Global Positioning Systems (GPS), proximity readers, swipe cards, video surveillance and computer monitoring, there are few jobs that are not subject to some form of electronic monitoring. Where electronic monitoring is not possible or practical, the use of so-called visual controls and other techniques designed to make any deviation from a standard immediately apparent means that workers are always "on stage," performing for their bosses.

Monitoring limits the ability of workers to find and take advantage of micro-breaks or downtime built into the work process. Monitored workers are less able and less likely to "stop and talk" with co-workers. Supervisors notice proximity to another worker or changes in pace, often in real time. Truck drivers in open pit mines with GPS equipped trucks, for example, report that if they stop for even a short period of time, they are contacted over the radio and warned to get moving. Nurses with active badges, sarcastically called "Nurse Lo-Jack," and teachers whose every move is videotaped and whose e-mails are subject to review all feel the burden of monitoring. Even the prospect of monitoring can be a powerful deterrent, as workers increasingly assume management's unlimited monitoring capability and adapt their behavior accordingly. Monitoring also contributes to work process optimization and work intensification, thereby limiting informal interaction time within the workday.

Trend 5: Digitalization

Computerization has undermined worker-to-worker interaction through automation-based downsizing, dispersion of work, isolation of workers, and increasing management control over the form and content of communication. The funneling of information through electronic channels tends to remove much of the person-to-person communication critical to creating connections among workers.

Computer automation eliminates networking opportunities by eliminating work that can create social interaction. With digitalization, equipment operators and others can be isolated in control rooms, at home, or in other remote locations, limiting or eliminating interaction outside formal work channels. While increased communication is certainly a key aspect of the information revolution, the impact in the workplace is complex and nuanced when it comes to interaction among workers. There is, as one worker put it, "a lot more communication and a lot less interaction." Simply put, telephoning someone in a different office to ask for information relevant to work often leads to informal conversation and information exchange. Walking to another office provides additional opportunities for informal connections. Going on a computer to get information from company databases or from Google creates interaction with no-one.

Digitalization can also be used to standardize the kind of work-based communication that used to

provide many opportunities for social networking. With Electronic Medical Records in health care, for example, the handoffs at shift change are being transferred to the computer and away from face time. Thanks to new methods of automated sorting, letter carriers who used to spend a good portion of their day in the office with others as they sorted the mail into their final route order are now out on the street alone most of the day. In trucking, the opportunities to meet coworkers are undermined by the monitoring and work intensification that result from the introduction of computers into the trucks. Global Positioning Systems and in-truck laptops have contributed to the further isolation of those already in isolated situations. Digitally enabled "home garaging" encourages workers such as cable tv installers, phone company repair people, and others to take their vans home with them at the end of the work day. The networking that occurred at and around the garage at shift startup and shift end is eliminated.

It is indeed ironic that enhancements in communication and information-sharing technologies that are touted for their ability to bring the world together should play such a significant role as an enabler of isolation and in the destruction of informal interaction and social connection.

Trend 6: Schedule Changes

Shift change has always been an opportunity for significant social interaction at the coffee shop or the bar, or simply during the walk to the parking lot or the bus stop. These between shift interactions, which strengthen and expand social webs beyond one's immediate work group, are being affected by changing work schedules.

The eight-hour stable shift operation, the result of many years of labor struggle, is rapidly disappearing. Twelve hour shifts, rotating shifts, part-time work, split shifts, staggered shifts, irregular shifts and forced overtime are all aspects of the new workplace. As a result, the shift change is fading as a significant opportunity for social interaction.

Inside the workplace, a decline in common scheduled breaks is also undermining informal interaction. In health care, for example, workers report "fitting breaks in whenever they can," meaning that they not only often do not get breaks, but they often take their breaks alone.

Even carpools, a significant time for building social relationships, are increasingly difficult as staggered start and finish times and the use of forced, unscheduled overtime become more common.

Trend 7: Contracting Out or Use of Contractors and/or Temps

Contracting out of what had been in-house work is common in today's workplace. Both off-site and on-site contracting significantly threaten social networking. With contracting, organizational, administrative, and other barriers to informal interaction multiply.

Offsite contracting or outsourcing, moving in-house work to another location as well as another organization, contributes to downsizing and reduces the opportunities for interaction among workers who are, in many respects, part of the same work process.

Even on-site contracting has an impact on social interaction and the common experience of the work process. Different bosses, working conditions, schedules, and work rules all stand in the way of social networking. Furthermore, interaction between the incumbent, often organized, workforce and contracted or temporary employees can be strained because the incumbents see the new workers as "the other," often blaming them for permanent job loss.

