

On the Unwholesomeness of Honest Toil

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LAST NOVEMBER, an article my husband and I wrote was printed in *Monthly Review*. Regularly published writers may smile at our naiveté, but nothing like that had ever happened to us before, and we hadn't the slightest idea what to expect. As it turned out, we got almost everything from anathema to praise; but of all of it, what confused me most were the honest workingmen who rose indignantly to defend their addiction to work. Mostly, they came to us in a spirit of good will, sincerely puzzled that we could defend anything as indefensible as sloth, and condemn anything as laudatory as industriousness. Their sincerity merits a thoughtful answer.

Yet, confronted in person, I always found it hard to give one. The work—*i.e.*, the labor one is constrained to perform in order to “earn” the right to food, shelter and clothing—should be a good-in-itself is a concept impossible for me to grasp; I've sold a great deal of my life in eight-hour slices, and always got the worst of the bargain. If I had been more highly paid, or worked under less unpleasant conditions, I'd still have been cheated, because life, even by the hour, simply cannot be compensated with money. All that can be said is that lack of money can terminate life sooner in our society, so that in order to prolong our years we sell our days—no, no matter how I phrase it, it just doesn't make sense. Whether a life is sold *in toto* on an auction block or piecemeal in personnel offices, it's still *life* that's being sold. Maybe if I accepted the salability of life, I could comprehend the virtue of work; but I don't, and can't.

But if people didn't *have* to work, our diligent critics tell us, they wouldn't do it. That may well be true, we agree, and they smile in satisfaction, confident they have won their point. Then it is I who's puzzled: what point? That idle people would waste their lives? But how can lives be more wasted than in a steel mill or a laundry? What could they do that would be worse? Watch television all day? That may be bad, with the programs we get, but it's not as bad as feeding punch presses. Get drunk? But they do that anyway when they can, and with desperation instead of joy.

Maybe the point is that society needs their labor. That has been true in the past, but at the moment, with over 40,000 jobs being lost to automation each week, it's a rather anachronistic proposition. Besides, our critics seldom argue society's need; their fear is that society will demonstrate the dispensability of their labor, any minute. If that fear has decreased somewhat in recent months, it's only because the government is now thoughtfully providing make-work jobs in the murder industry. That can't be it.

You see, I have been thinking, and defining work as labor performed under the duress of economic need or social custom, I cannot find any valid defense for it except as a dubiously

necessary evil. For pay, the human workingman degrades himself into an adjunct to an inanimate machine or into a brute beast of burden; and that act is a prostitution of his humanity.

There is, however, a thoroughly plausible explanation for this proletarian devotion to the cult of work: it's a pathological condition, an industrial disease, one of the more malignant manifestations of that endemic time-clock syndrome with which the modern working class has been inoculated.

The nineteenth-century socialists did not fall victim to this madness, by then as rampant among the working class as consumption and rheumatism. They recognized clearly enough that love of work was a monstrous perversion of the worker's human instincts, and they took the proletariat of their day roundly to task for allowing itself to be so corrupted. Note this, from Paul Lafargue's *Right to Be Lazy* (1880):

And meanwhile, the proletariat, the great class embracing all the producers of civilized nations, the class which in freeing itself will free humanity from servile toil and make of the human animal a free being—the proletariat, betraying its instincts, despising its historic mission, has let itself be perverted by the dogma of work. Rude and terrible has been its punishment. All its individual and social woes are born of its passion for work.

"Shame on the proletariat!" He added, and went on to propose a three-hour workday as the maximum compatible with human health and welfare, and entirely feasible given France's level of productivity in 1880; but to be reduced as new machines were invented:

Our machines, with breath of fire, with limbs of unhearing steel, with fruitfulness, wonderful inexhaustible, accomplished by themselves with docility their sacred labor. And nevertheless the genius of the great philosophers of capitalism remains dominated by the prejudice of the wage system, worst of slaveries. They do not yet understand that the machine is the savior of humanity, the god who shall redeem man from the sordid arts and from working for hire, the god who shall give him leisure and liberty.

