

The “Revolt Against Work” or Fight for the Right to be Lazy

How important is sabotage, absenteeism, job refusal, etc.?

Charles Reeve

During the last year the *Fifth Estate* has published numerous essays by John Zerzan (and others co-authored with Paula Zerzan) on the decomposition of daily life, the revolt against work, and the police role of unions. The following essay challenges many of the author(s)' contentions about the importance of sabotage, absenteeism, and other daily acts committed by a frustrated and distraught working class. The article originally appeared as “Refus du Travail’ ou lutte pour le Droit à la Paresse” in *Spartacus*, juillet-août 1976 (5, rue Ste-Croix de-la-Bretonnerie, Paris IV).

Examples of the Zerzan perspective under discussion are available in back issues of this newspaper or the specific article mentioned, in *Unions Against Revolution*, Black & Red (\$.50 from Ammunition Books).

One further note—we reprint this piece to continue the discussion regarding the role of unions, the state of capitalism, and the forces confronting both. However, it is difficult for us to associate ourselves with several of the remarks contained within it, particularly those referring to “principles of revolutionary action,” “collective, organized...conscious action...,” the author’s attempt to speak for “revolutionary” -workers and his assurance that coercion will be used to force “parasites” to do “productive” work after the revolution. His conclusions are fraught with authoritarianism, but his critique of the revolt against work is a substantial challenge to the Zerzans’ major perspective. Our January issue will contain a response from the latter. [See Anything new in the “Revolt Against Work?” by Peter Rachleff, FE# 280, February 1977.]

Have you ever heard of a boss satisfied with his employee’s labor? Certainly not and, if we are to believe John Zerzan’s text on “The Critical Contest,” this even holds for today’s American capitalists as well as for their faithful servants, the unions.

According to its author, the aim of this is to discuss “the conservative nature of official strikes, the growth of union centralization and autocracy, and the increasing institutionalization of business-labor-government collusion and cooperation...against the backdrop of such manifestations of heightened workers’ resistance as rising absenteeism and turnover rates, declining productivity, and a much greater anti-union tendency.” However, after reading it, one feels the absence of a critical analysis of these questions. In its place one finds a long list of quotations and thoughts of the American ruling class and its faithful sociologists.

Of course, the author tries to use all this “thought” of the ruling class to show how the revolt of the American working class is today reaching a critical point. These are the limits imposed by the academic approach of the author. The article was originally published in a radical journal of an American university. Neither the text added to the

English publication, and certainly not the quotation from A. Pannekoek inserted among pounds of reflections of industrial sociologists, can compensate for the absence of reference to the experiences of struggle and to the way in which they are perceived by American workers. And when the author promises to say something about the “state of mind of the American wage-earner,” we remain hungry.

In short, the objective of the text—to show how the revolt against work constitutes the new, radical tendency of the class struggle—appears to me to be far from achieved. Uncritical Confidence in the opinions of the ruling class on this subject don’t seem to me to be a sufficient argument for accepting such a thesis.

Nevertheless, this text presents, in my opinion, two interesting-points. First of all, in a condensed but clear form it refers to the most recent struggles of American workers and shows the existence of ever closer relations between the union machines and the capitalist state apparatus. Secondly, with reference to tendencies which it claims to discern in the current phase of struggles in the USA, “The Critical Contest” provokes a discussion of some questions now fashionable in a number of radical circles.

This “revolt against work,” absenteeism, sabotage—are these new tendencies within the workers’ movement? Does the absence of the work ethic ideology among young workers imply a radical attack on the system? Do these forms of revolt go beyond the traditional forms of struggle to call into question the very functioning of the system? Today there exist everywhere little leftist tendencies who would answer “yes” to these questions and who erect the “revolt against work” as the principle of the new revolutionary movement.

Is Sabotage New?

First of all, is sabotage of production a new aspect of the class struggle, or is it one of the forms of resistance which workers have always used against the violence of wage-labor from the very beginnings of industrialization? In *Dynamite*, his extraordinary book on class violence in America, Louis Adamic (a former Wobbly) describes how sabotage became one of the favorite forms of action of revolutionary American workers around the turn of the century. For American and European revolutionary syndicalists sabotage was a conscious class response to capitalist barbarism.

In addition to the IWW’s black cat, we remember the famous text on Sabotage by Pouget, the vice-secretary of the French CGT union when it was a revolutionary syndicalist organization. To present sabotage as something new in the working-class movement can only suggest little acquaintance with that movement’s history.

It is nonetheless true that with the integration of the unions into capitalism, that which was a principle of union action now appears only in wildcat actions. Sabotage has changed its form and also its meaning, while other forms of “revolt” appear. With the transformations of capitalism, with the end of liberal capitalism and the development of the modern form of state intervention, the union movement takes on a new function, that of managing the “social services” permitted by this new development.

The violence of wage labor increases together with the integration of the workers by the setting up of systems of social security and various sorts of relief. All this has the aim of reducing conflict in the process of reproduction. But these systems of social aid (the “social wage,” as they’ve been called) also offer the workers new possibilities for resistance to work.

Absenteeism, use of unemployment insurance, etc., appear to a growing number of workers as new possibilities for resistance. The system permits this as long as capital accumulation continues without serious disjunctures, for these forms of resistance are lesser evils for capitalists. After all, isn’t the struggle against capitalism superfluous as long as one can “profit” from unemployment and welfare?

It appears to me very questionable to claim, as Zerzan along with many others of the “revolt against work” school do, that absenteeism and other anti-work activities are the principal source of capitalism’s current crisis of productivity. The falling profitability of capital, the low level of investment in new productive capital, the low rate of utilization of existing productive capacity are so many sources of the productivity crisis.

