

The Meaning of Anti-Work

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I have worked in a number of different fields throughout my life. From data entry to manual labour, from paper pushing to restaurant work, from customer service to work from home. I've worked for myself and I've worked for others. But every single one of those jobs, no matter what they were, seized and drained my time, my energy, my mind, and my body. Despite the breadth of my employment experiences, I know I haven't faced the worst of what work imposes on people, but I can still recognize that we cannot simply resign ourselves to merely reforming work. Such an approach misses the forest for the trees. The mental, physical, psychological, social, and environmental consequences of work necessitate its end and the fundamental transformation of our society. But in order to understand the concept of antiwork, we first need to understand the concept of work.

What is Work?

The dictionary defines work as an activity involving mental or physical effort done in order to achieve a purpose or result. But antiwork advocates would more readily use that definition for the concept of labour. Work as understood by work abolitionists is grounded in an understanding of work's role in a broader socioeconomic sense. Work is forced labour, that is, compulsory production, enforced by economic and political means, by the carrot and the stick. Work is (usually) wage labour, as workers must sell themselves, mind and body, for the purpose of production. Thus, work has an inherent dynamic of domination, one that we see elaborated in all industrial societies today, even the ones that claim to be socialist.

We are employed to work at things called "jobs", where we must perform tasks which, no matter how intrinsically interesting they may initially be, eventually become dull and monotonous when performed for upwards of forty hours a week, with no say over when you show up or leave, what you do, how long you do it for, how much you do, how you do it, who you do it with, and for whom it is done, all for the profit of those who control the means of production.

The world of work is a degrading experience of suffocating bureaucracy, surveillance, rote-work, high pace, quotas, time charts, persistent harassment, paternalistic management, exploitation, subordination, and totalitarian control for the sake of it. Your washroom breaks are often timed and regulated. Your clothing and hair are strictly managed, which often has an anti-Black component to it. You are spied on and supervised, and you can be expelled at any time. Work is therefore the antithesis of freedom. The prison, the school, the factory, the office, and the store are all stamped with the discipline of modern despots, and all share techniques of control in common.

The lineage of domination from childhood in schools and at home to adulthood in the workplace is clear. Its purpose is to habituate us to hierarchy and psychological enslavement. Our aptitude for autonomy is atrophied and our vitality is suppressed so that we are reconciled with regimentation and can replicate and reproduce it throughout our interpersonal lives, politics, and cultures. That is Why Revolution Needs Therapy.

The clergy of work fail or don't care to recognize that we don't work, we don't sell our time and energy to a boss, because we want to. We work because we have no other way to get money to buy things to survive, because the commons were stolen and enclosed, and we have been deprived of any other choice. We get our tasks, repeat them over and over again, every day, every week, every month, every year, and yet our time at work is never ours, never really part

of our lives. That time is for our bosses, who take the things we produce, whether it be objects like pizzas or housing units; services like cashiering or cooking; or qualities like clean floors or healthy patients, and sell them for profit, paying us only a portion of the value we produce and using the rest to reinvest in capital and enlarge their own wealth.

Our own lives are centred around this work. The money we get from work sustains us just enough to keep us coming back to work. Our time away from work is spent travelling to or from work, or getting ready for work. Leisure itself is just nonwork for the sake of work. It's the limited time we spend recovering from work and trying to distract ourselves from work.

Because of work, we're constantly under the tyranny of the clock. It's like what Bob Black claims Socrates once said: Manual labourers make bad friends and bad citizens because they have no time to fulfil the responsibilities of friendship and citizenship. He's right. Our "free" time is not even ours. It still belongs to our bosses in some capacity, so really the only thing free about it is that our bosses don't have to pay us for it. And when we don't have work, we spend our time looking for work, because the threat presented by unemployment is graver than the consistent pains of employment.

"All the labour-saving machinery that has hitherto been invented has not lessened the toil of a single human being." - John Stuart Mill

One of the things that really troubles me about work is not so much the work itself, but the culture that surrounds it. Our society, our politics, our world is built upon the veneration and glorification of work. It's more intense in some places, especially those influenced by the Protestant work ethic, but it can be found all over the place. Conservatives may want right-to-work laws and liberals may want an end to employment discrimination, but the centrality of work, the unspoken idea that employment is a virtue, goes virtually unchallenged. This intense worship of work is even reflected in children's television.

Even many self-described socialists, who may more accurately be described as state capitalists, venerate work and the worker. In the Soviet Union, the Stakhanovite movement was supported and led by the so-called Communist Party to uplift the efforts of coal miner Alexey Stakhanov, and others like him, who continually raised the standards of productivity, and therefore the physical toil of other workers, through the country. Workerism, that is the ideology that encourages the acceptance of, and propaganda for wage labour, is endemic among so-called revolutionaries, who uphold the "virtues" of exploitation and alienation as a necessary and honourable sacrifice for the building of the state, the economy, and Capital. Workerism specifically often worships the idol of masculine manual labourers, who are said to be most productive, while denigrating service, office, and domestic workers, the latter of which are usually female.

