

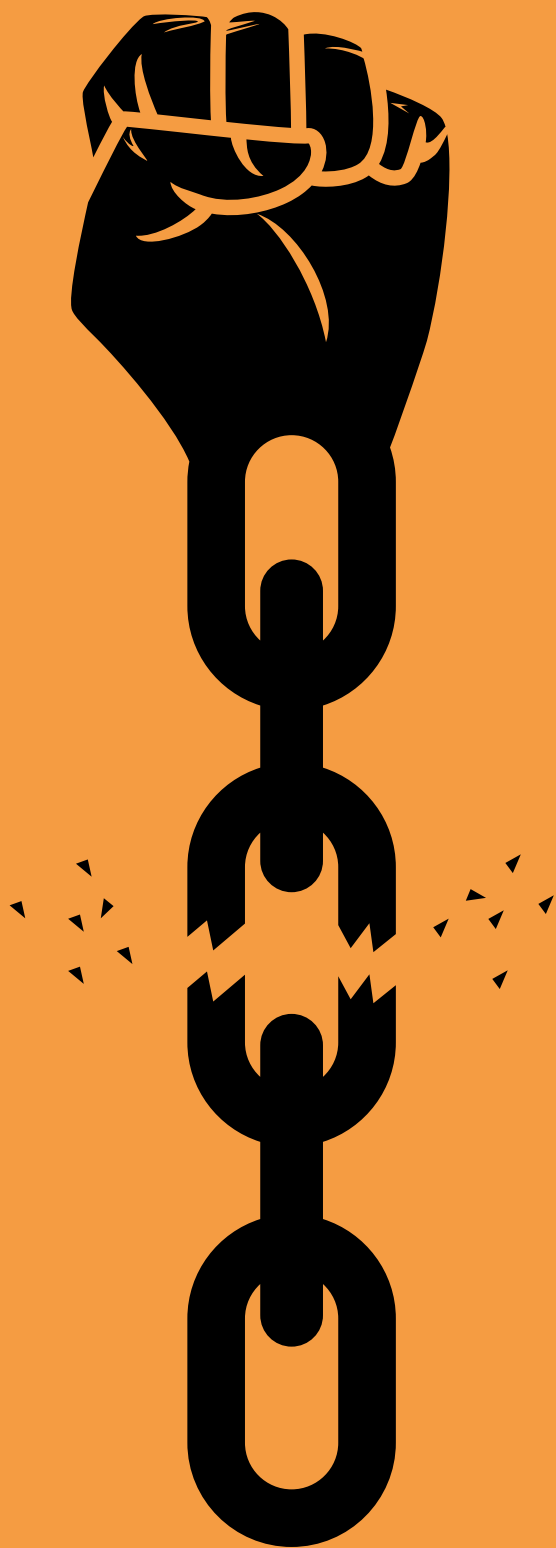
# ROAR

Reflections on a Revolution

ISSUE #2 - SUMMER 2016

Silvia Federici ★ Nick Srnicek & Alex Williams  
Immanuel Ness ★ Beverly Silver ★ many more







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Issue #2

# The Future of Work

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*“We have seen the future—  
and it doesn’t work.”*

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# The Future Doesn't Work

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**W**e have seen the future—and it doesn't work. The engine splutters, the machine has become stuck. In the years to come, it will swallow what it can and spit out the rest, trapping some of us on the ruinous treadmill of a 24/7 information economy while leaving the majority to eke out a meaningless existence on the margins. The lucky ones will work longer hours for lower pay, in shittier jobs with less security, to cover higher rents and mounting debts—while social rights and benefits are axed across the board. As the crisis of capital thunders on through periodic cycles of boom and bust, ultimately settling into the new normal of jobless recovery and secular stagnation, copious quantities of capital and commodities will sit side-by-side with anxious armies of idle labor-power—and no one will know how to put them back together. The financial aristocracy and political elite certainly know what's coming; we can smell their fear from afar. They, too, have seen the future. It's already here.

This second issue of *ROAR Magazine* considers the future of work in light of our precarious present. What is this bleak prospect we find ourselves confronted with today? What do the rapid transformations of labor and working life mean for class composition, for workers' struggles and forms of organization? Can we still imagine a way out? Are there any alternatives on the horizon?

Featuring some of the world's leading labor theorists, the issue departs from a world-historical perspective that recognizes the continuous remaking of working classes in the process of capitalist development. It emphasizes the fact that workers' struggles are far from over, and



recognizes the many ways in which the Global South has become the epicenter of a new wave of labor unrest and working-class militancy. It places the rank-and-file worker at the heart of the analysis and at the forefront of a transformative political project that bypasses bureaucratic unions and institutionalized parties to create democratic workers' councils and "street syndicates" whose aim is to establish communal control over the means of production. Crucially, it argues for a broadening of the concept of work to include reproductive, informal and digital labor—with the crisis of capital increasingly pushing these non-waged forms of work to center stage.

Finally, the issue joins a growing chorus of workers, activists and intellectuals in calling for a fundamental rethinking of the left's relationship to labor more generally—discarding the obsolete notion of the "right to work" and reclaiming the "right to be lazy"; maneuvering strategically "between the wage and the common", fighting for higher salaries and improved working conditions in the short term while building long-term reproductive resilience outside of the wage relation; moving beyond the social-democratic horizon of full employment to embrace a radical post-work politics that would see the left fight for a guaranteed material existence and the individual and collective freedom to pursue meaningful and conscious life activity and develop communal forms-of-life without one having to sell their labor-power as a mere means of existence. None of these themes are new, of course—they have been debated for centuries. But in the present crisis all of this acquires a renewed sense of urgency.

The crisis of work compels the left not just to rethink its relation to labor, but to rethink the very idea of the future. When the American journalist Lincoln Steffens returned from a trip to revolutionary Russia in 1919, he could still self-confidently proclaim that he had "seen the future—and it works." This notion of a history beyond capitalism has long since been gutted and turned upside down, with the Friedmans and Fukuyamas of the world arrogantly claiming the future as their own. The time has come to rectify these neoliberal aberrations and put old Hegel back on his feet. If their future won't work, neither will we.

**Jerome Roos**

FOUNDER AND EDITOR



All original illustrations by  
**Mirko Rastić**

**REMAKING OF THE GLOBAL WORKING CLASS**

The labor movement is far from dead—if anything, the upsurge of labor unrest and class-based mobilization since 2008 signals that the tide is turning. *By Beverly J. Silver.*

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**WORKING-CLASS MILITANCY IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH**

A profound movement is emerging among workers in developing countries, demanding radical action on grievances outside the system of established unions. *By Immanuel Ness.*

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Recent years have seen a proliferation of recuperated workplaces around the globe, laying the foundations for a truly democratic workers' economy. *By Dario Azzellini*

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**THE STREET SYNDICATE: REORGANIZING INFORMAL WORK**

As informality becomes a major feature of the global economy, street syndicalism may be the key to putting human dignity over property rights. *By Carlos Delclós.*

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**WILL ROBOTS TAKE YOUR JOB?**

Whether automation wreaks havoc on employment or not, the future of work under capitalism looks increasingly bleak. We must now look to post-work horizons. *By Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams.*

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**BASIC INCOME AND THE FUTURE OF WORK** There is no such thing as the dignity of work. It is not the right to employment but a guaranteed material existence that gives dignity to human life. *By Daniel Raventós and Julie Wark.*

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NEXT ROUND



*The remaking of the*

**Global Work**

*THE LABOR MOVEMENT IS FAR FROM  
DEAD. IF ANYTHING, THE UPSURGE  
OF LABOR UNREST AND CLASS-  
BASED MOBILIZATION SINCE 2008  
SIGNALS THAT THE TIDE IS TURNING.*



Beverly J. Silver

**ing Class**

The dominant approach in the social sciences since the 1980s had been to assume that labor and class-based mobilizations are a relic of the past. “Globalization”, it was widely argued, unleashed an intense competition among workers worldwide, and resulted in a relentless downward spiral in workers’ power and welfare. The restructuring of production—plant closings, outsourcing, automation, and the incorporation of massive new supplies of cheap labor—was said to be undermining the established mass production working classes in core countries and creating insurmountable barriers to new working-class mobilization everywhere.

This argument came to be known as the race-to-the-bottom thesis. It was an argument that left its proponents flat-footed when it came time to make sense of the worldwide upsurge of labor unrest and class-based mobilizations taking place since 2008. This new upsurge has taken a variety of forms: a wave of strikes by factory workers in China and other parts of Asia, militant wildcat strikes in South African platinum mines, occupations of public squares by unemployed and underemployed youth from North Africa to the United States, anti-austerity protests in Europe. These were just a few of the signs that the tide was turning.

## A WORLDWIDE UPSURGE OF CLASS-BASED MOBILIZATION

Indeed, it is likely that we are just at the beginnings of a new worldwide upsurge of labor and class-based mobilization. In order to make sense of what is unfolding before our eyes, we need an approach that is sensitive to the ways in which the recurrent revolutions in the organization of production that have characterized the history of capitalism resulted not just in the *unmaking* of established working

classes, but also in the *making of new working classes on a world-scale*.

Those who over the past several decades have been pronouncing the death of the working class and labor movements have tended to focus single-mindedly on the *unmaking* side of the process of class formation. But if we work from the premise that the world’s working classes and workers’ movements are recurrently made, unmade and remade, then we have a powerful antidote against the tendency to prematurely pronounce the death of the working class every time a historically specific working class is unmade. The death of the labor movement was pronounced prematurely in the early-twentieth century, as the rise of mass production undermined the strength of craft-workers; and it was once again announced prematurely in the late-twentieth century.

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*By focusing on the making, unmaking and remaking of working classes, we are primed to be on the lookout for the outbreak of fresh struggles, both by new working-classes-in-formation and by old working classes being unmade.*



By focusing on the making, unmaking and re-making of working classes, we are primed to be on the lookout for the outbreak of fresh struggles, both by new working-classes-in-formation and by old working classes being unmade; that is, struggles by those experiencing both the *creative* and *destructive* sides of the process of capital accumulation, respectively. I have called these two types of struggles *Marx-type*

and *Polanyi-type* labor unrest. Marx-type labor unrest is composed of the struggles by newly emergent working classes, challenging their status as cheap and docile labor. Polanyi-type labor unrest is composed of the struggles by established working classes, defending their existing ways of life and livelihood, including defending the concessions that they had won from capital and states in earlier waves of struggle.

In the current upsurge we see both of these types of labor unrest, with the strike wave by China's new migrant working class most closely corresponding to the *new working-class-in-formation* type and the anti-austerity protests in Europe most closely corresponding to the *established working classes being unmade* type.

## STRUGGLES AT THE POINT OF PRODUCTION

The ongoing wave of strikes in China is the latest manifestation of a dynamic that can be summed up in the phrase: *where capital goes,*

*labor-capital conflict shortly follows.* Put differently, the successive geographical spread of mass production across the globe from the

mid-twentieth century to the present has resulted in successive waves of new working-class formation and Marx-type labor unrest. We can see a *déjà vu* pattern whereby manufacturing capital moved into new geographical locations in search of cheaper/more docile labor,

but even though labor was weakened in the sites from which capital fled, rather than creating a straightforward race to the bottom, the result was the creation of new working classes and strong new labor movements in each new favored site of production.

This dynamic was visible when the “manufacturing miracles” in Brazil and South Africa in the 1960s and South Korea in the 1970s were followed, within a generation, by the emergence of “labor movement miracles” that dismantled the labor-repressive regimes that had guaranteed cheap and docile labor. And it is visible in China today.

One response of capitalists to the wave of labor unrest in China has been efforts to relocate production to sites with even cheaper labor. Factories are being moved from the coastal areas to interior provinces within China and to poorer countries elsewhere in Asia such as Vietnam, Cambodia and Bangladesh. But almost immediately, the thesis that *where capital goes, conflict follows* received fresh confirmation, with reports of strikes in the new favored sites of investment. It is

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***Labor unrest at the point of production continues to be an important component of overall labor unrest.***  
”

more and more beginning to look like there is *nowhere left for capital to run*.

Another response of capitalists has been to accelerate the long-term trend toward automating production—that is, solving the problem of labor control by removing workers from the production process. Yet labor unrest at the point of production continues to be an important component of overall labor unrest. The complete removal of human labor from the production process remains elusive. Moreover, the post-Fordist reorganization of production has actually increased the disruptive power of workers at the point of production in some sectors—notwithstanding the widespread tendency in the literature to exclusively focus on the ways in which these changes have weakened workers' power.

For example, just-in-time production, by eliminating all buffers and redundancies from the production process, has strengthened the disruptive power of workers at the point of production. In the automobile industry, parts are delivered “just-in-time” from supplier to assembly factories. With the elimination of the buffer supply of parts, a strike that stops production in one key parts factory can bring assembly operations throughout the corporation to a halt within a matter of days or less. Indeed, this is precisely what happened in China in 2010, with a strike in an auto parts factory leading in short order to the shutdown of all of Honda's operations in China.

Likewise, the globalization of trade and production has increased the bargaining power of workers in transportation and communications, as strikes in these sectors raise the specter of disrupting regional and national economies as well as the entire global supply chain. Thus, while the standard story of the February 2011 Egyptian uprising focuses on the protests in







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the street and the occupation of Tahrir Square, it was when the Suez Canal workers went on strike—with all the attendant implications for national and international trade—that Mubarak resigned from office.

## STRUGGLES IN THE STREETS

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While it would be a mistake to underestimate the present and future role of workers' struggles at the point of production, it would also be a mistake to underestimate the role of struggles in the streets. Indeed, the intertwined nature of these two sites of struggle can be derived from volume 1 of *Capital*.

On the one hand, what happens in the “hidden abode of [factory] production” was Marx's focus in the middle sections of volume 1 of *Capital*, where he catalogues an endemic labor-capital conflict over the duration, intensity and pace of work. The endemic nature of labor-capital conflict at the point of production remains relevant today. On the other hand, by chapter 25, Marx makes it clear that the logic of capitalist development not only leads to endemic struggles in the workplace, but also to broader societal-level conflict, as the accumulation of capital goes hand-in-hand with the “accumulation of misery”, most notably in the form of an *expanding reserve army of unemployed, underemployed and precariously employed workers*.

Seen from this point of view, historical capitalism is characterized not only by a cyclical process of creative-destruction, but also by a long-term tendency to destroy existing livelihoods at a faster pace than it creates new livelihoods. This points to the necessity to conceptualize a *third type of labor unrest* in addition to the protest by working classes who are being made (Marx-type) or unmade (Polanyi-type). This

*third type* (for which I do not have a name) is protest by those workers *that capital has essentially bypassed or excluded*; that is, those members of the working class who have nothing to sell but their labor power, but have few prospects of selling it *during their lifetime*.

All three types of labor unrest are the outcome of different manifestations of the same processes of capitalist development. All three are visible in the current global upsurge of labor and class-based unrest, with protests by the vast numbers of unemployed youth around the world as a paradigmatic example of our third type. Finally, the fate of all three types of struggles is deeply intertwined with one another.

## UNITING THE WORKING CLASS

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Marx's optimism about labor internationalism and the transformative power of proletarian struggles was in part grounded in his assumption that all three types of workers—those who are being incorporated as wage workers into the latest phase of material expansion, those who are being spit out as a result of the latest round of restructuring, and those who are surplus to the needs of capital—could be found within the same working-class households and communities. They lived together and struggled together.

Put differently, Marx held that distinctions within the working class—between employed and unemployed, active and reserve army, those with the power to impose costly disruptions on capital at the point of production and those who only have the power to disrupt peace in the streets—did *not* overlap with differences of citizenship, race, ethnicity or gender. As such, the workers who were the embodiment of the three different types of labor unrest were one working class with



shared power and shared grievances, and with the capacity to produce a post-capitalist vision that promised the emancipation of the world's working class in its entirety.

*Marx held that distinctions within the working class—between employed and unemployed, active and reserve army, those with the power to impose costly disruptions on capital at the point of production and those who only have the power to disrupt peace in the streets—did not overlap with differences of citizenship, race, ethnicity or gender.*

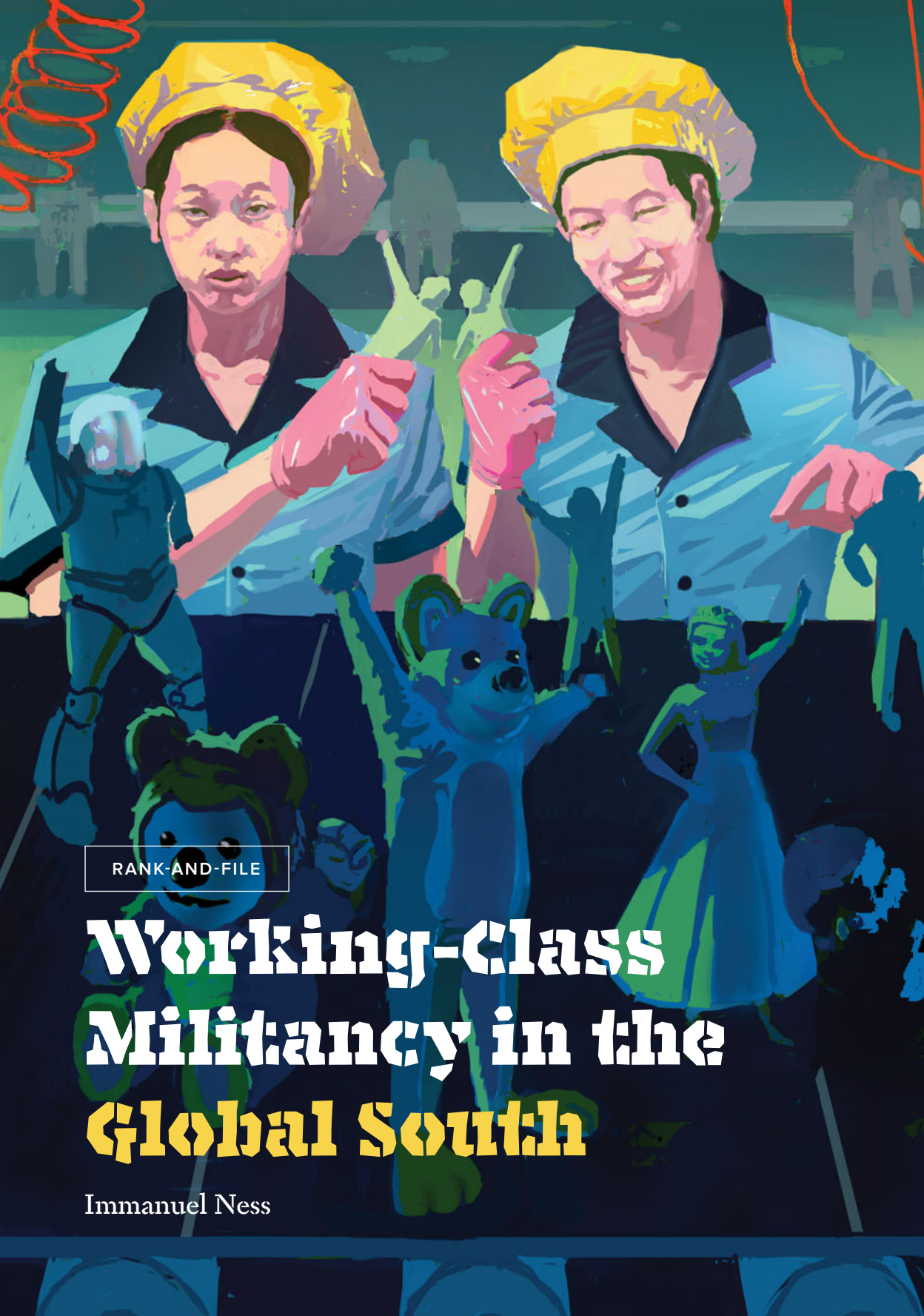
Historically, however, capitalism developed hand-in-hand with colonialism, racism and patriarchy, dividing the working class along status lines (like citizenship, race/ethnicity and gender) and blunting its capacity to produce an emancipatory vision for the class as a whole. Today there are some signs that these divides are hardening—the rise of anti-immigrant and xenophobic sentiments, efforts to restrict migration flows and to reinforce privileges based on citizenship. But there are also signs that, in other respects, these divides are blurring if not breaking down, opening up prospects at the local, national and international level for mobilizations that bring together in solidarity the protagonists of all three types of labor unrest and that have the capacity to generate transformative emancipatory projects for twenty-first century. ★

BEVERLY J. SILVER



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RANK-AND-FILE

# Working-Class Militancy in the Global South

Immanuel Ness

# *A PROFOUND MOVEMENT IS EMERGING AMONG WORKERS IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES, DEMANDING RADICAL ACTION ON GRIEVANCES OUTSIDE THE SYSTEM OF ESTABLISHED UNIONS.*

**I**n the 1980s, the economies that had dominated the world in the postwar era entered a period of far-reaching transition away from state participation to private sector dominance. The conversion process was not uniform: in some cases the shift to market control occurred gradually through the withdrawal of state subsidies for social welfare, and in other instances a radical shift away from public welfare was imposed all at once, in what came to be known as shock therapy.

