

Abolish Restaurants

A worker's critique of the food service industry by An Anonymous Restaurant Worker

anon.

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"When one comes to think of it, it is strange that thousands of people in a great modern city should spend their waking hours swabbing dishes in hot dens underground. The question I am raising is why this life goes on—what purpose it serves, and who wants it to continue."

—George Orwell, *Down and Out in Paris and London*

Your back hurts from standing up for 6, 10 or 14 hours in a row. You reek of seafood and steak spices. You've been running back and forth all night. You're hot: Your clothes are sticking to you with sweat. All sorts of strange thoughts come into your head.

No time to worry about relationship problems, or whether you fed your cat this morning, or how you're going to make rent this month, a new order is up.

The same song is playing again. You're pouring the same cup of coffee for the two-top in the window—the same young couple out on a second date. You give them the same bland customer service smile, and turn and walk by the same tacky decorations and stand in the same place looking out at the dining room floor. Behind you, the busser is scraping the same recycled butter off a customer's plate back into a plastic butter container. This is more than *deja-vu*.

It's election time. A waitress has three different tables at once. The customers at each table are wearing buttons supporting three different political parties. As she goes to each table she praises that party's candidates and program. The customers at each table are happy and tip her well. The waitress herself probably won't even vote.

One night the dishwasher doesn't show up. The dishes start to pile up. Then, one of the cooks tries to run the dishwasher and finds that it doesn't work. The door is dented and the wires cut. No one hears from that dishwasher again.

That's it! The last demanding customer. The last asshole manager. The last fight with a co-worker. The last smelly plate of mussels. The last time you burn or cut yourself because you're rushing. The last time you swear you're giving notice tomorrow, and find yourself swearing the same thing two weeks later.

A restaurant is a miserable place.

All the restaurants that have had flowery write-ups in the newspaper, that serve only organic, wheat-free, vegan food, that cultivate a hip atmosphere with suggestive drawings, still have cooks, waiters and dishwashers who are stressed, depressed, bored and looking for something else.

What is a restaurant?

"There's no such thing as a free lunch."

—popularized by right-wing economist Milton Friedman

Today it's hard to imagine a world without restaurants. The conditions that create restaurants are everywhere and seem almost natural.

We have trouble even thinking how people could feed each other in any other way (besides going to the grocery store, of course). But restaurants as much as parliamentary democracy, the state, nationalism, or professional police are an invention of the modern capitalist world. The first restaurants began to appear in Paris in the 1760s, and even as late as the 1850s the majority of all the restaurants in the world were located in Paris. At first, they sold only small meat stews, called "restaurants" that were meant to restore health to sick people.

Before that, people didn't go out to eat as they do today. Aristocrats had servants, who cooked for them. And, the rest of the population, who were mainly peasant farmers, ate meals at home. There were inns for travelers, where meals were included in the price of the room, and the innkeeper and his lodgers would sit and eat together at the same table. There were caterers who would prepare or host meals for weddings, funerals and other special occasions. There were taverns, wineries, cafes and bakeries where specific kinds of food and drink could be consumed on the premises. But there were no restaurants, as we know them.

Partially, this was because restaurants would have been illegal. Food was made by craftsmen organized into a number of highly specialized guilds. There were the "charcutiers" (who made sausages and pork), the "rotisseurs" (who prepared roasted meats and poultry), the pate-makers, the gingerbread-makers, the vinegar-makers, the pastry cooks. By law, only a master gingerbread-maker could make gingerbread, and everyone else was legally forbidden to cook it. At best, a particular family or group of craftsmen could get the king's permission to produce and sell a few different categories of food.

But these laws reflected an older way of life. Cities were growing. Markets and trade were growing, and with them the power and importance of merchants and businessmen. The first restaurants were aimed at this middle-class clientele. With the French revolution in 1789, the monarchy was overthrown and the king was beheaded. The guilds were destroyed and business was given a free hand. The aristocrats' former cooks went to work for businessmen or went into business for themselves. Fine food was democratized, and anyone (with enough money) could eat like a king. The number of restaurants grew rapidly.

