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Work

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Further Reading

The problem with work: feminism, marxism, anti-work politics and postwork imaginaries

Kathi Weeks, 2011

Abolish Restaurants

Prole, 2010

Wageless Life

Michael Denning, 2010

The Reproduction of Daily Life

Fredy Perlman, 1969

The Conquest of Bread

Peter Kropotkin, 1906

Endnote

Writing this pamphlet has left us feeling angry. While we started the project fully aware of the bare-faced truth – that our time and productive energies are being stolen from us so that some executive can buy themselves another car for their collection – it is hard to stomach the sickening disregard for human life that capitalism holds at its core. We only get one life and it is being robbed from us.

Our common interest as a working class comes from having our needs withheld and it is only by aiming for a free society, for anarchist communism, that we have a chance of changing this. Initially resistance will simply provide better conditions in our exploitation, but these struggles will provide the experience needed to win back control of our lives and provide liberty not only for ourselves but for all those who follow in our footsteps.

Wage Slavery: Making Profit for Others

‘When the highwayman holds his gun to your head, you turn your valuables over to him. You ‘consent’ alright, but you do so because you cannot help yourself, because you are compelled by his gun. Are you not compelled to work for an employer? Your need compels you, just as the highwayman’s gun.’

– Alexander Berkman, ‘What is Anarchism?’

When we go to work our activity, our labour, is used to create a service or product that our employers make money from. In return we are given a wage. The amount of money in our wage is unrelated to the usefulness of our job or the amount of money we make for the employer. Instead we get paid just enough to keep us in the job and no more.

The money employers have left over after the wages and bills have been paid is known as profit. Business owners control the profits and decide what happens to them – they have the power to pocket the money or to reinvest some or all into expanding their business interests so that greater levels of profit can be gathered in the future.

Higher profits do not lead to higher wages or better conditions for workers. In fact more profits are made when we are paid less, when we work more hours, or when we are forced to do more tasks in the time we are working. Developments in technology, rather than being put to use making our lives easier, are put to use making more profit. This happens either by

removing the need for workers or by using the new inventions as a way to get more work out of us.

Tasks that are useful to society do not take place within the system of wage labour because they are necessary; they take place because their outcomes can be sold and profits made. What use they have, if any, is just a hook to make them sell. Because the goal in a capitalist economy is making profit rather than fulfilling needs we find that even jobs which have a useful function are undertaken in ways that are inefficient or ineffective.

For example, jobs are duplicated throughout different companies due to unnecessary competition. Companies make choices that contribute to environmental destruction and lead to the poor health of us as workers. Items get transported from one part of the globe to another, clocking up months of travel time, as certain processes are cheaper to undertake in different places. Products that should be able to last a lifetime get made to poor quality so that they generate more immediate profits or so that in the future they break and need replaced.

We waste our lives doing work that only makes sense if you are trying to keep capitalism running but doesn't make sense otherwise. Even when the main task that our job seems to be about is something useful or enjoyable, we can see the ways that the drive for profit gets in the way.

The Free Society

'Freedom begins where work ends.'
– Work and the Free Society, 1st Edition

'From each according to their ability, to each according to their need.'
– Slogan popularised by Karl Marx

Winning reforms and changing the conditions under which we work can only get us so far. Eventually there is nothing else that can be won from the boss except the places we work and live themselves. However if we simply become our own bosses with capitalism and state intact then we would still be chained to the ideology of work for survival. We must recognise these limits and aim for a social revolution – the complete reordering of society. Having gained a revolutionary consciousness from our previous struggles we would be able to undertake the general political strike – the use of both mass industrial action and mass social protest – to replace capitalism with communism and work with free association.

This means the end of artificial competition for profits, and with it the huge volume of pointless or repeated work being done today. We would be given a fair voice in deciding what work is to be done and how we will undertake it. Dirty or dangerous tasks could be automated, shared through collective agreement, or abandoned as unworkable. Environmentally unsound practices would end, as our wellbeing as individuals and that of the planet as a whole would drive production and innovation. We would be free to learn our true potential as humans.

in advance for how items will be redistributed to those that need them. Often this can be done while getting the passive support of staff.

This is known as expropriation, and as well as being done to items in a supermarket could also be applied to taking over property (such as when squatting an unused building), or when a point of production is taken into collective control.

