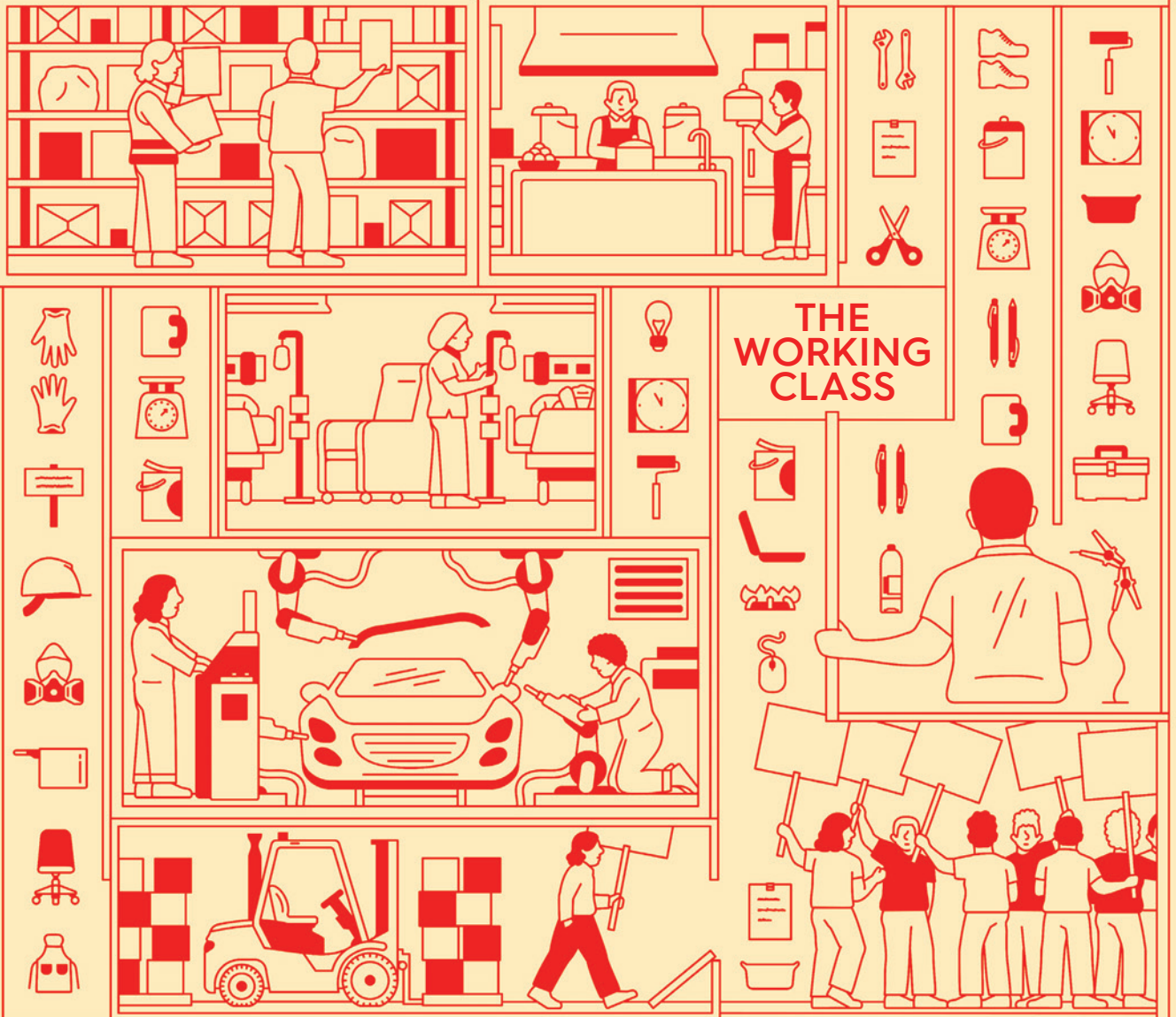


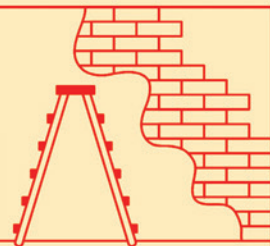
# JACOBIN



\$12.95 US / CN



1 2 >



**He who was previously the money owner now strides in front as capitalist; the possessor of labor power follows as his laborer. The one with an air of importance, smirking, intent on business; the other hesitant, like one who is bringing his own hide to market and has nothing to expect but a hiding.**

**— Karl Marx, *Capital***

# Citoyens



## EDITOR & PUBLISHER

Bhaskar Sunkara

## CREATIVE DIRECTOR

Remeike Forbes

## DEPUTY EDITOR

Micah Uetricht

## MANAGING EDITOR

Amelia Ayrelian Iuvino

## SENIOR EDITOR

Shawn Gude

## DESIGN DIRECTOR

Lauren Traugott-Campbell

## ART DIRECTOR

Benjamin Koditschek

## ASSISTANT EDITORS

Alex Caring-Lobel

Louisa Nyman

## EUROPE EDITOR

David Broder

## STORY EDITOR

Connor Kilpatrick

## FEATURES EDITOR

Daniel Finn

## STAFF WRITERS

Meagan Day

Branko Marcetic

Alex Press

Luke Savage

## COLUMNISTS

Ross Barkan

Ben Burgis

Liza Featherstone

## ASSOCIATE PUBLISHER

Jason Farbman

## EXECUTIVE EDITOR

Seth Ackerman

## EDITOR AT LARGE

David Sirota

## DEVELOPMENT

Roz Hunter

## CIRCULATION

Hadas Thier

## JACOBIN A/V

Cale Brooks

Conor Gillies

## PUBLICITY

Wes House

## GRAPHIC DESIGN

Cara Buzzell

Elaine Lopez

## EDITORIAL ASSISTANTS

John-Baptiste Oduor

Piper Winkler

## EDITORIAL BOARD

Nicole Aschoff

Alyssa Battistoni

Mike Beggs

Megan Erickson

Peter Frase

## CONTRIBUTING EDITORS

Bashir Abu-Manneh

Nicolas Allen

Loren Balhorn

Daniel Bessner

Jonah Birch

Sebastian Budgen

Ronan Burtenshaw

Emma Fajgenbaum

Sabrina Fernandes

Belén Fernández

Benjamin Fogel

Hilary Goodfriend

Eileen Jones

Matt Karp

Cyrus Lewis

Daniel Lopez

Chris Maisano

Karen Narefsky

Paul Prescod

Catarina Príncipe

Kate Redburn

Corey Robin

Miya Tokumitsu

*Jacobin* is a leading voice of the American left, offering socialist perspectives on politics, economics, and culture. The print magazine is released quarterly.

## SUBSCRIPTION PRICE

\$29 US (print)

\$39 Canada (print)

\$59 international (print)

\$19 (digital)

Solidarity \$59

Institutions \$69

Lifetime \$295

388 Atlantic Avenue,  
Brooklyn, NY 11217

[jacobinmag.com/subscribe/](http://jacobinmag.com/subscribe/)  
[subscriptions@jacobinmag.com](mailto:subscriptions@jacobinmag.com)

© 2021 Jacobin Foundation

## BOOKSTORE DISTRIBUTION

Central Books (Europe)

Disticor Direct

Media Solutions

One Source

Small Changes

TNG

## CIRCULATION (JUNE 2021)

Magazine: 74,230

Web Visitors: 2,450,612

*Jacobin* (ISSN: 2470-6930) is published quarterly by Jacobin Foundation Ltd., 388 Atlantic Avenue, Brooklyn, NY 11217-3399. Periodical postage paid at 1050 Forbell St., Brooklyn, NY 11256-9602 and additional mailing offices.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *Jacobin*, 388 Atlantic Avenue, Brooklyn, NY 11217-3399.

