

HEALS

Journal of Workplace Reappropriation

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*A **swipe** at the system
that steals the products of your labor*

April 15 is STEAL SOMETHING FROM WORK DAY! HEIST!



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Don't carp, carpenters!

Don't wait, waiters!

Let's put the team in teamster!

Every steelworker a steal-from-worker!

Every hoodlum a Robin Hoodlum!

Raise the bar, baristas!

Raise hell, bellboys!

Wage war, wage slaves—

**April 15 is Steal Something
From Work Day**

April 15 is celebrated worldwide as Steal Something From Work Day.

Every April 15, millions of employees around the world steal from their workplaces.

Sweatshop seamstresses slip spools of thread under their sweaters. Cashiers outsmart surveillance cameras to pocket cash from registers. Secretaries pilfer envelopes, carpenters slip screws into their tool belts, baristas treat their friends to lattes on the house. Employers lose hundreds of thousands of dollars to employee-organized shrinkage in the US alone.

Selections from interviews with Steal Something from Work Day media representative Robin Bossis

Beyond Capitalist Meritocracy

Is all of this genuinely intended as a rhetorical device, or is the disclaimer on your website simply intended to protect yourselves from being stolen from via lawsuits?

We don't need to encourage people to steal from work – they're already doing it, whatever anyone thinks about it. STEAL SOMETHING FROM WORK DAY is simply an awareness day. Just as African-American history is important all year round but the point of Black History Month is to bring it into the spotlight, STEAL SOMETHING FROM WORK DAY is every day, but it's also April 15, so workers can take time to think about what is being stolen from them.

Who steals more, consumers or employees?

Here's a hint: which way do they point the cameras?

What is the most valuable thing you've stolen from work? Where were you working at the time?

The first rule of STEAL SOMETHING FROM WORK DAY is – *you do not talk about stealing something from work!*

But there are different notions of *value* when it comes to stealing from work. The wealthiest people are usually the ones who get the opportunity to steal the most, whether that be via legal or illegal white collar crime. So perhaps it's a dead end to assess stealing from work in purely financial terms – it means privileging the ones who start with more, and thus can get access to more.

Think instead of the night watchman who writes a novel instead of doing his rounds – or the story that Trent Reznor of Nine Inch Nails secretly recorded his demo while working as

a janitor at a recording studio – or of the fed-up employee at an animal testing corporation who smuggled in a camera one day and got the whole place shut down. There are plenty of things to steal from work besides cash and condiments.

In theoretical terms, capitalists and socialists alike have always looked at work as something that produces value. Workers have to consider a different possibility – that working *uses up* value. That's why the forests and the polar ice caps are being consumed, the same as the hours of our own lives: the aches in our bodies when we come home from work parallel the damage occurring on a global scale. Everything ends up on the market, costing more and more but meaning less and less.

In the long run, perhaps the most valuable thing anyone could steal from work is the realization that there are better things to do with one's life than sell it away. Millions of workers know this already, but as a society we have yet to act on this knowledge.

What would you say to people who would turn in a co-worker for stealing?

The universal moral prescription against theft is intended to protect the collective interests of humanity against individual thieves. Ironically, when an employee turns in a coworker for theft, that prescription ends up protecting the individual interests of a few employers against the collective interests of their employees, whose labor it is that produces the wealth they hoard in the first place. So even though it may be intended to preserve fairness, turning in a coworker for stealing can actually accomplish the opposite – it's the equivalent of informing on freedom fighters struggling against a dictatorship.

The power that enables employers to exploit employees doesn't just come from inequalities of wealth; it is maintained by the part of every worker that identifies with employers' interests

rather than with his or her *own* interests. People identify with the interests of those who exploit them for a variety of reasons: notions of right and wrong (which are often framed by those in power), the idea that they might become employers themselves one day, a hesitance to acknowledge the embarrassing fact of their own exploitation. Employers thrive on the tensions and competition between their employees: so long as the employees don't view themselves as having shared interests, they will not act together to defend themselves. Instead, they may turn each other in for small-scale attempts to redress the grievous imbalances of the workplace.

Capitalist values are founded on the idea that those who own capital deserve the power it affords them; in concrete terms, this includes the power it gives them over others' lives, even though this is hardly a "democratic" relationship. Capitalism implies a meritocracy: the best and brightest are rewarded with the most power, and everyone else ends up serving them. In practice, of course, the cutthroat competition of the market often rewards the most rapacious and merciless with the most power. Stealing from one's workplace can be seen as an attempt to distribute power and resources according to a logic of need rather than of conquest.

Employees who turn in co-workers for stealing may be trying to abide by the Golden Rule – do unto others as you would have them do unto you. But stealing from a corporation is fundamentally different than stealing from another human being. The wealth of a corporation is the accumulation of profit derived from workers who are not paid the full value of their labor and consumers who pay more than the production cost of their purchases. Redistributing this wealth is not stealing so much as it is reversing the effects of a theft that is already in progress. Workplace theft is thus a challenge to the morality of capitalist meritocracy; at best, it can imply a totally different value system.



**NOBODY
LIKES A
SNITCH**

We are line cooks and bartenders, waitresses and bakers. We sell produce at farmers' markets; we operate cash registers, we stock shelves and make espresso drinks. We take commodities, rearrange them and move them around, adding value so that our employers may make a profit. We are workers in the service industry, in essence no different from those who work on construction sites or in the few remaining factories of our post-industrial cities.

The Team Is Real

on the
TEAM

**Wear the button when you're at work.
Hook people up with discounts and freebies.**

**Wear the button when you go out.
Get Hooked Up. Remember to ask your
teammates where they work.**

**Build the team.
Talk to your friends and trusted coworkers.
The more people on the team, the better.**

Unlike our industrial counterparts, most of us have been ignored by organized labor. We are excluded from collective bargaining by assertions that our work is too precarious, that we can't be expected to stick around long enough, that our workplaces are too small. Yet when we confess to our more securely employed acquaintances that we work for minimum wage, we never fail to hear the refrain, "Sounds like y'all could use a union." Not that we mourn the official union's lack of interest in our exploitation. We don't need more boredom, bureaucracy and control in our already stifled, suppressed lives. But we could do with a bit more money at the end of the month, a few more groceries in our pantries, a dose of complicity in our friendships, and a sprinkling of agency in the places where we spend most of our waking hours.

In the absence of a formal organization with pretensions of representing our interests, we are forced to supersede the union form and take directly for ourselves that which we are denied by the market. Along with workplace sabotage, slacking off instead of hustling, and the occasional sick day when it is just too beautiful outside, workplace theft constitutes our everyday practice of class struggle, our faceless resistance. Even those of us who work for "responsible," "ethical" businesses find ourselves looking for ways to take home some extra food or to slip some bills out of the register. And when we can, we give freely of the commodities we produce, transforming them from objects with value (a price tag) to objects for free use (nourishment, intoxication, fun...). In this way, we subvert the commodity form on a daily basis by giving free food and drinks to our friends, but we do it in a limited and isolated manner.

The Team is an attempt to coordinate and elaborate that subversion: to spread it beyond the circumscribed boundaries of friendship while at the same time creating new relationships based on a common material condition,

that of exploitation, and a common practice of rebellion, that of re-appropriation. Essentially The Team functions by the use of a common identifier – a button, a pin, a t-shirt or hat, anything that could be used to alert a stranger to the presence of a fellow member. The identifier should be unique enough to be easily distinguished, yet not so explicit as to tip off the boss. The deployment of explanatory cards is an optional compliment that while adding a potential risk also provides the opportunity to interject a more explicitly anti-capitalist theme. What do the kids say these days?

Everything for Everyone!

With only a few months of practical application, The Team has proven to be a moderate success in at least one average-sized Midwestern city. Almost two hundred buttons and cards have been given to enthusiastic young service workers. Some of us have enjoyed a trip to the grocery store with no bill upon checking out. Others have been able to feed their caffeine addictions for another day with no exchange of currency. Soon we hope to be riding city buses and partying in hotel rooms. Perhaps one day something will “fall off the truck” into our laps. In the meantime we are finding that social activities that normally leave us feeling isolated from those immediately surrounding us are now enveloped in an atmosphere of excitement and purpose. Knowing head nods and revealing conversations have once again found their way into the air around us. One story reached us of a twenty-something barista whose adolescent dreams of a network of free coffee suppliers has, years later, found resonance with our little union of thieves. We are finding that even apathetic hipsters and seemingly hostile liberals are making themselves at home in our attempt to do class struggle.

The Team, of course, is not a perfect system. There are many flaws, the exclusion of workers

who can not directly seize what they produce foremost among them, yet we believe that for every obstacle we, as a class, are capable of finding a creative solution. Some have suggested a central warehouse for things like toilet paper, soap, light bulbs, and office supplies – commodities that most jobs provide access to. Others have expressed interest in a directory of free social services. In the end, the point is not to establish some sort of alternative economy where we all just go on working our miserable jobs, but rather to help create a climate of subversion, to plant seeds that may manifest in various untold forms, to experiment, and above all to begin to attack the sources of misery.

In our fantastical visions of the near future, we see ourselves reclining on patio furniture while savoring lattes, stocking our larders with the finest of produce from local markets. We are enveloped in sensations of pleasure foreign to our proletarian tongues as we drink freely of the bourgeoisie’s wine. When we travel, we are greeted by friends and strangers with gifts of bounty and luxury. And when guests are received by us in turn we show them a night on the town like no other. A cornucopia of goods, freely taken and given, all at the expense of those who would exploit our lives, all in the spirit of the negation of capitalist relations.

These words have been written with the hope that others, beside ourselves might take up this project and make it their own.

Stories from the Front Lines

We encouraged our readers to send in stories about workplace theft. Here's a selection of the responses, providing a survey of some of the conditions, motivations, and tactics of workers who engage in it.

Many of the themes here will be familiar: food service, retail, alcohol, recreational drug use, bikes, motorcycles, resentment, revenge – the classic regime of the poor and precarious. If the narrators appear to be disproportionately young and located in the service sector, this may not indicate the demographics

of our readership – let alone of those who steal from their employers! – so much as of those who can afford to run the risk of sharing their experiences. Older workers with families or specialized jobs, or workers who lack immigration papers, have more to lose. This does not mean that they do not steal, too – the US Chamber of Commerce would hasten to tell you otherwise – but simply that this society suppresses their voices. We may not get to hear what, how, and why they steal until after the downfall of the system that compels them to.

