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Every Cook Can Abolish Governance — Part 2

From Occupation to Resistance

Lena Kafka

November 18th, 2016

My opening shift and hangover are finally over. Time to get something to eat and have a smoke before I go back to close for another seven hours. The prep list is finally filled out and everything is *mise en place*,¹ lunch rush is over, the manager is back at her desk taking an hour to reply to an email, and as I'm walking out the front door of the cult burrito chain, my co-workers are playing rock-paper-scissors to see who has to do dishes until I return. After playing catch-up and covering others all morning, I'm going to take an extra fifteen minutes.

These chain restaurants (fast food, fast casual, whatever) apply the logic of the prep list to all aspects of the kitchen. Labor hours and wages are budgeted and enforced by management; just as with the prep list, they punish for any "waste" and "excess" for any purpose. Did you have more work than taken into account by the prep list? Was your lunch/dinner rush busier than expected? Too

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Retrieved on 2020-08-14 from <https://fillerpgh.wordpress.com/2016/11/18/every-cook-can-abolish-governance-part-2/>

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¹ *Mise en place* = putting in place / everything in its place

many people called out and no one can make it in? Staying late to clean for an inspection the next day? Never are the prep list, the algorithms, the management, or anything with power criticized for the shortcomings of those in power. The crew just needs to work harder, everyone just needs to cover each other and everything will be okay. As if a kitchen that normally runs on five people can run on two or three as if it's not a major change from the regular flow of work. As if any of us want to do the work of three people for the wages of one!

“The need for communism transforms everything. Through the need for communism the need for non-work moves from the negative aspect (opposition to work) to the positive one: the individual's complete availability to themselves, the possibility to express themselves absolutely freely, breaking away from all models, even those considered to be fundamental and indispensable, such as those of production.”

— Alfredo M. Bonanno, *Armed Joy*

“Fucking watch it!” yells a man wearing clothes worth more than my yearly salary. Just let me smash bottles in the parking lot, asshole. I have fifteen minutes left to kill before they call me to come inside and stop being indignant, let me enjoy it. I step back to the curb and do what pissed off cooks do best: sit down.

Two years before I was in the same kitchen, somewhere further away. Doing the same shit for less pay, in a faster environment, with meaner management, and no smoke breaks on shift (unless you're management). One day I clocked in for the mid-shift around ten, started the shift as normal. My coworker, the cashier this shift, was ten minutes late due to the bus schedule either arriving ten minutes late or before her child's day care opened. That day the Area Manager (general manager of the general managers) was doing her monthly inspection, where she gets to blow off steam on

tomorrow morning for how sloppy everything is. I couldn't care less, I don't have to open tomorrow and I got to take an extra two hours break today. Going to the bathroom, taking out trash, sweeping outside, hiding out in the walk-in cooler, smoking a second cigarette, anything to increase the tension with management and reveal the absurdity of work.

“So, when these gentlemen say, ‘You are utopians, you anarchists are dreamers, your utopia would never work’, we must reply, ‘Yes, it’s true, anarchism is a tension, not a realisation, not a concrete attempt to bring about anarchy tomorrow morning’. But we must also be able to say but you, distinguished democratic gentlemen in government that regulate our lives, that think you can get into our heads, our brains, that govern us through the opinions that you form daily in your newspapers, in the universities, schools, etc., what have you gentlemen accomplished? A world worth living in? Or a world of death, a world in which life is a flat affair, devoid of any quality, without any meaning to it? A world where one reaches a certain age, is about to get one’s pension, and asks oneself, ‘But what have I done with my life? What has been the sense of living all these years?’”

— Alfredo M. Bonanno, *The Anarchist Tension*

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crew members. As soon as the cashier arrives, the AM screams at her until she leaves the store. Myself and the rest of the crew were on-edge until the doors opened and we had no more time to worry.

Lunch rush approached, and I felt some beautiful combination of dread and fury brewing inside me. The AM went off for half an hour about “personal responsibility” and how “she had to do the same thing” as the recently fired cashier. She’s been a big mouth for awhile, we already heard those stories about her mom paying her rent and babysitting for her during those “tough times.” I couldn’t deal with anything I was feeling and decided I couldn’t just calm down.