# Contributors

## COVER ART BY

Albert Tercero

**David Broder** is *Jacobin*'s Europe editor and a historian of French and Italian communism.

**Ronan Burtenshaw** is the editor of *Tribune*.

**Debbie Chase** worked as a line cook in St. Louis, Missouri.

**Vivek Chibber** is a professor of sociology at New York University. He is the editor of *Catalyst: A Journal of Theory and Strategy*.

**Anwen Crawford** is the author, most recently, of *No Document*, which will be published by Transit Books in North America in 2022.

**Meagan Day** is a staff writer at *Jacobin*. She is the coauthor of *Bigger than Bernie: How We Can Win Democratic Socialism in Our Time*.

**Richard J. Evans** is an author and provost of Gresham College, London. His most recent book is *Eric Hobsbawm: A Life in History*.

**Liza Featherstone** is a columnist for *Jacobin*, a freelance journalist, and the author of *Selling Women Short: The Landmark Battle for Workers' Rights at Wal-Mart*.

**Michael Grasso** is senior editor at *We Are The Mutants*, a web

magazine analyzing the pop and underground culture of the Cold War era.

**Owen Hatherley** is the culture editor of *Tribune*. His latest book, *Red Metropolis: Socialism and the Government of London*, is now out from Repeater Books.

**Paul Heideman** is the editor of *Class Struggle and the Color Line: American Socialism and the Race Question, 1900–1930*.

**Matt Huber** is assistant professor of geography at Syracuse University. He is the author of *Lifeblood: Oil, Freedom, and the Forces of Capital*.

**Anton Jäger** is a doctoral student at the University of Cambridge, working on the history of populism in the United States.

**Eileen Jones** is a film critic at *Jacobin* and author of *Filmsuck, USA*. She also hosts a podcast called *Filmsuck*.

**Chris Maisano** is a *Jacobin* contributing editor and a member of Democratic Socialists of America.

**Jack Saunders** teaches modern British history at King's College London. He is the author of *Assembling Cultures: Workplace*

*Activism, Labour Militancy and Cultural Change in Britain's Car Factories, 1945–82*.

**Freddie Stuart** is an audio producer and journalist based in London.

**Bhaskar Sunkara** is the founding editor and publisher of *Jacobin* and the author of *The Socialist Manifesto: The Case for Radical Politics in an Era of Extreme Inequality*.

**Hadas Thier** is an activist in New York and the author of *A People's Guide to Capitalism: An Introduction to Marxist Economics*.

**Isabella Weber** is an economist at the University of Massachusetts Amherst and the author of *How China Escaped Shock Therapy: The Market Reform Debate*.

**Daniel Zamora** is a postdoctoral sociologist at the Université libre de Bruxelles and Cambridge University. He is the coauthor of *The Last Man Takes LSD: Foucault and the End of Revolution*.

**Ryan Zickgraf** is an Alabama-based journalist and the editor of *The Third Rail*.

Photo Attributions — Page 42 Photo by Alfred Ge; Page 62 Photo by LMPC, Getty Images; Page 67 Photo by United Archives, Getty Images; Page 71 Photo by United Archives, Getty Images; Page 74 Photo by Mirrorpix, Getty Images; Page 76 Photo by Martyn Goodacre / Contributor, Getty Images; Photo by Martyn Goodacre / Contributor, Getty Images; Page 81 Photo by Hulton Archive, Getty Images; Page 107 Photo by PA Images via Getty Images; Photo by -/AFP via Getty Images; Page 108 Photo by PA Images via Getty Images; Page 109 Photo by -/AFP via Getty Images; Page 110 Photo by Harry Dempster/Daily Express/Hulton Archive/Getty Images; Photo by PA Images via Getty Images; Page 111 Photo by Staff/Mirrorpix/Getty Images; Photo by William Vanderson/Keystone/Hulton Archive/Getty Images; Page 112 Photo by Victor Blackman/Daily Express/Hulton Archive/Getty Images; Page 113 Photo by Daily Express/Hulton Archive/Getty Images; Photo by -/AFP via Getty Images; Page 114 Photo by Raymond Kleboe/Picture Post/Hulton Archive/Getty Images

28 DAVID BRODER

## The Many Farewells to the Working Class

For decades, the parties of labor have been slowly replaced by the parties of the educated. A Left that doesn't acknowledge this as a problem has already been defeated.

84 MATT HUBER

## Lifestyle Environmentalism Will Never Win Over Workers

And those are exactly the people we need to save the planet.

48 INTERVIEW WITH ISABELLA WEBER

## How China Avoided a Soviet-Style Collapse

What have three decades of market reforms meant for the world's largest working class?

106 JACK SAUNDERS

## We Built the Golden Age

The culture of British trade union militancy in auto plants like Austin Longbridge wasn't the "natural" result of a Golden Age of capitalism — it came from organizing.

F FRONT MATTERS

07 PARTY LINES  
Labor's Long March

12 THE SOAPBOX  
Letters + Internet Speaks

14 STRUGGLE SESSION  
My Life as an Amazon Warehouse Worker

21 STRUGGLE SESSION  
Why Line Cooks Like Me Aren't Going Back

23 FRIENDS & FOES  
We Went to Work. The Next Day, the World Shut Down.

T THE TUMBREL

93 GIRONDINS  
The Problem Isn't Classism, It's Class

95 VERSAILLES  
The Return of the Company Town

99 THERMIDOR  
Workers Didn't Bring Us Fascism

103 THE WORST ESTATE  
White-Collar Media

R READING MATERIEL

39 CANON FODDER  
Disorganized Democracy

43 DOSSIER  
What Is a "Proletarian" Anyway?

L LEFTOVERS

116 POPULAR FRONT  
Dentists of the World, Unite?

120 DUSTBIN  
The Ragged-Trousered Philanthropist

127 MEANS & ENDS  
Remembering Michael Jamal Brooks

C CULTURAL CAPITAL

62 RED CHANNELS  
Fassbinder and the Red Army Faction

74 WAYS OF SEEING  
When Our Homes Went *Miami Vice*

76 BASS & SUPERSTRUCTURE  
Anthem of the Commoners

79 BASS & SUPERSTRUCTURE  
China's Slacker Superstar

81 BEYOND A BOUNDARY  
Blue-Collar Jocks

# Front Matters

---

## CLOCKING IN

F

FRONT MATTERS  
PARTY LINES

BY VIVEK CHIBBER

## Labor's Long March

---

**The question is no longer whether the working class matters, but how it can fight back.**

In March 1978, Eric Hobsbawm delivered a lecture in which he asked whether “the forward march of labour and the labour movement” had been halted. His answer, not surprisingly, was “yes, but we can reverse it.” It surprised few that a great Marxist historian would take on such a topic. In the late 1970s, there was still a deep and abiding association of the Left with the working class — how the class was situated politically was the central question for that generation of socialists. Much of Hobsbawm’s audience was, after all, in or around the trade union movement. In the decades since, the ties between the Left and laboring people have been largely severed, with the Left mainly housed within the professional classes and the working class both atomized and set politically adrift from the socialist tradition.

Yet Hobsbawm was writing at a time when there was an expectation that labor, even though it was

weakened, could nevertheless carry the torch for progressive forces. There was still a sense of optimism for class politics, although it was waning. Even more, there was an expectation that, if socialists and labor organizers got their act together, they could revive the political momentum they had lost. But while there remained a basic optimism about class politics, Hobsbawm’s posing of such a question reflected a sense of doubt, even despair, about the socialist project. In the postwar years, many on the New Left

were warning that traditional Marxism had been too optimistic about labor’s putative mission — the expectation that the working class was destined to overthrow capitalism. At the time, this worry was mitigated by the very real gains that working-class forces made in constructing welfare states, and sometimes even full-fledged social democracies, though this fell short of abolishing capitalism. The disappointment was not that “we are losing political traction,” but rather, “why are we not achieving more with our resources?”

