

# Anti-Work and the Struggle for Control

John Zerzan

“Anti-Work and the Struggle for Control” continues John Zerzan’s work demonstrating the massive erosion of traditional American values, in this case centering on popular allegiance to the work ethic. Following it [in this issue, FE #309, June 19, 1982] is a rebuttal from Tim Luke, which appeared in *Telos* magazine No. 50 (Box 3111, St. Louis MO 63130, \$5); this is followed by a reply from Zerzan and a comment from Bob Brubaker from the FE staff.

The debacle of the air controllers’ strike and the growing difficulties unions are having in attracting new members (or holding old ones—decertification elections have increased for the past 10 straight years) [1] are two phenomena which could be used to depict Americans as quite tamed overall, or adjusted to their lot.

But such a picture of conservative stasis would be quite unfaithful to the reality of the work culture, which is now so untamed as to be evoking unprecedented attention and countermeasures.

Before tackling the subject of “anti-work,” a few words on the status of business might be in order. Bradshaw and Vogel’s *Corporations and Their Critics* sees enterprise today as “faced by uncertainty and hostility on every hand.” In fact, this fairly typical book finds that “latent mistrust has grown to the point at which lack of confidence in business’s motives has become the overwhelming popular response to the role of the large corporation in the United States.” [2] An early ’81 survey of 24,000 prominent students, as determined by *Who’s Who Among American High School Students*, showed a strong anti-business sentiment; less than 20% of the 24,000 agreed, for example, with the proposition that most companies charge fair prices. [3]

Not surprising then are Peter Berger’s conclusions about current attitudes. His “New Attack on the Legitimacy of Business” is summed up, in part, thusly: “When people genuinely believe in the ‘rightness’ of certain social arrangements, those arrangements are experienced as proper and worthy of support—that is as legitimate...American business once enjoyed this kind of implicit social charter. It does not today.” [4]

## Evidence of Aversion to Work

Within business, one begins to see the spread of work refusal. *Nation’s Business* strikes what has become a familiar chord, in its introduction to Dr. H.J. Freudenberger’s “How to Survive Burn-out”: “For many business people, life has lost its meaning. Work has become mere drudgery, off-hours are spent in a miasma of dullness.” [5] Similar is Datamation’s “Burnout: Victims and Avoidance,” because this disabling trauma “seems to be running rampant” among data processors. [6] Veninga and Spradley’s *The Work Stress Connection: How to Cope with Job Burnout* [7] was condensed by the December 1981 *Readers’ Digest*.

To continue in this bibliographic vein, it is worth noting the sharp increase in scholarly articles like Kahn’s “Work, Stress, and Individual Well-Being,” Abdel-Halim’s “Effects of Role Stress—Job Design—Technology Interaction on Employee Stress.” [8] *Studies in Occupational Stress*, a series initiated in 1978 by Cooper and Kasl, dates the formal study of this facet of organized misery.

There is other related evidence of aversion to work, including this reaction in its literal sense, namely a growth of illnesses such as job-related allergies and at least a significant part of the advancing industrial accident rate since the early '60s. Comes to mind the machinist who becomes ill by contact with machine oil, the countless employees who seem to be accident-prone in the job setting. We are just beginning to see some awareness of this sort of phenomenon, the consequences of which may be very significant.

And of course, there is absenteeism, probably the most common sign of antipathy to work and a topic which has called forth a huge amount of recent attention from the specialists of wage-labor. Any number of remedies are hawked: Frank Kuzmits' offering, "No Fault: A New Strategy for Absenteeism," [9] for example. Deitsch and Dilts' "Getting Absent Workers Back on the Job: The Case of General Motors," puts the cost to GM at \$1 billion plus, and observes that "Absenteeism is of increasing concern to management and organized labor alike." [10]

