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Steal Something from Work Day 2024

It's Time to Even the Score!

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April 15, 2024

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I think this model could be more effective in a geographically smaller place—for example, a college town where there is a central concentration of cafés and stores. It also could be interesting to try it out in a place that is experiencing active rebellion, or in a time of widespread unrest like during the George Floyd uprising. In a situation like that, it could be way to extend the energy in the streets into other forms of experimental resistance. When we’ve experienced rebellions like that here, we’ve often wondered how we could expand and extend them into ongoing social and class war. The “great resignation” that followed the COVID-19 pandemic saw anti-work sentiment reach new heights; some people interpreted that as a continuation of the uprising. Maybe something like “the team” could have opened up a new front then.

We are all fundamentally exploited in our daily experiences as workers under capitalism. We need new ways to experiment and spread class struggle outside of formal structures like unions, which aren’t available to some of us. Any gift shared freely heartens and encourages us, but if it is stolen back, it’s all the sweeter. *Everything for everyone!*

“The routine of robbing banks is no replacement for the carnival of storming them en masse. Something that holds true for many ‘survival’ acts: better to loot than 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, summer 2008

Contents

Attack the Gas Station	9
The Team	15

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.



Our experiment could have gone further. It didn't end up reaching far enough or lasting long enough to make a really deep impact on the tangible conditions of our daily lives. It did generate some conversations among coworkers, and that fostered a spirit of solidarity, or least insubordination. But materially, it was limited by what each of us was able to get away with in the workplace; we only had access to small quantities of what was available to us in our immediate environments. The real stockpiles of wealth are stored far from the outlets of the service economy.

Step two: Wear the button when you go out. Get hooked up. Remember to ask your teammates where they work.

Step three: Build the team. Talk to your friends and trusted co-workers. The more people on the team, the better.

You can read the whole manifesto here.

The proposal was basically to make a union of thieves that could expand beyond the limits of camaraderie, political alliance, and friendship, as a way to widen our connections with others based on our mutual material conditions and needs. It was a very simple system. If you don't have access to the kind of button maker we used, you could use other types of pins, patches, shirts, hats—any type of common identifier. Of course, you have to be careful that word does not get out to anyone who can't be trusted.

The idea spread through our subcultural community and across the lines that separated us from other scenes. It reached our peers and co-workers.

At the high point of our experiment, I could go out and visit a variety of establishments without ever spending money. I could get sandwiches, coffee, ice cream and gelato, and sometimes groceries from one of the fancy local grocery stores. Sometimes the people hooking me up were people I didn't even know.

That was good. But the flier described bigger ambitions:

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



Once again, it's April 15—Steal Something from Work Day! Every April, millions of workers around the world observe this day as a chance to settle accounts with those who are profiting off their labor. For us, it represents an opportunity to reflect on why so many people steal from their workplaces and what it would take to create a world in which that was unnecessary.

Feared by right-wing hacks like Glen Beck, *Steal Something from Work Day* is celebrated from Bulgaria to Greece, Spain, Germany, Sweden, and the Netherlands. You can learn about *Steal Something from Work Day* on the official site, or listen to this podcast about it, or watch this charming video.

Or just, you know, participate.

The United States Department of Commerce estimates that every year, "businesses lose \$50 billion as a result of employee theft." Let's zoom in on that word, "lose." They aren't saying that \$50 billion just disappears; it isn't simply mislaid, nor willfully destroyed.



A dishwasher uses a sink as a shield during clashes with police in Santiago, Chile on November 8, 2019. Let's turn the roles that capitalism forces upon us into weapons against the system itself.

The Team

I live in a second-tier Midwestern rust belt city with a deep legacy of poverty and segregation. Historically, there has been a lot of lawlessness and social rebellion here. This city is busted, broke, and broken.

Despite the challenges, we built a network of anarchists here, an informal community cultivating an ethos of rebellion. A gang of aspirational dreamers, scrappy squatters, and profound thinkers who took the question of how to create and push social struggles seriously. One advantage of this city is that it is possible to live very cheaply here, compared to other parts of the country. This afforded us the chance to experiment with different forms of daily life.