By 1978, doubt was creeping in about the working class's political capacity. Its traditional parties still upheld socialism, but this was more rhetorical than real; unions across Western Europe were tightly integrated into the bourgeois state; postwar economic gains were under fire as an economic crisis dragged on; and many of the class's political leaders seemed out of step with the new social movements. All these developments seemed a vindication of the New Left's Cassandras, and over the next decade or so, pessimism grew. By the late 1980s, it was near-universal.

### Steadying Ourselves

That was then. In our time, especially in the past five years, there has been a real change in American political culture. A left is slowly and painstakingly being reconstituted. There is a significant wing of the emergent left coalescing around the need for working-class organization, even if the steps toward that remain small and halting. This left, if it keeps growing, faces a monumental task — of first ending the decades-long process of marketization and class atomization, and then rebuilding the kinds of institutions that once enabled working people to take on capitalists. Nonetheless, it is far easier today to advocate for class politics on the Left than it was just a few years ago.

Hence, in one important respect, socialists are reviving the basic tenets of class politics that

motivated their predecessors for most of the twentieth century. First, they see that the main obstacle to social justice is the economic and political power of capital. This is so not because employers are all evil or greedy but because their structural position forces them to wage constant war on the tens of millions who show up to work every day as their employees.

These owners call the shots in capitalism — they control the wealth, and through that, they exercise a singular power over every other institution in society. And they deploy that power to defend their interests every time they are challenged. The reason labor is so central to socialist strategy is that it is the only social actor with both the power and the interest in taking on capital. It has an *interest* in doing so because it suffers systematically at the hands of capital. And it has the *capacity* to fight the power of capital because capital depends on labor to keep its wealth and profits flowing.

There is no other agency on whom the employer class is utterly dependent — not the state, not the military, and not the religious institutions. For the emergent Left, these nostrums are rapidly becoming a kind of common sense, much as they were in earlier decades, before neoliberalism's intellectual rot set in. The question is no longer whether the working class matters but how to activate its fighting capacity.

### How Capitalism Survives

There is nothing automatic about working-class organization. At times, Karl Marx and his early followers sounded as if they expected a seamless progression from class exploitation to class mobilization. They seemed to suggest that, just because workers were exploited by employers, they would take that as enough reason to come together and fight under the same banner. At the very least, many of the era's socialists believed that whatever the obstacles to class collective action were, they were dwarfed by the factors that drew workers together.

During the early twentieth century, there were ample grounds to be optimistic along these lines. For decades, the capitalist world witnessed a tidal wave of organized working-class action and revolutionary upheavals. It seemed to vindicate the view that there is a natural tendency for workers to organize themselves and take up cudgels against their masters.

However, it should be clear now that that era was an episode within capitalism, not the norm. Workers do not spontaneously organize, they do not necessarily band together and take on their bosses, and they certainly do not typically exhibit class consciousness. Worker organization is a hard-won achievement, not an inevitable outcome. It is the product of concerted effort over long periods of time, which often fails, and even when it succeeds, it is easy to derail.

---

## The ties between the Left and laboring people have been largely severed.

---

What makes it so daunting is that the very structure of capitalism, the same structure that gives workers good reason to resist their bosses' demands, also *channels* that resistance into manageable forms. It does so by making an individualized resistance more attractive than a collective one. In other words, when workers seek to defend their interests against their bosses, they do so in an atomized fashion, as individuals, in forms that are relatively easy to contain — instead of doing it as a group. And they do this because it makes sense, not because they are confused or laboring under a false consciousness.

Why does it make sense? The simple reason is that the alternative — collective action — comes with a great deal of risk. Forming a trade union is not like starting a book club. A worker can't just call up his colleagues, find a good living room, and get started. Any effort to create an organization at work poses a fundamental threat

to the employer, and if he gets even the scent of an organizing drive, he will move swiftly to squelch it — by firing the rogue elements or intimidating them in other ways. For any worker to participate in organizing efforts typically means risking a loss of livelihood. Employers are able to use workers' vulnerability against them.

On top of the risk is the sacrifice. Precisely because it is so risky, organizers often must use round-about ways to communicate with their peers in the workplace — secret mass meetings, after-work one-on-one conversations. They do this on top of the hours they are already putting in as workers. They do it at the expense of their family life and social life. As for the workers to whom they are reaching out, they have to convince them that their power resides in withholding their labor from the boss — going on strike. But this is just another way of saying that, when they exercise their power, they will also have

to go for a long period without an income. And a good outcome isn't guaranteed. The sacrifice might be for nothing. For most workers, most of the time, these obstacles are daunting enough to make collective resistance an unattractive proposition. Most of them therefore choose the less risky option of individualized forms of resistance. The most common is just not showing up for work: absenteeism. For decades, absenteeism has been recognized as an indicator of employee morale — in other words, worker resistance. But so is foot-dragging, “back talk,” and even sabotage. For some, the preferred route is not to resist at all but to improve their lot by trying to curry favor with the boss. The best way to do this is by working harder and better than their peers; but another might be to serve as the informal monitor on the floor, reporting on the others, especially if there is talk of organizing.



# Letters

---

We can only print the letters without expletives.

## No Criticism Necessary

I wanted to drop a note to say thanks for your “Ruling Class” issue. I’ve been around since, I imagine, decades before most of your editors were born, and I’m not sure I’ve seen such a beautiful magazine — much less one from the American socialist movement.

The contents matched up well, too. Special thanks to Benjamin C. Waterhouse for “The Political Wing of American Capital” and for the interview with the anthropologist Timothy Earle ... I suspect I should say something critical, or the least bit interesting, if I’m to get this published, right?

— Sarita Ali, Mesa, AZ

## Change the World by Taking Power

Chris Maisano’s critical review, “Secession Planning,” reminded me of a debate on the American right over the “Benedict Option.” The basic idea, most associated with the American Conservative’s Rod Dreher, is that Christians ought to withdraw from the world as such and create private, intentional communities.

The reply to Dreher among the Right is that the liberal order would never let such communities survive if they posed any real danger to what they imagine the ruling class to want. And although these right-wingers are profoundly confused about ... well, everything, the basic shape of the reply is right: a capitalist order would only permit local autonomy so long as it was useful to maintain their grip on the means of production.

— Ian Samuel, Los Angeles, CA

## Jacobinism With a Human Face

I used to live a fifteen-minute walk from the palace in Ottawa that is technically the queen’s residence. It’ll make a lovely public park.

— Dave Scrivener, Ottawa, Canada

## Just Regular Jacobinism

Prince Philip has joined the ever-increasing list of good royals. All these monarchs have one thing in common: they died.

— Kris Jerome, Albany, OR

## New Merch Idea

Can I get one of them Karl Marx PEZ dispensers?

— Nikki Soto, Queens, NY

## Why Memes Will Never Be Monetized

No corporate marketing team will ever come up with anything as ingenious as “ME AND THE BOYS AT 3 A.M. LOOKING FOR BEANS.”

— Matt Kilpatrick, the internet

# Internet Speaks

---

Sometimes it’s hard not to read the comments.

## The False Prophet of Doge

Elon Musk is a megachurch pastor but for weird nerds.

— Friptuleac Alex, Kishinev, Moldova

## Germany’s Greens Are Neoliberals With Bicycles

In Canada, we call our Greens “Tories in Teslas.”

— Evan Thomas, Toronto, Canada

## Primitive Accumulation

We gotta endure *Blade Runner* before we enlighten to Star Trek.

— Mark Bee, Saint Paul, MN

## A Working-Class Hero Is Something to Be

It’s a proletarian’s job to work as little as possible to reduce the rate of exploitation. I work about twenty minutes out of eight hours.

— Chris Elliott, Long Beach, CA



# My Life as an Amazon Warehouse Worker

I started working at Amazon during the pandemic. I wanted to organize my workplace, but at the end of a long day, everyone just wanted to get home as fast as possible.

I started working at an Amazon sortation center early last summer. When the pandemic hit, I got laid off from my previous job, and I spent months staying on friends' couches looking for work. Jobs were in short supply back then, but Amazon's recruitment ads were all over my Facebook feed.

