

Ultra-Left FAQ

The abolition of work / negation of work / Anti-work

ediciones ineditas

July 25th, 2019

We often get similar questions in regards to what our positions are in terms of organization, work, communization, the self-abolition of the proletariat and our experiences with our own activity within this milieu. In this FAQ we hope to give some quick answers to these questions. This will continue to be a work in progress.

The negation of work is the name of the process which abolishes work. The conversation around the abolition of work can get confusing because different theorists who write on this subject sometimes use the terms *labor* & *work* interchangeably, while others have specific definitions for each term.

Though this is a problem specific to English since in other languages there is often only one word, not two, for work. (Spanish: trabajo; French: travail).

The ultra-left generally sees the abolition of work as 1) a necessary part of the process of the self-abolition of the proletariat, 2) since to free the proletariat from capitalism it is necessary for the proletariat to self-abolish via revolution.

An aside, the proletariat is not just 'the workers' but EVERYONE that needs money to get by, whether legally or not, whether directly or through someone else, to live. So this includes those who are an unable to work, the unemployed, caregivers with no direct wage, sex workers, etc.

3) What the abolition of work fundamentally points to is the reality that work, as we know it, is a product of history and has not always existed. Just as wage labor & capitalism has not always existed. So for the ultra-left, the abolition of work is *necessary* for the creation of communism since work, as we know it, is something which arises from capitalism itself. It is a social category specific to it. 4) For the ultra-left, communism is not *just* having what you want and/or need, but also completely getting rid of our condition as proletarians. So communism will be the abolition of the *work* / *non-work* binary, since even under capitalism non-work time (leisure) is seen as a part necessary to work, where we recover from the day's, week's, month's work (in Marxian terms: the recovery of our labor-power). 5) So how is this binary abolished? By collapsing the false division of our activity between work & non-work. This does not mean that all of our time becomes *ONLY* work, or *ONLY* non-work, but rather our lifeway(s) will no longer see it necessary to divide our time into such categories.

An example sometimes used: *A bear is tromping through the woods, scratching itself against trees, swatting at bugs and then comes across a creek with fish. The bear feels hungry and decides its*

time to catch a fish. It dives in and after a few tries it catches one. It enjoys its meal as the sun starts to set. Now, at one point does the bear decide it is working? Is catching a fish fun? Or is it work? Or does such a binary not even make sense?

This may sound utopian, since human communities are often much more complex than the life of a bear, but there was such a time where human activity was not so uniquely guided by the false capitalist scarcity we live under. 6) If the activity we needed to do so that we can live was *directly* tied to our real needs & desires then it ceases to be work and not another timecard to punch, another imposition, but rather just doing the things that need to be done so that we can lead the lives we desire. This is part of the process of ceasing to be workers and starting to reconstitute the human community(-ies). Even Karl Marx, who many Marxists see as a *champion of labor*, and not necessarily its abolition, notes in the ***German Ideology*** that one of the features of communist society would have our sphere of activity drastically broadened and we would no longer hold hyper-specialized roles as we do under capitalism.

Of course, this does not mean that housework magically becomes not-housework, but rather housework would cease to be just something that happens at the home and falls along gendered lines. A fair amount of pre-figuration would have to occur to destroy the patriarchal (& often racialized) gendering of the activity necessary to our homes. But this activity would, by necessity, become communal and not just reliant on highly-socially isolated people and not passed along to those of lesser social status (i.e. racialized immigrants, etc.)

7) This points then to another important feature of communism. **Communism is not a mode of production** as capitalism is. Rather, it is a lifeway(s) that collapse the social categories of production & consumption. So it is not just another way to *manage* the world of work, as some communists & anarchists view it. These social categories, *production & consumption*, exist under capitalism since ALL production & consumption is centered on the extraction of *surplus value* from the work of the proletariat and not the direct needs and/or desires of those who are compelled to work. This accounts for this social division within capitalist time & space, where we go to the store to consume and we go to work 'to produce'. Much of the destructive aspects of industrial society would likely disappear since the vast majority of work is based on turning a profit and not fulfilling human needs or desires. And who wants to sit on a shopfloor making trinkets no one really needs unless your getting paid so that you can get by under capitalism? 9) Communism is then about the re-integration of the human with the natural world and not dominion over it. A collapse also between town & country. And to accomplish this work would, by necessity, need to be abolished so that our social relations are *fundamentally* changed and not just *managed* in a different way.

8) So then, what is *anti-work*? This is a term we use to describe our position when it comes to work and capitalism. Bruno Astarian wrote a long essay on the history of *anti-work* as well as its differentiation from *refusal of labor*. You can find it here. Saidiya Hartman has also written a speculative historical essay around a young black woman, Esther Brown, that sheds light on a racialized & gendered refusal of work – where work is seen the opposite of a directly-lived, un-alienated life. You can find it here (pdf).

Of course the horizon of a communist future feels incredibly distant and far off, but it was only a few generations ago that humans, across the world, lived in communal, non-capitalistic societies.

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[last updated July 25th, 2019; 2:53PM PST]

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