In the Global South, where most states had limited social welfare nets, economic liberalization converged on privatization of state production and market integration into the global capitalist economy. While twentieth-century industrialization in the capitalist and socialist economies of the North typically took place in the context of social welfare states, in the South, massive industrialization was carried out without provision for health-care, adequate food, child care, housing, education, unemployment insurance, and old age pensions for workers and their families.


## **PROMOTING FOREIGN INVESTMENT FOR EXPORT PRODUCTION**

In manufacturing, foreign direct investment (FDI) is concentrated in special zones such as

special enterprise zones (EPZs) where workers have few rights. Finance capital has become dominant over production decisions, on the basis of criteria that have largely regulated wages and working conditions. Finance capitalists profit by investing in contractors that pay workers the lowest wages (in other words, super-exploitation). Industrial contractors are subservient to foreign multinational investors: if they fail to meet profit expectations financiers withdraw support and shift to lower-cost producers. Even in the mining and petroleum industries, capital reinvests in new forms of extraction when labor costs rise and threaten profits. The threat of disinvestment compels producers to restructure their operations to lower costs and restore high levels of profitability.

Developing countries seek to attract foreign capital by establishing separate governmental regions and enclaves such as EPZs, following a model developed in Mexico and China in the 1980s, as a way of generating investment in manufacturing. In addition to private local producers, labor contractors and real estate firms, the primary beneficiaries of EPZs are multinational brands that provide specifications on production standards and designs for contractors. Profits are guaranteed by the lower production costs achieved through the great disparity between wages available in EPZs in the South, and those prevalent in the North.

By setting the price of goods, in most cases multinational brands can in effect set low wage rates. Foreign brands typically maintain agreements with contractors in several countries and regions, which provide multiple production options in the event of labor disputes between contractors and workers.



*National ruling classes seek to keep wages down, prevent workers from organizing into unions, and frequently use armed police forces to put down unauthorized wildcat strikes.*

Just like water, finance capital flows to the lowest level in the Global South. Profits are guaranteed through compliant national ruling classes that seek to keep wages down, prevent workers from organizing into unions, and frequently use armed police forces to put down unauthorized wildcat strikes.

EPZs provide a government partnership to ensure the abundant availability of compliant low-wage labor to foreign export production firms. To achieve this objective EPZs must:

- ★ **Draw in an oversupply of low-wage workers;**
- ★ **Support the capacity of producers to exploit workers through the removal of labor regulations governing wages and working conditions;**
- ★ **Promote a union-free environment to warrant continuity in low-wage labor and prevent the possibility of worker stoppages and strikes that potentially interrupt production.**

Thus the EPZs extract a high price from the working class of developing countries in exchange for the foreign currency revenues that flow from manufacturing for export. EPZs are managed by government and corporate-appointed authorities to regulate the operation of the entire region. A primary characteristic of the EPZ is to establish an environment that promotes the development of infrastructure facilitating foreign investment in logistics, including regional and international transportation networks, energy and power grids, and that supports the development of social services and accommodation for a compliant labor force to work in the manufacturing industries.

Police and security forces employed to guard against crime in EPZs are also, more importantly, used to prevent and impede worker mobilization and organizing against foreign firms in the Global South. The security apparatus in SEZs and in foreign firms includes surveillance and CCTV systems to monitor worker organizing and identify rank-and-file leaders.

## MIGRATION AND PROLETARIANIZATION

The industrialization of Europe and North America in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries depended heavily on the availability of migrant labor. European migrant laborers were employed in the American garment, steel, auto and electronic manufacturing industries, which largely excluded and marginalized Black, Mexican, Asian and unfree workers. In a similar manner, but to a far greater extent, today's industrialization in the Global South depends on laborers who migrate from rural regions into industrial zones where they are often marginalized.

Hiring migrant workers is a corporate strategy to increase the size of the reserve army of labor and reduce wage rates. Migrant workers are preferred because as newcomers they are not organized into traditional trade unions, allowing employers to maintain authoritarian control over the workplace. The vast majority of workers in new industrial zones are young people from rural areas who

are unfamiliar with their rights and typically isolated from other workers. As the dominant force in the workplace, employers can entirely control wage rates and the labor process: they can discipline workers with impunity by avoiding collective bargaining, seniority systems and formal grievance procedures; and they can relinquish social responsibility to workers while continuing to rely on the abundant reserve army that is unable to survive in rural areas, and so is desperate for any paid work.

In India's industrial zones, the career of an industrial worker may not last more than five or six years, and by the age of 25 workers are considered old and replaceable. As a consequence of the oversupply of labor and the relatively short working lives of these migrant laborers, capital depends on informalization and job insecurity to rotate workers out of the system. Those workers who do have permanent positions are forced into precarious jobs,

and in some cases encouraged to return to the countryside. However, as Jan Breman shows, urban informal work is becoming the norm in South Asia, and industrial workers cannot return to survive in rural areas because the commodification of land has destroyed their former way of life.

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*Employers can discipline workers with impunity by avoiding collective bargaining, seniority systems and formal grievance procedures.*

## CITIZENSHIP RIGHTS AND LIVING CONDITIONS

In the last decade industrial workers in the Global South frequently live in dormitories



managed by contractors or regional commissions established to deliver basic services to migrant laborers. Arriving as newcomers in transient municipalities, most laborers have few social bonds with long-term residents, and more often are reliant on fellow workers from rural areas and family members who have accompanied them. As new residential zones, SEZs are typically isolated from the political and social arena, and provide workers with few social contacts outside the workplaces and living quarters.

Although social isolation may preclude migrant worker contact with trade unions and community allies, it frequently creates stronger links with fellow factory workers, who are also exposed to continuous danger on the job and under threat from replacement by new workers. Marx's depiction of an alienated and estranged workforce in the nineteenth century can be applied to the condition of workers in the Global South today:

“ We have seen how this absolute contradiction between the technical necessities of modern industry, and the social character inherent in its capitalistic form, dispels all fixity and security in the situation of the laborer; how it constantly threatens, by taking away the instruments of labor, to snatch from his hands his means of subsistence, and, by suppressing his detail-function, to make him superfluous. We have seen, too, how this antagonism vents its rage in the creation of that monstrosity, an industrial reserve army, kept in misery in order to be always at the disposal of capital; in the incessant human sacrifices from among the working-class, in the most reckless squandering of labor-power and in the devastation caused by a social anarchy which turns every economic progress into a social calamity.





6 ALL INDIA  
GENERAL STRIKE

P.B.N.K.U

Living in new communities on the margins of major cities, migrant workers often lack the citizenship rights and residency privileges enjoyed by those living in the region and are officially documented and entitled to government services. Spouses and families are prohibited from joining workers; no formal education is provided for children; few rights to health care services exist outside the factory; casualization of the workforce allows employers to dismiss workers at will for any reason, and set permanent workers against an informal and temporary workforce; and young women are often subject to the highest level of exploitation as informal and temporary workers.

## WORKING-CLASS MILITANCY IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

The central issue confronting the development of a militant workers' movement today is to identify and surmount the inequities arising out of the hierarchical system of international value transfer that inflects the global capitalist order, which relies on the super-exploitation of the working class in the Global South.

The modern global system of production and accumulation is shaped by the historical dependence of capitalism to expand profitability, and by more than 250 years of class struggles. A distinct feature of contem-

porary capitalism is the emergence of foreign capital investment in firms that directly exploit land, resources, technology and markets, but also low-wage labor employed in the export-production industries of the Global South. In the mines and mills of the Global South, the disruptive and isolating working conditions that produce alienation and estrangement also activate militancy comparable to that, which has developed among low-wage undocumented migrant workers employed in major cities of the Global North.

Trade unions emerged in the twentieth century to represent a Northern working class that has not survived into the present era. In the South most established trade unions are an inheritance from labor movements immersed in anti-colonial struggles, and have few connections to the contemporary working class. Even ACFTU, the Chinese labor federation, is a legacy from the past. An array of unions was formed, and these continued into the period of formal independence, and have in various ways

defended the rights of workers. Like those in Western Europe, unions in the South were formed in periods of struggle and labor exploitation, often acting to oppose colonialism and pave the way for independence.

Most existing labor configurations in the Global South today are descended from earlier worker mobilizations and have formed within party systems that

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*In the Global South most established trade unions are an inheritance from labor movements immersed in anti-colonial struggles, and have few connections to the contemporary working class.*

have defined the scope of trade activity and power in the postwar era. These regimes delineate the limits of official trade unions and reveal the boundaries for the expression and development of unauthorized working-class militancy. It is always an open question whether existing labor unions can contain the concrete development of independent working-class organizations. The examples of China, India and South Africa reveal that industrial workers are engaged in direct action against institutionalized exploitation in various arenas, and are making demands that are reshaping traditional unions.

## — CHINA

The Chinese model of industrialization, which took root in the late 1980s and has matured in the 2010s, is founded on the ability to produce quality products for export at the lowest possible cost. A large reserve army of labor was generated by establishing industries in strategic geographic logistical hubs and by forcing the rural peasantry off the land, creating inequality in urban areas. Extensive industrialization and modernization has significant ramifications for class relations and the evolving class conflict. To promote FDI the public sector was reorganized and free markets established, causing major protests in older urban industries of the Chinese northeast.

The Communist Party of China (CPC) and the labor confederation ACFTU dominate the landscape and prohibit the formation of all independent organizations; workers were typically seen as subservient and incapable of organizing independently. However, the expansion of legal protection covering migrant workers in new export promotion industries has ignited a militant workers' movement that has witnessed a wave of strikes in the foreign-dominated export sector between 2010 and 2015. Without official unions and intermediaries, and without laws defining the precise terms of work stoppages, workers are free to strike over a range of grievances on a local level and increasingly these have been articulated in public protests and mass strikes that extend beyond local factories. In new export industries, women workers who have recently migrated are emerging as important participants in resistance against contractors.

While ruling out the formation of organizations that may be controlled by foreign non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the CPC and ACFTU have expanded labor law to protect migrant workers and their families, and have urged local governments to respond to worker demands for higher wages, benefits and living conditions. Chinese





PHOTO BY ANUSHYA BADRINATH, VIA FLICKR

rank-and-file activists operate outside of the traditional ACFTU structures and recognize that militancy can be successful without establishing a competing party or union, but through direct struggle on the job and within communities.

Despite compulsory membership in the ACFTU, striking workers in wildcat strikes have gained the capacity to push the federation and the state to represent and enforce their interests. Industrial workers in export industries are expanding the scope of strikes and are benefiting from the initiation of labor laws that place the migrant workers who have dominated the industrial working class in the same position as other members of the union. In a growing number of cases, rank-and-file committees have been effective in advancing worker interests when local unions fail to represent their members.

## — INDIA

Since independence in 1947, trade union federations affiliated with political parties have represented public and private sector workers primarily through parliament in a system that confers standing and provides legitimacy. In the post-independence era, trade unions in India have been unable to end the system of contract labor, which allowed industrialists to employ contract laborers alongside permanent workers, and to use the caste system to maintain employment segregation and thereby divide the workforce.

Following the introduction of free-market reforms in the 1990s, Indian employers and the state have sought to diminish the influence of trade unions in the industrial sector as a means to attract foreign capital. With foreign investment flowing into the non-union private



*In response to the obstacles to joining existing unions, Indian workers are forming independent unions to represent their interests.*



sector, the government withdrew economic support for the unionized state-owned sector, decreasing membership and the influence of trade unions in electoral politics. Independent unions established on a plant-by-plant basis are unable to negotiate national agreements and rely primarily on strikes and direct action to improve wages and workplace conditions. The wave of sit-down strikes in India from 2012 to 2014 has been met with harsh violence by corporate security and state police, but the strikes are nevertheless becoming ubiquitous in the EPZs.

By rejecting the contract system and demanding equal status for all employees, the Maruti-Suzuki Workers Union in Gurgaon has challenged the Indian model of production that rests on accentuating worker divisions. Solidarity served the interests of all the workers: full-timers would not be threatened by a subservi-

ent workforce and informal workers would gain equal rights and wages through a union that did not distinguish between workers on the basis of their status. The state responded with mass repression, violence and imprisonment.

On the whole, the nature of established unions remains unchanged. As a consequence unions are losing membership and over 90 percent of all Indian workers are employed in the informal sector and do not have union representation. The independent Bigul Mazdoor Dasta (BMD) has been at the cutting edge of worker mobilization and strikes. BMD was crucial in mass strikes in India, including the Wazipur iron and steel factory in North Delhi. It mobilizes the informal majority of footloose workers within urban slums, where the vast majority live. Thus far, government-recognized national unions have not challenged the contracting



system in India. Worker organizing continues to involve only the full-timers, which exposes it to challenges from independent labor organizations. These will become the center of struggle in the years to come.

Unlike the BMD, which has gained growing prominence in 2015 and 2016 by organizing mass walkouts, the dominant unions are unable to solve crucial issues facing workers for a number of reasons: unfamiliarity with the conditions of workers in India's burgeoning urban slums; the expansion and the perpetuation

of a contract system for the vast majority of workers, often on the basis of caste, gender and age; and fierce opposition to unionization by capital and the state. In response to the obstacles to joining existing unions, workers are forming independent unions to represent their interests.

## — SOUTH AFRICA

In the late 1980s the pivotal factor motivating the South African government to end the apartheid system was the need to join the global capitalist economy. Trade sanctions were restraining economic growth in its major industries, minerals and auto manufacturing. By 1990, however, the South African economy was shifting toward export promotion and becoming increasingly interdependent with the

world economy. The post-apartheid government conferred political rights on South Africa's black majority without granting them

equivalent economic rights. Moreover, the government put off significant wage increases to the industrial working class in the very mining and manufacturing industries that were crucial to the South African economy. Poverty, unemployment and inequality have increased.

In South Africa the corporatist system has failed to represent the interests of the working class, especially workers

in the mining and manufacturing sectors. COSATU, South Africa's leading trade union federation, is controlled by the Tripartite Alliance, which has dominated the political sphere in the post-apartheid era. The Alliance has not opposed the government's neoliberal policies, which permitted labor-contracting arrangements to create multi-tier wage systems.

South Africa has witnessed the emergence of the AMCU, a wholly new union in the mining sector that has arisen in response to the unwillingness of the NUM to represent mine workers against multinational mining companies, and that opposes government cooperation with management. Worker self-organizing expanded across South Africa's mining sector from 2009 to 2014, culminating in a five-month nationwide strike of platinum miners against mining conglomerates.

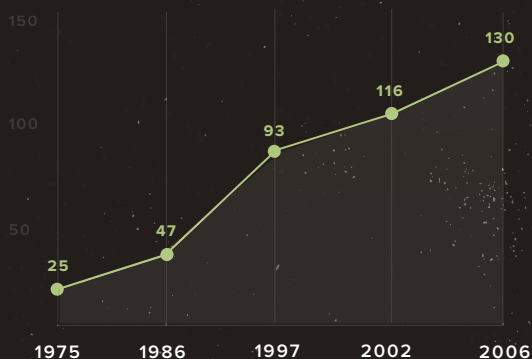
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*In South Africa the corporatist system has failed to represent the interests of the working class. As a result, worker self-organizing expanded across the mining sector and spread to the auto and electronics industries.*

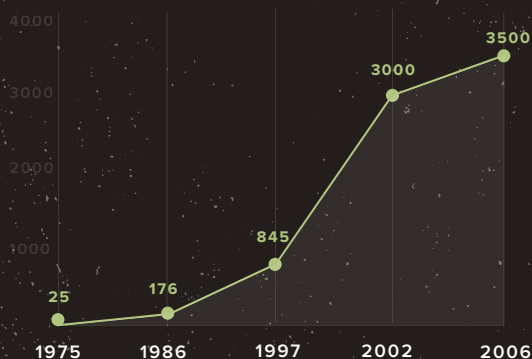
# Export Processing Zones

“The primary beneficiaries of EPZs are multinational brands that provide specifications on production standards and designs for contractors. Profits are guaranteed by the lower production costs achieved through the great disparity between wages available in EPZs in the South, and those prevalent in the North. EPZs are commonly managed by government and corporate-appointed authorities to regulate the operation of the entire region.”

No. of countries w/ EPZs



No. of EPZs or similar types of zones



No. of EPZs in regions



The worker insurgency spread to the auto and electronics industries, where the main union, NUMSA, recognized the need to represent the interests of excluded workers or risk the same fate as the NUM. In November 2014, NUMSA distanced itself from the position of the ruling African National Congress in support of multinational capital and mobilized workers in key industries. The union was expelled from the COSATU labor federation. In May 2016, NUMSA has joined forces with 17 other unions to form an independent federation of workers to fight against concessions and multinational corporations, which dominate the South African state.

## THE FUTURE OF TRADE UNIONS

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Today trade unions in the Global South are at a historic crossroad that will determine their future viability. We are deafened by the mantra that all unions need to do is grow larger so they can advance worker interests. In fact, capitalist globalization constrains the capacity of unions to adapt to changing conditions in the contemporary era. Trade unions are becoming outmoded under neoliberal capitalist industrialization across the South. While unions are under attack by the state and capital, they are also losing their credibility with workers. Given the origin of unions within the political and legal frameworks of independence and anti-capitalist struggles, it remains an open question whether specific unions will survive and even perhaps thrive in the future.

As in previous eras, poverty and inequality are related to gender, race, ethnicity, caste, religion and other social divisions. Wage inequality and job insecurity have increased in the North since the 1970s, but poverty and inequality are far higher among workers in the modern

manufacturing industries of Asia, Africa and Latin America. In the South, newly proletarianized workers labor in factories, mines and plantations, typically with little or no job security, and in many cases are represented by unions that are unable to negotiate for contract or temporary labor.

Meanwhile traditional trade unions, an inheritance of twentieth-century European and North American models, contribute to the marginalization of workers in the Global South, by supporting their incorporation into dominant bureaucratic state structures where at best union leaders are relegated to a subordinate and consultative position, and more typically they are ignored. Furthermore, traditional unions are committed to preserving and improving the wages and conditions covered by past agreements for a privileged few members, while ignoring the majority of workers who are not core members.

Workers can no longer rely on bureaucratic union leaders to defend them. Authentic worker struggles proceed from industrial workers themselves, who are both building independent unions and, where the workers' organizations they build are not officially recognized, challenging existing labor unions to represent their interests. It is the development of worker radicalism that will shape the form and survival of decaying traditional unions. In the absence of recognized unions, the results of these rank-and-file struggles are mixed—but the empirical evidence drawn from research in China, India and South Africa demonstrates that these movements are gaining traction and are achieving real wage gains and improvement in conditions.

The evidence drawn from the Global South is that a profound movement is emerging among workers demanding action on grievances out-

side the system of established unions. Workers' movements are operating within the interstices of existing trade union structures, with or without the sanction of the unions. Rank-and-file workers in industries are forming independent associations and compelling existing unions to represent their interests.

*Workers can no longer rely on bureaucratic union leaders to defend them. Authentic worker struggles proceed from industrial workers themselves, who are both building independent unions and challenging existing labor unions to represent their interests.*

To build on these struggles, workers will need a disciplined and strong class-based organization. It is in the interest of capital to undermine trade unions of any form. Eventually the worker mobilization that is taking place both inside and outside established structures will cohere into disciplined organizations. But each of the struggles demonstrates that the time when workers can be taken for granted or ignored is over. Workers' movements are emerging, and will expand to contest the legitimacy of capital, the state, and existing unions. ★

IMMANUEL NESS



*Immanuel Ness is the author of Southern Insurgency: The Coming of the Global Working Class (Pluto 2016). He is on the faculty of political science at Brooklyn College, City University of New York and at the Centre for Social Change, University of Johannesburg.*



# Social Reproduction: **BETWEEN THE WAGE AND THE COMMONS**

Silvia Federici — in conversation with Marina Sitrin



**“THE KEY QUESTION IS HOW TO EXPAND OUR AUTONOMY, HOW TO BUILD NEW RELATIONS OF SOLIDARITY, HOW TO RE-APPROPRIATE SOME OF THE WEALTH WE HAVE PRODUCED.”**

**S**ilvia Federici is a writer, activist and one of the most influential feminist theorists of her generation. Her contributions to the practice-based theory of reproductive labor and the commons are increasingly gaining the recognition they deserve within the academic and activist community, and will hopefully help lay the foundations of future collective projects geared towards the transformation of society beyond capitalist relations.