Good Work & Taking Charge

Sometimes breaking the rules can hurt other segments of the working class in a way that turns them against your struggle, isolating you and giving the bosses a chance to win. Good work is coming up with ways to break the rules in a way that hurts the bosses but helps others. Letting customers go without paying, adding on extras, going the extra mile when you don't have to, or bending the rules to make a job more fulfilling and satisfying to everyone except the bosses and their profits.

Taking charge takes good work and mixes in the ideas of an occupation, except here the workers agree as a group how to run their work and do it that way in the bosses face. When workers decide that they are going to do what they want to do, instead of what the employers want, there is not a lot can be done to stop it.

These act of collectively deciding how to subvert their job roles can bring workers closer to activity as it would be under communism, meeting people's needs in a way that we can all find acceptable.

The Management

'So when you spend a dollar that's ten seconds of my time. And when ya spend a billion that's my life and that's a crime'

– The Coup, 'Lazymuthafucka'

All this waste and harm takes place because employers can take the output of our work and make more money from it than they pay out in wages and costs. This is the driving force behind capitalism and our exploitation as workers. So why do bosses act they way they do?

First up, it is rare that the person directly managing you is a capitalist boss in the real sense of the word. Foremen, team leaders, gaffers – no matter what they're called workplaces often have layer upon layer of management, each watching the layer of workers below them. Managers are in the same boat as every other worker in terms of having their needs withheld from them by the capitalist class, and so in that way we share an interest. However, unlike other workers, they are being employed to represent the class interests of those above them, making sure the work gets done as specified and that the workers don't organise against the bosses. To make their job worthwhile they have to believe that those workers under them require what amounts to a glorified babysitter, causing management to not only act against workers interest but also their own.

When we look at the real capitalists we can see that competition between different sets of bosses is taking place on a global scale. Those who attempt to give their staff a better qual-

ity of life in one part of the world will find they are undercut by employers elsewhere and so will lose profits. If the director of a company doesn't squeeze as much value out of the work of their employees for as low a wage as possible then they'll be replaced by someone who will. Capitalism creates these external drives, known as market forces, that cause bosses to be ruthless.

doing the rounds' and the likelihood of it spreading to important areas of work can work wonders with a stubborn boss or supervisor.

Work to Rule

This is another powerful tool at our disposal today. Every industry is covered by a mass of rules, regulations and agreed working practices that, if applied strictly, can make work difficult if not impossible. While following the letter of the rules may inconvenience workers for a time, if they stay focussed it will ruin the profitability of a workplace and leave the boss powerless to fight back; after all, the workers are following the rules. Even an agreement not to take overtime for a short period can be effective if applied at the right moment.

Sabotage, Collective Theft and Expropriation

Another way that workers can choose to strike at the point of production is to put a spanner in the works. Machinery is damaged, parts go missing, work bottlenecks around vulnerable points in production, and all the workers say they have no idea what is happening. Other times, rather than things randomly breaking down, they just go missing. Businesses put in place all kinds of checks that keep a watch on the small scale, but they are rarely prepared for a large-scale theft that can't be pinned on any one person. These are risky tactics, but sometimes needed.

This concept of collective theft can be used to have our social reproductive needs met while minimising the amount of paid work we have to do. Individualised shoplifting can be scaled up so a group enters the target shop together, sticks tight while loading up on goods, leaves quickly, and has a plan worked out

a picket. As this happens without notice the bosses ability to minimise the impact of a strike is non-existent.

Strike action can also be taken at the same time as other workplaces and communities even if you have no demands of your own. Even if the strikers are superficially unconnected, the act of solidarity striking makes the original demand easier to achieve as the bosses not only have to manage their own workforce but multiple strands of the economy being shut down. It is also in our own interests to make solidarity striking commonplace, as when it comes time for us to make a demand we know we can rely upon the mutual aid of others in achieving our goals.

Wildcat and solidarity strikes may be illegal, but combined they are the most powerful form of industrial action. When undertaken successfully they almost always included a demand to have no negative outcomes for the strikers which is backed by a threat of harsh repercussions if not kept.

Outside of the formal workplace there is also a history of reproductive labour strikes. This can take many forms, from a rent strike (where a group of tenants refuse to hand over rent until demands are met), through to sex strikes (organised by groups of women who refused sex with their partners unless conditions were changed for them). Any type of unpaid labour could be targeted and very quickly have a knock-on effect to be addressed.

