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Them Pore Ol' Bosses Need All the Help They Can Get

Kevin Carson

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Leave aside for the moment the question of what role unions would play in a free market, and whether current state intervention is more on the side of unions or employers. On a purely emotional level, why is it that so many people who call themselves libertarians, when it comes to employment relations, become Type-A authoritarians? In an earlier comment thread, Jeremy of Social Memory Complex drew my attention to a message board discussion on this article: "Proud to be a Replacement Worker." It's a real eye-opener.

Even when the utility-maximizing behavior of employers and workers is exactly the same, the anarcho-authoritarians' reaction to such behavior by the worker is visceral outrage; on the other hand, they react to complaints of such behavior from the employer with a glare of disapproval and a terse "if you don't like it, look for another job." Try it for yourself. Go on the typical libertarian message board and complain about conditions where you work, and see how long it takes you to get the first admonition to "look for work elsewhere." Then try complaining about the laziness of people where you work, and

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sit back and wait for all the commiserations about “how hard it is to get good help these days.”

Charles McDowell: Unions are just generally difficult to empathize with because of their lazy, entitlement mentality. If you’ve ever worked anyplace with a union, you’ll know what I mean. They are all about doing the minimum possible and removing all mechanisms whereby more able employees move up the ranks more quickly.

Jeremy: Economically speaking, why should they do more than the minimum possible for their pay?

McDowell: Why not just rob people if you can get away with it? Economically speaking?

Jeremy: If a person does a certain amount of work and gets paid for that amount of work, is the person really pricing himself efficiently if he does more work without getting paid more?

Just what do you think McDowell’s response would be to a complaint that employers are “robbing people” when they try to get the most work they can for an hour’s wages?

So is the sale of labor a market exchange between equals, or is it an authority relation between servant and master? If it’s an exchange between equals, why is it acceptable for the employer to maximize the return he gets for the wages he pays, while the worker is “lazy” if he doesn’t look for opportunities to “do a little something extra”? Why do self-proclaimed libertarians not only respond emotionally to such theoretically equal exchanges as though they’re really authority relations, but go so far as to identify with the authority figure in the relationship? Even though they’ll stipulate, theoretically, that the employment relation is an equal market exchange, in practice vulgar libertarians accept that the boss is an authority figure who’s entitled to expect “something extra,” and that good

workers should go out of their way looking for ways to impress him.

The most egregious display of a double standard is by Paul Birch, who repeatedly refers to strikes as a “breach of contract.” So let me get this straight: your employer should be able to fire you at any time, for any reason, or without any reason at all; but you’re bound by some kind of implied contract that prevents you from withdrawing your labor at any time, for any reason, including in concert with your coworkers?