ROAR contributor Marina Sitrin recently sat down with Federici at her home in Brooklyn, NY to discuss the relationship between struggles over social reproduction, gender, work and the commons, particularly in today’s context of crisis and austerity.



*Marina Sitrin: Social reproduction is being talked about a lot recently. Could you begin by describing the basic concept? You are one of the key writers and thinkers on this question, having challenged and expanded the concept as theorized by Marx.*

**Silvia Federici:** The fact that the concept of social reproduction is receiving so much attention today is a good development. For too long there has been an exclusive concentration on the production of the commodity, even though reproductive life and work are at the center of any transformative project. They are not only central to capitalist accumulation, but to any form of organization.

Social reproduction is a relatively recent term. In the 1970s, we spoke of it in terms of domestic work, referring to all the activities that reproduce our daily life and at the same time, in a capitalist society, also reproduce labor-power. Later, we expanded the concept: we saw that procreation is part of the reproduction of life and that “reproduction” has two sides, in contradiction with each other. On the one hand it reproduces us as people, and on the other it reproduces us as exploitable workers. The question we posed is how to turn reproductive work into a reproduction of our struggle.

In more recent times, activist and academic circles have popularized the concept of social reproduction to stress that the reproduction of

the workforce also takes place outside of the home, in schools and hospitals, for instance. My own understanding of reproduction has also changed over the years. Traveling in Africa or Latin America, you realize that for many women across the world reproductive work begins with putting some grains in the soil—not for sale, but for feeding the family. The care of the environment is also part of reproductive work, which means that ecological degradation especially affects women.

The problem here is that there is a gap between theory and practice. There is a lot of discussion today about care work, particularly in relation to children

but also in relation to the elderly, as feminists are aging and are confronted with the care of their parents. But we have not really seen many initiatives at the neighborhood level addressing this urgent need and beginning to create the type of networks and structures we need.

*Could you talk a bit about the context of austerity and crisis? This seems to be one of the main reasons why discussions about social reproduction are gaining traction in Europe and North America today.*

Yes, the impoverishment and dispossession we see across the world are also present in Europe and North America. For millions of people, and especially for people of color, neither capital nor the state provide any means of reproduction—they exist only as re-

pressive forces. So many have begun to pool their resources and create more collective forms of reproduction as the only guarantee of survival.

We see it in Greece, with the attempt to build a network of social clinics in a situation where the healthcare system has been dismantled—people there have come together, communities have mobilized, farmers have brought food from the countryside. And it is significant that the Greek population, which has been confronted with the most brutal austerity program in Europe, is also the one that has been at the forefront of the solidarity movement

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*For millions of people,  
neither capital nor the  
state provide any means  
of reproduction—they  
exist only as repressive  
forces.*

with refugees and immigrants. This has been very inspiring, and I wish some of the lessons we can draw from this experience could be the foundation for a new politics in the United States.

*What about the gap between the language of social reproduction and the reality of what people are doing on the ground? If you look at the clinics or the work with refugees in Greece, many participants tend to be women. Is the way social reproduction is being spoken of today placing gender at the center?*

Yes, much of the work of reproduction is done by women. In Latin America and particularly in Africa, you see that those who have held on to subsistence farming are mostly women. Until recently, subsistence agriculture was one of the main activities for African women,

but now it has come under attack by the World Bank, which argues that you should use the land to borrow money and set up a business, because only money is productive and only business can pull you out of poverty—so you should not use the land for sustenance and shelter.

The reason women have been targeted by these institutions is that, in the face of the crisis, they have taken matters into their own hands. They have gone into the streets and have created a whole alternative economy that has its roots in subsistence farming—it is the micro-trade, the small snacks and drinks that they prepare and sell for very little money to neighbors and other workers. This is an economy that international organizations and governments try to destroy or manipulate, through the aggressive promotion of micro-credit for instance, because it gives women and people in general more independence from the market.

*So if we could link that back to the ways of organizing that have been mainly led by women, how do we begin to break down the division of labor? We have the language of reproduction, and it seems very useful, but the practice seems more of the same?*

This is a difficult issue with broad implications. I just came back from Colombia, and one of the things that has happened there is a massive process of dispossession—an attack on the means of reproduction to which people have access, which often begins with displacing people from the land. This is implemented with much violence against women, from witch-hunting to pure massacres. The question, though, is why only women are organizing against it. This is not a women’s problem. Women are the first to be targeted, but it is a men’s problem too—as most of the perpetrators are men.

***We need to fight against the redefinition of masculinity that is taking place today, with its glorification of aggressiveness.***

Women are on the frontline because they pay the highest price for these developments. But we must have a men’s movement against violence against women. We need men who organize to tell other men: you cannot do that. More broadly, we need to fight against the redefinition of masculinity that is taking place today, with its glorification of aggressiveness. The male model now is the soldier, the security guard, the *narco*—always the man with the gun.





PHOTO BY LM TPOVA FLICKR



As the French feminist sociologist Jules Falquet has pointed out, in the new international division of labor, the main work that has become available to men is the work of violence—working as a soldier, a security or jail guard. This may be one of the reasons why there is so much violence against women today. There is a growth in the militarization of everyday life and the shaping of a new violent concept of masculinity.

We think that men should be taking on more work of reproduction. Some younger people are doing it, but it is still an enormous challenge. In some cases, that difficulty has material roots, as men get better jobs and wages, so if there has to be a choice in the family, they are the ones who go out to get wages. After all, they are more likely to be the ones who get them and they generally get better wages than women.

*But there is also a real complicity by men with capital today, in the same way that there is complicity at the level of violence. How can we deal with that?*

One way is for women to carve out their own spaces and not compromise in that. It is important that women have their autonomous political space even if they work within mixed organizations. This is the only way we can analyze our situation and devise strategies and struggles adequate to produce change. Otherwise, entire areas of exploitation remain unexamined and are made invisible again.

I remember how bitterly men in the left opposed the feminist movement in the 1970s, charging that we were dividing the working class and expecting us to be a support group for their struggles. It was difficult for them to accept that we could move autonomously on the basis of our own work, our own exploitation. Only when women left

their organizations were they forced to open their eyes. So my advice now is for women to build their power autonomously.

*That is interesting because even in the more recent global movements—like the more autonomous movement of the squares in Europe and the US—you had this language arguing that ‘there is diversity and acceptance, but we are all basically the same and beyond divisions’—a kind of apolitical post-feminism.*

I do not believe in post-feminism, post-colonialism, or the politics of “post-ism” more generally. Colonial relations are stronger than ever and feminism is still necessary—just not the type of feminism, obviously, created by the United Nations, which has tried to co-opt the feminist movement as it had already co-opted the anti-colonial movement.

The tendency towards post-feminism worries me because there is now an attack on the very notion of “women”; a project that began with post-modernism and that rejected the assumption of any commonality among women, even proletarian ones. Today some young women reject the very concept of women assuming it to be a purely capitalist construction. But what it means to be a woman has also been defined by the struggles that women themselves have waged, in particular those challenging and rejecting the capitalist definition of “femininity” and “gender”.

*Do you think a similar misuse could also be taking place with the language of social reproduction and care work? I have seen these terms used in academic circles, by progressive people as well, but in ways that are sometimes incomprehensible and that take it out of any social practice.*

Federici moves to the United States to complete a dissertation in philosophy, where she soon becomes involved in the student movement and begins her collaboration with the radical journal *Telos*.

# Silvia Federici

**1984** – In part to escape an increasingly suffocating political environment, Federici accepts a teaching position at the University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria.

**1972** – Formation of the International Feminist Collective in Padua, Italy, whose main purpose is to launch the international Campaign for Wages for Housework. In the US, Federici cofounds the New York Wages For Housework Collective.

1967

1970'S

1972

1984 1987

Federici works with Italian comrades residing in the US translating texts from the Italian New Left. In 1972 she coauthors "*Theses on the Mass Worker*", together with Mario Montano. After reading Mariarosa Dalla Costa's "*Women and the subversion of the community*", Federici decides to devote all her political activism to the Women's Liberation Movement.

**Silvia Federici is an Italian-American scholar, teacher, and activist from the radical autonomist feminist Marxist tradition.**

**1987 to 2005** – Federici teaches at Hofstra University, participates in the rising antiglobalization movement in the US, joins the radical Philosophy Association, cofounds the RPA AntiDeath Penalty Project, and contributes to various issues of *Midnight Notes*.

**2004** – *Caliban and the Witch. Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* is published by Autonomedia, a work reconstructing the process of original accumulation from the point of view of its impact on the women and the process of reproduction.

**1995** – Publication of *Enduring Western Civilization. The Construction of the Notion of the Western Civilization and Its Others*, edited by Federici.

Federici's primary engagement after returning to the US is to put to work the knowledge gained in Nigeria concerning the new paths of globalization, practically and theoretically.

**2012** – Publication of *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction and Feminist Struggle* (Oakland, PM Press), a collection of essays on reproduction written over the course of more than 30 years.

1990

1995

2000

**1990** – To publicize the struggle of students against the 'adjustment' of the Nigerian universities Federici, together with George Caffentzis and others, launches the Committee for Academic Freedom in Africa (CAFA), promoting the right to study.

**2000** – *A Thousand Flowers. Social Struggles Against Structural Adjustment in African Universities*, a collection of the materials produced by CAFA is published by Africa World Press.

2004

2012

2016



**Presently** Federici lives in Brooklyn writing, teaching in various contexts, including classes, and networking with feminists and other social movements above all in the US and Latin America.

The moment a concept like “care work” is taken out of a practice, it is made static and reified. It becomes an innocuous idea, like the “care society”, so popular today in some feminist circles precisely because it is thought in isolation from what we need to do in order to achieve it. Language, too, is a terrain of struggle. You have these terms like “social reproduction” or “the commons” that that have been emptied of any meaning in academic discourse. I see language as another battleground where we must try to re-appropriate the meaning of our struggles.

Social production, for me, should be the door to a whole rethinking of the neighborhood, the community—to a politics weaving together our desires, our possibilities, our crisis, and then mapping courses of action. I am interested in developing a new politics that moves between the wage and the common. In fact, this is my slogan now: “between the wage and the common.” This is because we cannot abandon the wage struggle today: we see it all around us, with the fast-food workers and Walmart workers fighting to increase the minimum wage.

This may not seem very revolutionary, but it is actually quite important as it brings together many workers who are among those who have the least power in society today, and is turn-

ing them into a new social force. Today, when the fast-food workers call for \$15 an hour, they are calling for liberation, they are calling for an end to slavery, they are saying ‘we are tired of being the ones whose wages can be cut to the bones, we are tired of living at the margin.’ Their struggle is about much more than the actual amount of money, and not accidentally is now connected to the struggle over immigration and the struggle of Black Lives Matter.

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*The key question is how to expand our autonomy, how to build new relations of solidarity, how to re-appropriate some of the wealth we have produced, without exchanging with more exploitation or more control by the state over our lives.*

You have to be careful when you struggle for wages because wages are used to divide people, but as a tool for change they can be used in the opposite way. For example, in Italy in the early 1970s, at a time of very intense class antagonism, workers began to demand inversely proportional wages, so that those who had the lowest wages would get the biggest raises and vice-versa. There the wage was used politically, it was used as a way to unify people and to

subvert the labor hierarchies that have been built through the wage system. Now something similar is also happening in the struggle around the \$15 minimum wage—it is about subverting these hierarchies, it is the bottom rising.

I see the wage and the common not as two separate areas, but, potentially, in some situations, as two instruments reinforcing each



other. You need commons to give power to the struggle over the wage and you need the wage to give some resource to the commons. The key question is how you expand your autonomy, how you build new relations of solidarity, how you re-appropriate some of the wealth we have produced, without exchanging with more exploitation or more control by the state over our lives.

*Social reproduction should be the door to a whole rethinking of the neighborhood, the community—to a politics weaving together our desires, our possibilities, our crisis, and then mapping courses of action.*

*Like some of the housing movements? The PAH in Spain, for example, take over houses, then they see what people need in assemblies of families (which they call “villages”), and they provide it in common, reorganizing various elements of daily life.*

Exactly. But first people in the neighborhood have to decide what they want—you cannot allow the state to decide that for you. You need to build a base, for instance by holding regular meetings with people who work in public services—nurses, educators—who are part of the state but who today are very dissatisfied because they know they cannot really do a good job with the constant cuts and the taylorization of their work, which leaves no space for relations with the people they serve. That is where the transformation has to take place. It should be a process of building alliances with people who are also interested in bettering the condition of social reproduction and who know from within how serious the problems of the present system really are.



MARINA SITRIN



*Marina Sitrin is a writer, lawyer, teacher, organizer, militant and dreamer. She is the author of *Everyday Revolutions: Horizontalism & Autonomy in Argentina* (Zed, 2012) and co-author, with Dario Azzellini, of *They Can't Represent Us!* (Verso, 2014)*

WORKPLACE DEMOCRACY

# Workers' Control

*IN THE CRISIS OF CAPITALISM*

Dario Azzellini





*RECENT YEARS  
HAVE SEEN A  
PROLIFERATION OF  
RECUPERATED  
WORKPLACES AROUND  
THE GLOBE, LAYING  
THE FOUNDATIONS  
FOR A TRULY  
DEMOCRATIC  
WORKERS' ECONOMY.*

**I**n February 2016, a dozen former workers of a small woodworks plant in the small Greek town of Patrída, some 60 kilometers from Thessaloniki, had had enough. Since 2008 they had been tricked by the owners. With a promise to pay back everything soon, the bosses did not pay the workers their full salary anymore, reduced working hours and announced bankruptcy without making it official. But the situation never improved and the workers never saw their money. Finally, in December 2015, the plant closed. The debt accumulated by the company in terms of unpaid salaries currently stands at around 700,000 euros.

The workers do not believe they will see any of this money. Instead they decided to take over the plant and run it under workers' control. They contacted the workers of the recuperated factory Vio.Me in Thessaloniki asking for support. The workers from Vio.Me came and helped to build a struggle and restart production as soon as possible. They want to switch production to benches and sales booths for markets and kiosks—all products needed by common people and their communities. The workers are now getting in touch with co-operatives and collectives all over Greece and organizing and participating in mobilizations.

## A WIDESPREAD PHENOMENON

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The workers in Patrida are doing the same thing thousands of workers have been doing over the past few years of capitalist crisis all around the world. Workplace recuperations became most visible and best known around the takeovers in Argentina in response to the crisis of 2001-'02, when they became a widespread phenomenon. In early 2016, there were approximately 360 worker-recuperated companies in Argentina, involving some 15,000 workers; at least 78 worker-recuperated companies employing 12,000 workers in Brazil and almost two dozen in Uruguay. In Venezuela there are several dozen worker-recuperated companies, some managed jointly by workers and communities, and a handful have emerged in Mexico, India and Indonesia. In the course of the contemporary crisis, some 60 workplaces were recuperated in Argentina, two dozen in Venezuela, and a few in Italy, France, Greece, Bosnia, Croatia, the US, Egypt, Turkey and in Tunisia.

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*Throughout history,  
workers have struggled  
for participation in  
decision-making  
processes and have  
tried to develop  
democratic forms of  
self-management”*

Workplace occupations, company takeovers and struggles for workers' control are not new phenomena. Worker initiatives for control of their companies have historically appeared in situations of economic, political or social crisis, in socialist, national and democratic revolutions, under government-proclaimed socialist and in capitalist contexts, at times of peak production and in stages of restructuring or decline. Throughout history, under every form of political system and government, everywhere in the world, workers have struggled for participation in decision-making processes at work, and have tried to develop forms of co- and self-management, or workers' control.

Even without previous experience of forming workers' councils, collective administration—whether by means of assemblies or other mechanisms of direct democracy and horizontal relations—has often appeared as an inherent tendency of the worker base. And workers have proven that they can run factories under their control in most industries, including metal, textile, ceramics, food processing, plastic and rubber, print shops and others, as well as workplaces in the service sector, such as clinics, education facilities, media, hotels and restaurants.

## A LIBERATING EXPERIENCE

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What clearly emerges from the legacy of workers' control, both historic and contemporary, is its liberating character in transforming a situation of capitalist alienation and authoritarian control into one of democratic practice. Workers in Argentina and in France might face very different conditions, but the essence of their struggles remains the same: opposing oneself to the capitalist process of production—the backbone of any contemporary society—and



building, by means of councils and self-management, elements of a future classless society.

In this context it is important to underline that this endeavor is undertaken by common workers and communities. As the Argentinian researcher Andrés Ruggeri points out:

“ *In a worker-recuperated company there are all the workers who used to be in the company. That includes anyone from the leftist vanguardist convinced of going straight against capital to the one who yesterday voted for the first time, who was the employers’ best friend. The conclusion is that self-management does not need vanguards—everyone can be part of a process of self-management.*

As Jeremy Brecher stressed in a 1973 article:

“ *Workers’ councils do not possess any secret quality that makes them by virtue of their form, revolutionary. They do, however, have several characteristics that make them different from unions. First, they are based on the power of workers who are together every day and exercise continuous power over production. Second, they are directly controlled by the workers themselves, who can recall their delegates at any time. Third, they follow the actually-existing organization of the working class in production, rather than dividing it along lines that quickly become obsolete, as has happened over and over again in the history of unionism.*

Workers taking over a workplace or struggling for workers’ control usually find themselves confronting not only private entrepreneurs, capitalist structures and company administrations, but also union sectors and governmental institutions. Almost all the historical experiences of workers’ control have inevitably collided with political parties, unions and state bureaucracies, whether in the Russian Revolution, Italy in the 1970s, Poland in the 1950s and 1980s, or in present-day Argentina, Venezuela, Greece or India, to name but a few examples. On the other hand they usually have the support of local communities, solidarity structures and other worker-controlled workplaces.

Worker-controlled workplaces work differently from common capitalist workplaces: the social relations change, the labor process changes, often the products themselves change. Nevertheless, the pressure of the capitalist market is immense and often the workers have to compromise somehow, as they cannot completely avoid engaging with the market.

# Workers' control case studies

## NEW ERA WINDOWS

Chicago, US

In 2008, a windows factory in Chicago went bankrupt and was shut down overnight under suspicious circumstances. While banks were being bailed out, the workers became jobless. After years of struggle, in 2012 they raised enough funds with the support of the community to buy up the factory that has since been organized as new cooperative business by the name New Era Windows.

[WWW.NEWERAWINDOWS.COM](http://WWW.NEWERAWINDOWS.COM)

*“Although there is no doubt that interactions with the capitalist environment have provoked severe contradictions, recuperated companies have proven to be more long-lasting than many common capitalist companies.”*



## HOTEL BAUEN

Buenos Aires, Argentina

In March, 2003 the former workers of Hotel Bauen in downtown Buenos Aires, Argentina, decided to take action after being laid off without receiving months of back pay. They recuperated their former workplace, and organized it as a collectively-run hotel and activist meeting place. Until this day Hotel Bauen is a powerful representative of the hundreds of recuperated workplaces across Argentina.

[WWW.BAUENHOTEL.COM.AR](http://WWW.BAUENHOTEL.COM.AR)

## FRALIB

Géménos, France.

After 1,336 days of resistance, the workers of Fralib—a tea processing and packaging plant near Marseille, France—were able to celebrate their victory against Unilever, the giant multinational that had decided to close down the factory. Unilever pulled out, the workers took over the factory, founded the Scop-TI co-op and launched a new brand of tea: “1336”, referring to the duration of their struggle.

[WWW.SCOP-TI.COM](http://WWW.SCOP-TI.COM)



## KAZOVA

Istanbul, Turkey

In the wake of the historic Gezi protests in Turkey, workers of the Kazova textile factory in Istanbul were emboldened in their fight for justice against their former bosses who had refused to pay the workers months of back pay before collectively sacking the entire workforce and disappearing of the radar. Now, Özgür (“Free”) Kazova is one of the first worker-run factories in Turkey, producing “jumpers without bosses”, as their slogan goes.

[WWW.OZGURKAZOVA.ORG](http://WWW.OZGURKAZOVA.ORG)

## VIO.ME

Thessaloniki, Greece

Vio.Me in Greece is probably the most famous recuperated factory in Europe.. Under the slogan “If you can’t do it, we can!”, workers of the former construction materials manufacturer occupied their closed-down factory and started producing environmentally-friendly cleaning materials. Despite facing a continuous threat of eviction, Vio.Me has become a beacon of the anti-capitalist struggle in Greece.

[WWW.VIO.ME](http://WWW.VIO.ME)



Although there is no doubt that the inevitable interactions with the capitalist environment have provoked severe contradictions and complications for companies under self-management and are also often a source of internal conflicts, they have also proven to be more long-lasting than many common capitalist companies. In the case of Argentina, of 205 worker-recuperated companies studied in 2010, only six had shut down at the end of 2013 while 63 new worker-recuperated companies had been created. And they did not only survive economically, but also continued to follow their political orientation of democratic decision-making and equality between workers.