The strike at the Lordstown GM factory, of which Zerzan speaks, is a good example. Driven to the wall by a drop in profitability, the automobile sector, in which Taylorism pushed the division of manual labor the furthest, still sought, by means of a sizable investment in new machinery, to increase the division of manual tasks, that violence

of labor. It is this capitalist need to surpass a formerly sufficient level of productivity that preceded and provoked the revolt of the workers at Lordstown. The failure of this attempt shows the limits of Taylorism and poses as a question fundamental to the survival of the system: whether or not it has the capacity to completely reorganize industrial labor on a new basis.

Does Revolt Depend on “Social Wage”?

From another point of view, one can say that the apparent permanence of the present day crisis of profitability will not fail to call into question the famous “social wage” which, like all state expenditures, depends on the steady functioning of productive capital. In all capitalist countries, the necessity of tightening the social welfare belt is freely discussed with appropriate steps being taken as they are politically feasible.

Once the possibility of drawing on the “social wage” is reduced, we will see the collapse of the myth of absenteeism as a radical form of struggle, in the same way as today already the slogan of the “revolt against work” is Collapsing in the face of rising unemployment. As always there will then remain for the workers only an open struggle against the wage system or else submission to it and to the barbarism it engenders.

This leads us back to the question of absenteeism and sabotage as forms of struggle. Where these have become in the last few years mass phenomena (as in the automobile industry in Italy), some revolutionary militants, after a period of euphoria, are beginning to draw some critical conclusions. Thus, in an analysis of mass absenteeism, we discover that:

“Although it represents an important form of labor action, it has contradictory consequences on the level of organization. To stay away the workers must establish an informal organization; but once they are out of the plant, they find themselves isolated in their neighborhoods and in practice they lead individual existences. It is common, for example, for absenteeism to be allied with holding down two jobs...or for it to isolate workers who practice it spontaneously from their shop and thus open the way to employer repression...This form of action should not be confused with the revolt against wage labor, a revolt which can express itself only inside the factory in a collective fashion and the action of the proletariat as a whole.” (*Collegamenti* No. 7, bulletin of the Communist Center for Research on Proletarian Autonomy)

This poses in a clear way the essential question raised by these forms of refusal: their relation to the collective and conscious action of the workers. Certainly the productivist ideology and the work ethic are in crisis, a crisis inseparable from the development of the division of labor. This attitude can have revolutionary significance if it is expressed in connection with collective and autonomous working class action.

But it is also true that this revolt often manifests a privatistic desire to “take it easy” (itself a product of the increasing division of the workers by modern organization of the labor process), a desire which, while understandable, is without any consciously radical meaning. Ultimately, what counts is the desire and determination to fight capitalism and, in this regard, the attitude towards work is not, to start with, decisive.

If for the revolutionary worker at the beginning of the century sabotage went hand in hand with a “craft pride,” today the absence of the work ethic often accompanies a rebirth of working class privatism. Already in the late 1920s survivors of the American revolutionary syndicalist movement stressed the privatistic content of the new forms of sabotage, the loss of what they called the “social vision of sabotage.”

Adamic notes in this connection that sabotage then became the expression of “individual radicalism,” “forms of vengeance that the American working class used blindly, unconsciously, desperately “...” and no longer “a force controlled by those who practiced it and the consequences of which did not escape them.”

Rather than a new form of struggle, sabotage and the rest of the “revolt against work” are in fact the result, the manifestation of weakness of the workers, a demonstration of their incapacity to take on capitalism in a conscious, independent and collective fashion.

Individual or Collective Action?

Its privatist content marks the “revolt against work” as an inevitable consequence of the violence of the wage system, a product of the defeat and division of workers in capitalism. The principles of revolutionary action remain unchanged. Only the collective, organized, autonomous and conscious action of the producers can lead to the end of wage labor. Such action alone creates solidarity, the spirit of initiative and imagination, a readiness to frame desires and to make decisions, the mental qualities necessary to get rid of the world we know.

When someone says, as John Zerzan does, that workers today exhibit a tendency in their struggles to aim at taking control over the forces of production, it’s hard to see how the “revolt against work” and sabotage can be “critical” forms of the modern revolutionary struggle! In fact, it’s only from collective struggle that these new tendencies to re-appropriate power over the productive apparatus can arise.

The confusion made in the slogan “revolt against work,” between work as labor, and work as wage labor, only conjures away the real issue of the revolutionary transformation of society. The “revolt against work” (or “zero work”) has no originality as a slogan—it has been that of the bourgeois class and its flunkies since the beginning! How not to smile when John Zerzan teaches us that the “contempt for work” is “nearly unanimous” “from welders to editors to former executives” (p. 3). Overworked bosses are certainly a new feature in working class solidarity!

Among revolutionary workers, the daily horror of wage labor only reinforces their conviction that the radical transformation of society consists essentially in the reorganization of production and in the putting to productive work of that whole mass of people who now live off our exploitation; bourgeois, bureaucrats, cops of all sorts, military men and women, and other parasites.

For, contrary to what goes on in capitalist society, it will be on the basis of participation in socially necessary labor that we will be able to work out principles of production and distribution in the new society. Only in this way will we realize the old desire of the working class movement, whose meaning is today much clearer—the abolition of wage labor and...the right to be lazy.

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<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/279-december-1976/the-revolt-against-work-or-fight-for-the-right-to-be-lazy>
Fifth Estate #279, December, 1976

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