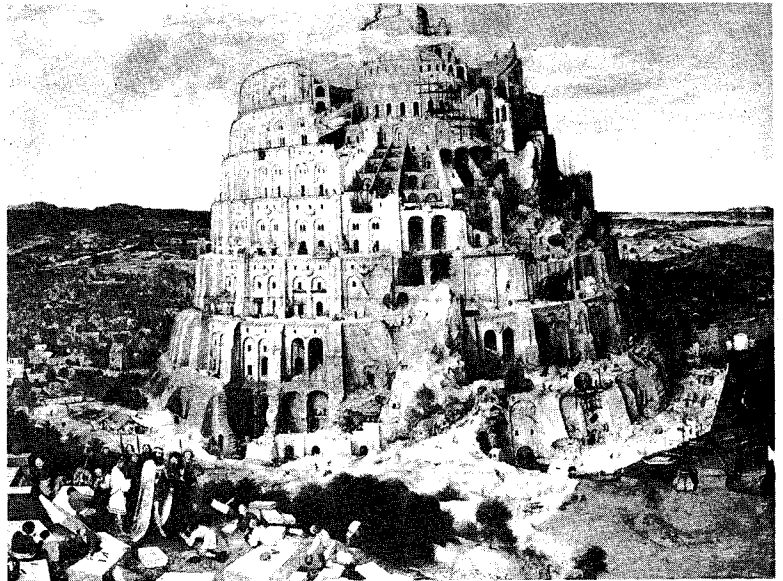


"It is remarkable that there is little or nothing to be remembered written on the subject of getting a living; how to make getting a living not merely honest and honorable, but altogether inviting and glorious; for if getting a living is not so, then living is not. Most men would feel insulted if it were proposed to employ them in throwing stones over a wall, and then in throwing them back, merely that they might earn their wages. But many are no more worthily employed now."

—Henry David Thoreau

BEYOND FULL EMPLOYMENT



The Tower of Babel—early “public works”

For some time now the left has, not surprisingly, been preoccupied with unemployment. At the same time there has been a tendency to move from apparently revolutionary positions to social-democratic, “realistic” ones, exemplified by the change of name of a leftist journal, *Socialist Revolution*, to *Socialist Review*. Part of the left has gravitated toward the left wing of the Democratic Party, moving into the vacuum created by the liberals’ “new conservatism” and taking up the feeble and dated war-cry, “full employment.” Humphrey passes away, but Harrington carries on.

Of course, this is rationalized as part of a “transitional program” to socialism or as a goal unrealizable for capitalism, which the untutored masses will take up, thereby being hoodwinked into fighting for socialism. To the contrary, it must be understood that “full employment” is not the road to socialism and that unconscious, manipulated people cannot create a communist society in which men and women will consciously make their own history.

“Full employment” must be criticized and the revolutionary “program” of our epoch, which the proletariat is already beginning to articulate in deed as well as thought, made explicit.

The surplus population

The accumulation of capital entails an accelerating increase in the ratio of the mass of means of production and raw materials to the mass of labor employed (technical composition). As a result, a portion of the working population becomes surplus "in relation to capital's average requirements. . . ."

"But if a surplus population of workers is a necessary product of accumulation or of the development of wealth on a capitalist basis," Marx pointed out, "this surplus population also becomes, conversely, the lever of capitalist accumulation." It forms an industrial reserve army which capital can make use of in periods of expansion.

Marx claimed that the general movements of wages were "exclusively regulated by the expansion and contraction of the industrial reserve army." In a depression the reserve army would swell and the general price of labor-power would fall. Although Marx noted the "setting up of trade unions, etc. . . . in order to obviate or to weaken the ruinous effects of this natural law of capitalist production," he could not anticipate the degree to which this and other factors would counteract the effects of the law. Today, the labor market is no more free than other markets. Unionization, minimum wage laws, the expansion of the public sector and social welfare all counter the tendency of the industrial reserve army to grow and the price of labor-power to fall in economic downturns.

Nevertheless, it is becoming increasingly obvious that these factors do not *overcome* what Marx called "*the absolute general law of capitalist accumulation*," the secular tendency of the surplus population to expand.¹

The greater the social wealth, the functioning capital, the extent and energy of its growth, and therefore also the absolute mass of the proletariat and the productivity of its labor, the greater is the industrial reserve army . . . [and] the pauperized sections of the working class.²

In fact the measures taken by the State, in response to working class struggle and the threat of its intensification, attempting to create "full employment," are only an admission that the production of a surplus population is still an essential dynamic of the system. The technical composition of capital continues to rise in an accelerated fashion as production is progressively mechanized. And the re-emergence of the economic crisis makes manifest a phenomenon which could already be discerned in the '50s and '60s, as the period of post-war reconstruction wound down: the tendency of the surplus population to become *absolute*.