## AN ALTERNATIVE VALUE-SYSTEM

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Workplaces under workers' control do not follow an internal capitalist rationality. Instead, they produce and try to follow their own set of values as much as possible. They do so even if they know very well that these values does not correspond to a strict entrepreneurial logic, as Ernesto from the worker-controlled print shop Chilavert in Buenos Aires states:

“ We also feel the pressure here—we live from our work and have to, so every hour of our work-time that we decide to use in order to militate in some type of social question is lost time from the capitalist point of view; it is money you lose because you do not earn it. That is what you learn when you are little, that is what everyone tells you. So there is a constant systemic pressure to incorporate you, to absorb you. First the system rejects you, but once it sees it cannot kill you, it includes and transforms you into something that can be bought and sold.

Most workplaces under workers' control consider solidarity with other struggles, especially with new recuperations, as a central part of their work-time. Almost all workplace recuperations have had support from other recuperated workplaces. Usually they are connected to other recuperated companies, but also to more militant cooperatives and sectors of the solidarity economy. The connections and forms of cooperation are political but also economic. If possible, worker-controlled companies prefer to enter business relations with other worker-controlled companies.

Most worker-recuperated companies also maintain contacts with other movements, political or social organizations, or the local neighborhood. Almost all worker-recuperated companies engage in political, social



and cultural activities, and 39 percent even offer permanent space to cultural centers, radio stations, day-care facilities, educational facilities and other services and activities. The more recent the recuperations are, the more they connect with other movements. This is also where the force of the worker-recuperated companies comes from.

What Andrés Ruggeri describes for Argentina can be extended to most other recuperations around the globe:

“ One of the most interesting aspects of worker-recuperated companies is their relation with the communitarian, with the social, and that is what we are talking about when we say that none of the recuperations is recuperating itself alone. It is all about the movement, as there has been a lot of activism and militancy surrounding these recuperations. [There is] a much bigger movement with social links and social networks built around every recuperated company and around recuperated companies as such. [This movement] is very broad and very strong, it's changing the very meaning of the companies. If the workers recuperate a company all alone, if they turn it into a cooperative and so on, no matter how radical the internal process is, if it is a company with only economic activities it would not have the transformative potential it has with the whole network surrounding the movement.

As Gigi Malabarba from the WRC RiMaflow in Milan, Italy, states:

“ We can win if we are part of a larger struggle and increase tenfold and a hundredfold experiences such as these, to nurture the idea that another economy is possible. If the economy of the bosses is in crisis, we need to develop a different idea of economics.

The “different economy”, an economy based on the needs and desires of workers and communities is not only experimented with and developed in praxis, but the worker-recuperated companies also meet regularly with other recuperated workplaces, workers' cooperatives and labor researchers in order to discuss and exchange experiences around the “workers' economy.” Continental and world meetings are taking place every two years. The idea for this came from Argentina, where several meetings of this kind have been organized during the past years. Starting at a national level, by now already seven regional meetings for Latin America and four world meetings have taken place.

In 2014, the first North American meeting and the first European and Mediterranean meeting of “The Economy of the Workers” were held. The European meeting took place in the recuperated factory Fralib near Marseilles. Some 200 people attended the meeting, among them

PHOTO BY JOPA ELLEUL, VIA FLICKR



1336

AUTHENTIQUE

N°3

TILLEUL  
MENTHE

25 sachets

37,5 g

COOPÉRATIVE FRANÇAISE

*Éveille les consciences  
réveille les papilles &*



1336

AUTHENTIQUE

N°5

VERVEINE  
MENTHE

25 sachets

37,5 g

COOPÉRATIVE FRANÇAISE

*Éveille les consciences  
réveille les papilles &*

activists, workers from five recuperated factories in Europe and one in Argentina, and researchers from Europe, Mexico, Brazil and Argentina. The idea behind these meetings is to create a self-organized space to debate the common and different challenges the recuperated companies face, and how they can use these different experiences to build a network among themselves and with other alternative, self-organized and democratic forms of production and self-administration to create a new economy at the service of workers and communities, and not vice versa.

*The idea is to build a network of self-organized and democratic workplaces to create a new economy at the service of workers and communities.*

There is no doubt that recuperated workplaces are gaining more visibility and takeovers are increasingly becoming an option to be considered in workers' struggles. Given that the financial, economic, political and social crisis of capitalism that generated the current recuperations still persists, it is likely that the takeovers by workers will continue. ★

DARIO AZZELLINI



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*AS INFORMALITY BECOMES A MAJOR FEATURE OF THE GLOBAL ECONOMY, STREET SYNDICALISM MAY BE THE KEY TO PUTTING HUMAN DIGNITY OVER PROPERTY RIGHTS.*

# THE STREET SYNDICATE: RE-ORGANIZING INFORMAL WORK

Carlos Delclos

**C**hristopher Columbus towers over Barcelona, pointing outward, far beyond the harbor. Carved in stone beneath him, an indigenous man kneels before a priest, head down, eyes averting the holy man's gaze. Built in 1888 for Spain's first International World's Fair, this monument to colonialism stands where the port meets the Ramblas—the tree-lined mall Orwell de-

scribed as the Catalan city's "central artery". There, it commemorates the bloody events that inaugurated Western dominance over the global economy. And today, it is a flash-point in the struggle between life, property and the Sovereign.

This is among the first places tourists see when they step off of luxury liners and into

Europe's cruise ship capital. In every direction, the path is framed by commerce. Boisterous salsa music shuffles sweetly over the din as street musicians, vendors and artisans compete for the visitors' attention with overpriced restaurants, tacky cocktail bars, hotels and corporate shopping centers. But every so often, the party is violently broken down. In a coordinated effort to expel them from the city's streets, police forces from three separate authorities—local, regional and port—charge at dark-skinned street vendors, swatting at their backs and limbs with telescopic steel batons. It's an unsettling sight, but an increasingly common one in a city that has come to symbolize the European left's hopes for a working model of emancipation.

Informal work has never fit neatly within leftist categories. While the governing left tends to view it as a space for regulation, in more anarchistic circles it is often treated with suspicion as a field dominated by capitalist values. For mainstream organized labor, informal work is just one more form of exploitation that happens to affect women, migrants and other vulnerable groups more than others. The International Labor Organization (ILO), for instance, defines its characteristic features as a lack of protection against non-payment of wages, compulsory overtime or extra shifts, lay-offs without notice or compensation, unsafe working conditions and an absence of social benefits including pensions, sick pay and health insurance.

Of course, none of this is false. But the characteristics outlined by the ILO hinge on expectations defined by the social rights particular to Western welfare states. In this sense, they depart from a very specific idea of work constructed within a very specific set of power relations—namely, those depicted in the Monument to Columbus. That African and

Asian informal workers are routinely pursued next to scenes from what Marx called “the chief moments of primitive accumulation” harbors a poetic truth. To unpack that image is to unveil one of the critical antagonisms at the heart of world trade.

## CODIFYING INFORMALITY

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The concept of “the informal economy” was coined by the anthropologist Keith Hart in the 1970s as he was studying low-income work in Accra, Ghana. It's an odd term when you consider that, according to the ILO, between half and three-quarters of the non-agricultural work being done in developing countries falls into the category. In fact, the OECD claims that half of the world's workers were informally employed in 2009, and that, by 2020, the number will rise to two-thirds. So by labeling it as “informal”, it appears we are depicting most of the work being done in the world as an anomaly, peripheral to the global “formal” economy.

But this was not Hart's intention when he first applied the term. Departing from Marx's notion of the “reserve army of the unemployed”, he was more interested in knowing whether the “surplus population” of low-income workers in the urban Third World were a “passively exploited majority” or if their informal economic activities possessed “an autonomous capacity for generating incomes”. At the time, he concluded that both were true, to a certain extent, and that there was some potential there for economic development.

The ILO were particularly enthusiastic about his findings. After seeing Hart present his work at a conference in 1971, and before he could even publish his work in an aca-

democratic journal, they sent a large employment mission to Kenya. There, they examined the potential for converting the country's traditional economy—which they began to refer to as “the informal sector”—into something more in line with the “formal economy” of Western welfare states. This approach continues to this day, and the formalization of informal work has gone on to become an important part of the ILO's Decent Work Agenda.

Meanwhile, Hart's position has evolved somewhat. In recent years, he has described the informal economy as the antithesis of the national-capitalism that dominates world trade. He also claims that it has become “a universal feature of the modern economy” as a result of the deterioration of employment conditions in rich countries, which began in the 1980s under Thatcher and Reagan and was exacerbated in the aftermath of the Great Recession.

Sociologist Saskia Sassen explores this further in her own research, attributing the expansion of informal work in advanced capitalist countries to two main processes. The first is rising inequality and the resulting changes in the consumption habits of the rich and poor. The second is the inability of most workers to compete for the basic resources needed to operate in urban contexts, since leading firms tend to bid up their prices. This is particularly notable in the price of commercial space.

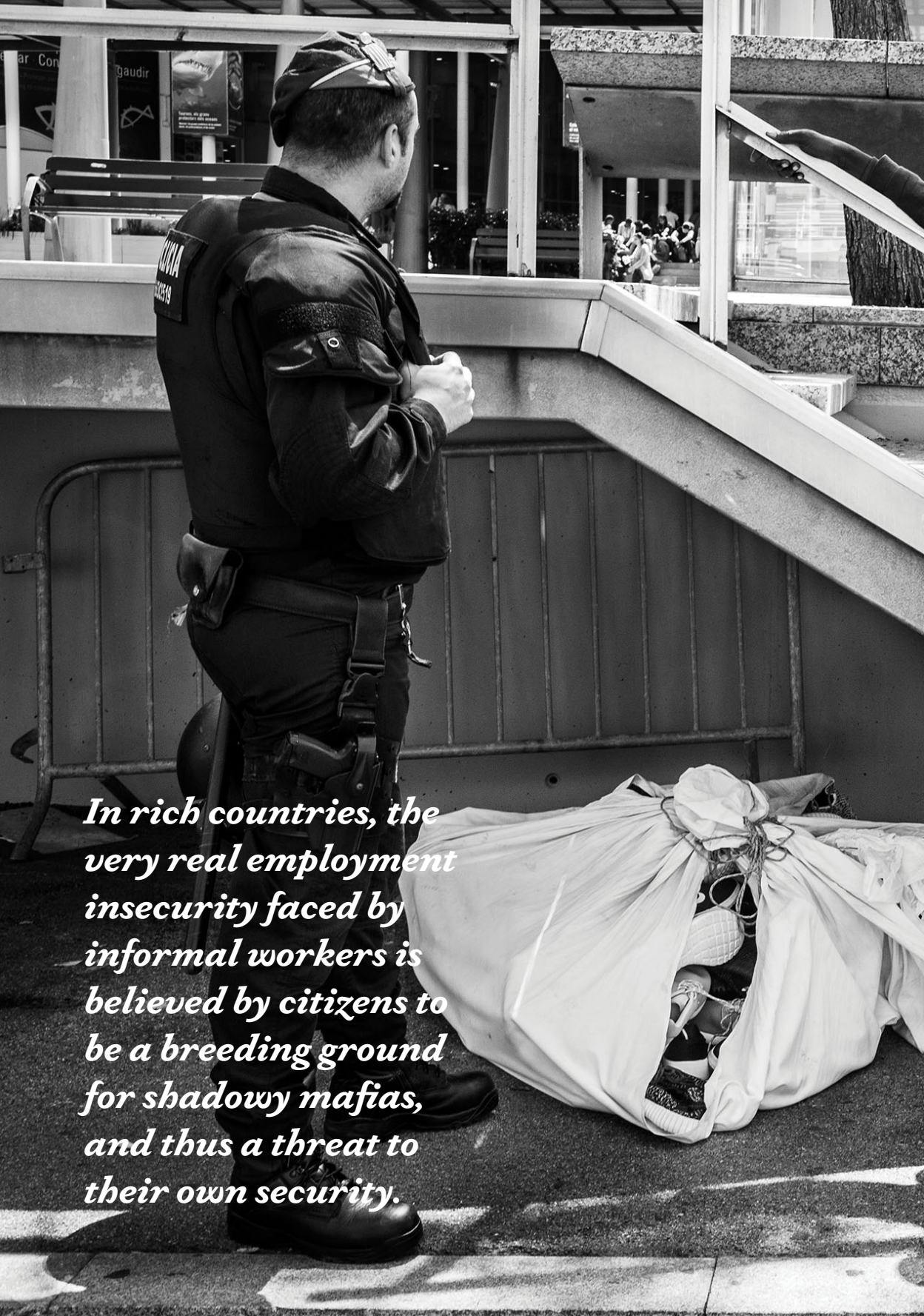
Yet, raising the costs of participating in commerce or national labor markets is not solely the domain of private enterprise. The state plays a major role in reproducing national-capitalist class relations through the selective inclusion or outright criminalization of certain types of work and certain types of people. This is especially clear in the case of undocumented migrants or ex-convicts, minoritized workers who are expelled from

the formal economy and warehoused in slums, prisons and detention centers. If neoliberalism is, as sociologist Loïc Wacquant claims, “an articulation of state, market and citizenship that harnesses the first to impose the stamp of the second onto the third,” then it is the tension between unemployment, informality and survival that makes its

most repressive institutions so sticky.

Because it encompasses work that lies beyond the halo of legitimacy that enshrines national-capitalist values, informality is often associated with corruption and violence in the Western imagination. This has implications at both the global and local level. In poor countries, the informal economy provides an impetus for colonization via the imposition of Western norms and legality. In rich countries, the very real employment insecurity faced by informal workers is believed by citizens to be a breeding ground for shadowy mafias, and thus a threat to their own security.

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*By labeling informal work as “informal”, we are depicting most of the work being done in the world as an anomaly, peripheral to the global “formal” economy.*



*In rich countries, the very real employment insecurity faced by informal workers is believed by citizens to be a breeding ground for shadowy mafias, and thus a threat to their own security.*






The recent implementation of Spain's draconian Citizen Security Law is a textbook example of how this social dynamic becomes codified into public law. Better known as the Gag Law, the legislation drew considerable attention from the international press and human rights groups due to its assault on the right to protest. Less was written, however, about how it punishes being poor in public by levying heavy fines on informal workers whose livelihoods depend on their access to public space. Coupled with a simultaneous reform of the country's penal code, the new legislation inaugurated a sea change in policing poverty which cemented the informal sector's role as the pipeline connecting prisons with the urban periphery.

## A SYSTEM OF MUTUAL AID?

Almost everything you see in the Besòs neighborhood was built by and for migrant workers. Lying on the outskirts of Barcelona, on the southwestern bank of the Besòs River, it began as a shantytown housing workers who had come from Southern Spain to work on the 1929 International World's Fair. From then on, its history has been a tug-of-war between the precarious structures of the informal city and the hulking bureaucracy of the metropolis, as successive waves of migrant workers organized into rowdy neighborhood associations to demand the most basic forms of urban infrastructure.



***“We’re not going to let another African sleep on the street. Tell me, have you ever seen a black man sleeping in one of those ATM buildings?”***

But despite countless bottom-up victories, it remains a poor neighborhood. Today, roughly 30 percent of the population was born abroad, primarily in poor countries, and families earn roughly half the income of the average Barcelona household. This is where many of the Senegalese street vendors who sell bootlegged goods by the harbor live, partly due to the dynamics inherent to international migration and partly due to severe racial discrimination in Barcelona's housing market. “The moment property owners hear your accent, they just hang up,” Mamadou tells me when I ask if he's ever experienced racism while looking for a place to live. “Sometimes they'll just flat-out say it: ‘Nope. No Africans.’”

The house I'm in is small, but well-kept. The image of a smiling Sufi *marabout* hangs serenely on the wall as the television news mumbles

quietly in the background. The sweet, spicy smell of *djar* drifts in from the kitchen where a fresh pot of *café touba* is being brewed. Noting that there are only three tiny bedrooms, I ask my host how many people live here. “About six or seven,” he answers. Curious, I ask him where they all sleep. He tells me people generally come and go as they please, but a few stay all the time. That’s why the number he gave me is so high. When I ask him if it doesn’t get crowded with so many people, he nods, “A little. But we’re not going to let another African sleep on the street.”

I ask him if he’s ever thought about pointing people towards social services, since they often provide food and shelter for people who need it, and aren’t finicky about whether one’s immigration documents are in order. “Yeah, I know about social services,” he replies. “They give you a meal ticket and a roof and that’s it. But we don’t need those things.” He notices my surprise and smiles. “Tell me,” Mamadou says. “Have you ever seen a black man sleeping in one of those ATM buildings?” Come to think of it, I haven’t. Or at least, not many. “If you have, they probably weren’t African,” he explains. “Look, we think of things very differently than you. Every African here knows they can go to a friend for a plate of rice or a place to stay for the night. We take care of one another. We don’t go hungry and we don’t sleep in the cold. Not yet, anyway.”

It’s actually not the first time I’ve heard this argument. This exact sentiment is often repeated by the African recyclers that have spent the better part of the last decade living and working in the abandoned warehouses of the de-industrialized Poblenu neighborhood. It is also used in reference to Spanish families, to explain why there is not more social unrest despite the country’s high unemployment. Hearing it again, I can’t help but think of what Kro-

potkin wrote about the resilience of mutual aid against the onslaught of the centralized state, how “it reappeared and reasserted itself in an infinity of associations which tend to embrace all aspects of life and to take possession of all that is required by man for life.”

Investigative reporter Robert Neuwirth also recognizes this aspect of informal work. In his book *Stealth of Nations: The Global Rise of the Informal Economy*, he criticizes Hart’s notion of informality for aligning roadside vendors and hawkers with the criminal underground and political corruption. Instead, he refers to the activities carried out by street vendors, street artists or informal recyclers as the result of self-organization, group solidarity and collective intelligence, loosely structured around a set of well-worn but unwritten rules.

Together, the informal workers of the world are part of a system that “stands beyond the law, yet is deeply entwined with the legally recognized business world.” To refer to it, Neuwirth imports a slang term from French-speaking Africa and the Caribbean: System D. But in October 2015, Barcelona’s street vendors started using a concept that is substantially more familiar in Spain: *el sindicato*. The union.

## DISOBEYING UNEMPLOYMENT

Walking up the Ramblas can be a bit like trying to illegally stream a TV show. Immediately, you are overwhelmed by cheap attempts to lure your senses, in a manner that recalls those invasive pop-up ads for gambling sites, porn and online fantasy games. Small flower shops sell vulgar souvenirs, like pussy flowers and dick-shaped peppers. Pushy waiters approach you from sidewalk cafés, menus in hand as they try to convince you to sit down for an oversized beer or sangria and some terrible tapas. On a



*The Popular Union of Street Vendors in Barcelona began as an attempt by the vendors to negotiate with local authorities and confront the pervasive rumors and racist stereotypes that are frequently repeated in discussions about their work.*

nearby balcony, a Marilyn Monroe lookalike reenacts the famous subway scene from *The Seven Year Itch*, drawing your attention to the Erotic Museum of Barcelona.

Today, however, is different. Almost the entire length of the kilometer-long mall is lined by about a hundred street vendors. In an attempt to appease local merchants, they leave a bit of distance between the blankets they display their merchandise on and the space taken up by “formal” businesses. West-African men stand behind knockoff Barça jerseys and D&G handbags, Bangladeshis next to umbrellas covered in shiny earrings. A handful of Senegalese women sell colorful jewelry to tourists, homemade food and cold, sugary hibiscus tea

to the vendors. Accompanying each worker is a local with a sign or banner. The most common slogan reads *Sobrevivir no es delito*. It is not a crime to survive.

The Popular Union of Street Vendors began as an attempt by the vendors to negotiate with local authorities and confront the pervasive rumors and racist stereotypes that are frequently repeated in discussions about their work. But as police pressure has made their jobs increasingly difficult, they’ve teamed up with the Espacio del Inmigrante, a Zapatista-inspired migrants’ rights group, and Tras la Manta, a network of local activists who support their cause, to organize what they are calling “rebel flea markets”.



The logic behind these actions is similar to the civil disobedience campaign that made the former housing rights activist and Mayor of Barcelona Ada Colau a household name. By accompanying the vendors in their activity, they make police intervention far more costly, both economically and politically. It is, in many ways, a form of social unionism. And what is particularly interesting about the Popular Union's actions and discourse is how they expand the vocabulary of local movements to encompass a broader dynamic of globalized antagonism against the Western habit of putting property rights over human dignity.