The Sick In

A sick-in is a way to strike without striking. The idea is to cripple your workplace by having all or most of the workforce call in sick on the same day(s). Unlike a formal walk-out, it can be used effectively by departments and work areas instead of the whole workplace, and because it's usually informal it can catch management unawares. Sometimes just the hint of 'flu

Being Your Own Boss

'I remember standing in the aisle where I work, casually chit-chatting with a co-worker, wondering aloud about what things would be like if all workplaces were run entirely democratically like our store. I figured without hierarchies (formal ones, anyways), that big changes could be realized. Workers would own and run everything. It would be the end of capitalism. And then my co-worker said, "Yeah, but if you flipped a switch and tomorrow every place was a co-op, we'd still all be competing with each other, just without bosses."'

– Ogier, 'Workers Co-Ops – Crashing in the same car'.

Some people try to escape the frustrations of waged work by becoming self-employed or joining a co-operative (which is basically a group form of self-employment). In both cases those involved have equal say, investment, and recompense from the business. Unfortunately the idea that you are becoming your own boss has more truth to it than is often intended.

A business where the workers are their own boss is still subject to the same market forces as every other business, so instead of a manager or director telling you what to do, market forces set the boundaries of any decision you have to make. Rather than having capitalism managed for you, you end up managing it for yourself, internalising the boss.

In good times being your own boss can feel empowering and fulfilling, as the decisions you are allowed to make roughly match up with what you are comfortable doing anyway, though self-exploitation and overwork are common companions. However when the capitalist economy takes a downturn, and competition becomes more cut-throat, the crushing inevitability of the choices required to carry on can hit with far more impact than if you were able to pin them on a boss.

Even worse than this, some bosses now force workers to be listed as self-employed freelancers in order to gain more profits by avoiding the cost associated with the hard-won rights from previous workers' struggles (such as sick pay, holiday time, guaranteed regular hours, or regular pay raises). This often means having all the disadvantages of having an employer, while the company you sell your labour to is free from the legal obligation to give you your basic employment rights.

over a plant and deny access to the management. The latter needs a high level of militancy and solidarity, as well as good rank-and-file organisation.

An occupation requires a high level of militancy and organisation on the part of the workers concerned. It is doomed if they remain isolated from the rest of organised labour and the working class generally but in the right conditions it can be dynamite. What is needed is mass involvement. Workers should not be presented with a plan: an effective occupation must be preceded by mass meetings to plan the occupation, and lots of promotion to gather popular support both in the place of work and beyond.

Occupation can also be used to prevent eviction by bailiffs, as groups of people use their own bodies to block the streets and entranceways to target properties. In areas where there are multiple houses under threat, a phone tree and internet call-outs can be used to gather people quickly, however nothing beats being at a property before the bailiff starts their work and staying until after they have gone home.

Boycott, Protest, Picket Line & Strike

Boycotts and protests try to hit the profitability of a business by pointing out the flaws of the employer and encouraging customers to shop elsewhere. Boycotts are rarely effective by themselves as they attempt to have the battle at the point of purchase, making it relatively easy for bosses to weather the storm and wait for customers to return.

Far more effective is to strike at the point of production. This involves the workforce and their supporters blockading the entrances, forming what is known as a picket line, and preventing scab workers from going in and the transport of goods or work vehicles from getting out. Wildcat strikes are when a workforce ballot in person and walk off the job there and then to form

further action will be taken. The people with the grievances then gather along with as many people that will stand in solidarity with them and march on the target to deliver the letter. Once those with the grievance hand it over everyone leaves to clapping from everyone present before dispersing. While the action can be over in mere minutes the show of collective strength and support can sometimes be enough to sway the bosses' mind.

Communications Blockade

Businesses today rely on their ability to stay in contact with customers, a state of affairs that can be exploited to our advantage. A communications blockade is where a mass of people complain about the situation at hand by phone, email, website, social media, and fax to the bosses all in the same time period. The length of time the blockage is set to take place in can be scaled to suit the numbers you have at your disposal, and it is a good action to engage friends, family and general supporters. Many smaller disputes have been won with a communications blockade. These tactics can also be adapted to targets that are particularly reliant on getting good reviews online.

