

Zerowork

New Journal reviewed

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Zerowork No. 1; Available from P.O. Box 515, Station C, Toronto, Ontario, Canada or through Ammunition Books (see further in this issue).

The last few years have seen the appearance of few new journals, even fewer of which are worth taking seriously. *Zerowork*, however, is one of the exceptions. Despite a density of text and an absence of graphics and photographs, this journal is well worth reading.

There are a number of excellent reasons for doing so.

(1) This is one of the few efforts to examine present day struggles (internationally as well-as in America) and to try to draw out of them their unifying features, with an eye toward developing an analysis of class struggles without relying on the use of preconceived standards. *Zerowork* is a genuine attempt to give expression and articulation to contemporary class struggles.

(2) This journal is part and parcel of a new wave of ideas, beginning with the resurgence of 1968–1969. The past two years or so have seen the appearance of a number of pamphlets similar (though not identical in thrust) to *Zerowork* in the U.S. and Canada (see list at the end of this review). The ideas they offer should be considered and discussed by those who seek the destruction of capital in all its forms, for they are meant as part of the on-going process in which we are all engaged.

(3) While many of these ideas have had some currency in Europe (particularly Italy), they have been slow to reach America. It is of no small importance that we consider these ideas now that they are accessible in English and hold them up to the light of our own experiences.

This review is not intended to convey the content of each essay in *Zerowork* No. 1. Rather, I will restrict myself to certain key features.

Focus Is On Sources of Working Class Power

Zerowork grounds itself in a clear definition of capital: “As a class relation, capital is first of all a power struggle.” (p.3) It then moves rapidly to analyze particular struggles (essays on postal workers, auto workers, and coal miners); the impact of these and other struggles on the working class itself, further struggles; and capital, both nationally and internationally, all largely in terms of “power.” Throughout, the focus is on the sources and obstacles to working class power in society as a whole. In the introduction, the editors write:

“Through these interdependent levels of class analysis we can understand the relation between the working class and capital. They enable us to specify the composition of the working class. At the same time, such an analysis allows us to see how the working class changes that relation and reconstructs its composition at a greater level of power, that is, in its political recomposition.

“By ‘political recomposition’ we mean the level of unity and homogeneity that the working class reaches during a cycle of struggle in the process of going from one composition to another. Essentially, it involves the overthrow of capitalist divisions, the creation of new unities between different sectors of the class, and an expansion of the boundaries of what the ‘working class’ comes to include. Thus, the ‘working class’ is not some structural category into which people are placed, but an active agent, the product of both society and its own struggle.”

Zerowork stresses certain features of recent struggles which it sees as central to the present “recomposition” of the class. Foremost is the struggle to separate income from work. Many of us who have had to depend upon the sale of our labor-power in order to live have come to the realization that we are entitled to live (not merely eke by) simply by virtue of the fact that we are human beings.

Moreover, we have begun to act on that realization—both by fighting for more income (demanding higher unemployment and welfare payments, looser eligibility requirements, higher wages, more “fringe” benefits, stealing at work, shoplifting, and looting) and by refusing to do more work (or any work) in return (sabotage, restricting output, absenteeism, quitting jobs, sleeping on the job, fighting the introduction of new production techniques, refusing jobs, and so on).

Secondly, these struggles have tended to challenge in practice, and at times overcome, what is seen by *Zerowork* as the major division within the working class—that between the “waged” and the “wageless” (i.e., those who are frequently unemployed, on welfare, or perform work without receiving a wage, such as housework).

On occasion, these two groups have struggled together, in looting stores, demanding higher unemployment and welfare payments, or rejecting the organization of work as a whole. But more importantly, the thrust of the independent struggles of the “waged” and the “wageless” have become the same: “Re-appropriation of wealth in the community and struggle over wages within the factory were but two sides of the same struggle for higher income which was waged independently and irrespective of any work relationship.” (p.15)

This fundamental identity pointed to two important features: (1) that society has become the “social factory” in which the efforts of capital in society were the same as those within the factory, that the social reproduction of capital dominated human activity; (2) that on the basis of this “recomposition” of the working class (the breakdown of the division between “waged” and “wageless”) “autonomy” became possible. “Autonomy means that the struggles are waged outside and often against the unions and that the objectives of the struggles are themselves autonomous. The size and the quality of the demands are measured only in terms of the workers’ own needs and are ultimately aimed at achieving a subjective recomposition.” (p.17) While part of the struggle against capital, such “autonomy” represents the starting point for an all out battle.

