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Every Cook Can Abolish Governance — Part 1

Lena Kafka

October 25, 2016

We don't work anymore: we do our time.

– The Coming Insurrection

They got ready to put their hands on me, a thing I am...allergic to.

– Freedom: My Dream, the autobiography of Enrico Arrigoni

Seven a.m., hungover again getting ready for work. Doubled yesterday into a clopen today. I can't call out again, the manager knows I was drinking. He assumes the cooks were drinking, it's the one way to deal with being a cook. I roll into work around eight to find out my coworker called out because she was hungover. High schoolers aren't all that reliable.

It's just the manager and me until another cook comes in at eleven. I think about my debt and my half full pack of smokes, and try to not walk out as long as possible. The manager puts his hand on my shoulder and shows me the freshly printed prep list, ready to talk about the mountain of shit we need to climb.

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Every fucking day the manager prints out the prep list for the crew members to complete before opening. This list must be followed, even if common sense (and knowledge from working the same position 6 days every week) says otherwise. I've had two very similar kitchen experiences, one being a cultish burrito chain that won't be named, and the other a faux-ethical noodle restaurant. Both kitchens were set up similarly, had similar divisions of labor, similar power dynamics, same equipment, similar layout, and both obeyed the prep list. The prep list is a set of equations, based on previous sales data and other factors. One kitchen's prep list was scarily accurate, and took into account weekly/monthly trends, weather, local events, and so on. The other list felt like a sick joke the management played on the cooks. Nonetheless, the decisions of the kitchen are made by the equations.

These equations determine what is prepared before opening and at shift change, how much is to be produced, how much revenue is necessary,¹ how much can be spent on wages/labor, etc. and deviation of this must be recorded (as in, waste must be accounted and explained to off-site management). The numbers are not always reasonable to anyone who works full time, and the numbers result in at least one shortage/fuck up a day. "produce number Z of commodity X," except Z is 5.36. The fuck is 0.36 of a commodity that can only be produced in integers. If you make 5, you're responsible for the next shortage. If you produce 6, you're in trouble for overproduction ("waste").

Waste, excess, shortage, and really anything they can pin on you is enforced by the managers on-site. Managers at these restaurants, while holding the authority to fire and hire (with explanation to higher ups), don't control production. *Hell, many of em don't even touch the means of production!* They

¹ Necessity means here what it means to those who make the prep list. The two kitchens required a profit rate of 100% (as in, revenue = 2 x expenses). Not meeting that goal won't collapse the company, but it'll make those at corporate upset.

just make sure everything keeps flowing smoothly, like cops of the workplace.

Around eight-thirty, the manager slaps me on the shoulder again, I feel the whiskey slosh around inside me. “You know,” he says to me, unusually happy, “I knew today was going to be fucked before I came in, but I’m glad I’m fucked with you.” What he means is that I’m going to do three jobs for the pay of one again. He grabs my second shoulder to force eye contact; I want to lose every fluid in my body onto his shoes. “One of you hungover is more productive than at least two other sober coworkers.” Fuck, man!

Fuck! I threw up again. It’s almost nine, I can’t puke again, I can’t flip this cutting board again. I cannot wait for the other cook to come in. Then I get a smoke, then the lunch rush, then off to the bar.

During the lunch/dinner rushes, managers always take the position that requires the least effort and got to oversee every product. At the cult burrito chain, these positions were expo (next to the cashier, looking down the line) and linebacker (moves food from the kitchen to the line). During hours of peak production, every product quality checked and every wrong motion corrected by the managers.

Their other ‘work’ mostly consists of reading comments from customers, sending emails, and delegating their share of the prep work. This ‘work’ doesn’t create value, the crew creates value. They don’t control production, the prep list controls production. But if the kitchen managers and general managers don’t hold power over production, who does?

The prep list is created by technocrats and their employers at ‘corporate.’ The technocrats get final say on what is and isn’t a reasonable demand in production. Most of them, hell if not all, have never stepped foot in the kitchens they make decisions for. Class struggle has been removed from the workplace, to anywhere off-site so the on-site managers can take the prole rage instead. Technocrats, A-B-CEOs, the board of directors,

and all the other scum on my non-slip shoe decide how much to produce.

While the manager goes to shit around ten, I sneak myself a nice glass of bad wine and go outside. I light my 27 and sit down on the curb. Across the parking lot, a cop is sitting outside the beer distributor. Given my kitchens reputation, and criminal record, I'm not all that surprised he's staring at me. I wish I could puke on his shoes too.

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