The first stage of the online application process was a fifteen-minute multiple-choice assessment. After watching Amazon's introductory video, which assured me that there were "no wrong answers," I set about answering a host of

personality questions. It was actually nice not to have to write a cover letter or résumé for once.

The questions varied from "How would your last supervisor rate your work ethic?" to how comfortable I was having my day-to-day performance "closely monitored." Many of them had nothing to do with work at all, such as asking me to agree or disagree with statements like "I rarely expect that good things will happen to me," or "It's best to keep your hopes low to avoid disappointment."

I had no idea what sort of person they were looking for, so I guessed, trying to appear as positive as possible. And then there was a puzzle game. Put the virtual boxes in the right spaces according to a set of predetermined criteria — three times. Childlike, sure. But straightforward.

After two months and a lengthy process of robocalls, I was invited to an "office hour" meeting about an hour's drive from the warehouse I had applied to. I was expecting a drug test, but I'd also heard stories from friends who were on cocaine throughout this process and were now filling the warehouses of Amazon.

I waited without hearing anything for about a week, dodging endless calls about my half-completed Amazon applications elsewhere, too nervous to end them in case this job fell through. Finally, I was accepted, and twenty-four hours before my start date, I received my paperwork and training videos.

## The Day Begins

I wake up for work at 6:30 A.M. It's about a half hour commute from my place in the suburbs to the Amazon sortation center. I've dropped the morning shower to save time — with the pandemic, I have to scrub down after my shift anyway. Plus, I can't be late. If I clock in after 8:00 A.M., they'll dock me half a point. If I get to six points, I'll be fired.

The center is hidden in a massive industrial park right out in the middle of rural nowhere. You can't see it from the highway, and you'd never know what it was unless you got close enough to spot the trucks.

Pulling in to the parking lot, I pass rows of Uber and Lyft stickers, all belonging to workers with unofficial second jobs. I scramble for my Amazon-branded COVID mask and slip on my high-visibility vest with a harness for my ID. Phones are banned inside — I leave mine in the car, a rental from a local garage that costs around a third of my monthly paycheck.

I scan my badge to pass through the full-height turnstiles and follow my coworkers between the metal detectors, ready to get my body temperature scanned. Standing a few feet in front of a heat sensor, I watch as my red-yellow silhouette appears on the screen like in a sci-fi movie.

The entrance area always reminds me of a securitized high school — the steely cameras, metal detectors, and security guards clashing with the bright colors, murals, vending machines, and notice boards. Ahead of me, one large board lists

former workers who have been fired for stealing. No names, but it has the date and the item they were caught trying to take (smartphones, mostly).

Another whiteboard reads "Voice of Associates." Under this, workers scrawl their complaints or thoughts about the workplace. I remember, on my first day, two notes jumped out at me. On one, an employee had written a detailed report about a manager, citing abusive language and a condescending tone. On the other, an anonymous note simply read, "No one here works just one job."

## The Warehouse Floor

Once I'm past the entrance area, I head toward a small opening and a staircase that leads down to the main underground warehouse. From the top of the stairs, I can see across the whole facility: forty feet high, three football fields long.

There aren't any windows in the warehouse. No seeing in, no seeing out. Natural light gives way to the sterile whiteness of LEDs. All sound is drowned out by the constant buzz of machines, broken only by abrupt, earsplitting alarms. Gray cement walls are plastered with corrugated iron and yellow hazard tape.

Above the black lines of the conveyor belts, I can't help but notice the security cameras that cover the building and the "general manager" lounging behind a glass window overhead, like a football coach with a headset directing the team from his corporate box.

Descending about fifteen feet down the stairs, I pass the massive American flag that adorns the wall and feel the sudden chill of the air conditioning. I follow a green line on the floor that takes me past HR and around the Learning Center, where new recruits are trained nearly every day. The path I'm following is called the "Green Mile," the nickname for death row in that Tom Hanks movie. It's Amazon's name for the route we take to get to our workstations.

As I walk, I'm confronted by dozens of information boards, each covered with Amazon slogans like "NO TASK IS BENEATH YOU" or "LEADERS HAVE RELENTLESSLY HIGH STANDARDS."

There are about a thousand of us working in this facility, and two hundred on shift at any one time. As we file in, we head straight toward five large screens. The first displays a number around two hundred thousand. It's the total number of boxes Amazon wants our center to sort that day. As they flicker, the screens list our names, roles, and where we need to go. I don't know how this system works. Is it random? Do managers allocate who works where? All I know is that I'm rarely in the same space twice, and I'm almost never working alongside the same people.


Most days, I'm a "scanner." I pick up my barcode reader, which beeps every time I scan a package, and sign into it using my ID. The digital pad on the front lights up with a number. This is my "rate" — the speed at which I'm scanning

## Have a Backbone, Disagree and Commit.

### Attendance Points

**Points will accrue anytime you miss a shift, are late, or leave before end of shift is called.**

Point Description	Accrual
Late by less than 1 hour	0.5 point
Leaving early 1 hour or less	0.5 point
Late by more than 1 hour	1 point
Leaving early more than 1 hour	1 point
Absent the entire shift	1.5 point
6 points	Termination



~ February 2018 ~

**Incident:** Products missing during receive process

**Detected by:** Loss Prevention Investigation

Text from Amazon Distribution Center materials.

packages. It changes every few seconds throughout the day.

Before heading to my workstation, I take a lap around the warehouse — partly to waste the minutes as my shift begins, and partly to see if there’s anyone else I know working today. If there is, I’ll ditch my allocated spot to join them — it’s all just disorganized enough that you can get away with it. More often than not, there isn’t, so I return to my position and set the timer on my watch for two hours, after which I’m allowed a break.

There are two big clocks overlooking either end of the warehouse, and they run about two minutes apart. Most of us

use the fast one to clock off and the slow one to clock back on.

#### Like Playing an Endless Game of Tetris

In the Amazon supply chain, my sortation center is where your packages go after they’ve been prepared and packaged at a fulfillment center. We sort the boxes by destination so they can be stowed on giant silver trucks and driven to distribution centers and then your homes.

In practice, my job is to identify numbered packages, pick them off a moving belt, scan them, and stack them on plastic six-by-eight-foot pallets, like an endless game of Tetris. Large packages on the

bottom, small ones on top. Four-hour shifts, four days a week.

Once the tower is stacked, workers called “water spiders” are the ones charged with approving the pile, wrapping it in cellophane, and taking it to the staging area to be loaded.

As routine as it sounds, it’s not a job you can switch off from. You’ve got to build your pallet tower properly, if only to avoid provoking anger from other workers at your station. They don’t train you when you arrive, and the mistakes of new recruits fall on the rest of us.

This can create tension when we’re working, with arguments

breaking out when people fail to pull their weight. For many people, there’s pride in completing the work well (for others, it’s in figuring out how to cheat the system). The speed of your scanning and the quality of your pallet towers are really the only things that can give any sense of satisfaction in the warehouse. Every box I pack is one less for someone else. It’s never-ending, though. The warehouse operates 24-7. You hear the belts moving as you enter, and they’re still going when you leave.

Whatever the weather outside, the warehouse is always cold. Massive turbine fans push stale air around the perimeter, but I still sweat as I work. As the shift drags on, I begin to crave the positive reinforcement of the mechanical scanner as it beeps, keeping one eye on my score as it tracks my rate.

Management keeps a list of the best and worst scanners at the end of every shift. I used to aim for around fifty boxes every minute, but since I’ve been here a while now, I’ve realized that most people don’t care. I don’t even know what the exact metric of the “rate” is. No one told me about it when I joined; they just told me that every package I mis-sort costs Amazon over \$3, and that the company loses more than half a million a week when workers like me mess up. Still, I don’t think management ever does anything with the scanning records.

#### When the Red Vests Show Up

The job of the managers is to keep the whole warehouse moving. If

a package blocks a belt while we’re scanning, a blue light is triggered about four feet above the chute. If the blockage lasts more than a couple minutes, the light turns orange, and the entire machine grinds to a halt. That means management is coming.

