Interview with Worker 9, Connecticut Workers & Technology Project, by Robert Asher, January 19, 1982.

Asher: Why don't we start by talking about your days, when you are working in production, when you first entered the trade. Do you want to just start by telling me your first job and what it was?

Worker 9: Well, the first job was vibrating hair springs.

RA: Vibrating? What does that mean?

W9: Vibrating's a machine that you put the wheel on and look over the top in a valance, vibrate it. In other words, vibrate it to bring the spring into the gauge that we had up top. Because that's where they used to cut them off and get the right amount of the wire for the . Then, from then, the company come up with -- during the war, it was 1942 that the war work was in. Being a leader, which went from operation to operation, which is a carousel, we get the fuse out. And after the fuse part of it, they went into making tape recorders. I worked on the tape recorders which was for a very little while. And then they took on what they called a doll, a talking doll. All those things are since gone. They went out on a watch, clocks; they had clocks up there. We made alarm clocks, kitchen clocks.

RA: What did you do in making those pieces?

W9: The whole complete thing.

RA: You assembled the whole thing.
W9: Yes. We made -- every piece--part was made from the gear all the way to the --
RA: Oh, so you made the parts too.
W9: Yes.
RA: Now you were on different jobs at different times?
W9: Yes. We started with two girls and we learned every one of the piece-part that went into the watch. At that time they were plastic, plastic gears and all that. We had to set them, check them before they went out. Then from that part of it, I went on to a department which is the press room, which was a wire brush, just a present. About fourteen years ago, I was on that. Instead of putting it in tumbling and rolling, having it washed, did dry, they now put it on a machine, which is a big table to feed it the frame, just back and forth every day. Every piece had to go on the frame and they had a big wire brush that just wirebrushed it and knocked the chips off.
RA: What was being done to the piece on the frame?
W6: Cleaning the holes.
RA: Cleaning the holes.
W6: Or clearing the holes for any burrs that were on.
RA: And how would that be done? By a sander or --?
W6: There was a big wire brush put on the machine. That wheel would keep turning and turning and the table was going around. As the piece went around the brush was brushing the wire the machine the frame.
RA: Is that the job you've worked on the longest?
W9: Yes. Since that time, that's been automated. Now you put the piece in the bowl, and from the bowl, it goes on the track, and goes right into the machine, as far as the same operation that's being performed that I used to feed.

RA: So your main job on that was to feed the pieces in?

W9: Yes. They called it a packer-matic machine, which meant you put the frames, just frames, all different model frames. That's all the machine did. Then they automated it, which meant they didn't need all the girls in that job.

RA: Before they automated it, over the years, did they speed it up?

W9: Originally they came in and time-studied the job, and maybe about a year after, they come in and tried to cut it. So what happened here, we told them, "Get the full speed of that machine"; which was good because they never could come in after that and change the job, like they come in and do the same method as there. I think they found it doing one piece different from what it was timed. Nobody could pick up that much. This way here they were never able to come in and touch that rate. You've always got your union increase rates, because that was the most that machine could do. With that, they turned around and they automated it.

RA: So rather than actually trying to make the machine run faster, they just put in a whole new machine.
W9: No, they put a bolt, just put a bolt and a track that feeds instead of the operator feeding. You used to run the machine and just go like this, with a frame. Now you don't have to do that.

RA: Did they cut the rate when they automated?

W9: Oh, sure, because that was a piece work job that went from piece work down to a flat rated job.

RA: Overall, would you say that was a ten per cent cut or what?

W9: Well, in the monies I really don't know, but what happens here the company gain, because instead of every operator doing a machine, they would have now, say, four or five machines, one operator just putting the work in there.

RA: But I'm just wondering for most of the people who had gone from the piece rate to the flat rate, would they be making the same amount of money or a little bit less or --?

W9: No, they would make less.

RA: Like five per cent you think? Or ten per cent? Do you have any idea how much the decrease would be?

W9: I wouldn't have any idea, but it went from, just say, five dollars an hour, it could have went down to three dollars.

RA: That much?

W9: Yes.

RA: I see.