The Heart of the Crisis

This line of argument leads *Zerowork* to a set of provocative hypotheses concerning the present crisis. While, for the Left, the working class is “an innocent victim of the internal contradictions of capital, a subordinate element in a contradictory whole,” (p.6), for *Zerowork* the recent struggles of the working class are at the very heart of the crisis. Just how, however, remains a bit ambiguous.

Some partisans of a *Zerowork* position (the New York Struggle Against Work Collective, in their pamphlet “Developing and Under-Developing New York”) argue that the (relatively) successful struggle for “more money for less work” has caused a crisis of profitability for the system. The rate of profit has fallen, not due to the rising organic composition of capital, but due to the struggles of workers to reduce the rate of surplus value itself.

The *Zerowork* journal, on the other hand, sees the present crisis as part of capital’s “strategy” to force the working class back into a passive, subordinate role, clamoring for “work” and willing to submit to discipline both at work and in society (“the social factory”).

This “strategy” was largely formulated and implemented through the State, which sought to “dismember” the new unity and power of the working class. (See Paolo Carpinano, “U.S. Class Composition in the ‘Sixties” and

Mark) Montano, "Notes on the International Crisis" in *Zerowork* pp.7–59). Nevertheless, *Zerowork* sees this "strategy" as having failed, as wage demands, absenteeism, turnover, etc., have remained unaffected by the crisis.

All in all, then, *Zerowork's* perspective hinges on the revolt against work. As they quote a little known statement from Marx on their back cover:

"It is one of the greatest misunderstandings to talk of free, human, social work, or work without private property. "Work" is essentially the unfree, inhuman, unsocial activity, determined by private property and creating private property. The abolition of private property becomes a reality only when it is understood as the abolition of 'work.'"

This revolt against work undermines "state socialist" or "workers' control" notions as goals. Rather, a re-thinking of "work" itself and the relationship between "work" and the rest of "life" is called for. The most explicit and eloquent statements on this subject are found in the pamphlet "Working-and Not Working at the Post Office" (Toronto Struggle Against Work Collective):

"I really didn't like working at the post office. In fact, I hated it... And it wasn't simply the job itself, although sticking letters in pigeon holes isn't exactly the most fulfilling way to spend 8 hours a day. Much more than this, I hated work because of the kind of life it forced me to live 24 hours a day. Because, after a while, it became pretty clear that work affected just about everything I did away from work.

"If I quit work because I refused to live the kind of life it forced on me, then I also refused to live that life even while I was working Every night I worked was a night lost forever. If they were going to try to take my life away from me, then they weren't going to get away with it without a fight that would cost them as much as possible."

"Wages for Housework and Schoolwork"

There are a variety of conclusions drawn by Zero-work. One, as we have already seen, is the rejection of the dead-ends of "state socialism" and "workers' control." Another is the advocacy of struggles seeking more money for less work and "wages" in return for all social activity. For example, *Zerowork* raises the demands for "wages for housework" and "wages for schoolwork." (George Caffentzis, "Throwing Away the Ladder: The Universities in the Crisis," *Zerowork* pp128-142).

Such demands grow from several sources: (1) The sense that, in the social factory, all activity is part of the social reproduction of capital and should be paid for; (2) such struggles in themselves contribute to the further "recomposition" of the working class, by assaulting the capitalist division between the "waged" and the "wageless;" (3) the increased income won from such struggles will provide people with the resources and security to carry on further struggles.

On other questions, *Zerowork* remains undecided or ambiguous. Here I will point to only two, both of which have concerned readers and writers of the Fifth Estate: (1) the nature of "revolutionary organization," and (2) the role of unions. On the former, *Zerowork*, while acutely recognizing the utter bankruptcy of all self-proclaimed "revolutionary organizations," offers no vision of its own.

Indeed, the introduction opens with the statement: "The present capitalist crisis has made the problem of working class organization more urgent. But any discussion of revolutionary action must be based upon an analysis of the present relation of the working class to capital. The first issue of *Zerowork* takes up this task." (p.1) There are, it is to be noted, no appeals for the formation of a new party, nor any explicit rejection of the party or vanguard form. We must wait. On one hand, it is argued that unions are an agent of capital in its efforts to control the working class. On the other hand it is stated that "unions are used as a means to organize and spread the struggle, but are easily bypassed when the circumstances require." (p.20) In short, unions are seen by *Zerowork* as somewhat responsive to workers' demands, and can be "used" as a first step to further activity. *Zerowork's* ambiguity on this question of unions reflects a contradiction which I will later address.

At this point I would like to offer some of my criticisms of the *Zerowork* perspective. I must first stress that they have definitely seized upon a major aspect of on-going class struggles. My chief concern is whether they have confused a single major aspect with the totality of the struggle, collapsing too much into one theme and, therefore, inadequately confronting the problems we face.