Go Slows, Sit-Ins & Occupations

A go slow works exactly as it sounds. The workforce as a whole pick a speed to work at and stick to it rigidly. This is where collective action is vital as even if a few workers were to break from the agreed pace then there would be the chance to victimise those who refused to scab. Sit-Ins are similar to go slows only with a clear physical expression – people stop work and sit down. While this can be effective, management will carry on as best they can before security or police remove everyone. Occupations take this a step further and actually take

Unemployment

‘[Capitalism] begins not with the offer of work, but with the imperative to earn a living. [...] We must insist that ‘proletarian’ is not a synonym for ‘wage labourer’ but for dispossession, expropriation and radical dependence on the market. You don’t need a job to be a proletarian: wageless life, not wage labour, is the starting point in understanding the free market.’

– Michael Denning, ‘Wageless Life’

There are many ways to get our needs met: working for a boss or a co-operative, self-employment in any form, under-employment, benefits, scraping money together legally or illegally, or some combination of these. No matter how someone gets their needs met, the one thing we have in common as a working class is that capitalism cuts us off from what we have produced and denies access to the things we need to survive.

At the same time we live in a world where useful tasks go undone: buildings and land sit derelict, pollution clogs up the world, food rots in fields, and people are denied access to work that they’ve been specially trained for. Again, the reason for this waste is to make profits. If having a job done doesn’t make someone money then it usually won’t happen.

Unemployment also helps to maintain a backdrop of desperation that happens to work in favour of the bosses. If there is a high level of unemployment then people become trapped in their jobs as there is nowhere else for them to go to gain the employment they feel is the only way to get their needs met, while

at the same time they can easily be replaced if they step out of line. Employers can take advantage of this to drive down pay and worsen conditions, while it is in the government's interest to remove previously hard-won legal obligations on companies that favour workers as this helps the state's global capitalist strength.

Being provided with unemployment benefits, pensions, paternity leave, free healthcare, free education and a host of other safety nets can all be described as part of the social wage. This is the bottom-line provided by the state, and is mainly funded by the state taking a portion of the profits of businesses and investing them into projects that on the one hand will keep the peace, but on the other not allow people to live too comfortably. Benefits need to be low enough to make unemployment an unattractive option.

By demonising the unemployed, sick and disabled as scroungers the state gains the ability to lower the social wage further. Services are cut, allowing for lower taxation on business, which means increased profits. As the social wage is driven down unemployed people are forced to take worse paying jobs than they would have previously considered. This also gives employers the option to freeze the wages or remove benefits from existing workers as the pressure of not losing what they have keeps people in line. Again, this leads to increased profits.

One way to make our actions have more impact on the bosses is to work out a plan of escalation. This means that rather than throwing our most powerful punch from the start or simply trying out different actions in random order, we work out all the different methods of collective direct action we could take against the bosses and rate them from weakest to strongest (given how much we think they will hurt the boss and how much energy it will take out of those involved). We then start the campaign with the weakest action, and if it fails to work take the next on the list, working our way one step up the list each time an action fails to have the desired effect. This has some key benefits.

First, we might win concessions far sooner and for less effort than we believed would be possible, while people will not be tired out and lose heart when the first action is a big push that the boss manages to survive. We can use the space between each escalating step to prepare for any backlash from our actions, plan out the next stage, and even change course if required.

At the same time bosses don't just have to weather the storm of our current activity but also have to start worrying about what we have planned for them next. The effects of profit loss happening now are compounded when there is a real fear of ever more profit-harming actions down the line, and it is often this factor that will win the struggle.

What follows is a brief introduction to some ways collective direct action has been used to win past struggles:

The Demand Delivery

This is usually the first action taken in a series of escalating tactics. A letter is produced with any outstanding grievances listed, the demands being made to resolve the issue, and a declaration that if they are not met within a certain time-frame then

far simpler (and loses less profit) to concede to the demands of a large group or an entire workforce compared to getting into a lengthy fight with them. Direct action is where we try and solve a problem as directly as possible, without hoping that someone else will fix the problem for us.

