

The ASL position on 'the new technology' was clearly and cogently expressed in its twelve-page booklet, Are the Machines to be Masters?, written by George Black for the ASL and published by the ASL's General Propaganda Committee in 1893. (Geo. Black, *Are the Machines to be Masters? Another View of the Wage Question, written for the Australian Socialist League and the Benefit of its Propaganda Fund, General Propaganda Committee, A S L, Castlereagh St, 1893, Workman Print, 7½ Bathurst St, 12pp, 1^d*) Black commenced with a remarkably prescient vision of the role of machines in future society, where the 'man-created, man-devouring, mechanical monster would have full play' and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* be read as 'an allegory of industrial import'. His technological imagination, though as mechanist in form as Flash Gordon's meccano-like conceptions of the future of the universe, was astonishingly correct ^{to} as the function of future technology. He predicted, for example, the annihilation of the compositor.

one may easily imagine how, through a development of the type-writer, the thinker will some day be enabled to translate his thought into leaden characters without the intervention of the compositor... The printing-machine, charged with matter for the world's enlightenment, would then proceed to give practical proof of the verity of the assertion that the more mechanical power you put into an article the less manual force is necessary, by feeding itself with paper and transmitting the sheets it had printed on one side over to another machine which, having finished the printing process, would then hand the papers on, without manual aid, to a folding-machine, which would in turn transfer them to a packing-machine, which would fasten the finished papers up in bundles, label these and, all the most expensive processes being completed, would deposit them with the public for transmission to the public. (pp.4-5)

The instincts of the Luddites had been correct, Black argued, as the increase in wealth production caused by machinery had not even been distributed 'in the proportions previously observed'. Wealth had increased proportionately more than wages, a process, Black observed, which had been taking place in Australia in the previous 50 years. (10) Moreover, the demand for employment had slackened, then as now. Black argued: 'The economic tendency of all improvements in privately-owned machines - when not accompanied by a shortening of hours and an increase of wages - is towards a reduction in the number of toilers'. (6) He predicted 'hordes of discharged workers dependent of public and private charity' and called on his readers to imagine the lessening of consumption consequent upon the vast reduction in the total of wages paid, which would cause a contingent reduction in the ranks of distributors.

The monopolists even would revolt against a social condition which compelled them to produce wealth that almost no one could afford to purchase, because past wealth had been so inequitably and unequally distributed that, though wants and population were yearly increasing, the means of satisfying needs were yearly diminishing.

Black maintained that if employers and employed would only read the writing on the wall they would see that heart was being eaten out of society, not only by the monopoly of land but by the monopoly of capital. 'Master and man, the machine are mastering us. Piston, lever, wheel, crank and boiler, are pressing us daily to the edge of an abyss whose name is Chaos!''(5) The only outlets for absorption of the compulsorily idle were the prison, the asylum, the hospital, and the premature grave.(8) Black's solution, the only means of averting the headlong rush towards the brink of barbarism was that machine must be made common property; people should, unlike Frankenstein, control their master by socialising it.

Now the machines, and those own them, rule civilization, and crush humanity to pulp. If we would "master" the machines instead of being mastered by them, we must substitute united collective capital for private competing capitals.(12)