

Every Cook Can Abolish Governance — Part 3

Sobriety and Sabotage

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Two years have passed since I left the empty world of open kitchens for closed kitchens. The struggle against the clock, the technocrats, the middle manager cops, and all the other bastards has changed dramatically but continues as it will until the end of Time. No matter where you work, power and hierarchy exists albeit in varying forms and orders.

This is less of a story and more a list of reflections on my errors/failures in organizing efforts, I hope it is of use to anyone else struggling against Capital from behind the (enemy's) line.

At Santoku Knives Drawn

Today is no different from any other day at the new kitchen. I walk in through the front door and look around the dining room to see what I'm walking in to. Every day starts by checking the prep list to see what still needs to be done. Now, the prep list isn't the Law of the kitchen as it used to be in my previous experiences. It still demands completion and submission, but contains more leeway in how that is accomplished. Errors in the list are to be expected, and so long as there is enough product to last through dinner rush and until closing then the list is considered complete.

Before the managers unlock the doors, the prep list is written up according to the projected sales calculated by their higher-ups. The prep list is far more organized than it was at my previous kitchen jobs. This list features *actual whole numbers*, as well as leeway for incompleteness at the cooks' discretion.¹

While the managers are responsible for the list's completion, they are primarily responsible for enforcing it. They coordinate their own daily submission. They're on the same sinking ship as the rest of us, but are salaried and enjoy better health care options.

Corporate is far more concerned with inventory counts than the prep list. They don't get hurt if we run out of something during rush, we do. We don't get hurt by missing inventory, they do.

I work my way through the prep list, cutting cabbages, rolling taquitos, portioning and bottling the same shit I portioned and bottled and yesterday. Once things are somewhat slow, I sneak out for a short walk around the back alley. Sometimes cops on bicycles come around and try to catch us smoking, drinking, or selling, but I'm not worried about that anymore.

I haven't gotten high in over thirteen months, I drink casually only after work, and I've finally kicked cigarettes after eight years. Since then, I've found that getting fucked-up less actually helps me fuck more shit up.

In my last few cooking jobs, organizing and camaraderie revolved around collective intoxication. The first few months in this kitchen, I got to be friends with many of the other cooks by packing bowls for each other or passing the bottle back and forth. I was drunk daily during my first year in this kitchen. A bottle of whiskey almost every single day. I lost track of days. Some of us would go out for a drink after dinner rush, and then come back in wondering how soon rush was going to start. But friendship among workers isn't a threat to Capital by itself. Friendliness is a casual thing, conspiracy is another.

The sorts of relationships most likely to spring from such a situation are those that reflect the humiliation and social impoverishment inherent in it. Based on the necessity to escape the isolation of a crowded, but atomized society, a generalized "friendliness" that is slightly more

¹ At my last few jobs, prep lists often demanded we prepare 0.75 units of an item. The fuck is 0.75 of a chimichanga?

than mere politeness (since it permits harmless, light mockery and safe, substanceless flirtation) develops. On the basis of this generalized “friendliness,” it is possible to meet some individuals with whom to commiserate more closely — people with whom to share a beer at the pub, go to football games or rock shows or rent a movie... And these are one’s friends.

“It really is no wonder then that what is called friendship today so often seems to be nothing more than the camaraderie of mutual humiliation and disrespectful toleration. When all we really have in common is our shared exploitation and enslavement to commodity consumption and our differences mainly lie in our social identities, themselves largely defined by our jobs, the commodities we buy and our uses to those who rule us, there is really very little to spark pride, joy, wonder and passion in our so-called friendships.”

— Wolfi Landstreicher, *Against the Logic of Submission*

A Confederacy of Drunks

Cooks getting fucked up at work only amounts to a higher tolerance for their sad social/economic/whatever-positioning. It gives us something to look forward to at the end of the shift, something which makes all the bullshit “worth it.” *This hope is counter-insurrectionary.*

It is easy to forget and forgive the shit you go through daily when you can’t even remember what you did that day, or how much money you made for your bosses compared to how little you made, or how you just went almost eight hours without eating because the rush never let up. To quote an old coworker of mine, “why would I eat if I’m trying to catch a buzz.”

