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Women's Place in the Integrated Circuit

This report from *Southeast Asia Chronicle* examines the latest personnel management techniques specially designed to manipulate women—in Malaysian Electronics Factories

"We hire women because they have less energy, are more disciplined and are easier to control."
— Personnel Officer, Intel Corp., Malaysia

A GROUP of women was wrapping gifts of talcum powder and candy for the upcoming Christmas party, while I talked to the personnel officer at the Intel plant in Penang. She described the charts which hang beside each operator's chair on the plant floor to record the quantity and quality of her daily production. She told me about factory-wide competitions and weekly quotas sent from California.

This personnel officer, a very likeable Malay woman in her late 20s, spoke casually. But her message was brutally clear. There is a direct relationship between her ability to control and involve "her girls" and the numbers on the productivity charts. "Personnel operates with the goal of having management and operators cooperate. Otherwise, we can't survive."

The Intel plant in Penang, Malaysia, is a subsidiary of one of the largest semiconductor firms based in Northern California's "Silicon Valley". Women make up 90 percent of the assembly work-force in this 1,400 person plant, as they do in the other 18 electronics factories on the island of Penang. Approximately 19,000 women work in these factories and several thousand more work in electronics factories in other places in Malaysia. In all, between 200,000 and 300,000 women work in electronics plants throughout Southeast Asia.

Electronics, especially semiconductors, is the fastest growing industry in Southeast Asia. It is also technologically the most advanced industry in the developed economies, providing critical components to all others. Governments, banks, factories, armed forces and other major institutions are changing their operations to incorporate new electronic products — all involving some kind of "brain". Even individual customers find themselves increasingly dependent on such gadgets as hand calculators.

Ironically, the most invisible element in this glamorous, breakthrough industry is the repetitive, semi-skilled labour of Asian women. Driven by the need to cut prices to outdo competition, virtually all the major semiconductor companies have sought cheap labour to perform the labour-intensive parts of their operations. To a large extent, they have found it in Asia, where women assemble the tiny components of products ranging from digital watches to multi-million-dollar computers. Their labour makes possible the low prices which in turn have made possible the explosive growth in the market for semiconductor devices.

Because they must keep productivity high and costs low to be competitive, semiconductor firms have developed a whole battery of methods to manipulate and control the women who work in their plants. Their personnel policies now combine authoritarian discipline with the most sophisticated human relations techniques. Most highly developed in Malaysia, these techniques specifically exploit the traditionally defined attributes of femininity — passivity, submissiveness, sentimentality, sexual desirability — while creating a factory lifestyle distinct from that of the general society. Their purpose is to make workers immediately productive and to inculcate in them a sense of identity with the company. The emphasis on passive femininity is intended to forestall the rise of any sense of independence or unified strength among the women workers. In the patriarchal societies of Southeast Asia, the sudden concentration of women in advanced industrial enclaves might well be expected to foster the emergence of a strong feminist consciousness among them. The carefully planned personnel policies work against this.

Recreation as Technique

Beauty contests are the most dramatic example of the way electronics factories manipulate traditional concepts of femininity. "The last beauty contest winner spent M $80 (US$40) on her evening gown. But she made so many slits up the skirt — to show more leg, you know — that she can't wear the dress any more." The personnel officer was very matter-of-fact about the extravagance which she saw as an example of how seriously the workers take the beauty contest. This year's beauty contest winners will receive: first prize, a package tour to Medan (the nearest big city); second prize, a cassette player; third prize, a night for two at the Rasa Sayang (the ritziest hotel in Penang). When I asked about the implications of offering a night for two to 18-year-old Malay women,

primarily from rural Muslim backgrounds, the officer quipped, "We tell the winner: 'This is your prize. Whatever happens nine months from now, we aren't responsible.'"

One American plant manager in Penang explained, "We've developed recreation to a technique. Recreational activities keep turnover down. We spend US $100,000 a year on personnel activities." He listed such stereotypically feminine activities as sewing classes, a monthly shoe sale, singing competitions and the beauty contest as well as a library, the company store and sports events. Monthly company publications contain an endless stream of images of women as sex objects and passive providers. Their features range from pictures of scantily clad beauty contestants to romantic poetry and sexist humour. There are also notices of classes in cooking or using cosmetics.

