

Steal Something from Work Day

April 15, every year

CrimethInc.

April 15, 2019

Contents

Introduction	5
Frequently Asked Questions	6
Outreach Materials	8
Stickers	8
Posters	8
Pamphlets	8
Postcard	8
Journal	9
Interviews	10
<i>The Guardian</i> , March 2019	10
<i>Beyond Capitalist Meritocracy</i> An Interview with Steal Something from Work Day Press Liaison Robyn Bausez	11
Analysis	13
Stealing from Work at the End of the World	13
But How Do We <i>Steal from Work</i> in a Pandemic?	13
“Essential” Workers	14
Remote Workers	15
The Team is Real	
A Model for Cross-Workplace Organizing	16
Everything for Everyone!	17
A Theft or Work?	18
<i>La Perruque</i> , “the Wig”	18
Trickery and Domination	19
Can the Master’s Degree Dismantle the Master’s House?	20
100% Time	21
The Potlatch: Destructive Gifts	23
Resources	24
Yes, We Even Stole from Work under Socialism	24
In Search of the Great Homer	25
Epilogue	29
Beyond Stealing from Work	30
Narratives	32
Time is Always the Best Thing to Steal from Work	32
Paper Delivery	32

High School Tech Support	33
Pool Admissions Desk and Concession Stand	33
Grocery Store	34
College Computer Lab	34
Web Design Internship	34
Every Computer-Focused Office Job	35
In the Time of Global Pandemic	35
Out Of Stock	36
Confessions Of A Grocery Store Guerrilla	36
My Name Is Carlos	36
Death to Loss Prevention	36
Sabotage on the Dairy Floor	37
The Falcon Cannot Hear the Falconer	37
The Damage Done	38
Appendix	38
Steal from Work to Create Autonomous Zones	38
A Cashier's Guide to Putting Yourself Through College via Workplace Theft	
How I Stole My Higher Education from a Hardware Store	41
What Became of the Boxes	45
Stealing from Work Is a Gamble, but It Can Be a Good Bet	46
Don't Beg for a Piece of the Pie—Take the Whole Pizza for Yourself!	49
Like Most Workplace Thieves, I Am an Exceptional Worker	51
Testimonials	53
STEAL FROM WORK TO HELP PEOPLE	53
STEAL FROM WORK FOR EDUCATION	53
STEAL FROM WORK TO EAT	53
STEAL FROM WORK TO PROVIDE FOR YOUR COMMUNITY	53
STEAL FROM WORK FOR A SELF-ASSIGNED BONUS	55
STEAL FROM WORK TO EVEN THE SCORE	55
STEAL FROM WORK TO RIDE	57
STEAL FROM WORK TO ROCK	57
STEAL FROM WORK TO STAY HYDRATED	57
STEAL FROM WORK TO PARTY	58
STEAL FROM WORK WITH THE WHOLE FAMILY	59
STEAL FROM WORK FOR ENTERTAINMENT	59
STEAL FROM WORK TO STAY FOCUSED ON THE JOB	59
STEAL FROM WORK TO TILL THE SOIL	61
STEAL FROM WORK FOR DOWNRIGHT DADAISM	61
STEAL FROM WORK EVEN AFTER YOU QUIT	62
Further Reading	63
Selected Coverage	64
Horrified Partisans of Law, Order, and Exploitation Respond	64

Allies and Accomplices	64
International Coverage	65

Introduction

Getting robbed by the boss?

April 15 is Steal Something from Work Day!

Does your boss work less than you but take home a bigger paycheck? Is somebody zipping around in a private jet at your expense? If the corporation is making money at the end of the day, that means they're not paying you the full value of your labor—that's where corporate profit comes from! So if you need something in your workplace, take it. You earned it!

Steal something from work! It could be a paper clip, or some cash out of the register, or full-on embezzlement. If you're a barista, grab a bag of coffee; if you work at a garage, get a wrench set. If you're unemployed, take something from someone else's workplace! Unemployment works for the bosses, too—it forces people to take any job they can, and sends the message to other workers that if they don't knuckle under they'll be in for it too.

Steal something from work! You could share it with your friends, or give it to your family—the family you never see because of your job. You could use it yourself, to do something you've always dreamed of—maybe something making use of all that potential you would fulfill if only you didn't have to work for someone else all the time.

Don't take shit from your boss—**steal it!**

Steal something from work! Break down the divisions that separate you from your co-workers. Work together to maximize your under-the-table profit-sharing; make sure all of you are safe and getting what you need. Don't let the boss pit you against each other—in the end, that only makes all of you more vulnerable. Build up enough trust that you can graduate from taking things from work to taking control of your workplace itself!

Chances are you already steal from your work—if not physical items, at least time on the clock. Good for you! But don't stop there—think of how much more you could take, how much more you *deserve*.

Mark your calendar and plan ahead—

April 15 is Steal Something from Work Day!

Disclaimer: This website is intended as a rhetorical device only; in simple terms, it aims to uncover the already prevalent phenomenon of workplace theft, not to encourage those who otherwise would not commit such illegal acts. Neither the host, nor the developers, are responsible for people navigating to it, or what they do afterwards.

Frequently Asked Questions

Is STEALING SOMETHING FROM WORK immoral?

Stealing is immoral, yes. That's why your employers should pay you the full value they obtain from your labor, rather than paying you a fraction of it and taking the rest for themselves as profit. If you take something from the workplace, you're not stealing, but simply taking back the results of your effort.

Is STEALING SOMETHING FROM WORK illegal?

Technically, it may be. Slavery, on the other hand, was legal until December 1865.

Is STEAL SOMETHING FROM WORK DAY anti-employer?

Hate to break it to you, boss, but your employees steal from you every day. By encouraging them to focus on one day a year, we're looking out for you! Consider this a harm reduction approach.

Does STEAL SOMETHING FROM WORK DAY make it harder for employees to get away with stealing?

Not significantly. The number one obstacle to employee theft is not bosses or cameras, but misguided coworkers. STEAL SOMETHING FROM WORK DAY is a consciousness-raising holiday promoting worker solidarity and legitimizing employee redistribution of wealth.

Not everyone has an easy time stealing from the workplace. Some demographics are singled out for surveillance, and many people can't afford to risk getting into trouble!

That's true! That's why, if you are not one of those people, you should STEAL SOMETHING FROM WORK to share with those who can't risk it themselves.

I'm retired. Can I participate in STEAL SOMETHING FROM WORK DAY?

Yes, you can—just go back to your former place of employment! If you had to wrestle over a pension with them, they've got it coming. It's never too late to STEAL SOMETHING FROM WORK!

I'd love to STEAL SOMETHING FROM WORK, but I work at a local non-profit foundation providing free services to survivors of domestic violence.

If you truly love the place you work, chances are it's under-funded. That's because the for-profit mega-corporations are hogging all the resources! Time to pay a visit to someone else's workplace.

But my employers give to charitable causes when they make a profit! If I STEAL SOMETHING FROM WORK, they'll have less to donate.

Who do you think should choose the most deserving charitable cause for your earnings—you, or some corporate bureaucrat? Just because you STEAL SOMETHING FROM WORK doesn't mean you have to keep it all for yourself!

If I STEAL SOMETHING FROM WORK, will it make me a more selfish person?

Not necessarily! By and large, people find it easier to share things when they don't have to trade their lives for them in miserable drudgery. STEALING SOMETHING FROM WORK might actually make you a more generous person!

What does God think about STEALING FROM WORK?

Academic theologians such as German Old Testament scholar A. Alt, author of *Das Verbot des Diebstahls im Dekalog*, suggest that the commandment “thou shalt not steal” was originally intended against stealing *people*—against abductions and slavery. This lines up with Jewish interpretations of the statement as “thou shalt not kidnap”—for example, as stated by Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki, famed as the author of the first comprehensive commentary on the Talmud. If this is so, the real crime is not the worker taking back a part of the fruit of his labor, but the economic system that forces him into wage slavery in the first place. Likewise, as Jesus explains, “It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” (Matthew 19:24)—don’t put your employer at such risk!

What if I STEAL SOMETHING FROM WORK and my company goes out of business? Is this biting the hand that feeds me?

Corporations plan workplace shrinkage into the budget well in advance. They’re practically *counting on you* to steal something! If that surplus goes unclaimed, it’ll just stay in their coffers as more unearned profits.

Will the costs of STEALING SOMETHING FROM WORK be passed on to consumers?

Your employers are shrewd businessmen—if they were simply trying to distribute goods to the needy as affordably as possible, they’d be in a different line of work. That means if they could be charging customers more, they already would be. The prices of their products are determined by the market, not by the cost of producing them.

But won’t STEALING SOMETHING FROM WORK destabilize the economy? What if the market crashes again? Will STEALING SOMETHING FROM WORK bring about the end of the world?

Are you kidding? Who does all the work in this society—bosses, or workers? If anything, things would go more smoothly without them. If every corporation went out of business tomorrow and we could get our hands on all the resources they’ve hoarded, don’t you think we’d be able to distribute them more sensibly? They’re lucky we don’t steal *everything*!

Will STEALING SOMETHING FROM WORK inhibit real social change? Shouldn’t we be organizing to address the root of our problems rather than acting individualistically?

Maybe you’re onto something! But STEALING SOMETHING FROM WORK doesn’t prevent you from organizing collectively. For example, you could coordinate with your coworkers to share what you pocket. Really, what good would it do to get organized together if you were still afraid to take what you deserve? On the other hand, imagine if we could go beyond taking things from our workplaces, and take over the workplaces themselves...

Why is April 15 STEAL SOMETHING FROM WORK DAY?

As most employees know, every day can be Steal Something From Work day. But we can’t encourage people to go steal from their workplaces all the time—for all we know, that would be illegal. The best we can do is ask people to limit their workplace theft to one day a year!

If there was ever a good day to Steal Something From Work, it has to be April 15, Tax Day. For the government, every April 15 is Steal Something From You Day. They take your hard-earned money and dump it right into some oil war or back-room deal—that’s yet another way the corporations are making out at your expense.

Don’t take it sitting down. **Steal something from work.**

Outreach Materials

Stickers

Print these out on a sheet of sticker paper, cut them up, and deploy!