The only organizing “success” I had at this job was when the kitchen flooded with sewage up to our ankles. The fry cook and I both refused to keep working under these conditions and got sent home early. The kitchen ended up shutting down a half hour later after more servers and cooks refused to tolerate it. We never got reimbursed for our ruined shoes and coats stored downstairs under the broken pipes.

Besides that, organizing in this kitchen has been a lost cause. Few cooks have any desire for better conditions (let alone control over the Means of Production!). Almost everyone has a side hustle to make ends meet. Some cooks drive uber after work, some cooks just jump ship to the next gig they can get after getting a paycheck or two.² A cook who sells cocaine only cooks as a cover for his P.O., and more than likely isn’t concerned with work conditions so long as the cops are off their asses.

We have no aspirations to self-manage our own misery. What dishwasher wants to be responsible for the dishmachine? They’d rather smash it to hell and forget they were ever covered in other peoples’ half eaten food, detergent, and bleach.

“We aren’t just fighting for representation in or control over the production process. Our fight isn’t against the act of chopping vegetables or washing dishes or pouring

² Our kitchen has run on a core group of three or four cooks, with another six to eight who are either half way into the job and being trained, or half way out of the job and already looking to bounce. I don’t bother to really get to know people until they’ve been there over a month. The last three months we’ve had six people come and go under two weeks.

beer or even serving food to other people. It is with the way all these acts are brought together in a restaurant, separated from other acts, become part of the economy, and are used to expand capital. The starting and ending point of this process is a society of capitalists and people forced to work for them. We want an end to this. We want to destroy the production process, as something outside and against us. We're fighting for a world where our productive activity fulfills a need and is an expression of our lives, not forced on us in exchange for a wage—a world where we produce for each other directly and not in order to sell to each other. The struggle of restaurant workers is ultimately for a world without restaurants or workers.”

— *Abolish Restaurants*

From Reflections to Retaliations

Sobriety has helped my own awareness around the kitchen, not simply spatial awareness but awareness of the logistics of the kitchen. Understanding the logistics of production, the flow of production, the divisions of labor, the (in)formal hierarchies among the kitchen provides a more acute ability to attack the production process. Accurate assessment and understanding of tactical capability is a threat to management, far more than the faux-friendliness between coworkers sharing a bottle. A union of cooks can take over a restaurant, but a single cook can halt production.

The prep cook left alone has some autonomy at work, whatever that's worth under Capital. This cook being unsupervised can waste resources or improperly use them up. Say this cook has only enough of one ingredient to make one recipe, when there's two recipes that call for the ingredient. The cook can use the ingredient on the recipe that isn't at risk of being 86'd, or on whichever produces the least profit for their bosses. Say you need buttermilk to make a batch of buttermilk battered chicken or a bucket of ranch, and you know that night you'll have enough chicken but not enough ranch. Make that extra batch of chicken so whenever dinner rush comes, there's customers who wish they could just fucking drink ranch unable to get what they came for.

A line cook (or hell, a dishwasher if they ever took the notion) can 'accidentally' cause a back up in the dishroom. Quality checking plates or running the same rack of plates claiming "they're too dirty" until there's no plates to serve food on. No backup in production is permanent, but all backups in production open up space for coworkers to talk about the absurdity of their situation as workers. Almost every (un)intentional production halt I've been involved in has led to a conversation along the lines of "how do we make this last longer?" "thank god we have some time to ourselves again," or "finally a break!"

This sabotage isn't going to stop the exploitation of cooks, or bring the service industry to a halt. Conflictuality with a steady flow of production will start slow, and can build up with the development of confidence in our capabilities and potentials, and eventually lead to an industry wide culture of rebellion and sabotage. Developing a culture of rebellion through sabotage is sustainable so long as the sabotage leads to the sustainability of sabotage—giving out free meals to fellow co-conspirators, "forgetting" to charge our friends when they eat at our restaurant, and stealing food for free groceries for fellow co-conspirators outside of the industry resisting in their

own ways. If you work in a kitchen, no one in your crew should ever have to buy paper towels again.

These sabotages in addition to other acts of resistance, such as shoplifting (or larger expropriation actions), dumpster diving, and communal meals, can liberate time from work and build our culture of rebellion and other projects and infrastructure we're working on. Money saved from groceries can go back into your local infoshop to help the collective make rent, or filling up repurposed newspaper boxes with your favorite zines and agitprop, or donating to the riseup collective, or materials to start making your own zines and books. Whatever you can't steal can sometimes be bought.