STEAL FROM WORK TO EAT

I have worked in kitchens and various other corporate jobs all my life. These fucks throw away perfectly good merchandise for no reason at all just for a tax write-off.

Money started running low and I just stopped caring one day. My bosses were probably going to end up throwing it away, so I loaded lots of fruit, vegetables, and about three pounds of hamburger patties into a box, then put it in two garbage bags and then into a garbage can right before the end of the shift. I acted like I was taking the trash out and stashed the bag in some bushes down a back alley. I went home that night and ate until I felt good. Why should I starve when they are throwing it away – for money?

Luther Blisset

STEAL FROM WORK TO RIDE

I work in an upscale bike shop. Where I live, family-owned and local is all the rage and it goes for this bike store as well. Of course, most things start off local and family-owned. The “family” running this place has millions to invest in stock to outdo the competition of local bike enthusiasts, and hence are forcing them out of business. I also get paid a meager single-digit rate per hour. To compensate for this and for the fact that this bike store is yet another spoke, perhaps small, in the large wheel of capitalist industrial society, I garnish my wages by stealing various bike goods. Like my \$60 photocromatic cycling glasses, or some Clif™ bars to ease my hunger, chain lube, cycle lights, etc. All stuff I use or my friends use, so it's not just plain old wanton stealing for the hell of it, though I am typically not opposed to that either.

Pedals

STEAL FROM WORK TO PROVIDE

I am an anarchist who has been working in the service industry for way too long. In this time I have met some of the worst assholes you can imagine. I am not referring the yuppies that come in everyday and humiliate me – who avoid eye contact with me while they make demands, who make harass my female coworkers – the people who ignore me while their scalding-hot plate burns permanent scars into my hands. I'm not referring to the ones who have asked that I be fired because of their bad day. I'm not even referring to the people who make a shitstorm about the dressing not being on the *side* of their salad.

I am referring to the Management. The Supervisors. The Boss. The ones who make sure that they let you know at every opportunity that you are beneath them. That you are expendable. That there are people lined outside the door to take your slave wage job if you get out of line. The ones that make life so precarious that we thank our good fortune to be lucky enough to work regardless of whether our dignity is robbed of us or we are selling our souls in the process. The ones who challenge you to speak back to them with grins on their faces.

Little do these muthafuckas know that we have plans. In fact, we've had them all along. The staff has already been infected thoughts of strikes, labor rights, unionizing, etc. Collective agreements have already been made as to how to strike back, but in the meantime I have mutual aid in mind.

On a daily basis I seek out the radicals and the poor to try and help. I invite my comrades to come feast at the restaurant as well. This is easy considering I work in a progressive town and have several music venues on the same street. People mostly come in between sets for a quick bite or drink. Most of the poor sit and just watch TV with a doubtful look on their face. Some ask

FOR YOUR COMMUNITY

for the cheapest meal or cheapest beer. However, I am already on top of it. Deals have been made with the both the bartenders and the food runners. Beer is free in the form of "samples." Food that I take directly out the window or off the line myself is also free. The gratitude in people's faces is worth every risk. However, to take our discontent and turn it into radical action and sabotage... fucking priceless!

That is only one tactic on a multifaceted approach in restaurant revenge. Another scheme is to order the wrong food on purpose. This tactic can get you into trouble, and some places would actually *throw out* the food, but if you're quick, you can take these meals and box them for street distribution. A related tactic is to take away banquet food from a party before it's finished and box it for street distribution as well.

As the end of the shift nears, I make my way to the back of the restaurant to do a little personal shopping. First to the walk-in fridge where I can choose from an assortment of cheeses, fruits, and veggies. Second to the pantry for canned food, condiments, bread, and pasta I can share with my elderly neighbor who seems to have been forgotten by the outside world. Then to the supply closet in case I am out of toilet paper, hand gloves, and so on.

I exit the workplace with a backpack full of goods for the house and two bags of meals ready to distribute to the countless hungry people I will undoubtedly come across on the way home. I always encounter a few homeless people at the bus stop where I wait. I ask them if they're hungry. Most peer back with a distrustful eye, then notice that I've got bags and utensils waiting. They ask "Why you doin this?" or exclaim "Ain't nobody helping us! Not the police, not nobody!" This opens up the conversations I am happy and willing to have. "We don't need no fucking police if we got each other!"

STEAL FROM WORK FOR EDUCATION

The high school decided that to save costs, all teachers had to provide their own lined and graph paper for their students. Use of the copy machine is free, however. A single page of graph paper and a double-sided printer equals about 500 pages of paper for the math department. Sometimes making the teacher's job easier at the cost of the administration is a genuinely philanthropic act.

Small-Town Educator

STEAL FROM WORK FOR A SELF-ASSIGNED BONUS

Being a busser is often the one of the lowest rungs in a restaurant hierarchy (besides dishwashers). At one job, this meant picking up slack for the waitresses and kitchen throughout closing duties if you were to get out of the place before 11:00, even if you were a minor. Among other tasks, you had to bring a large mesh bag full of linen napkins and liquor stock up from the basement. The napkins were taken to a container right next to the dumpster (a wonderful source of fine, free fabric!) and the liquor was normally taken to the bar.

Slowdowns in the customer flow provided a great time to plot ways to unite these two tasks. Naturally, there was a camera in the liquor closet, but a bag full of napkins is a great way to get from the blind spots past the camera and out of the room. Then you would put the napkins in the container outside, along with whatever else you might want to. Later, after you punched out, no consumers who happened to be in the parking lot thought twice about someone in restaurant uniform going through the napkin bin. Even big bottles of cheap wine aged finely through that process. Self-assigned bonuses taste best!

Ghrey Mann

STEAL FROM WORK TO STAY HYDRATED

The man in the suit and his hostile smoldering eyes are on me. I'm standing in the corner of the movie theater lobby. After unloading the delivery, I hold the wooden palette in my hands. I have to bring it out to the dumpster in the ice rain. My hands sting from the splinters and the wind.

I come back in and bring a cold sweat on my forehead. I go for a cup of water.

"No drinking in the lobby," the manager says.

"I'm sorry," I say.

Since I can't drink his tap water in front of the customers, then I'll just mosey on down to the basement... where I just unloaded three cases of Vitamin Water.

In the basement, all the concessions and supplies are in storage. My hands feel burned and raw as I take the cap off a Vitamin Water.

I can sense the liquid energy hit my teeth, but it only makes my fatigue more vivid. I calculate the math of this steal. Minimum wage plus movie theatre overpriced drinks equals an almost living wage. Except the bosses are disrespectful and the job is dirty. Some of my immigrant friends tell me I'm so American – liking baseball, jeans, and quantifying/monetizing things. But is financial oppression uniquely American?

I decide to hunt down some paper towels and a box of large garbage bags for my house. Time to get even, but this can't be the end.

Dan Larkins, an aspiring author



STEAL FROM WORK FOR ENTERTAINMENT

Half of my DVD collection and sizable portion of my record collection have been stolen from work. We're talking a retail value somewhere in excess of \$2000. Add to that the little things in life, like stationary, toilet paper, cleaning supplies, and lunch money, and it's hard to keep from breaking down into incoherent giggling. Keeping a straight face while the manager explains that the store can afford to be lax on loss prevention because of how much trust he has in employees who don't even make enough to stay above the poverty line is a monumental struggle, but well worth the effort.

Obviously Anonymous

STEAL FROM WORK TO TILL THE SOIL

The sun was about to rise, so I had to be quick. It was the very last shift at the seasonal sugar beet harvest I work at every fall. When the foreman was finally out of sight I slipped out of my car while two coworkers looked out for me. I grabbed the nicest shovel and pitchfork on our site and stuffed them in my trunk. They would be much more useful for the garden back home, or perhaps helping lay the groundwork for the guerilla garden people had been talking about starting at the site of the Really Really Free Market in our town.

Seasonal Worker

STEAL FROM WORK WITH THE WHOLE FAMILY

"Don't leave any evidence behind," my dad told me as we cleaned up our mess. It was fun to be in an office building during the night when no one was there. That photocopier wasn't used to printing anarchist propaganda, but the next day was May Day and it was time to celebrate! We made enough copies of a zine about the Haymarket Martyrs and the origins of May Day to fill a big box.

My dad wasn't familiar with radical politics, so it was exciting to converse about the zines as we folded and stapled them all in the conference room together. The next day I met some friends at a park next to one of the busiest intersections in our small town. "Happy Holidays!" we exclaimed as we handed out the zines to the drivers and passengers stopped at the stoplight.

Pilferer's Progeny

STEAL FROM WORK TO EVEN THE SCORE

I wasted much of my youth working in retail sales. For some reason I did well lying to honest people and selling them stupid shit that was rarely worth half what it sold for. I'm sorry to all the people who I lied to, to whom I talked nonsense about bullshit products that were surely designed to last a short time before breaking. It depresses me to think of how much time I spent trading my life for a low hourly wage, but I'm happy to know that I figured the whole scam out at an early age rather than committing to a lifetime of drudgery.

I've stolen a lot of things from my past employers (all from corporations, I never took a thing from a small shop or individual), usually as a result of me calculating the retail value of the product and adding it to my day's wage in an effort to justify me being there in the first place. It was a fruitless activity though, as no amount of money is worth spending your time in such spirit-crushing environments. The one time I was caught, it was for stealing a number of high-value electronic devices; I was working at large national hardware chain, putting together bicycles in a dusty corner of the warehouse. I have had an obsession with two-wheeled methods of transport since I was a kid: starting with bikes with training wheels, then mountain-bike racing around high school, and more recently motorcycles. Riding means feeling free and I rationalize that the tunnel-vision-mind effect you get when you're really in the zone on two wheels of any kind is a good way to decompress from all the bullshit you face in a normal day.

Putting together those piece-of-shit bikes was not fun, though. Department store bikes are a whole different breed from the quality rides you can find in a local bike shop. Like everything else sold in a major retail outlet, they are made of shit and are not meant to last long. The

manufacturers choose the cheapest components and materials and do their best to flash up the bike with decals, glaring colors, and weird and useless frame shapes, all to try to make a travesty of engineering that appeals to people who know or care little about bikes. If ridden with any purpose, the retail store bicycle will essentially self-destruct in a short number of rides. One could spend a little more on a good bike from a dedicated bike shop, or purchase a well-maintained used bike from a reputable manufacturer and enjoy a tool that will last almost a lifetime. The best bet would be to steal one from a larger bike shop, but make sure the owner is a rich capitalist asshole that deserves it. Most good bike shops are owned by people who simply love riding and these types of shops generally make very little money.