Much of the organized recreation takes the form of competition, which is intended, in the words of one personnel officer, "to develop incentive and motivation". Competitions pit workers against one another, strengthening their sense of individualism and their willingness to work hard. The contests run the gamut of possibilities—singing contests, sports contests, "guess whose legs these are" contests, talent contests, crazy-costume contests.

Production competitions, also billed as "fun", barely mask speed-ups and provide the rationale for increasing quotas.

They range from individual contests based on the daily charts hanging behind each worker to competitions between subsidiaries in different countries.

In the transition from beauty contests to production competitions the guiding principle behind all the clever games becomes suddenly visible: control. Discipline is strict, because electronic components are either perfect or unusable. Workers are assigned quotas. They are prohibited from talking on the factory floor. They must wear uniforms. They are allowed an average of only 45 minutes break time during an eight-hour shift, and workers at the Fair-child factory in Indonesia reported having only a ten-minute tea break and a 15-minute lunch break. They also said **about 20 women were laid off every week for failing to meet their production quotas.**

Discipline extends beyond the factory floor as management tries to orient workers' lives around factory schedules. In Malaysia, factories rotate shifts every two weeks. "They like rotating shifts. They plan their lives around the rotation," explained a personnel officer at Monolithic Memories Inc. Yet the workers complained that changing shifts meant they could not plan many activities or attend classes outside the factory, and they found it hard to readjust their sleeping and eating habits.

"Together to Stay, Together for Good"

From the day a worker enters the factory, she is bombarded with such slogans as "Catch on to the Motorola Family Spirit and build a good future for yourself and your family." These portray the factory as a family incorporating many of the patriarchal features characteristic of real families in Southeast Asia. "Big brother" male supervisors lord it over the female operators. The plant manager, usually an American, enacts a kindly—but nonetheless demanding—father figure role, playing basketball with the team, kissing the beauty contest winner, eating in the factory canteen. Says the manager of Fairchild's Indonesia plant, "What we are doing resembles a family system in which I am not just the manager but also a father to all those in Fairchild. This conforms to a very important Indonesian principle, that of the family *(kekeluargaan)."*

For women brought up in families where the father's word is law, the image is compelling. While the culture of the factory is radically different from that of their homes, the stress on family ideology helps prevent them from recognizing the implications of their own independence from their families. The family analogy legitimizes the combination of authoritarian discipline and "indulgence" (recreation). Management's purpose is to prevent any desire by workers to organize themselves. Management representatives throughout Southeast Asia express the same thought: "If management operates well it is my hope that a union will be unnecessary"; "Unions only set up an adversary relationship between

workers and management"; "Intel doesn't believe in unions. We believe in finding out what workers want. We conduct twice-yearly attitude surveys with workers." Back in California a semi-conductor executive explained that the industry stresses human relations to prevent unionization which would raise wage costs and "rigidify" the size of the workforce. The industry wants to retain its ability to lay off workers if the market slumps or if automation becomes profitable.

Foreign owned semiconductor corporations are now well established in Malaysia. Some of them have begun upgrading their operations, adding testing and automated bonding processes. Malaysia is the centre for testing in Southeast Asia. The automated bonding machines cost US $ 50,000 per unit and allow a single worker to produce ten times as much as one working with a microscope. These more complex processes require fail-proof discipline. Malaysia has been chosen for upgrading because its educated, English-speaking workers are easily controllable and trainable. Most of the electronic workers have not held any other industrial job, many are the first female members of their families to hold such jobs. They are particularly susceptible to the appeal of the western culture which is offered as part of the employment package. As a result electronic workers are conspicuous wherever they go, identified by their elaborate make-up, tight jeans and high heels.

In Hongkong and Singapore where industrial work and western culture are more familiar and job mobility more common, workers hold out for hard cash rather than be impressed by such offerings as beauty contests and cosmetics classes. In the Philippines and Indonesia, on the other hand, poverty reduces the need for elaborate personnel programmes. The personnel manager at AMD, Philippines reported as many as 500 applicants a week for 50 openings and a personnel officer in Indonesia reported 500 applications a day.

Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand (not covered in this report) are the last frontier of the highly integrated Asian circuit of semiconductor factories. In these countries poverty and unemployment spawn extremely cheap labour, but also political instability. The plants located here are generally "jellybean operations" —the most labour intensive and least expensive. They can be closed down at short notice if the political climate appears too risky or if they become superfluous. The National Semiconductor (NS) plants in Thailand, Indonesia, and Malaysia do the same work, so that political upheaval in one will not precipitate a breakdown in the overall production cycle.