“The emotional and affective intensity of our relationships must be manifested into a material consistency. A failure to do so will inevitably result in our being pulled part. Every life decision – where we live and whom we live with, where we get food and how we share it, how we get money and what we do with it – is a question that can be answered differently. What appears initially as an individual duty or responsibility can be understood as an opportunity to increase our collective strength.”

– *How to Start a Fire*

Beyond Unionizing, Beyond Utopias

Unionizing a kitchen has been a goal of mine for some years now and I've found it to be a waste of time, outside of the few stoppages and successful sabotages (not to mention how I haven't had to pay for most cooking tools I have in my possession, and how I get two free meals a day). To quote Monsieur Dupont at length,

”Most workers are now employed in sectors that are peripheral to the economy's well-being, if they take industrial action it causes inconvenience only to the immediate employer and perhaps a few companies up and down the supply chain. In contrast the essential proletariat is that group of workers who can halt vast areas of the economy by stopping their work.

These workers are employed in the economy's core industries, industries that can only operate with a relatively high level of labour input into their processes, which gives to those workers an already existing control over process; core workers' latent power can be demonstrated immediately in industrial action which spreads its knock-on effect to all businesses in the locality and beyond, producing spiralling repercussions in society. Core-workers include factory workers, dustmen, power workers, distribution workers (post, rail, road haulage, ferries, dockers, etc); in all of these examples the cessation of work causes immediate and widespread problems for the economy, and this is why it is precisely in these industries that wildcat action is most frequent, quite simply, industrial action in these industries has a history of success.”

– Monsieur Dupont, *Nihilist Communism*

I'd rather not get into my critique of this text in this piece as a whole, but here I find Monsieur Dupont to be spot on. Workers not involved in essential industries who go on strike, who sabotage and disrupt production at their workplaces, are not going to bring the capitalist economy to a stand-still. If a kitchen becomes unionized, or has its production halted, all that happens is customers in a certain area have to go to another shithole to get whatever style of food their looking for. If a single Chipotle halted its production and the local store went down, customers would just go down the road to Moe's or some other cali/tex-mex shithole. Some capitalists would lose profits, but not their power as a class. Where the previously shutdown restaurant was, another restaurant will pop-up, after some construction on its aesthetics and equipment installation. The e-coli break/freakout caused more economic damage to the company than any sabotage or unionizing effort I've known about during my time at three different Chipotle restaurants.

This is not simply to say that all unionizing and organizing efforts in kitchens (and really all non-core industries) are worthless, but when the main goal is to shutdown the economy, to destroy hierarchy, to liberate yourself and set free your capabilities and autonomy, then unionizing and sabotage does not go far enough to achieving those ends on their own. For short term goals, such as minimum wage struggles and bettering working conditions, the (informal/solidarity) union is one way to go as long as there is a cross-restaurant struggle that can outlast the turnover rate of each individual restaurant. For our longer term struggles, the seizing/building of infrastructure and developing of a culture of rebellion outside of the radical milieu is beyond absolutely crucial. Restaurant sabotage is one of the many forms of attack that could be added to our arsenal in achieving these goals.

“[S]abotage is a fascinating game, but it cannot be the only game one wants to play. We must have a multitude of games at our disposal, games that are varied and often in contrast with each other, aimed at avoiding the monotony of the rules becoming just another boring, repetitive job.”

— Alfredo Bonanno, *Let's Destroy Work, Let's Destroy the Economy*

Toward an Army of Cooks

The struggle against domination and hierarchy is in and beyond the workplace. From my own experience, I've already seen that the control over the major decisions of the workplace have been outsourced to technocrats and bureaucrats, with the locus of power being those who dictate production not being onsite. Maybe the focal point of our attack should be outside of our workplaces, to what causes the most damage to the flows of production.

Kitchens can't operate if the overstock is repurposed for our ends. Kitchens can't operate if the trucks carrying food and other supplies don't arrive. Same goes for almost every industry. No product, no production. Attack the flows of production, there are points of weakness everywhere. All we have to do is find them and strike tactically.

Until the roads are torn up, the tires are slashed, the phone lines are toppled and cables dug up, the struggle against work/production/Capital/living hell continues. It's almost last call, what do you want?

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