Classic Sticker

A downloadable PDF of a sheet of our classic Steal Something from Work Day stickers

[Download PDF](#)

Sticker Mix

A downloadable PDF of a sheet with a variety of Steal Something from Work Day stickers

[Download PDF](#)

Posters

If Your Coworker Needs Something

A downloadable PDF of a Steal Something from Work Day poster

[Download PDF](#)

Hang in There

A downloadable PDF of a Steal Something from Work Day poster

[Download PDF](#)

Pamphlets

Print out these trifolds to spread the word. Slip them into lockers, leave them in a tip jar paper-clipped to your tip, give them out at the metro.

Trifold Front

[Download PDF](#)

Trifold Back

[Download PDF](#)

I ☒ Workplace Theft Front

[Download PDF](#)

I ☒ Workplace Theft Back

[Download PDF](#)

Postcard

Postcard Front

[Download PDF](#)

Postcard Back

[Download PDF](#)

Journal

Heist (reading)

An on-screen reading version of the journal in color

[Download PDF](#)

Heist (printing)

A black-and-white PDF of *Heist* imposed for

[Download PDF](#)

Until we can abolish capitalism—**make every profit cost them!**

Interviews

The Guardian, March 2019

Why and when did you start Steal Something From Work Day? And what is its purpose?

Steal Something from Work Day arose as a way to call attention to the widespread phenomenon of workplace theft, which we understand as a form of covert protest activity. We'd prefer to live in an egalitarian society in which everyone has direct access to the resources they need—but so long as we don't, we think it is important to reflect on the ways ordinary people get by in the prevailing order.

What do you encourage participants to steal?

We don't *encourage* people to steal anything. We simply provide a space for people to talk about what they are stealing and why. You can find scores of narratives from participants in workplace theft in our annual coverage of Steal Something from Work Day.

What date will the event be this year? And roughly how many people do you expect to take part?

This year, Steal Something From Work Day falls on Monday, April 15. It coincides with Tax Day, calling attention to the variety of institutional forces that profit on the labor of employees—from individual employers to the military-industrial complex.

Considering that employee theft accounts for billions of dollars annually and involves up to three quarters of the workforce, we anticipate that millions of people will be participating.

Why do people steal from work?

On the basis of all the interviews we have conducted and all the testimony we have received, we can summarize that the two chief reasons people steal from their workplaces are, first, needing resources to survive or at least live with dignity, and, second, losing respect for their employers on account of the asymmetry of power in the employer-employee relationship.

Why do you think the number of people stealing non-cash items from work is on the rise?

Since the recession of 2008, the economy has recovered, but this has largely benefitted employers, not employees. Your average employee senses this and acts accordingly via whatever means are at hand.

What is your view on the morality of stealing from work?

Stealing is immoral. That's why employees should receive the full value of their labor, rather than a fraction of the value they produce for their employers. When employers enrich themselves on the labor of employees, many employees experience this as a form of theft. From this perspective, much employee theft is an attempt to reclaim the value of their labor and their dignity and autonomy. As much as employees steal today, there is no danger that the employing class will take home less profit this year than their employees.

A truly ethical project would be to set out to create a society in which no one would have any incentive to steal from anyone else. This is the question that really concerns us.

Beyond Capitalist Meritocracy

An Interview with Steal Something from Work Day Press Liaison Robyn Bausez

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.

Is this website genuinely intended as a rhetorical device, or is that disclaimer 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 Black history is important all year round but the point of observing February as 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.

Analysis

- **Stealing from Work at the End of the World**—Workplace theft in the age of the COVID-19 pandemic, economic collapse, and “essential” and “remote” labor.
- **The Team is Real**—A model for how employees at a variety of businesses can support each other beyond networks of kinship or affinity.
- **A Theft or Work?**—A grad student brings poststructuralist theory to bear on time theft, why the master’s degrees will never dismantle the master’s house, and how to resist work when it has spread so far beyond the workplace.
- **Yes, We Even Stole from Work under Socialism**—An extract from *A Worker in a Worker’s State*, a book written by Miklós Haraszti in 1972 when he was a young employee at the Red Star Tractor Factory and suppressed by the Hungarian government as a threat to socialism.
- **Beyond Stealing from Work**—Stealing from the workplace is only the beginning.

Stealing from Work at the End of the World

For ten years now, we have observed April 15 as Steal Something from Work Day. Coinciding with tax day—when the government robs workers of a portion of their earnings to fund the police, the military, and various welfare programs for the ultra-rich—Steal Something from Work Day celebrates the creativity of workers who take a swipe at the economy that exploits them.

Yet today, the consequences of the global rip-off called capitalism have gone so far that nearly a quarter of us have no employment or source of income whatsoever. Many of those who still have jobs are being forced to risk death on a daily basis just to bring home a paycheck, while more privileged workers have seen their jobs invade their very homes. Tax day is pushed back to July—it’s difficult to rob those who have no income, though our oppressors aim to squeeze it out of us sooner or later.

The crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic should put things in proportion. While executives and loss prevention experts wring their hands about workplace theft, sticky-fingered employees are not the ones responsible for systematically draining resources from hospitals or accelerating catastrophic climate change. It’s not *stealing from work* that is outrageous—the outrageous thing is how much capitalism has stolen from us.

But How Do We *Steal from Work* in a Pandemic?

As history accelerates, the humble little gesture of workplace theft, via which so many workers have asserted their autonomy and made ends meet, has almost become outmoded. In a global

disaster that is just a taste of things to come, we have to become more ambitious about what we aim to seize.

“Essential” Workers

The workforce has been divided into “essential” workers, “remote” workers, and the unemployed. In many cases, “essential” simply means “disposable”—along with doctors and nurses, it describes a range of low-paid jobs that involve a high risk of exposure to COVID-19. Of course, if you are working one of these jobs, you still have access to material goods; you can still steal from a grocery store or warehouse.

When so many people have no access to resources whatsoever—while employers and the politicians above them are conspiring to force us to risk a million deaths to re-start the economy—stealing to support those who cannot buy products becomes a solemn duty to humanity.

What can “essential workers” do besides sneaking food, medical supplies, and cleaning products out of workplaces? Can we set our sights on something more systematic?

Last month, facing layoffs, General Electric employees demanded to be kept on to build ventilators for the treatment of COVID-19. This points to the possibilities for workers to steal back their entire workplaces. Yet making demands of corporations like General Electric will produce few results unless we are able to find ways to exert leverage on them.

In Greece, unpaid workers in Thessaloniki went further, seizing the factory they had worked in and using it to manufacture their own line of ecological cleaning supplies. This is an example of *workplace theft* writ large, one we can aspire to emulate in the United States over the coming years.

Could we steal the existing infrastructure and use it to produce a different society? Should we aspire to take over the global supply chain and run it *more efficiently* than its current overlords do?

The quintessential 21st century work environment is the Amazon warehouse. Surveillance devices and software force humans to behave like robots. In some Amazon warehouses, gigantic screens display footage of employees who were caught stealing to terrorize workers into obedience. Cashing in on the pandemic, Amazon has added over 100,000 new positions, but all the profits are still concentrating at the top. Signs in Amazon warehouses instruct workers to remain three feet apart at all times as an anti-viral measure, when their work stations are actually two feet apart. Is there a place for such places in our dreams of the future?

Before we decide what aspects of the global supply chain to keep, let’s look closer at the meaning of the word “essential.” Police in some parts of the US have explicitly stated that “protesting is not listed as an essential function”; they aim to take advantage of the pandemic to suppress any dissent, though dissent is the only means by which we can assert our needs and defend our safety. Freedom is inessential, along with the lives of frontline workers. Meanwhile, the governor of Florida has deemed professional wrestling an essential function along with all other “professional sports and media production[s] with a national audience.” As in ancient Rome, what is essential is *bread and circuses*.

So we should not accept the concept of “essential workers” at face value. Capitalism has monopolized activities like food production that used to take place on a more decentralized basis. We are among the first human beings to be born into a society in which the only way to obtain

food is to go to a grocery store staffed by employees. Most of us have no other option today; this monopoly is what makes grocery store workers “essential.” In almost any other model, these workers wouldn’t be the only line between us and starvation.

On a fundamental level, Amazon warehouses and corporate grocery store chains are like police: they are essential to the maintenance of *this* social order, but they are not *necessarily* essential to life itself. We depend upon them because—through centuries of successive enclosures of the commons—we have been robbed of everything that sustained our species through the first million years of our existence.

When we are thinking about how to *steal our lives back from work*, this suggests another point of departure, alongside individual workplace theft and collective workplace occupations. We can begin to re-establish means of subsistence outside the economy—for example, via occupied urban and suburban gardens. Especially for those who are now unemployed, this is a way to steal the possibility of subsistence from a world optimized for employment alone. Perhaps, one day, where there are currently Amazon fulfillment centers, there can be community gardens complete with collective dining areas and childcare bungalows.

Remote Workers

In the age of surveillance technology, some of the differences are eroding between warehouse workers who are monitored by drones and white-collar workers who are monitored by technologies that take screenshots at random throughout the workday. All of us are being “optimized” according to capitalist control mechanisms and criteria. In remote or “smart” working, our employers invade our bedrooms, ruthlessly fixing our most intimate activities to the demands of the market. Middle-class workers have to worry about whether the décor of our bedrooms and the behavior of our children will be acceptable to our employers. Nothing is sacred.

Camera-bearing drones maintain surveillance inside warehouses, just as the camera on the device you are using to read this article can be used to surveil you.

At the same time, as more and more of our lives become dependent on digital technologies, some of the differences between the employed and the unemployed are also eroding. Among those of us who are unemployed, many of us also spend our days in Zoom meetings and clicking around on phones and computers. Our behaviors—paid or not—can be almost identical. Our online activity continues to provide income to corporations employing a profit model based on the attention economy, harvesting data, and the like.

Presciently, for *Steal Something from Work Day 2013*, one of our authors analyzed the ways that time theft alone can fail to take us beyond the regimes of capitalism:

Workers who engage in tactics of *la perruque* [i.e., time theft], but use the reclaimed hours to participate in a digital capitalism that commodifies user attention, merely sneak from one job to do another. In 2013, we call it “social media”—in thirty years, it will have no name. [...] We add stars and comments to Amazon products improving their sales; we self-surveil with Facebook; and we help search engines anticipate human desires by performing as a human test audience for them.