Both in the workplace, on the dole, and in our neighbourhoods we can find unions presenting themselves as the place to go to solve our problems, by having members of the union bureaucracy sit in official negotiations with management. In order to have any say in these negotiations the union needs to be able to both start and stop any worker militancy. Therefore the interest of the union, and its paid bureaucrats, is not to do the best by workers but to become a layer of management with the main task of controlling our ability to take collective direct action. Union members who have an interest in fighting for the best are either isolated, given shop-floor roles that bury them under case work, or are convinced to fall in line. Although much importance is given to negotiations with the bosses, a union committee negotiating on our behalf rarely produces satisfactory results as they do not live with the same problems and have different interests to ourselves. In spite of these limitations, there can be good reasons to be part of your union. The local branch can be a place to meet workers who are itching to take militant action outside of the union's restrictions and if it gives all members a fair vote in any decisions being made then it can produce effective results.

Before taking action we should undertake a realistic review of the situation and ask how much harm can we cause the target (given the number of people we can call upon and the energy they can put in), and how easy is it for them to give in. If the profits lost would be significantly more than the cost of conceding then the chances of winning are good. On the other hand if a boss has a lot to lose or can ignore any action being taken then the fight could be long and the chances of victory are slim.

Reproductive Labour: Refreshed for a New Days Exploitation

‘Let us fully understand that a revolution, intoxicated with the beautiful words Liberty, Equality, Solidarity would not be a revolution if it maintained slavery at home. Half humanity subjected to the slavery of the hearth would still have to rebel against the other half.’

– Peter Kropotkin, ‘The Conquest of Bread’.

To be able to come back every day and continue working, we also need to do various other tasks, such as travelling to work, cleaning, feeding and clothing ourselves, taking some time to relax, and of course to sleep. Capitalism also benefits from the tasks associated with raising a new generation of workers. The combined tasks that are needed to ensure we are fresh for the next shift and that there are new people coming into the workforce are called reproductive labour, as in the tasks required for the reproduction of our labour power, and are generally taken place outside of our scheduled (and paid) hours of employment.

Traditionally much of this reproductive work has been done by women, in their roles as wives and mothers. When a boss employed a man they also benefited from the wife providing cooking, cleaning and childcare. The oppression of women helps to squeeze as much labour out of men as possible.

While as a family unit husbands and wives traditionally undertake everything needed to survive between them, women's

work is not valued or paid, and they depend on their husbands for survival, making men the boss of women in the home. Gendered oppression is supported by the need for free reproductive labour. Even with women having entered the workforce this gender-based oppression is maintained by these past, but still currently accepted, ideas limiting access to certain (often higher paid) jobs, social pressure to prioritise home labour over waged work, and with lower wages being offered to women for the same tasks. Because of this, even working women in family relationships often end up doing most of the reproductive labour, referred to as the second shift.

Not only do we have to pay for everything from shelter to entertainment to help us relax, there is an ever increasing push for our downtime activities to be turned into products and sold by others. This is most visible with social media, as our interactions can be considered a kind of unwaged work, where we are given a platform to produce content that generates advertising revenues for the parent company.

Anti-Work: Realistic Resistance

‘I say to the wage class: Think clearly and act quickly, or you are lost. Strike not for a few cents more an hour, because the price of living will be raised faster still, but strike for all you earn, be content with nothing less.’

– Lucy Parsons, ‘The Principles Of Anarchism’.

‘An injury to one is an injury to all.’

– Motto of the IWW.

Most of us do not have the option to just drop out of the systems that exploit us because we have no other way to survive. Those who can move to a self-sufficient commune are few and far between, and while someone looking out for their own well-being can’t be looked on too poorly, in doing so they do not provide an example for the world (as it is often presented), but hide themselves from the struggles we face as a class.

The struggle against work is the struggle to have our needs met on our own terms. This puts us up against capitalism and the state. While individual battles can sometimes lead to small victories, these are isolated and any gains can be easily reversed at a later date. The strongest concessions won in the past have always happened when the working class has taken collective direct action.

Collective action means that we recognise that we have to work together as a group. Bosses may be able to sack one or two people and still keep their profit level steady, but it is often

free labour to prove they are passionate enough about their craft. Not only is it harder to make a case for overtime pay or a smaller workload when the job is presented as a labour of love, it also devalues work that is clearly only done for money. This is because the aspiration to “do what you love” puts pressure on us to instead settle for trying to “love what we do” so we can also achieve the idealised position of not being there for the money. Belief that we are working out of a love for the job, and not just to have our needs met, makes us easier to exploit. In fact, any enjoyment or sense of purpose we manage to experience at work is a bonus, but our survival and comfort are paramount.