In a restaurant, a meal could be gotten at any time the business was open, and anyone with money could get a meal. The customers would sit at individual tables, and would eat individual plates or bowls of prepared food, chosen from a number of options.

Restaurants quickly grew in size and complexity, adding a fixed menu with many kinds of foods and drinks. As the number of restaurants grew, taverns, wineries, cafes, and inns adapted and became more restaurant-like.

The growth of the restaurant was the growth of the market. Needs that were once fulfilled either through a direct relationship of domination (between a lord and his servants) or a private relationship (within the family), were now fulfilled on the open market. What was once a direct oppressive relationship now became the relationship between buyer and seller.

A similar expansion of the market took place over a century later with the rise of fast food. As the 1950's housewife was undermined and women moved into the open labor market, many of the tasks that had been done by women in the house were transferred onto the market. Fast food restaurants grew rapidly, and paid wages for what used to be housework.

The 19th century brought the industrial revolution. Machinery was revolutionizing the way everything was made. As agricultural production methods got more efficient, peasants were driven off the land and joined the former craftsmen in the cities as the modern working class. They had no way to make money but to work for someone else.

Some time in the 19th century, the modern restaurant crystallized in the form we know it today, and spread all over the globe. This required several things: businessmen with capital to invest in restaurants, customers who expected to satisfy their need for food on the open market, by buying it, and workers, with no way to live but by working for someone else. As these conditions developed, so did restaurants.

What the worker wants

“Nothing is more alien to a strike than its end.”

– François Martin, co-author, *Eclipse and Re-emergence of the Communist Movement* (Black & Red, Detroit, 1973)

With few exceptions, the workers in a restaurant want one thing more than anything else: to no longer be workers in a restaurant.

This doesn't mean we want to be unemployed. It means that restaurant work is an alienating and miserable way to make a living. We are forced to be there. Work does not feel like part of our lives. We feel like ourselves when we're not at work.

The fact that restaurant workers hate the work is obvious to the point of being a cliché. In most restaurants you can find people who “aren't really restaurant workers.” They're actors, or writers, or musicians, or graphic designers. They're just working in a restaurant until they can save up some money and start up a business of their own, or until they get through school and can get a “real job.”

One way we try to escape from work is by quitting, hoping another restaurant will be better. Restaurant work has a very high turnover. Often the majority of employees in a restaurant have only been working there for a few months. Of course, whatever our illusions, most of us just keep moving from restaurant job to restaurant job, from bistro to bar and grill to lounge to diner to café.

This doesn't mean we have no pride. Anyone who is forced to do something over and over and over and over and over again has to take some minor interest in it or go crazy. Anyone who works in restaurants long enough can't help but take a little pride in all the knowledge they acquire about food, wine, and human behavior. Still, aside from a handful of chefs in very expensive restaurants, the only people who are really proud to be restaurant workers are the boss's pets, who are usually shunned by the rest of the workers.

But the rejection of our condition as restaurant workers is not simply a conscious preference. Often the workers who have the highest expectations, who are most interested in the food service industry, or who have the least hatred for the work, come into serious conflicts with the boss. They have greater illusions and greater surprise and indignation when they come into contact with the miserable reality of the restaurant.

A restaurant is a boring, uncomfortable, stressful, repetitive, alienating, hierarchical machine for pumping out surplus value. Even the obsequious waiter who is always hanging around complimenting the boss and suggesting ways for him to better run the restaurant will one day get into a heated argument and quit when the boss blatantly treats him like a subordinate. Ironically, it is often those that openly recognize the miserable position they're in that last longest in restaurant jobs.

Our fight against restaurant work is much more fundamental than our consciousness. Almost everyone steals from work. Even workers who have sympathy for the boss and hope the restaurant makes good money will do things to make their job easier that cut into the profit margin. We'll tell the customer the espresso machine is broken so we don't have to make a cappuccino. We'll throw a perfectly good fork in the trash at the end of the night rather than going to all the trouble of turning the dishwasher back on.