So while time theft is the one ostensible remaining means of *stealing something from work* for an entire social class now under de facto house arrest, we should not assume that it will suffice

to get us beyond the logic we are trying to escape. That goes for the unemployed as well as for those working remotely.

What is the solution? To return to the wisdom of our forebears, we should never use any tool produced by the capitalist system for its intended purpose. To quote “Deserting the Digital Utopia,”¹

“There is an invisible world connected at the handle to every tool—use the tool as it is intended, and it fits you to the mold of all who do the same; disconnect the tool from that world, and you can set out to chart others.”

For those confined to working or playing online from home, this offers a way to think about our little individual revolts. When you are engaging in time theft, don’t just click around on the internet, delivering additional information to the corporations and governments that are spying on all of us. We have to use this time creatively and effectively to prepare for the next phase of global collapse. Teach yourself a skill that you can use away from the computer, something that can help you heal or nourish people, whether biologically or psychologically. Create new connections and networks that can assume an untraceable offline form in the near future. Print out letters and deliver them to all the tenants around you inviting them to participate in the unfolding rent strike and offering them support. Remember, you must always have a secret plan.

Now more than ever, *stealing something from work* has to mean assaulting the system that forces work on us in the first place.

The Team is Real

A Model for Cross-Workplace Organizing

- 1. Step one: Wear the button when you’re at work. Hook people up (discounts, freebies, extras, etc.)**
- 2. Step two: Wear the button when you go out. Get hooked up. Remember to ask your teammates where they work.**
- 3. Step three: Build the team. Talk to your friends and trusted coworkers. The more people on the team, the better.**

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.

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

¹ The text continues, “The ideal capitalist product would derive its value from the ceaseless unpaid labor of the entire human race. We would be dispensable; it would be indispensable. It would integrate all human activity into a single unified terrain, accessible only via additional corporate products, in which sweatshop and marketplace merged.” Now we are seeing sweatshop, office, and even bedroom merged.

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 cannot 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.

—Committee for Attacks Against the World of Work (CAAWW - *Birds of the Coming Storm*)

A Theft or Work?

Why Steal Something from Work Day Means Burn Down the Internet

A critical essay on the possibilities and limitations of *stealing time at work* as a revolutionary practice. Our contributor is one of the countless grad students who have better odds of participating in an anarchist revolution than landing a tenure track position. Like anything *stolen from work*, this text bears the imprint of the context in which it was created—yet hints at what it will take to abolish that context. Thieves of time, one more effort to steal back the world!

La Perruque, “the Wig”

It is impossible to steal from work. If you are *at work*, you are either an employee or a boss, or else both. A boss cannot steal from work because he or she already owns the apparatus of production; an employee cannot steal from work because *working* means being part of that apparatus. If I get away with it, the staplers and printer cartridges my bag are just a category mistake, a peculiar misgrouping of my little hands with other company property. If I don’t, they are a trail of evidence proving that I was never really an employee.

The labor of workplace theft is a ruse, but the ruse rouses. The soul is an engine calibrated for pursuing the impossible: as long as capitalism makes equipment out of people, people will make off with equipment. This is a sign of life. The question is how the ruse relates to capitalism, how capitalism absorbs and reverses it, and whether the ruse can help us to abolish capitalism.

Let’s begin with the labor of stealing back your time, if only because that may be your primary workplace activity. Michel de Certeau, a hybrid Marxist/Jesuit philosopher of language whose specialties included May ‘68 and late-medieval demon possession, discusses this in *The Practice of Everyday Life*:

Take, for example, what in France is called *la perruque*, “the wig.” *La perruque* is the worker’s own work disguised as work for his employer. It differs from pilfering in

that nothing of material value is stolen. It differs from absenteeism in that the worker is officially on the job. *La perruque* may be as simple a matter as a secretary's writing a love letter on "company time" or as complex as a cabinet maker's "borrowing" a lathe to make a piece of furniture for his living room.

Trickery and Domination

For de Certeau, *la perruque* is exemplary of "tactics," as opposed to "strategy." The difference between the two is central to his analysis of how power functions everywhere from the factory and the kitchen to language itself:

Strategies are able to produce, tabulate, and impose these spaces... whereas tactics can only use, manipulate, and divert these spaces.

His basic insight will be as familiar to dishwashers lolling in the locker room as to conspirators planning revolutions:

The space of a tactic is the space of the other. Thus it must play on and with a terrain imposed on it and organized by the law of a foreign power. It does not have the means to *keep to itself*, at a distance, in a position of withdrawal, foresight, and self-collection: it is a maneuver "within the enemy's field of vision," ... and within enemy territory. It does not, therefore, have the options of planning general strategy and viewing the adversary as a whole within a distinct, visible, and objectifiable space. It operates in isolated actions, blow by blow.

Since de Certeau was writing in the 1980s, computers have rapidly replaced both letters and lathes in our workplaces. Digital spaces may operate differently than the ones he was examining. Yet the problem is not just that de Certeau was writing thirty years ago, but that he presumed an eternal present. The space of tactics, he says,

takes advantage of "opportunities" and depends on them, being without any base where it could stockpile its winnings, build up its own position, and plan raids. What it wins it cannot keep. This nowhere gives a tactic mobility, to be sure, but a mobility that must accept the chance offerings of the moment, and seize on the wing the possibilities that offer themselves at any given moment.

The subject of de Certeau's analysis turns the "actual order of things" to his or her "own ends, without any illusion that it will change any time soon." And de Certeau seems to agree: tactics can evade, subvert, and defy structures, but not destroy them. De Certeau sounds like King Solomon in Ecclesiastes 2:18-26, presenting a work/play dialectic in a closed and unchangeable universe. As far as de Certeau can see, free moments are free, but they are doomed to remain forever transitory: *born to lose*. Vanity of vanity, nothing is new under the sun.

For worker/theorists who both enjoy the ruse of workplace theft and refuse a "realism" that cannot envision the abolition of the workplace, is there any way to retain de Certeau's insights without his assumption of a static universe? He is, after all, a fine theorist of *secret games* like ours.

Or, to use de Certeau's metaphor, though our tactic is inevitably immersed in and permeated by its surroundings, can we insinuate ourselves *like worms* into a place from which *la perruque* could constitute revolutionary sabotage?

Can the Master's Degree Dismantle the Master's House?

A good Jesuit, de Certeau flourishes a mind like a filigree of silver: he is refined toward ornate visionary practice and ordered instruction. To be crude, he's a fancy poststructuralist academic, and he concisely presents the ethos of the well-meaning academic leftist:

If one does not expect a revolution to transform the laws of history, how is it possible to foil here and now the social hierarchization which organizes scientific work on popular cultures and repeats itself in that work? The resurgence of "popular" practices within industrial and scientific modernity indicates the paths that might be taken by a transformation of the object of our study and the place from which we study it.

He presents the academy as a place where *la perruque* can have different effects, precisely because, in a regime grounded in science, the university is the factory that produces the systems of control:

Let us try to make a perruque in the economic system whose rules and hierarchies are repeated, as always, in scientific institutions. In the area of scientific research (which defines the current order of knowledge), working with its machines and making use of its scraps, we can divert the time owed to the institution.

So here we have the Poststructuralist Battle Plan:

1. Gain access to the means of academic production;
2. Escape the space of strategy by situating oneself as a thief;
3. ????
4. Prophet.

De Certeau claims that as (social) scientists, academics can make clandestine use of science, the means by which everyday life is produced, and thus undermine the structural difference between the theoretical remove of strategy and the immersed immediacy of tactics. It sounds so tantalizingly like sabotage that even those who dream of "a revolution to transform the laws of history" could see the value of pursuing an MA in Poststructural Theory.

If shops have lathes, what could we use at a university? Funding, projectors, libraries, food, photocopiers, scanners, USB voice recorders, staplers... bricks and ivy! The academy is an armory waiting to be raided.

But we should be suspicious of this plan because the most expensive piece of academic machinery is the well-exercised brain. A stapler can be removed from its post, but prying your brain

loose from the system in which you have immersed it is something else entirely. You never actually arrive at the moment when you have just stolen a graduate-student brain. The moment, instead, is always either the discovery that this was not in fact a graduate student brain, but the brain of an unemployed writer with an unpalatably narrow range of expertise, or the expansion of the academy to incorporate a range of once-threatening ideas.

Ethnographically, de Certeau's plan is unconvincing for other reasons. The college town in which I write has a healthy infoshop, still selling shirts announcing the now departed presence of the 99% movement, and continuing to engineer tactics against ecocide, homophobia, and other contemporary faces of hierarchy. But neither that shop, nor that fleeting movement, nor the tactics that flow through it are significantly enhanced by the thousands of college students a few blocks away. The marks of *la perruque* are all over the classroom—professors and students working to use the academic machinery against itself and other hierarchical structures. Personally, I have both taught and attended courses that teach potent radical texts. Students who get high marks for understanding Marx, Bakunin, Fanon, Debord, and Solanas are no more likely than anyone else to engage in the struggles those texts endorse.

The university seems to be a machine that provokes people to commit a *perruque* in which they redirect their attention to structural inequalities, then neutralizes this by means of a flood of relativizing information. The now-harmless critique is administered to classrooms as a sort of vaccine against outbreaks of mobilizing rage, while technologies of cathartic distraction (beer, usually, with or without basketball) expel the remainder safely from the system.

And if you leave, it only gets worse: I have spent full years of what I occasionally pass off as an academic life diverting my energy and resources into sneakery and tactics. The university cannot be drained in this way.

Elsewhere, de Certeau seemed to understand this tendency of the university to reabsorb subversion quite well. He understands, for instance, that the historian “has received from society an exorcist's task. He is asked to eliminate the danger of the *other*... ejecting those dangerous individuals from the social body, and keeping them temporarily or permanently isolated.” In observing how the student riots of 1968 were neutralized, de Certeau indicts the academy, and notes how the students in revolt were later decried for their limited vocabulary of “two dozen words” like “consumer society,” “repression,” and “contestation.” Good words, but the University will demand that you use so many words that they cannot be used for anything in particular.