The "setting free" of labor as a result of the rise in the technical composition of capital produces only a relative surplus population as long as the increase in the technical composition is offset by the expansion of total capital. Workers set free by mechanization in one industry can be re-employed elsewhere. However, if accumulation falters and mechanization continues apace, the surplus population becomes absolute. New investment fails to recruit a significant portion of the industrial reserve army into the active labor force. Marx noted the creation of an absolute surplus population in agriculture; today it is becoming a general and global phenomenon.

Even before the manifest signs of economic crisis in the early '70s, evidence had been accumulating for some time

that the post-war expansion had come to an end, and that "full employment" was to remain an illusive fantasy. In the U.S., persistent stagnation was indicated by low rates of utilization of the means of production. Investment tended to go increasingly for mechanization of existing plants to save on labor costs and boost productivity rather than for an expansion of production sufficient to produce full employment. Industries that had been developed since the war tended to be highly capital-intensive (e.g. chemicals) and the mechanization of industries which had at one time been highly labor-intensive was brought almost to completion (e.g. agriculture). Agricultural laborers (largely black) who had been displaced by mechanization and had migrated to the cities were not finding jobs. There was a relatively steady demand for skilled labor but a decreasing demand for unskilled labor. With every business cycle unemployment rose and fell but left an increasingly large residue of chronic or "structural"³ unemployment, made up primarily of ethnic minorities, women and youth. Mechanization, combined with the intensification of labor (speed-up), permitted the expansion of production with relatively little increase in the number of jobs. In the auto industry, after each recession, companies were able to produce the same amount of vehicles with fewer workers. After the 1958 recession, it took seven years for U.S. auto employment to return to its 1958 level, while in the meantime production had expanded 50%.

Since the '30s, and especially since the war, State-induced production has come to account for an increasing proportion of employment. It has taken up the slack in employment created by the combined effect of the displacement of labor by capital and stagnation in the private sector. However, by the end of the '60s it was becoming clear that the continued growth of the public sector had limits. Despite the growth of productivity in the private sector, productivity was not increasing fast enough, and thus profitability was insufficient to support both the continued expansion of State-induced production and employment and the expansion of private capital. Now, facing an intractable national debt and persistent inflation, the State is pressed not to compensate for the rise in unemployment by a major expansion of public employment. One result of the world recession of 1973-5, thus, has been a residue of chronic unemployment higher than previously considered "socially acceptable," reflected in continual 1984-like new-speak redefinitions of full employment upward.

A large number of people whose labor-power is, for reasons of race, sex, age, skill level or geographical location, least in demand on the labor market face a lifetime of virtual permanent unemployment. Others whose labor-power is somewhat more saleable face long periods of unemployment, or part-time or temporary employment, or employment which does not make use of their training and skills, or employment which is marginal and super-exploitative. As a whole, they constitute the surplus population.

Due to reasons of demography (post-war baby boom) and economy (training costs), the global surplus population is disproportionately young. Capitalist development has produced what the International Labor Organization calls "virtually a nation" (7 million) of unemployed youth in the industrial countries of the West and Japan—highest number ever in absolute terms. In Europe more than a third of the

unemployed are under 25. In the OECD, the young make up 22% of the workforce but 40% of the unemployed. In the U.S., teenage unemployment continues to hover around 13%, black teenage unemployment around 40%—both higher in the cities.⁴

Government leaders made a point of expressing their concern over the high rates of youth unemployment at the London summit last year. Giscard d'Estaing has called it France's number one priority. There is a growing recognition that the phenomenon may have profound implications, both immediate and long-term. "A lot of people are going straight out of school and into the labor force and becoming unemployed," observes an OECD analyst. "As these young people become middle aged," he wonders, "what's going to be the impact on their employability from their never having had a suitable job?" A Stanford professor speculates that the fact that college graduates are increasingly taking jobs that used to go to high school graduates will create

"Scrubbing floors and emptying bedpans have just as much dignity as there is in any work to be done in this country—including my own."

—Richard Nixon

frustrations and dissatisfactions . . . that will manifest themselves increasingly in disruptions of production and lower productivity. Quality control will become a more serious problem. . . . We are likely to see rising incidences of absenteeism, employee turnover, and alcohol and drug usage on the job, as well as increasing work stoppages created by wildcat strikes and employee sabotage.