The line goes through the door as the rush peaks. I walk over to the cooler, put my back to it, and slide down. The AM sees me and immediately gets red in the face screaming at me.

“What is this? A fucking strike?!”

“I guess so!”

Five minutes of back and forth screaming and the area manager agrees to rehire the mother she fired an two hours ago. Unfortunately, none of my coworkers joined in. Some thought I was absolutely out there to risk my job, some later thanked me and started talks of something bigger...

I walk back into the kitchen, say my hellos to the night crew who just came in, and relieve whoever was covering me at the dish pit. Unsurprisingly, no one kept it up after twenty minutes. Hard to blame them, we aren’t allowed to have to back door open and the industrial sized fan is more likely to knock you over than keep your cool.

Slowly I build up momentum again and start busting out dishes and keeping the back room tidy. The dish pit can only ever been caught up after the doors close, anything sooner is naive optimism. After awhile you need to accept it can’t be finished, and hope if someone needs something specific that they’re capable of cleaning it on their own. I put the plastic apron on the hook and head up to the front to back-up the grill cook during dinner rush. It goes by

quickly, and during a lull in the action I make moves to make some food, steal a drink, and take my break.

During the first three or so weeks at this job, no one got breaks unless our “performances showed we deserved to have them.” If we didn’t get everything *mise en place* and swept clean before open, no one got to eat for the seven or so hours they were on the clock.² Everyone in the crew hated it except the few who got the shorter shifts. Together we started taking our breaks at 10:30am on the dot every morning, despite pleas from the shift managers. Sometimes you just really want to be treated like a human being and have your needs met. Sometimes everyone around you feels the same way. After two weeks of taking back a half an hour a day, management decided to make it mandatory we all take breaks by at least 10:45.

Eventually it became common practice to just take break at 10:30 as long as your station was clean, regardless of how much of your share of the prep list you finished.

At this particular store, we ran a crew of five. Four working from 8-4ish, and two working 11-7ish, then night crew, with four working 4-12. Without the optimism of assuming everyone shows up, there are eight people working eight hour shifts. When each weekly (or bi-weekly) schedule comes out, the amount of money able to be spent on wages is represented as labor hours. Labor hours are wages put into ratio time and used to budget each store. Say the base wage is \$9/hour, so each labor hour costs \$9.

So if all eight people work eight hours at \$9/hour, they spend sixty-four labor hours. But not everyone in the store works for the base wage. Shift managers make closer to \$18/hour (two labor hours per hour worked) and kitchen managers closer to \$13/hour (one and a half labor hours per hour worked). Five people work eight hours, using forty labor hours. One kitchen manager works eight hours, and two shift managers work eight hours each, using forty four hours.

² Yes even double shifts

“Freedom is a destructive concept that involves the absolute elimination of all limits. Now freedom is an idea we must hold in our hearts, but at the same time we need to understand that if we desire it we must be ready to face all the risks that destruction involves, all the risks of destroying the constituted order we are living under. Freedom is not a concept to cradle ourselves in, in the hope that improvements will develop independently of our real capacity to intervene.”

— Alfredo M. Bonanno, *The Anarchist Tension*

The schedule limits labor hours each day by expected production (the same algorithms that decide on what and how much is produced each day on the prep list). A total of eighty-four hours means nothing except when put in comparison with the limit of seventy hours a day. Never was there ever enough time to properly clean and close the store. Any time spent over the limit warranted an angry phone call from higher-ups, or worse reprisals.

Clocking back into work after my break, I sneak out the back to take out the trash bags. Every trip takes me about ten or fifteen minutes, I wanna enjoy this cigarette. There’s a nice breeze outside and it would be a shame if I missed it to wash dishes. I go in once again, sneak over to the bathroom, then return to the dish pit. The manager, one of my best friends at the store, comes over to help me bust out dishes before we close. They already did my prep work while I was outside, no patience I guess. We go back and forth scrubbing and rushing to scrape burnt rice out of pans. Once shit gets ‘reasonable’, they dip to go clean the other side of the back of house. Without them, I’d probably have to pretend to do it. Saves me having to lie once again.

We finish whatever we can until there’s enough labor hours left for us all to piss for pay. *Boss makes a dollar, we make a dime, that’s why we piss on company time.* Then we clock out and step out for a cigarette together to commiserate the berating we’re going to get