There was a graduate student from the anthropology department, a self-described Marxist, who came frequently to our Occupy encampment. He would tell us that if we really wanted to change things we would go home and read more theory.

100% Time

So *la perruque* of writing about *la perruque* doesn't constitute sabotage. Yet the problem is not the academy. De Certeau is right in asserting that nearly everyone sneaks time from work to do their own projects, even if they are being watched. But somehow millions of people running errands in company cars, making snacks from spare ingredients, and sexting while “on the clock” have failed to abolish capitalism.

Every workplace has two reflexes that work to prevent *la perruque* from damaging the functioning of the system. Let's call these reflexes *release* and *recapture*.

Release is a simple reflex. In the academy, it takes the form of scheduled forgetting, and in most non-academic jobs it is described poetically as “the blind eye.” *La perruque* is simply forgotten so the system can continue as it was before. Jobs that can be done by machines already are, so the remaining jobs must accommodate the fact that humans require *play*. Play: that is, a space of free movement so the system can adjust to inevitable tiny changes without shattering. A gear also requires *play*; humans just require more *play* than gears, and tend to fracture more dramatically when they are not provided with it. This should not be mistaken for freedom any more than the fact that skyscrapers sway from side to side in the wind should be mistaken for a “small victory” for the forces of horizontal movement.

Recapture is a more complex reflex, and while it is ancient, it seems to be becoming more important these days. We can see historical traces of recapture, for instance, where certain pre-existing facets of slave religions have been nurtured by masters in order to promote docility. Let’s consider how recapture relates to *la perruque*.

In 1948, the corporation 3M began encouraging employees to use 15% of work time to do any project they want, so long as it ultimately benefited 3M. It was in this creative space that a 3M employee invented the Post-it note, making the corporation countless millions. Today, Google encourages its employees to spend 20% of their time thus; that recapture of free time created gmail.

The nightmare capitalism of the future will consist only of “100% Time,” constant freedom under total capture.

Or maybe that future is already here. Consider your own recent moments of *la perruque*. What were you doing? Think hard, because some of your favorite activities may have been designed to leave no harsh mnemonic trace. Were you *fiddling around online*?

Workers who engage in tactics of *la perruque*, but use the reclaimed hours to participate in a digital capitalism that commodifies user attention, merely sneak from one job to do another. In 2013, we call it “social media”—in thirty years, it will have no name. Would that we had more lathes. Because we cannot build with computers, we ply games like Farmville or World of Warcraft, becoming background objects for other players; we add stars and comments to Amazon products improving their sales; we self-surveil with Facebook; and we help search engines anticipate human desires by performing as a human test audience for them.

Tactics are immanent, whereas strategy is transcendent, so *la perruque* is always a movement down and in. With “social media,” we have learned to enjoy the practice of fleeing from a larger job into a smaller one nested within it. Facebook’s interface is surprisingly honest: a sort of matryoshka doll that recedes deeper and deeper toward the ends of attention. Only on the middle level, where one gathers *and becomes* a sort of currency counted in “friends,” does this work comprise what Julian Assange has called the “most appalling spy machine that has ever been invented.” The smaller jobs of glancing at ads, which finances the appalling and pleasurable spy machine, are too small to remember. Imagine a book stamping on a human face forever.

As an aside, the video game industry is a phenomenally successful experiment in recapture by the military-industrial complex. Some argue that the first game was *Tennis for Two* (1958), created on a computer properly used to calculate missile trajectories, but most claim it was *Spacewar!* (1962), created by MIT’s military-funded computer labs and spread widely through the networked “ARPA community.” This military organization, famous for creating the Internet, spread *Spacewar!* as part of their general endorsement of “blue sky mode research”: they gave their employees nearly total freedom and funding, and fired them if they failed to produce lethal results. Perhaps

in 1963, someone thought the proliferation of video games was too wasteful a *perruque*. But twenty years later, Ronald Regan revealed that the Air Force regarded Atari as military training for the masses: “Many young people have developed incredible hand, eye, and brain coordination in playing these games. The Air Force believes these kids will be our outstanding pilots should they fly our jets.”

It is has been a long recapture, but a successful one: 40 years after the release of *Spacewar!*, *America’s Army* became the name of both a murderous force of empire and the video game it uses as an official training and recruitment device.

The Potlatch: Destructive Gifts

What, then, can we do? Can any *perruque* oppose the regime of 100% Time?

De Certeau offers a hint. *La perruque* is no doubt related to the potlatch described by Mauss, an interplay of voluntary allowances that counts on reciprocity and organizes a social network articulated by the “obligation to give.” ... It survives in our economy, though on its margins or in its interstices. It is even developing, although held to be illegitimate, within modern market economy... the loss that was voluntary in a gift economy is transformed into a transgression in a profit economy: it appears as an excess (a waste), a challenge (a rejection of profit), or a crime (an attack on property).

Waste, challenge, and crime! This sounds quite like how we reclaim our time “on the clock,” but where does de Certeau find the “obligation to give” in *la perruque*? The love letter and the family furniture he mentioned in his first example sound generous, but certainly many forms of *la perruque* are like masturbation in employee bathrooms—unlike anything we would call “generosity.” Taking a closer look, we see that de Certeau is directing our attention to Marcel Mauss’s ethnographic conception of “the gift.”

Mauss hoped to use ethnography to show that capitalism is neither natural nor complete, that “Apparently there has never existed... anything that might resemble what is called a ‘natural economy;’” no matter how much capitalism asserts itself as a system of natural (that is, rational, or at least non-magical) exchange. One of his most powerful tools for this purpose was his analysis of the potlatch, a cycle of ritual gifting among the indigenous Kwakiutl people of the American Northwest. The principle was simple (more so in Mauss’s academic reduction, certainly, than in Kwakiutl reality): to receive a gift is to take on an obligation that must be paid with interest. So gifting spirals. We are weighed down by generosity, and collective efforts to relieve ourselves produce spirals of accelerating gifting. A madness of generosity.

It is not clear why de Certeau, writing in the 1980s, saw this in *la perruque*, but it should be familiar to anyone mired in Facebook. The gift of “friendship” is an obligation, as is Farmville manure, or mentions by friends. Social media is already a potlatch. We have created 100% Time by trying to rid ourselves of the curse of free time.

But Mauss’s description of the potlatch gives us one more hint:

In a certain number of cases, it is not even a question of giving and returning gifts, but of destroying, so as not to give the slightest hint of desiring your gift to be reciprocated. Whole boxes of olachen (candlefish) oil or whale oil are burnt, as are houses and thousands of blankets. The most valuable copper objects are broken and thrown in to the water, in order to put down and to ‘flatten’ one’s rival.

Recent historians have suggested that the potlatch only reached this immolative form when the Kwakiutl were confronted with the crisis of colonization. Previously, the spirals of gifting had been acquisitive rather than destructive. Perhaps this is true. And perhaps there is a kind of gift spiral that can only emerge in 100% Time, in which it will not be enough to waste the hours we reclaim, nor to share them, but within which a new relation to time must emerge. Perhaps in the furtive laboratories where tactics are invented, we are only now discovering a mode of laziness that manifests as revolutionary sabotage. Perhaps here can we finally put on *la perruque* to end all *perruque*.

“Perhaps not,” Alice cautiously replied: “but I know I have to beat time when I learn music.”

“Ah! that accounts for it,” said the Hatter. “He won’t stand beating.”

Resources

- De Certeau, *The Practice of Every Day Life*
- Mauss, *The Gift*
- Bataille, *The Accursed Share*

Yes, We Even Stole from Work under Socialism

We present this extract from the book *A Worker in a Worker’s State*, written by Miklós Haraszti in 1972 when he was a young 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 and socialism 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 Eastern 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 above all to keep alive that which is best in themselves.

At a time when young people in the West who did not experience the horrors of state socialism are spreading nostalgia for it while fascists gain legitimacy in Eastern Europe by presenting themselves as its foes, it’s important to remember that state socialism never gave workers the freedom or abundance it promised—and that its true opponents are not the nationalists who would inflict still worse horrors, but anarchists and other ordinary working people who resist all forms of imposed authority. Likewise, Haraszti’s text is prescient in anticipating how artisanal craftsmanship would be further commodified in the post-industrial economy, offering the illusion of free activity as yet another facet of the market. Instead of peddling nostalgia for state control of industry, factory work, or any other specter of the 20th century—or seeking to monetize our autonomous activity after the fashion of the 21st century—let’s take immediate action against capitalism, socialism, and work itself.

In Search of the Great Homer

*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 that 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, wellbeing, 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 beside 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 that 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 that 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 that 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-rates.

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.

The tiny gaps that 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.

Epilogue

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’ interests—it gives us a pressure valve to blow off steam, and enables us to survive to work another day without a wage increase. Perhaps they figure the costs of it into their business plans because they know our stealing is an *inevitable 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 relevant to labor struggle enforces a dichotomy between “legitimate” workplace 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 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.*

“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*

Narratives

- **Time is Always the Best Thing to Steal from Work**—A narrative covering a lifetime of workplace theft.
- **Out Of Stock: Confessions Of A Grocery Store Guerrilla**—A former Whole Foods employee recounts his efforts to run his employer out of business by means of sabotage, graffiti, and insubordination, reinterpreting William Butler Yeats’ line “The falcon cannot hear the falconer” from a bird’s-eye view.
- **Steal from Work to Create Autonomous Zones**—The shocking true story of how a photocopy scam nearly escalated into global revolution.
- **A Cashier’s Guide to Putting Yourself Through College via Workplace Theft**— How one worker stole a higher education from a hardware store.
- **What Became of the Boxes**—An adventure in proletarian revenge.
- **Stealing from Work Is a Gamble, but It Can Be a Good Bet**—The story of one risk-tolerant employee who set out to double his earnings.
- **Don’t Beg for a Piece of the Pie—Take the Whole Pizza for Yourself!**—A chronicle of workplace resource distribution in Eastern Europe.
- **Like Most Workplace Thieves, I Am an Exceptional Worker**—Being a small-time criminal, demystified.

Time is Always the Best Thing to Steal from Work

I’m writing this on company time under stay-at-home orders.

