Worker “Upskilling” in an Age of Insecurity

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Abstract: In an organization that claims to value worker “upskilling,” and which pursues steps with this objective in mind, what prevents workers from acquiring skills on the job? I explore this question through a series of semi-structured interviews with employees of a unionized U.S. automaker called AutoCo, along with employees of the associated labor union. In an insecure environment, two flexible work reforms pose opportunities and threats. One delegates certain job tasks downward from higher-skilled maintenance employees to lower-skilled production employees. Another permits certain higher-skilled employees, as part of self-directed teams, to cross job boundaries. Prior research provides clues as to contextual factors that either inhibit or induce formal skill upgrading in firms. But scholars of work and organizations face a dearth of recent grounded, multi-stakeholder accounts of formal skill development, especially in highly insecure environments. The interviews suggest the following: Under threat, skilled employees guard their work. Under pressure to maintain labor peace, the company makes concessions that sever national policy from local practice. Lacking strategic influence, the union exercises strict control of workplace practices. These constraints promote adherence to workplace rigidities that have the potential to limit skill development, in spite of declarations to the contrary. This work furthers our understanding of how unions influence skills upgrading in firms, while positing certain structural explanations associated with the prevailing labor-management relationship in the U.S. Further, it has the potential to contribute to literature on how organizational structures and activities shape the economic distribution.