I’ve never seen the general manager on the warehouse floor. Instead, we’re watched by the operations managers. They wear red vests with silver stripes. Usually, they sit in their Command Center, staring at a wall of screens connected to the cameras that survey the warehouse. When the orange light goes off, they descend onto the factory floor. At that point, workers rush to clear the jam as quickly as possible.

The rush is a good example of how we all relate to the work. No single person that I’ve met really understands how the entire process operates.

We aren’t told what the lights mean in training. John, a “water spider” in his early forties who’s worked here for nearly five years, told me that they don’t teach us because they “don’t want to give us too much information.”

The same goes for the warehouse hierarchy. It’s not always easy to tell who your manager is or who even qualifies as management. Red vests are always delegating the supervision of individual belts to those beneath them. I’m an “associate,” but above me are the “learning ambassadors” who train new recruits and the “process assistants” who supervise each workspace. They wear blue vests

with different-colored stripes. I don’t know who’s in charge between these positions. I don’t think any of them get paid any more than I do.

It’s easy to go a whole day without interacting with management — or talking to anyone, really. It’s the screen that tells me where to be, and it’s the scanner that tells me what to do. To start a conversation, you need to actively stop work. I don’t know many names, and very few people know mine. It’s tough to recognize anyone behind a mask. I can go whole days without speaking to anybody.

We all got sent home early recently. There was a commotion on the warehouse floor, and one of the operations managers was fired. I asked one of the red vests what was going on. He told me that all the workers were being sent home because Amazon “didn’t have enough volume to justify the costs.” The volume is the number of packages. We’re the costs. Our shift got cut to three hours. We didn’t get to work the standard four.

It’s not unusual to leave work early like that. At sortation centers like mine, Amazon can “flex” shifts up or down, adding or cutting an hour to fit their “volume” needs. For us, it makes planning even harder. How can I budget on changeable working hours? How can I fix my commute if I’m relying on someone picking me up? These flex shifts often mean rearranging carpools on short notice — which is tough when you aren’t allowed a phone.

Amazon also runs a system of voluntary time off (VTO). If they've oversubscribed one role, management will offer some workers the chance to leave early. Our scanners make a noise, and a message pops up reading "VTO, come to the Command Center." It's first come, first served. Some rush to the Command Center, but only a few get there in time. The rest walk slowly back to their stations. When some people leave, it's more work for those who stay. I've heard that managers get a bonus when they send us home.

Only some people want to go home — only some can afford it. The older workers at the warehouse, those who have been here the longest, never take VTO. In fact, they're usually the ones asking for voluntary extra time (VET). I've met seniors who've worked here since the center opened. The physical work is punishing. At the front of the warehouse, there's a large board with a drawing of a man on it. Next to each limb is a number — representing how many recent incidents have related to that body part.

Then there are those who are hard of hearing. Two guys stand next to each other and sign the whole shift. It makes you wonder, if they're safe for work, why are we banned from wearing headphones?

**"NO HEADPHONES, NO PHONES, NO HOODIES"**

There are tight rules about what we are and aren't allowed to wear at work. If you're in a position of power, you have to wear your vest.

You're also expected to wear a blue badge. These are pinned to our ID cards, which I keep on a harness around my neck. If you're wearing a blue badge, it means you're a "permanent" employee (not seasonal), and you're allowed to work longer than six months.

We have to apply (and pass a drug test) to be considered permanent, and if the status is granted, we get paid an extra twenty-five cents an hour. Workers who have been here for longer than five years also stand out. They've got a gold lining around the edge of their badge.

Management is more interested in what we aren't allowed to wear, though. I've seen women sent home for wearing shorts that are too short, and others that have been made to change into scrubs. If you've got long hair, you're expected to have it pinned up above the shoulders. We aren't allowed hoodies.

These rules are selectively enforced. New recruits are always getting told off, but older workers are rarely criticized. If we're at the workstation, they'll let anything slide, but as soon as we take a break, they jump on us. This has been especially true during the COVID-19 pandemic. Managers only care about masks when we aren't working. The same goes for social distancing. On the beltline, it's impossible to stay six feet apart. In the breakroom, everyone has to sit at their own table.

They've employed a whole team of "COVID auditors" to enforce these rules. They wear neon-yellow vests. As far as I can tell, their only

job is to patrol the warehouse and sporadically shout, "Six feet apart!"

**Amazon Under COVID**

For the first time, recently, I met two Amazon workers who know each other outside the job. They used to work together driving patients home from hospital appointments. The shifts were long, clocking up to sixty-five hours per week. Once the pandemic hit, they began to get COVID patients without warning and without protection. For them, Amazon represented a safer working environment, even though at least twenty thousand of us around the country have caught the virus.

Every time someone at my sortation center tests positive, Amazon sends me a text reminding me that "your health is our top priority." If it's someone from one of my shifts, HR will email me. Nothing actually changes. I still go to work.

I know multiple people that have tested positive after working in the center. This means they're passing the temperature check, working for four hours in the warehouse, and often being circulated from one belt to another.

Amazon has done nothing to organize against this. Workers have, though. There's a massive Excel spreadsheet going around on Reddit and Facebook that logs every known case of coronavirus in an Amazon facility. I've been using it and updating it to try to keep track of where is safe and where isn't.

Like many things in the warehouse, we have to pick up where Amazon fails.

**Organizing in the Belly of the Beast**

I've been trying to organize my workplace for a while now. I came into contact with a group called Amazonians United, and I've been doing what they call "salting" — a metaphor taken from the miners' union. As a "salt," I've been trying to develop contacts at the warehouse and bring workers together over shared experiences to identify and fight for the changes we want to see in our workplace.

With the speed of the production line and the stress of the work, it feels almost impossible to strike up a meaningful conversation. And when one does start, the staggered shifts and working locations, along with the size of the warehouse, make it extremely rare to see the same person again for weeks at a time.

Even during our designated ten-minute breaks, people rarely speak to one another. It's barely enough time to walk to the break-room and back, so most people just spend the time sitting on benches at the back of the warehouse, only a few feet from where we've been working. Almost everyone breaks the "no phones" rule. As long as you're not being obvious, managers don't really care.

The best place to chat is outside in the smoking area. The first person I struck up a real conversation with was Alex, who was sitting on the curb of the parking lot. She was in her late thirties and had a one-year-old kid waiting for her back home. She told me that she'd taken this job because it was flexible, but now she's anxious about finding childcare. Her mom

is moving out of state, and she doesn't know how she's going to afford it. It's been over a month now since I've seen her.

The turnover rate is high in my facility, particularly during COVID. Lots of people have left, but many more have joined. Amazon has been on a hiring drive. New recruits are usually working people who have lost their jobs. Recently, there has also been a noticeable increase in the number of younger, whiter college students. Temporary jobs and gig work have dried up around here, so young people are turning to Amazon for seasonal employment.

I recently started chatting with one of the new kids named Kevin. He usually swaggers across the warehouse floor to tell me, with a smirk, that he's going to hide in the restroom and Snapchat cowork-

Text from Amazon Distribution Center materials.

ers. There are only two bathrooms for two hundred people — one for men and one for women, each with two stalls. Most people don't go during a shift because it'll affect their rate. He doesn't care, though — he's only here for the summer and can risk racking up penalty points before he leaves.

### The Essential

More often than not, a conversation starts with a complaint. People are nervous or unwilling to criticize Amazon, and most of our interactions are with machines anyway. Instead, anger is directed at coworkers or expressed through gibes at customers whose names are printed on the front of every package. The attitude toward management is indifferent. John, the “water spider,” told me that “management doesn't care about us, because if we quit, they'll just hire someone else.” He complains about the poor training and the lack of information, but when I asked him why he'd stuck it out here for so long, he explained that he'd “won a forty-two-inch flat-screen TV in a company raffle a few years ago.”

