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WORK SUCKS

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help various auxiliary or delivery workers steal time and goods, teach our friends the best ways to steal from our stores and workplaces? How much can we steal, eat, pilfer, and destroy? How much time can we take back for ourselves? During the height of the Autonomia movement in Italy, when revolutionary workers controlled radio stations, they practiced something called “demotivational speaking” on their morning programs, reminding workers who were waking up to their alarms how warm and cozy their beds were, how hot and unpleasant the factory was, how long and useless the commute. Beautiful.

Let’s start working together openly on those projects, and let’s stop framing them as “individual acts” rather than collective ones. Let’s talk about how to attack our jobs, and call these acts of theft “autonomous wage increases” or whatever makes them palatable to our theory friends. Let’s describe it with that magical talismanic word of “organizing” we love so much, to appeal to the activists. Let’s recognize there are more satisfying ways to fuck the boss than just getting a contract with the union. Why not build a politics around material reality—that we hate our jobs, that our productivity is destroying the planet—instead of around some magical idealistic notion about the dignity of our labors. Fuck that. Your job sucks, and so does mine. Let’s team up to make sure we never have to go there again.

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Kassandra Vee is a trans woman in Philadelphia who hates her job, her boss, and her landlord.

theaters elsewhere in the city, paid all of us minimum wage, though his son who worked there as a projectionist got paid well above the union rate. The son also sexually harassed all the women who worked there. It was the kind of plucky family business that fires people of color when they have the temerity to ask for a raise after two years of minimum-wage employment. In short, it sucked, and we were talking about it: We reached out to three unions in the area that we thought might help us organize—only ever heard back from one organizer, literally six months later, to tell us he couldn't help, sorry.

But instead of waiting for the assistance of the labor movement, we got organized. When one of us was in the box office, and the other tearing tickets, the box officer would sell each ticket twice by tearing it in half at the point of sale, tally in her head how many tickets had been sold without going through the computer, and when the manager wasn't looking slyly slip that money into a pocket. The usher just wouldn't do anything about the fact that tickets were arriving at her station already torn. The three of us in on the gambit made rent pretty easily while the scam was running—we gave ourselves a huge raise. I had another job, working doors for a sleazy rock promoter, where a friend's "training" literally consisted in showing me how to rip off the boss.

But lots of us don't work in cash industries, or else those registers are locked down with cameras. What else can we do? I'm getting paid to write this essay by comrades at the New Inquiry, but I'm writing it at my day job when my manager's out of visual range—that's small-fry. Can we swipe each other in and out on time cards, cover for each other taking extra-long breaks? Can we sabotage equipment so the work can't get done, glue the locks shut so we can't go inside? How do we give goods away to broke customers, get coworkers to look the other way when we shoplift, fudge invoices and forms so customers pay less,

People don't need any convincing to hate their jobs—their jobs do that for them. Like hating the police, hating your job is one of the most beautiful and natural things you can do, which is why popular culture works so hard to convince us that cops are heroes and that jobs are actually good. Sometimes, in order to survive our day-to-day, we need to believe them. So we spend a tremendous amount of time and energy telling ourselves that work is fine, even as the power used, waste created, and products manufactured in our work destroy the planet. But toxic repression isn't just bad for your mental health—it's terrible for your skin.

For many people, this repression curdles into ideology: Love what you do, do what you love. If you love what you do you'll never work a day in your life. In other words, the mark of work is that it's the thing you do that you fucking hate. Boomers consistently peddle this "love your job" line. It's a bad hangover from the conservative side of the hippies' and workers' movements of the long sixties. At its best, the movements wanted to abolish work and spread love in its place, but as the movements sputtered out, a bunch of assholes in California came to a compromise with capital, decided to love their work instead, and invented Silicon Valley. Nowadays you can't throw a management book at a workplace motivational poster without hitting a phrase about "worker passion."

What happens if you do succeed, get a "dream job," and actually love your work? You're the biggest sucker you know. Loving your job is just doing affective labor for your boss. Sure, it may make survival easier, but loving your job is a compensation that benefits your boss much more than you, making you more hardworking, less likely to quit or move on, better at making money for them, and therefore easier to exploit. I've never met a job I couldn't be ungrateful for, and not just because no one is gonna pay me to watch horror movies, read novels, and eat bonbons in bed all day. Because

even if they did, one day I'd wake up and decide what I really wanted to do was go for a hike, or move to Georgia, or just go back to sleep, but my boss would be there tapping his foot, looking at his watch, with a box of Ferrero Rocher and a Blu-ray copy of Alien vs. Predator. Though the tasks and conditions of work are themselves often oppressive, it is the necessity of giving up the majority of your waking time and energy to production, irrespective of your desires, feelings, or needs, that is the fundamentally oppressive (and valuable) aspect of work.