Five years ago an NAACP official warned,

If they—unemployment rates—continue, and unfortunately there is every reason to believe that they will, then it is necessary to conclude that virtually an entire generation of ghetto youth will never enter in the labor force. . . . This development is the single most explosive factor in causing urban unrest and has dangerous implications for every city and suburb in the United States.

George Perry of the Brookings Institute has asked a fundamental question: "What kind of experience with the capitalist system is it for a teenager entering the labor force to find that nobody wants him?" As if in answer, a Conservative member of Britain's parliament has proclaimed, "The young unemployed of today are most likely to be the criminals and political bomb-throwers of tomorrow."

The job as social control; the weakening of the tie between income and work; ghetto riots; Italy '77; punk

The *essential* function of the job from the capitalist point of view is the production of surplus value. Only to the extent that labor-power can be employed profitably does its employment contribute to the accumulation of capitalist wealth. Otherwise its employment is, for capital, unproductive.

However, as capitalists have long understood (they now hire sociologists to study the process), joblessness leads

to a breakdown of social norms and to civil disorder. The job has a *social control* function as well as a purely economic one.

The regulation of civil behavior in all societies is intimately dependent on stable occupational arrangements. . . . So long as people are fixed in their work roles, their activities and outlooks are also fixed. . . .⁵ But unemployment breaks that bond, loosening people from the main institution by which they are regulated and controlled. . . . The entire structure of social control is weakened. . . . The result is usually civil disorder. . . . The trigger that sets off disorder is not economic distress itself but the deterioration of social control.⁶

Since much of life is organized around the institution of the job and it is still a focus of personal evaluation and social identity, its absence, especially its chronic absence, has often led to a breakdown in other institutions of social control which depend on it (like the family), in social norms and in personal identity. The job means a stable income, on the basis of which one makes long-term plans (raising a family, incurring debts, etc.); it means the routine imposed by the regularity of the working day and the work week; it means the discipline of the factory or office and of the labor process itself; it means the social identity of the occupational role.

People on welfare often complain of becoming "nobodies." The unemployable, whose social worth, measured in the marketability of their labor-power, is zero, also, according to psychologists, experience feelings of worthlessness to a greater degree than others. Deprived of participation in social production, the unemployed experience themselves, more than others, as helpless, powerless to impose their own sense of order on the world and victims of external disorder. More than others, they are afflicted by various social and psychological ills: loss of self-esteem, drug addiction, alcoholism, diminished libido, mental disorder, marital tension, family disorganization and suicide.

Freed of the obligations of wage-labor, the unemployed are simultaneously deprived of means for creating an alternative existence. A 17 year-old black high school dropout describes his life: "Sitting around on a bench, waiting for the welfare check, watching TV, running back and forth to the liquor store. Got to be something better than that." Unemployment is not so much a liberation from wage-labor as itself a moment of wage-labor. Unproductive inactivity is also a kind of job. "It's no easy job just sitting here from one year to the next doing nothing."

State-supported inactivity (welfare) is one of the bases of a weakening of the tie between income and work. "Welfare dependency," observes *Time*, "means that for many members of the underclass the concepts of income and jobs are barely related if at all." If you derive your income from the State, or from criminal activity, the dominant ideology may say you have to work for your living, but the reality of daily life contradicts the moral injunction. If you can't find a job or the only jobs available are menial and low-paying, the basis is missing for believing in work as the only legitimate means to income. If other sources of income are available and common, wage-labor loses its inevitability and practicality. "Everybody steals," says a Harlem hustler. "Politicians steal. What's the use to bust my ass from 9 to 5 to get \$100 a week." "I'm worth more than \$2.90 an hour as a

human being," one New York black said to an interviewer. Black kids in Chicago, asked on TV about the proposed "youth wage" (lower minimum wage for teenagers), looked on the idea with disdain, declared they wouldn't work for a mere \$2.25/hour and pointed out they could get more on welfare.

The fact that people break laws does not necessarily mean that they question the legitimacy of those laws. Preference for theft over work does not in itself constitute a conscious critique of wage-labor. As long as illegal means to income remain the pursuit of atomized individuals, the ideological legitimacy of capitalism's social norms tends to remain intact and crime retains a parasitic character.⁷ Most victims of ghetto crime are ghetto residents.

However, in the "commodity riots" of the last 15 years, this atomization has tended to break down, the generalization of property crime leading to its *socialization*. Large groups cooperate in breaking into stores. Sometimes some of the goods are freely distributed. Looting, vandalism and arson begin to acquire a certain social legitimacy. Crime against property becomes a collective activity in which the actors can acquire a sense of their own social power. For a short time and to a degree, ghetto populations can overcome their powerlessness in the face of deprivation and social disintegration and impose their own festive order. The urban riot takes on the character of a joyful collective enterprise, a festival of theft and destruction.

