

Anything new in the “Revolt Against Work?”

Sabotage and absenteeism differ today

Peter Rachleff

Charles Reeve has raised a number of important questions in his critique of John Zerzan’s “Unions Against Revolution.” [See The “Revolt Against Work” or Fight for the Right to be Lazy (FE 279, December, 1976).] These questions should not be tossed out of the window, nor should they be viewed as the only or most important questions which can be raised. For the moment, I would like to probe certain areas, in the hope that others will go even further in their considerations—or take issue with mine.

Reeve’s critique hinges on several major points: (1) that there is little in fact which is new about the “revolt against work”; (2) that absenteeism, sabotage and job refusal or quitting are essentially escapist alternatives to open collective struggle, made possible by relatively full employment and the state’s continuing ability to fund a “social wage”; and (3) that the “revolt against work” is misplaced, in that it is directed against “work” rather than “wage-labor.” I want to take up each of these points in turn.

What’s New About the “Revolt Against Work?”

Reeve is certainly right to point out that sabotage (and here we should add absenteeism and job refusal /turnover) emerged as forms of resistance in the early part of the twentieth century. Moreover, he correctly adds that what was then a union tactic (but only among certain unions) has now come outside the pale of official union actions. Yet we must push deeper if we are to see whether contemporary practices differ more fundamentally from those of the past.

Two major differences appear upon closer examination. First of all, the workers to whom sabotage made sense were seldom the same as those who practiced absenteeism and job refusal as forms of struggle. In the first decades of this century in America, sabotage was primarily engaged in by unskilled workers, in factories, common labor, and service trades. Textile operatives, migrant farm laborers, waiters and waitresses, lumberjacks, dockers, etc., were the major social groups within the Industrial Workers of the World—and outside of it—who used forms of sabotage to fight back against their oppression.

With brutally low pay, and irregular hours, they could little afford to take days off from work (absenteeism), and, facing steady competition for jobs, they could seldom afford to quit of their own accord. With no unemployment benefits and little if any savings, they could not afford to quit work altogether. Financially unable to support lengthy strikes, they often turned to sabotage as a form of “striking on the job,” in fact, as a bargaining tool.

Skilled workers, on the other hand, often had some personal savings as well as union out-of-work benefits to rely upon. They were often quick to quit a job, knowing full well that they could fairly easily obtain another. Not only could they afford to take a day off when they wanted, but they also knew that the boss could not afford to fire them, as he needed their skills to maintain production. Rather than sabotaging production, they often practiced restriction of output, which was primarily a means of securing their jobs and perhaps even creating additional skilled jobs. (Machinists and building trades workers were particularly well-known for such activities.)

In short, far from being a revolt against work, this restriction of output sought to maintain work. Proud of their skills, few could contemplate sabotaging a product. Indeed, many of the complaints they raised about the introduction of scientific management revolved around the deterioration this wrought in the quality of the products.

A New Perspective

Today a very different situation exists. It is the same workers who practice sabotage, absenteeism, and job refusal. This is to no small extent the product of the second major difference between the early 20th century and the present—the incredible changes in the actual processes of production.

This century has seen the decline of both skilled and unskilled jobs, and the rapid emergence of “semiskilled” factory operative positions. These machine tenders, the modern embodiment of abstract labor, care little about the quality of “their” products, earn enough (and have state-provided unemployment and welfare benefits to fall back on) to take time off or quit altogether, and are able to find jobs in a great variety of industries, as their “semi-skilled” tasks can often be learned in a matter of days if not hours.

Sabotage, absenteeism and quitting are now much more widely diffused as social practices throughout the working class and are closely-related to a new perspective on work itself—it is seen as a means to an end, a way to gain income. Within this perspective, the existence of other options—unemployment benefits, sick pay, workmen’s compensation, welfare, theft—increase the desire to subject oneself to work as little as possible.