Attitudes to Work

‘Choose a job you love and you’ll never work a day in your life.’

– Proverb.

As well as maintaining our position as workers through our dispossession there are also a whole host of myths and attitudes that go towards strengthening the ideology of work.

One view is that there’s virtue in labour in itself. We’re encouraged to keep a strong work ethic, ask one another what we do for a living, and are expected to look down on people who are “workshy”. Anyone without employment isn’t just lazy, but is somehow wrong for refusing to take part in pointless jobs that provide poor pay. At work we can be complaining about how stupid a task is one minute, then complaining about a “lazy” colleague who is trying to avoid it the next. The question of whether the unemployed person or the “lazy” colleague would otherwise be doing something valuable to society is conveniently avoided to make people feel that doing anything at all for money is more noble than doing nothing. It is never mentioned that our work provides the employer with far more money than we’ll ever see in our pay packets. In light of these facts, we should reject looking down on people who shirk some pointless task, and should instead figure out ways to take back our lives together.

We often hear that the boss is the wealth creator, an entrepreneur, and that they are taking all the risk when starting a business. This is a lie. Even if the boss works their ass off, which much of the time they don’t, they do so in the hope of

being able to live off the backs of others at a later date. Their only real risk is losing the business they control, leaving them (at worst) in the same position as any other person being put out of work. On the other hand the workers do all the labour that creates the profits yet have just enough to live on at the end of each month. They can be put out of work at any time, not just when the company goes belly-up.

Another common myth is that our jobs should be an “expression of our own self-actualisation”, needed to make us whole. They are presented as the medium by which we express our own values or creativity. The platitude often applied here is “Do what you love and you’ll never work a day in your life”, though “Love what you do and you’ll never work a day in your life” is also used, in spite of the very different implications. Either way, the onus is on the worker to get into a position where the labour they’re performing is effortlessly enjoyable to them. If not, maybe they picked the wrong job, maybe they don’t really enjoy what they thought they enjoyed, maybe they haven’t worked hard enough to attain the level of privilege and independence that gives them room for self-expression, or maybe they just don’t have the “right” attitude.

The idea that turning something you enjoy into a job will lead to a fulfilling life ignores the mechanisms by which taking money for something fundamentally changes the nature of the activity, as making money becomes the goal, while any other possible benefits become incidental. This problem is exposed in discussions on at what point an artist has “sold out”, as their vision of what they would like to produce clashes with the pressure of market forces. In fact the predicament exists throughout the work and is a constant burden on an artist’s creativity and authenticity which is felt to a greater or lesser extent depending on the circumstances. The gap between what you should be doing and what you want to be doing is the breeding ground for alienation.

A particularly stark illustration of the absurdity of this myth is in society’s attitudes to sex and sex work. In our highly sexualised culture sex is something everyone is expected to want. It is assumed to be everyone’s default hobby. Having sex is automatically expected to be a fun activity as well as an indication of one’s worth. In contrast, sex work is considered to be disgusting and demeaning, and obviously a last resort which no one would actually want. People claiming this will often correctly be able to explain how the work aspect of sex work might make it unpleasant. In spite of society’s expectation that we should want as much sex as possible, people know that what makes sex good is being able to choose what you do and who you do it with, which is a liberty that the necessity of following the money will impact on and often completely override.

Any valid arguments against the existence of sex work are arguments against the existence of all work, narrowly applied to a single industry. On the other hand, many arguments in favour of the existence of sex work justify libertarian capitalist ideology, and would easily be recognised as such if applied to work in general. In these discussions the inherent alienation of work is only brought into focus when it comes to the sex industry. This is to the detriment of sex workers as it demands that they should convince people that they’re just as able to “love what they do” (as is expected of all work under middle class idealism), before people will consider supporting them to make their work safer. This is a major hurdle to improving conditions.

The expectation that we should enjoy our work impacts on our ability to organise in a more direct way too. If we consider our jobs a form of self-expression, or we convince other people that they are, then we undermine our demand to work less for more money. People working as teachers or nurses are shamed for demanding better pay and conditions. Striking transport workers and firefighters are made out to be selfish. Actors, musicians, and designers are expected to put in many hours of