Trend 8: Reduction and Elimination of Networking Jobs

In the past, many workplaces relied on networking jobs to facilitate communication, provide services across organizational or geographic boundaries, and to help with handoffs in production and service. Examples include mail room clerks, expediters, tool room clerks, and copy machine operators.

Workers in networking jobs interact with people from different departments and geographic areas, they communicate with others to fulfill their roles, and they operate under relatively little supervision. These workers serve the work process, but they also serve as links among departments and among workers.

With computerization and rationalization of production, many of these networking jobs are being

eliminated. Computer systems track parts in the shipyard so workers roam the computer system rather than the physical space. In office buildings, robots are delivering the mail, replacing the "mail room guy" who was an important source of informal information and social connection. Materials to be copied are e-mailed to the copy room and finished copies are shipped rather than picked up.

Solidarity or Unity?

Before we can identify responses to these challenges to workplace solidarity, we must first examine how solidarity is built. At the beginning of this paper, I described what solidarity looks like, stressing that when worker solidarity exists, people are united by much more than connection to leaders or to a program. It didn't matter to us what Dan believed about god, guns or gays, or even how he felt about his union. What mattered was that we weren't going to let him go down alone.

Recently, the labor movement has paid increasing attention to involving and mobilizing members. A mobilizing model, such as the Program/Unity Model in Figure 1, seeks to build connection and interaction between individual members and "the union." This model helps to inform members of union programs, positions and campaigns, and can even build some members' commitment to a specific leader. This focus on member involvement, communication, and mobilization is an important development, but it misses something fundamental—the something that got my co-workers and me out of the shipyard and into the streets to protect our health and safety—namely, the deep and dense connections among workers that result from workplace interaction.

In contrast, a solidarity model, such as the Social Model in Figure 1, seeks to build the connections between individual members, while also connecting members to the union leadership. This model accepts that some members may have little or no connection to "the union," but instead can be strongly connected to their coworkers.

Mobilizing individual union members into group activities is not the same as building a movement from below. Despite admonitions that "the members are the union," in most members' eyes the reality is that the program and the leadership are the union, and the connection between work-based networks and the collective is not always clear. While member mobilization is an important mechanism for building union strength and exerting leverage in political and other arenas, it does not build the robust connections among workers that will hold them together through tough times and that will send a message of strength to management. People can unite behind a person or a program, but this does not replace the fundamental solidarity that is a stronger, more visceral reaction growing out of social connection.

Figure 1: Organizing Models
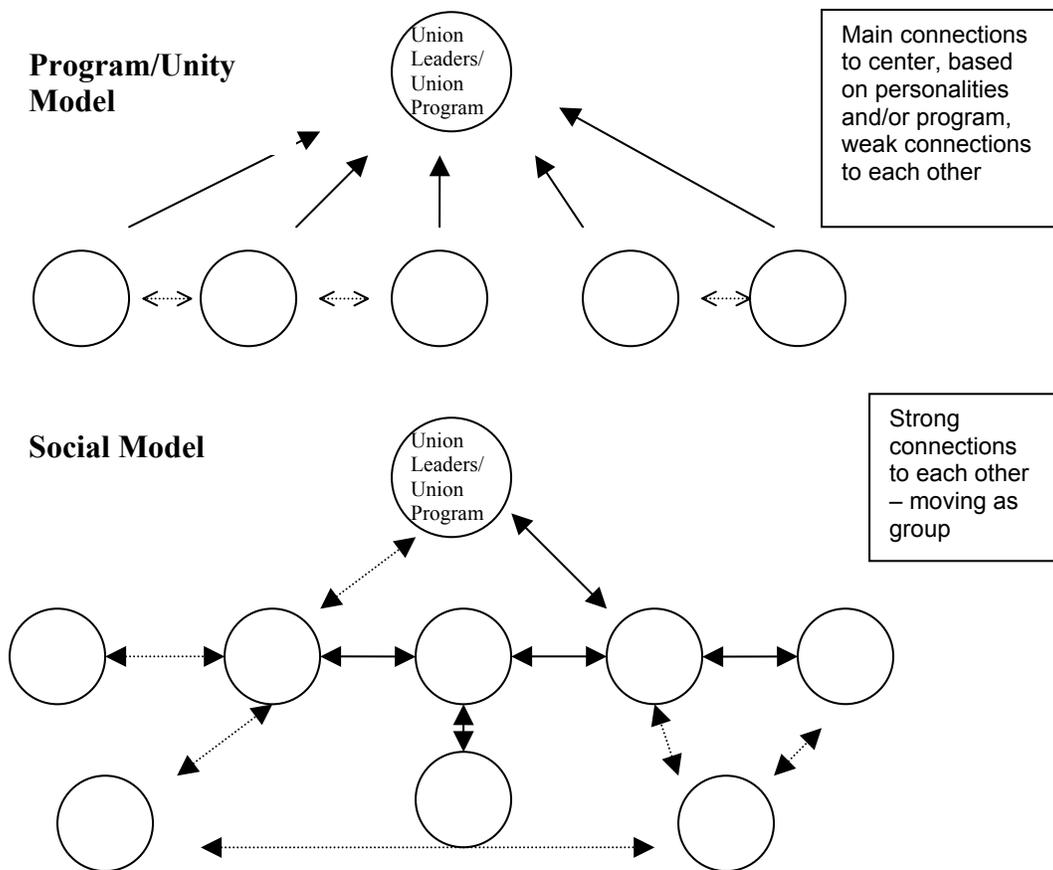
To counteract the impacts of management's plan for changing work, unions must develop ways to create a solid foundation for collective action by building the kinds of ties that will bind union members and other workers together. It is critical to understand these mechanisms more deeply, to connect the changes in the workplace to the corporate destruction of these mechanisms and to develop counteracting strategies that protect social interaction and collective voice.