The job, the wage itself, are forms of social control, both at the workplace itself and throughout the rest of the hours of the day—your life-time is shaped by someone else. Thus, sabotage, absenteeism, and job refusal take on a new importance today—as manifestations of the refusal of this social control, the refusal of self-definition according to one’s job, the attempt to define one’s own needs autonomously of the demands of capital. Its significance is markedly increased by its widespread practice and legitimacy in every form of wage labor. This is indeed new and must be seen as such.

The “Revolt Against Work” and “Collective Struggle”

Nothing could be further from the truth than to perceive sabotage, absenteeism and quitting as “individualistic” practices. At the very least, all are rooted in shared perceptions of the job. Even when sabotage is practiced by only one individual in the shop, he/she is enmeshed in a network of collective social relationships with fellow workers—the saboteur is protected from management. Often, in auto plants for example, workers will take turns fucking up the line so that all may take a break.

Absenteeism as well is often informally organized. Pittsburgh bus drivers, for example, have so organized absenteeism that they can take a day off when they feel like and, due to others’ taking time off, earn overtime pay the following week, thus boosting their income while working no additional hours.

Quitting, while very much an individual decision, contributes to collective perceptions and struggles on several levels—it calls into question one’s (self) definition as “autoworker,” “steelworker,” “waitress,” etc.; it concretely demonstrates one’s willingness and ability to define one’s own needs autonomous of the job; and it may often contribute to a willingness to fight back—for, if one is willing to quit or planning to quit at some point, why put up with demeaning shit at work?

In fact, all the forms of the “revolt against work” both grow out of shared collective experiences and perspectives, and can fuel collective struggles. Quite often, management’s response to these “individualistic” actions provoke mass struggles. But it is important to see how these contemporary collective struggles refuse to conform to the patterns of the past.

It is here that Reeve is trapped by outdated notions. For these collective struggles cannot grow out of the suppression of “privatistic” personal desires, the subjection of the individual to the collectivity, but are the product of a new fusion of individual and collective needs and desires—the self-abolition of the proletariat.

The struggle against work is both individual and collective—and these two aspects of it mutually reinforce each other. The individual's refusal to be a wage-laborer is wedded to the proletariat's struggle to free itself from the constraints of its social position. In order to see this though, we must break with the traditional notions of the class struggle which posit its goal as the dictatorship of the proletariat.

This whole conception is erroneous. The goal of contemporary class struggles, the results they prefigure, is the abolition of the proletariat, the destruction of capital in all its aspects.

The onset of economic crisis in the past several years has not had a noticeable effect on the "revolt against work." Managers of automobile factories continue to puzzle over the fact that increased unemployment has not diminished absenteeism and turnover.

Leftists continue to seek the uprising of the unemployed—or to generate it by peddling their wares at unemployment offices—while young unemployed autoworkers take their SUB benefits and head for Florida.

Sociologists, employers, government officials, union bureaucrats and their ilk continue to seek job enrichment plans, participation schemes, new work organizations, etc., in their desperate attempt to counter the "revolt." They know that it still exists; even in the face of 10% unemployment. We, too, know it exists—we are part of it every day.

Work and Wage Labor

Reeve argues that Zerzan and other chroniclers—advocates of the revolt against work—confuse this with a revolt against wage labor. Here he misses the profound truth which underlies the real movement which we are here assessing. Today it is no longer desirable, even imaginable, to seize control of the productive apparatus as it exists and to manage it in our own interests: Capital has sunk its tentacles into the very nature of work itself.

The communist movement seeks the abolition of wage labor. But it is much more radical than this alone. It strives for the total transformation of "work," both as it is performed and as it fits in with the totality of our time and activity. That is, it strives for the total transformation of life itself. Reeve wants to abolish wage labor but preserve the working class. This is a utopian dream. *

Our future society, and our role in it, cannot be defined simply by the "socially necessary labor" that we do. Rather, for the first time, we will meet as human beings and define our own needs and the paths to their realization. While labor will be part of this, there is no way that this activity can exhaust either our desires or the solutions to our problems.

It is this future which is prefigured by the "revolt against work," and its comprehension demands a willingness to discard the blinders of traditional conceptions.

* *FE staff note in print original: ...or more accurately, the continuation of capitalism.*

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