"They say our work is illegal," cries union spokesperson Lamine Sarr over the loud-speaker. "We consider it disobedience. We are disobeying hunger. We are disobeying unemployment. We are disobeying borders. The very idea that some people can go and work wherever they want while others can't. The very idea that some people have human rights while others don't."

The Popular Union is a major nuisance for Ada Colau's city government. The moment her left-wing municipal platform Barcelona En Comú took office, the mainstream press brought local business leaders' calls for social cleansing out from their usual place in the Letters to the Editors section and put them on the cover. Meanwhile, local police unions began putting out a constant stream of press releases criticizing city hall for not applying a firm hand to what they consider a threat to public safety.

It's not the first time this has happened. Every time the left has come into power here, the mainstream press, security forces and the local business community have used informal workers as a pressure point to destabilize the

government. When a coalition between the Socialist Party, the Catalan Greens and the Republican Left took office in 2004, for instance, they were bullied by the press, police and merchants into passing the civic bylaws that eventually became the model for Spain's Gag Law.

It also happened when the left won Barcelona's municipal elections in 1931, forcing King Alfonso XIII out and inaugurating the Second Spanish Republic. As historian Chris Ealham describes in *Anarchism and the City: Revolution and Counter-revolution in Barcelona, 1898-1937*, the local press frequently published stories in which prominent local business associations called on the city to eradicate street trade using "all means necessary", threatening that they "were ready to take the law into their own hands if 'unlicensed traders' remained on the street."

The Colau government has responded to this conflict by shifting blame upwards while working to please all sides. They began by recognizing the Popular Union and trying to sit them down at a table with local police, NGOs and local business leaders to discuss the situation. Unsurprisingly, this was sabotaged by the police and the business community, who refused to recognize the union. Then they began to emphasize the social integration of the mostly undocumented street vendors through a job-training program run by the city's social services. But because the penal code considers their work a criminal activity, it is all but impossible for the street vendors to receive favorable reviews when they apply for residency, making their participation in the formal labor market all the more difficult.

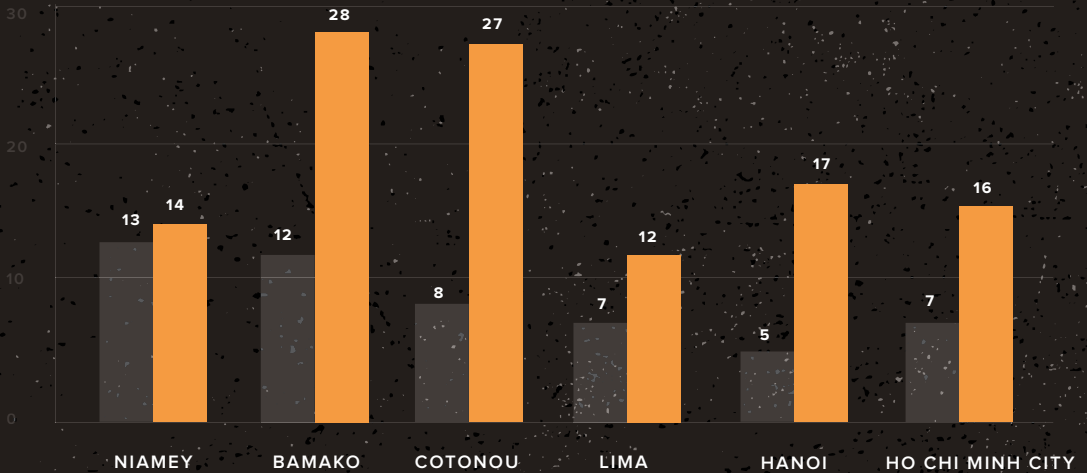
Meanwhile, rather than confronting higher levels of public administration like the Cata-

# Informal economy

“The OECD claims that half of the world’s workers were informally employed in 2009, and that, by 2020, the number will rise to two-thirds. Together, the informal workers of the world are part of a system that ‘stands beyond the law, yet is deeply entwined with the legally recognized business world.’”

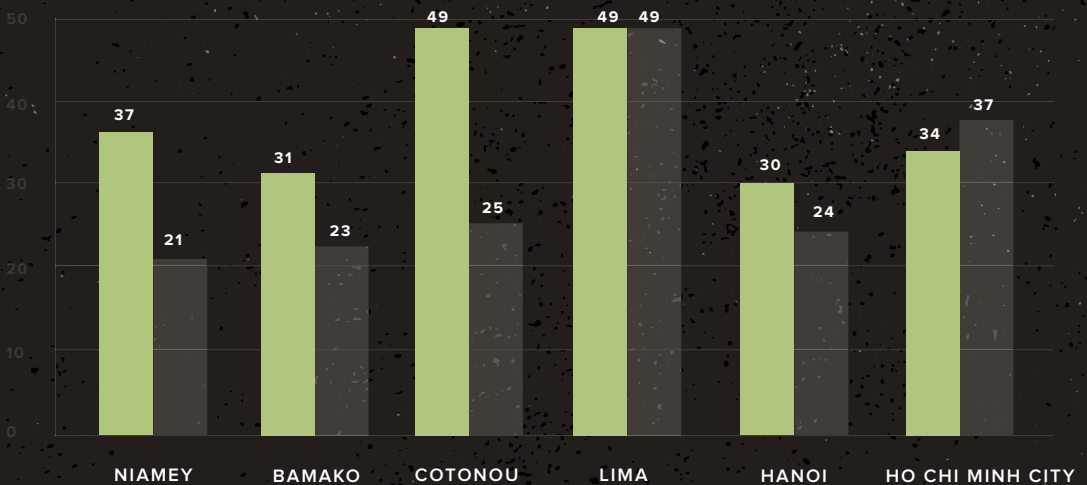
### Women’s and Men’s informal Employment in Services (%)

M W

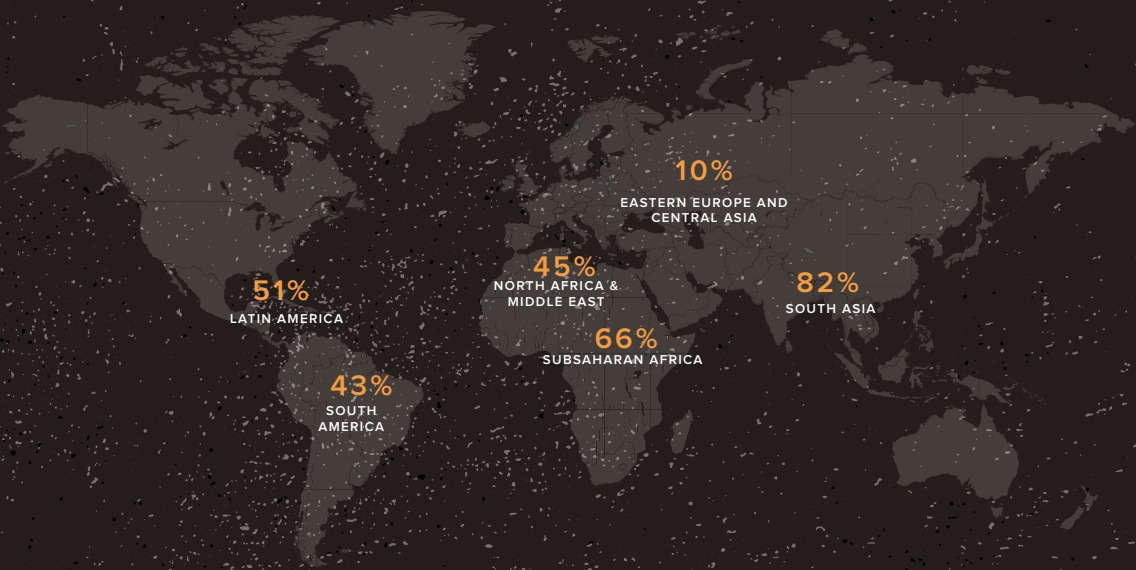


### Women’s and Men’s informal Employment in Manufacturing (%)

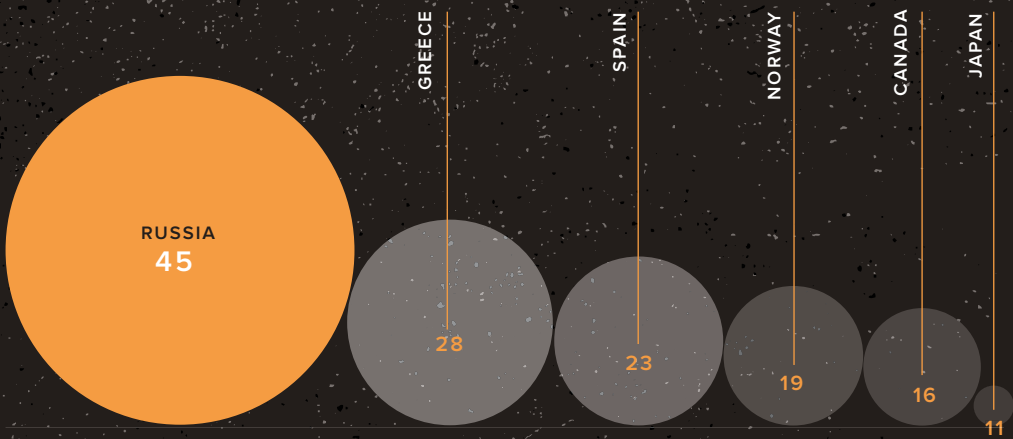
M W



# Informal Employment as Per Cent of Total Non-Agricultural Employment (%)



## Size of the informal economy in developed countries



SIZE OF THE INFORMAL ECONOMY, AVERAGE 2001/02, VIA OECD "TOWARDS A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF THE INFORMAL ECONOMY" ECONOMICS DEPARTMENT WORKING PAPERS NO.873

lan government or the Spanish state, the city has opted for a legalistic defense of intellectual and industrial property, collaborating with the Catalan Mossos d'Esquadra to crack down on the informal economy generally and the street vendors specifically. This can only increase the number of street vendors with criminal records, further complicating any attempt to successfully regularize their documentation status or participate in the formal labor market. And where it does succeed in halting the street vendors' activity, it effectively dismantles the material infrastructure of their system of mutual aid, making it impossible for them to pay rent, and pushing them closer to either living on the street or working in the criminal underground.

## **STREET SYNDICALISM OR THE UBER MAFIA?**

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At the base of the Columbus monument's pedestal, there are four statues of Catalan historical figures who are thought to have made his voyages possible. One is Father Bernat de Boil, the priest mentioned at the beginning of this article. The other three are the diplomat Jaume Ferrer de Blanes, royal finance minister Luis de Santángel, and Captain Pere Margarit, who is also depicted next to a submitting indigenous man. Together, they represent the four types of power—moral, political, financial and military—that sustain the legal order of the Sovereign in the Western-dominated era of world trade.

If the colonial project consists in submitting all other forms of value and legitimacy to the formalities of that legal order, informality is both what lies beyond the Sovereign's reach and what grows in the cracks of its institutional architecture. In a context where the multiplication of labor and the emergence of new forms of employment are testing the limits of that architecture, informality can either be appropriated to fortify national-capitalism or organized to dismantle it.

The emergence of the so-called "sharing economy" is an example of how informality can be appropriated to fortify national-capitalism. After the global financial crisis left millions of younger workers unemployed, many of those workers responded to their lack of access to commercial space by selling their work on the Internet. The result? Companies like Uber and Amazon Mechanical Turk privatized the System D-style networking that allows these workers to earn a living, and then challenged governments to adapt their legal structures to their "no-benefits" employment scheme.



The Popular Union, on the other hand, overcame their lack of access to commercial space by occupying public space. There, through the sale of bootlegged goods, they re-appropriate a portion of the market value associated with large clothing brands and feed it into a system of mutual support that provides food and shelter for people who are denied those by the legal order. Of course, this work has been criminalized. But at the end of the day, it is the Popular Union's syndicalism that seems more like "sharing" and Uber that seems more like a mafia.

*If the colonial project consists in submitting all other forms of value and legitimacy to the formalities of that legal order, informality is both what lies beyond the Sovereign's reach and what grows in the cracks of its institutional architecture.*



The question of how informality is organized is not going away anytime soon. Long-term unemployment is becoming an increasingly dominant feature of the global economy and systems are being forced to adapt to one model or the other. If we are to confront a regime that has been built around private interests and property, the street syndicalism of the Popular Union is a vital example of how to put human dignity over property rights. ★

CARLOS DECLOS



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AUTOMATION



**WILL ROBOTS  
TAKE YOUR**



**WHETHER AUTOMATION WREAKS  
HAVOC ON EMPLOYMENT OR NOT,  
THE FUTURE OF WORK UNDER  
CAPITALISM LOOKS INCREASINGLY  
BLEAK. WE MUST NOW LOOK TO  
POST-WORK HORIZONS.**

*Nick Srnicek & Alex Williams*

**OTS  
IA JOB?**

**I**n recent months, a range of studies has warned of an imminent job apocalypse. The most famous of these—a study from Oxford—suggests that up to 47 percent of US jobs are at high-risk of automation over the next two decades. Its methodology—assessing likely developments in technology, and matching them up to the tasks typically deployed in jobs—has been replicated since then for a number of other countries. One study finds that 54 percent of EU jobs are likely automatable, while the chief economist of the Bank of England has argued that 45 percent of UK jobs are similarly under threat.

This is not simply a rich-country problem, either: low-income economies look set to be hit even harder by automation. As low-skill, low-wage and routine jobs have been outsourced from rich capitalist countries to poorer economies, these jobs are also highly susceptible to automation. Research by Citi suggests that for India 69 percent of jobs are at risk, for China 77 percent, and for Ethiopia a full 85 percent of current jobs. It would seem that we are on the verge of a mass job extinction.

## **NOTHING NEW?**

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For many economists however, there is nothing to worry about. If we look at the history of technology and the labor market, past experiences would suggest that automation has not caused mass unemployment. Automation has always changed the labor market. Indeed, one of the primary characteristics of the capitalist mode of production has been to revolutionize the means of production—to really subsume the labor process and reorganize it in ways that more efficiently generate value. The mechanization of agriculture is an early example, as is the use of the cotton gin and spinning jenny. With Fordism, the assembly line turned complex manufacturing jobs into a series of simple and efficient tasks. And with the era of lean production, we have had the computerized management of long commodity chains turn the production process into a more and more heavily automated system.

In every case, we have not seen mass unemployment. Instead we have seen some jobs disappear, while others have been created to replace not only the lost jobs but also the new jobs necessary for a growing population. The only times we see massive unemployment tend to be the result of cyclical factors, as in the Great Depression, rather than some secular trend towards higher unemployment resulting from automation. On the basis of these considerations, most economists believe that the future of work will likely be the same as the past: some jobs will disappear, but others will be created to replace them.



In typical economist fashion, however, these thoughts neglect the broader social context of earlier historical periods. Capitalism may not have seen a massive upsurge in unemployment, but this is not a necessary outcome. Rather, it was dependent upon unique circumstances of earlier moments—circumstances that are missing today. In the earliest periods of automation, there was a major effort by the labor movement to reduce the working week. It was a successful project that reduced the week from around 60 hours at the turn of the century, down to 40 hours during the 1930s, and very nearly even down to 30 hours. In this context, it was no surprise that Keynes would famously extrapolate to a future where we all worked 15 hours. He was simply looking at the existing labor movement. With reduced work per person, however, this meant that the remaining work would be spread around more evenly. The impact of technology at that time was therefore heavily muted by a 33 percent reduction in the amount of work per person.

Today, by contrast, we have no such movement pushing for a reduced working week, and the effects of automation are likely to be much more serious. Similar issues hold for the postwar era. With most Western economies left in ruins, and massive American support for the revitalization of these economies,

the postwar era saw incredibly high levels of economic growth. With the further addition of full employment policies, this period also saw incredibly high levels of job growth and

a compact between trade unions and capital to maintain a sufficient amount of good jobs. This led to healthy wage growth and, subsequently, healthy growth in aggregate demand to stimulate the economy and keep jobs coming. Moreover, this was a period where nearly 50 percent of the potential labor force was constrained to the household.

Under these unique circumstances, it is no wonder that capitalism was able to create enough jobs even as automation continued to transform for the labor process. Today, we have sluggish economic growth, no commitments to full employment (even as we have commitments to harsh welfare policies), stagnant wage growth, and a major influx of women into the labor force.

Likewise, the types of technology that are being developed and potentially introduced into the labor process are significantly different from earlier technologies. Whereas earlier

waves of automation affected what economists call “routine work” (work that can be laid out in a series of explicit steps), today’s technology is beginning to affect non-routine work. The difference is between a factory job on an assembly line and driving a car in the chaotic atmosphere of the modern urban environment.

Research from economists like David Autor and Maarten Goos shows that the decline of routine jobs in the past 40 years has played a significant role in increased job polarization and rising inequality.

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*Most economists believe that the future of work will likely be the same as the past: some jobs will disappear, but others will be created to replace them.*”

While these jobs are gone, and highly unlikely to come back, the next wave of automation will affect the remaining sphere of human labor. An entire range of low-wage jobs are now potentially automatable, involving both physical and mental labor.

Given that it is quite likely that new technologies will have a larger impact on the labor market than earlier waves of technological change, what is likely to happen? Will robots take your job? While one side of the debate warns of im-

minent apocalypse and the other yawns from the historical repetition, both tend to neglect the political economy of automation—particularly the role of labor. Put simply, if the labor movement is strong, we are likely to see more automation; if the labor movement is weak, we are likely to see less automation.

## WORKERS FIGHT BACK

In the first scenario, a strong labor movement is able to push for higher and higher wages (particularly relative to globally stagnant productivity growth). But the rising cost of labor means that machines become relatively cheap in comparison. We can already see this in China, where real wages have been surging for more than 10 years, thereby making Chinese labor increasingly less cheap. The result is that China has become the world's biggest investor in industrial robots, and numerous

companies—most famously Foxconn—have all stated their intentions to move towards increasingly automated factories.

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*The future of work does not look like a bunch of programmers or YouTubers. The belief that we will all become high-skilled and well-paid workers is ideological mystification at its purest.*

This is the archetype of a highly automated world, but in order to be achievable under capitalism it requires that the power of labor be strong, given that the relative costs of labor and machines are key determinants for investment. What then happens under these circumstances? Do we get mass unemployment as robots take all the jobs? The simple answer is no.

Rather than mass decimation of jobs, most workers who have their jobs automated end up moving into new sectors.

In the advanced capitalist economies this has been happening over the past 40 years, as workers move from routine jobs to non-routine jobs. As we saw earlier, the next wave of automation is different, and therefore its effects on the labor market are also different. Some job sectors are likely to take heavy hits under this scenario. Jobs in retail and transport, for instance, will likely be heavily affected. In the UK, there are currently 3 million retail workers, but estimates by the British Retail Consortium suggest this may decrease by a million over the next decade. In the US, there are 3.4 million cashiers alone—nearly all of whose work could be automated. The transport sector is similarly large, with 3.7 million truck drivers in the US, most of whose jobs could be incrementally automated as self-driving trucks be-

come viable on public roads. Large numbers of workers in such sectors are likely to be pushed out of their jobs if mass automation takes place.

Where will they go? The story that Silicon Valley likes to tell us is that we will all become freelance programmers and software developers and that we should all learn how to code to succeed in their future utopia. Unfortunately they seem to have bought into their own hype and missed the facts. In the US, 1.8 percent of all jobs require knowledge of programming. This compares to the agricultural sector, which creates about 1.5 percent of all American jobs, and to the manufacturing sector, which employs 8.1 percent of workers in this deindustrialized country. Perhaps programming will grow? The facts here are little better. The Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) projects that by 2024 jobs involving programming will be responsible for a tiny 2.2 percent of the jobs available. If we look at the IT sector as a whole, according to Citi, it is expected to take up less than 3 percent of all jobs.

What about the people needed to take care of the robots? Will we see a massive surge in jobs here? Presently, robot technicians and engineers take up less than 0.1 percent of the job market—by 2024, this will dwindle even further. We will not see a major increase in jobs taking care of robots or in jobs involving coding, despite Silicon Valley’s best efforts to remake the world in its image.

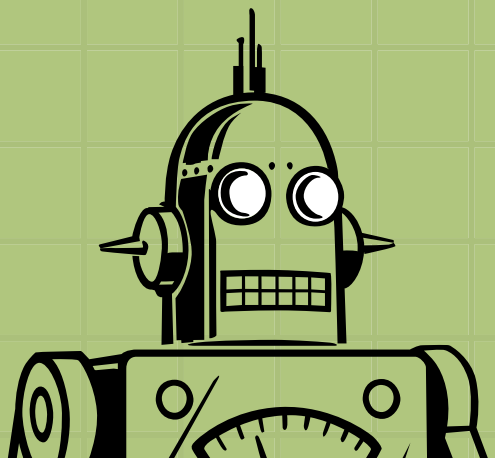
This continues a long trend of new industries being very poor job creators. We all know about how few employees worked at Instagram and WhatsApp when they were sold for billions to Facebook. But the low levels of employment are a widespread sectoral problem. Research from Oxford has found that in the US, only 0.5 percent of the labor force moved into new industries (like streaming sites, web

## THE BIRTH OF **The Robot**

**robot** /'rəʊbɒt/ *noun* - a machine capable of carrying out a complex series of actions automatically, especially one programmable by a computer.