A Global Assembly Line

The production process of which the semiconductor factories in Southeast Asia are a part, is literally a global assembly line stretching more than halfway around the world. The industry came into being since the 1947 invention of the transistor and has grown with help from Pentagon contracts and research done at Stanford and other universities. Many large companies are headquartered in the area around Stanford, known as "Silicon Valley" because silicon is the basic material for semiconductors.

Competition in the industry is still so heated that prices for its products are falling faster than the cost of production. "A transistor which 12 years ago cost US$ 25 now costs 15 cents," bragged one American executive in Penang. Since, ironically, much of the production process for these labour-saving devices is extremely labour intensive, labour costs have been the major target for economizing. In California 90 per cent of the assembly workforce is young and female. More important than cutting costs in California, however, has been the division of the production process into smaller and smaller discrete segments. This and the microscopic size of the semi-conductors (which makes it practical to ship unfinished parts from one plant to another) has allowed the industry to shift its most labour-intensive work to places where labour is cheap. Furthermore, the very equipment produced by the industry makes finely tuned long-distance coordination possible. As a US manager in Asia quipped, "Santa Clara is just a telex away."

The first moves were to Mexico but the industry soon looked to the even cheaper labour of Asia. Fairchild Camera and Instrument Co. set up the first Asian assembly plant in Hong Kong in 1962. During the 60s other US, European and Japanese companies expanded to Hong Kong, Taiwan and South Korea. Searching for even cheaper wages, the semi-conductor industry then moved into Southeast Asia, coming to Singapore in 1969, Malaysia in 1972, Thailand in 1973 and the Philippines and Indonesia in 1974. The manager of a plant in Malaysia explained how profitable these moves have been: **"One worker, working one hour produces enough to pay the wages of 10 workers working one shift plus all the cost of materials and transport."**

The Fast-Fingered Malaysian

The electronics industry has not operated in a vacuum in constructing its Asian circuit. Asian governments, looking for development capital and solutions to their employment problems have actively sought labour-intensive investment. Semiconductors have appeared particularly attractive, according to one Malaysian government official, because "they are so fast moving. They come in and quickly soak up people." In addition governments hope to acquire new technology from the semiconductor industry. In wooing foreign investment, Asian governments have stressed the availability of large, cheap pools of female labour. Glossy brochures describe the prospects in terms similar to the following from *Malaysia: The Solid State for Electronics:*

The manual dexterity of the oriental female is famous the world over. Her hands are small and she works fast with extreme care. Who, therefore, could be better qualified by

nature and inheritance to contribute to the efficiency of a bench-assembly production line than the oriental girl?

Domestically, Asian governments have taken measures to make their country's women even more attractive as potential employees by ensuring that they will not resist demands made on them by foreign firms. In 1970 when electronics companies wanted to locate in Malaysia, the government provided for exceptions in the law which protected women from night-shift work. In the Philippines, Presidential Decree No. 148 issued shortly after the declaration of martial law in 1972, reduced maternity benefits from 60 per cent of pay for 14 weeks to 100 per cent of pay for six weeks, and limited coverage to the first four children. According to the personnel director at one textile factory, "This made it profitable to hire women again."

Perhaps even more serious than removing legal protections has been the active role of all capitalist Southeast Asian governments in putting down all forms of worker protest. Over and over again the story is told — in the Philippines, in Indonesia, in Thailand, Singapore, Taiwan, South Korea: "As soon as the protest began, carloads of police and government officials descended on the plant..." Such actions are backed up by laws preventing strikes in "vital" industries, which normally include foreign-owned manufacturing plants.

In a recent article entitled "Why We Woo Foreign Investment", Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammed asserted: "The government could not help the people if they refuse to realize the importance of a better economy and to be more responsible... Workers must uphold their dignity and not cause problems that would scare away foreign investors. They should instead be more productive so that government efforts to attract investors would be successful."

"Soaking up People"?

In actual fact the corporations have failed to live up to the expectations of their hosts in providing employment. Their requirements for young educated (high school) female workers have meant that they have brought a new category of people into the workforce rather than reducing the ranks of the unemployed. A study in Penang found that two-thirds of the workers had never worked before and came from families whose female members had never worked for wages. Malaysia defines "active unemployed" as men who have registered at employment exchanges.