It would be a mistake to ignore the temporary character of the explosion, the limitation of expropriation to consumer goods, the re-assertion of exchange as a hucksterist opportunism even before the rioting is over,⁸ and the fact that the rioters are not so much motivated by revolutionary conviction as simply taking advantage of a situation. Nevertheless, these riots do represent a mass rejection of the existing system of distribution, appearing on the basis of the dissolution of the tie between income and work and the growing feeling that people have a right to what they need and want. "They couldn't understand why we were arresting them," a cop said after the New York blackout riot last year. "They were angry with us. They said, 'I'm on welfare. I'm taking what I need. What are you bothering me for.'" "We're just out shopping with our parents." "Shopping with no money required." "If you keep giving people stuff," a Watts teenager explained to a journalist, "that's why they

loot when the lights go out. Working is out of their minds. They think everything must be taken."

Working may have been out of mind during the looting, but afterwards, when Mayor Beame toured the stricken neighborhoods, he was pursued by youths chanting, "We want jobs." New York is, as a Bureau of Labor Statistics official put it, "the non-working teenage capital of the country." The unemployment rate for black teenagers was a startling 86% last summer. As is well-known, the city is in an advanced state of decay. The fact that various neighborhoods rioted during the blackout corresponds to the spread of ghetto conditions throughout the city. As industry has moved out, so have jobs. Minority youth wait in long lines to apply for available jobs; local riots have broken out at Manpower Centers.⁹

What happened in New York last year differs in many ways (degree of consciousness, organization, continuity, etc.) from actions of the surplus population in Europe which nevertheless are akin to it in very important respects. In Italy, which as one reporter put it, "is rapidly degenerating into an anarchic thieves' paradise," various organized means of acquiring income without work have become common: housing occupations, self-reduction (reduction of prices by popular force), "proletarian shopping" (collective shoplifting). There, last year, the most self-conscious movement of the modern surplus population to date, the movement of unemployed, marginally employed and students, began to submit wage-labor to popular criticism. The Metropolitan Indians demanded the right to income regardless of work, "Wages for Laziness." Others spoke of a desire for "jobs fit for human beings, neither alienating nor badly paid, jobs that leave us time to play and be together"; still others carried banners in marches declaring "Against Wage-Labor—Less Work"; and some public discussions were held on ways to avoid work.

Italy has never achieved levels of employment comparable to other industrial nations and the ratio of labor force to population has declined continually since the late '50s. Now, in conditions of widespread and chronic unemployment, the government of the "historic compromise" plans for *falling* employment as part of its "recovery" program.¹⁰ The young constitute three-fourths of the unemployed; many are looking for their first jobs; one-third have college degrees. The universities, opened up to working class and peasant youths without paper qualifications after the stu-



Students at Rome University attack the truck from which CPI leader Luciano Lama spoke.

dent revolt in 1968, are scandalously overcrowded. Last spring, recognizing that the reforms had become a convenient way for the State to park a large number of unemployables, students declared their situation *disguised unemployment*. An alliance developed between students, unemployed, people engaged in "black labor" (not covered by minimum wage and benefit laws) and other "marginals."

It was in this context that a leader of the Communist trade unions (Lama) provoked his audience to shower him with stones, and eventually iron bars, when, on the campus of Rome university, he denounced student occupiers as criminals and spoke of "parasites who do not want to work." The violence soon/became urban warfare, during which record stores and gun shops were looted, cars and busses burned, and selected targets bombed.

Also last year, a new rock music, with associated trappings, was gaining popularity, especially among unemployed youth and students in Britain (youth unemployment rate: 46%) and would soon acquire international notoriety: punk. Bitterly nihilistic, the punk bands were able to express in song the truth of the moment for many kids who were (or had friends who were) living on the dole (welfare), squatting (occupying vacant apartments) and shoplifting. "At least it's a bit real again," wrote a young woman who worked for the Sex Pistols.