This brings us to the work that isn't even seen as work. The unpaid and invisible care work relegated to the realm of women. Housework is just as feminist authors describe it: monotonous, repetitive, and fragmented, consisting of long hours at a pressurised pace, inescapable and in isolation from all others. Or consider those who, due to physical or mental disabilities, are unable to work, unable to access basic necessities, and are left to fall by the wayside. What kind of society discards those most in need of support?

State control is not the solution, nor is deregulation. Because either way, work is sapping us of our life force, it is stealing our time, and it is literally killing us. In fact, work kills most people, directly or indirectly. Millions of people are killed on the job around the world every

year, millions of people are injured or disabled on the job every year, and millions of people are killed by occupational diseases they acquired on the job every year. Millions of people are killed by vehicles going to work, coming from work, or looking for work. Millions are killed by work-induced cancer, heart disease, or addiction. Millions are killed by the environmental pollution caused by work.

Work is nothing to die for.

The Mythology of Work

But the mythology of work persists. The mythology of work insists that work is necessary. But after centuries of false promises and technological leaps and bounds, we work far more than our ancestors, who had the added benefit of enjoying natural commons and shared knowledges, ever did. The class that destroyed that way of life tells us we should be grateful. They feed us narratives of glorious progress. Yet despite all this so-called progress, which could have liberated us from the need to work if founded on humanity and not capitalism, here we are, still working to death. We generate abundance, but only a select few get to benefit from it.

The mythology of work insists that work is productive, but at what cost and for whose sake? Work generates mass waste worldwide. The Earth is now filled with disposable items, obsolete technologies, abandoned factories, and wasted food. Communities and ecosystems, which should be treasured in common, are pillaged and exploited, all for the sake of profit for a wealthy few. The pains and stresses we experience at the end of a workday are a microcosm of the pains and stresses experienced by our home planet. The mythology of work insists that work creates wealth. But work creates poverty, in direct proportion to profit, because work enriches some at the expense of others. In sharing societies, even when there's scarcity, no one is forced to go without while others hoard more than they need. Work also creates poverty in a nonfinancial sense, as our physical, social, and mental health are all impoverished by work.

The mythology of work insists that you must work to make a living, but the cost of working is higher than the cost of living. It costs us the only thing we can't get back: time. It costs us our relationships. It costs us our human potential. And the only reason we have to do it, and so much of it, is because of the violence that instituted and maintains these systems and suppresses all alternatives. Capitalism exists because our daily activities reproduce it, but I don't think we would reproduce it if we truly had a choice in the matter. Believe it or not, people weren't exactly ecstatic about the violent arrival of colonisers and pillagers.

The mythology of work insists that work incentivizes initiative, but true initiative, the full unfolding of our creative potential, often contradicts the profit motive. Work, instead, often erodes initiative. You don't get to leave work early for developing a more efficient and less time-consuming way of doing things. Most times, you're just paid the same and expected to produce more. Despite all the innovations of the past century, the average work week has not decreased. Not to mention that your initiative outside of work gets eroded too. We're so burnt out by work that we can hardly pursue the interests and activities we actually enjoy doing. As a result, some can't even imagine a world without work, where people are able to invest their energy in projects they actually want to do.

The mythology of work insists that work teaches responsibility, but workers check their own consciences at the workplace door. The Nuremberg defence of "just following orders" has been

employed to avoid accountability for mass pollution, mass animal cruelty, mass wastage, mass destruction, mass surveillance, mass imprisonment, mass enslavement, and mass violence. Lastly, the mythology of work insists that work provides security, despite the hazards and instability that practically define work. But true security would be found in a community built on mutual aid, where people support and look out for each other. Work is really the thing that keeps us from building and sustaining such communities.

Abolishing Work?

People are sick of work and yearning for more. Some turn to individualistic entrepreneurship, UBI, or reformist unions; there's still a widespread acceptance of the inevitability of work. Sadly, it's still hard for many people to consider, let alone imagine, the ambitious aim and effort to abolish work and advance freedom and fulfilled potentials for all.

Contemporary hunter-gatherers, according to anthropologist Marshall Sahlins, enjoy what he terms "the original affluent society." They "work" for about four hours per day in total, but based on my earlier definition, what they do can hardly be defined as work. It is not forced labour. Their quests for food are intermittent, leisure abundant, and varied. What they do is more akin to "play": free activity stimulated by a superabundance of life and the liberty of thought and feeling.

