Interview with Worker 4, Connecticut Workers and Technology Project, by Martha Detzer, January 19, 1982

Detzer: Let me ask you first of all, how long have you been working for Corporation?

Worker 4: Fourteen years.

MD: Fourteen years?

W4: Fourteen years, and I've seen a lot of changes.

MD: Did you do the same job for fourteen years?

W4: No. I've been on quite a few different ones.

MD: How did you start out then?

W4: When I first started, I started as packed assortments, like the displays you see in the stores. We put the watches in, ship them to the stores, so they can put them in the displays. All different models of watches. That was done all by manual. You walked around, picked so many of each watch, put it in a box, taped it up, shipped it out. Now, within the last two years, that went automation. Now they have it on a carousel. It just swings around. You stand in one spot; the watches come to you. You take them out and put them in the cartons. It's all completely different than what it was.

MD: Are you still doing the same job?

W4: No. That was day rate, then it was piece work. So I figured I could make more money, because the other job was flat rated. I could make more money on piece work. So I switched to piece work, which was packing the finished product, like the watches.
MD: Again, on the day shift?

W4: Yes. Still on the day shift. I was on the end of the conveyor. I was called an end girl, because that's where the finished product ended. I had to stamp every individual watch that came down. It had the number of the watch, the price of the watch, and the information, whether it was water-resistant, or whatever, and the date that it went out, onto each individual box.

MD: You used to do that manually?

W4: Yes. All by hand. I had to stamp each individual -- say they put a set-up on the line of two thousand of one watch. I had to stamp every one of them boxes, two thousand, each come down the line. Now, just this past year, they automated. They put a stamping machine in, which takes the job away from the girl. Now, all she does is pick them up and pack them. She doesn't have to stamp anymore.

MD: These are still piecework then, to do it that way?

W4: Well, they haven't come up with anything, whether it's going to be piecework or not. Before, it was piecework, and it was good money. That's why this last job I switched off of, because with the automation most likely it's going to be a flat-rated job. It's going to cut you right down in half. That's why I transferred to this job I'm on now, which is tool-setter. I set the machines up for the girls, as they're working. They're on piecework. So I
have to have them set up for them, get them set up ahead. It's in the strapping area.

MD: So before the women come in to work, for instance, you have to set the machines up and make sure that they're operating?

W4: Yes. I check them out. I don't do it before they get in. They'll be working on one the end of the day, like today, and they'll go on it tomorrow morning. But if they're going to make a change, I have to have that set up in time, so when they finish that job, (they can) just jump over onto this one here.

MD: Was there special training that you got for being a tool setter?

W4: No. It's not really that complicated. It's just setting up the machines. You more or less learned on the job. It's not really that hard.

MD: So your day is spent how? Constantly going back and forth on all these?

W4: Yes.

MD: Are you responsible for a certain number of machines?

W4: I'm responsible for all of the machines in the strapping area. Then they tell you, "If you have time, help out the other tool setter." (laughs) Which is almost impossible. You have enough to do with your own. It is constantly going all day. Like I say, you're under pressure where you have to help, not really help the girls. You have to get it set up
so it's working good for them when they get over there, so they can make halfway decent money on it. When you set it up, it's got to be set up perfect almost, so when the girl comes over she just jumps on that machine and takes off on it right away.

MD: So that there is no delay you mean?
W4: Yes.

MD: How many machines are in the strapping area?
W4: We have hand strappers.
MD: That's this thing?
W4: Yes. They put the bands and the straps on. But most of the hand strapping is with the bands. The straps like you have on your watch there, we have an automation. Semi-automatic, they call it. You put the head of the watch in; you set it in this. Then you attach the blade to it. All the girl (does is) sit there and hold the strap and hit the food pedal. And the machine does all the work. You just buckle the watch, put it in the tray, and that's it. You don't have to do it by hand. See, they automate it in there too. So we have hand strapping and automation strapping. Right now we have twenty-four semi-automatic strapping machines. We have some that have to be put on with a slide tool. The band fits up and it's got to be bent over, right to the watch. We have eight to ten of them. Then we have presses where the watch is strapped and it's sent over to the press, where the girl has to put it in the press and press it.
I would say we have a good twelve of them.

MD: So you're working on how many machines all together? You work on the manual ones as well then?