Our hostility to restaurants doesn't come from our political ideas. It comes from our position as wage workers in a restaurant.

Workers, Management, and Worker-Management

“Class society has a tremendous resilience, a great capacity to cope with ‘subversion’, to make icons of its iconoclasts, to draw sustenance from those who would throttle it.”

–Maurice Brinton, “The Malaise on the Left,” *Solidarity*, 1974)

Our struggle against restaurant work is also a struggle against the way the work is set up—against the division of labor and the hierarchy at work. At the most basic level, we often take an interest in the jobs of other workers. In

slow times, a bored waitress will prepare simple foods in the kitchen, while the dishwasher asks questions about the difference between different kinds of wines.

The fact that the work process is so chopped up and specialized feels strange and unnatural to us, and we want to go beyond it. In order to form any kind of work groups, we have to treat each other as equals. This starts to undermine the divisions between skilled and unskilled and the hierarchy within the workers.

In any restaurant, the workers have to be able to manage the work themselves to a large extent. We have to be able to prioritize tasks, as well as communicate and coordinate with other workers. In smaller restaurants, the boss will sometimes even leave and we have to manage everything ourselves. This means that our resentment towards the job often takes the form of a critique of how the restaurant is managed. We'll complain that the restaurant owner "has no class" for buying cheap ingredients or for serving near-rotten food. We make comments about how if we managed the place, things would be different. We develop our own ideas about how food should be cooked and served, and about how much things should cost.

This is a constant cause of conflict, but it is also easily co-opted. Often the boss will simply give in to our desire to run things ourselves. The more disorganized and inefficient the restaurant, the more likely this is to happen. He'll let the hostess deal with problem customers. He won't buy enough supplies or fix machinery, and we'll have to fix machines or bring in supplies ourselves.

He'll leave a cook alone with 10 orders at once, or a waitress with 10 tables at once saying "You work it out." And, we have to push ourselves instead of being pushed directly. In fact, part of being a good restaurant employee is internalizing the rhythm of production, and being able to push yourself hard enough that management doesn't have to push you. In these situations we try to help each other out and do bits and pieces of each other's jobs—our solidarity with our co-workers is used against us as a way to get us to work harder.

Some restaurant workers have made an ideology out of the struggle over the way work is set up. They establish cooperative restaurants where there is no boss. They do the work as well as make the management decisions themselves. In these restaurants, the workers are no-longer under the arbitrary power of a boss. They often eliminate some of the division of labor and the worst aspects of customer service. They may sell vegan, vegetarian, organic, "fair traded," or locally grown food.

At the same time, they forget that the division of labor is brought about because it helps make money more efficiently. The boss isn't an asshole for no reason. The boss is under a lot of pressure that comes from outside the restaurant. He has to keep his money in motion, making more money. He has to compete and make a profit, or his business won't survive.

Workers in a collective restaurant, like some "Mom n' Pop" small businesses, have not eliminated the boss. They have merely rolled the position of boss and worker into one. No matter their ideals, the restaurant is still trapped within the economy. The restaurant can only continue to exist by making a profit.

The work is still stressful and repetitive, only now the workers are the managers. They have to enforce the work on themselves and on each other. This means that workers in self-managed restaurants often work longer and harder and are paid even less than those in regular restaurants. Either that or the self-managed restaurants don't make a profit and don't survive very long.

More common than self-management, is that traditional management replies to workers' struggle by trying to create some kind of community within the restaurant. They know that workers brought together in a restaurant will form groups. Instead of fostering isolation and prejudice, they foster community—a community that includes the restaurant management. This is especially common in small restaurants, where employees may even be related to each other and management. The boss may explain how tough business is, especially for a small independent restaurant like his. The boss may be gay or a woman or from an ethnic minority and try to create some kind of community based on that identity. The restaurant may not sell certain brands, might only sell "fair traded," organic, or vegetarian foods.

Whatever the community, the function is to smooth over the class struggle. The idea is that instead of simply standing up for our own interests, which would naturally bring us into conflict with management, we should take management's point of view into account.