There are other well-known elements of the anti-work syndrome. The inability of some firms to get a shift working on time is a serious problem; it is why Nucor Corporation offers a 4% pay hike for each ton of steel produced above a target figure, up to a 100% pay bonus for those who show up as scheduled and work the whole shift. The amount of drinking and drug-taking on the job is another form of protest, occasioning a great proliferation of employee alcoholism and drug abuse programs by every sort of company. [11] Tersine and Russell confront the "staggering" employee theft phenomenon, observing that it has become "more widespread and professional in recent years." [12] Turnover (considered as a function of the quit rate and not due to lay-offs, of course, very high since the early '70s, has inched up further. [13]

All of these aspects come together to produce the much publicized productivity, or output per hour worked crisis. Social scientists Blake and Moulton provide some useful points; they recognize, for example, that the "declining productivity rate and the erosion of quality in industry have caused grave concern in this country" and that "industry is pouring more money than ever before into training and development," while "the productivity rate continues to fall." Further, "attitudes among workers themselves" including, most basically, an "erosion of obedience to authority," are seen as at the root of the problem. Unlike many confused mainstream analyses of the situation—or the typical leftist denial of it as either a media chimera or an invention of the always powerful corporations—our two professors can at least realize that "Basic to the decline in productivity is the breakdown of the authority-obedience means of control"; this trend, moreover, "which is one manifestation of a broader social disorder...will continue indefinitely without corrective action," they aver. [14]

Librarian R.S. Byrne gives a useful testimonial to the subject in her compendious "Sources on Productivity," which lists some of the huge outpouring of articles, reports, books, newsletters, etc., from a variety of willing helpers of business, including those of the Work in America Institute, the American Productivity Center, the American Center for the Quality of Work life, and the Project on Technology, Work and Character, to name a few. As Ms. Byrne notes, "One can scarcely pick up any publication without being barraged by articles on the topic written from every possible perspective." The reason for the outpouring is of course available to her: "U.S. productivity growth has declined continuously in the past 15 years, and the trend appears to be worsening." [15]

The August 1981 *Personnel Administrator*, devoted entirely to the topic, declares that "Today poor productivity is the United States' number one industrial problem." [16] Administrative Management reasons, in George Crosby's "Getting Back to Basics on Productivity," that no progress can occur "until all individuals begin viewing productivity as their own personal responsibility." [17] "How Deadly Is the Productivity Disease?" mulls Stanley Henrici recently in the *Harvard Business Review*. [18] An endless stream, virtually an obsession.

Dissatisfaction with work and the consequences of this have even drawn the Pope's attention. John Paul II, in his *Laborem Exerlens* (through work) encyclical of September '81, examines the idea of work and the tasks of modern management. On a more prosaic level, one discovers that growing employee alienation has forced a search for new forms of work organization. [19] The December '81 *Nation's Business*, in fact, has located a new consensus in favor of "more worker involvement in decision-making." [20] James O'Toole's *Making America Work*, [21] emphasizes the changed work culture with its low motivation, and prescribes giving workers the freedom to design their own jobs, set their own work schedules and decide their own salaries.

## The Inauguration of Worker Participation

The Productivity crisis has clearly led to the inauguration of worker participation, in a burgeoning number of co-determination arrangements since the mid-seventies. The May 11, 1981 *Business Week* announced the arrival of a new day in U.S. management with its cover story/special report, "The New Industrial Relations." Proclaiming the "almost unnoticed" ascendancy of a "fundamentally different way of managing people," the article noted that the "authoritarian" approach of the "old, crude workplace ethos" is definitely passing, aided "immeasurably" by the growing collaboration of the trade unions. "With the adversarial approach outmoded, the trend is toward more worker involvement in decisions on the shop floor—and more job satisfaction, tied to productivity." [22]

Shortly after this analysis, *Business Week's* "A Try at Steel-Mill Harmony," recounted the labor-management efforts being made between the U.S. steel industry and the United Steelworkers "to create a cooperative labor climate where it matters most: between workers and bosses on the mill floor." The arrangements, which are essentially production teams made up of supervisors, local union officials, and workers, were provided for in 1980 contracts with the nine major steel companies, but not implemented until after early 1981 union elections because of the unpopularity of the idea among many steelworkers. "The participation-team concept...was devised as a means of improving steel's sluggish productivity growth rate," [23] the obvious reason for a climate of disfavor in the mills.