I'm sick of silly lovesongs which don't have any meaning when you know however passionately you're in love, that your chances of getting a place you can call your own or a job with enough money to support your kids aren't too hot. . . . Try to imagine a life with no future, with such limited possibilities that you feel like dying of boredom before you even start. . . . Kids these days have grown up in a very different environment from even five years ago. Since they've been aware of politicians and the economy, things have been sliding downhill at quite a rate. Is there much worth preserving? . . . You're feeling useless, meaningless at the age of 19. . . .¹¹

Reacting to all the talk of hardship, Johnny Rotten remarked, "When I was on the dole, it was not terrible. . . . I was being *paid for not working*." (My italics.) The Sex Pistols extolled laziness and provocatively encouraged envy for life on the dole:

*Eat your heart out on a plastic tray
You don't do what you want and you'll fade away
You won't find me workin' 9 to 5
It's too much fun oh bein' alive*¹²

In this rejection of work there is a certain romanticism of the dole and a belligerent *pose*. "Rock and roll is not just music," observed Sex Pistols manager Malcom McLaren. "You're selling an attitude, too." Punk is, after all, only the latest version of the teenage rebellion syndrome which has always led to assimilation of the star rebels and failure of the kids who bought the attitude to escape their fate in society. Far from allowing escape from that fate, punk tended to embrace it, to become a marginalist ideology. Nevertheless, it did announce, with remarkable clarity and power, the spread of conditions and attitudes which had previously been more limited. For example, in envy of the West Indian kids who have rioted at Notting Hill two years running now, The Clash wrote "White Riot":

*White riot, we wanna riot
White riot, a riot of our own*

Full employment as social control; the re-assertion of the tie between income and work

*They offered me the office, offered me the shop
They said I'd better take anything they got
"Do you wanna make tea at the BBC?"
"Do you wanna, do you really wanna be a cop?"
Career opportunity, the one that never knocked
Every job they offer you's to keep you off the dock
They're gonna have to introduce conscription. . . .
If they're gonna get me, well I got no choice*

—The Clash¹³

In "free market" capitalism (which never actually existed in pure form but is useful as a model), the market directly organizes social life; employment is determined by market forces. In the modern "mixed economy," the State plays a greater role in organizing social life. In periods of recession the expansion of the public sector has been accelerated in order (in part) to keep employment from falling to a point that might threaten social cohesion. The State attempts to counter the market forces producing unemployment through public employment, State purchases, subsidies to private firms, incentives to the unemployed to train and move their residence and training programs (if certain kinds of skilled labor are still in short supply). Besides the limited role it can play in stimulating private capital expansion, full employment is a program for *social control*. The liberals, the unions and the left have been the representatives, within the capitalist political apparatus, of this policy.

As long as the job is the primary source of income, workers (employed and unemployed) must struggle to maintain and expand employment. As long as this can be done without overturning capitalist relations of production, the struggle can be canalized through the bourgeois political apparatus. The struggle is recuperated as a State employment policy for the purpose of maintaining civil order.

When, in Britain in 1576, local officials were instructed to deliver various raw materials to the homes of the needy for processing in exchange for wages, one of the explicitly stated purposes of the program was to ensure that "youth . . . be accustomed and brought up in labor and work, and then not grow to be idle rogues." Today, on a much grander scale, the State pursues essentially the same objective. Governments of the industrialized nations, noting the threat posed by the high number of unemployed youths, have instituted a number of employment programs aimed toward youth.

The emphasis in Europe recently has been on subsidizing private employers who train and/or employ youth. The U.S. has combined public service, public works and public and private training programs, but plans now to follow Europe in emphasizing training for the young in private industry subsidized by the government. It will continue to try to connect welfare and work ("workfare") and to increase "incentives" for work *over* welfare or crime, as well as incentives for private over public jobs.

Of the "job creation" programs, *Business Week* has said, "It's return to the pick and shovel school of public employment. . . . Administration spokesmen concede that they do not want to make public jobs attractive." This is partly so as to avoid the "substitution effect," i.e., simply drawing low-wage employees from the private to the public sector without actually raising employment.

Pick and shovel jobs are generally justified as "work

experience," and are supposed to involve training, a fraud exposed in the '60s when hearings revealed that welfare mothers were receiving "experience" in domestic work. In fact "work experience" is really experience in *work discipline*, in showing up on time every day, following orders and doing what's expected of you, i.e., it is experience in submission. For people who have been surviving by means of welfare and/or crime, "work experience" serves the purpose of *re-asserting the tie between income and work*. Hubert Humphrey, who was one of the main advocates of job creation, argued for "work experience" as a means of turning youth away from welfare and crime to wage-labor:

The first thing that a young person needs is to learn how to work—to have a work experience. All this business about training—important to be sure. But the first training you need is to know how to get out, get on the job, do what you're assigned to do and understand the importance of work. . . . It's good for us. It's good. Work is therapy. Work is health. Work is income. Work is growing up. . . . We have a whole decade of youth now—a decade of them—that have never learned how to do anything except one thing: how to get by. And they live in what I call the shadow economy. And there is no way that man or God can figure out how to stop crime until we figure out how to put young people on constructive work.