I want to share an incomplete list of all of the things I’ve stolen from work over the course of my two and half decades as part of *the work force*. I want to start by acknowledging that my situation is likely different than yours. When and where we grew up, where we are living now. The kind of work we do. The relative privilege that each of us benefits from.

This is not a prescription or playbook. You might have access to opportunities I have not. The time and place and situation may be different, but the bosses are still the bosses and the fight is still the fight. Look for the cracks and squeeze through them.

Paper Delivery

When I was in junior high school, I had a paper route. I delivered the paper every day after school. Once a week, there was a coupon day. An extra stack of little papers arrived at my house

with the bundle of newspapers. I was supposed to stuff these coupons into all the newspapers before delivering them. I was a good kid. At the beginning, I did what I was supposed to. It made the load of papers in my satchel weigh twice as much.

Still, I couldn't help suspecting that most people didn't care about the coupons. So I performed an experiment. I stopped stuffing the paper with coupons and waited to hear who complained. I made a mental list of the few houses at which people really wanted the coupons. I'd include the coupons in the papers I delivered to those houses. All the rest of them went straight into the recycle bin.

This saved me a literal weight off of my shoulders. It also freed up an extra hour of precious post-school daylight hours to play with neighborhood friends. The paper route was supposed to teach me the value of a job well done—and it did.

High School Tech Support

In high school, I was in a computer class. We students had free rein to use whatever we wanted, as long as we did tech support for teachers who were having issues. Jammed printer. Dead network. Missing mouse. We would come fix it.

Most of the time, though, I was in the corner using the high-speed audiocassette dubbing machine. It could transfer one tape to three others at the same time, at four times normal speed. I started a little do-it-yourself record label using that machine. This changed my life, connecting me to other young people around the world in the days when the internet was just getting off the ground.

I also designed, printed, and mass-produced countless zines on those high school computers, printers, and copiers.

Pool Admissions Desk and Concession Stand

Around the same time, I worked in a concession stand at a fancy pool serving upscale neighborhoods. I made minimum wage. I never paid for nachos or slushees, and neither did my coworkers, friends, or casual acquaintances.

In subsequent years, I also worked at the admissions desk. I operated the cash register. People who came to swim paid me and went on their way. Dollar fifty for kids. Two dollars for adults. Fifty cents extra for the water slide. All day. Over and over.

On hot summer days, the pool brought in several hundreds of dollars per day. Some days, a group would come in from a day care or camp. Those were big days.

It's hard to skim off the top of a \$1.50 charge. If you're keeping the change, your pockets get heavy and jingly. There's also a paper trail of receipts.

But not if the cash register is broken. Weirdly, every summer I worked there, the cash register would stop working the first or second week. In effect, this reduced the cash register to a money drawer, abolishing the paper trail of receipts. I would do the math in my head, pop the drawer open, make change, and keep a running count in my head. *How many customers have come through the door today? How much can I skim without anyone noticing?*

The answer: I bought a new computer, printer, monitor, and scanner to take with me to college. And a lot of records!

Learning to do math in your head can be an important skill if you weren't born with a silver spoon under your tongue.

Grocery Store

Every shift during my lunch break, I'd wander over to the juice aisle, pick out a bottle, then go to the hot foods bar and heap up a pile of French fries. If my friend was working the hot foods register, we talk for a bit, putting on a little performance for any potential spectators. If not, I'd just go sit down and start eating.

As a cashier, I had a lot of discretion and prerogative. If something didn't ring up properly, or lacked a barcode, or neither I nor the customer knew the produce code... they got it for free. Or, if I didn't get the feeling that they were down, I'd ring it up for twenty-five cents. That way, they still saw me ring up something and weren't forced to make a decision about the ethics of workplace theft.

Any time friends came through my checkout line, I pantomimed ringing up their groceries, turning each so the barcode was facing up, away from the scanner. I'd say "boop" out loud with my voice. We'd share a nod, a wink. Then I'd ask them to buy me a pack of gum. Total bill: twenty-five cents.

Once, I made the mistake of trying to pass along those savings to my best friend's dad. He was pretty cool on most accounts. For example, during Sunday church, rather than making them listen to sermons, he taught his kids algebra and other math that was advanced for their respective ages.

But on this day, I grossly misread his sense of ethics. When he noticed that I was scanning items upside down, he started making a stink, raising his voice about his principles. Luckily, I was able to recover the situation before anyone figured out what was going on.

I was the slyest employee thief when taking food off the shelf; I always left with something tucked down my pants. A meal or two to tide me over from one shift to the next.

I also stole pantloads of film, processing, and prints. I would drop off a few rolls of photos from punk rock shows at the film developing desk, checking the boxes for all the upgrades: oversized prints, duplicates, fancy finish. When I picked them up, I'd say I had some other shopping to do before checking out. They just let me walk away with them. I never once paid for film, processing, or prints there. The good ol' days.

College Computer Lab

In college, I worked in the computer lab. The university had a really fancy computer sitting unused in storage. I took all its internal parts home with me one by one. Later, I bought a case and reassembled them into a new computer to serve the general public in a shared computer lab at a DIY collective space.

Like many other things, *stealing from work* was easier in the 1990s.

Web Design Internship

It turned out I was good at web design. I'd crank out the work really quickly, then spend the rest of the time designing zines and working on other creative projects.

Every Computer-Focused Office Job

I have always stolen time from office jobs. It was especially useful to be good at keyboard shortcuts in order to hide or destroy whatever I was up to when the bosses came around.

I also took all the normal office things: cables, paper, printouts, photocopies, staplers, staples, tape, keyboards, mice, laptop stands, chairs. I've stolen a few computers from jobs. Once, I traded a couple such computers for a car that I then drove around the country on a Great American Road Trip.

When it's provided, I always load up on food. Snacks for myself now, snacks for myself later when I'm not in the office. If friends come visit me at work, they eat for free, too, but they should also load up their bags and pockets. I try to make a point of using office-provided food to channel meals, snacks, and drinks to the houseless.

In the Time of Global Pandemic

This trip down memoir lane is all fine and good, even if some of the particulars aren't necessarily useful anymore. But what does it mean to *steal something from work* when many people are working from home or out of work entirely?

If you still have a job at a physical place and still have access to physical stuff, you can continue to steal. Food, supplies... toilet paper! Take some for yourself, for your friends and family, for your mutual aid network. Don't just hoard it—everything you pass on to those in need will be returned to you fourfold.

You can also steal for others so that they don't have to. Do it without them knowing, if you think knowing might make them anxious. Cashiers still have the prerogative to selectively miss ringing up items for customers buying supplies during the pandemic. People loading bags of food for delivery can slip in an extra of this or that.

If your workplace is now your living room couch, dining room table, or bedroom, there are still ways you can *steal something from work*.

If you're lucky enough to have "unlimited" paid time off (PTO), then for goodness' sake, take paid time off! Use it to focus on your physical and mental health. Use it to care for your friends and neighbors. Use it to volunteer in mutual aid projects.

If you have flexibility to take some time away from the computer while on the clock, do it! Even if you don't actually go anywhere, just step away from the computer for a while.

You can steal time.

You can take time during your workday, between Zoom meetings and Slack channel discussions, to do whatever you want. You can put some time on your calendar as "quiet working hours" to protect your calendar from meeting invitations. You can watch movies, educate yourself, or even write an article for an anarchist website about stealing from work! If you need it, take a nap or stare out the window.

It's OK not to be productive™ in this situation. This time is not simply *working remotely*. We are *working remotely during a global pandemic that has already killed over 100,000 people, an ongoing fascist takeover, and large-scale economic failure*. You have permission to forgive yourself for not writing the next *King Lear*, discovering the next calculus, learning another language, or mastering a musical instrument.

If you want to do these things, you should. If not, that's OK too. Just take care of yourself out there. Remember, your time is the most valuable non-renewable resource that you'll ever have.

If your heart is free, the time you spend is liberated territory. Defend it!

Out Of Stock

Confessions Of A Grocery Store Guerrilla

This narrative is dedicated to the courageous individuals who attacked the Whole Foods during the general strike in Oakland on November 2, 2011; whatever the papers say, many of us employees would be overjoyed if you paid a visit to our workplaces.

My Name Is Carlos

I am twenty-eight years old. I am wearing a black apron in the canned food aisle of the well-known corporate natural foods grocery store at which I work. I'm staring into nothingness, reflecting on the decisions that have put me here. I am beyond depressed; I've reached that juncture where depression meets anger. I am hostile, reactionary, and dangerous.

I'm so lost in thought that I'm honestly unaware of the shoppers scuffling around me—until a customer interrupts to ask a question I had already heard many times since I had clocked in. I turn my blank stare upon her: "What?" She repeats the question and I cut her off, pointing to the empty space where the product should be; below it is a sign that announces, in very large decipherable letters, "Out Of Stock." She commands me to go check in the back, obviously annoyed at my poor social skills.

I've been asked this question about a dozen times already; I let out a sigh through my clenched teeth. This customer isn't happy with my reaction and asks for my name, since I'm not wearing a name badge like all the other employees. This is a threat. "My name?" I answer, drawing on all my resentment. "My name is Carlos. I work in the Bakery Department." Two falsehoods.

Confused by my response, she heads straight to the customer service booth to submit a complaint. This is not the first time this has happened; I disappear to my hiding spot. Thus begins the career of Carlos, grocery store guerrilla and ghost in the machine, the shadow employee known throughout the store for disobedience, obstruction, and customer service performance art.

Death to Loss Prevention

I had been living in the same city for almost five years already and hadn't yet made contact with other anarchists. It was an incredibly isolated phase of my life. Between the hours I spent working and recovering from work, I schemed plan after spectacular plan to break free from my loneliness, only to have them crushed when I stepped back through those sliding doors.

I often saw customers shoplifting; a shoplifter myself, I'd try to give them space, but I wasn't the only one watching. The Loss Prevention Agent (LP) stalked the isles, attempting to blend in among the shoppers, though not much good at it. LPs are the scum of the retail industry, the vilest of would-be cops. I saw many taken into custody by these bounty hunters and eventually couldn't stand passively by anymore; I began competing with the LP to get to the shoplifters first. This was incredibly risky: not only was I risking getting fired for preventing their apprehension,

but I had to be secretive enough not to attract attention to any of the shoplifters I was attempting to make contact with.