In a series of *Fortune* articles appearing in June, July and August 1981, the new system of industrial organization is discussed in some depth. "Shocked by faltering productivity," according to *Fortune*, America's corporate managers have moved almost overnight toward the worker involvement approach (after long ignoring the considerable northern European experience), which "challenges a system of authority and accountability that has served through most of history." [24] With a rising hopefulness, big capital's leading magazine announces that "Companies which have had time to weigh the consequences of participative management are finding that it informs the entire corporate culture." Employees "are no longer just workers: they become the lowest level of management," [25] it exults, echoing such recent books as Myers' *Every Employee a Manager*. [26]

The bottom line of such programs, which also go by the name "Quality of Work Life," is never lost sight of. G.T. Strippoli, a plant manager of the TRW Corporation, provides the guiding principle: "the workers know that if I feel there's no payback to the company in the solution they arrive at, there will be a definite no. I'm not here to give away the store or run a country club." [27]

In effect in about 100 auto manufacturing and assembly plants, the co-management method replaces the traditional failed ways of pushing productivity. Auto, with virtually nothing to lose, has jumped for the effort to get workers to help run the factories. "As far as I'm concerned, it's the only way to operate the business—there isn't another way in today's world," says GM President F. James McDonald. [28] United Auto Workers committeemen and stewards are key co-leaders with management in the drive to "gain higher product quality and lower absenteeism." [29] Similar is the campaign for worker involvement in the AT&T empire, formalized in the 1980 contract with the Communication Workers of America.

The fight to bolster output per hour is as much the unions' as it is management's; anti-work feelings are equally responsible for the decline of the bodyguards of capital as they are for the productivity crisis proper. AFL-CIO Secretary-Treasurer T.R. Donahue has found in the general productivity impasse the message that the time has come for a "limited partnership—a marriage of convenience" with business. [30] *Fortune* sees in formal collaboration "interesting possibilities for reversing the decline" in organized labor. [31]

*Business Week's* "Quality of Work Life: Catching On," observes that shop-floor worker participation and the rest of the "QWL" movement is "taking root in everyday life." [32] Along the same lines, the October 1981 issue of *Productivity* notes that half of 500 firms surveyed now have such involvement programs. [33]

William Ouchi's 1981 contribution to the industrial relations literature, *Theory Z*, cites recent research, such as that of Harvard's James Medoff and M.I.T.'s Kathryn Abraham, to point out the productivity edge that unionized companies in the U.S. have over non-union ones. [34] And David Lewin's "Collective Bargaining and the Quality of Work Life" argues for a further union presence in the QWL movement, based on organized labor's past ability to recognize the constraints of work and support the ultimate authority of the workplace. [35]

It is clear that unions hold the high ground in a growing number of these programs, and there seems to be a trend toward co-management at ever-higher levels. Douglas Fraser, UAW president sits on the Board of Direc-

tors at Chrysler—a situation likely to spread to the rest of auto—and the Teamsters appear close to putting their representative on the board of Pan-Am Airways. Joint labor-management efforts to boost productivity in construction have produced about a dozen important local collaborative set-ups involving the building trades unions, like Columbus’s MOST (Management and Organized Labor Striving Together), Denver’s Union Jack, and PEP (Planning Economic Progress) in Beaumont, Texas. Business Horizons editorialized in 1981 about “the newly established Industrial Board with such luminaries as Larry Shaprin of DuPont and Lane Kirkland of the AFL-CIO” as a “mild portent” of the growing formal collaboration. [36] The Board, a reincarnation of the Labor Management Board that expired in 1978, is chaired by Kirkland and chairman of Exxon, Clifton C. Garvin, Jr.

