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The Work and the Job

Wild Rose Collective

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“I don’t think I’m cut out to be an employee.”

It was a bitter joke. My friend had just finished venting about one of her two jobs. She was typing to me just after getting bossed around on the smallest details of her job at a small nonprofit. After that, she had an evening as a temp to look forward to, grading middle-school standardized tests. She had said that working so much was starting to mess with her head. She hadn’t played music in too long. Too much of her life went to satisfying somebody else.

I had to laugh at the idea there was something wrong with her. I typed back, “Yeah, me neither.” I work at a low-level healthcare job. In some ways it’s worse than my friend’s jobs, and in some ways it’s better. She sits at a desk. I scrub disgusting things off the floor. Her jobs require a degree. I dropped out of college. She gets paid more. I haven’t always been paid on time. On the other hand, I get to see positive results of the work I do. The work itself is more rewarding. That counts for a lot more than you might think.

But the work and the job are two different things. The other day I had to stay late after an overnight shift, correcting paperwork. I spent more than two hours signing and dating every little error. Every time I wrote in the wrong pen color. Every time I crossed

out a word with an “X” instead of a single horizontal line. I felt like one of those middle school students, jumping through a hoop for a stranger very far away. Then I went home, took a short nap, and went right back to work that afternoon.

You might say that we’re wrong to object to boring or demeaning jobs. That these are just “first world problems.” In a way you’d be right. I have enough food to eat, and a place to live. I’m better off than workers in most of the world. Hell, I’m better off than a lot of people in Iowa City. Why complain about working too much, if we’re lucky to have work at all?

But I think that’s the wrong question to ask. It’s right to be angry about inequalities between workers. While I was dealing with red tape, a lot of people in Iowa were being denied basic rights like bathroom breaks. Still, I don’t think setting larger and smaller injustices against each other is the right way forward. Some better questions to ask are: How did things get this way? And what can we do about it?

Our jobs didn’t end up like this by accident. The more simple and repetitive a grader’s job gets, the more money an “education” company saves on training and wages. Then there’s that much more money left over for the owners. The less nursing education a healthcare job needs, the less the “nonprofit” needs to spend on training and wages. Then they have that much more money to spend on the director’s company car. Children should be taught, and people with medical needs should be taken care of. But those real needs aren’t what make our jobs boring, isolating, or pointless.

Our work is like this because it’s good for business. We didn’t end up with a school system where the students don’t even meet the graders because it was good for them. We didn’t end up with a healthcare system where so much money and time is put into paperwork because it’s good for the people getting care. It just keeps the funding coming. No matter who you work for, or what work you do, it’s going to be set up based on what’s good for business,

on what keeps the money flowing around. Not based on what’s good for people.

So I don’t think we should put these different injustices against each other. The boredom that a worker entering data faces and the abuse that a worker processing turkeys faces both come from the same place. We all should face the injustices in our own lives. By learning to fight for ourselves, we’ll be getting ready to fight alongside others.

When we get bossed around, we’re right to be angry. When we’re made to do the same boring task over and over again, we’re right to be unsatisfied. Our lives don’t have to be like this.

Nobody is cut out to be an employee.