

# **Steal Something from Work Day 2023**

**Take Matters in Your Own Hands**

CrimethInc.

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# Contents

|   |   |
|---|---|
| Leak Now or Forever Hold Your Peace . . . . . | 3 |
| Further Reading . . . . .                     | 6 |



Welcome to Steal Something from Work Day 2023! Every year, we observe this day as an opportunity to reflect on the individualized forms of anti-capitalist resistance that millions upon millions of employees engage in on a daily basis, and to imagine forms of collective action that could take that resistance as their point of departure.

Today, we'll zoom in on a particular variant of workplace theft: the leak.

Cheers to Yugoslavian film director Dušan Makavejev and hip-hop duo Test Their Logik.

## **Leak Now or Forever Hold Your Peace**

There are many things you can steal from work. You could steal money, time, goods, raw materials, access to specialized equipment. Another thing you could steal is **information**. For this year's Steal Something from Work Day, let's talk about the last of these.

In the information age, knowledge is power. The circulation of classified information is integral to the lattice of repressive institutions that maintain the prevailing order. Information is the blood in the bloodstream of the beast.

Controlling which information circulates and which does not has always been central to statecraft. But in the heyday of social media, this is arguably the most determinant aspect of rule itself, even more so than military force.

“In a digitally interconnected world, whoever has the most robust networks, the right relationship between visible and opaque channels, and the most persuasive narrative

will triumph. Communication and coordination trump brute force when any clash can draw in a potentially infinite number of participants on either side.”

-Canary in the Coal Mine: Twitter and the End of Social Media

In a globalized economy in which work has penetrated into every corner of our lives, practically every worker is accustomed to inhabiting multiple identities and being subject to conflicting loyalties. The battle lines of social conflict now cut directly through the heart of every ordinary civilian. One weapon in these battles is the **information leak**.

Information leaks can serve a variety of agendas. On the one hand, they can destabilize established power. For example, embassy cables published by Wikileaks played a role in catalyzing the revolution that brought down president Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia, sparking a global wave of uprisings that lasted from 2011 through 2014. On the other hand, defenders of the prevailing order can use leaks to circulate cherry-picked information, as well. Intentionally or not, the advance leak of the Supreme Court ruling overturning *Roe vs. Wade* arguably served to defuse resistance, giving the general public a chance to get used to the bad news before it was confirmed and ensuring that those who might otherwise have been shocked into action joined predictable liberal demonstrations.

Still, as a persistent **strategy** aimed at the reigning power structure, leaking information has considerable advantages. The less that the various institutions of repression can trust each other and their own employees, the more difficult it becomes for them to respond rapidly and coordinate with each other. We saw this in the administration of Donald Trump in 2017, when a series of leaks eroded trust within the regime. If information is the blood in the bloodstream of the security state, persistent leaks coagulate that blood.

Today, it is widely understood that our society is headed directly for economic and ecological disaster, but the authorities have yet to take meaningful steps to change course. When millions are complicit in structures that they know to be destructive and doomed, this creates the conditions in which formerly complacent employees may choose to carry out individual acts of subversion from within the halls of power.

This is not the first time that such conditions have developed in the American workplace. At the end of the 1960s, the Vietnam War contributed to an erosion of faith in the United States government and associated corporations and industries. In late 1969, with the assistance of his former RAND Corporation colleague Anthony Russo, Daniel Ellsberg secretly made photocopies of a number of classified documents that became known as the Pentagon Papers. Ellsberg set out to reestablish contact with anarchist poet Gary Snyder, with whom he had previously debated US foreign policy, and put the Pentagon Papers into circulation.

Inspired by Daniel Ellsberg's action, former National Security Agency employee Perry Fellwock revealed the existence of the NSA and its worldwide covert surveillance network. Peter Buxtun, an employee of the United States Public Health Service, revealed the existence of the Tuskegee syphilis experiment in 1972. Many more revelations followed, impacting the nuclear power and petroleum industries as well as various government agencies.

Three decades later, the Iraq War created a similar erosion of faith. When US army intelligence analyst Chelsea Manning discovered that she was, in her words, “actively involved in something that [she] was completely against,” she began bringing rewritable CDs to her job:

I would come in with music on a CD-RW, labelled with something like “Lady Gaga”... erase the music... then write a compressed split file. No one suspected a thing. [...] You had people working 14 hours a day... every single day... no weekends... no recreation... people stopped caring after three weeks.

Exemplifying the spirit of Steal Something from Work Day, Manning “listened and lip-synced to Lady Gaga’s ‘Telephone’ while exfiltrating possibly the largest data spillage in American history.” Chiefly owing to faulty security culture, Manning was eventually caught and imprisoned. (To quote the aforementioned song, “I shoulda left my phone at home, ‘cause this is a disaster.”) Nonetheless, she set a precedent that was echoed by Edward Snowden, Jesselyn Radack, Thomas Drake, and others, all of whom ultimately concluded, as Manning had, that “Information should be free—it belongs in the public domain.”

These events still lingered in recent memory at the opening of the Trump administration, when government employee Reality Winner saw a document that she believed should be public information. She printed it off the classified server, hid it in her pantyhose, and sent it to The Intercept. Unfortunately, the printed document was digitally watermarked, The Intercept refused to take her safety seriously, and Winner caved in under the pressure of interrogation. All of those setbacks underscore the importance of proper operational security when it comes to carrying out workplace theft in the public interest.

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Of course, leaks alone can only do so much. Unless it is accompanied by concrete opportunities to act, information can desensitize people, accustoming them to injustice and inactivity. One risk of celebrating whistleblowing in a vacuum is that it tends to position the same institutions it critiques as the solution to the problems it identifies; another is that it tends to frame those who hold privileged positions within the system as the agents of change, sidelining those who do not work for the NSA or the military.

It follows that we need a more inclusive and engaged model for what could constitute *employee information theft* in the public interest. Our colleagues at Unicorn Riot have demonstrated some examples of what this might look like by publishing a series of smaller-scale leaks compromising fascist groups as well as government agencies. These hint at an approach to information leaks that could draw on the information that many ordinary workers have access to every day, eventually giving rise to an open-source intelligence ecosystem that could serve a broad range of movements for liberation.

So here is our challenge to you, begrudging employee. It’s one thing to steal cash or toilet paper—it’s another thing to take steps to topple those who keep all the *other* resources we need to themselves. If we’re talking about Stealing Something from Work, the best thing you could do would be to take something that could equip us all to get free together. The same capitalist economy that keeps you chained to your work station runs on the information that passes before your eyes every day. The brutal mercenaries whose violence keeps you from creating a better life for yourself depend on that same information.

At some point, something may cross your field of vision that could be useful to someone who is engaged in the struggle for a better world. It could be the location of a meeting, the address of a wealthy tycoon, the involvement of a corporation in a construction project, or the day job of a

participant in fascist street violence. Make a note of it and figure out how to get it to those who can use it. Focus above all on actionable intelligence.

Keep your eyes open. If you see something, say something.



## Further Reading

- Beyond Whistleblowing
- Steal Something from Work Day main page
- The Mythology of Work
- What Work Steals from Us
- Workplace Theft in the Age of “Essential” and “Remote” Labor

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