

The Monthly Labor Review through a century of economic transformation

Editor's note: This essay is part of a series being published to help commemorate the Monthly Labor Review's centennial (July 1915–July 2015). The essays—written by eminent authorities and distinguished experts in a broad range of fields—cover a variety of topics pertinent to the Review and the work of the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Each essay is unique and comprises the words and opinion of the author. We've found these essays to be enlightening and inspirational. We hope you do as well.

When Royal Meeker, appointed Commissioner of Labor Statistics by President Woodrow Wilson in 1913, launched the *Monthly Review* in 1915, the world of work and the workforce looked dramatically different from what they look today.¹ I doubt that he could have ever imagined that the Industrial Age he had seen dawn would give way to the information economy and the rise of Apple, Google, and Microsoft. Not even science-fiction writers of his day would have imagined how robots, computers, and nanotechnologies would transform how work gets done and what is produced. At the time, agriculture was king, with 1 out of every 3 workers employed on farms. Today, it's about 2 out of every 100 workers, yet the United States leads the world in food exports. Paid vacation, sick days, pensions, and health insurance—all nonexistent a century ago—have become commonplace benefits enjoyed by workers. Child labor in the United States has largely disappeared, labor force participation rates among older workers have declined steadily, and women now account for nearly half of the workforce.

These are but a handful of the dramatic, and not readily predictable, transformations that the economy and workers have undergone since the *Review's* first appearance. The journal has been a faithful and trusted chronicler of these transformations and other emerging trends in the workplace and the workforce. It has a justly deserved reputation for presenting factual information on key aspects of this constantly changing environment. It should be applauded for a job well (even if somewhat dryly) done.

In the journal's 50th anniversary issue, 13 former Secretaries of Labor and experts in labor relations advised the *Review* to focus on the challenges posed by technology, on the role of unions and the nature of collective bargaining, and on the challenges faced by different groups in the workforce.² Plus ça change, plus c'est la même



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chose. I suspect that, over the next 50 years, the *Review* will continue to report on how technological change affects the way in which we do our jobs and what products are available. We will also need to know how workers get the skills and knowledge to fit into the new jobs being created. Globalization will interact with and accentuate the impacts of technology interacting with workers and companies in new ways. What happens in markets in one corner of the globe will have increasingly larger and faster ripple effects elsewhere. This will affect rates of job creation and destruction, alter mobility and tenure patterns, and change price and wage dynamics. The organization of work will also change, to fit the new technology and to accommodate the new workers. Whether unions continue to decline or not, workers will continue to seek mechanisms to exercise their individual and collective voices.

Technological change will continue to transform the *Review* itself. Over the past century, the journal went from a printed periodical with a monthly circulation of 8,000 copies to an online publication with 1.1 million monthly page views.³ I suspect that 50 years hence, the online version of the *Review* will also be relegated to the dust heap of history, perhaps replaced by some virtual reality or artificial intelligence format. Indeed, technological change will likely have profound impacts not only on how the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) communicates with the public but also on how it gathers data to begin with. Web-scraped data, sensor data, satellite data, social media data, and administrative records offer a wealth of potentially useful information, with richer geographic and temporal variability, at a fraction of the cost of the traditional sample survey that has been the bread and butter of BLS. Harnessing and accurately using these new data will pose significant challenges. That said, I doubt that they will eliminate the need for an entity such as BLS or a communications platform like the *Review*. Although data are becoming more plentiful, their reliability is often suspect or unknown. The public, and policymakers, will want and need accurate, objective information on the performance of our economy, the nature of work, and worker outcomes.

SUGGESTED CITATION

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NOTES

¹ For an interesting discussion of the history of the Bureau of Labor Statistics, see Joseph P. Goldberg and William T. Moye, *The first hundred years of the Bureau of Labor Statistics*, Bulletin 2235 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, September 1985), <https://www.bls.gov/opub/blsfirsthundredyears/>.

² "Future assignments," *Monthly Labor Review*, July 1965, <https://www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/1965/article/pdf/50th-anniversary-future-assignments.pdf>.

³ See Emily Lloyd Liddel, "The *Monthly Labor Review* gets a new look," *Monthly Labor Review*, July 2013, <https://www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/2013/article/mlr-gets-a-new-look.htm>.

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