Engels noted the corruption of the British proletariat, but the housepainter-writer Robert Tressell described it best:

In May, as the jobs increased and the days grew longer, they were allowed to put in overtime; and as the summer months came round once more the crowd of ragged trousered philanthropists began to toll and sweat at their noble and unselfish task of making money for Mr. Rushton. Papering, painting, whitewashing, distempering, digging up drains, repairing roofs, their zeal and enthusiasm were unbounded. Their operations extended all over the town. At all hours of the day they were to be seen going to or returning from jobs, carrying planks and ladders, paint and whitewash, chimney pots and drainpipes, a crown of tattered imperialists, in broken boots, paint-splashed caps, their clothing saturated with sweat and plastered with mortar. The daily spectacle of the workingmen, tramping wearily home along the pavement of the Grande Parade, caused some annoyance to the better classes, and a letter appeared in *The Observer* suggesting that it would be better if they walked on the road. When they heard of this letter most of the men adopted the suggestions and left the pavement for their betters.

In America, the Wobblies had a word for such workers, and they spat it out with utmost scorn: *Scissorbill!*

Yet even socialism's resistance broke down when, after the Soviet Revolution of 1917, it was exposed to a new and more virulent form of *ourgomania*, the pathological addiction to work. Contrary to expectation, socialism had come first to a backward, agriculture-based nation, and

the urgent need of the new socialist state was development of an industry that could hold its own in competition with the capitalist countries. Of necessity, work became the order of the day.

If it seems a bit ridiculous that the poor devils who fought a revolution to lighten their labors found themselves toiling harder than ever to sustain their revolution—well, *ourgomania* is a madness, by definition. At any rate, it happened; and as capitalism's necessity has been elevated into a *good*, so too did socialism's. In the Soviet Union, diligent scissorbills got Stakhanovite medals. Glorifying the working class, Soviet ideologists found themselves glorifying Work itself—they had to, for their heroic working class must continue to work, else descend to hooliganism and bourgeois decadence, and fall pretty to the capitalist enemies that ringed round it. So the cult of work was sold to socialist workers too, and soon they surpassed all others in their zeal. Working like piss-ants, they consolidated their socialist society, caught up with capitalism both industrially and militarily—and have become so addicted to work they now strive even harder, aiming for a twenty percent advantage. When they get it they'll undoubtedly raise the ante, become unable to conceive of a life free from toil.

Indeed, they suffer from the most fearful depression at the very suggestion of it; and any real threat to deprive them of their work, or even to reduce the hours of its duration, is quite likely to bring on hysteria and may precipitate suicide. That it is fear of idleness and not paylessness which so obsesses the *ourgomania* is demonstrated by his desperate resistance to all proposals for his emancipation, even those which carry with them provisions for the continuance of his income. He clings tenaciously to outmoded methods of production, that he may work the harder. Fearful that in a moment of unwonted clarity he may be tempted to revert to his natural inclinations, he often sets up elaborate precautions, enmeshing himself in debts for no other reason than to reinforce his need to work.

In one serious form of the malady, the *ourgomaniac* whose job does not reduce him to the utter nothingness he apparently craves may remove himself to a distant suburb, in order to lengthen his unsatisfactorily short workday by several hours of strenuous freeway driving, and add yard work to his extra vocational chores. The advanced case (most often a childless worker with relatively well-remunerated skills, who least needs the additional pay) seeks another job, and moonlights. When this occurs the crisis may follow quickly, and the worker who escapes death recovers with a high degree of immunity.

The more sophisticated worker is apt to exhibit somewhat different symptoms. He claims that he himself would welcome his freedom from work, and is quite certain he could use it wisely and well, yet suffers from the delusion that he is alone, or nearly so, in his capacity for living. Others, he feels, would surely find a workless life unendurable, and only be corrupted thereby—blindness to their present corruption, and his, being a universal concomitant of the disease.

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