

## **Firms tag workers to improve efficiency**

**David Hencke**

Workers in warehouses across Britain are being "electronically tagged" by being asked to wear small computers to cut costs and increase the efficient delivery of goods and food to supermarkets, a report revealed this week. New US satellite- and radio-based computer technology is turning some workplaces into "battery farms" and creating conditions similar to "prison surveillance", according to a report from a professor of geography at Durham University, Michael Blakemore.

The technology, introduced from the US at the start of the year, is spreading rapidly, with up to 10,000 employees using it to supply big retail chains. Now trade unionists want safeguards to be introduced to protect worker privacy.

Under the system workers are asked to wear computers on their wrists, arms and fingers, and in some cases to put on a vest containing a computer that instructs them where to go to collect goods from warehouse shelves. The system also allows direct access to the individual's computer so orders can be beamed from the store. The computer can also check on whether workers are taking unauthorised breaks and work out the shortest time a worker needs to complete a job.

Academics are worried that the system could make Britain, which already has the largest number of street security cameras, the most surveyed society in the world.

In his report for the GMB union, Professor Blakemore said the new technology was raising a host of ethical issues, with the danger that the computer was taking over the human rather than humans using computers. There is also concern that the new technology might create industrial injuries because of the need for workers to make repetitive movements with their arms and wrists, similar to repetitive strain injuries caused by overusing computers.

But the companies say that the system makes the delivery of food more efficient, cuts out waste, reduces theft and can reorder goods more quickly. A spokeswoman for one supermarket chain insisted that the company was not using the technology to monitor the staff and said it was making employees' work easier and reducing the need for paper.

But at the GMB's annual conference in Newcastle this week one of the union's national officers, Paul Campbell, said: "We are having reports of people walking out of jobs after a few days' work, in some cases just a few hours. They are all saying they don't like the job because they have no input. They are just following a computer's instructions".

Other monitoring devices are being developed in the US, including ones that can check on the productivity of secretaries by measuring the number of key strokes on their word processors; satellite technology is also being developed to monitor productivity in manufacturing jobs.

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