One distinctive group that shopped infrequently at the store wore all black and weren't particularly subtle about stealing. Often they were lucky enough to come in when the LP wasn't working, but one evening the LP began creeping behind them from a distance. Somehow the middle-aged rent-a-cop did not attract their attention. I was desperate to approach the would-be shoplifters in black, but I knew that could mean getting caught myself, so I decided to start with the LP instead.

I walked to the back of the store and used the intercom to call for the LP by his first name, asking that he call me back at that number. Then while the LP attempted to return the call I headed to a different phone at another location in the store, from which I called for the LP over the intercom again. Miraculously, this little stunt bought just enough time for the shoplifters to leave untouched by the confused loss prevention agent.

Afterward, the LP and the store manager questioned me as to why I had called twice and never picked up. My answer was simple and easy enough to believe: I was trying to contact him about the group of shoplifters I had seen. When he didn't answer in time, I decided to follow them and called from a phone in another location. This put the blame back on the LP. A few months later, I met those same shoplifters in black outside my workplace and told them about what had transpired. They are my friends now and although I no longer work at that store, I do what I can to keep them safe when we are together.

Sabotage on the Dairy Floor

Anyone who's worked in a grocery store knows how miserable the dairy department can be. You're stuck in a claustrophobic freezer room for eight hours, terrified you'll be accidentally locked inside. No matter how many layers you wear, the cold creeps in and reminds you of all the things you'd rather be doing. On top of that, you're forced to listen to terrible muzak blaring from the speakers, occasionally interrupted by a shrill voice to add to your aural torture.

Everyone was expected to work at least one dairy shift a week; although I did my best to evade it, I was often stuck stalking the dairy floor. On one of these shifts, I broke one of the large metal sliding doors by slamming it too hard in a fit of rage. I quickly found out that if one of these dairy doors stopped functioning correctly, I didn't have to stock that particular door.

I wasn't content reserving my anger for the dairy doors. My second target was those deafening speakers. On one of my closing shifts, after my bosses had left for the day, I took the opportunity to paint the connecting wires with clear nail polish I had pocketed from the beauty section. I chose this method instead of just cutting the wires because I was already under suspicion for the dairy doors. After that, to my great relief, I didn't have to hear 80s music anymore, as none of my coworkers could figure out what was wrong with the dairy speaker system.

Following several broken doors, a new speaker system, and a long list of health code violations, I was taken off dairy duty.

The Falcon Cannot Hear the Falconer

In the course of my final days as an employee, I took it upon myself to leave messages throughout the store. Armed with a permanent marker, I wrote anti-capitalist slogans under items, on

items, on the bathroom stall doors, on baby diaper boxes, and on all the self-help customer computers, being careful never to get caught on the security cameras. The most notorious of these slogans was “the falcon cannot hear the falconer,” which I heard repeatedly discussed by both customers and employees. It’s a line from a William Butler Yeats poem describing Europe after the Second World War; I used to say it to my boss at a different job many years earlier when he asked me to do things I didn’t feel like doing.

Despite all the amusing things I wrote, this was the only one shoppers seemed to notice. Customers would simply ignore graffiti cursing work or capitalism as if it were just another tag on a shelf; but wherever I put up “the falcon cannot hear the falconer,” I’d witness customers staring at it, trying to decipher its meaning. Of course, any item that was written on became “damaged,” and employees were allowed to take home damaged items—so not only was I detracting from corporate profits, I was also improving conditions for us workers. And walking around the store with my permanent marker was one of my many ways of looking busy while doing as little work as possible.

The Damage Done

Aside from breaking the dairy doors, writing graffiti, and carrying out psychological warfare against my employers, most of my antics consisted of petty vandalism and general bad behavior. My acts of indignation would probably have gotten me fired on the spot or arrested if it hadn’t been the affinity I had developed with my coworkers around our hatred for work. Most of the grocery team would mark off items to bring home or just blatantly put groceries in their bags as they were leaving for the night. Only a few of my coworkers were “good” employees, and those were widely loathed; after my first week working at the store, I was informed of who they were and warned to avoid them.

All good things come to an end, however. Cameras were installed throughout the store, most of them in the back stock area where my team usually worked. Though we were able to find a few spots outside the camera’s view to continue our pilfering, the store managers initiated mandatory bag searches at the end of our shifts. My reign of terror came to a close soon after when upper management ordered my boss to get rid of me. In a generous gesture, my boss instead informed me of the decision and offered me the option to turn in my two-week notice. I put in my two weeks just in time for summer and took the opportunity to spend my free time making connections with other anarchists, fostering friendships that were only possible because I was no longer giving my time to that terrible job.

Appendix

- How to quit your job at Whole Foods
- How to quit your job at Taco Bell

Steal from Work to Create Autonomous Zones

It was the late 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. How 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 a song by the Misfits playing 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 skinhead-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 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 secret underbelly of the city. 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 predates 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 graveyard-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 and 5 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 handcrafted unique editions of our favorite books.

The company had recently switched their machines from a plug-in counter system to a primitive card system, in hopes of thwarting the various scams based around the plug-in counters: resetting them with pins or magnets, stealing an extra one, just slamming them against something and claiming you had no idea what had happened but you'd only made a couple copies. Of course, my friend could produce the new cards behind the counter at his leisure. Whenever I mailed out a 'zine to someone, I threw in a \$100 copying card 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 my friend worked in, 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 the sense that one is on one's own territory. We workers never feel like we're 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, consisting 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 an alternate 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.*”

A Cashier's Guide to Putting Yourself Through College via Workplace Theft

How I Stole My 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, pawnshops, 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 2000s, 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—I 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 merchan-

dise 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 re-filled 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...

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

—*The Angry Po-Boy Collective, March 29, 2010*

What Became of the Boxes

The testimony of a wage slave who recalls his misspent youth in the stockroom of an upscale clothing store and recounts how he exacted his revenge, ultimately calling into question whether there is anything worth taking from the world of work at all.

My friends in high school thought I was joking. I'd gotten a job at Express, an upscale Armani-Exchange-type clothing store in our suburban Texas shopping mall. How could they allow the sight of me in my duct-taped Chucks and Clockwork Orange hoodie? It made more sense when I explained that I worked in the back, in a stockroom where no one could see me. Occasionally my manager would pop in when the front was slow to tell me about a Rob Zombie concert, but other than that I was left alone with the clothes.

My responsibilities in the backroom were twofold: new stuff comes in, old stuff goes out. I wheeled in the boxes of new clothes delivered daily from the hidden passageways that run behind the stores of any proper indoor shopping mall. If you've never been inside, think of it like the modern equivalent of the walkways under the Roman Coliseum where dudes, or tigers, or gods from the machine pop out from trap doors all day to keep the crowds happy. The khakis, and cardigans, and skirts, and chamois got opened, sorted, shelved, and most importantly, security tagged. This made me, essentially, the first line in loss prevention. That was a mistake.

Pretty soon into working there, I figured out that I could steal whatever I wanted by just going for a walk out the back door, down that gloomy hallway, and out the door into the sunlight, to stash merchandise underneath a bush to grab after I got off. It was pretty easy, since the other half of my job was to take the trash and empty boxes out. In fact, looking back on it, it was laughably easy, and it felt nice and vengeful in a workplace where we were all marched out one by one through the security sensor at the end of each night and had our bags checked to boot.

I started stealing jeans and coats for my friends who wanted them, but I never took much for myself. Partly because Express Ltd. didn't really cater to my teenage punk fashion sense, and also because my Mother, who still did all my laundry, also worked there as a second job (which was embarrassing on multiple levels) and would totally bust me if she noticed a sudden influx of expensive pants.

After a while, my friends had their fill, and I didn't really know enough about eBay to set up some sort of fencing scheme. Stealing from work can be an exciting break from the drudgery, but, in all the jobs I've ever worked, it can also be a huge drag. Every time I go to a college dining hall, I walk in the door with big ambitions: "I'm gonna eat for the next two days, and then fill my bag with all the food I can carry!" But half an hour in, when my second plate of pasta hits me and I'm comatose with mediocre nutrition, the very thought of bringing all that crap home with me makes me wanna ralph. Work's the same shit. Even if they're expensive power tools or building supplies, the thought of bringing the things you've been stuck with in a warehouse for 12 hours home with you can be revolting. It's just hard to get excited about it. You feel a little cheap acting as if the stuff that the company has or makes could somehow compensate for the emotional toll work takes on you.

One particularly grueling day, when I was feeling that kind of nausea with the job and the boxes seemed endless, I had a stroke of genius: it would be a lot simpler to combine my two responsibilities into one. Why not just throw out the new boxes of clothes? No sorting, hanging, or tagging, and no smuggling or fencing, either—just garbage, straight to the dumpster. It was exhilarating: all of the fun and none of the baggage. As long as I didn't throw out too many, it would never be noticed till next year's inventory, and I (correctly) assumed that I would probably be fired for some other reason by then anyway.

So it became a routine: some time after lunch, I would load up the little dolly, roll it down those hallways, and heave 'em into the big dumpster never to be seen again. They looked just like empties anyway.

Was this theft? I don't know. I mean, if I got caught, I would have been charged with that, but it just seemed different when I didn't keep or even want the stuff. It was my time, my effort, and some sense of control that I was trying to steal back. All that shit was just trash to begin with.

Stealing from Work Is a Gamble, but It Can Be a Good Bet

In the repertoire of punk jobs there used to be a job known as poster tour. Many people who have spent a little time on college campuses can conjure a memory of this traveling spectacle. Picture it: a company orders absurd quantities of posters from overseas and sends forth its minions to market them to the gaping voids of personality that are the college students of America. The premise is that these first-year students, lost in the sea of their future, will desperately cling to any kind of material affirmation money can buy—to be specific, by adorning their dismally blank walls with beautiful portraits of the complex identities they've laboriously constructed throughout their lives.

By and large, the students' poster selections involve a constellation of beer pong, action movies, bikini babes, the ever-present visage of Bob Marley, and some poem about Jesus.