The word “robot” first entered the public lexicon in 1920, when the Czech writer Karel Čapek published his play R.U.R. (*Rossum’s Universal Robots*). The story of the play centers around a factory producing living creatures resembling humans as an alternative emotionless and obedient workforce. When the robots—*roboti*, as they are called in the play—eventually become conscious beings, a global robot rebellion leads to the extinction of the human race.

It was not Čapek himself who came up with the term “robot”, but rather his brother Josef who derived the word from the Czech *robota*, meaning “corvée” or “serf labor”. The word *robota* had been used in many Slavic languages to indicate the period a serf was forced to work for his lord.



# Three Laws of Robotics

Robots were popularized by the American author and professor of biochemistry Isaac Azimov, who focused on the relation between robots and society in many of his science fiction stories. In his 1942 short story *Runaround* he introduced the famous Three Laws of Robotics, designed to minimize the threat robots posed to human society.

**1.**

A ROBOT MAY NOT INJURE A HUMAN BEING OR, THROUGH INACTION, ALLOW A HUMAN BEING TO COME TO HARM.

**2.**

A ROBOT MUST OBEY THE ORDERS GIVEN TO IT BY HUMAN BEINGS, EXCEPT WHERE SUCH ORDERS WOULD CONFLICT WITH THE FIRST LAW.

**3.**

A ROBOT MUST PROTECT ITS OWN EXISTENCE AS LONG AS SUCH PROTECTION DOES NOT CONFLICT WITH THE FIRST OR SECOND LAW.

He later formulated a fourth, or zeroth law that outranked the others:

**0.**

A ROBOT MAY NOT HARM HUMANITY, OR, BY INACTION, ALLOW HUMANITY TO HARM.





design and e-commerce) during the 2000s. The future of work does not look like a bunch of programmers or YouTubers.

In fact, the fastest growing job sectors are not for jobs that require high levels of education at all. The belief that we will all become high-skilled and well-paid workers is ideological mystification at its purest. The fastest growing job sector, by far, is the healthcare industry. In the US, the BLS estimates this sector to create 3.8 million new jobs between 2014 and 2024. This will increase its share of employment from 12 percent to 13.6 percent, making it the biggest employing sector in the country. The jobs of “healthcare support” and “healthcare practitioner” alone will contribute 2.3 million jobs—or 25 percent of all new jobs expected to be created.

There are two main reasons for why this sector will be such a magnet for workers forced out of other sectors. In the first place, the demographics of high-income economies all point towards a significantly growing elderly population. Fewer births and longer lives (typically with chronic conditions rather than infectious diseases) will put more and more pressure on our societies to take care of elderly, and force more and more people into care work. Yet this sector is not amenable to automation; it is one of the last bastions of human-centric skills like creativity, knowledge of social context and flexibility. This means the demand for labor is unlikely to decrease in this sector, as productivity remains low, skills remain human-centric, and demographics make it grow.

In the end, under the scenario of a strong labor movement, we are likely to see wages rise, which will cause automation to rapidly proceed in certain sectors, while workers are forced to struggle for jobs in a low-paying healthcare sector. The result is the continued elimina-

tion of middle-wage jobs and the increased polarization of the labor market as more and more are pushed into the low-wage sectors. On top of this, a highly educated generation that was promised secure and well-paying jobs will be forced to find lower-skilled jobs, putting downward pressure on wages—generating a “reserve army of the employed”, as Robert Brenner has put it.

## WORKERS FALL BACK

Yet what happens if the labor movement remains weak? Here we have an entirely different future of work awaiting us. In this case, we end up with stagnant wages, and workers remain relatively cheap compared to investment in new equipment. The consequences of this are low levels of business investment, and subsequently, low levels of productivity growth. Absent any economic reason to invest in automation, businesses fail to increase the productivity of the labor process. Perhaps unexpectedly, under this scenario we should expect high levels of employment as businesses seek to maximize the use of cheap labor rather than investing in new technology.

This is more than a hypothetical scenario, as it rather accurately describes the situation in the UK today. Since the 2008 crisis, real wages have stagnated and even fallen. Real average weekly earnings have started to rise since 2014, but even after eight years they have yet to return to their pre-crisis levels. This has meant that businesses have had incentives to hire cheap workers rather than invest in machines—and the low levels of investment in the UK bear this out. Since the crisis, the UK has seen long periods of decline in business investment—the most recent being a 0.4 percent decline between Q12015 and Q12016. The result of low levels of investment has been virtually zero growth in productivity: from 2008 to 2015,



*With a weak labor movement, we may never arrive at a fully automated future, but the alternative—an increasingly low-wage and precarious labor market—looks just as problematic.*

growth in output per worker has averaged 0.1 percent per year. Almost all of the UK's recent growth has come from throwing more bodies into the economic machine, rather than improving the efficiency of the economy. Even relative to slow productivity growth across the world, the UK is particularly struggling.

With cheap wages, low investment and low productivity, we see that companies have instead been hiring workers. Indeed, employment levels in the UK have reached the highest levels on record—74.2 percent as of May 2016. Likewise, unemployment is low at 5.1 percent, especially when compared to their neighbors in Europe who average nearly double that level. So, somewhat surprisingly, an environment with a weak labor movement leads here to high levels of employment.

What is the quality of these jobs, however? We have already seen that wages have been stagnant, and that two-thirds of net job creation

since 2008 has been in self-employed jobs. Yet there has also been a major increase in zero-hour contracts (employment situations that do not guarantee any hours to workers). Estimates are that up to 5 percent of the labor force is in such situations, with over 1.7 million zero-hour contracts out. Full-time employment is down as well: as a percentage of all jobs, its pre-crisis levels of 65 percent have been cut to 63 percent and refused to budge even as the economy grows (slowly). The percentage of involuntary part-time workers—those who would prefer a full-time job but cannot find one—more than doubled after the crisis, and has barely begun to recover since.

Likewise with temporary employees: involuntary temporary workers as a percentage of all temporary workers rose from below 25 percent to over 40 percent during the crisis, only partly recovering to around 35 percent today. There is a vast number of workers who would prefer to work in more permanent and full-time jobs,

but who can no longer find them. The UK is increasingly becoming a low-wage and precarious labor market—or, in the Tories' view, a competitive and flexible labor market. This, we would argue, is the future that obtains with a weak labor movement: low levels of automation, perhaps, but at the expense of wages (and aggregate demand), permanent jobs and full-time work. We may not get a fully automated future, but the alternative looks just as problematic.

These are therefore the two poles of possibility for the future of work. On the one hand, a highly automated world where workers are pushed out of much low-wage non-routine work and into lower-wage care work. On the other hand, a world where humans beat robots but only through lower wages and more precarious work. In either case, we need to build up the social systems that will enable people to survive and flourish in the midst of these significant changes. We need to explore ideas like a Universal Basic Income, we need to foster investment in automation that could eliminate the worst jobs in society, and we need to recover that initial desire of the labor movement for a shorter working week.

We must reclaim the right to be lazy—which is neither a demand to be lazy nor a belief in the natural laziness of humanity, but rather the right to refuse domination by a boss, by a manager, or by a capitalist. Will robots take our jobs? We can only hope so. ★

*Note: All uncited figures either come directly from, or are based on authors' calculations of, data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, O\*NET and the Office for National Statistics.*

#### NICK SRNICEK



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DIGITAL LABOR

\$0





Joseph Todd

SOCIALIZE

the Internet!

*GOOGLE AND FACEBOOK ARE  
TECHNO-PARASITES. THEY RAKE  
OUR DATA AND SQUEEZE US  
FOR PROFIT. LET US DEMAND  
REMUNERATION. LET US DEMAND  
DATA LIBERATION.*

**L**ife in the age of the datascape is wild. We can communicate with anybody, for free, the world over. We can meaningfully engage in the lifeworlds of our loved ones irrespective of their geography. We can drown in knowledge at the tap of a keyboard. We can map our way across unknown cities. We can create, edit and share text, sound, picture and video instantly, collaboratively, across multiple devices, on the fly. Our brains, thought patterns and subjectivities become technologically augmented. Search engines and social networks become extensions of the self.

The underside of our age is the heavy digital trace we leave behind. Every movement tracked by the location service on our smartphones. Every need, want and desire recorded as search terms. Our communication over phone, text and email potentially recorded. The content of our emails and instant messages algorithmically raked for themes and keywords.

This data—which is then collated, categorized and described in vast bulk as metadata—is an explosive store of value that has emerged over the last two decades. It is our lives, recorded, extracted and stored. It is information that, before the digital mediation and capture of human existence, was lost into the ether. And it is from these vast new data stores, these virtual representations of ourselves, that tech-monoliths such as Google and Facebook parasitically extract their value. It is for this which we must demand remuneration. It is against this privatization which we must demand data liberation.

## DATA-PARASITES

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Google and Facebook are hailed as either the benevolent providers of a beneficial, transformational and free digital infrastructure, or the practitioners of increasingly total, nefarious data gathering in aid of surveilling our every move. Neither of these two characterizations is quite correct. While services such as email, messaging, search and maps have both extended and transformed our communicative, intellectual and logistical abilities, they are not provided benevolently, nor are they provided for free.

Simultaneously, while these corporations do have the ability to build up incredibly detailed profiles on individuals, their aspirations are not totalitarian. They are not interested in liberating human potential, but neither are they interested in controlling us via surveillance. What they pursue is surplus value extraction. They aim to reproduce capital. As every other corporation, they chase profit.

This is something Google and Facebook do incredibly well. While being worth nearly \$800 billion combined—more than the total GDP of the Netherlands—they are also the two fastest growing corporations in the history of capitalism. And yet, it is initially mysterious as to where this value originates. Neither Google nor Facebook create any content, only an infrastructure that catalogs and ranks. Nor do they charge for their products or services, instead giving them away for free. Both have minute labor inputs when considering their size, the value of Facebook being nearly five times that of Starbucks while employing just 7 percent of the labor.

So how do these companies come to be valued so highly? It is because we—the consumer, user and producer—labor for Google and Facebook for free. We create the content that they index. We expose our lifeworlds to digital capture and enclosure. We let them mine us for data. Data that is then collated and described as metadata. Metadata which is used to serve us the precise, targeted advertising on which Facebook and Google’s revenue streams depend. By our very existence in the datascape, by becoming a digital being, our lives are squeezed for surplus value.

## DATA-LABOR

Such a notion of hidden data labor aligns with that of digital labor theorists such as Tiziana

Terranova. Her work cataloging exploitation in the datascape and the existence of “digital sweatshops” has been important in de-glamorizing digital labor and exposing companies—such as the *Huffington Post*, who rely on vast swathes of unpaid writers—for what they are: exploitative of increasing precarity in the culture industry and elsewhere. But more than this, Terranova claims that labor is also diffuse, essential and existential. That

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*How do tech companies come to be valued so highly? It is because we—the consumer, user and producer—labor for them for free. We create the content that they index.*

merely by existing in the datascape, through the most basic forms of engagement, we are laboring in the interests of capital.

I will admit, this sounds peculiar. Using Google or Facebook does not seem like work. It is a leisure activity that we choose to pursue, or at the very least a convenient service that improves our lives. And while the latter is true, the use of these data-parasites is becoming increasingly difficult to avoid. As they institute themselves as the unseen infrastructure of both our digital and physical worlds, our increasingly coerced engagement begins to look a lot like labor.

Already, if we are to exist in the datascape, we cannot avoid data-mining services such as email, search and social media. Not owning an email address, for example, would result in exclusion from social networks, online shopping, online banking, most spaces of virtual community and nearly all forms of digital communication. Search is also unavoidable. Constructive engagement with the vast jungle



of the web is impossible if one does not use Google or one of its competitors. At the same time, every major email and search provider will algorithmically rake over each word you type. Your thoughts, queries, communications and desires will be captured and transformed into valuable, privatized metadata.

We can go further than this, however. Increasingly, engagement with the datascape—and consequently these tech-parasites—is a prerequisite for a meaningful existence in the physical realm too. Email is an unavoidable necessity for vast swathes of twenty-first-century work. Search is essential if one is perform any labor with an informational component. Google maps are indispensable for the ever-increasing amount of precarious, freelance workers who have to navigate cities on the fly.

In this way, these data-parasites have come to establish themselves as the unavoidable, omnipresent infrastructure of a datascape upon which we increasingly depend for our own reproduction. Their use becomes normalized and expected. Our lifeworlds are increasingly channeled through them. More and more of our everyday action is mined for data, and produces value for these corporations.

Couple this unavoidability—this attempted existentiality—with the fact that our engagement is the main source of their value, that the data they extract is also their profit, and it seems obvious that our use of these data-mining services is labor. We cannot avoid it. We are coerced into performing it. It is directly productive of capital. We are data laborers.

## RESISTANCE IN THE DATASCAPE

In light of this reframing, the tech dream of Google's founders rapidly turns into night-





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mare. Sergey Brin wonders at the possibility of creating “a little version of Google that you just plug into your brain,” so that, as Schmidt puts it, “we would know enough about you to give you targeted information, the targeted news, the targeted advertising, to make the instantaneous, and seamless, happen.”

Revealed is Google’s intention to *existentia-**lize* themselves totally. To occupy the most data-rich pastures. To attach their parasite to the source—our brains—and ensure the capture, enclosure and privatization of the totality of human cognition. Google would become biological, our every flicker of consciousness making them a profit.

Such wretched, dystopian futures can only be averted if we assert the reality of data labor and use it to interrogate current modes of resistance and inform potential alternatives. For example, if we continue to view struggles over privacy as panoptic rather than economic, as a fight against nefarious surveillance rather than surplus-value extraction, we will continue to obfuscate the extractive, data-mining intentions of these corporations.

One alternative tactic is to start analogizing the privacy policies of Google and Facebook to that of traditional wage contracts—with all the attendant struggles over pay, conditions and working hours. This reframing helps

us to realize our true position in relation to these techno-parasites. We are not the grateful beneficiaries of free services as Silicon Valley claims. Nor are we the controlled and surveilled totalitarian subjects usually offered by the liberal left. Instead we are laborers. Laborers who should demand more than a smattering of free services as remuneration.

This has obvious and powerful implications for post-work politics. Srnicek and Williams, in their explosive post-capitalist treatise *Inventing the Future*, argue that the introduction of a Universal Basic Income will never gain any traction unless a counter-hegemonic project to radically undermine the work ethic is actioned in tandem. Such a task will be difficult, however, if popular definitions of labor fall within the traditional coordinates as quantifiable, enumerated by the hour and explicitly and obviously coerced. However, if we can popularize a concept of labor as dispersed, continuous and enmeshed with the digital infrastructure upon which our lives depend, a form of remuneration that is similarly generalized, such as the Universal Basic Income, begins to make sense.

Another realization this reframing brings is the potential of metadata as a new value store,

and the velocity at which it is being captured and privatized. Before, when we looked up information in a book or asked another human being face to face, these externalities were immediately lost—vanishing into the ether. But in the data age, our wants, needs, desires and creative capacities—or our “general intellect” as Marx called it in the *Grundrisse*—are digitized and recorded.

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***We are not the grateful beneficiaries of free services as Silicon Valley claims. Nor are we the controlled and surveilled subjects usually offered by the liberal left. Instead we are laborers. Laborers who should demand more than a smattering of free services as remuneration.***

We must conceptualize these networks as a new form of social machinery, a new mode of production from which we could reap immense amounts of value—evidenced in the incredible growth of Facebook and Google—if only they were liberated from private enclosure. This is not to claim, as many tech utopians of both the left and right do, that the proliferation of information alone will cause the emergence of a post-capitalist, post-scarcity era. Instead, it is to recognize that

the data age has brought with it an immense new value store, and that the potentials for its use—by individuals through networked, open source production—are only just beginning to be realized.

## TECHNO-FUTURES

The arguments above might tempt many on the left to adopt a techno-rejectionist stance.

# 1 minute on the internet

1,354,440 GB OF DATA TRANSFERRED EVERY MINUTE



UPLOADS

41,460

LIKES

1,111,140

COMMENTS

60,000

SEARCHES

276,480



LIKES

3,131,760

POSTS

3,298,560

APP DOWNLOADS

38,040



VIDEO HOURS  
WATCHED

138,840h

VIDEO HOURS  
UPLOADED

120h



MESSAGES SENT

13,194,420

ACCOUNTS  
CREATED

720



TWEETS

342,000

ACCOUNTS  
CREATED

660



## Profit generation

	REVENUE	PROFIT
Facebook	\$14,940	\$2,880
Google	\$105,660	\$24,540
Apple	\$325,140	\$70,440
Microsoft	\$325,140	\$41,580
<b>TOTAL PROFIT</b>		<b>\$139,440</b>

BASED ON DATA FROM  
JUNE 8, 2016 11:52 - 11:53 AM GMT.

DATA VIA  
[HTTP://PENNYSTOCKS.LA/BATTLE-OF-INTERNET-GIANTS/](http://PENNYSTOCKS.LA/BATTLE-OF-INTERNET-GIANTS/)  
[HTTP://PENNYSTOCKS.LA/INTERNET-IN-REAL-TIME/](http://PENNYSTOCKS.LA/INTERNET-IN-REAL-TIME/)



*We must construct a radical vision of how we can seize and shape present tendencies in the datascape to our advantage. We must embrace the future as our natural terrain. We must endeavor to make it our own.*

Of the more traditional left this would be an implicit tendency borne from inertia and dogma. Orthodox notions of the factory as the site of production and the proletariat as the revolutionary class still prevail, and in various ways conflict with social reproduction, digital multitudes performing data labor and, more generally, the importance of new informational, immaterial developments within capitalism.

On the “new left”, we find a layering of technological rejection and embrace. While on one level we see an ardent embrace of capitalist technologies as a means of amplifying struggle, there is also a concurrent impulse that prizes the local, the immediate, the bodily and the geographically situated above all else. Be it the occupations of squares, assemblies on street corners or direct actions against arms manu-

facturers, airport expansion or open pit coal mining, all are examples of a political practice that prizes the unmediated as genuine.

While such a localist orientation is at the heart of countless solidarity initiatives, social centers, cooperatives and community projects that could one day form the basis of a decentralized, stateless society, there is a temptation in such forms of organizing to forget about the network itself. To overlook the value of global technologies. To retreat from the analysis and liberation of communicative and informational networks that have been captured by capital—precisely because they are not locatable, visceral and immediately experienced.

We must resist these temptations vigorously. While the urge to reconstruct a pre-datascape



world is wildly unpopular—who would want to give up Google?—it would also be a disastrous retreat from the utopian horizon if we were to cower in the face of these complex global technologies. Instead, we must construct a radical vision of how we can seize and shape these tendencies in the datascape to our advantage. We must embrace the future as our natural terrain. We must endeavor to make it our own.

Two proposals immediately become obvious. The first is a Universal Basic Income funded by a tax on these techno-parasites. Flowing from the recognition of our hidden, existential data labor, it would represent an appropriate and explicit remuneration for our online activities, recognizing the generalized and unquantifiable nature of this labor and the fact that, in different ways, we all create and reproduce the datascape.

However, such a move would remain moderate, akin to upgrading barely paid labor to a form of waged labor. The real goal, which Paul Mason suggests in *Postcapitalism: A Guide to our Future*, is not only the recognition and remuneration of our data labor, but access to and the ability to utilize these vast quantities of previously uncaptured data, via open source, peer-to-peer modes of production.

Presently there is incredible data asymmetry. Whereas data-parasites, governments and more traditional corporations know incredible amounts about us, we know so little about each other. We know so little about society writ large. We can only begin to imagine the possibilities such stores of metadata may bring if they were used for the public good, in common. It is essential that we liberate this data from private hands. It is imperative that we socialize the vast wealth these data-parasites extract. It is time we began socializing the Internet. ★

JOSEPH TODD



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# Basic Income and the Future of Work

*THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS THE DIGNITY OF WORK. IT IS NOT THE RIGHT TO EMPLOYMENT BUT A GUARANTEED MATERIAL EXISTENCE THAT GIVES DIGNITY TO HUMAN LIFE.*

David Raventós and Julie Wark

**H**ere is a definition of work: “a set of remunerated or unremunerated activities whose results procure goods or services for members of our species.” It is useful for our purposes because it embraces the three kinds of work we will discuss below.