I had been madly putting bikes together all summer, when – thanks to the company's tactic of outsourcing payroll – I got robbed of more than a couple hundred dollars worth of work due to some oversight. I went to my manager, who was a perfect fit for retail management due to her inability to feel compassion for her fellow human being, and asked her to correct the error. I still distinctly remember her telling me that it was my problem and up to me to sort it out. What the fuck? My job description of wrenching on bikes for minimum wage shouldn't include taking care of managerial duties. I attempted on numerous occasions to contact the person responsible for payroll but I was never successful in getting the problem resolved. So I started taking back from the store what they owed me and more.

Fortunately, I was also employed in the same store as a retail clerk for the outdoor department, which sold a variety of high value items. I took a number of handheld GPS units. They were perfect: small and expensive, easily sold

for cash. Once I tasted the satisfaction of taking from the corporation, I couldn't get enough. I started taking other products and I even figured out a scheme for selling a new bike as a damaged "used item" for a massive discount to a friend who was broke and needed a bike (although reflecting on this, I think I wronged him by letting him ride that piece of shit). It made my new found criminality even better that the owner of the store was the personification of rich asshole. Long story short, I got caught because someone I sold one of the hand-held GPSes to snitched on me. They interrogated me and I spilled the beans – I was young and scared, though now mum's the word for ever and ever. They called the cops, and I was supposed to do all this bullshit legal stuff but nothing ever came of it. I ended up having to get back the units from the people I sold them to and return them to the store, but the store managers never found out about the numerous other items I'd taken. My parents were super pissed, I remember.

I can't and won't ever work like that again. Apart from the utter boredom and massive depression that accompanies standing around like a robot all day, I can't stand the idea of making my boss super-rich while I get crumbs. I obsessively calculate the profit the asshole owners make and compare it to my wages, and the urge to make up the difference is too strong. I'm not lazy. I enjoy working when I know it is for a better future and that I'm doing something to help better my life, as well as the lives of the people I care about. I hate seeing the waste these stores create. I think the leeway they are given by the government to trade their negative effects on the environment for the supposed betterment of the economy is fucking absurd. I don't agree that a person or company should be allowed to destroy the world just to make a profit. It seems so pointless to me to make all

this fucking money and then just die of cancer because of all the shit you put into the land.

I'm not money-hungry either, although it sounds like I am when I talk about stealing to make up for what I was owed. I just don't like the idea of some asshole who spends his days at the lake on his Jetsport 2000 boat getting rich while I stand around in an artificial environment, slowly dying and not making enough to make my time off nearly worth the time spent at work (a pointless aspiration at any wage, I've realized). It was more about revenge than greed.

I could be a farmer. I enjoy gardening and building things. I'm not averse to physical labor, but me and the hourly wage aren't compatible. Salary would be even worse. I think everyone should have a large organic garden that could take care of all of their vegetable and possibly fruit needs, depending on climate. I don't know really, I don't think my idea of a good life is compatible with modern life but I don't care. Someone will talk about the profit motive and I have no answer for that. Whatever, let me die naked and free – we're all just a blink of the eye on planet earth anyways.

I know that the human spirit is smothered when it is subjected to working in such places as I've described. The excuses for the survival of the economy ring hollow because quality of years always trumps quantity. Once I started accepting absolutes like this and just saying, "I don't give a fuck" to all these intellectual arguments about economies and technology, I started feeling a lot more human. Some asshole on some message board will likely respond to me and call me an idiot and reference a bunch of political science bullshit and some literature written by some asshole I've never heard of and make me look stupid but I just don't care. It is so liberating. I'm never getting a job again. Everyone who is able to should steal from work.

Kid Fucking Vengeance

STEAL FROM WORK TO PARTY

Summer 2000 was the most enjoyable example of employee theft I've experienced at the workplace. I worked at an alcohol distribution warehouse where employee theft was common. There was so much theft going on that it had become a point of tension between the owners and workers. They even hired a manager specifically to tackle the problem. This manager was universally despised among all workers.

Some were alcoholics; some stole to sell beer and wine on the street. Still others simply stole to get drunk. In this particular instance, it was a bunch of teenagers barely out of high school looking to get beer for their party. I was working second shift in the truck, shipping; these new guys had been working there only a couple weeks and already had got the drift of how things worked.

If a case of beer had a bottle broken in it, it was no good to ship, so it would go to the breaker pile, from which employees and friends of employees could buy \$1 wines and \$5 cases of beer. Needless to say, I had a technique for loading cases of beer where the case would drop on a corner and only one beer would break, effectively ruining the case, sending it to the breaker pile. So these teenagers came up to me saying, "We heard you were the guy to talk to if we wanted to get a case of beer from the breaker pile." I asked them their beer of preference.

About an hour later, sure enough, a case of beer fell, breaking one bottle, ruining the case. I quickly loaded it onto the pallet going to the breaker pile and rushed it over. However, the case had become so soggy that when I lifted it, it fell apart, and a second bottle fell, only to break, ruining the case. I said disappointedly,

"Oh man!" and scrambled to gather the unbroken bottles from the ground. Half the workplace came over to see what was going on. The teenagers asked what was wrong, and I replied "It's ruined. It isn't any good now." Frustrated, I grabbed a bottle, cracked it open, and began to chug it down. The teenagers paused, watching me drink, then grabbed bottles and joined in. After they started, everyone else rushed over, drinking down the "ruined" beer.

I was on my second beer when the anti-theft manager came around the corner and saw the spectacle of all the workers drinking illegally. I looked him in the eye defiantly as I turned my bottle up in my lips, the beverage pouring down my throat in rebellion. He stood there for a second, realized it was a battle he could only lose, and walked away. We laughed about the incident and I promised the teenagers I'd get them a better case as soon as I could.

Argumentative Midwesterner

STEAL FROM WORK TO ROCK

The greatest thing about my job is being able to listen to music on the company-provided MP3 players while I work, but I never liked having to return home to my lacking-a-music-player room at the end of the night. So last night I devised a not-so-elaborate plan to liberate one of these players and bring it home with me. I wrapped it up in a garbage bag and put it in the bottom of the dirty rag basket I use to clean the rooms, then told a co-worker I was going to clean out the changing rooms. I cleaned the locker room, but not before putting the newest addition to my belongings in my backpack. As I write this I'm listening to some of my favorite bands on my brand new (sort of) MP3 player.

The Help

I got out of school and walked the 25 minutes to the Baskin Robbins downtown, passing my coworkers and heading to the back to grab an apron and a visor. As I got dressed, I checked the clock: 2:45, early. I was almost always on time, and always showed up for my shifts. While this may seem like the bare minimum expected of an employee, being where I was supposed to be when I was supposed to be there and not spending whole shifts on the phone shouting at my significant other qualified me as one of the best employees there. This is because my boss hired exclusively high school students. The advantage of that was that she could pay us very little (after nearly three years I was making 75 cents more than when I started); she even had a system for screwing us out of our tips from time to time. She could also mess with our schedules and push us around in all sorts of other ways. The disadvantage was that somebody like me, who was really quite bad at doing my job, could be a *star employee*.

I clocked in and went to deal with the line of customers extending out the door. It was like this all summer, every summer, from opening till close: never-ending lines of customers, each more disrespectful than the last. Kids upset that their *Shrek* cups didn't look like the one in the picture, parents furious that buying ice cream hadn't stopped their bratty kids from being upset.

I took the first order, two single scoops in cups. Those cost \$1.80 each. I turned to the second register, the one facing away from customers: when you were using it, your back was to the web-cam which my boss watched from her home. I entered in one single scoop. The person paid with a five and I gave them back \$1.40, making a mental note that there was now an extra \$1.80 in the register. It wasn't just that I thought that my time was worth more than I was being paid; *this was how I solved my boredom*. This was how I kept from getting angry. I

STEAL FROM WORK TO STAY FOCUSED



would do this over and over again throughout the afternoon and night. As customers verbally abused me and looked at me like I was an idiot, I smiled blankly, lost in the math of how much I could skim off their order. The real beauty of this trick was that even if one night there was no opportune time to swipe the money, few bosses will seriously investigate when there's *too much* money in the register.

There were a dozen games like this one could play to stay entertained during a shift. My coworker, Devon, was staying interested by selling weed out of the store. Double cupping single scoops with a bag in between the cups, his customers leaving twenty dollars in a crumpled cup beneath the dumpster in back for him to fetch on his next cigarette break. I had taught him that trick back before I'd figured out my new tricks with mental arithmetic. I had no fear that he would notice what I was doing, as he was fully preoccupied and probably high as well.

Then there was the manager, Natalie, who happened to be my girlfriend and was no doubt in the process of doing the same thing I was. At the end of the night we'd compare figures, usually coming out with about \$40 each. My friend, Wes, walked into the store and waited patiently for me to take a break. When I finally met him out back, I had a treat: "I finally figured out how to make the smoothies vegan!" I handed over the smoothie with a giant cup of granola from the toppings bar. This was my favorite part of the job, and of every food service job I've worked since: gift-giving. It's so easy to be generous when you don't actually own the things you're giving away.

Natalie stuck her head out the back door: "We're gonna swap the kids at Nice Slice some milkshakes, what topping do you want?"

I thought for a moment. "Broccoli and onions, and one that's half no cheese for Wes." We had relationships all over town. We traded

ice cream products to the kids at Nice Slice for pizza, the kids at Starbucks for fancy coffee, and the kids at Bruegger's for bagels; a couple of my coworkers had even swapped with the guy at the liquor store a couple of times. Food was the most common thing taken, given away, or traded, but it certainly didn't stop there. Rubber gloves were in demand for those of us with graffiti habits; empty (and sometimes full) whipped cream cans were taken for recreational purposes (if they weren't consumed on sight); for our friends who lived on their own, toilet paper, cleaning supplies, saran wrap and any other household items were always welcome. The thing about food service is that there's so much waste that keeping track of supplies is extremely difficult, so the question about everything in the store was "Is this item useful to anyone outside of an ice cream shop?"

Wes thanked me for the food and headed out to write his name on other people's stuff until I got off at 10:30. When the door had been locked, the last customer served, the floor mopped, the windows wiped, and the register counted – \$42.35 for me, and similar adjustments for Natalie – I turned to her: "How many folks are coming over?"