If you work in a creative industry, you've almost certainly been told that you should be happy you get to do what you love; you've probably been paid nothing, terribly, or in "exposure" for your beautiful labors. But it's not just creative workers: If you work in a historically woman-dominated field (teaching, nursing, nannying, caring, etc.) you know all about this too. These jobs, we are told, are driven by the kindness, love, sacrifice, and dedication of their workers, which is why it's OK to pay those workers like garbage. The idea of loving your job is used to drive your wages down and make it harder emotionally to perform acts of resistance. And in 2019, way too many of us are or have been precarious part-timers, day laborers, hustlers, or independent contractors to believe that "being your own boss" is any different.

The difficulty in loving yourself for hating your job, of course, is that there is something satisfying in most work. We find pleasure and compensation in even the most banal endeavors, because we have to survive everyday life in this capitalist hellscape, because we have to pay the rent and keep the lights on, because exercising our creativity, our ingenuity, our skill, or even our willful capacity for hard work can be satisfying, can make us proud, no matter the work. But there is a serious danger in confusing these survival mechanisms for desirable horizons of possibility. Let's start recognizing the truth: Hating your job is smart, and it's the

otherwise, a pleasure and joy in resistance, transformation, and healing. Because when we make revolution a job, the day will come when we want to quit, to opt out, to secede or fall away: We saw this happen to the Boomers all too clearly. Why repeat the old mistakes? The least we can do is make new ones.

There have always been some number of unpleasant but necessary tasks, both in society and in revolution, but what if we stopped romanticizing that fact and heroizing those who do those tasks, what if instead we bemoaned their necessity, imagined a horizon where they were in fact unnecessary? What if we tried to conceptualize a struggle whose central goal was reducing the amount of work, both in the process of struggle itself and in the world we want to build? What if we, along with the merch-about-how-much-Mondays-suck industry, embraced the fact that we hate going to work?

Of course, the simplest solution to that problem would be to quit, but the vast majority of us can't afford to lose our jobs. (If you're reading this and you can afford to quit your job that you hate but you haven't yet: What the fuck?!) Striking remains one of the best tools for getting out of work. But why should we reduce our imaginations to what strikes have become: a drag. We picket while pacing slowly in a circle outside our workplace, not even sleeping in, unable to prevent our boss from getting paid, let alone to sock him in his smug fucking face. Why spend all day unpaid outside the factory if it's not even gonna be a riot? What other forms of workplace organizing and striking can we imagine that do not involve respecting the workplace, that do not imply a horizon of going to work forever?

I've experienced glimpses of these different kinds of organizing. When I worked at a small movie theater, a lovely local business of the kind that gets so many people all misty-eyed and romantic, the owner, who had two other

are, instead, mutually enforcing facts? If we had more time to look after ourselves and those closest to us we wouldn't need so much speed, convenience, and ease; we wouldn't need so many people to specialize in picking up the pieces.

The second rotten premise embedded in the sewer question is a moldy conception of revolution. In this conception, the revolution is centered around an event limited in time and place (e.g. Russia, October, 1917), with a clear-cut before and after, defined by the overthrow of the ruling political regime and its replacement by revolutionaries (either as a political party, as a class, as a soviet, or whatever you like). Those revolutionaries will then set about transforming society on the basis of their principles and their class—but society continues largely the same as it had before, with new rulers, new guiding politics, and new goals. The strike has put us in power, and now it's time to get back to work. This comrade needs to know who will clean the sewers, because she imagines she will shortly have to make that person do it.

These revolutionaries think they can avoid the catastrophic mistakes and tragedies of the 20th century revolutionary movement and somehow, against all historical evidence to the contrary, lead a state that will eventually wither away. Those who believe the road to revolution leads through the state cannot be anti-work, at least not yet. The end of work is always deferred, because a world without work—built around not productivity, wealth, or profit but human flourishing, ecological harmony, pleasure, joy and desire, love, and communal care—has no use for a state.

How many times has a call to action come to us with this poisoned promise: “We must work hard for the revolution, but soon, comrade, soon we will be able to put down our tools and rest.” We don't have another century to gamble on this mode of revolutionary transformation. We could instead be cultivating a desire for learning, loving, and being

right relationship to work. Finding pleasure and happiness at our jobs is a way to make ourselves able to show up at work the next day, not a reflection of work's intrinsic moral value.