In this definition, not all activities can be classified as work, and work cannot be equated with effort alone. Climbing a mountain to 3,000 meters above sea level is laborious but usually it cannot be categorized as work. The definition does not require that work should be strenuous. Indeed, it includes “autotelic” work, that is, work that has a purpose in and of itself, such as voluntary work. Most kinds of work are not like this, but respond to a need that must be dealt with. The definition also embraces work carried out for pleasurable purposes. The result of the activity does not have to be a material object; it could be a service (paid for or not). Most results of housework, for instance, are not material objects.

Even today, the economic, political and social aspects of work are not always very well understood because, until the 1960s, both in academia and everyday life, what was generally called “work” referred exclusively to that done in the job market. For the purposes of this article, we will divide work into three categories—remunerated work, domestic work and voluntary work—and then ask a question: how would a Basic Income, understood as a guaranteed unconditional cash payment to every member of the population, affect these three kinds of work?

## THE JOB MARKET AND BASIC INCOME

If a Basic Income were to be introduced, we could foresee at least four different effects on the job market: 1) increased bargaining power for workers; 2) more self-employment; 3) more part-time waged work; and 4) salary increases in certain jobs and decreases in others.

First, greater bargaining power for workers would be a big plus. The fact of receiving a guaranteed income means workers would be less pressured to accept any job under any conditions. When they obtain the “exit option” of leaving the job market they also acquire a much better negotiating (or resistance) position. When you know your subsistence depends almost exclusively on the bosses at the other end of the table, taking negotiations to the verge of rupture is a risky business, as the latter can easily replace you with machinery or other workers from the “reserve army of labor”. This is the usual situation in today’s highly asymmetrical capitalist labor relationship.

With a Basic Income, workers could convincingly refuse to accept undesirable, exploitative jobs and also think about more fulfilling, alternative forms of organizing their working conditions. Unlike Bartleby the Scrivener in Melville’s Wall

Street story, they would have the dignity of saying “I would prefer not to”, without dying of hunger. Finally, during strikes, a Basic Income would constitute a guaranteed resistance fund giving workers a much stronger position than they have today, when they can be faced with punitive pay cuts while possessing no other resources to cushion the blow.

Second, a Basic Income would almost certainly encourage self-employment as it would con-

siderably reduce the risks of starting a new venture. For a person embarking on a small business, a Basic Income would be a kind of guaranteed grant that would help to overcome the risk aversion that is often associated with this kind of project. It would also allow for greater innovation and make workers’ and consumers’ cooperatives a much more attractive and viable option.

Third, it is reasonable to assume that the introduction of a Basic Income would favor a choice of part-time jobs over full-time employment. At present, those who might like to work less are still often forced into full-time employment as the alternative simply does not pay enough. Then again, official statistics show that a lot of people working part-time do so because they cannot find full-time work. In other words, people today cannot choose the amount of hours they would like to work. A Basic Income would provide

workers with much more choice.

Finally, a Basic Income would mean a guaranteed pay increase in some jobs and, possibly, lower wages in other positions. In concrete terms, it would bring about an upward pressure on wages for people doing disagreeable, unfulfilling work like manual labor or cleaning, while some authors suggest that the average salaries for prestigious or cushy jobs might drop because this type of work would be valued differently.

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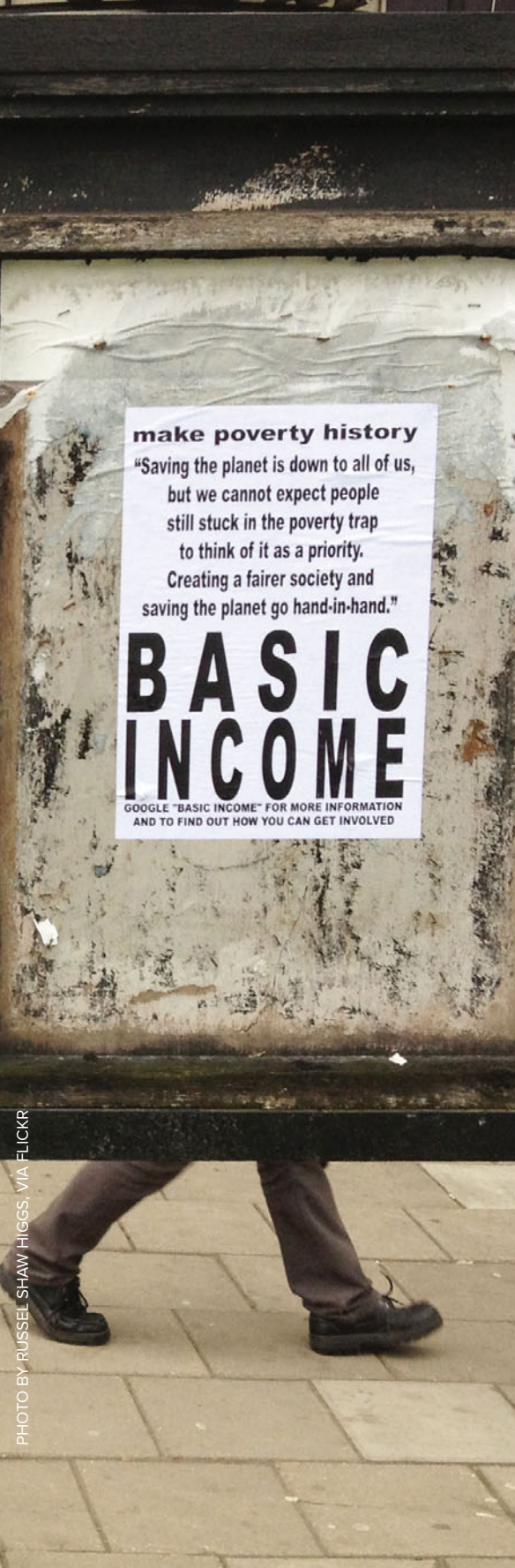
There is, of course, a general objection that people would not want to do some kinds of work at all if they had a Basic Income. We can come up with at least three answers to this objection. The first is directly related with possible changes in salary scales. Significant pay rises for certain undesirable jobs would make them more appealing for some people, at least in the short term. Second, and more generally, it would not be the end of the world if some jobs in tele-marketing or guarding refugee detention centers disappeared because people found better, more fulfilling things to do. Third, the fact that some kinds of work would simply not be viable at the pay levels demanded would encourage technological innovation and automation.

*There is nothing dignifying about work per se and certainly not a demeaning, badly paid job in wretched conditions. What gives dignity is having your material existence guaranteed.*



Here we have to question the notion of the “dignity of work”. There is nothing dignifying about work per se and certainly not a demeaning, badly paid job in wretched conditions. Of course there are gratifying kinds of employment, but they are not the norm. According to *Forbes*, 70 percent of people hate their jobs or are completely disengaged from them. Following Aristotle, Marx observed that if you are only free to *sell* your labor, you are not truly free but subject to a form of servitude. What gives dignity is having your material existence guaranteed. In this sense, supporting a Basic Income is perfectly compatible with (even complementary to) defending access to paid work for anyone who wants it. Indeed, proponents of a Basic Income have convincingly described how a Basic Income would make this goal more attainable.

The tremendously damaging changes in the job market resulting from the austerity policies and structural adjustments that were first imposed with the early symptoms of the global financial crisis are all too visible today. Some pundits, winding the clock back to the years before World War II, offer full employment as a “solution” to the crisis of work. But there are several urgent, interrelated realities that make a Basic Income a more reasonable priority: the burgeoning phenomenon of the working poor; the extremely precarious circumstances of much of the working class; the strong likelihood of further automation causing more unemployment without the compensation of newly created jobs; and huge changes in working relationships (or lack thereof).



It has been estimated that by 2033 almost half of today's jobs will be automated. Many people working in the artificial intelligence field therefore support a Basic Income. One well-known example is data scientist Jeremy Howard, who has said that if we do not want half the world's population to starve because they cannot add economic value, the best solution is to implement a Universal Basic Income.

Then there is the matter of taxation, which would be used to finance a Basic Income. Information technology is supplanting jobs, but it is also fast accelerating the concentration of wealth. A few decades ago, corporations needed roughly 100,000 employees to create \$1 billion in value. In 2014, the value of WhatsApp, with 55 employees, was estimated at \$19 billion. What has been referred to as "trickle-down" economics actually constitutes an upward flow of income that eventually stagnates in secret caches and offshore tax havens, thus stymying real wealth creation.

As it turns out, people with small incomes spend their money quickly while the rich hoard theirs. The Institute for Policy Studies has found that every extra dollar paid to low-wage workers adds about \$1.21 to the US economy. If this dollar went to a high-wage worker it would add only 39 cents to Gross Domestic Product (GDP). In other words, if the \$26.7 billion paid in bonuses to Wall Street punters in 2013 had gone to poor workers, GDP would have risen by some \$32.3 billion.

If economies are to escape from the stranglehold of neoliberalism, become productive, offer a more just distribution of work, and begin to address the tremendous problems of today's inequalities, some form of efficient redistribution of wealth is required. Let's not forget that from the 1950s through to the early 1970s, the top income tax bracket was over 90% (in the UK and US)—and these economies boomed.

PHOTO BY RUSSEL SHAW HIGGS, VIA FLICKR



*A Basic Income could change the distribution of domestic tasks between men and women in some households. The negotiating power of women would be greater with it than without it. Women would gain a lot, also in terms of freedom.*

## **BASIC INCOME AND DOMESTIC WORK**

Domestic work, also called reproductive or care work, has many definitions, mainly because of the difficulty of covering all the activities it involves. Yet there are some constants in all of these definitions: they generally include child-rearing, caring and nursing activities carried out at home, as well as other activities concerned with the wellbeing of people living under the same roof, especially with the oldest and youngest members of the household. Taking these constants into account, we could say that domestic work is that which is carried out in the home to attend to one's own needs and those of others, and that it includes activities such as cleaning, preparing meals, shopping, looking after children, old people and any sick members of the household.

One of the oldest definitions of domestic work was offered by Margaret Reid in her pioneering work *Economics of Household Production* (1934). For Reid, domestic production means unpaid work carried out by and for members of the family. Interestingly, however, she focuses on activities that can be replaced by products on the market or remunerated services, when factors such as income, the market situation and consumer preferences make it possible to engage the services of others from outside the family.

Beyond these aspects, there are four characteristics of domestic work that should be taken into account. First, domestic work uses goods acquired on the market or through services offered by public administrations to produce goods and services destined for home (or self-) consumption, but it does not draw on exchange. Second, and related to

this, there is no monetary payment. Third, the basic aim is reproduction of the labor force, with an immediate result being a reduction of subsistence costs. Finally, the person who carries out this work establishes some control over pace and timetables.

Domestic work is carried out by both sexes, but by no means proportionally. In rich and poor countries alike, women do by far the greater share. Surveys show that in the European Union, more than 80 percent of women who have children at home spend four hours every day on housework, compared to only 29 percent of men.

There is no doubt that when less time is spent on remunerated work, more time is given to domestic work. But the gender proportions are very different here, too. Women who spend less time on remunerated work devote much more time to domestic work than men in the same situation. Also deserving attention is the rather inconsistent practice of considering the exact same activity as work in some cases and as not-work in others (cooking, for example). Why? Because people think that only an activity for which one is paid can be called work.

How might domestic work be affected by a Basic Income? A general aside is relevant at this point. A Basic Income will not solve all the social problems related with the sexual division of labor. Sexual inequalities and gender-based discrimination are two major social problems requiring much more sweeping changes than a Basic Income alone. But a Basic Income would certainly permit greater freedom for women. More than two centuries ago, Mary Wollstonecraft pointed out that rights, citizenship and a better status for women—both married and single—required their economic independence.

Many women who are caught in the poverty trap within the present-day system of means-tested subsidies could escape from it with a Basic Income. The feminization of poverty would be greatly mitigated. Since Basic Income is universal and thus paid to both men and women, it follows that at least some problems arising from assigning allowances to the (usually male) head of the family would be resolved. A Basic Income could therefore change the distribution of domestic tasks between men and women in some households. Whatever the case, the negotiating power of a woman receiving a Basic Income would be greater with it than without it. To sum up, women would gain a lot, not only with an income but in terms of freedom as well.

## **BASIC INCOME AND VOLUNTARY WORK**

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Voluntary work is understood as using one's own time in unpaid activities devoted to helping others, without coming under the rubric of domestic work. Voluntary work embraces a wide range of areas including nursing, education, solidarity with the poor and marginalized, prison work, counseling of battered women, relief work after natural disasters, helping refugees, and aid work in the developing world.

The motivation for engaging in voluntary work may be twofold. First is personal satisfaction. This would be the case with autotelic activity, the reward for which is the activity itself—the opposite of instrumental activity, where the process is merely a means to an end. Remunerated work, with some exceptions, is basically instrumental. If you have to acquire essential items like food, housing, clothes and so on, you need money and, for most people, paid work is the only way of getting it.



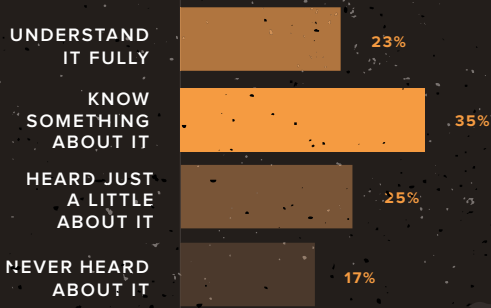
It would be difficult to understand voluntary work if it were not autotelic. The same thing happens with political participation, when understood as a firm commitment rather more than voting every so often—and something that brings its own rewards. Evidently, autotelic work would not include the work of officials, office-holders and paid appointees for whom political activity is as instrumental as any other salaried job, with its own perks, power, influence, cushy conditions, glitz and so on.

A second motivation of voluntary work might be altruism, understood as genuine concern for the welfare of anyone who benefits from the work. This is not to deny that some feel-good effects, or the desire to be admired, could come into play as instrumental factors in voluntary work. In short, this second benevolent motivation is related to the first, even if they can be conceptually separated.

One essential rule binding the political and economic effects of a Basic Income is that sustainable democracy requires high levels of political participation, which, in turn, requires much lower levels of economic inequality to free up time and resources for political activity. Today, when 62 people control more than half the world's wealth, we have a highly unsustainable global political system on a planet now entering the Sixth Extinction. Without major changes at the base of society and in the ways in which we understand work and progress, things can only get worse.

*The introduction of a Basic Income could provide a stimulus to voluntary work and political participation, which generally requires much more time than people have available at present.*

The introduction of a Basic Income could provide a stimulus to voluntary work and political participation, which generally requires much more time than people have available at present. Voluntary work, in this sense, should not be considered an “alternative” to remunerated work, which, in the absence of other sources of income, remains essential for survival. Many people who would like to engage in voluntary activities simply cannot do so due to a lack of resources.

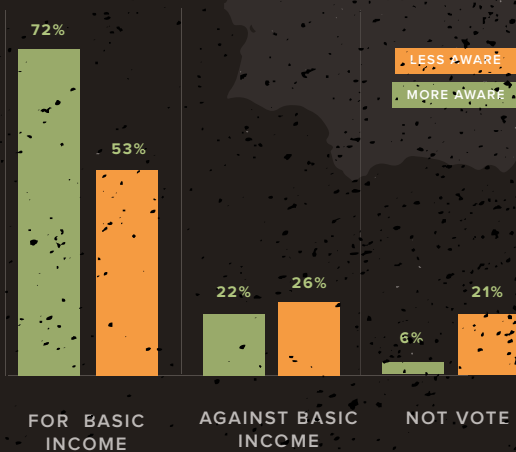


## 58% of Europeans are familiar with basic income

*% of respondents answering to the question "How familiar are you with the concept known as "basic" income?"*

# Basic income in the European Union

A survey conducted by Nico Jaspers for Dalia Research, in April 2016, among 10,000 people in 500 cities across 28 European countries shows some surprising results: while a majority of the respondents is in favor of a Universal Basic Income, only a small minority of 4% would consider to stop working after the introduction of a UBI.



## Awareness and support for basic income are linked

*% of respondents grouped by their reported awareness of basic income, answering the question: "If there would be a referendum on introducing basic income today, how would you vote?"*

## BIGGEST HOPE



Less anxiety about financing basic needs

## BIGGEST FEAR



People would stop working



64%

of Europeans would vote for basic income

24%

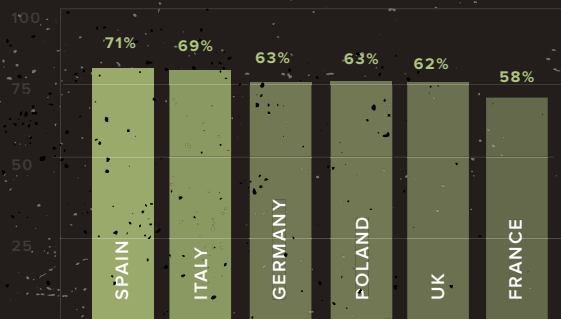
WOULD VOTE AGAINST

12%

WOULD NOT VOTE

## Support is highest in Spain

% of respondents by country who would vote in favour of basic income: "If there would be a referendum on introducing basic income today, how would you vote?"





*A universal, unconditional Basic Income could go a long way in honoring the thus far hollow promises of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.*

The democratic possibilities of greater freedom in the sphere of work were not lost on the freed slave Garrison Frazier, who stated that “the freedom promised by the proclamation is taking us from under the yoke of bondage, and placing us where we could reap the fruit of our own labor, take care of ourselves and assist the government in maintaining our freedom...”

## **BASIC INCOME AND HUMAN DIGNITY**

Poverty is much more than just an economic problem. The importance of its social, political, environmental, legal and occupational aspects become much clearer when the effects of a Basic Income are considered from the standpoint of

the world’s poorest people. One example will suffice. In 2008-’09 a pilot project was carried out in the Namibian village of Otjivero, where 930 residents received 100 Namibian dollars (about 9 euros) a month. Poverty levels fell from 76 percent to 37 percent, and figures for underweight children from 42 percent to 10 percent.

People in Otjivero started to use the local clinic, school attendance rose, household debt dropped, social relations improved and there was a considerable decrease in crime. Meanwhile, economic activity flourished when the beneficiaries started their own businesses like brick-making and baking bread. The conclusion is that, in poor countries, proceeds from cleaning up corruption, presently misused aid money, taxes on tourism, cars and luxury goods could be better used to finance a Basic Income.



In the absence of fully-fledged examples in practice, the general political benefits of Basic Income can only be hypothesized. As Naomi Klein suggests in *This Changes Everything*, they could even be planet-saving. Most people would agree that humans need more in their lives than just working to sustain bare existence. If basic needs are not met people are unlikely to fulfill other human needs like security, love, belonging, esteem, leisure, creativity, spontaneity and problem-solving—all aspects of human life that are commonly associated with freedom.

v To put it slightly differently: the three core underlying values of human rights and a democratic society—freedom, justice and human dignity—require basic needs to be satisfied. Wage labor rarely respects freedom, justice and human dignity. A universal, unconditional Basic Income could go a long way in honoring the thus far hollow promise of Article 23 (1) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: “Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favorable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment.” The bottom line, however, is that it is not work but a guaranteed material existence that gives dignity to human life. ★

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# TOWARDS A POST-WORK SOCIETY

THE POLITICS OF TIME OFFERS A RESPONSE  
TO THE CRISIS OF WORK, INVITING US TO TALK  
ABOUT THE CONDITIONS FOR FREEDOM AND THE  
KIND OF SOCIETY WE WANT TO LIVE IN.

David Frayne

THE ROAD AHEAD



**W**hen a stranger meets you for the first time, the first question they will almost always ask is: “what do you do?” Convention tells us that what they really mean is: “what job do you perform?”, which is a terrible question to ask a person who does not work, or who dislikes the work that she does. It is also a sure sign that, whether we like it or not, we in industrial societies live in a profoundly work-centered world.

The centrality of work is grasped when we consider just how much time society spends working, in which we can also include the time spent looking and preparing for, traveling to and from, and recuperating from work. In his 1935 essay, “In Praise of Idleness”, Bertrand Russell lamented the amount of modern leisure time spent on “such amusements as are passive and vapid,” but the truth is that work, after devouring people’s time and energy, often leaves them inadequately resourced to do anything more fulfilling.

For those with demanding jobs, it becomes impossible to do anything outside of work that would require an investment of time and attention, or community ties. Unemployment does not offer any reprieve either, as even this has now been turned into a kind of work. In modern society, unemployment takes the form of “job-seeking”, which, like work, has its own performative demands and system of accountability.