W9: Because it was a flat rated job. I'm not sure on the
figures, but it took a big dive.

RA: A big cut, in other words. Were the people who had been working on piece rate on that job given the chance to bid on other jobs so they wouldn't have to take a pay cut?

W9: Well, then they would have other foot and drill jobs in the same department. Then when everybody (was) at the foot and drill, that's when the company again automated the foot and drills. First of all, instead of the kit, they would have buttons on the side. Then from buttons on the side, they went right over to the button machine.

RA: And they cut the rates there again when they went to automation?

W9: Right.

RA: Does that mean that actually they've been cutting down the number of higher paying jobs within the whole plant?

W9: I would say so. You work down at the plastic area, which is a plastic department, it's the same thing there. Constantly putting bowls in to feed the machines. When you get the bowls feeding the machine it eliminates people.

RA: But in addition to eliminating people, they're also cutting the rates a lot.

W9: Oh, yes.

RA: So it's two things happening really.

W9: Right. The company's getting their productivity. For instance, on the wire brush, if there was one
machine running, every operator was feeding it, and just say that machine produced three hundred an hour, if you had six or seven operators feeding it, then it's boiled down to one. So they're getting the productivity, the operator is naturally going to get less money. That's what we're finding out on a lot of the jobs. You've heard about the watches; how they're doing it in the watches.

RA: Yes.

W9: You're familiar with the watches being involved in the union. Every operation, every department in the company, in the interviews before, from the packing strap, to the press, to the tumbling, rolling, to the plastic room, to the gyro, and then to the new methods and change that they're giving the plastic. Originally they came in and girls fed those too.

RA: It sounds like they gyro area is the one area where the skills and the pay are actually being upgraded a little bit.

W9: Well, not now. They had different tests that require a little bit more money. I think they have to know more, because a lot of those jobs require a lot -- you know, it's a job where you just can't goof off. All your gauges and all your tests.

RA: So there it's actually a little higher skilled, but everything else they've been cutting back on the skill, and cutting back on the pay, it sounds like.

W9: Yes. Because they've never brought the pay rate up to
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it. Just recently I find that you can take a domestic cleaner that's being paid more than the gyro girl.

RA: Really?

W9: Yes. That's the next issue I'm working on. That's for re-evaluation for what they do in there. All the new equipment. You know, it's a great responsibility. Even though they figure it's just a button you turn. It takes a little bit more than that.

RA: When did the automation machines from the various processes really begin to come in? Was it ten or fifteen years ago or more recently?

W9: I'd say roughly maybe ten years, or just a little bit more. I mean I'm not quite sure of the date but I know it's over ten years.

RA: And then it's been like one department after another. The machines sort of keep coming in more and more.

W9: Right now the companies are working on like the QC department, which are the inspectors. I understand they do have a couple of machines right now that they're working on where they can just set it as a computer type. Instead of the girls having to check every piece-part, all you got to do, trying these two new machines. If it gets working, if, you know damn well the companies are going to get it to work. That isn't in force right now, but constantly the company is just going on and on to get the auto- mation going. Productivity's going for them and then the people just seem to go out the door.
RA: Do you think that absenteeism in the plant has gone up over the last ten years?

W9: It certainly has. That's one of our biggest problems is absenteeism. And then it's like a rush if they need to work. Work Saturday, work Sunday. You know, you can't keep on doing it.

RA: But the absenteeism is definitely up?

W9: Oh, yes. The absenteeism is a problem.

RA: And do you think -- why do you think it's up?

W9: I think it's up because of the people, the way they now have to work. To get anywhere they're constantly going. Where before you had a machine that produced your work, you were able to go take a break. Now, machines are just running.

RA: Constantly you have to tend more machines?

W9: I don't think you can relax as much working today as you could years ago. It's the type of work you're doing now, and also the bosses being on your back, not caring, "I don't care how you do it but that's what I want."

RA: When more people are absent, does that mean that more people are getting warnings. "You've been out too much; we're going to fire you if you don't stop it."