The overwhelming unemployment in these countries arises from the stagnation and even impoverishment of agriculture while most resources are directed into building up an urban industrial sector. Because so much capital is needed to create new industries, these industries do not grow fast enough to

absorb the increasing flow of people pushed out of peasant family farming. In addition a large proportion of each country's surplus is siphoned off by foreign investors repatriating profits. As long as peasants own land they can choose between a lower standard of living or seeking other employment. But the commercialization of agriculture is resulting in the outright loss of their land for large numbers of peasants.

Until recently it has been men—mostly fathers and brothers—who have sought wage labour when family farming could no longer support the people dependent on it. The men have migrated to the cities while the women stay behind to run the household and continue the farming. When women migrate to look for work however, it is not mothers but daughters who go. To girls who have some education the electronics factories promise work. A personnel officer at NS, Philippines reported that 30 per cent of the assemblers there are college graduates and another 30 per cent have some college education.

For electronics firms the newness of the work force they are creating is an advantage. Not only are the young women more tractable than older women or men might be, but since they are not believed to be supporting families, their wages can be kept low and they can be laid off more easily. Thus employers give first preference to women with no work experience and generally refuse to hire married women. The ability to lay off workers at will is essential to electronics firms because the work is by definition temporary. After three or four years of peering through microscopes, a worker's vision begins to blur, so that she can no longer meet the production quota. The unspoken expectation of the company is that she will marry and "retire" by the time she becomes unfit for the work, but she will be laid off in any case.

The nature of the industry also requires an expendible work force for the fierce competition means each company experiences strong ups and downs. Some will survive only a few years before going under. The recession of 1974 provided a vivid example of the impact on Asian workers of world economic trends and decisions made in California (or elsewhere). Approximately 15,000 workers—one-third of all electronic workers—lost their jobs in Singapore alone. Some factories in Penang laid off thousands of workers, while others cut the work week to three days. In the Philippines where the first electronics plant had just begun operations, one-fifth of its 200-person work force was laid off. Meanwhile, more automated processes are available — enabling one worker to produce 10 times as much as she does now manually — and could be introduced on a wide scale whenever companies deem it profitable to replace workers with machines.

If electronics plants do not provide permanent jobs, then perhaps they train women for other work? Not so. As highly compartmentalized segments of a multinational production process, the jobs develop skills with no application in other industries. This kind of division of the production process does not lead to the growth of local semiconductor firms because there is no transfer of technology to the local economy. Government officials whom I interviewed in more than one country expressed dissatisfaction with the failure to acquire technology.

Subsistence or Less

The companies use various means to keep wages low. In the Philippines and Indonesia women are paid less than the minimum wage for as long as six months, during which they are considered apprentices. With legal minimum daily wages of 11 pesos in the Philippines and Rp. 500 in Indonesia, electronics apprentices receive eight pesos or Rp. 390 respectively. Yet personnel officers readily admit that a new operator can learn her job in a week, or at most two. In Manila a worker living in the six-by-six foot extension of a squatter hut told me she needed ten pesos a day to pay for the bare minimum of fish, rice, water and rent. A community organizer in the province of Bataan reported that peasant families often had to support their daughters the first year of employment in factories in the Bataan Export Processing Zone or Manila.

Rather than institute adequate wages, companies use monetary bonuses as a means to put pressure on their workers even after the apprenticeship period. In order to earn adequate income, a worker must qualify for bonuses, which are paid for perfect attendance, punctuality, high production, work on the microscopes. With any infraction of company rules or a single absence in a month, a woman loses her eligibility for extra payment. This practice is particularly rampant in Hong Kong where industry uses monetary incentives rather than recreational activities to discipline and motivate the work force. There a worker earning a daily base wage of HK$24 (US$5) can collect an additional living allowance (US$60), meal allowance ($40), and travel allowance ($20). However, if she is 15 minutes late she will lose all allowances for the day.

At plants in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Malaysia and the Philippines, employees receive a thirteenth month bonus at the end of the year instead of higher monthly pay for 12 months. A worker hired at mid-year has her bonus prorated, while one who leaves during the year receives none of the bonus.

Wages increase somewhat after the apprenticeship period and most women begin contributing to their families once their own subsistence needs are met. In the Philippines many workers report that they send half or more of their monthly earnings home. In Malaysia where electronics workers come from slightly less severe economic backgrounds, they still turn over 25 to 50 percent of their wages to their families.