The defeat in 1979 of the Labor Law Reform Act, which would have greatly increased government support to unionization, was seen by many as almost catastrophic given Labor’s organizing failures. But the economic crisis, perhaps especially in light of generous union concessions to the auto, airlines, rubber, trucking and other industries, may provide the setting for a “revitalization” of the national order including a real institutionalizing of Labor’s social potential to contain the mounting anti-work challenge. [37]

There is already much pointing to such a possibility, beyond even the huge participation/QWL movement with its vital union component. The 1978 Trilateral Commission on comparative industrial relations spoke: in very glowing terms about the development of neocorporatist institutions (with German “co-determination” by unions and management as its model). [38] Business Week of June 30, 1980, a special issue devoted to “The Reindustrialization of America,” pro, claimed “nothing short of a new social contract” between business, labor and government, and “sweeping changes in basic institutions” could stem the country’s industrial decline. [39] Thus when the AFL-CIO’s Kirkland called in late ’81 for a tripartite National Reindustrialization Board, a concept first specifically advanced by investment banker Felix Rohatyn, the recent theoretical precedents are well in place. One of the main underlying arguments by Rohatyn and others is that labor will need the state to help enforce its productivity programs in its partnership with management.

## **Renewed Social Control Minus Spending Outlays**

Thus would spreading “worker involvement” be utilized, but shepherded by the most powerful of political arrangements. Wilber and Jameson’s “Hedonism and Quietism,” puts the matter in general yet historical terms: “Ways must be found to revitalize mediating institutions from the bottom up. A good example is Germany’s efforts to bring workers into a direct role in decision-making.” [40]

A change of this sort might appear to be too directly counter to the ideology of the Reagan government, but it would actually be quite in line with the goal of renewed social control minus spending outlays. Washington, after all, has been trying to reduce its instrumentalities because this giant network of programs is past its ability to coherently manage, just as its cutbacks also reflect the practical failure of government social pacification programs.

Meanwhile, the refusal of work grows. One final example is the extremely high teenage unemployment rate, which continues to climb among all groups and is the object of a growing awareness that a very big element is simply a rejection of work, especially low-skill work, by the young. [41] And legion are the reports that describe the habits of teenagers who do work as characterized by habitual tardiness, chronic absenteeism, disrespect for supervisors and customers, etc., which recalls the larger picture drawn by Frederick Herzberg in his “New Perspectives on the Will to Work;” “the problem is work motivation—all over the world. It’s simply a matter of people not wanting to work.” [42]

The gravity of the anti-work situation seems now to be approaching an unprecedented structural counterrevolution. Tripartism dates back to World War I, to Coolidge in peacetime, but the addition of a mass-participation schema is just beginning to emerge as a national hypothesis. Of course, this nascent reaction intersects with a political tide of non-participation (e.g. declining voter turnout, massive non-registration for the draft rolls, growing tax evasion). The larger culture of withdrawal, from the state as from work, will make this integration effort highly problematic, and may even produce a more effective exposure of capital’s organization of life given that organization’s heightened dependency on its victims’ active participation.

## Footnotes

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4. Peter L. Berger, "New Attack on the Legitimacy of Big Business," *Harvard Business Review*, September-October 1981, p. 82.
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16. *Personnel Administrator*, August 1981, p. 23.
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18. Stanley B. Henrici, "How Deadly Is the Productivity Disease?" *Harvard Business Review*, November—December, 1981, p. 123.
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22. *Business Week*, "The New Industrial Relations," May 11, 1981, p. 85.
23. *Business Week*, "A Try at Steel Mill Harmony," June 29, 1981, p. 135.
24. Charles G. Burck, "Working Smarter," *Fortune*, June 15, 1981, p. 70.
25. Burck, "What Happens When Workers Manage Themselves," *Fortune*, July 27, 1981, p. 69.
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28. Burck, "Working Smarter," p. 70.
29. Burck, "What's In It For the Unions," *Fortune*, August 24, 1981, p. 89.
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31. Burck, "What's In It..." p. 89.
32. *Business Week*, "Quality of Work Life: Catching On," September 21, 1981, p. 72.
33. As noted in the September 21, 1981 *Wall Street Journal*.

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