Training programs can be used as well, as Jerry Brown, governor of California, has demonstrated, to try to turn youth away from crime into servants of the State *combating* civil disorder. A pilot program in Oakland (10.2% unemployment, blacks a majority of the population) offers technical training provided by the armed forces for jobless youth willing and qualified to join the National Guard, which is currently undermanned. There is an emphasis on recruiting "youth offenders" into the program. Thus, the program simultaneously aids business (by subsidizing training costs), grants the unemployed a saleable commodity (skilled labor) and meets domestic counter-insurgency needs. The unemployed are literally forced to choose between a "life of crime" and National Guard duty. "My situation on the streets is, I can't find a job," said one of the first recruits, "and I would do anything to avoid becoming a thief." Prospective private employers for people coming out of the training program feel the Guard will instill the discipline and stability they are looking for in employees. A U.S. Labor Department official has called this program a "model for the nation."

Making jobs available raking leaves or doing clerical work for a low wage does little to re-establish social cohesion. "Employment by itself does not seem to serve as a deterrent to crime if this employment has no meaning, no status and no opportunities for learning and personal growth."¹⁴ And training programs so far have a poor record. "We told them in the '60s to stay in school and they'd get jobs. They didn't," says ex-Labor Secretary Willard Wirtz. "Now we're telling them to learn skills and they'll get a good job. They won't."

When deprivation persists, frustrations accumulate and social control breaks down, there is often no alternative for the chronically unemployed other than some form of direct action, and little constraint. When things get out of hand (crime, riots), power is forced to recognize that something must be done to maintain order. Various policies are pro-

posed, from increased police powers to full employment. Full employment can only become State policy if it is defined in such a manner as not to run counter to the necessities of capital accumulation. The commitment to full employment in the 1946 Employment Act is still not really a government policy because there is no way of realizing it (short of full mobilization of the economy by the State) without inducing unacceptable inflation rates. Capitalism's economic limits come into conflict with its need to maintain civil order. The bourgeois political apparatus sorts out priorities and tries to come up with a workable solution. If the social contradictions are intense (as presently in Italy), the political apparatus may be thrown into crisis. Since both sides of the debate over policy, the left and the right, accept, on the one hand, the need to maintain order, and on the other, the need to maintain profitability, at least on a national scale, the political debate is only an attempt to carve out a compromise both sides—the advocates of private enterprise and the advocates of State intervention—can live with. It is an *intra-capitalist* debate.

The right to work and the abolition of labor

The surplus population refuses super-exploitation and the imposition of menial work, and tries to maintain its income despite the lack of jobs, through welfare movements, preference for welfare and direct expropriation over low-paid, menial work, through urban riots, violent confrontation with the State and an emergent conscious critique of alienated labor. The struggle against layoffs increasingly uses radical means such as occupations (common in Europe) to try to force the capitalists to maintain employment despite its unprofitability; thus the struggle to defend jobs has a tendency to reject the *conditions* of wage-labor. Employed workers demonstrate their aversion to capitalist work by opposing speed-up, productivity deals and forced overtime, through widespread absenteeism,¹⁵ high quit rates, doubling up,¹⁶ "government work,"¹⁷ sabotage and through increasing grievances over working conditions and health and safety. As a whole, these struggles, if pursued to their ultimate conclusion, would lead to rejecting the criterion of profitability in determining the conditions of labor and its content.

Thus, the real movement already points *beyond full employment* toward a new *kind* of employment, a new use of time. It must come to know itself as such. At the very time that capitalism is proving its "incompetence to assure an existence to its slave within his slavery because it cannot help letting him sink into such a state, that it has to feed him, instead of being fed by him" (Marx), the *realistic* and revolutionary and socialist alternative is not "full employment," not the *extension* of wage-labor, but its *communitistic abolition*.

What does this mean?

As industry develops, labor tends to play a progressively diminishing role in the creation of wealth, and science and technology gain a central position. "The *creation of real wealth comes to depend less on labor time and on the amount of labor employed*," wrote Marx, "then on the power of the agencies set in motion during labor time," which power depends on the state of science and the progress of technology. This raises the possibility of a *new way of measuring wealth*; not in labor time (as in capitalism) but in the time *set free* from labor. The "general reduction of

the necessary labor of society to a minimum" would then, in a communist society, allow for "the artistic, scientific, etc. development of the individuals in the time set free, and with the means created, for all of them." Moreover, this individual development would not be divorced from and opposed to social labor. "Disposable time" (i.e., leisure time) would cease to have "an *antithetical* existence."