W4: No. The manual is all done by hand. I don't have to bother with them. I have twenty-four semi-automatic strapping machines and, I would say, twelve presses and then about ten slide tools. You're not working on them constantly. Maybe you'll be working on one here and then they'll need a press set-up. So you go set up the press. Then you jump from the press when you're done there, set up a semi-automatic, change the nest and the blade.

MD: All of these machines, even though they do different kinds of strapping, are they basically the same function, or do you have to be a specialist in all of the three different machines? In other words, do you need different tools for each of the different machines to repair them?

W4: Oh, yes.

MD: You do. So you have to carry a tool case with you or something?

W4: I have a tool box with certain tools in it, but with the nest and blades that have to be changed on the semi-automatic, I have set up in a drawer with numbers, the blade and the nest that match for that watch. I have to go look it up, take it out of the drawer, and then bring it over to the machine and set it up.

MD: The nest I gather is where the face of the watch --
W4: -- the shape of the watch. They have different nests for different --

MD: And what does the blade do?

W4: The blade is the part that pushes the spring bar into the little holes on the side. So the watch just sets it in that, say the shape of the nest. You just set it in there. Then the blade comes forward, pushes your pins back, and pops them in.

MD: What would a typical day of yours be like? Do you punch in on a clock?

W4: Yes. Ring in. Then go in and check with the boss, see if she wants any new machines set up. If they do, then I set them up. If not, then I wait until they do want one set up and then set it up.

MD: How long does it take you to set up one machine?

W4: Well, it varies because some, you run into all different kinds of problems with it. You may have to raise one side, and lower one side. So it could take you five minutes. But then another one, the same thing, it could take you half hour to get it running perfect.

MD: If during an inspection process, it's discovered that something's too shallow, or too deep, are you given specs and then you go and spec out the machine to the way it should be producing?

W4: No, not really. If it's too shallow, you have to be able to build it up, where it's going to work right.

MD: So that means sort of trial and error.
W4: Yes. You have to use your own judgment. If when your blade comes forward, it's hitting on this side, you've got to raise this side up and even it out so both sides are hitting exactly the same. Or if the watch is higher, you have to build up the blade, so the blade will clear the watch, so it's not putting any scratches on it. On the presses, you have to set up the press, then you have to do a sample, and call QC over. QC checks it, even before the girl who's on the machine to make sure the product is good.

MD: So that can take anywhere from a few minutes --

W4: Yes. If you're lucky, it'll set up beautiful right away. You don't have any problems. But other times you could run into problems.

MD: And how long would that take you, on an average? Could you work as long as half an hour on one machine?

W4: Oh, yes. Definitely. If the watch doesn't fit in the nest right. Or say you put the watch in the press, and you press it and its scratching. You've got to find out why it's scratching and see if you can correct it. It could be just a little piece of metal in there and you could just take the piece of metal out and no problem. But it could be you have to back off on the stop, could have to back off on the pressure. There's a lot of different things. You have to try and figure out what it is. Sometimes you could be there an hour on a machine and still be stuck, can't figure it out. Then when you can't figure it out,
you have to call in the tool maker or the engineer. But mostly they depend on you to try and figure it out.

MD: So you come in, you set up these machines, you check with the supervisor to see what machines have to be set up. Then you spend the rest of the day essentially doing this except for your breaks and your lunch and all that.

W4: Yes. And then if I'm set up, anybody that has trouble even when I'm setting up a machine, if a girl is on piecework, on a machine and the machine starts acting up, I have to drop what I'm doing because there's no one working on that, and go over and try and fix hers so she hasn't got a wait or anything.

MD: Is there only one tool setter --

W4: In my area, yes.

MD: So you're responsible. What happens if you're sick?

W4: Well, if I'm sick they have the engineer, or they're supposed to have a back-up, which they don't. The engineer or the tool maker has to do it.

MD: You have a lot of responsibility then, don't you?

W4: Yes.

MD: You take your work seriously?

W4: Oh, yes. Very.

MD: So you're not apt to want to stay out too much because you know all those people depend on you.

W4: Yes.

MD: How many people depend on you in that strapping --
W4: Well, I would say there's a good seventy-five. When they go on a machine, they expect that machine to be running perfect. So I have that on my mind too. I have to set this machine up good so this girl can make some good money. Because she's got to be there, she's got to work on it. You try and set it up the best you can, so she can make money.