"A lot."

I opened the freezer. "Vanilla chocolate chip?"

"Sounds good," she said, grabbing a sleeve of single scoop cups off the shelf beneath the counter. I pulled one of the 5 gallon tubs from the freezer in back and rolled it out the back door before setting the alarm – y'know, to stop burglars.

Star Employee

STEAL FROM WORK FOR DOWNRIGHT DADAISM

OK, so there's your garden-variety stealing from work, which is basically about survival. Of course, it can never go past a certain point, since you also need the job for survival. Fair enough, right?

But there's another kind of stealing from work for people who can afford to lose their jobs or who just don't care anymore. People who are so fed up with wage slavery they're ready to abolish themselves if no one's gonna abolish it. This kind of stealing from work isn't about survival, it isn't about accomplishing goals – so it doesn't have any built-in limits. It's a kind of psychological terrorism to make sure the bosses never know what to expect. It doesn't help the ones who do it – working class revenge almost never does – but it shows the war is still on.

Back in high school, I used to work in the dish room at a college cafeteria. We'd get three thousand, four thousand dirty dishes coming in on the conveyer belt every meal – people getting scalding water in their shoes, skin coming off, the whole nine yards. The only way I could handle it was to grab a dish about every half hour, go out the back door, and sling it against the trash compactor as hard as I could. Maybe that's not stealing, exactly, but the only thing I wanted to do with anything in that place was destroy it. If we'd taken over our workplace, Argentina-style, I would have voted to burn it to the ground, not to self-manage it or whatever.

That same year, my buddy "Bill" applied at a grocery store. First day on the job the manager shows him around, gives him the whole routine, and then puts him in the back room to move stock or some shit. There are big boxes of whipped cream there, and as soon as the guy is gone Bill huffs all the whipped cream and passes out. The manager comes back and sees him there, with all the cans and everything. Can you imagine what he must have thought? Like, *"I have to run a business with these fuckups?"*

A few years later, "Chris" worked for a month behind the register at a gas station and spent the whole time calling Belgium on their land line. He ditched out just before the bill came in. He used to do shit like that a lot.

But my favorite story is when "Zach" worked graveyard at UPS. All night, he would unload boxes off a conveyer belt with this camera pointed right at him. He did that shit for months, getting more and more pissed off. One night he comes in and he's the only one working in the room, lugging all these boxes. Finally he picks up one of them, carries it over to the camera and sets it down, and cuts it open with his pocketknife. Inside it's chewing gum, case after case of the stuff. He takes one of them out, opens it up, unwraps a stick of gum, and puts it in his mouth, looking right into the camera the whole time, and starts chewing, real slow. Then he walks out.

Class Warrior

STEAL FROM WORK EVEN AFTER YOU QUIT

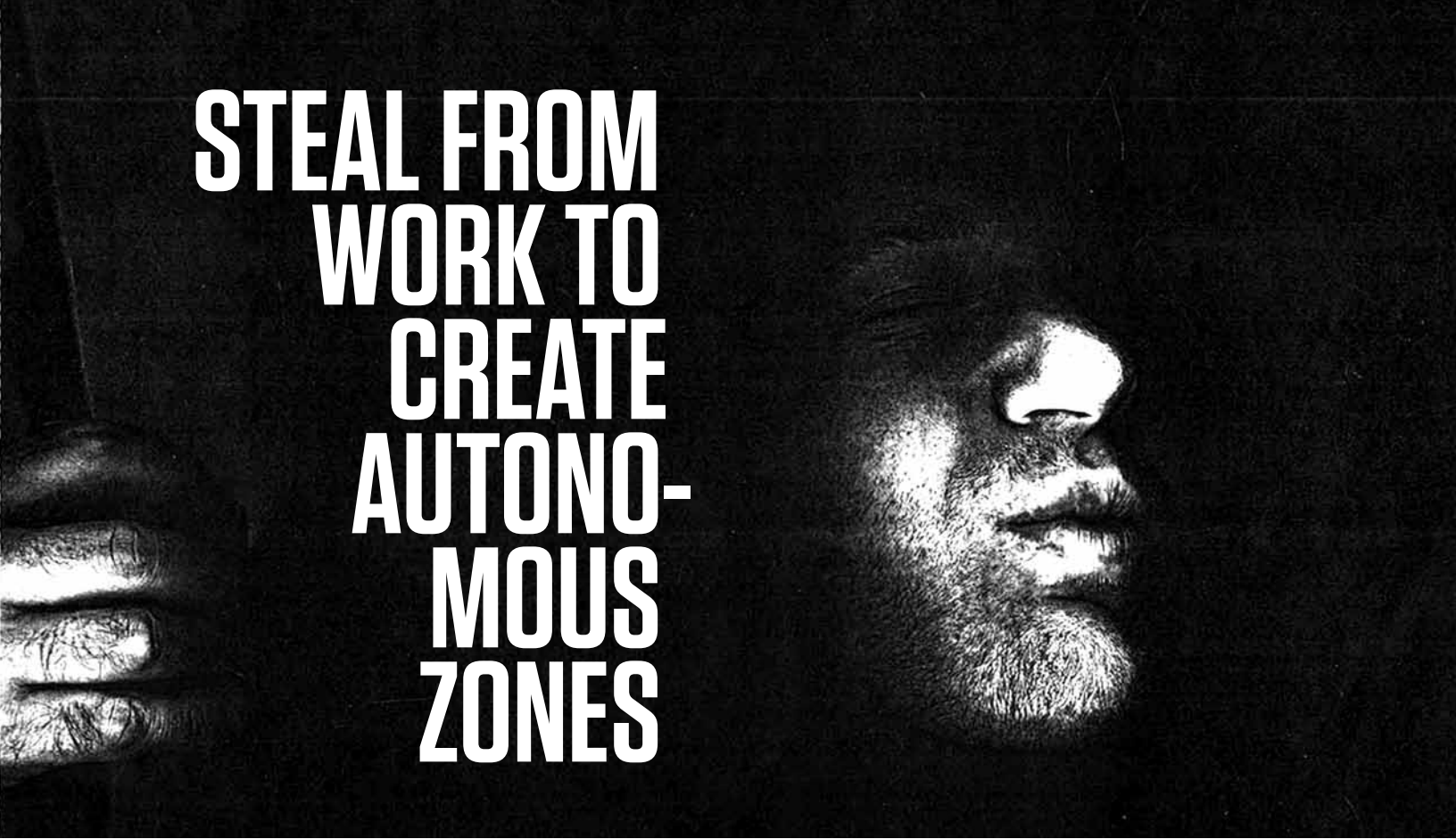
Back when I used to work more, I used to steal more. When I worked at a chain one-hour photo place, the upper management sent us a new manager to cut back on employee theft and hookups (which was why most of us worked there). But by being quite polite to the new manager, I was still able to steal all the film and printing I needed for myself and my friends. A year later, I stopped by the store. "The same manager still work here?" I asked the man behind the counter.

"Christ, it's a Nazi regime in here," he said. We talked for a minute about working there, then he asked: "Can I help you with anything?"

"Not really," I said. "I'm just here to steal DV tapes."

"Oh," he said. And I picked up what I needed and left.

Random Name



STEAL FROM WORK TO CREATE AUTONO- MOUS ZONES

It was the 20th century, back before the internet really took over, and I was trying to make a zine but I didn't have any money to pay for copying. I'd lost my last office job after I accidentally left my zine masters in the copy machine when I sneaked in to use it one night. Embarrassing!

So I went to the local copying store – it was a chain, and this same story was playing out all over the country, but I'll leave the name out just for good form – and hung around until I heard the Misfits behind the counter. Back then employees were allowed to blast a stereo even during daytime hours; it was a different era. The employee who had put it on was this big skin-head-looking guy.

"The Misfits, huh?" From that moment, we were friends. It was an unwritten rule that if you were into punk or ska or other underground music, you got a discount. He copied my zine for me, and in return I used to bring him food and other stuff I ripped off, since with the wages he was getting he had to sleep in the back of his friend's truck.

Then they put him on night shift by himself, and things started getting interesting. Now instead of waiting for him to do a run of 100 for me when the boss wasn't looking, I could join him behind the counter, doing runs of 200, 500, even 2000. I learned to use some of the big machines. Customers would come in and mistake me for an employee, and I would help them with stuff while my friend knocked out his jobs for the night. I probably spent three nights a week there, working and hanging out from midnight to 5:00 AM. I remember stumbling back to my apartment in the early morning loaded down with crates of photocopies, watching the street sweepers and paper delivery trucks pass – the city's secret underbelly. Sometimes I made conversation with homeless people or other night owls like myself, up to no good. Surprisingly often, they would demand copies of the zines I had made, as if sensing they were not part of the world of sales and bosses.

Despite all the copying he and I were doing for ourselves, my friend was still a more

efficient worker than most of the other employees, because he was careful not to make mistakes and waste paper. For good or for ill, big-time workplace thieves usually make better workers. Much later, when he got promoted to management, I wondered whether there was a connection there – whether stealing from his employers actually helped prepare him to swindle wealthy customers. At the time, though, that was still far in the future.

We took smoking breaks together, standing out in front of the store at three in the morning comparing notes on music, politics, gossip, our philosophies of life. I never hung out with this guy outside the copy place – we were from different crowds – but our mutual commitment to photocopying drew us together, even if he was doing it for work and I was doing it to overthrow the government. There is a kind of camaraderie unique to those who labor together; I bet it pre-dates wage slavery by a thousand generations.

Other friends of his started spending their nights there, mingling with the eccentrics and insomniacs who came in to make copies and ended up making conversation. The place became a sort of night-shift salon where the most unlikely cast of characters gathered to jest, scheme, and experiment. In the witching hour, we entered an alternate reality in which we ran the place, like the goblins that come out at night in fairy tales. The store had just expanded to offer personal computer stations, and a handful of high-school dropouts taught themselves programming between 2:00 AM and 5:00 AM every night. Some of them later made successful careers for themselves during the dot-com boom, defying the barriers of social class and education. Meanwhile, once his assignments and my projects were done, my friend and I would experiment with the cutting and binding machines, retracing Gutenberg's steps as we lovingly hand-crafted unique editions of our favorite books.