What Needs To Be Done: Understanding the Problem, Developing a Response

Workplace interaction and connection that are critical to the growth of solidarity are being challenged by the restructuring of work and the introduction of new technologies. While manufacturing has historically been the centerpiece of discussions about new technologies and work process change, the eight trends I identified above are playing out in all sectors and industries. This crisis is largely being ignored by the U.S. labor movement.

In order to protect solidarity as an organic force, a force that can be the core of a revitalized labor movement, attention needs to be paid to:

- ☑ **Acknowledging and understanding changing work and its impact on the creation of solidarity.**

  Unions and other organizations dedicated to building the working class movement need to think deeply about solidarity in its most basic forms. There needs to be further analysis of the significance of what I have termed organic solidarity and of how that solidarity is being affected by the trends I have discussed. Without acknowledging and understanding the problem, we can never get on the road toward solving it.

- ☑ **Evaluating all changes in technology and work organization for their impact on social interaction and social networking—on solidarity potential.**

  Overly broad acceptance of management rights to determine technology and work

organization has led many, if not most, unions to surrender the work process to management. Even when unions confront such changes the effect on solidarity are seldom part of the analysis: even in a case involving home garaging where a strong, activist local union was paying attention, negotiations were limited to individual protections; the issue of effects on solidarity did not make it onto the union's radar screen. In another case, management approached a local union suggesting split lunches for three machine shops in its plant, arguing that due to cafeteria crowding split lunches would give people a longer effective lunch. The local union agreed to the proposal because they saw it as a benefit to his members **as individuals**. It failed to notice the potential impact on solidarity among the three machine shops and to bargain protections for the union.

Unions need to look at the changes in technology and work organization that management is making and evaluate their impact on solidarity and the potential for solidarity development.

☑ **Proposing alternatives.**

When facing changes in technology and work organization, unions need to look at their impact on solidarity and social networking and formulate demands that defend social interaction and solidarity. We need to know a lot more about the key components of solidarity growth so that we can more effectively bargain to protect them or defend them in public discourse on technological change. Some changes should be opposed simply because of their isolating character, while the isolating impact of others can be mitigated through bargaining. Developing the struggle against social isolation is, in fact, a solidarity-building exercise in and of itself.

In the home garaging case referred to above, proposals to protect the collective might have included monthly or weekly meetings on paid time where members would have an opportunity to network and where the union would have an opportunity to communicate with the members as a group.

☑ **Taking on the ideological attacks on solidarity.**

Individualism inside and outside of work is having negative repercussions at work and in the community. To enhance the collective good, unions need to develop broader social programs that take on individualism as an ideology and as workplace practice.

Working alone is a growing challenge to the kinds of collective action that can change the world for the better. In this paper, I argue that without collective experience and collective connection, there can be no real voice for workers in the work and workplaces of the future, and that this in turns threatens the voice of workers in society overall. The union movement, and all those who care about the collective voice of the working class, must recognize this problem and strive for solutions. Understanding the effects that work organization and technological change can have on collective experience and worker-to-worker relationships is critical to understanding the role that workforce voices will play in determining the future of work. Perhaps even more than organizational leaders, rank and file workers who have experienced the meaning of social interaction and social connections can make a significant difference in changing today's workplaces and creating those of the future.