We can also grasp the work-centered nature of society when we consider how many important social functions have been delegated to work. Work is society’s main mechanism for the distribution of income, meaning that most people rely on their work for survival. The ability to earn one’s own bread is what traditionally marks the passage to maturity,

and working is also the main and certainly the most culturally approved way that people live out a public existence.

## THE CRISIS OF WORK

If work is vital for income, social inclusion and a sense of identity, then one of the most troubling contradictions of our time is that this centrality of work persists even when work is in a state of crisis. The steady erosion of stable and satisfying employment makes it less and less clear whether modern jobs can offer the sense of moral agency, recognition and pride required to secure work as a source of meaning and identity. The standardization, precarity and dubious social utility that characterize many modern jobs are a major source of modern misery.

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*One of the most troubling contradictions of our time is that the centrality of work persists even when work is in a state of crisis.*”

Mass unemployment is also now an enduring structural feature of capitalist societies. The elimination of huge quantities of human labor by the development of machine technologies is a process that has spanned centuries. However, perhaps due to high profile developments like Apple’s Siri computer assistant or Amazon’s delivery drones, the discussion around automation has once again been ignited. An often-



cited study by Carl Frey and Michael Osborne anticipates an escalation of technological unemployment over the coming years. Occupations at high risk include the likes of models, cooks and construction workers, thanks to advances such as digital avatars, burger flipping machines and the ability to manufacture prefabricated buildings in factories with robots. It is also anticipated that advances in artificial intelligence and machine learning will allow an increasing quantity of cognitive work tasks to become automated.

What all of this means is that we are steadily becoming a society of workers without work: a society of people who are materially, culturally and psychologically bound to paid employment, but for whom there are not enough stable and meaningful jobs to go around. Perversely, the most pressing problem for many people is no longer exploitation, but the absence of opportunities to be sufficiently and dependably exploited. The impact of this problem in today's epidemic of anxiety and exhaustion should not be underestimated.

What makes the situation all the crueler is the pervasive sense that the precarious victims of the crisis are somehow personally responsible for their fate. In the UK, barely a week goes by without a smug re-affirmation of the work ethic in the media, or some story that constructs unemployment as a form of deviance. The UK television show *Benefits Street* comes to mind, but perhaps the most outrageous example in recent times was not from the world of trash TV, but from Dr. Adam Perkins' thesis, *The Welfare Trait*. Published last year, Perkins' book tackled what he defined as the "employment-resistant personality". Joblessness is explained in terms of an inter-generationally transmitted psychological disorder. Perkins' study is the most polished product of the ideology of work one can imagine. His study is so dazzled by its own claims to scientific objectivity, so impervious to its own grounding in the work ethic, that it beggars belief.

It seems we find ourselves at a rift. On the one hand, work has been positioned as a central source of income, solidarity and social recognition, whereas on the other, the promise of stable, meaningful and satisfying employment crumbles around us. The crucial question: how should societies adjust to this deepening crisis of work?

## **BUSINESS AS USUAL**

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Throughout the history of capitalism, societies have tended to compensate for the labor-displacing effects of productivity gains either by increasing the output of particular industries, or by expanding the



economy into new industries and sectors. Anders Hayden has referred to this solution as a treadmill: the need for never-ending economic expansion simply to maintain employment levels.

Among the more dystopian possibilities of this trajectory is the vista of a world sunk in disposable consumer goods, produced primarily to keep people working and spending, as well the dismal prospect of a society where virtually all needs are outsourced to the market, and all social relations mediated through the economy. Perhaps the biggest objection to the solution of “more jobs”, however, is the unsustainable nature of perpetual economic expansion. Even if economic growth could keep pace with the demand for jobs, what would the environmental costs be? Pointing to well-established bodies of research on the depletion of natural resources, the loss of biodiversity, soil pollution, and that mother of all limits, climate change, political ecologists like Tim Jackson have shown that expanding the economy in order to provide work has become an increasingly unpalatable strategy.

If the solution is not “more jobs”, what other responses are available to us? Under neoliberalism, citizens have been encouraged to take matters into their own hands. The most socially acceptable strategy today is to avoid the whirlpool of precarity, unemployment and meaningless work by personally investing in “employability”, making a long-term effort to gain the skills, qualifications and sensibilities that will be the most attractive to employers.

The project of employability might shape anything from what subjects people choose to study to which aspects of their personalities they deem as “problematic” and in need of reform. One of the biggest casualties of this



*The most socially acceptable strategy today is to avoid the whirlpool of precarity, unemployment and meaningless work by personally investing in “employability”.*

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focus on employability is education, whose role in the work-centered society has been reduced to an economic function. Education’s most readily accepted contribution is not to teach the principles of democracy, critical thinking or self-reliance, but to prepare and certify young people for the adoption of a pre-defined job role. Anxiety runs riot in the degree factory (among teachers as well as students), and the social mobility promised by educational advancement is in any case a poor substitute for genuine economic justice. Clearly not everybody can succeed in the race for decent jobs.

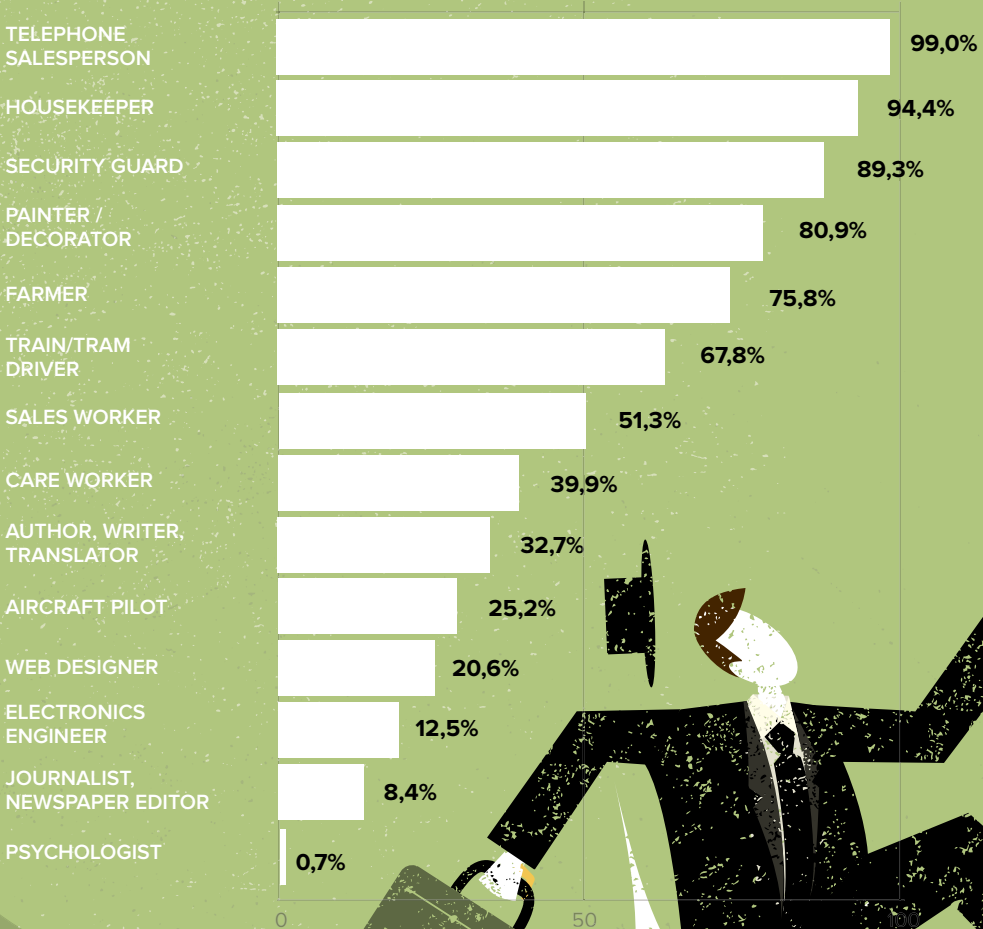
The need to become what Michel Foucault called an “entrepreneur of the self” in or-

der to mitigate the insecurity of life under neoliberalism also demolishes the bargaining power of society’s precarious workers. One of the best assets of an employable subject is agreeableness—an aim to please—which puts workers in a weak position to negotiate better conditions for themselves. This is perhaps one explanation for the recently documented phenomenon of “presenteeism”, which sees people obediently staying late at the office, even if they have no work to do.

In a recent paper on graduate employability, Costea and colleagues suggested that the ultimate tragedy of employability is its psychological condition of “endless potentiality”. The entrepreneurial self is never satisfied

# Risk a job will be automated in the next two decades.

(DATA VIA BBC.COM, BASED ON MICHAEL OSBORNE AND CARL FREY (2013)  
*THE FUTURE OF EMPLOYMENT: HOW SUSCEPTIBLE ARE JOBS TO COMPUTERIZATION?*)





that it has done enough. Every relationship is a potential “connection” and every activity a potential item for the resumé. Coupled with the spillage of work into the home via networked technologies, the “endless potentiality” of employability renders understandable one of society’s guiltiest collective secrets: the hidden craving for a brief spate of personal illness to—at least for a few days—*make it all stop*.

## A RADICAL ALTERNATIVE

It seems we need a more radical alternative—and, fortunately, there is no shortage of resources to turn to for inspiration. There exists an important legacy of critical thinkers who have argued that the most rational and liberating solution to the crisis of work is neither economic nor personal. This provocative group of thinkers—ranging from critics like André Gorz and Herbert Marcuse to members of the Italian post-workerist movement and contemporary feminist authors like Kathi Weeks—have all argued that the only legitimate solution to the crisis of work is a *political one*. Recognizing that the work-centered society is no longer tenable, these authors argue that we must radically rethink the role of work in modern society.

A common theme in these critiques is to note how capitalism’s tremendous capacity for

productive development has opened up the theoretical possibility of more free time. The machines do more of the necessary work, leaving us free for other things. Crucially, however, technology alone does not have the capacity liberate us from work. As Gorz argued in his *Critique of Economic Reason*, “the development of productive forces may, of itself, reduce the amount of labor that is necessary [but] it cannot, of itself, create the conditions which will make this liberation of time a liberation for all.”

For critics like Gorz, the challenge set before us is to develop a political struggle that will allow us to finally turn the time saved by decades of productivity gains to humane ends.

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*The challenge set before us is to develop a political struggle that will allow us to finally turn the time saved by decades of productivity gains to humane ends.*

This collective challenge—which Gorz called the “politics of time”—requires the definition of new freedoms and collective guarantees, which will allow everybody to benefit from more free time. One of the things that makes the critique of work such an exciting project is that the concerns of critics are always differently accented. However, in terms

of political proposals, there are a number of these that are fairly consistent across the board.

The first proposal is for a society-wide policy of shorter working hours, coupled with a social redistribution of the necessary work. By spreading the available working hours more evenly among populations, the goal here is to

reverse the escalating division of society into stressed-out occupational elites on the one hand, and a mass of unemployed, underemployed or precariously employed people on the other. Each of us would work less so that more of us could work.

This goes hand in hand with a second proposal to uncouple the right to a wage from the activity of work, and explore alternative methods of income distribution. The growing discussion around the Universal Basic Income is a promising sign. Basic Income has many competing justifications, but an important one is that it promises to remedy the depressing wastage of time and talent witnessed in the capitalist present, where social inclusion still depends on the ability to keep a job. Whether their labor power is required by the formal economy or otherwise, people who benefit from a Basic Income will be resourced to undertake work for themselves and for each other, if they so choose. The hope is that, with the benefit of time and an income, people would be able to develop a range of interests and capacities outside employment.

These changes would perhaps not amount to much were they not underpinned by a more qualitative shift in our cultures and sensibilities. A radical solution to the crisis of work also requires that we re-examine ourselves

and explore the possibility of alternative ways to experience the pleasure and solidarity that people have conventionally sought (often unsuccessfully) in work. To articulate this in terms of a demand: we need to call for an end to the conservative idea that paid work is inherently healthy and civilizing.

Some will no doubt object by saying that employment is crucial for people's sense of well-being (and there is a wealth of research on the miseries of unemployment that they may cite as evidence). The dynamics of this debate are complicated because work really is in some

senses important for health in a society organized to promote a dependency on work. It is only a moral attachment to work, however, that stops us from remaining open to the idea that the future could be different. In the future, it is perfectly feasible that alternative activities would allow us to experience the sense of solidarity and purpose that work now provides (or fails to provide, as the case may be).

We would also do well to remind doubters that the current construction of identity and social solidarity through work renders us supremely fit for exploitation.

Others might protest the critique of work as a somewhat juvenile defense of "the right to be lazy". For example, when the UK Prime Minister David Cameron declared that his gov-

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*Whilst laziness certainly has a rightful place in a post-work future, what is ultimately demanded by the critique of work is less an entitlement to idleness than a right to develop human capacities more fully.*

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ernment would mainly serve the interests of “hardworking people”, the ethical lines were firmly drawn: are you a worker or a shirker? It was thought that there is no space to occupy in between, no legitimate way of making a social contribution other than through work.

It is important that we reject this dichotomy whenever possible, and also recognize that the critique of work is much more than the defense of a right to be lazy. Whilst laziness certainly has a rightful place in a post-work future, what is ultimately demanded by the critique of work is less an entitlement to idleness than a right to develop human capacities more fully. In *The Problem with Work*, Kathi Weeks articulates it well when she argues that to critique work is not necessarily

“*It is, rather, to insist that there are other ways to organize and distribute that activity and to remind us that it is also possible to be creative outside the boundaries of work. It is to suggest that there might be a variety of ways to experience the pleasure that we may now find in work, as well as other pleasures that we may wish to discover, cultivate and enjoy.*”

At a time when work is very clearly in a state of crisis, the critical project that Weeks describes here is an important one. Given the escalating crises of work, the dreamer is perhaps no longer the utopian who searches for alternatives, but the person who believes things can go on as they are. The radical solution is the sane solution.

At the same time, however, it would be a mistake to see the critique of work merely as a “solution” to crisis. It is also a chance to finally deliver on the original promise of capitalism’s productive development: to liberate us from work and allow us to collectively enjoy more free time. The hope is that a politics of time would allow us to explore those aptitudes and aspects of ourselves that often get sidelined in a work-centered world. The hope is that having more time outside work would, with the benefit of new public facilities, spark the creation of informal networks of production and exchange outside the boundaries of the formal economy.

Perhaps an increase in free time would also allow people to become more active citizens. One of the reasons democratic debate is currently in such a moribund state is that our busy lives leave us with so little time to engage with politics, collectively organize or find out what is going on in our communities. What a politics of time perhaps promises above all, however, is to allow us to use our free time for something other than escaping from work.



*The politics of time aims to offer a practical response to today's disintegrating world of work. It invites us to talk about the conditions for freedom and the kind of society we would like to live in.*

## THE ROAD AHEAD

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The social construction of work as a key source of income, rights and belonging is unswerving. Yet what is also clear is that for vast numbers of people work has become an unreliable source of these things. This is a profound crisis, requiring an equally as profound re-evaluation of work and its place in modern society. This task—which André Gorz has called the politics of time—aims to offer a practical response to today's disintegrating world of work. But more than this, it also invites us to talk about the conditions for freedom and to engage in a fresh dialogue about the kind of society we would like to live in.

Overall, I am inclined to agree with Gorz's suggestion that the cultural shift to a post-work

society has already occurred to a certain extent. If we slice through the glorification of the work ethic in the conservative media, what we will find is that massive numbers of people have already mentally clocked-out of the work-centered society, and are now actively trying to maximize their leisure time, reconfiguring their identities through non-work activities. Anti-work sensibilities can be found everywhere, whether it is artists and hobbyists finding time to do what they really love, unpaid volunteers and carers devoting their time to others, people retiring early in order to rediscover lost pleasures, or graduates slowly giving up on the dream of a stable job that they enjoy.

I have documented these anti-work sensibilities to some degree in my book, *The Refusal of Work*, which drew on interviews with people trying (with varying degrees of success) to re-

resist performing paid work. Many were willing to endure significant hardship in order to do so. One of the notable things about this study was that its participants were less radical political subjects, demanding social alternatives, than ordinary people who were simply trying to work less and have more leisure time. They embodied a latent dissatisfaction with work that has yet to find political purchase, and the dilemma we perhaps now face is how to legitimate and mobilize this dissatisfaction. We need to find ways to articulate it in the form of a political alternative.

With regards to the prospects of developing a post-work politics along these lines, it is fair to say that I concluded my research on a somewhat pessimistic note. In the UK, mainstream politics on both the left and the right still seems obsessed with the dignity of work. However, there have been some notable rumblings since my research was published. The anti-work politics of the UK activist group Plan C are worth mentioning here, along with the New Economics Foundation—a think tank that has been exploring the possibility of a 21-hour working week. The discussion around Basic Income also appears to be mounting, with a number of notable campaigns and experiments having been documented by the Basic Income Earth Network in recent months.

Also worth mentioning is the recent “No Jobs Bloc”—a coalition of groups coordinated by the Radical Assembly, who marched as part of London’s anti-austerity protest earlier this year. The marchers carried banners with slogans inspired by Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams’ recent critique of work, *Inventing the Future*, demanding a Basic Income for all, full automation, a reduction of the working week, and the attribution of value to unpaid and emotional labor. This popular uptake of the critique of work is heartening, and it is hard to predict the fate of the critique in the future. One thing, however, is certain: if anyone had told me a year ago that activists in the UK would be chanting anti-work slogans in the streets, I would not have believed it.

DAVID FRAYNE



*David Frayne is a writer and social researcher interested in radical approaches to work, education and the consumer society. His first book, The Refusal of Work, was published by Zed Books in 2015. David also lectures in the social sciences, when he can find the work. You can follow him on Twitter via @theworkdogma.*



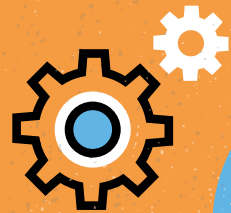
# Mobilizing around a post-work consensus: four demands

## 1 FULL AUTOMATIZATION

“The tendencies towards automation and the replacement of human labor should be enthusiastically accelerated and targeted as a political project of the left.”

“The demand for full automation amplifies the possibility of reducing the working week and heightens the need for a universal basic income.”

**“The combined effort of these measures would be the liberation of a significant amount of free time without a reduction in economic output or a significant increase in unemployment. Yet this free time will be of little value if people continue struggling to make ends meet.”**



## 2 THE REDUCTION OF THE WORKING WEEK

“One of most important reasons for reducing work time is that it is a demand that both consolidates and generates class power. [It] can be deployed as a temporary tactic in political struggle ... [and it] also makes the labor movement stronger.”

## 3 THE PROVISION A BASIC INCOME

A universal basic income “transforms precarity, it recognizes social labor, it makes class power easier to mobilize, and it extends the space in which to experiment with how we organize communities and families. It is a redistribution mechanism that transforms production relations. It is an economic mechanism that changes the politics of work.”

**“Take back the future from capitalism and build ourselves the twenty-first-century world we want.”**

SOURCE: NICK SRNICEK & ALEX WILLIAMS – *INVENTING THE FUTURE* (VERSO, 2015)



#### **4. THE DIMINISHMENT OF THE WORK ETHIC**

“What is needed is a counter-hegemonic approach to work: a project that would overturn existing ideas about the necessity and desirability of work, and the imposition of suffering as a basis for remuneration.”

“Capitalism demands that people work in order to make a living, yet it is increasingly unable to generate enough jobs. The tension between the value accorded to the work ethic and these material changes will only heighten the potential for transformation of the system.”

**Workers of the world —**  
**relax.**



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# The Right to Be Lazy

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by **PAUL LAFARGUE**

*Let us be lazy in everything, except in loving and  
drinking, except in being lazy. – Lessing*

A strange delusion possesses the working classes of the nations where capitalist civilization holds its sway. This delusion drags in its train the individual and social woes which for two centuries have tortured sad humanity. This delusion is the love of work, the furious passion for work, pushed even to the exhaustion of the vital force of the individual and his progeny. Instead of opposing this mental aberration, the priests, the economists and the moralists have cast a sacred halo over work. Blind and finite men, they have wished to be wiser than their God; weak and contemptible men, they have presumed to rehabilitate what their God had cursed. I, who do not profess to be a Christian, an economist or a moralist, I appeal from their judgement to that of their God; from the preachings of their religious, economics or free thought ethics, to the frightful consequences of work in capitalist society.

In capitalist society work is the cause of all intellectual degeneracy, of all organic deformity. Compare the thorough-bred in Rothschild's stables, served by a retinue of bipeds, with the heavy brute of the Norman farms which plows the earth, carts the manure, hauls the crops. Look at the noble savage whom the missionaries of trade and the traders of religion have not yet corrupted with Christianity, syphilis and the dogma of work, and then look at our miserable slaves of machines.

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