Free time, i.e., time for the full development of the individual . . . [would] in turn react upon the productive power of labor as itself the greatest productive power. Free time, which is both idle time and time for higher activity—has naturally transformed its possessor into a different subject, and he then enters into the direct production process as this different subject.

Communism would mean the supersession of the contradiction between the development of the productive forces and the full development of human potential.

Capitalism's development of the productive forces, however, remains contradictory. It reduces necessary labor time only so as to expand surplus labor time and appropriate it as surplus value, as profit. While it has an inherent tendency to reduce labor time to a minimum, it simultaneously needs to maintain labor time as the measure of wealth. It cannot institute the new measure of wealth for which its own development of the productive forces establishes the material foundation. For this, a *new* mode of production based on *new social relations* must be established. A *social revolution* is necessary.

Without a revolutionary transformation, the further development of science and technology, the increasing mechanization of production, leads to the reduction of necessary labor in a manner which maintains and even extends the *underdevelopment* of individuals, the misuse and disuse of their creative potential. The time of both work and leisure remains time of alienation; the time of unemployment, dead time.

Within capitalism, the mechanization of production turns the laborer into a mere appendage of the machine and the capitalist division of labor fragments human personality. The organization of labor for maximum exploitation divests it of skill, "destroys the actual content of labor by turning it into a torment" (Marx). Labor is *de-subjectivized*, measured, standardized, made to conform to the rhythms of the machine. Trades die out. Labor tends to become a homogeneous and imbecilic activity. "I don't even feel useful now," said a young Lordstown worker. "They could always find somebody stupider than me to do the job." Within production capital suppresses labor, devalues it, impoverishes it, while it *remains dependent* on exploiting it, pumping surplus value out of it, for its expansion. As its powers of exploitation increase, moreover, capital expels relatively more labor from production. "All automation has meant to us," remarks one worker, "is unemployment and overwork. *Both at the same time.*"

Capitalism tends to the abolition of labor, but under its regime the abolition of labor is a process of *immiseration*: degradation of labor and pauperization. This is the abolition of labor *within wage-labor*, the "freeing" of labor within the capitalist mode of production.

Despite the degradation of labor, people often still find some satisfaction in work. For many, work is a place to meet people, converse and form friendships. To one de-

gree or another, the job itself may allow for some pleasure in work and a sense of engaging in socially valuable activity, imposing new structure or order on the world, meeting challenges, demonstrating competence, receiving recognition, etc. Many people reject their occupational roles and seek their identities outside of the job in activities they can determine themselves, in hobbies, sports, church activities, cultural pursuits, politics, and in the lifestyles and consumption patterns associated therewith. But most still identify, to one degree or another, with their role in social production. In the absence of alternatives, it is a source of self-esteem and a primary means for satisfying (however little) the "need for labor" (William Morris), "life's prime want" (Marx).

Needs are too often thought of solely as consumer needs; people also have needs for pleasurable productive activity. This was what was meant when Fourier, a utopian communist, first formulated the "right to work." He had in mind not the onerous work of the capitalist factory or office but a "natural right" which had belonged to man in the "savage" state,¹⁸ and which civilized man had been *deprived* of: "To equal nature's bounty you must give us at least what it gives to the savages and wild animals, a job which pleases them. . . ."

In 1883, Marx's son-in-law Paul Lafargue decried the "right to work" tradition in the proletarian movement. "They proclaim as a revolutionary principle the Right to Work. Shame to the French proletariat! Only slaves would have been capable of such baseness." The proletariat, he thought, had come to accept a bourgeois ethic which justified long hours of debilitating labor. It must reject this ethic and

return to its natural instincts, it must proclaim the Rights of Laziness, a thousand times more noble and more sacred than the anaemic Rights of Man. . . . It must accustom itself to working but three hours a day, reserving the rest of the day and night for leisure and feasting . . . work will become a mere condiment to the pleasures of idleness, a beneficial exercise to the human organism, a passion useful to the social organism only when wisely regulated and limited.

Lafargue seems to have agreed with Marx in seeing labor as the "realm of necessity" and the machine as potentially limiting that necessity and opening up a "realm of freedom," although Lafargue stressed idleness, while Marx stressed art and science, as well as idleness and festivity, as characterizing that realm. William Morris, a socialist and designer, on the other hand, had great hopes for work. For him, it could become "part of the pleasure of our lives," a self-fulfilling activity rewarded by "the pleasure of creation itself, which is what excellence in work means." And Fourier designed an imaginative system to ensure congruence between people's passions and their industrial activity. Thus work could become play, i.e., itself enter the realm of freedom.