W9: Oh, that's pretty painful. It's coming. More now than it has in the past. And when there's an absenteeism, they try to push it on the other person. You know, the good operator is in, go on over there and do the best you can. Which is overloading,
expecting a person to take care of two people's work, and get the pay for one.

RA: Do you ever get grievances that someone's been doing two persons' work for, say, a week?

W9: No, not where it's a steady diet because we write in. I see. But it happens a day, or half a day, and they don't get any extra pay for it.

W9: No. What they do if they're able to call people in -- You know, some people go home at eleven and called in at nine o'clock in the morning due to absenteeism. They even ask people to work over from the eleven. Instead of go home at seven, they'll ask them to stay over three or four hours, or five hours or more.

RA: Suppose someone said, "Look, I'm sorry. I have something to do. I won't stay." What happens?

W9: Well, then they'll just ask the person that's there to try and double up and get the best out they can.

RA: But there's never any punishment for refusing to do overtime, is there?

W9: No. I think they can't punish you for overtime.

RA: That is legally they can't. The foreman can be nasty to you.

W9: Oh, yes. They want you to work the overtime. That's why we have a good shop, because these people are working a lot of hours. They have to take a day off. Why should that foreman say, "OK."

RA: Is more overtime being requested, say, in the last five years than previously?
W9: I'd say so.

RA: Why do you think that is?

W9: Because I think they use a lot of overtime when there's a layoff. A person can be laid off on a Thursday or on a Wednesday, and have a layoff in the department, and yet that department will be working Saturday, and in some cases, Sunday. I think maybe the companies are feeling they're gaining more, paying a person to time and a half than bringing another person in. Don't forget, your benefits and everything. It's cheaper for the company. All's they're going to give you is time and a half for that eight hours. The person could be out on the street with their benefits.

RA: With benefits in some places run twenty-five to thirty per cent of salary, so I could see how that would work.

W9: Ours is about fifty. Fifty to fifty-five per cent.

RA: It's that high. So they save a half right there. And then someone's not accumulating seniority, which would mean more benefits and higher pay and all that.

W9: That's right. And that's why we ask for no overtime while others are laid off in the department.

RA: So you try to limit the overtime.

W9: You can see that it is to the company's advantage because people lose out on vacation pays, their pensions. The company feels it's better. Leave them out. They're saving on so many. I'm sure it's ."
RA: Have there been any strikes in the last fifteen years when all -- ?

W9: We haven't had a strike in twenty-five years in this plant.

RA: Do you think there have ever been small groups of people in the plant, workers in the plant, who favored a strike?

W9: Well, if they did, they never showed it. I only can speak for myself.

RA: No one's really called for a strike. There hasn't been any strong desire for a strike. Do you think that's because people feel it wouldn't work? A strike wouldn't be successful?

W9: I suppose they'd look around and I can't answer for people, but people make the demands and they haven't made them.

If they want to strike, all people get together, right?

RA: Yes.

W9: They demand We've been successful that they just offered (to) check the company's offers. I said there was no strike in twenty-five years. It means people were happy and accepted what the company offered.

RA: They were happy despite -- well, I mean, in all these interviews we've heard complaints about various things that weren't necessarily always settled to the satisfaction of the workers. But I guess that was not enough to make people want to strike, basically. That's what it comes down to, right?
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W9: Yes. I think people now have more fear of going out.

RA: Because there's so much unemployment.

W9: You'll find the people will be going to the company's way because they are afraid.

RA: What do you think? Do you think that the workers are more appreciative of the union since there's been a lot of change in machines and technology, and the union has helped them get new time studies, new rates set, and things like that? Has that made them appreciate the union's help more?

W9: I really can't see where the company automation that the people are thankful for, because people go out the door.

RA: Yes, that's true, but the union is at least giving some protection.

W9: Yes, if you get overloaded or something, they'll go in and talk to the boss. I don't see where it's not benefiting our people.

RA: Is there anything you can do to fight it, though, really?

W9: How can you fight it? If I say overloaded, well, over there on a daily basis, then it will come right back again to the word; it's an absenteeism. If the people were here, we wouldn't have to ask the people to do this. That's what it's all about.