At the time this story took place, most of us were service industry workers: cooks, servers, bakers, bartenders, cab drivers, baristas, home care workers, grocery store clerks, things like that. We often found ourselves on the lower rungs of the job ladder. We would work the tedious and unpleasant jobs that offered us some degree of flexibility and the freedom to live our weird lives.

We set out to make the road by walking. We believed that we could build with those around us, drawing on our shared interests and common anguish to create the conditions for rebellion on a broader scale. Many of us shoplifted and stole from our workplaces. Someone in our community had the idea to try to make these secret individual acts into a point of connection.

I don't remember exactly how it first started. A photocopied flier titled "The Team is Real" circulated, presenting a proposal. A small button accompanied each flier, like the buttons you get at punk shows. Someone in the punk scene had a button maker and was putting it to use.

The flier set out the proposal:

Step one: Wear the button when you're at work. Hook people up (discounts, freebies, extras, etc.).



They mean that \$50 billion ends up in the pockets of the workers, rather than in the bank accounts of corporate executives. In other words, the problem is that *the money ends up in the hands of the people who are doing the work that produces it.*

Is this a problem, really? Even if you are an avowed proponent of capitalism, the market needs people spending money to function. Workers who are struggling just to pay their rent and put food on the table are going to put that money right back into the economy. Corporate executives would more likely sit on it, or use it to buy up more real estate, making it even harder for the rest of us to afford rent.

Of course, if you're *not* invested in capitalism as a good in and of itself, if you value equality and human life above the "health" of the market, there are even stronger arguments as to why the workers should be the ones to go home with this money, not executives and investors.

Let's be clear that when we talk about workplace theft, we're not talking about a self-seeking criminal minority enriching itself at everyone's expense. Apparently, three quarters of *all* employees have stolen from their employer at least once. Workplace theft is arguably the most widely practiced form of wealth redistribution. It might also be the most effective—though we can aspire to come up with even *more* effective models.

What if workers in the United States took home \$50 billion *less* every year? The richest 1% of United States citizens now own more wealth than the entire middle class. The top 10% control more wealth than everyone else added together. The combined wealth of the billionaires in the United States has almost doubled over the past half decade, reaching \$5.529 trillion—that's all money that they have accumulated from other people's labor.

Now imagine taking another \$50 billion away from workers in the United States every year. Imagine plunging families further into poverty, making it even harder to afford groceries, rent, utilities bills, car insurance, tuition. In fact, employers aim to do pre-



This chart from 2017 tells a different story about who is committing the most theft in the workplace. Even according to the laws that are currently on the books, which overwhelmingly favor employers over employees, it is employers¹ who commit the majority² of theft in this society, both in the workplace and outside of it.

One day, the friend and co-worker who had gotten me the job told me that the manager had asked him if he knew whether I was stealing from them. Apparently, they didn't realize that he was my close friend. He told them that he was positive that I would never do such a thing, and they left it alone. Looking back, I'm sure that the vague inventory numbers must have looked incredibly suspicious, but they had no way to confirm what was happening.

Eventually, I wound up quitting that job to take another job that was less horrible in some ways but nowhere near as lucrative—aside from the free late-night access to the office photocopier. A couple weeks later, that gas station went out of business. I was sure that my efforts had something to do with it. If a full accounting were to be done, the owner of that place probably stole more hours of my life than I stole from him, but I did my best to even the score.

In the years since then, my politics have become more sophisticated, and so have my ways of striking back at the employing class. You could say I've become more ambitious. But just as every prisoner is a political prisoner, every cashier in every gas station is a fighter in the class war. People steal from work because it is demeaning, because their workplaces don't engage their creativity, because they want to share things with others, because it's bullshit to have to waste time just to turn a profit for a boss.