The point is not to choose between different utopian schemes or principles. Clearly, the communistic abolition of labor involves both the right to be lazy and the right to work, both time for individual self-development, idleness and festivity and the transformation of work itself, both the negation and the realization of labor.¹⁹ It involves, moreover, the supersession of the opposition between work and leisure,

between production and consumption, between labor and life as a whole. "Under a new society work will have to be something completely new, not just work to buy food and things. It will have to be completely tied up with life itself."²⁰

However small the time of our lives we must devote to the "minimum necessary labor," we may still wish to enrich that time. The various "job enrichment" programs of industrial sociology are pathetic compared to the real possibilities²¹ primarily because they lack the essential requirement for enrichment, the *transformation of social relations* which will manifest itself ultimately by the *destruction of the wage-system*.

When the social revolution is complete, our lives will no longer belong to capital but will be our own free creation. Social reproduction will no longer be carried on as *wage-labor*, forced work, but as the voluntary activity of free men and women. Nothing less than a *new use of life* is on the historical agenda.

Today, far from embracing an ethic which justifies debilitating and dehumanizing work, the proletariat has put alienated labor on the defensive. The proletarian revolution will finally do away with it.

—Ron Rothbart



"Against Wage Labor—Less Work"

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NOTES

- ¹To discuss this "absolute general law" at length would require consideration of the less developed countries, not discussed in this article.
²Note that pauperization means not only poverty but dependence on private charity or public assistance.
³The structurally unemployed are people who do not have and cannot get training for the skilled jobs which are available, or do not reside in areas of high labor demand. Behind the concept is an ideology that assumes capitalism can solve its problems through re-organization and rationalization.
⁴These official statistics notoriously understate unemployment, in part because they omit from the "labor force" people who have given up looking for work.
⁵The authors continue: "They do what they must and think what they must." Although this tendency is real, Piven and Cloward seem to overstate their case, ignoring employed workers' capacity for revolt.
⁶F.F. Cloward and R.A. Piven, *Regulating the Poor*, pp. 6–8.
⁷Moreover, the breakdown of existing social norms can lead to barbarism or to the re-assertion of reactionary values.
⁸The recent New York blackout riot was distinguished by the extent to which stolen goods were resold in an organized fashion.
⁹As regards employment, a cross-section of the ghetto population has participated in most commodity riots, but the rate of unemployment is high in the ghetto and the employed are generally low-paid and irregularly employed. In last summer's New York riot, 52% of the rioters arrested were not regularly employed, 60% of the employed earned less than \$100/week, 32% less than \$50/week. "The third category of the relative surplus population is the stagnant population. This forms a part of the active labor army, but with extremely irregular employment. . . . Its conditions of life sink below the average normal level of the working class. . . . It is characterized by a maximum of working time and a minimum of wages." (Marx)
¹⁰The government hopes for a 4.2% growth rate, with a .7% fall in total employment in 1978, the growth thus being based solely on increased productivity.
¹¹Sophie Richmond, "Anarchy in the U.K.," *Social Revolution* no. 7.
¹²Put more succinctly years ago by Frank Zappa: *Be a jerk / Go to work*.
¹³The British welfare system was threatening to send the Clash's Joe Strummer to Birmingham for a government retraining scheme. He avoided the retraining and wrote "Career Opportunities." The line about conscription is perhaps a reference to the fact that a Tory politician has called for a return to conscription to "help the fight against crime." Cf. Jerry Brown's plan below.
¹⁴Quoted in *Work in America* (Report of H.E.W. Task Force), p. 89.
¹⁵Note that wage-struggle is part of this too, since high wages help make absenteeism financially feasible.
¹⁶One worker doing two jobs while another rests; commonly done, on the initiative of workers, in auto.
¹⁷Making things for oneself in the factory. Cf. Miklos Haraszti's wonderful description and analysis of "homers" in Hungary in *A Worker in a Worker's State*, pp. 138–46, Pelican Books, 1977.
¹⁸Fourier points out that this right belonged only to men and not to women.
¹⁹"It is of little importance whether the term [labor] remains or disappears. If it must stay, it will be necessary to profoundly change its meaning. Perhaps in the end it will designate the ultimate delight." *Un Monde Sans Argent: Le Communisme*, p. 23.
²⁰Quoted in Raya Dunayevskaya, *Marxism and Freedom*, Chap. 16.
²¹The "real possibilities" for the reduction and transformation of work constitute a valid and extensive area of research which I cannot go into here. Suffice it to say that the development of the productive forces since the nineteenth century have enhanced the possibilities for the "first stage" of communism.