RA: Do you think that the plant could run smoother if workers were asked more often for their opinions and advice about how to set up particular jobs, how to run things?

W9: I think if the company's had more concern for their
workers, like that, and get down and talk to the people on the floor, where there's a problem, you know, "How do you think you could do this?", it would show the people that the company really cares about them. It's the attitude of the man that's in charge on the floor. We're saying that he does not give a damn about workers today. They're young. The older foreman, he just went in; you respected him; you told him if he needed this, you did it. There was no "I'm not going to do it," because he knew how to handle the workers.

RA: Are there any women foremen now?

W9: We have some women foremen.

RA: Is this a recent development?

W9: We just had one recently put in this department that we've been talking about. The press room, where the automation is. We just recently got a woman there.

RA: Was that because people specifically asked for a woman?

W9: No. You don't ask who's going to be the foreman.

RA: But over the years, most of the foremen have been men, right?

W9: Yes.

RA: And the industrial relations people have been men?

W9: Yes. I never remember a woman.

In time it's the industrial relations. It's part of being the manager of it. We had a couple of women in, just for a short period of time. There was supposed to be a

but they no longer do it. We've gone up to higher
RA: I see.

W9: The last ones have been men.

RA: Have there been a lot of requests by the union to have various new jobs time-studied? Has that happened very frequently?

W9: Well, that's another field where we used to be able to go in time-study and work it very nicely on a daily base or a weekly base. We could put out a reasonable job. We were able to go out, observe the operator, what she was doing, and compare one frame to the other. The companies are just doing away with this. Now the time-studies are all being done through personnel. It was nice because the company and the union had a time-study man who we dealt with. The problems were settled there more on the floor level. Today you can't get to a time-study. It was nice; the foreman called them up; they'd come in, but since that practice has been stopped.

RA: Has the union ever called in its own time-study people?

W9: Never got called in time-study.

RA: When there was a real disagreement over the company's time-study? Is that when you do it?

W9: Yes. By the time you get to it, to arrange, the job is out.

RA: If you have agreements under those cases, though, can't you sometimes get retroactive pay?

W9: Yes. more problems from each one. I think it's the attitude of management against their workers today that have these people in those stages.
Tranquilizers, upset, and all this, instead of trying to solve what is your problem. Why can't you get here?

RA: So overall you think that the average worker has a higher work load today than, say, ten years ago.

W9: Definitely. They might say it's a little bit easier, but, hell, if you could compare feeding machine and walking the length of that floor. It takes a hell of a lot more out of a person than a person sitting and producing from just here to here. There's a lot more moving and walking.

RA: Do you have any predictions about what's going to happen in the next five years.

W9: I don't have any prediction what's going to happen.

RA: Is there concern that even more people will be laid off?

W9: Well, right now. You can't ever know how the orders come in. It's a field -- watches -- that we have a lot of competitors today.

RA: But have they kind of automated or highly mechanized most of the departments now so that the major reduction from the new machines in terms of the number of people working is already taking place, do you think?

W9: Oh, yes.

RA: So you won't see the same kind of work force decline that you saw in the last five years.

W9: No, at present, you know.

RA: As long as they sell their product. So you can kind of expect now a bit of a breather in terms of layoffs due
to new machinery coming.

W9: It's that right now.

RA: But the last five to ten years you've seen a lot of people go?

W9: A lot of other people; every year there's a change in the watch. And every year, our people go out the door.

RA: A few.

W9: Or let's say all of them. On the watches themselves.

Course they get the More productivity is being done overseas than is here in the United States.

That's

RA: Do you hear stories of so-and-so who was laid off because they put a new machine that did the work of five people? Do you hear whether they were able to get a job in some other factory? Do you have any feeling for that?

W9: No, they can come back to the shop on recall rights.

RA: Yes, if they have seniority. But the people who don't have seniority, they're out for good, right?

W9: Yes.

RA: Do you have any feeling whether they find other jobs in the area or a lot of them just stay unemployed for a long time or what?

W9: I have no idea. The only ones I check are the ones that have not exceeded their time in service. If they exceeded their time in service If it's a year, they've worked a year, then they got a year to come back before they lose any seniority.
RA: Oh, that's how it works.