The company had recently switched their machines from a plug-in counter system to a primitive card system, to try to thwart the various scams based around the counters: resetting them with pins or magnets, stealing an extra one, just slamming them against something and claiming you didn't know what happened. Of course, my friend could produce the cards at his leisure. Whenever I mailed out a zine to someone, I threw a \$100 copying card in with it: *Now go start your own zine.*

Corresponding with people around the country, we discovered this was going on elsewhere as well: it seemed that everywhere there was a night shift at one of these franchises, there were people like us. We heard about a branch in the Bay Area where they were so sure of their power they even had bands play late-night shows right in the middle of the customer service area! We'd already developed a feeling of ownership of the store, but now this came to extend to the entire chain. Everywhere we went we looked for one, and usually we clicked with the employees we met. When we didn't, we fearlessly looted the places all the same, more brazenly than we ever would have anywhere else: we were discovering the feeling of entitlement normally reserved for the rich, that comes from feeling one is on one's own territory. We workers never feel like we are on our own territory, so we never stand up for ourselves – but the night-shift salon had worked wonders for our self-confidence.

Across the continent, a network was forming of employees and volunteers like myself. Now, when one of us discovered the masters for an exciting new zine, we made twenty copies of it instead of 200, and mailed those to twenty different stores around the country that would produce 1000 copies each. We believed in freedom of the press, god damn it, and the more photocopies we stole and circulated outside the exchange economy, the better we

understood what that really meant. What had started as humble workplace pilfering was escalating into a full-scale insurgency as we spread from city to city like a virus. Like a virus, we proliferated by seizing the means of production and using it to produce more of ourselves: the zines, it turned out, were the coded DNA of another society.


What happened? The immune system of corporate America swung into action, and various people were fired or even led out of stores in handcuffs – but that clumsy show of force would have had little effect on its own. In some ways, we were victims of our own success. The most politicized ones gravitated to more direct forms of confrontation, which took them far at first but ultimately isolated them from everyone else – there’s always the danger of being seduced into direct conflict on unfavorable terrain before you’re ready for it. Meanwhile, new opportunities opened up for others among us, in the form of promotions and new

career paths; even when these resulted directly from collective illegal activities, they ultimately tamed the ones who pursued them. But by far the most significant factor was the penetration of the internet into everyday life – that simply outmoded the territory we’d been fighting for, and everyone had to start over again to get their bearings. I think our story must be a fairly typical one.

A lot of water has passed under the bridge, but I’ll always treasure memories from the high point of the copying wars, when everyone except the manager himself was in on our secret society. I remember one night, I walked into the store at 7:00 PM. with a friend visiting from the other side of the country. Behind the counter was an employee I had not yet been introduced to, and a new employee he was training. We could hear him explaining to her:

“You see those two people who just came in? Whatever they ask for, *give it to them for free.*”





“The U.S. Chamber of Commerce estimates that 75 percent of all employees steal at least once, and that half of these steal repeatedly. The Chamber also reports that one of every three business failures is the direct result of employee theft. According to the US Department of Commerce, employee dishonesty costs American business in excess of \$50 billion annually.”

Hire Power Associates

Meanwhile, the richest 1% of society own more financial wealth than all the bottom 95% combined. That means the wealth of the upper upper class is greater than all of the wealth of the upper class and middle class added to all of the wealth of the working class and underclass.

Can you imagine how much more unequal that distribution would be if employees didn't steal?

Putting Yourself Through College—for the Rest of Us.

How one Cashier Stole Higher Education from a Hardware Store

This is a tale of two cities. Both are nominally suburbs of the same Rust Belt metropolis, but both are large enough to be major cities themselves. They share the same local bus system and the same daily newspaper. What separates them is ten miles of suburban sprawl and the tremendous chasm of class privilege.

The first city, which I will call Huffmanville, is what generally comes to mind when one hears the word *suburb*. Mansions with chemical-green lawns, each a respectful distance from its neighbors, face winding lanes without sidewalks for mile after mile. The small central business district is promoted throughout the greater metropolitan area as a tourist attraction and “shopping destination,” and the town itself is consistently ranked by national business magazines as a desirable place to live and own property. Historic buildings, in which generations-old businesses were long ago forced out by high rents, now house high-end clothing retailers, specialty wine shops, and a Barnes & Noble bookstore. Trendy and expensive restaurants rival those of the metropolis. Attractive white people can frequently be seen jogging on a network of bike trails (intended for recreation only!), wearing *Spandex* on their buttocks and electronics on their faces.

The other city, which I will call New Stolp, is what is known to demographers as a “satellite city” of the metropolis, rather than a true suburb. This means it used to be a separate city

before the expanding suburbs caught up with it, and there is still a large, relatively old, relatively dense urban core. For those of you on the East Coast, think Newark or Paterson; if you're on the West Coast, think San Bernardino. This urban part of New Stolp is mainly lower- and working-class, and includes a large Mexican immigrant population. The billboards in town are in Spanish, and the main drag is lined with *carnicerías*, liquor stores, pawn shops, and predatory "payday loan" vendors. The Latin Kings are active there, and high-school students at New Stolp East are subjected to searches using metal detectors upon their arrival each morning. The police prowl neighborhoods keeping an eye on the residents, not for possible intruders, and routinely flush sleeping vagrants from the bus station and the parks. In the downtown area, the old stone and masonry buildings are mostly vacant, tenantless. Business leaders have been clamoring about "revitalization" for years, and the process of gentrification has only recently begun along the river's edge.

The people in the suburban sprawl outside New Stolp (but still technically within the municipal limits) do not identify with the urban core, and will always make some kind of qualifying statement when they tell you where they live ("It's not *New Stolp* New Stolp; it's actually a nice area..."). And finally, as if to give expression to this division and make it more formalized, a county line runs through the municipal area such that Huffmanville and the suburban part of New Stolp are in one county, and the old, poor, urban part of New Stolp is in another.

In the middle Aughts, I was a commuter across this gap between worlds: I lived and worked in New Stolp (the urban part), and I went to a well-funded private liberal-arts college with a leafy campus in Huffmanville. Tuition there was expensive, and it wasn't the kind of place that gave out a lot of scholarship or financial aid money – or maybe they did, but

I was ineligible for some reason (probably my grades). I don't know. Basically, the only reason I went there was that it was close by and I had already taken all the courses I could at community college. But regardless, it was expensive, and I was determined not to go into debt to pay for it. Debt makes you a slave – I had already known that for a long time. So I decided before I even enrolled that I wasn't going to take out any loans, ever: I would only continue going to school if I could pay for it at the bursar's office with cash.

For a long time I only took one three-credit course per semester, because that was all I could afford. I rode the bus into Huffmanville on the days I had class, and worked all the days I didn't. It was demoralizing. Things could have gone on that way forever – slowly, plodding along, one course a semester, three days a week – on and on, and in ten or twelve years or so I would eventually have graduated. But this was unacceptable to me. *Why should that pretty, leafy campus be accessible only to the children of rich Huffmanville parents?* I fumed, and realized that if I wanted to graduate from the place in a human timeframe I was going to have to do something different. I would have to find another way to feed those swine at the bursar's office. I would have to *make my own financial aid*.

Over the span of less than a year after that decision I successfully embezzled more than twenty-five thousand dollars from my place of employment: a hardware store, owned by two Huffmanville businessmen, where I worked as a cashier. I was never caught or fired. And I graduated from college one year later.

The store in which I worked was part of a regional chain of between ten and twenty others, all based out of a flagship store in Huffmanville. Definitely not a mom-and-pop operation, but not Wal-Mart, either. In fact, looking back, the

size of the company was probably ideal: if it had been much smaller (a single store, or even a handful), I might have felt guilty about stealing from them – making things even tougher for the little guy than they already are. On the other hand, if it had been a big multinational corporation, there probably would have been too many security measures in place for me to do what I did. As it was, the chain was wholly owned by a father-and-son team, both big shots in the local Huffmanville business elite – there was even a building at my college named after them. The father had started the chain with the main store in Huffmanville, and the son was now president. This was also something that suited me: unlike many cases of workplace theft, I knew exactly who I was stealing from – had *looked them both in the eye* when they dropped by our store one time for a surprise inspection. And I knew they could afford it.

Likewise, the particular store I worked in was probably the one in the entire chain best suited to large-scale cash liberation: although the chain included several stores in Huffmanville and spread out in other towns and suburbs all around, ours was the only one in New Stolp, on the edge of one of the city's poorest neighborhoods. It received the least attention from the owners, since it made the least money (though obviously still enough for \$25,000 to be able to disappear unnoticed). The store had no security cameras (although the management claimed there were hidden ones, every employee knew this was a lie), there were very few clear lines of sight (old layout; shelving nearly up to the ceiling), and the cash registers used an antiquated computer system since the owners were too cheap to replace it.

The standard wage for grunts like me was seven dollars per hour – just enough over the minimum wage, the managers must have thought, to buy our loyalty. When I started working there, they had me doing everything

in the store – from cleaning the bathrooms and stocking merchandise to cutting keys (using a manual grinder, not the fully automated ones you see nowadays at Home Depot) and filling propane tanks for grills (our store didn't participate in an exchange program – we actually refilled the tanks ourselves from a giant one in the alley out back behind the store). But when the managers learned how proficient I was at running the cash register and handling minor problems that arose there (and I was), they made me a permanent cashier – and eventually, as they gained confidence in me, they began to give me a considerable degree of autonomy in doing my job. By a certain point I was basically running the front end of the store for them single-handedly, during the time I was on the clock. In their eyes, of course, this made me a valuable employee. They liked the fact that I didn't *need* supervision, and I was just as happy not to have it. I taught myself how to trouble-shoot the computer system, made snap judgments, and took care of problems with customers on my own without having to radio the manager-on-duty for help with every little thing.

To my benefit, they seemed never to consider that this same problem-solving ability of mine could be put to uses contrary to theirs.

I am what you'd call good with numbers. Remembering them, adding and subtracting them, keeping accurate running totals, all in my head – a skill which would prove to be quite useful, given the fact that my job involved handling a nearly ceaseless flow of cash every hour of every day, with minimal supervision. In some ways it's one of the oldest stories in capitalism – the savvy accountant ripping off his less-mathematically-inclined wealthy clients – but there were also important differences. By this time in my life I was already familiar with anarchist principles, and I therefore considered all of my interests and those of the store owners

to be in polar opposition. I wanted to inflict as many losses on the store as I could possibly get away with, even in ways that did not directly benefit me.