Health and Safety

A photograph of the interior of an electronics plant is striking for its sense of immaculate order: a spacious, well-lighted room in which rows of women dressed in white bend

over gleaming microscopes. On an actual walk through a plant, however, the visitor often gags on the strong smell of chemicals and a trial look through a microscope quickly produces dizziness or a headache. Toxic fumes and eye ailments are the twin enemies of electronics workers. Yet the companies do not inform them of the health hazards their jobs entail.

"Hey Grandma!", young women greet their slightly older co-workers at the factory gate every morning. In Hong Kong most electronics workers over 25 are called "Grandma" because they wear glasses. While workers in Southeast Asia are much newer to electronic work than those in Hong Kong, they too are beginning to have serious eye problems. In 1975, just three years after the first electronics plant opened in Penang nearly half the workers there complained of deteriorating eyesight and frequent headaches—the result of microscope work. Most workers suffer at one time or another from conjunctivitis, a painful and highly contagious inflammation of the eye. Individual comments echoed this worker's story: "After some time we can't see very clearly, it's blurred. We'll be looking into the microscope for over seven hours. We have to work with these gold wires, very thin like our hair..." Virtually anyone who stays on the job more than three years must eventually wear glasses. Companies usually refuse to pay for the glasses— although they require 20-20 vision when they hire.

Caustic chemicals, all toxic and many suspected of being cancer-causing, sit in open containers beside many workers, giving off fumes. They include TCE, xylene and MEK, all particularly dangerous acids and solvents which are used extensively throughout the production process. Workers who must dip components in acids and rub them with solvents frequently experience serious burns, dizziness, nausea, sometimes even lose their fingers in accidents. A major cause of accidents is the high speed at which workers are required to carry out their tasks. It will be ten or 15 years before the possible carcinogenic effects of these chemicals begin to show up in the women who work with them now.

A Bed and A Cupboard

As a new segment of the work force, many women have to move long distances from their homes to take jobs in the plants. The conditions in which they live reflect the meagreness of their wages and the social disruption caused by their jobs. In Malaysia, where wages and living conditions are better than in the other countries I visited, electronics workers live in boarding houses. Four to eight women usually share a room. In a hostel where I stayed, each individual possesses a bunk space and a two-foot cube of a cupboard. The kitchen, outfitted only with 19 kerosene stoves, is shared by 50 women.

"Watch out for your camera. Someone might steal it." My hostess was carefully relocking the cupboard. I was surprised. Couldn't I relax in her room? Couldn't she relax? "No," she explained, "we work different shifts. I didn't know all these people before and we haven't all become friends. Besides, people are moving in and out all the time."

She doesn't rent a room because she can't afford one. She rents the bed and the cupboard and has no control over the other women who rent beds and cupboards in the same room. In a society based overwhelmingly on families and stable communities, where people have known each other for generations, the individual migration to the city is a lonely one. Neither their own backgrounds nor the factory's encouragement of competitive individualism prepares these women for developing lasting relationships with strangers.

Coffee and Cosmetics

After casting a sidelong glance at the men at the next table, Tuti shot the rest of us a conspiratorial smile, eyes twinkling. I stared into the coffee I was stirring, pulling the Malay words together in my mind to ask why they had come to work in this factory. Suddenly I laughed to myself, realizing that part of the answer was right here at this coffee stand at 1 o'clock at night.

Malaysian workers' answers to my question were often similar. They come for the money, of course, but also for the freedom. They talk of freedom to go out late at night, to have a boyfriend, to wear blue jeans, high heels and make-up. Implicitly they contrast this social freedom with the sheltered, regulated lives they would lead with their families in Malay villages and small towns. They revel in their escape from the watchful eyes of fathers and brothers.

Complementing the sense of social freedom is the opportunity to sample a bit of the consumer society which is their image of the West and modernity. On pay day, the factories arrange for sellers of costume jewellery to come in during the lunch break. "Tee-shirts and clothing salespeople are not allowed in, because try-ons would take more than the half-hour lunch break. Whatever we do, we don't disrupt production time," explained a personnel officer. Elaborate make-up is part of the electronics image in Malaysia and the factories even provide classes in how to apply it. All this allows the workers to feel they are part of a global culture which includes the choice between Avon and Mary Quant products, posters of John Travolta and Farah Fawcett-Majors by their beds, and the music from *Saturday Night Fever* played on the factory Muzak system.