We may have some problems, but our boss also has problems, and we have to come to some kind of compromise—a compromise that ends up with us working for them. Unlike tipping, this is a purely ideological way of tying

workers to the work, and tends to be less effective. Still, management never has more control over the workers than when the workers believe they're working for a good cause.

With self-management, as with the community which includes management, we are supposed to enforce the work on ourselves and on each other. Both are a response to our struggle against our situation that ultimately just creates a greater form of alienation. Our problem with restaurants is much deeper than just how they are managed. And, we can't solve our problems by working with management.

A World without restaurants

"It is only when the routine daily struggle of the class explodes into violent activity against the bourgeoisie (the throwing of a foreman out of the window, the conflict with the police on the mass picket line, etc.), activities which require an overt exercise of their creative energies, that the workers feel themselves as human. As a result, the return from the picket line to the covert class struggle is even more frustrating than if the strike had never taken place. The molecular development of these offensives and retreats can only explode in the revolution which will enable the working class to employ its creative energies not only in smashing the old relations of production but also in establishing new social ties of a positive and creative character."

– Ria Stone (Grace Lee Boggs), *The American Worker*

The conditions that create intense work and intense boredom in a restaurant are the same that create "law and order" and development in some countries, and wars, famines, and poverty in others. The logic that pits workers against each other, or ties us together with management in a restaurant, is the same logic behind the rights of citizens and the deportation of "illegals." The world that needs democracies, dictatorships, terrorists and police also needs fine dining, fast food, waiters and cooks. The pressures we feel in everyday life are the same that erupt in the crisis and disasters that interrupt everyday life. We feel the weight of our bosses' money wanting to move and expand.

A restaurant is set up by and for the movement of capital. We are brought into the production process and created as restaurant workers by this movement. We make the food and make it sell. The movement of our bosses' money is nothing more than our activity made into something which controls us. In order to make life bearable, we fight against this process, and the bosses who profit from it.

The impulse to fight against work and management is immediately collective. As we fight against the conditions of our own lives, we see that other people are doing the same. To get anywhere we have to fight side by side. We begin to break down the divisions between us and prejudices, hierarchies, and nationalisms begin to be undermined. As we build trust and solidarity, we grow more daring and combative. More becomes possible. We get more organized, more confident, more disruptive and more powerful.

Restaurants aren't strategic. They aren't the hub of value-creation in the capitalist economy. They are just one battlefield in an international class war that we're all a part of whether we like it or not.

In Spain in July of 1936, millions of workers armed themselves and took over their workplaces. Restaurant workers took over the restaurants, abolished tips, and used restaurants to feed the workers' militias going off to fight the fascist armies. But the workers in arms had not gone far enough, and had left the state intact. The Communist Party soon took over the government and the police, jailed or shot the radical workers and reversed most of the gains of the revolution. Within a year, restaurants were almost back to normal, and waiters were receiving tips again, this time from Party leaders.

Every time we attack this system but don't destroy it, it changes, and, in turn, changes us and the terrain of the next fight. Gains are turned against us, and we are stuck back in the same situation at work. The bosses try to keep us looking for individual solutions, or solutions within an individual workplace or an individual trade. The only way we can free ourselves is to broaden and deepen our fight. We involve workers from other workplaces, other industries, and other regions. We attack more and more fundamental things. The desire to destroy restaurants becomes the desire to destroy the conditions that create restaurants.

We aren't just fighting for representation in or control over the production process. Our fight isn't against the act of chopping vegetables or washing dishes or pouring beer or even serving food to other people. It is with the way all these acts are brought together in a restaurant, separated from other acts, become part of the economy, and are used to expand capital. The starting and ending point of this process is a society of capitalists and people forced to work for them. We want an end to this. We want to destroy the production process, as something outside and against us. We're fighting for a world where our productive activity fulfills a need and is an expression of our lives, not forced on us in exchange for a wage—a world where we produce for each other directly and not in order to sell to each other. The struggle of restaurant workers is ultimately for a world without restaurants or workers.

This is the direction we push every day. We need to push harder and better. We can't let anything stand in our way.



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