For most people I've spoken to, it's the \$15 hourly wage that keeps them here. Particularly during the pandemic, there aren't many other options. Unlike many of my friends' employers, Amazon has boomed. They've kept us all on. We're deemed essential, so we're allowed to work, although I can't say I feel “essential” when I'm sorting packages of flavored seltzer or carrying twenty pounds of gourmet dog food.

Even people who are grateful for work will find a way to cheat the system, though. Donald, a “learning ambassador” who trains new workers, taught me how to wear headphones without getting caught. The trick is wearing a balaclava as a mask that goes up to your ears, so you can hide the headphones underneath. Donald is there to enforce rules, but he also worked on the belts for years. He doesn't get paid any more than I do and doesn't bother to order anyone around. Like the COVID auditors, he has to be seen to be working, but in reality, he doesn't do any more than he absolutely has to. He would often tell me that “minimum wage equals minimum work.”

### Off the Clock and You're on Your Own

Through conversations like these, I've managed to create a group chat of about fifteen people. Only a few of us really use it, and the conversation is mainly just complaining about the job. It doesn't sound like much, but it feels like a lot.

There's something about working here that people don't want to confront when they leave the facility. There's no shame about working in a warehouse, or the fact that it's manual labor, but there's this sense that, once your shift ends, you want to forget that Amazon even exists. No one wants to bring the job outside of work. To keep up with colleagues outside the warehouse would be to allow that reality into other parts of your life.

When we leave, we all want to separate ourselves entirely. I think that's partly why it's so hard to build relationships. It's hard to build a sense of community when the thing that bonds us is something we want to forget.

Recently, our facility had an anniversary, and Amazon printed a load of merchandise to sell to workers to mark the occasion: Amazon T-shirts to celebrate the anniversary of an Amazon warehouse. It amazes me that some workers actually bought them.

Especially since COVID, people here are thankful to have a job at all. As stressful and depressing as it is, there's no alternative — there's nothing better out there.

Yesterday, for the first time, I managed to organize for a group of us to get lunch after work at the Olive Garden across the street. Even with the news of what's happening with the organizing drive at the Alabama fulfillment center, no one really wanted to talk about work, let alone discuss organizing to change how our own warehouse runs.

I'm glad that I'm getting closer with my colleagues, and I'm still hopeful that we can change something — though right now, it still seems a long way off. ■

*Based on extensive interviews with an Amazon worker in the Northeastern United States.*

“Hey Kenny, did you see BJ's text about going back to work?” This was in May 2020. After receiving a message from the general manager of the wine bar where we worked as line cooks, I called each of my coworkers to see how they felt about returning to the kitchen after sixty days of stay-at-home orders and restaurant shutdowns. We had gotten paid for the sixty days because of the government's Paycheck Protection Program, but now that the money was gone, the owner wanted us back at work.

The text from BJ said that we would be starting up again at the end of the week and that the shift schedule was posted. That was it. No guidance. No procedures for coming back. In contrast, there were nine pages of regulations posted by the county health department on how to operate a restaurant safely. Distance requirements. Cleaning measures. Workflow changes. I read them because I wanted to help keep my colleagues safe. Also, I was personally petrified of going back inside the airless kitchen where we normally worked with less than a foot between us — sharing knives, slipping gloveless hands into vats of prepped vegetables and meats, wiping off the cutting board only when there was a natural break in orders.

So I called all the other line cooks and asked them what they thought about going back. They each said they were afraid. We were collecting unemployment, but if the restaurant called us back, we had to go, otherwise we'd lose both our

unemployment insurance and our job. The extra government assistance the owner received was running out, and the pressure to resume profit-making was shifted to us.

I knew my coworkers had no choice, and I knew they couldn't speak out for fear of losing their job. I, on the other hand, had two other jobs and some savings. I suggested that I would talk with the owner and the general

manager to help us understand what coming back to work would entail. “Yeah, sure,” Kenny said, echoing the response from the others, “I'd be cool with that.” We arranged the meeting for the following afternoon.

I knew, walking in, that I was taking a risk. Identifying yourself as a “leader” speaking on behalf of others is a good way to put a target on your back, especially as a woman. Yes, I had other work to

# Why Line Cooks Like Me Aren't Going Back

**If an extra \$300 a week in unemployment is enough to keep us out of kitchens, it should tell you something about our lives.**

rely on, but the extra income really helped, and I'd grown oddly attached to the job — the friendships I developed at work, the skills I acquired, the physical joy I got when working in a busy kitchen. There were things I knew I would miss if I left: joking arguments with coworkers about how thin to cut the prosciutto, who was more afraid of the meat slicer, and which one of us had the deepest burn scars.

At 2 P.M. on a Wednesday, we gathered in the empty restaurant — six line cooks in various states of cleanliness and disarray, a frowning sixty-five-year-old owner, and his twenty-seven-year-old general manager. Normally, I didn't speak during restaurant staff meetings. In fact, there's never a whole lot of staff input during those gatherings. Now, I told the owner that we were ready to come back to work, but we needed to understand what safety procedures and practices would be in place. He turned his head and his watery, slightly protruding eyeballs toward me, crumpling his brows as if confused. "What are you talking about when you say 'procedures'?" he asked.

I took a deep breath and looked right into those eyes. "Well, for example, we're required to wear masks. Will you be providing them for us, or should we bring our own?" The law required him to provide them for us, but I didn't want to say that to him.

He turned toward the general manager, who was young and seemingly oblivious to safety standards, even under normal

conditions — we had earned a "B" rating last summer from the health department for failure to keep the kitchen clean. "I ordered them this morning online," she replied, now glaring at me. "They aren't in yet. We should get them next week." She didn't like to be questioned. I knew this. When she tried to show me how to make a margherita pizza, even when I knew she was wrong, I always let it go. "Wait till she's gone and then fix it," my coworkers used to say.

The owner asked if we each had masks we could bring. Most of us didn't. Then he went on to say that he didn't really believe masks made a difference.

I asked about cleaning supplies. The new regulations had very specific disinfectants we were supposed to use to clean tables, chairs, dishes, and other surfaces. He said we would be using what we had always used, and that would be good enough. He said all these rules were beginning to challenge his "liberal sensibilities." I wondered what that meant. He had received the federal payroll protection money so that he could pay us, himself, his rent, and his suppliers for eight weeks. I kept that thought to myself.

We tried to ask about workflow and systems to keep us safe. He said he didn't like protocols. I began to see that he and the manager were getting quite irritated with our questions. I looked out the window at the park across the street and tried not to cry. We talked a bit more about customer interactions and then adjourned.

I knew I was the troublemaker now. I knew they would be talking about me afterward and characterizing me as uppity and paranoid.

Nothing got resolved at the meeting, but I decided I would go to setup day and see how things were unfolding. So, two days after that meeting, I showed up at the restaurant. There were twelve staff members inside the small bar, close together, moving tables, cutting up food, and arranging glasses. I was the only one wearing a mask. I approached the general manager and said that it was the law that we all needed to wear masks. We were working in a restaurant, we were less than six feet apart, and we were preparing food. She stopped to look at me and said, "This is what we're doing. I don't have time for this today. If you don't like it, you can leave."

I asked if she really meant that, and she said yes. I never went back to work there — but most of my colleagues had no choice but to stay.

After I left, the restaurant opened. It shut down twice because staff members had COVID. But the owners reopened again each time. No one held them accountable.

There's a lot of chatter about why restaurants can't get workers now. If an extra \$300 a week in unemployment is enough to keep us out of kitchens, it should tell you something about the conditions that millions of American workers face and the system's failure to protect us. ■

One Saturday last March, Gustavo, a thirty-nine-year-old single dad to three, went to work at a San Jose bar. "The next day," he tells me, "the world shut down."

This was Gustavo's first time being unemployed since he started working at the age of sixteen. Both the health and economic realities of the pandemic came as a shock. "I had been hospitalized with pneumonia back in 2008, so I knew how scary it can get," he explains.