The life skills needed for this job are similar to those required for other facets of the punk lifestyle, especially for anyone who has been on any other kind of tour. You wake up and eat a

sorry excuse for a hotel breakfast, then get in a van and navigate to an unfamiliar destination; the host of the sale might meet you to introduce you to your venue (the requirements for the role of host do not include being available, being present, having any idea what's going on, or being sober); you set up your poster sale, painstakingly facilitate access to it, and watch the clock until the event is over. Then you break down the sale, head to the cheapest motel the company could possibly find for you, fill out a bunch of paperwork, and cry yourself to sleep. Repeat this the next day, and the next, and the next—for six weeks.

The job attracted outliers from several sections of society. The largest faction, due to the connections of our subculture and the viral nature of our relationship to employment, was the punks. Besides us, there was a smattering of hippies, weirdos, a few wild cards (including some non-subcultural, seemingly successful people), and a healthy portion of Europeans. People from the last category were in a unique circumstance. Through shady outreach efforts and middlemen, they were promised gainful employment in the USA—at a price, of course. The company made sure that the workers' profits were drained from what they owed to the company for securing their employment, as many companies do.

To top it off, we were tasked with selling the drivel of American culture. In rural Kansas, I watched as a dumbfounded Czech person was asked about the TV show *Friends*. Then the confused college student asked his companion, "Why are there Russians on campus?"

It goes without saying: the system was rigged. The company set projections of how much they expected you should sell; you wouldn't get paid above a meager daily base rate unless you sold more than their projections. It was an easy way to motivate workers while making sure they could never get ahead. The workers were instilled with the desire to work harder in order to reach their projections and make more money via commission, while the company set the numbers high enough that the workers could rarely make a profit—yet in the company's logic, the workers could only blame themselves for this failure.

It was obvious from the get-go that playing by their rules wouldn't get us anywhere. We needed to create a new landscape if we wanted to take advantage of this opportunity that was taking advantage of us.

The first step is always to get organized. At orientation, we exchanged contacts, made friendships, and vetted each other for trust. Mixing fun and subversion, someone uploaded a bingo board to a blog and shared the login passcode with others. (This whole story precedes smart phones.) The idea was that this would help us to keep in touch and allow us to report our winnings.

The squares on the board included a fun mix of communal misery (crying yourself to sleep, an easy square to win), impossibilities (going a day without selling a Bob Marley poster, which was never achieved by any team), hijinx (selling cute monkey posters to really tough sports bros), and bad behavior (going skinny dipping, drunk dialing the boss, meeting with other poster teams on tour). The blog served as a break room for us to gripe about our working conditions, share tricks, and foster a work environment that would be increasingly hostile to our employers.

We showcased our commitment to slacking and time theft front and center. This was such a pillar of our work culture that there was no place for people who weren't slacking and boasting about it. With the help of the blog, every day became a competition to see who could commit the most outlandish offense to the job. At the same time, the blog also helped us share information which enabled us to work out how much profit we were making for the company: with over 50 teams at work, we were making the company about *a million dollars a week*.

We tried to organize a strike. Unfortunately, in the end, the strike did not really come together and the team who was leading it decided just to quit. Quitting seemed like the best option—until we learned what happened when you quit: the company had all kinds of sly rules to ensure that you lost your earnings if you quit prematurely. Worse still, you might end up owing the company money afterwards! The team that quit ended up having to hitchhike out of the company office, as a final insult to the work they had done already.

This incident transformed our small-time scheming into war. We had already been telling each other how to pull the small scams we all depended on to stay afloat while working. The company gave us a small stipend for food, so we used our food stamps and pocketed the money. The company paid for hotels, so we would camp or stay with friends and pocket the money. The company allowed for a percentage of shrinkage, so we made sure that a percentage of posters “disappeared” and pocketed the money. Teams got creative: one bought a bunch of their own merchandise and sold it alongside the merchandise provided by the company. They weren’t found out until a college contacted the company to say that it was not OK for them to be selling “all this marijuana merchandise.”

The company noticed our sales weren’t meeting their projections, so they authorized us to have a 20% off sale. We charged full price and kept the extra 20%. When you’re in this mindset, the ball just keeps rolling.

In a Super 8 motel, I began to toy with a new idea. We dealt with lots of cash. How do you make more cash out of cash?

The answer hit me the next day as we drove by a riverboat casino: gambling.

Obviously, this was a bad idea. Countless movies, crime novels, and real-life disasters start this way. Still, we passionately hated the company, we shared an affirming and subversive worker culture, and we had already gotten away with a lot. The fact that it was a bad idea was what made it so appealing: workers at terrible jobs are always looking for something self-destructive to do that might just take the whole enterprise down with them.

There was one problem—I knew nothing about gambling. I sat in the motel for hours scribbling out math and probability problems, the way so many people have done in motels near casinos. The prudent gambler would have consulted proper sources via the internet or the library, as many people have written extensively on gambling tactics. But I was motivated and in my zone, and after a few days of neglecting the duties of the job, I had worked out my plan.

I won’t get into the mechanics of the plan; I wouldn’t want to bore the reader or showcase its obvious flaws. Let’s just say I came up with a strategy that felt safe as long as I would be working with a large amount of cash.

To play it safe, I did a test run with some of the money I had earned already. I was really nervous—taking risks with money is completely contrary to my character. I also hadn’t been to casinos, so it was terrifying to watch people lose hundreds and thousands of dollars in seconds. I watched a couple who had just gotten married earlier that day, still in their wedding attire, lose more money than I was slated to make all year in less than an hour. I wasn’t cut out for this.

Still, I persevered, comforting myself with the thought that if I lost my own money, I’d just take it from the company and figure out some way to get away with it. Sure enough, a nerve-racking hour or so later, I had more than doubled my initial bet. Like many gambling strategies, it worked in the short term.

The next day just happened to be an anniversary dear to jingoistic patriots. It always feels appropriate to do something irreverent to capitalism and America on such a day. We went into

the casino, a battlefield of flashing lights and singing machines desperately fighting to keep you feeling like a winner while draining all of the life and money out of you. I'd heard that when you're gambling, it's important to have a stopping point—a goal you set beforehand to keep yourself in check in case the desperation of losing or the elation of winning takes over. I won't disclose the numbers, but with the pretty penny squeezed out of all those Bob Marley posters in my hand, I set out to make ten times the amount I walked in with.

In casinos, they don't want you to stop gambling. They offer free drinks to gamblers, free food, members-only areas, concerts, shirts, stickers, and all sorts of other useless crap to assure you that you're a winner in hopes that you'll go on gambling until you've lost it all. I couldn't fall victim to this nonsense; I had a scheme supported by math problems I did on napkins. It was mechanical, cold, exacting, and required the coolheaded rejection of any kind of victory-induced excitement that could tempt me to stray from my path.

Dealer after dealer watched me make the same tactical choices, unfazed by the results. While most gamblers would think about their next bets and take time to place them, I had already done my thinking and was simply executing a strategy. I didn't take any of the free alcohol; I gave it to my tour buddy, who intelligently decided not to participate in my harebrained scheme. Like a rising flood, my winnings slowly grew while I watched other gamblers win and lose thousands of dollars around me. After a full day of what must be called work, I achieved my goal. I had taken company money and made tenfold what I put in.

I experienced none of the feelings I project to be associated with gambling—I felt no elation, no highs and lows, no sense that my good fortune would enable me to steal the wealth of the casino. I did a math problem and it worked long enough for me to quit while I was ahead. Having reached my self-prescribed goal, I was free to revel in all the benefits that the riverboat casino had to offer. We enjoyed all the free bowling we could handle, ate free hot dog after free hot dog, and danced with middle-aged day-drunk casino goers to a band of older men doing a cover of “What I Got” by Sublime (with several additional gratuitous saxophone solos).

The money I made came and went, as money does. But the feeling of getting yet another one over on the company that had engineered nothing but failure for its workers is something that I'll carry with me forever. It reminds me that if I divert the energy and time that my bosses want me to invest in the job towards the more strategic goal of subverting my workplace, my fellow employees and I will come out ahead.

Don't Beg for a Piece of the Pie—Take the Whole Pizza for Yourself!

Being from the part of the world that is considered Eastern Europe in the West, you get paid a lot less for the same shitty jobs. I had a few of those jobs already, starting at the age of 14, usually sorting products on the shelves in the big hypermarkets. The theft prevention there seemed omnipotent, so however angry I was about getting paid the equivalent of \$1.50 an hour (25% of which was taken by the contractor agency through which I found work), I had no idea how to do anything to improve my situation.

One day, I told myself I couldn't carry like that for the rest of my life. I would rather risk and even lose my job than never try, and instead lose myself. By then, I worked behind the counter

at a KFC franchise; my salary was still less than \$2 an hour. This was a decade ago, and I doubt much has changed since then.

As a 16-year-old punk, before I even made a single crown, I had to buy my own fancy shoes to go with the ugly uniform, which had false pockets so the employees couldn't steal. Although I already considered KFC to be an icon of pure evil, I never ceased to be surprised by the politics and regulations for workers. I couldn't keep tips—they wouldn't feed us for free—the leftovers were thrown into the trash, which was kept locked in a special room.

My first idea was to invite couple of friends for lunch and give them a lot of food for free when the manager wasn't looking, then try to take a lunch break so I could eat some of the food too. Eventually, I realized that if I went for supplies to the refrigeration room, I could eat there—but it was so cold, and anyone could open the door at any time. I started to see more and more employees eating in the kitchen, smuggling food to the bathroom and locking themselves there, or sneaking it behind the counter when the manager went out to smoke.

I started to build up to talking about it with the other workers; until then, it had been taboo to talk about getting back what we deserved. People got more conscious and started to help each other to get as much food as possible for lunch, like preparing a big bucket of food in the kitchen and then taking the manager out for a cigarette break so the one going for lunch could take it upstairs. From the counter, we would bring soda, coffee, muffins, and such back to the workers who had no access to those things.

I was new to working and still went to high school, so I didn't work that often. I wanted to get some food and leftovers to bring home and to school, to share with my family and friends. We made a deal that my colleagues would make a bag of food for me and leave it in the back so I could grab it when I went to change while the manager counted out my cash register.