One of the ways I did this was by charging customers less for their purchases than I was supposed to. Like I said, I was very good at my job – and as anyone who has ever worked as a cashier before knows, all this really means is that I was good at getting customers through the line *quickly*. Sometimes my hands moved items over the counter and into bags so fast that half of them didn't scan, and the customer got a little unexpected discount. Other times an item had trouble scanning, so I'd either make up a (ridiculously low) price or – if the customer looked like they'd be down with it and no one else was looking – just drop it into a bag with a smirk and a shrug. Is that belt sander coming up in the computer as invalid? Just ring it up as \$2.00 under “miscellaneous” and you're good to go!

Some items in the store didn't have bar codes, like nuts and bolts and so forth, and so we relied on customers to write the prices on a bag, using the “honor system.” This was a ridiculous expectation, not least because the sign telling them to do so was in English only and most of our customers spoke Spanish. If a customer did write down the prices, I had to charge what they wrote, but if they didn't (which was most of the time), I was free to charge them whatever I wanted! Even the quantities were at my discretion. So, say a person had what looked like forty screws worth 59 cents each in a bag (total price = \$23.60): I'd ring up twenty “miscellaneous hardware” items at five cents each (total = \$1.00), resulting in a net loss to the store of \$22.60! Most customers were all too happy to accept the new prices I offered them. Some were merely confused, however, and stood examining their receipt after I had handed them their change, wondering why they hadn't been

charged more. *Don't question it*, I tried to convey with a quick look of the eyes. *Just take your shit and go.*

It was always important for me to maintain the *appearance* of doing my job accurately and correctly, at least as long as no one looked too closely. For instance, I'd always be very careful about doing anything if there were other people in line – let's face it, some customers are as good as narcs. And this may sound bad, but I was always more wary about giving unauthorized discounts to customers if they were white – it just seemed to me that white people would be the most likely to inform on me. Why certain people feel they have to protect the interests of the store owners at the expense of themselves, the employees, and everyone else is beyond me, but some of them do it.

My fellow employees soon figured out that I'd turn a blind eye to almost anything that could be carried out the front door and into their cars. And when I noticed customers who looked like they were trying to shoplift – since I couldn't openly tell them *Hey, take what you need, I'm on your side* – I would step away from the register and pretend to be busy doing something else so they'd feel like they could “sneak past” without my noticing.

Of course, I'd steal whatever I needed, too – paint, tools, light bulbs, and so on – but I didn't sell them or anything like that. They were just things that I needed. In order to get the money, I had to use other tactics.

In the primitive computer program that the cash registers used, it took only a single keystroke, made by the cashier at any time during a sale, to turn that sale into a refund of the same amount. In mathematical terms, all of the signs on the prices would be flipped instantaneously from positive to negative, meaning that the computer expected money to be removed from the drawer rather than put in. So, naturally, if the cashier wanted the amount of cash in the

drawer to stay the same as the amount on the sales summary at the end of the day, he or she would just have to take the amount in question out of the drawer and stick it in a pocket.

A simple concept, but surprisingly difficult to execute repeatedly without getting caught. How did I manage to pilfer twenty-five grand this way? The answer lies in the principle of sustainability, something we radicals like to talk about a lot – being patient, knowing when enough is enough, being aware of your limits and not exceeding them. Other cashiers stole money this way too – obviously, I wasn't the first person to think of it – but they were too greedy, or too obvious, or too impatient, emptied half their drawers in a shift and got busted. I was able to skim well over a hundred dollars a day off the top and sustain it for close to a year, all while maintaining the outward appearance of a diligent worker and arousing little or no suspicion.

During this period, the store was robbed. The robbers were smart: they hit the store at closing time on the biggest shopping day of the Christmas season, when the safe was as chock-full of cash as it would ever be. I wasn't there that night, and the owners didn't disclose how much was taken, but from my knowledge of the store's operations it couldn't have been more than five or six thousand dollars. It still brings a smile to my face to know that I got away with far more loot than those robbers ever did. True, it took longer – but I didn't have to make use of fear or intimidation or run the risk of somebody getting killed.

I truly felt bad for the assistant manager who had a gun stuck in her face; she didn't deserve it. To my knowledge she never received any acknowledgement from the owners that she had

had her life threatened on behalf of *their* money. She even had to open the next day.

As far as I know, no member of the management at the store ever discovered what I was up to – or if they did, they had no way of proving it. I was too careful. But my guess is they had no clue. Anyone who is familiar with hourly-wage-work power relationships knows that even the weakest circumstantial evidence is sufficient for a boss to terminate an employee at will. If they had known about something like what I was doing, they'd have done *something* about it. Realistically, they probably assumed I engaged in some minor theft (try finding an employee – especially in a place like New Stolp – who doesn't!), but they clearly had no inkling about the *scale*, or else I would have been given the boot in two seconds flat, and possibly brought up on charges.

Perhaps ironically, when I stopped working at the store it was because I had achieved my goal: I was now going to college full-time in my senior year, thanks to the money I had stolen. But the *really* ironic part is that I now regret what I did – not the stealing money part, but the spending it on college tuition part. I now dream of all the *other* things I could have done with twenty-five thousand dollars besides hand it over to them in exchange for a degree I now consider to be next to worthless. I could have bought a house; I could have opened my own anarchist reading library and coffee shop; I could have given the money to a struggling free clinic or community center...

I may have pulled one over on my employer, but in the end the bursar's office got the last laugh.

March 29, 2010

The Angry Po-Boy Collective



In Search of the Great Homer

The following extract is from the book *A Worker in a Worker's State*, written by Miklós Haraszti in 1972 when he was an employee at the Red Star Tractor Factory and suppressed by the Hungarian government as a threat to socialism. Throughout history, workers have stolen from their workplaces under capitalism, socialism, and communism alike. Haraszti suggests that this stealing is actually the most creative and enterprising activity that takes place in the factory, implying the possibility of a world in which all labor would be equally creative and free. His text also provides a window into the lives of workers in the Soviet Bloc, revealing the void at the heart of the supposed workers' utopia. So long as there are managers, workers will rob their workplaces – not just for personal gain, but to keep alive that which is best in themselves.

A homer is an object made for his own purpose or pleasure by a worker using his factory's machines and materials. It is not made for sale as an additional source of income. The word does not appear in most dictionaries, but appears to have been the most widely used equivalent in England and North America.

"Homers? Is there any chance of homers?" is often asked by those thinking of leaving this factory, when they're tipped off about another place. Many factors must be taken into account when you want to change your job. Although for most workers homers are not vital, they'll make them if they have the chance, and they'll try to create the opportunity if it doesn't exist already. Some will pay a high price to obtain

a position which allows them to make homers.

The government journals portray workers who make homers as thieves. Similarly, the factory bosses "fight" against homers. Warnings and sanctions rain down on the heads of those who misappropriate materials, use machines for their own purposes, or tap the factory's supply of electricity. If the factory guard finds a homer in our pockets or on our bodies, he has caught a thief.

But even if the journals don't acknowledge it, both workers and bosses know very well that this is just words. The real damage to the factory is the time lost in making an object – time which cannot be utilized by the factory. "If the foreman knows you're making homers, he'll send one of us to fetch some glue and he'll

stick you to your machines for the rest of the day,” said my neighbor, joking with someone who was borrowing a tool from him to make a homer.

The secret of this passion for homers is not a simple one. It can't be reduced to the minimal value of the knick-knacks which the workers actually make and, especially on piece-rates, how long they take bears no relation to the value of the time lost.

Workers on hourly wages turn to homers when they have given to the factory what the factory has demanded, or when they have a free moment. If hourly workers make homers they don't risk anything – except being found out. Not only will they then be punished, the discovery will also offer an excellent opportunity to demand increased production from them.

Workers on conveyor belts, or on fully automatic machines, completely delivered from the pressures of time, are only likely to make homers in their dreams. Technological development has given these workers a moral superiority, which at least forces the government satirists to look for a new theme in their attacks.

But the piece-rate worker manages his time himself, and each minute that passes without an increase in the number of pieces represents a financial loss for him. With the constant pressure of piece-rates, the factory does all it can to preach the morality of labor. According to the rate-fixers' estimates, the piece-rate workers should themselves renounce their passion for theft. In fact, management has to admit that nothing – neither prohibitions, nor punishments, nor public humiliation by the security guards – will persuade them to give it up.

Perhaps it is more than an empty play on words to say that we “loot” [that is, cut corners in violation of regulations] in order to have time to steal.

Making homers is a real addiction; those who go in for it know that they do themselves more harm than good. The bosses and the rate-fixers view the persistent refusal of piece-rate workers to give up this habit in terms of the basest instincts. “How does a person like that bring up his children? We gave him sound advice and even delivered a sharp rap across his knuckles, but nothing will stop him from pilfering,” the foreman grumbles, talking about a homer addict. Yet the passion for “looting” does not upset the bosses. Not because they force us to do it, but because “looting” doesn't cost anything except the strength, nerves, well-being, thoughts and life of the worker – even when he thinks that he is stealing something from the factory.

Why, then, are piece-rate workers so fond of making homers? The usefulness of homers cannot be the real motive, because the worker's life is so dependent on the workshop, the machine, his materials, and his eight-hour shifts that there is no chance whatever of his making anything which he really needs. It would be a dubious triumph for “do-it-yourself” – given the gigantic level of infringements that would be involved – if the conditions of work were such that they permitted workers to make everything they needed for setting up house in the form of homers. Then, certainly, homers would be worthwhile, since every worker could do repairs, and make small gadgets cheaply and with little effort.

Some of my colleagues still harbor a nostalgia for the days of the domestic artisan, but they rarely talk about their feelings, except when they are embarrassed or are making an excuse if someone catches them out. “Peasants, too, give what they produce to the State, but they don't buy their vegetables in a market. Here, there are all the tools you could want, and stacks of discarded materials – but if I want to repair my faucet, I'm supposed to call the plumber.” This

sort of talk is really a rationalization; it doesn't bear much relation to the real motives for making a homer.

Perhaps the mechanics and fitters, who are paid by the hour, really do have the means – thanks to homers – to set up their families, since they have at their fingertips, in the workshop, all the tools and machines necessary for household repairs large and small. But I am chained to my machine even if, at the most once a week, I find after an interminable number of runs that I have won a little time for myself. It is impossible for the piece-rate worker to flit across the workshop like a butterfly and to fiddle around with other machines. The foreman would see him at once, and fix him up with more work. Besides, the others are also riveted to their machines, and in any case our machines are too specialized, too large, too powerful, and too complicated: they themselves dictate what we can make with them.