Underlying the lifestyle attractions of electronics work, most strongly felt is the economic imperative. Women come to work in the factories because their families need or want the income. A worker in Indonesia recounted:

"When I started working at Fairchild, I didn't tell my father. He finally found out after a week when my mother explained why I was leaving so early every morning. At first he was upset but then he saw that I was able to bring home some money for food so he let me work ... I would like to move out

and contract a room near the factory but my parents won't let me do this. It's just that my house is so crowded — with nine brothers and sisters there are always people around...My younger sister wants to apply at the factory for a job, but I don't want her to. I like having my own identity."

Tensions

The role of income provider is a relatively new one for Southeast Asian women. While women have always shared the work of family enterprises — whether peasant or urban — and supplemented household income by doing cottage craft work, only a small proportion have taken on full-time wage-earning jobs, outside the family. The arrival of the electronics industry has dramatically expanded opportunities for young women.

While the families welcome their daughters' income, it is often difficult to accept a daughter's greater independence. This tension becomes especially acute when the women push for more freedom or flaunt the alien lifestyle which is so actively encouraged inside the factory. The Intel Penang personnel officer complained, "Our major problem is complaints, from parents, and brothers in particular, when they see the cultural changes and new lifestyles their daughters and sisters are taking on." In an attempt to overcome parental disapproval, several factories have arranged Parents' Days to "show parents that the working environment is actually very amenable." Other plants have established factory-run hostels for workers so that parents will not worry about what their daughters do during unsupervised hours. The hostels feature chaperones and strict timings.

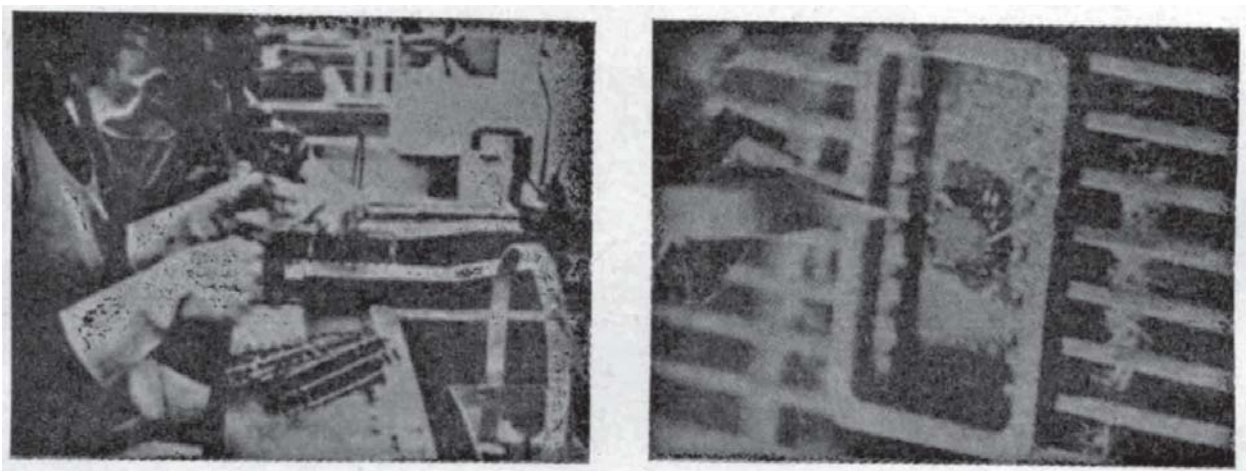
Ties to California

Workers in Asia and California are subject to many of the same conditions and problems, including job hazards, high production pressures, coercive discipline and human relations techniques aimed at preventing independent worker organizing. In California the hazards arise from the greater number of chemicals used in the fabrication of silicon wafers. The pressure to produce is expressed in forced overtime speed-ups and competition. California executives regularly attend seminars on "How to make unions unnecessary".

Women in California are very aware that women in Asia carry out part of the production process, because their employers constantly remind them. The companics use the international division of labour to manipulate and intimidate their workers. California workers are threatened with loss of their jobs if they organize themselves or make too many demands: the plant can always relocate to Asia.