Gustavo grappled with a lot of emotions during those months. "You're taught to feel shame," he recounts. "It reminded me of when I was a child, being in line at the welfare office with my mother, tears streaming down her face because she was embarrassed."

In December, Gustavo survived a COVID infection that rendered him barely able to walk and in too much pain to speak. "I was drenched in sweat, trying not to move, silently sobbing. I was afraid not for myself but for what I'd be leaving behind. Who's going to raise my boys?" Ultimately, he recovered. And by April 24, 2021, with bars beginning to reopen, he returned to work. Unemployment benefits had kept the lights on and a roof over his head for more than a year.

Not everyone has been so lucky. Mary Gent is fifty years old. She has been working in hospitality for thirty years, for the last three at Hollywood's iconic Standard hotel, which closed permanently this January. She's managed to stay afloat financially, but she's

## We Went to Work. The Next Day, the World Shut Down.

**While millions of Americans worked remotely during the COVID pandemic, millions more either showed up to a deadly job site or were thrown into unemployment. What will the recovery be like for them?**

still unemployed. "I've applied for all the programs, rental assistance — I got food stamps, I got Medi-Cal. So I've done all the work. And it's a lot of work, let me tell you, to be poor."

Mary's discouragement is palpable. "My industry is decimated in Los Angeles," she says. "The place that I used to call home is gone. The hotel closed, and nobody saved it. And I won't lie — I wake up some mornings, and I'm like, 'Well, what's the point?' I'm tired of this fight."

It's no secret that low-wage workers have suffered disproportionately throughout the pandemic, with black and Latino workers bearing the biggest burdens. More than 80 percent of the pandemic job losses were those held by low-wage workers.

As the economy shows the beginning signs of recovery, two contradictory narratives have emerged. One highlights the collapse of the low-wage labor market and its likely slow recovery ahead. Despite some significant

gains and promising signs of further job growth in leisure and hospitality, as of June, the sector remained 2.5 million jobs below its pre-pandemic levels.

The other narrative claims widespread labor shortages and jobless workers who prefer to collect historically generous unemployment benefits rather than return to work. In this account, labor shortages are granting workers the kind of leverage over employers they haven't seen in decades.

The first narrative is undoubtedly true. But there is also a grain of truth in the second. While a shifting balance in class forces shouldn't be overstated, there are signs that the extraordinary levels of government spending since last spring have shifted the terrain on which workers and the labor movement can organize.

### The Low-Wage Nightmare

Wealth and income inequality in the United States was already at historic highs before the pandemic hit. The top 1 percent of US households held almost a third of the country's wealth. Meanwhile, wages for the lowest income earners have remained stagnant for decades, despite significantly rising productivity over the last forty years.

Despite the relative strength of the pre-pandemic economy, in 2019, a quarter of adults had a family income of less than \$25,000, almost one-fifth of adults were not able to find full-time work, and one in ten adults were



Jesenia Rochez

“regular” gig workers. Official poverty rates declined in 2019, but they demonstrated deep racial disparities: 7.3 percent of white people were living in poverty, while the poverty rate for African Americans was 18.7 percent.

The experience of low-wage workers during the pandemic has exposed and exacerbated these inequalities, not only between workers and CEOs but among workers as well. The US economy has relied on an increasingly bifurcated workforce, and those divisions have become all the more entrenched as the pandemic has continued.

The most job losses by far were experienced by the lowest earners,

and these jobs have also been the slowest to recover. In part, this reflects a simple pandemic reality: the industry hit hardest by lockdowns was leisure and hospitality, a sector characterized by low wages. But jobs in government, education, and health services were also hard-hit. And, significantly, a recent paper found that, in every sector, it was the lowest-earning workers that were disproportionately hammered by job losses.

Gig economy workers had to contend with an added layer of hardship. Seydou Ouattrra is an Uber driver and father of three who found himself without riders in March. But he was unable to collect

Seydou Ouattrra



unemployment benefits for almost two months, while he and his fellow drivers were asked to fax in document after document in order to prove that they worked for Uber. He finally participated in a lawsuit against the Department of Labor to get his benefits. Other drivers he knew waited twice as long.

“It’s hard,” he says, telling me about his family. “This is the first time everyone is hurting. We’ve reduced our spending to

a minimum: bills, rent, and internet for school. I used to work every day for years to make sure they didn’t have to do without money. And now it’s completely different.”

Of course, the unemployment rate is far from the only measure of the pandemic’s consequences. Low-income workers are disproportionately concentrated in frontline, essential work. Poor workers have often had to choose

between risking their lives or their livelihoods, while higher-wage workers were six times more likely to be able to work from home, effectively shielding them from both the health and economic devastation wrought by the pandemic. The stark income division among workers who were able to stay home goes beyond leisure and hospitality, where the vast majority of work simply can’t be done from home. Yet both within and outside of this sector, the bind expresses a basic dynamic of capitalist exploitation — those least compensated for their work also tend to hold the least power in determining their working conditions.

So when Jesenia Rochez, twenty-eight years old, found out that the childcare center where she had been working as an assistant teacher was closing, she was given just two weeks paid time off. After that, she had the option of getting furloughed or being transferred to one of the “hubs” that the childcare chain kept open through the pandemic.

The pressure was on to accept a transfer. “There were a lot of rumors going around that if you didn’t go back to work, you might get fired.” She saw some coworkers being let go, and it was unclear whether they’d be brought back. “I thought really hard, and I said, ‘You know what, I’ll put a mask on for safety and just go out there and continue to work.’”

The transfer wasn’t easy. Her hours weren’t guaranteed. She was

transferred a second time. The child-to-adult ratio actually went up, making work a lot harder.

“I had a lot of anxiety and depression,” she tells me. “I wanted life to kind of just stop for a second. I felt like I was clinging on to my mental health, trying to stay positive and find my sanity riding the subway every day.”

Income inequality and racial disparities have also played central roles in determining COVID mortality rates. One recent study in Elsevier found that, while wealthier counties were often first to experience high infection rates, owing to greater levels of economic activity, workers from poorer areas nearby exposed themselves to the virus while providing services to their rich counterparts. Once COVID enters poor neighborhoods, social, health, and economic disadvantages take hold, making the disease much more difficult to control than in richer counties.

In 2020, 11 million households were significantly behind on their rent or mortgage payments. The threat of homelessness in normal times is associated with higher rates of depression, expulsion from school, and increased health risks. During a pandemic, the consequences of housing instability are much worse.

Renters, who tend to have lower incomes and fewer savings to draw from in a crisis, particularly suffered. Among renters, while 18 percent of households overall were behind on rent by the end of last year, 27 percent of those

---

**“I do want to go back to work, but what they’re offering me, I can’t survive on. Whereas me staying on unemployment could really help.”**

---

households earning less than \$25,000 per year were behind. The CARES Act made it relatively easy for many homeowners to receive a mortgage forbearance for a year — but renters had no such recourse.

It was through this and similar government programs that a real growth in household savings has been noted, a potential source of economic recovery. Though the personal savings of US households skyrocketed over the past year, however, the top 20 percent of income earners accounted for 85 percent of the savings accrued, while the bottom 20 percent accounted for just 0.5 percent.

#### A Peculiar Recovery

As the economy reopens more widely and hopefully more steadily in the months ahead, jobs are coming back at a faster clip than in previous recoveries. The COVID recovery, just like the crash, is unique. Recoveries usually entail months or years of slow job

growth, with many more people looking for work than there are new openings appearing.

In contrast, businesses today are reopening, but not everyone is ready to go back to work. The extent to which that has to do with the relatively large size and scope of unemployment benefits has been hyperbolized by conservatives seeking to claw back government spending. In reality, many jobless workers are weighing the difficulties of finding reliable childcare, health considerations, and still-low wages against unemployment benefits that have provided consistent economic support (at least to those who were able to penetrate an often-dysfunctional bureaucracy). Even the recent uptick in pay observed in leisure and hospitality only means that wages there are approaching rates that are still lower than other sectors’ average earnings.