MD: Are you on a production schedule of some sort?

W4: What do you mean?

MD: Is there a certain number of machines that you have to look at every day?

W4: No.

MD: I mean, put out seventy per cent or you know how other places will have an --

W4: No. There's no possible way they put me on production.

MD: No. Because you're like a troubleshooter. What happens? I've heard that as well as other corporations are constantly adding new and better types of machines. Do you have to crash train for those new machines so that you're able to operate on them like that?

W4: Yes.

MD: How often are you learning new machinery?

W4: It's not that often. Before I had the strapping room, plus I had the other room where they have another automation, which is a stamping machine. I had to learn that before they got another tool setter. There's one line that's run almost completely (by)automation. Up the end it starts, where the trees, the watches go
on, in the display cases, are fed into the machine. The machine comes down, puts the price tag on, it goes down this little track, keeps rotating around, and they're still feeding in that constantly. All the girls do is pick that up, put the watch on—it has the price and everything on it—put it in the box, send it down the line, the line carries it down. It goes through the stamping machine, stamping machine stamps it, the girl on the end picks it up, and I was running that. So I had to set up the stamping machine, and I had to set up the machine for the price tags. Everytime you change the different watch, you would have to change that, or the roll the price tags would run out. Plus you would have to adjust it if it went off on the tree, say, too low or too high. You had to keep watching that. Plus watch the little conveyor that it didn't jam up with the trees. That was, I would say, almost a constant job. Plus they wanted me to do this other one, which I finally told them, "I can't keep up with all this. You have to get another tool setter." So they finally listened to me. (chuckles)

MD: My gosh. Let me ask you then the simple question: Do you like your job?

W4: Oh, yes, I do like it.

MD: Why?

W4: You're constantly going, you're working with the people. It can be hectic, but it's rewarding when
a girl goes on and says, "This machine is working good," or something like that. Or she makes a good day's work. If you can help the people out, where if they have someone who didn't care, they would just slap it in there and wouldn't care how it ran, and tell the girl, "You have to work on it." That's what they had before. They had a guy who had too much work, and he didn't really have the time. He just slapped them on and told the girls, "That's the best I can do. I'm too busy. I can't spend the time with it." Where I take the time and spend with it. It is hectic, but I do like it. It keeps you busy, and sometimes you're going all day long. Sometimes you have fifteen, twenty minutes, you're not doing nothing. You go out and get a cup of coffee, sit there.

MD: It's very important to you that the machines are in working condition so that the girls get the kind of money —

W4: It is, because I know what it's like, because I was on piecework before.

MD: So you really feel like you are a responsible, important part of that department.

W4: Yes.

MD: That's very important. When we discussed this whole thing of job satisfaction, it's very important to feel that what you're doing is very important to the people who depend on you. So that's very good. Would you say that there are any parts of your job that you
feel that you're not satisfied with?

W4: Oh, yes. You tell them that you need certain tools and stuff, and you have to wait till doomsday to get them. They don't really listen to the person that knows the job. I know what I need, and how the machine runs, and what tools I need to fix it. And you've got to practically beg them to get them. But you're the one that's working on the machine. You know what you need. You should just have to tell them to get it for you right away. They don't.

MD: We're talking about management now?

W4: Yes.

MD: So one of your problems, if you were to state and make a list of the problems that you have in doing your job successfully, is getting management cooperation.

W4: Yes.

MD: Any other areas?

W4: Not really. No, I don't think so.

MD: The people that depend on you, the other workers have never given you -- have always made you feel like a good part of the work force, that you've never had any problems with.

W4: Oh, yes. I mean you get some -- like I'll set the machine up and it'll be working good but you get somebody else on it works different, and they have a little problem. But if they call me, I try to adjust it and tell them, "Now try it. See if it's
better for you." Because everybody works different. I don't really have that much problem with the people. I work with them.

MD: You never experience anything like boredom or monotony?

W4: No. Not on that job. No. (laughs)

MD: If there was anything you could change about your job what would you change?

W4: I don't think I would really change anything. No, I don't think I would. (laughs)

MD: Just maybe in your dealing with management a little bit.