It was nice to be able to eat for free and share with the others. But soon, everyone got tired of eating ultra-spicy steroid-filled fried chicken wings with fries and mayonnaise. I became vegetarian, and soon vegan. I felt like stealing food didn't really pay me back for all the time I spent there in constant hustle and stress, sometimes without any breaks. Free wings didn't pay for all the cigarettes I started to smoke when I worked there. It just wasn't enough.

Thinking about it every day and getting more committed to breaking the rules, I figured out that no one was watching the security cameras and they didn't archive the records. I discovered that I could open my register by typing that I sold a small drink, fries, or even a helping of ketchup. I quickly learned how to keep track of the costs of different items; if a customer had money ready or was in a hurry, I would first make the whole order and count it in my mind, then take the money, typing that I had sold something much cheaper. By doing that several times a day, I physically kept much more money in the register than they expected according the system.

Yes, this is simple and they knew about it—that's why we didn't have any pockets and they would check to make sure that we weren't leaving with money in our hands or elsewhere. To bypass this control, I would ask some of my friends to come in for food, pretend we didn't know each other, and pay with big bills. This time, I would type everything beforehand and correctly, in order not to be suspicious if the manager came around; but when giving the change back, I would give them all the money I knew I had saved during the day. In this way I would split the money with some friends who also had financial problems.

Once, my manager told me I had to clean the tables in the lobby for the rest of the day as soon as I finished with my next customer. At that point, I had way more money in my register than I was supposed to, so I pretended to tie my shoelace and put some money into my sock. I was still

over the expected amount in the register, but I explained that I got big tips that day. It was good to know that I could get the money out myself so I could steal a bit every day rather than a big amount once in a while when my friends came. After that, I started to make pretty good money for a teenager.

All the same, working there became unbearable. The end of last shift felt so liberating. I couldn't believe they didn't catch me.

I started to work at a pizza window. Once again, we were not paid well. But in this new workplace, to my surprise, the workers had a system by which to multiply their income. In addition to selling weed alongside pizza, they figured out that the owner only kept up with the stock by counting the balls of dough. He was a busy man, opening more and more places; he never did any work besides coming in to take the cash at night. He always had a new car or fancy stuff. We sold big pizzas by pieces, so he wasn't counting boxes, just the dough that we had to press into the pizza bases. My colleagues figured out that they could make seven pizzas out of the dough intended for six by setting a bit of each dough ball aside. Soon we were making four pizzas out of three balls, so our crew could sell every fourth pizza for the direct profit of the workers, and split 25% of the daily gross among ourselves.

Sometimes the boss would say we were using too much cheese or tomato sauce. Then we would buy our own supplies to make the extra pizzas, and still come out ahead. It was a workers' cooperative pizza shop within a capitalist pizza shop.

Nowadays, looking back, I remember those times as less risky than my adult life has been, in which (like many people in this country) in order to survive I have to be officially unemployed while I make a living under the table, supplemented by shoplifting and insurance frauds. It's too bad the customers had to eat those thin little pizzas, but hey, I'm not the one who came up with this social order or the incentives that drive it! If you want thick crust pizza, abolish capitalism!

Like Most Workplace Thieves, I Am an Exceptional Worker

My name is Ann and I am a successful small-time career criminal. I'll start the story with some background information about my lifestyle. I have lived out of my car and in squats alternately for the past several years. I live remarkably cheaply, but I do use some money. My main expenses are my car, my storage unit, my gym membership and my coffee and cigarette addictions. Nobody's perfect. I have more affluent tastes than the vast majority of homeless people but after having been on the streets off and on, I've learned to live without a lot and how to source a lot of things for free.

My last job was at a (relatively) small corporate retail chain specializing in greenwashed products for rich people to appease their consciences over their consumption habits. My boss was a sexist jerk who knew way less about the products we sold than I did, but had a background in management (in another field) so he got to be in charge. I am an artisan craftsperson who's seeing my trade being completely industrialized and my skill being made obsolete and relegated to being a niche curiosity for wealthy people. The main push from management was on sellership and creating ambiance, which I hate. Efficiency increased dramatically when I was alone in the shop.

It took a little while to gain the trust to be left alone in more often, but like most workplace thieves, I am an exceptional worker. Part of this is obviously in the MO, but I think the joy of

padding one's own paycheck helps combat the lethargy and meaninglessness that most low-level employees feel from their job. Part of it may also be that clever, hard working people are more inclined to combat their own class oppression than apathetic people are.

The register setup was perfect. I could cancel a transaction and pop the drawer open without customers seeing anything. I have a natural aptitude for mathematics and just kept a tally of how much in cash transactions I had canceled out until the shop was empty and I could take it from the drawer. I started out small, like \$5-\$15 per day but as the ease of it hit me, and as business picked up through the summer, I eventually moved to taking as much as they were paying me. I gradually learned some issues this posed to me regarding money management. The first was with the supply of change in the register. Even though the balance at the end of the day matched the register tape, the change would be drastically depleted. I started carrying a wad of ones and fives and a handful of coins in my purse to refill the drawer at the end of the day. The second issue was when I noticed that I had been depositing all of my paychecks without withdrawing any money for anything and just living off the cash I took. I started withdrawing some money from the bank just so my records wouldn't look so strange, but this was leaving me with a quickly growing bail of cash. Paranoia set in just a bit. I took out a storage unit to keep my money (and a few possessions) in.

Business (and therefore my cash flow) was declining towards the winter. The boss installed a new POS [point of sale] system in the register to keep track of inventory. The next day a customer came in and bought something really expensive that we only had one of and paid in cash. I think it might have been a setup but I couldn't resist. One time I worked somewhere where the supervisor was stealing and the boss knew it but didn't fire him. He wanted to catch him in the act so he could press charges and he made me participate in trying (unsuccessfully) to trap him. I stayed up late into the night wondering if there would be cops there for me the next day. I decided to call in that morning with some bullshit story about having just been injured in a bicycle accident and never went back.

At the end of my employment, I had saved up about ten grand in six months, roughly half of it stolen cash. I've been unemployed for eight months now. I've volunteered at a local youth drop-in center, and started a Food Not Bombs chapter and another free grocery distribution project. Giving back to my street community is important to me. I do a lot of resource sharing—clothing, sleeping gear, etc. I've taken up several hobbies, started a regular workout routine, traveled, and read lots of educational literature in that time. I bought myself a few nice toys, but mostly just lived modestly off the money. As I write this today, I am still sitting on five grand.

Testimonials

STEAL FROM WORK TO HELP PEOPLE

My wife and I are both employed in Central Florida through a technical division of the largest American motor company. The location overstocks the restrooms with free hygiene products like tampons and pads, soaps, and first aid kits. We both fill our bags with these items a few times a week before leaving. We make waterproof bags and leave them in areas where homeless people congregate. We have done this for over a year and have redistributed thousands of items.

–Robin Hood of Hygiene

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 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 PROVIDE FOR YOUR COMMUNITY

I am an anarchist who has been working in the service industry for way too long. In this time I have come across some of the worst muthafuckas you can imagine. I am not referring the bourgeoisie that come in everyday and humiliate me—who don't make eye contact with me while they make demands, who make gestures to my female coworkers—the people who ignore me while their piping hot plate burns permanent scars into my hands. I'm not referring to the

ones who have had me fired just because they were having a 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—this, almost always coming from a person who ordered a fried appetizer, salad (ranch on the side, of course), a disgustingly huge burger with more fried shit added, an unneeded dessert, and finally... a DIET FUCKING COKE! The logic of this I will leave to you to decide.

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 by 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 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!"

Re-appropriate Everything!

–*Service Class Insurgent*

STEAL FROM WORK FOR A SELF-ASSIGNED BONUS

Being a buser 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 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 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 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

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.

–*Aspiring Author Dan Larkins*

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 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 all that 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 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 STAY FOCUSED ON THE JOB

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 kept from getting bored*. This was how I kept from getting angry. I 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 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 guerrilla garden people had been talking about starting at the site of the Really Really Free Market in our town.

—*Seasonal Worker*

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 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

Further Reading

- Abolish Restaurants
- Capitalism Is a Pyramid Scheme
- The Mythology of Work
- Recipes for Disaster: An Anarchist Cookbook
- The Secret Is to Begin
- To Change Everything
- What Is Security Culture?
- Work: Capitalism, Economics, Resistance

Selected Coverage

- The Guardian
- Haaretz
- Enet.gr
- Baltic News Network

Horrified Partisans of Law, Order, and Exploitation Respond

- Glenn Beck
- Signs of the Times, the in-house magazine of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church of Australia and New Zealand
- Security InfoWatch Forums
- The Fraud Doctor

Allies and Accomplices

- *I <3 Workplace Theft*—Also available as a 'zine from our comrades at Strangers in a Tangled Wilderness, *How to Justify Workplace Theft*
- Steal Something from Work Day in Texas—A mysteriously positive column that appeared in the *Maroon Weekly*
- Indie Rock arguments for stealing from work

To give credit where it is due, STEAL SOMETHING FROM WORK DAY was inspired by Steal Something Day, itself a response to Adbusters' Buy Nothing Day—both of which belong to another century.

International Coverage

Bulgaria

СВЕТОВЕН ДЕН “ОТКРАДНИ НЕЩО ОТ РАБОТНОТО СИ МЯСТО” - 15 Април

Greece

Ημέρα «Κλέψε κάτι απ' τη δουλειά» (15/4)

Spain

15 de Abril, día mundial de robar algo del curro

Germany

BEKLAU-DEINEN-ARBEITSPLATZ-TAG

[Download PDF](#)

Sweden

A downloadable PDF of a sheet of these stickers.

[Download PDF](#)

Sno-Från-Jobbet-Dagen: An action in support of Steal Something from Work Day 2018 in Sweden. The banner reads “Your job is eating you up—Steal a little back!” The line of the advertisement still visible below it urges “Don’t let pollen stop you this year.”

[Steal Something from Work Day](#)

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)
Anti-Copyright



CrimethInc.
Steal Something from Work Day
April 15, every year
April 15, 2019

Retrieved on 29 April 2024 from crimethinc.com/steal-something-from-work-day

usa.anarchistlibraries.net