And lots of people steal from work because they need to. If more advanced inventory systems have made it more difficult for cashiers to steal from their employers, that only means that life is even harder for workers and those who depend on them. Better anti-theft technology is one of the factors that are contributing to escalating inequality, as capitalists concentrate more and more wealth in their hands relative to the rest of us. Stealing from our employers is the very least we ought to do in this situation. Attack every gas station.



weed dealing and the kindness and generosity of his roommates. At the end of pretty much every shift, I would load up my car with a grocery bag or two of food and a couple boxes of beer. I tried to take a variety of stuff in the course of each week in order to make it less obvious what was being stolen, but ultimately, I wasn't as subtle as I thought I was.

All of my underage friends and acquaintances started coming in, hoping to get beer without being carded. I saw another opportunity here. Beer was another item that wasn't easily tracked by the primitive inventory system, so it was easy to avoid ringing the beer up in the register and just let people hand me cash for the beer at a steep discount. After I realized this, I put it together that pretty much any item that was likely to be paid for in exact change (like a 50 cent newspaper) didn't need to be entered in the cash register. I would wait to ring them up until I could see whether the customer had exact change. Soon, I was taking home between \$50 and \$100 at the end of every shift, at a time when I paid \$125 a month for rent.

cisely that—that's why they are investing in surveillance technology, security guards, and new inventory systems rather than paying the people whose labor enriches them. If there is a self-seeking villainous minority out there, it is not those who steal from their employers, but the capitalists who want to hoard even more of the wealth of our society in their hands.

This is why a growing anti-work movement has begun to question the foundational premises of capitalism and exchange economics. Labor unrest is ramping up, but the majority of workers in North America lack labor organizations that are capable of asserting their interests with the firmness that they deserve. It's time to reimagine what the tactics of a previous era, such as the general strike, could look like today in our current conditions. At the same time, we can look at the activities that the vast majority of workers already engage in—including workplace theft and other informal or clandestine forms of resistance—as points of departure for new strategies.

In the following narratives, two authors from different parts of the Midwest recount their experiments with stealing from their employers—one individual, one collective.

(Yes, the header photograph at the top of this page is a real stock photograph about workplace theft. The horror!)

Attack the Gas Station

During the last few months of my senior year of high school, when I stopped attending class, a friend got me a job at a gas station convenience store after my car went on strike and refused to deliver any more pizzas. The morning after graduation day, I moved into a two-bedroom apartment with a couple of friends.

A two-bedroom apartment with a couple of friends. In other words, I was staying on the couch in the living room.



From 1830 to today, we must weaponize the ordinary conditions of our daily lives if we are to defend ourselves against our oppressors.

At the time, I cared about very little besides hanging out with my friends, riding bikes, reading fantasy novels, and drinking beer. I needed money to pay my rent, pay for food and beer, pay for gas and car insurance, and so on, but it was possible to squeeze by with a terrible minimum wage job.

The gas station was owned by a typical franchise owner. He was mostly hands off, except when he was hands on. We all worked five ten-hour shifts by ourselves every week. Working alone meant that we had to take bathroom breaks as fast as possible, between customers. At that time, it was possible to pump gas without paying for it, so we had to hope that someone didn't pull up and pump gas while we were in the bathroom. It wasn't as if I cared if someone stole gas, but gas was one of the few items that was actually tracked by the inventory system, and we would catch hell if the gas numbers were off.

The upside to this situation was that tons of other merchandise was not tracked in the inventory, and the CCTV surveillance system didn't work. I've worked dozens of jobs in my life, and I don't think a single job I've ever worked has succeeded in preventing me from stealing something from them while I was on the clock. But this job failed to prevent me from stealing *a whole lot* of shit while I was on the clock.

For most of each of my ten-hour shifts, I had nothing to do. There is only so much time you can spend stocking and straightening the shelves, making pots of foul coffee, and staring out the window at gas pumps. I started eating and drinking the stock solely in order to pass the time. Pretty soon, every shift, I was drinking several bottles of juice and eating countless snack cakes, bags of chips, packs of cookies, candy bars, and terrible deli sandwiches.

Then I started taking food and beer home to share with my roommates. It wasn't like there was good food available at a Midwest gas station, but we were in a thieves-can't-be-choosers kind of situation. While one of my roommates had a regular manual labor job, the other had no job at all; he was surviving off of small-scale