W4: Oh, yes. Getting the parts and when I ask for something, they should take me serious. I shouldn't have to ask them five or six times for something. But besides that, I wouldn't really change anything.

MD: Let me ask you now a little bit about the work environment itself. For a tool setter, for a female tool setter, are there any hazards that you see that make it particularly difficult for you or any of the other tool setters that you meet?

W4: What do you mean?

MD: Some people work with microscopes for instance. Do you work with solvents that would make the job hazardous? Is there a high noise level or anything like that?

W4: No. Ours are mostly quiet. The only solvent we use is to clean the machines with. It's nothing really
hazardous what we're working. These are air presses. So there's nothing really. Just a freak accident where an air hose blows off or something like that. But there's nothing really hazardous.

MD: So you don't use things like an X-acto knife as they would in gyro?

W4: No.

MD: Or microscopes.

W4: No.

MD: Or heavy corrosive kinds of solvents?

W4: No. None of that.

MD: That's wonderful.

W4: So it's not really hazardous or anything. It's not really bad. The reason I took this tool setter's job is because I was on the end and automation was coming in and I knew that I was never going to make the money that I was making on piecework. So I figured, "Now's the time to make my move." So I made it. This is a flat rated job where I know what I'm going to make every week. When they put the automation in, I don't know what it's going to be. I know definitely it's going to be lower because the company already says they don't want to pay the high rates anymore. They can't afford to pay them. So I figured this was a good time to make my move. They weren't too happy about getting a girl tool setter because they figured she couldn't do it.
MD: Were there not very many female tool setters?

W4: No. I think I am the only one in the Torrington plant. No. They just added another one to it.

MD: That has traditionally been a male job?

W4: Yes. When I signed for the job, I know the word went around through the bosses, "She'll never do it. She doesn't know that much about it." Which I know one of the bosses did, because I was on the machine, we had the engineer, we were having a lot of problems with it. The engineer come out and he was looking at it, and all the bosses were around, trying to figure it out and get it running right. So I had said to the engineer, "Let me try this. It can't hurt it. It might help." So I tried it. He said, "Oh, it'll never work." I said, "Well, let me try it. It won't hurt." So I tried it and it worked. So the boss was standing there and he says to the engineer, "See, she does have some smarts." Then the boss says to me, "Your father must have wanted a boy." So I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "Because you're mechanically inclined. You got some smarts up there, which usually girls don't have." I says, "I wouldn't say that too loud." But they just had the feeling that a woman couldn't do the job. She didn't have enough smarts, in other words.

MD: That's interesting. The job that you do, and the pay that you get for your job, are you satisfied with that?
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W4: Yes. I mean, everybody always wants more, but I think it is fair. I'm happy with it.

MD: You also have a lot of decision making ability too?

W4: Yes.

MD: One of the things that I discovered when I was doing work in stress was that the ability to make decisions, the feeling that you are an important part of the work force, also the feeling that you're being paid what you're worth, are three real important factors in creating job satisfaction. And you seem to have all three of those things in your job. With the exception of management problems, and communication is a very big problem in industry right now, all over. The problems that you have with management are the same kind of problems that a lot of people all over seem to be having. What do you think is going to be the future of the strapping room? Do you think there's going to be more automation coming?

W4: Yes. I know there's going to be, because there's a lot of them that are done manually that they have done research on and I know that they are coming in automation. A lot more. Even bands now. All the bands were done by hand because they can't do them by automation on the machines. Semi-automatic are mostly straps, all straps. Now, we're getting in a machine that does do bands. So that means there's going to be all automation in there.
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MD: Do you worry about your position there as more automation comes in?

W4: Not really because I know they're going to have to have somebody to set up these machines. I'm working there, and I'm working with them as they come in. I know the ones that are in there already. No way can they make a tool setter automation. They can't make an automation tool setter. (chuckles)

MD: So you don't have that fear of being laid off like some of the other workers would?

W4: No, but I do have a lot of concern about the girls, because I know automation is going to cut down on a lot of people. Because if they put in automation, they're not going to need all of these people. They're going to need the people to operate the machines, but they're going to be putting out more with the automation, and they're not going to need as many people.