And so in fact homers are seldom useful things. Bizarrely enough, when they are, it is generally not for some outside use, but for something needed within the factory. In theory, there are special workers to manufacture the base plates and braces for mounting pieces, but in fact we must make them ourselves. It is an unwritten rule that when feasible we make everything our jobs require with our own machines. Such operations have real utility, but are also infuriating. They are hardly paid but they are necessary to get through faster, or even to complete a job.

Even around such necessary preparatory work, the mysterious aura of homers begins to appear, to the extent that everyone calls these pieces “homers” even though in fact they entitle us to a supplementary payment. No one would think of telling his neighbor how he'd run through a series, and no one would be interested if he did. But everyone can talk with

gusto about these preparatory “homers,” and find an interested audience. Without doubt, the reason is that we plan this work ourselves, and can complete it as we think best.

Our machines rarely give an opportunity for other useful kinds of homers. But that doesn't do away with homers, it only changes them. For piece-workers, homers are ends in themselves, like all true passions. Here the passion is for nothing other than work, work as an end in itself. The diverse forms of homer have only one thing in common: they have to be of a size that can be surreptitiously smuggled out of the factory. Some have not kept to this rule; and finished objects lie gathering dust in their locker, or their tool boxes, or besides their machines, until the worker changes his factory, when they try to get them out, or, if this is hopeless, give them away.

For us, the potential of milling machines, lathes, and borers stimulates and at the same time limits our imaginations. The raw material is chiefly metal. The objects that can be made are key-holders, bases for flower-pots, ashtrays, pencil boxes, rulers and set squares, little boxes to bring salt to the factory for the morning break, bath mats (made out of rolls of white polystyrene), counters in stainless steel to teach children simple arithmetic (a marvelous present), pendants made from broken milling teeth, wheels for roulette-type games, dice, magnetized soap holders, television aerials (assembled at home), locks and bolts, coat-holders for the changing-room cupboard, knives, daggers, knuckle-dusters, and so on.

In place of the order, “You make *that*,” comes a question: “What can I make?” But if this work is an end in itself, it is not thereby without a purpose. It is the antithesis of our meaningless “real” work: the possibilities are limited, but the worker who makes a homer uses his head and keeps his eyes open. He scans the raw materials

around him, weighs up the unexploited capacities of his machines and the other auxiliary machines, like the small disc-cutter in the corner of the section or the grinding-machine, as he examines the hand tools at his disposal. Then he decides. He decides on what he will accomplish and works to realize that chosen object and not for some other purpose. If he uses the product itself, then before all else he will relish the pleasure of having accomplished it, and of knowing when, how, and with what he made it, and that he had originated its existence.

This humble little homer, made secretly and only through great sacrifices, with no ulterior motive, is the only form possible of free and creative work – it is both the germ and the model: this is the secret of the passion.

The tiny gaps which the factory allows us become natural islands where, like free men, we can mine hidden riches, gather fruits, and pick up treasures at our feet. We transform what we find with a disinterested pleasure free from the compulsion to make a living. It brings us an intense joy, enough to let us forget the constant race: the joy of autonomous, uncontrolled activity, the joy of labor without rate-fixers, inspectors, and foremen.

A complex organization forces me to maintain a minimum level of quality in my daily work. In making homers, quality, which itself arises as I have envisaged it, is the aim itself, the profit, and the pleasure. It is so natural that the question is no longer "What are you making?" but "How are you making it?"

The joy of this unity between conception and execution stands in extreme contrast to our daily work. "Where is the blueprint?" an inspector asked as usual when he came over to make a check. M--- loves to repeat the brazen response (fortunately it did not get him into trouble) which aimed to rub in that for once he and the inspector had nothing to say to each other: "It is

here, in my head." The inspector had to puzzle over this for a while before it clicked. M--- was *making a homer*. In outward appearance, nothing had changed. The same movements, which otherwise served only to increase production for the factory, were transformed by what he was doing into an activity of an entirely different kind.

By making homers we win back power over the machine and our freedom from the machine; skill is subordinated to a sense of beauty. However insignificant the object, its form of creation is artistic. This is all the more so because (mainly to avoid the reproach of theft) homers are rarely made with expensive, showy, or semi-finished materials. They are created out of junk, from useless scraps of iron, from leftovers, and this ensures that their beauty comes first and foremost from the labor itself.

Many do not care if their noble end-product clearly reveals its humble origins; but others hold fervently to the need for a perfect finish. Were it not that homers have to be made in a few snatched minutes, and that often we can't get back to them from one week to the next, if making homers were not such a fleeting activity, then one could almost claim that there were two schools: the first "Functionalist," the second "Secessionist" [a pre-Soviet Hungarian art movement celebrating excessive decoration]. There are also passing fashions in homers. And just as homers are a model of nonexistent joys, so they are the model for all protest movements.

Making homers is the only work in the factory which stands apart from our incessant competition against each other. In fact it demands cooperation, voluntary cooperation – not just to smuggle them out but also to create them. Sometimes my neighbor asks me to do the necessary milling for his homer, and in return makes a support for me on his lathe. On these occasions we wait patiently until the other "has

the time." Among piece-rate workers altruism is rare. Even in making homers, aid without a return is inconceivable. But it is not a matter of like for like: no one calculates how much his help is worth, or the time spent on it. Sometimes one can even come across selflessness *without* any expectations of recompense – which could never happen in "real" work. Most friendships begin with the making of a joint homer.

These *different* joys are obviously marred by the knowledge that they are only the joys of an oasis in a desert of piece-rate work. Slowly, the factory returns to itself, the computer dries out the oasis, the pressures of production continue unchanged. Despite this, everyone is cheerful during these few precious minutes. This is manifestly obvious to all but the bosses – who don't need to worry about the constant bad temper of piece-rate workers except insofar as it relates to production; and who don't display the least understanding of this loophole to happiness, not even as a matter of tactics. A foreman's anger is a sure indication of the happiness which the worker sows with a homer.

I am convinced that homers carry a message. "Artisanal tinkering, survivals from a dying industry: if homers are a negation, then they are only a nostalgia for the past." This might be said if you didn't grasp the importance of homers for workers on piece-rates. In fact, they don't know the old handicrafts any more and they detest the private customers for whom they often do black market labor after factory hours.

Workers would gladly renounce the artisan character of homers, but they have no other way to assert themselves over *mechanized* labor. Similarly, they would gladly produce things which made sense, but the production of senseless homers is their only chance to free themselves, for a few minutes, from the "good sense" of the factory. They would gladly manufacture, often collectively, things which were

useful for the community; but they can only make what they want to make on their own, or at most with a few others.

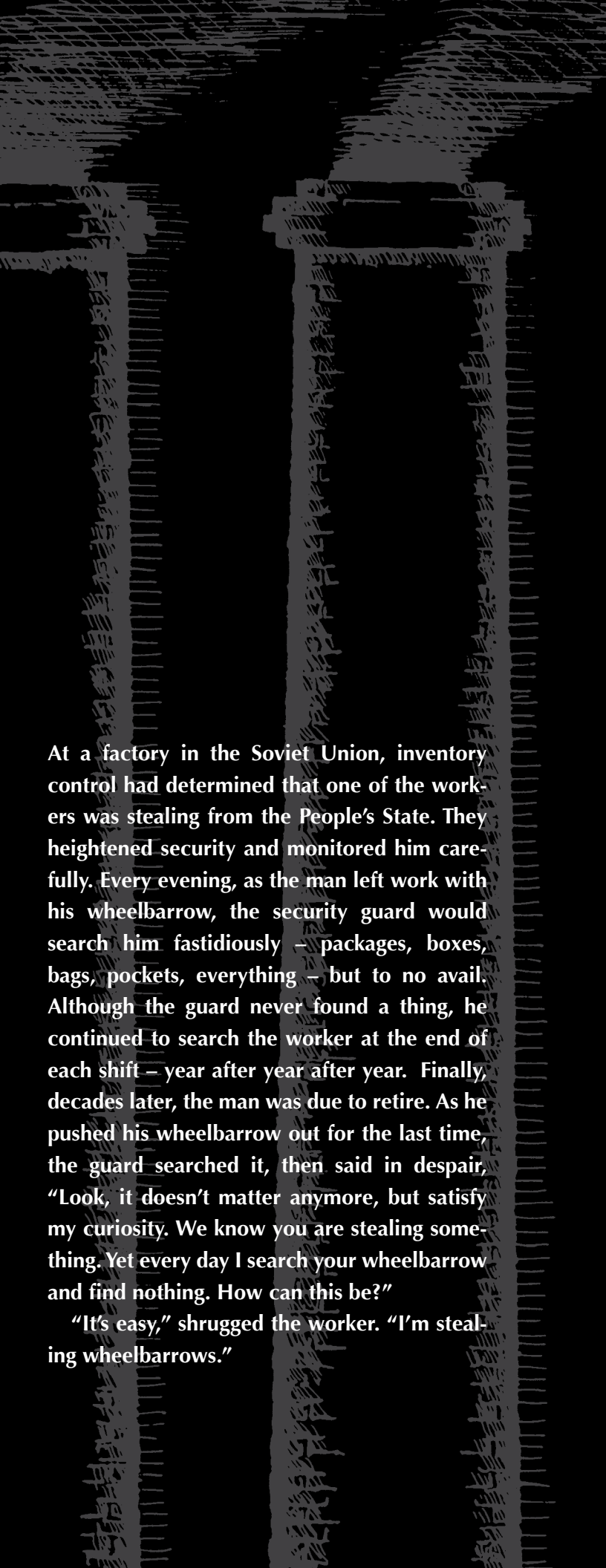
So these two steps towards the senseless – producing *useless* things and *renouncing payment* – in fact turn out to be two steps in the direction of freedom, even though they are swiftly blocked by the wall of wage labor. In fact, homers are a vain attempt to defect from the cosmos of piece-ratios.