The Zerowork Perspective—Some Criticism

1. The problem of social relationships and self-organization. *Zerowork* focuses on the “content” of working class struggles—the revolt against work, the struggle to separate income from work. This “content” appears largely as monetary demands and the performance of less work.

It seems to me that questions of “form” must also be addressed—how are these struggles carried out? The “form” of self-organization bears a “content” of its own—the practice and experience of defining one’s own demands, developing ways to fight for them, controlling one’s own activity, and entering into mutually supportive and co-operative relations with fellow “proletarians” (a category which includes the “waged” and the “wageless”). This experience is of equal importance to the “content” of the revolt against work, for in it lie the seeds of genuine “autonomy.”

2. This brings us immediately to the problem of unions. Such organizations exist to channel and control working class struggles into acceptable outlets. Not only does this affect the “content” of struggles (a persistent commitment to linking wage increases to higher productivity, a concern with “protecting” the viability of the firm and industry and defending workers as workers), but it also works against self-organization.

Unions seek to maintain all struggles under the control of the officialdom, and rank and file members must follow their orders and carry out their decisions. As long as *Zerowork* concerns itself strictly with the question of more money (won, at times, through—if not by—unions) for less work (won by daily shop-floor struggles), they will remain trapped in their vision of the path towards “autonomy.” As so many articles in the Fifth Estate have argued, unions are the first obstacle to self-activity.

3. Other problems arise with the notion of “intermediate demands”, i.e., wages for students, wages for housework, etc. The problem here is with the activity itself and not with questions of compensation. Moreover, it is highly unlikely that such demands can be won. Rather, to win such demands (which would bankrupt the state and totally alter the structure of society) such a massive struggle would be required that revolution itself would be possible. Then why not come right out and call for it?

The very implications of *Zerowork’s* analysis demand the total restructuring of every aspect of daily life, something we all have the greatest interest in doing. Let us communicate that interest, that desire, to the world rather than propose utopian reform demands, which only encourage a greater reliance on the State anyway.

4. The nature of the present crisis. *Zerowork* lays too much emphasis on two factors, both of which are quite real, but not solely responsible for the crisis: (a) workers’ struggles to reduce the rate of surplus-value, and (b) capital’s “strategy”. On the first, long run factors in the changing organic composition of capital and the growth of unproductive (non-profitable) production (cf. Paul Mattick, “Marx and Keynes”) are ignored. This is the setting within which a drop in the rate of surplus-value can indeed precipitate a crisis.

On the second, I fail to see how capital, via its agency the State, is capable of even having a coherent “strategy” on a societal level, let alone being capable of implementing it. I also fail to see the possibility (let alone the reality) of the bourgeoisie uniting to cause a crisis.

While there are other problems, particularly those of language and style, I will stop here. Despite my criticisms, much of the thrust of *Zerowork* has altered and enriched my own understanding of the revolutionary project. I recommend it in hopes of furthering discussion and dialogue, as we grope towards an understanding of the revolt against work, the touchstone of our present lives and hopes.

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Sidebar: According to *Zerowork*, workers like Wanda Waif, shown here waiting for her bi-weekly unemployment check, who increasingly expect a wage without producing, are the main cause of the current economic crisis.

In its September and October issues, *Fortune* magazine ran several articles dealing with corporate concern about the “...extent to which not working has become an increasingly attractive alternative to working...”

“... the new composition of our labor force, the new attitudes toward the institution of work, the buffers that shield the jobless from attendant hardships—all these are blocking the flow of people to jobs.”

“The new policies (to deal with unemployment) (should)... add to the attractions of work and motivate people to stay on the job. They must also dampen down the negative incentives—the kind that add to the attractions of not working.”

As Capital sees it, run-away inflation is caused by workers' growing desire for more money, less work. In response, Capital brings on a recession to whip these laggards into shape.

... the payoff from running a slack economy for the past two years begins to materialize. Not only have price increases decelerated, but the rise in hourly earnings has slowed perceptibly... So long as the labor market can be kept relatively loose, wage increases, which are the principal component of price rises, will gradually moderate.”

... (it is) clear that unemployment must remain at much higher levels than conventional political rhetoric demands if we are to solve the problem of inflation.”

Additional Readings

“Working—and Not Working—at the Post Office,” John Ford, 31 Sullivan St., Toronto 2B, Canada 25 cents.

“Developing and Under-Developing New York: The ‘Fiscal Crisis’ and a Strategy for Fighting Austerity,” 75 cents.

“Sex, Race and Class”, \$1.20 (and much other material), from *New York Wages for Housework* c/o Cox, 689 10th St. Brooklyn, N.Y.11215.

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