Dilemmas, Contradictions

The semiconductor industry presents its Southeast Asian women workers with short-term dilemmas and long-term contradictions. Jobs which seldom last more than four years can bring profound changes into their lives for years to come.



For the short-term, the tens of thousands of jobs the electronics industry has brought to each Southeast Asian country have created new economic roles for women, potentially raising their status and undermining the patriarchal structure. At the same time, however, by stressing Western versions of feminine passivity, the companies have been able to prevent the workers from realizing their potential for independence.

In Taiwan and Hong Kong where the industry has offered employment for over a decade, workers complain that their families have pressured them to remain in the factories despite their personal wish not to. Particularly common is dissatisfaction because families have become so dependent on their daughters' income that they resist the daughters' wishes to marry.

Industry personnel policies which encourage Western

manners and consumption habits often make it difficult for women workers to fit into their communities and families. Church organizers in South Korea, where electronics industries are over ten years old report that many retrenched electronics workers have no alternative but to become prostitutes to support themselves.

The ramifications of the electronics companies' manipulation of their women workers reach into other "female" industries as well. Semiconductor factories have divided their workers from those in other industries by requiring more education as a condition for hiring and creating an image of superiority among them. Throughout Southeast Asia, workers and observers reported that women in other industries view electronics workers with both envy at their style and apparent freedom and contempt of their flaunting of alien lifestyles. Such division makes it difficult for workers to cross industry lines to organize themselves or even understand their common position as workers and as women.

Nonetheless, resistance is beginning. Regular reports of protests, sit-ins, and work-stoppages come from established factories in Hong Kong, Taiwan and South Korea. Worker militancy in Hong Kong in the late 1960s discouraged further foreign investment for several years and may have been the catalyst in the decision to locate new factories in other Asian countries. Even in these newer factories resistance is taking shape. In the Philippines, for example, workers in one US owned plant are developing a union despite heavy government restrictions on all labour organizing. Workers periodically halt production for short periods to press demands in all Southeast Asian countries.

A major aspect of organized worker resistance—in the Philippines, South Korea and Hong Kong as well as California—is the investigation of their particular roles in international production. As they challenge the companies, workers find they must understand their international structure if they are to be successful in organizing across national and eventually industry lines. In one step toward developing an international labour movement to confront multinational capital in the semiconductor, workers in Hong Kong have organized trips to visit workers in the Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand. One woman summed up her trip to the Philippines in early 1979:

"The 11-day trip was over, but the sight and sound of the Philippines was embedded in my heart. The Hong Kong workers should learn from them, because generally speaking we were not so aware of fighting for power. This tour has helped me to identify my role." ❐

Hysteria—the subconscious wildcat strike

WITHOUT strikes, without unions, without collective bargaining, Malaysian workers have regularly shut down factories for hours and even days at a time with spontaneous outbreaks of possession by spirits affecting hundreds of workers. "Spirits" provide Malay women with one of their few culturally acceptable forms of social protest. Their culture does not condone expressions of anger and strong emotions by women.

A possessed woman becomes "hysterical", going into contortions and often taking on a totally different voice and personality. In one possession I witnessed, ten adults were needed to restrain a very slight teenaged girl. In another, a worker who was possessed in her hostel began to shout that she hated being there, hated working in the plant and wanted to go home to her mother. Afterwards, she and others were at pains to explain that it was not she who was speaking but a spirit who was speaking through her. Hence, she was not responsible for what she said.

Mass possessions in the factories usually occur during times of high production pressures, changes in the production process or other generally recognized tension. Incidents commonly begin with one worker seeing a spirit in her microscope, often that of her mother. The vision sweeps through the factory floor and suddenly several hundred women are hysterically weeping and writhing. Though management personnel try to remove the affected women from the floor immediately, the outbreaks frequently close the factory down in a subconscious wildcat strike. One American manager openly acknowledged the connection between possessions and working conditions: "If people believe management cares, there are no problems. Hysteria doesn't occur." Affected workers always receive a paid two-week medical leave in a further, implicit admission that possession is linked to working conditions.

Workers and management alike offer many explanations for the epidemics, usually revolving around unhappy spirits or ghosts. According to one theory, the spirits are ghosts of prisoners of war killed on the factory sites by Japanese during World War II. Management efforts to end the outbreaks have ranged from importing industrial relations experts from New York to hiring local spiritual healers, on a monthly stipend, to exorcise the spirits. But the possessions continue.