Suppose that all of our work could be governed by the pleasures of homers, then it would follow that in every homer is the kernel of a completely *different* sense: that of work carried out for pleasure. The industrial psychologist, the expert in managerial methods, the social technician, and all the growing number of specialists who are replacing functionaries once breathless with the heroism of labor cannot comprehend the hopelessness of their task if they are unable to understand the pleasures of homers. Their task is to dry out the oases while filling the desert with mirages. Were it not that these experts in production are also dispensers of our livelihood, in command of discipline and achievement, we would enter the age of the Great Homer. This alienated sense, imposed from outside by wages (and its denial, the consolations of forbidden irrationality), would be replaced by the ecstasy of true needs. Precisely what is senseless about homers from the point of view of the factory announces the affirmation of work motivated by a single incentive, stronger than all others: the conviction that our labor, our life, and our consciousness can be governed by our own goals. The Great Homer would be realized through machines, but our experts would subordinate them to two requirements: that we use them to make things of real utility, and that we are independent of the machines themselves. This would mean the withering of production controls. We would only

produce what united homer-workers needed and what allowed us to remain workers united in the manufacture of homers. *And we would produce a thousand times more efficiently than today.*

To take the whole world into account, to combine our strength, to replace rivalry with cooperation, to make that we want, to plan and execute the plans together, to create in a way that was pleasurable in itself; to be freed from the duress of production and its inspectors – all these are announced by the message of the homer, of the few minutes that resurrect our energy and capacities. The Great Homer would not carry the risk of our frittering away strength senselessly; on the contrary, it would be the only way to discover what is even precluded by the homer of wage-earners: *the real utility of our exertions*. If we could direct our lives towards the Great Homer, we would gladly take on a few hours of mechanized labor a day, so long as it was needed. Otherwise, if everything remains as it does today, we face a terrible destiny: that of never knowing what we have lost.

Connoisseurs of folklore may look on homers as a native, decorative art. As yet, they aren't able to see further than that. But they will, and the day will come when homers are no longer forbidden but are commercialized and administered. People who work on automatic machines will be able to buy homers in the shops after seeing them in magazines or on television. Then, no one will suspect that homers were originally more than a "do-it-yourself" hobby or a mere pastime; that they once shone through factory controls, the necessity of making a living, and the pressures of wages, as a surrogate for something which by then perhaps will be even more impossible to name than it is today.



At a factory in the Soviet Union, inventory control had determined that one of the workers was stealing from the People's State. They heightened security and monitored him carefully. Every evening, as the man left work with his wheelbarrow, the security guard would search him fastidiously – packages, boxes, bags, pockets, everything – but to no avail. Although the guard never found a thing, he continued to search the worker at the end of each shift – year after year after year. Finally, decades later, the man was due to retire. As he pushed his wheelbarrow out for the last time, the guard searched it, then said in despair, "Look, it doesn't matter anymore, but satisfy my curiosity. We know you are stealing something. Yet every day I search your wheelbarrow and find nothing. How can this be?"

"It's easy," shrugged the worker. "I'm stealing wheelbarrows."



Beyond Stealing from Work

In the final analysis, stealing from our workplaces is not a rebellion against the status quo, but simply another aspect of it. It implies a profound discontent with our conditions, yes, and perhaps a rejection of the ethics of capitalism; but as long as the consequences of that discontent remain individualized and secretive, they

will never propel us into a different

world. Stealing from work is what

we do instead of changing our

lives – it treats the symptoms,

not the condition. Perhaps it

even serves our bosses' inter-

ests – it gives us a pres-

sure valve to blow off

steam, and enables

us to survive to work

another day with-

out a wage in-

crease. Perhaps

they figure the

costs of it into

their business

plans because

they know our

stealing is an *in-*

evitable side effect of

exploitation – though

not one guaranteed to

bring exploitation to an

end.

On the other hand, the

notion that stealing from

our employers is not rel-

evant to labor struggle

enforces a dichotomy be-

tween “legitimate” work-

place organizing on the one

hand and individual acts of

resistance, revenge, and survival on the other. So long as this separation exists, conventional workplace organizing will always be essentially toothless: it will prioritize bureaucracy over initiative, representation over autonomy, appeasement over confrontation, legitimacy in the bosses' eyes over *effectiveness* in changing our lives.

What would it look like to go about labor organizing in the same way we go about stealing from our workplaces? First, it would mean focusing on means of resistance that meet our individual needs, starting from what individual workers can do themselves with the support of their comrades. It would mean dispensing with strategies that don't provide immediate material or emotional benefit to those who utilize them. It would establish togetherness through the process of attempting to seize back the environments we work and live in, rather than building

up organizations on the premise of an always-deferred future struggle.

A workforce that organized in this way would be impossible to co-opt or dupe. No boss could threaten it with anything, for its power would derive directly from its own actions, not from compromises that give the bosses hostages or give prominent organizers incentives not to fight. It would be a boss's worst nightmare – and a union official's, too.

We might also ask what would it look like to go about stealing from work as if it were a way to try to change the world, rather than simply survive in it. So long as we solve our problems individually, we can only confront them individually as well. Stealing in secret keeps class struggle a private affair – the question is how to make it into a public project that gathers momentum. This shifts the focus from *What* to *How*. A small item stolen with the knowledge

A black and white photograph showing a person from behind, wearing a long trench coat and dark pants, standing on a paved surface. They are looking at a large, light-colored wall covered in graffiti. The graffiti consists of the words "NO CONT..." in large, bold, black letters. The background shows a flat, open landscape under a clear sky.

"It is better to loot than to shoplift, to ambush than to snipe, to walk out than to phone in a bomb threat, to strike than to call in sick, to riot than to vandalize... Increasingly collective and coordinated acts against this world of coercion and isolation aren't solely a matter of effectivity, but equally a matter of sociality – of community and fun."

WAR ON MISERY #3

and support of one's coworkers is more significant than a huge heist carried out in secret. Stolen goods shared in such a way that they build workers' collective power are worth more than a high-dollar embezzlement that only benefits *one* employee, the same way a raise or promotion does.

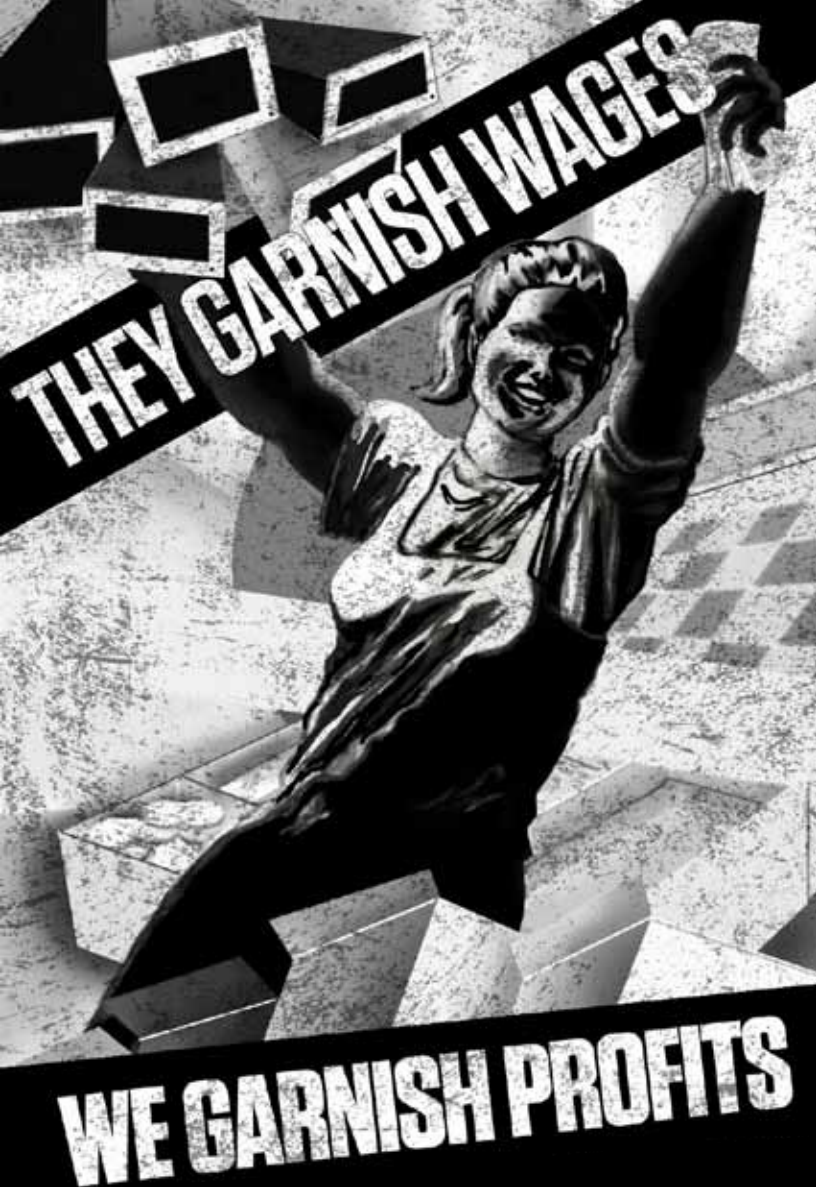
Remember the story of the hardware store employee who embezzled enough money to get a college degree, only to find himself back behind the cash register afterwards! When it was too late, he wished he'd done something with the money to create a community that could fight against the world of cash registers and college degrees. Even as he broke the laws of his society, he had still accepted its basic values, investing in status that could only advance him on the bosses' terms. Better we invest ourselves in breaking its values as well as its laws!

Practically *everyone* steals from work, even if many people won't admit it, even if some people would like to reserve the privilege of doing so for themselves. Let's draw this practice out of the shadows in which it takes place, so all the world has to engage with it and its implications in the full light of day. Perhaps workplace theft could be an Achilles heel for capitalism after all: not because it alone is sufficient to abolish wage labor and class society, but because it is the sort of open secret that must remain suppressed to preserve the illusion that everybody believes in and benefits from the present system.

So if you find yourself coveting items in your place of employment, don't just steal *something* from work – think about how you could steal *everything* from it, yourself and your coworkers above all. Stealing from work one thing at a time will take forever, literally – it would be more efficient to just steal *the whole world* back from work at once. That's a daunting project, one we could only take on together – but it's one we can begin *right now*.



Next April 15, we won't just pocket a few items – we'll show up at our workplaces with helmets and torches. Stealing something from work is not enough when work is stealing everything from us.



WWW.STEALFROMWORK.CRIMETHING.COM
stealfromworkday@gmail.com

Garnish – “Deduct money directly (from a person’s salary, etc.) to settle a debt or claim”

Etymology: Old French *garnir*, related to **warn...**

Further Resources

WWW.WILDNETTLE.COM To obtain STEAL SOMETHING FROM WORK DAY materials

WWW.PROLE.INFO Comics for the angry wage worker

WWW.ANTIJOB.ANHO.ORG Russian anti-work site