Play has been reduced to "mere child's play," but play is a far greater and more expansive activity than we might initially recognize. Play is energising and enjoyable. It is the exuberant expression of human creativity. I hinted at it briefly in my video on *The Importance of Imagination*, but we seriously need to undertake the task of creating a new way of life, based on play instead of work. The enormous task of transforming work into play will require a lot of effort. But work abolitionists recognize that, unlike the vast majority of work today, such an effort would actually be worthwhile.

Work abolition is twofold: quantitative and qualitative.

First of all, quantitatively speaking, we need to cut down on the amount of work being done, by a significant margin. David Graeber identifies the problem in the provocatively titled *Bullshit Jobs*: most work today is simply useless, if not actively damaging, serving the purpose of commerce or social control as opposed to actual human needs. We don't need to salvage the tedious white-collar work that now dominates post-industrial societies. We can get rid of all the real estate, insurance, banking, marketing, finance, advertising, lawyering, and other jobs, including all those who work under them, that exist simply to maintain capitalism and the state. We can get rid of a lot of the more "productive" work too, particularly the work that exists to supply the appetite of mass consumerism and the shrine of car centrism. We can also automate much of the productive work that needs doing too, and though I don't believe we need total automation in order to pursue the goals of anti-work, we can use labour-saving technologies within reason to actually save us our time and labour.

And by abolishing wage labour, we can also dismantle the whole sexual division of labour, liberating women from the burden of housework and approaching the vital task of abolishing the patriarchy. See my video on *Rethinking The Family*. Also see my videos on *Education*. Schools exist to create workers, and thus the abolition of work will also involve the abolition of schools as we know them.

If we wish to reorganise our society from one built on work to one built on play, children must absolutely be involved, as teachers and students in the ludic revolution. This revolution will require a transformation of whatever useful labour remains into games, crafts, and creative pastimes. This is the qualitative aspect of work abolition. No more “jobs.” Fun activities usually lose their fun when they become jobs anyway. That’s why farming is a job and gardening is a hobby. Instead of jobs, there are things to do and people who do them.

We can take the useful activities we enjoy and do them just as much as we enjoy them and in the ways we enjoy them. We can actually have a say in what we do. We can rest when we need to. There are some things I can do for hours nonstop and other things I can only do in short bursts every once in a while. What these specific activities are will vary from person to person. Many people enjoy spending time with kids, but it becomes draining and tedious when, for example, you’re a single parent with no support network or you have to teach them all day every day with no say in the what/when/where/why/how. Many people enjoy cooking for others, just not in the hostile and frantic environment of a restaurant or in the isolated and unappreciated setting of domesticity. And as for the things we don’t like doing but need to be done? They can be rotated, gamified, or transformed in some way to make the drudge less drudgerous. Our different interests, tolerances, and temperaments are what make a life of free play possible. Most people have a variety of interests and an interest in variety, and they should have the freedom to pursue them.

Work abolition is a destructive and creative project. It will require the efforts of millions of people around the world working together to transform their conditions. Typically, workers have turned to workers’ unions as forces for change. Unions are capable of organising strikes, boycotts, sabotage campaigns, protests, and more on a massive scale. But we cannot limit our efforts to unions, as they are also often stagnant, bureaucratic, and ultimately reformist and capitulatory. At the end of the day, workers’ unions need workers and jobs, but we don’t, and we cannot afford to keep making the mistake of half-measures. We can’t just take over our workplaces and leave everything else jussu. To quote Abolish Restaurants by Prole.Info,

“Every time we attack this system but don’t destroy it, it changes, and in turn changes us and the terrain of the next fight. Gains are turned against us, and we are stuck back in the same situation—at work. The bosses try to keep us looking for individual solutions, or solutions within an individual workplace or an individual trade. The only way we can free ourselves is to broaden and deepen our fight. We involve workers from other workplaces, industries, and regions. We attack more and more fundamental things. The desire to destroy restaurants becomes the desire to destroy the conditions that create restaurants.”

This struggle, for a world of free association and play, has been placed under the banner of antiwork and anarchy. Personally, I’m fond of post-work, because I think it better encapsulates my desire to both oppose and propose, to move against and beyond this detour, this phase of destruction called work, but the term antiwork does what it needs to do too. There have been attempts to co-opt and defang this liberatory project, but despite the recent online drama, this struggle is older than the Internet, and it will continue unabated, because I believe the impulse to be free is one of the defining attributes of the human experience, and this system is fundamentally unfree. Once liberated from the shackles of employment, people will be free to sloth and to slack,

but also to do and to act. Humans are verbing creatures. We should fight for a world where we can verb to fulfil our needs and express ourselves instead of line pockets and destroy the Earth. All power to all the people.

Peace.

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IP0nBIO1Qo8>

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