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The Disconnect Is Coming From Inside the House

Kevin Carson

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At *Reason*, C.J. Ciaramella (“Tim Scott Says UAW Workers Should Be Fired, Invoking Ronald Reagan”) gives GOP Presidential hopeful Tim Scott two stars for his proposal to fire striking auto workers like Reagan fired striking air traffic controllers and broke PATCO: “He said, you strike, you’re fired. Simple concept to me. To the extent that we can use that once again, absolutely.”

Ciaramella’s reservations are limited to concern over the possibility that gummint might be invading the holy prerogatives of private business. As regard the proposal itself, he makes no pretense of being anything other than completely on board with the idea, just so long as it’s the Big Three auto executives themselves who do the firing. Unions themselves are — as goes without saying for a commentator at *Reason* — problematic at best and flaming red ruin on wheels at worst.

Ciaramella makes it clear that “UAW’s demands are fair game for criticism,” noting that “UAW leaders have been bargaining for a four-day workweek, in addition to higher wages

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and cost of living protections.” He goes on to quote Scott with apparent approval:

We’re seeing the UAW fight for more benefits and less hours working,” Scott said at the event. “More pay and fewer days on the job. It’s a disconnect from work, and we have to find a way to encourage and inspire people to go back to work.

The “disconnect” is Scott’s and Ciaramella’s. Workers have been seeking to “disconnect from work” — to obtain more pay and more benefits for fewer hours working — since the beginning of capitalism. For their part, capitalists have sought to pay less for more hours; and the state violence on which they have relied to pursue this goal has been integral to the capitalist economic model on a scale which organized labor, right-libertarian pearl clutching about “union thugs” notwithstanding, could hardly dream of.

The landed classes and capitalist farmers of 18th century Britain openly lamented the fact that the rural laboring class would not work as many hours, or for as little pay, as their betters desired so long as they had independent access to means of subsistence on common pastures, wood, and waste. For example, a 1739 pamphlet argued that “the only way to make the lower orders temperate and industrious... was ‘to lay them under the necessity of labouring all the time they can spare from rest and sleep, in order to procure the common necessities of life.’” Another tract called “Essay on Trade and Commerce” warned in 1770 that “[t]he labouring people should never think themselves independent of their superiors.... The cure will not be perfect, till our manufacturing poor are contented to labour six days for the same sum which they now earn in four days.”

Scott and Ciaramella also display more than a little disconnect with the history of right-libertarian ideology itself. Libertarian polemicists never tire of giving capitalism the credit for

the shift to a 40-hour work week in the mid-20th century — a development which, had he been around at the time, Tim Scott would have doubtless denounced as a “disconnect from work.” The standard argument by apologists for capitalism is that capital accumulation by the wealthy leads to capital investment in new forms of machinery that increase the productivity of labor. And increases in labor productivity are automatically passed along to workers. As the productivity of labor goes up, capitalist employers are forced to raise wages to match productivity; if they don’t they lose out in the competition for workers. As Percy Greaves put it, “No businessman in a free market society can long pay a worker a dollar an hour and sell his product for five dollars an hour.” Walter Block gives the example of a newly hired worker with a marginal productivity of \$20/hour.

What will his wage tend to be?... Suppose it is \$3 (something like that would be the offer expected by the average “progressive”). The employer would profit to the extent of \$17. Would matters end there? Not bloody likely. Nature abhors a vacuum and economics does so with profits: they serve as blood in the water does for a shark. Many other companies would like to have Joe’s services at \$3. The only way they can entice him away from his present employer is to offer him more money. How much more? At \$4, there would still be profits of \$16 to be garnered. At \$12, the employer would still “exploit” the employee, but now to the tune of \$8. Joe’s wage would rise to as close to \$20 as possible, given that there are transaction costs of finding such people, bidding for them, etc.

Wages, so the right-libertarian orthodoxy goes, are determined — like the returns to all “factors of production” — by marginal productivity.

Although this argument for a connection between productivity and wages undermines Scott's stance against less work for more pay, it's largely irrelevant to the real world; it pretends that economic relations between capital and labor are actually governed by the "free market," rather than by power. We can see the falsity of this assumption in the fact that — among many others — since the beginning of union membership's decline in the 1970s and its utter collapse from the '80s on, wages have ceased to go up with productivity and have instead remained stagnant. Since Reagan and Fed Chairman Paul Volker declared war on organized labor and workers' bargaining power, we have seen the material gains from increased productivity almost entirely funneled to the super-wealthy. The top 1%'s share of total wealth has gone from around a quarter to something like 40%, and the differential between CEO pay and that of production workers has increased several times over.

But even if there were no structural power inequalities or background violence involved in the relation between capitalist employers and their workers, even if increases in productivity actually did result in higher wages through market mechanisms under the existing capitalist system, unions would serve a vital role in the discovery process by which the market mechanism operated.

Nevertheless, all stipulations for the sake of argument aside, such structural power issues not only exist but are the core logic of capitalism. Unions, therefore — and all other forms of collective action by workers — are not simply a discovery mechanism for the price of labor. They are a weapon of struggle.

The "disconnect from work" is inherent in technology itself. It takes progressively fewer work hours, and fewer material inputs, to produce not only the same standard of living but a vastly increased one. The technologies of abundance are in existence, and growing exponentially in productivity. Capitalism seeks to contain these technologies of abundance within

a framework of artificial scarcity, in order to continue extract a surplus from labor. Our goal is to throw off the shackles of artificial scarcity, destroy the structural power relationships by which capital is able to extract surplus labor, and bring about the full realization of the disconnect from work.