W9: Yes. If they got six months, that's all they get. anybody over two years who doesn't have recall rights in two years.

RA: If you worked twenty years you still only have recall rights of two years?

W9: That's right.

RA: That's the maximum recall. From time to time, people have been recalled?

W9: Oh, yes.

RA: When production expands?

W9: Years back, they used to have somebody working on the next model that was coming in the next year. Today you don't have that.

RA: Are any of these stamping processes dangerous in any way really? Or are they pretty safe?

W9: No, they're safe.

RA: So there are no real safety problems.

W9: No.

RA: Have there been any questions around new chemicals coming into the plant?

W9: No. Everyone that comes up, if they should develop a rash or something, (they) check it out. Some can work on it, and some just can't. But it's not like a chemical plant.

RA: But there are no major problems as you see it with chemicals in the factory. Can you think of any major changes that we haven't talked about?

W9: I think the companies today are buying up all the industrial engineers, the i.e.'s, and they seem to be
coming in and running plants. No labor background.

RA: No knowledge of how to deal with people in other words.

W9: Yes. Or you should have, if you're in industrial relations, you should have some kind of backing, because that's where you work. Union and management does that. Personnel isn't finding out; they're just bringing people in who are not -- For example, right now, ours was an old time-study. What are you going to get out of him? He has no concern and he's young to begin with. His kids are four and five years old. If you're going to take somebody who's got nineteen, twenty, twenty-five, they know what raising a family's all about. But this one here -- sit in a corner. And that to me is the type that's been treated --

RA: And that's the plant manager now basically?

W9: Yes. "I'm the boss, and that's it." You should have some labor backing. If you're personnel, you don't have to have it. There just seem to be time-study i.e.'s. You know what they're for.

RA: Squeeze out production. Do you think the quality of the pieces produced has been about the same or gotten better because of the new automated machinery?

W9: I would say no.

RA: It's about the same. No big increase. They just turn out more.

W9: Same piece part. I really think companies if they paid a little bit more for the part that's coming in, you can buy something for five dollars, three dollars, or
two dollars. If you're going to buy the two dollar part and hope to get the three dollar, five dollar work out of it, you're not going to get it. You find out people have to work more on it, and the end result, you have to go right back the company are buying cheaper materials.

RA: I see. And you think it would be better if they bought better material.

W9: Especially in the gyro department. Just recently had a survey. He gave it to me 

. Boiling it all down, it was just management not knowing how to handle people. And materials .

RA: When you say you did a survey, you mean you asked people what they thought?

W9: No, they asked us how we could help them. What we thought the problem is.

RA: And you told them you thought it was materials and the way they were treating people?

W9: Yes. That's about it. The boss doesn't have a concern for the product. say, "The hell with you." And that's what you're finding out more and more is the people who are involved with the worker — it's just not knowing the people, work with the people. There's a clown in every office but you make more out of that clown than the person who's sitting here all day long.

RA: Do you think the workers kind of get annoyed when the quality of the parts they have to deal with is low, and
would just feel happier about their jobs generally if they had better quality materials to work with?

W9: I think you take your gyro; you're building that up, going through . The end result they like to see too. If it's going to be turned down everytime they do it, due to a faulty part --

RA: I understand there was a lot of frustration when they switched from mechanical to electric movements. There were problems with the assembly and all that. People just were kind of annoyed that the finished product was not as good.

W9: They were there to put out production, quantity and quality. How can you get the quality? They want the quantity; how can you get the quality? That upsets the operator because she may do it and she might get written up for doing bad work, and actually it's probably not even her fault.

RA: Do you think the quality of the metals being used for the various parts on the stamp press has gone down?

W9: When you say on the stamp press--

RA: I'm sorry, not the stamp presses; your area where you have to brush with the burrs. Have you seen more burrs and more problems with that?

W9: Like I say, that was to knock off the burrs.

RA: Yes, but are you having more problems with more burrs?

W9: No.

RA: That's about the same in your area. Can you think of anything to add?
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W9: No.

RA: Okay. Thanks a lot.

End of Interview