MD: That's true. What about the union? You've been involved in the union that represents --

W4: Yes. I've been involved. I am a steward besides my job. We do have a lot of problems with management because they don't seem to want to cooperate with the union. I'm constantly arguing with them or telling the boss, "You can't do this, you can't do that. That's violating the contract." They don't want to listen. They'll say okay for now and then they'll turn around and do the same thing over again. I guess that's
all part of the job. That's why they have up there. (laughs)

MD: Do you feel that the union has been a productive role in the problems that are going on in that workplace?

W4: Oh, yes. Definitely. If they didn't have a union in there, that company would walk all over the people. They're constantly trying to add to a person's duties. If they know they can get away with it, they're going to make you do more and more, which isn't really your job. Add more and more onto your job. Where if they do, and the people come to us, we go in and we stop it. If they didn't have a union in there, I would hate to see what that place was like.

MD: Yes. I can imagine. Have there been any work stoppages as a result of some of the problems that have been going on? Has the union engineered any strikes or slowdowns or anything like that?

W4: No, the union has. But I know, it is our job, we try to see people happy. We've never really had a strike as far as I can remember. Not since I've been there. The girls have got aggravated and wanted to stop working but it's our job to tell them, "No, you can't." We have our job cut out for us to try to talk them into it, or give us us time, it does take time. But there has been a lot of times when they wanted to do that but we've
talked them out of it.

MD: So all in all, if I were to ask you a final question -- the people that will either be listening to this tape or writing books or reports out of tapes like this -- is there anything more that you can tell me that you have seen or experienced about this whole idea of technology and its effects on the workers, that you might want to add as a last comment?

W4: I know that the girls know that there's a lot of automation coming in, and they are afraid. I don't want to see this come in because they know it's going to eliminate people. They are afraid. They'll ask me. I say, "Don't worry about it till it happens. We can't do nothing till it happens. Wait and see." The people are afraid.

MD: As a steward, as a union representative, how do you feel about the fact that you know that ultimately there will be layoffs, and your ability to deal with that kind of thing?

W4: I know that there will be, but I wish there was something that we could do, but our hands are tied. If company decides to bring in a machine to take that person's place, we can't really do nothing about it. They have the right to advance. I wish there was something we could do, like telling them, "You can't bring them in." (laughs) We wish that we could do a lot more, stop them from doing this. But there's no way that we can. And it's really sad, but what
are you going to do? Times change.

MD: Have there been any clauses that you've negotiated in your contract to deal with the issues of technological changes?

W4: You mean as far as putting a machine in and a worker having to go out? If a job is sent overseas, we have that in our --

MD: Oh, you do.

W4: Yes, something like that. But as far as them putting a machine in and putting a person out, we haven't really got that far yet.

MD: Some companies, some unions, like the auto workers and the steel workers, have contract clauses that are wonderful in terms of layoff provisions in the event of technological changes. Or retraining positions or transfer provisions.

W4: Oh, we have that. Yes. If a person is out of a job, like a machine comes in and replaces this person. Well why can't you transfer this person over here and train him over here, because they have the seniority and stuff. Why can't you use him, instead of just throwing him out the door after twenty-five years, train him on this job here. Or something like that. We do have that. We enforce that, our people to stay. We try to keep all of our people.

MD: It's difficult to do.

W4: I mean, you may keep the senior people and you may be knocking a lower person out. But eventually
that's what's going to happen if you keep coming in with the automation, which we know they're going to. But still with the automation, they can only go - I don't know, they say they can go further - but, to me, they can only go so far with automation. They got to have somebody to run the automation. With the work that we do, they can only go so far with it. They can automate and have the machines put the price tag on, but they can't - they say they can, but I don't see how they can - have an automation machine box the watch, in that they have to have people there. I'm not too worried about that coming in. They're still going to have to have people. All the automation that they're doing hasn't affected our people, where any of our people had to go out. We still have our people there. They're advancing, but it hasn't put any of them out yet. They say they're coming in with more, but until it happens --. But as far as the automation they've done, it takes some of your work away, in which they're going to cut in your pay, of course, but the person still has to be there. It's not taking the job completely away from the person. For instance with the stamping machine, we used to have to stamp every one manually by hand. Now the machine stamps it, but it still doesn't take care of everything, because you still have to pick them up, pack them in the boxes, which they haven't got a machine to do that yet. So they haven't gotten rid
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of us yet.

MD: Well, thank you very much. I appreciate this with you.

End of Interview