

In any language: NEVER WORK!

Ne jamais travailler!

Kim A. Broadie

2022

a review of

Never Work: Essays Against the Sale of Life. Detritus Books, 2022

“Workplaces are fascist. They’re cults designed to eat your life; bosses hoard your minutes jealously, like dragons hoard gold.”

—Nouri, solar punk

This collection of essays argues that we are sacrificing our lives in the service of the Machine. The concluding essay sums it up. Written in 2022, “Anti-work: from ‘I quit’ to ‘We revolt’ by Crimethlnc Ex-Workers Collective, starts by addressing the revolt against work that coincided with the two years of the pandemic. In 2021, a quarter of the workforce quit their jobs. The pandemic made it clear that the function of the market is to force people to sacrifice their lives for others’ benefit.

The social order that forces you to sell your time and labor to the highest bidder is squandering your humanity, just as it is grinding cows into hamburger and reducing rainforests to junk mail. You are justified in not wanting to waste the irreplaceable moments of your life toiling to enrich bosses and investors.

Work time is the opposite of life time. More work; less life. Even the phenomenon of remote working has not given us more life time. Instead, work has overtaken homes and imposed the measured time of work to strangle home life. There is no escape from the clock. No escape from wage slavery.

The August 15 *New York Times* ran a front-page story on remote work entitled, “On the Clock and Tracked to the Minute.” The subhead reads, “Digital surveillance of productivity has spread to all kinds of labor, aiming to exclude idle time from paychecks. Managers see a tool for efficiency and accountability. Many employees see a degrading and error-prone system.” All levels of remote workers, reports the article, are having their paychecks docked if the surveillance tools detect idle time.

The essays in *Never Work* document that it has been this way since the division of labor began eons ago. The book features writing by Freddie Baer, David Graeber, Luo Huazhong, Laurie Penny, Penelope Rosemont, André Thirion, Kevin Tucker, Raoul Vaneigem, George Woodcock, and many others.

If anything, the soul-destruction is intensifying. In one of the first essays, Herman Schuurman, in a 1924 essay, “For Work is a Crime,” writes that work is the enemy of life; a social ill.

When we cease to work, then our lives begin. He contrasts work and creativity proclaiming that we yearn to create as a free person, not work like slaves. If we do not work toward the collapse of capitalism, we work toward the collapse of humanity.

In the 1920s, when Herman Schuurman wrote his essay, consumerism went mainstream through modern advertising. Workers worked more hours for more wages in order to consume more. Gilles Deleuze, 20th century French philosopher who authored *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, asserted that the only modern myth is the myth of the zombies.

Zombies eat brains, lack an inner life, cannot connect to the world. No matter how much a zombie devours it will continue feeding for as long as it is able. It is insatiable, pure addiction.

Never Work is really about restoring our humanity. As Crimethlnc puts it, “anti-work is a practice that actively abolishes the necessity to work...In other words, an activity aimed at doing away with all the mechanisms that serve to concentrate power—from debt to intellectual property rights to the prison industrial complex.”

All of our institutions serve this concentrated power. As the caption of a cartoon facing Fredy Perlman’s essay, “The Reproduction of Daily Life,” says: “If you liked school, you’ll love work.” Read John Taylor Gatto’s *Underground History of American Education* to understand how the psychopathology of modern education injects into the bloodstream of our children the lesson of obedience to the prison of measured time.

Under the reigning ideology, human beings under capitalism are not entitled to a meaningful life unless they have earned it. No doubt sociologist Max Weber was right about the connection between Protestant guilt, capitalism, and the work ethic. The pain of the job makes us moral, in this twisted concept.

We are conditioned to accept this pain, this coercion, in order to survive because we can’t imagine another way to keep the Machine running. Psychologist Tony Gibson’s 1952 essay, “Who will do the dirty work?” poses the question: “But in a social condition of anarchy, who will clean out the sewers?”

Is it forever the case that sewer cleaning is an undesirable task? Gibson documents that it is not so much that some jobs are considered dirty, but that our willingness to do them is connected to the social prestige or contempt connected to a job.

Unaddressed is the larger question: If no one worked, how would anything get done? Perhaps little would. Civilization as we know it, became defined by its megaprojects from its origins. Mass agriculture, pyramids, huge cities, water systems, roads, temples, and into the modern age of industrialism with the factory being the central point of commodity production would not have occurred on the scale it did without the coercion of whip and wages. Without them, mostly likely none of what constitutes the contemporary world would be possible, nor would its crises.

In Perlman’s classic 1969 essay “The Reproduction Of Daily Life”, he argues that the practical activity of a specific social form is not the outcome of the natural characteristics of humans. The everyday activity of slaves reproduces slavery. In the capitalist system, the living, creative activity of labor is sold for wages which turns the laborer into a thing, the property of the owner of their labor, a mere factor of production. The sale of our labor may be the painful necessity of survival under capitalism, but to us it appears as the eternal, natural order of things.

However, it is not the natural order of things. Perlman writes in his *Against His-tory, Against Leviathan*, that the state of nature and freedom are synonyms. Birds are free until we cage them. The state of nature is a community of freedoms.

Regarding cages, primitivist philosopher John Zerzan makes a critical point in his contribution, “Taylorism and Unionism: Labor cooperation with the ‘modernization’ of production” [FE #278, November, 1976]. The modern structure of our cages was affirmed by organized labor when it accepted the duality of labor and capital, with the former being sold to the latter with unions functioning as its broker to defend its selling price.

At the turn of the 20th century, skilled craftsmen still had knowledge and power that was usually greater than that of the employer. Enough to give them leverage on the job. Taylorism, as it was labeled after its innovator, used time and motion studies to break down the work of the craftsmen into unskilled components, allowing management to break the power of the skilled workers, as well as obscuring the larger picture from the unskilled.

Workers despised scientific management. But it is still with us. As we saw in the *Times* article, management of remote work is just its latest iteration. The Taylor method knew what it was doing.

Scientific management, Zerzan writes, meant “the degradation of workmen into obedient oxen under the direction of a small body of experts—into men debarred from creative participation in their work.” Even though workers opposed Taylorism, union leaders bought into it and focused more on wages, leaving managers in complete control of production.

There are many essays in this volume describing the dehumanizing and soul-destroying effects of work, but only a few address what will it take to break this stranglehold on our lives?

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Fifth Estate #412, Fall, 2022

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