Instead, however, we're increasingly seeing the reemergence of vulgar pro-work sentiments among revolutionaries. With the “first as tragedy, then as farce” return of U.S.S.R. worship on the left, there are probably people you know who think that Lenin, Mao, and Stalin were right to call your average lazy workers saboteurs and wreckers, to put them in prisons and gulags, to subject them to public criticism sessions or secret trials and executions for refusing to work. Once we establish the worker's state you'll love your job . . . or else. These poor lost souls have rejected market economies only to make the revolution their boss.

But many of our comrades who are significantly less confused about history still have a bad case of activism-ism. They will tell you, their voice backed by the sounding of trumpets and the singing of angels, that revolution means “doing The Work.” Like good Calvinists, they know the real revolutionaries are the ones seen working hardest at it, the ones raising more money, getting more signatures, winning more votes, taking more arrests, getting more retweets, selling more papers, organizing more demos, breaking more windows, sitting through more meetings, etc. etc. etc. Though more common among nonprofit types, activism-ism (or its sullen asshole cousin, militantism) is not limited to any particular political tendency. Bad news for those comrades too, however: The revolution will not be a job fair. No one is gonna check your CV.

Still other comrades argue that the correct response to work is to organize, or, more explicitly, to unionize. And yet, most of the union organizers I know see their work as an exhausting, thankless, Sisyphean task that nevertheless must be done. My job is already an exhausting thankless

Sisyphian task that nevertheless must be done! How will I make my job more palatable by doing a double shift for the union? Especially since the first thing most union contracts guarantee is that the workers won't go out unexpectedly on strike! So I've spent all this time producing another structure (beside the state and its pigs) that I literally pay a percentage of my paycheck to to make sure I go to my job every day, the job that I hate? Surely we can use all this energy to do something better! We have such short lives, the world is on fire, I don't want to stay at this job forever, and I don't want to build a union that makes that feasible, possible or desirable. I want to burn this hideous world of productivity down before it can do the same to our planet.

Of course, what makes us collectively capable of so many beautiful revolutionary things is our polymorphous perversity, our ability to desire anything under the sun and many things that have never been besides. For example, I love reading dry historical texts about revolutionary movements and go through phases where I absolutely adore being at long, borderline pointless demonstrations, then going out afterward with comrades to dissect, complain, and drink. I'm not here to kink shame anybody: Someone out there I'm sure loves gathering signatures. That's great! Honey, go get those signatures. But my life improved—as did, I imagine, the quality of the protests I did not attend—when I learned to recognize the difference between that real desire to be in one of those demos and attending on the basis of guilt or identity-defining necessity. People doing something guiltily, unwillingly, or resentfully are incredibly good at producing profit, but they can never produce the revolution.

If we would learn to think and live through our pleasure and desire—to do the tasks that we enjoy, to mostly leave those we don't to others who do; if we would just be honest and recognize that that's something we mostly end up doing

anyway; if we wouldn't use all this mental and social energy, all this neurosis and hand-wringing to convince ourselves or others we are being bad revolutionaries when we actually just don't like huge parts of what we think we "have to do"; if we wouldn't resent our friends or comrades who have different desires, projects or tactics; if we wouldn't project that guilt onto them—if we could stop doing all that, we would be so much closer to imagining truly revolutionary tactics, liberatory ways of life, abolitionist strategies.

But what about the sewers? Who will change the soiled bedclothes of the infirm, who will pick up the collective's trash, who will fabricate medicines and mine minerals? What to do about all the unpleasant work that keeps society running? This objection is made in good faith, by comrades who are worried for the well-being of their fellow creatures and feel keenly the responsibility we have to each other, to the most downtrodden and marginalized. But, with love, I insist that this objection carries within it two rotten premises that will always lead us into defeat.

The first presumption is that the world as it is now guarantees adequate and equal access to public works and running water (shout-outs to Flint), medicine, and sanitation, to goods and services, and that a massive upheaval and transformation could only make things worse. While capitalism is incredibly good at making sure a U.S. American can get a \$2 T-shirt delivered to her door tomorrow morning, it will never guarantee that the garment maker has access to clean water, the warehouse stocker affordable Insulin, the delivery driver mental-health support—and they're all working their fucking asses off. Because we are all working so hard and our world is nevertheless balanced over the precipice of apocalypse, when people imagine a reduction of work they imagine only collapse. Is it not possible that this edge of total crisis and the constant state of frantic work are not in contradiction but