Consider Kharisi Bonner, a twenty-nine-year-old single mother. Before the pandemic, she seemed



Kharisi Bonner

to be on track to fulfilling her goal of moving out of her parents’ apartment and into her own place with her daughter. She was working as a passport agent at the Brooklyn Public Library, and she had just completed classes to be certified as a phlebotomy technician. She had started an internship at a pediatric clinic. She was the vice president of the PTA at her three-year-old’s school. In early March, she found out she was pregnant with her second child. And soon thereafter, the passport agency closed down.

Over the course of the past year, she has handled complications with her pregnancy, birthed a baby boy, and helped her mother undergo chemotherapy.

The manager from the passport agency reached out to her in January with news that they were reopening at partial capacity. They could offer her a one-day-a-week return. But returning to work poses a major problem. Kharisi’s mother is her only source of childcare assistance, but her mother’s current health struggles limit how consistently she can help. Kharisi wanted to try. She explains, “I thought, ‘Okay, I really want to go back to work.’ I was even looking at it as a break from these kids, even if that means going back to work for only one day. Because I love my job. And I’m stuck in the house 24-7 with a baby and a four-year-old.”

Ultimately, the math didn’t add up. A one-day-a-week job would barely cover the cost of her transportation to work. Her mother told her, “I don’t see how that’s going to help you.”

“It really put me in a bind,” Kharisi explains. “They want everyone to get up and go get a job, which is understandable. But where I’m coming from is — I do want to go back to work, but what they’re offering me, I can’t survive on. Whereas me staying on unemployment could really help.”

The reality of the recovery is complicated. Jobs are coming back, but the ability of jobless workers to get back to work is uneven, and it particularly disadvantages women who have been saddled with full-time childcare responsibilities. While a tighter labor market has the potential to give workers greater leverage in demanding higher wages, better job conditions, and scheduling flexibility, it’s far from a guarantee. And what will happen to millions once COVID-era benefits expire?

“I’ve never experienced anything like this in my life,” Gustavo, the San Jose bartender, said when I followed up with him this June. “To see how fragile the system really is, how it immediately collapsed, who suffered and who didn’t. The rich got richer, the poor got poorer. And the poor died. A lot of things that you heard about or read about, we saw in real time in my lifetime. It’s kind of like, ‘Wow, were we living this way this whole time?’” ■



ILLUSTRATION BY ANUJ SHRESTHA

---

For decades, the parties of labor have been slowly replaced by the parties of the educated. A Left that doesn't acknowledge this as a problem has already been defeated.

---

■ Faced with today's continual crises and soaring social inequality, it's easy to idealize the postwar decades as an era of "social-democratic consensus." In much of Western Europe, these were the "thirty glorious years" in which labor and capital shared the proceeds of growth — with even center-right governments overseeing key welfare measures. Yet this narrative of a Fordist golden age often overlooks the deprivations that persisted and the pitched battles working-class parties fought to win a share of economic growth for labor.

One of the fastest-rising economies was Italy, whose northern industrial core drew in millions of migrants from poorer regions during the 1950s and 1960s. But

working-class people who weren't in the factories organized, too. Unemployed workers and farmhands even invented a new tactic, the "reverse strike," in which they voluntarily filled in roads, fixed railway lines, and patched up dilapidated school buildings. Their protests showed that there were plenty of socially useful jobs to be done — it was just that Christian Democratic governments had chosen to leave them penniless and idle.

One such strike was immortalized by *Brave New World* author Aldous Huxley in a text he wrote about Sicilian popular educator Danilo Dolci. In a region with mass illiteracy and long-term unemployment, on January 30, 1956, Dolci joined hundreds of jobless men

---

# The Many Farewells to the Working Class

DAVID BRODER



The historic labor movement — often slammed by post-work analysts for its “productivist” defense of smokestacks — in fact has a long track record of fighting for shorter working hours.

who began fixing a road. But, as with previous “reverse strikes,” the authorities reacted with repression — and police violently broke up the assembly a few days later. Dolci was jailed for “occupation of the public highway,” in a widely publicized trial that also rallied artists and intellectuals behind the workers’ demands.

Spreading from rural areas to the Roman slums through the late 1940s and 1950s, these reverse strikes were a vital way for the Communist Party to form local branches in areas inhabited by “underclass” populations with the lowest educational levels and weak traditions of organized politics. Captured on film by neorealist director Gillo Pontecorvo, the reverse strikes showed how this party of 2 million members built a class politics extending far beyond the factory gates — and constructed a broad vision of social progress around even the most marginalized.

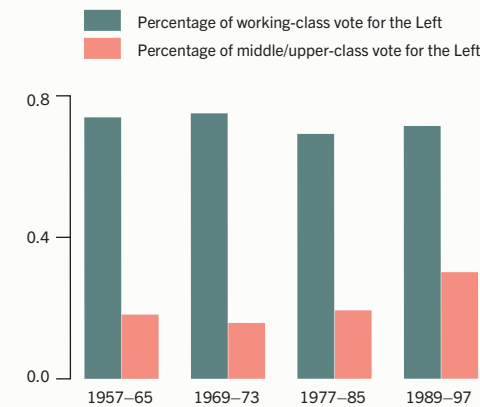
Today, such a story may sound like it comes from a different world. In recent decades, the connection between social inequality and political allegiance seems to have frayed entirely — and the Left’s historic working-class base is narrowing around the globe. As economists Amory Gethin, Clara Martínez-Toledano, and Thomas Piketty explore in their new collection *Political Cleavages and Social Inequalities*, while social inequality has been rising worldwide since the 1970s, the Left is itself becoming both smaller and less defined by questions of work and income.

From the Nordics to Latin America, social-democratic parties have withered, and they are today

heading toward the same collapse that most Western Communist Parties suffered upon the Soviet Union’s demise. But it isn’t just a problem of declining numbers of supporters. In almost all countries, the Left’s social base has shifted away from the workers that “workers’ parties” might be expected to represent. Piketty reaches a blunt conclusion: the parties of labor are being replaced by the parties of the educated. The data in *Political Cleavages and Social Inequalities* develops an argument already present in Piketty’s *Capital and Ideology*. It portrays coalitions built around two different kinds of elites: a culturally liberal “Brahmin Left” that prizes cosmopolitan values and education for its own sake, and a “Merchant Right” defending the asset-rich and those best able to monetize their education. On this reading, the vote for conservative, pro-business parties is held together by material interest, whereas the Left is built around cultural values that are essentially minoritarian.

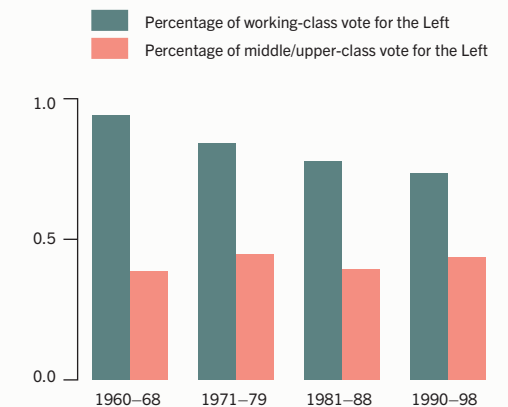
Unrepresented and fragmented by identity, large parts of the working-class left have shrunk into abstention or turned in favor of hard-right parties that claim to speak for the “losers of globalization.” Across dozens of countries, while those with fewer qualifications were once much more likely to vote for left-wing parties, today, they are far less so. David Graeber’s *Bullshit Jobs* hints at the reasons why these people may see a billionaire like Donald Trump as more “relatable”: they could dream of getting rich but wouldn’t even want to become professors.

### Class-Based Voting Decreases in Norway, 1957–2009



In Norway, support among leftist parties from people self-identifying as working-class has declined, replaced somewhat by backing along self-identified middle-class and upper-class voters. These leftist parties include the Labour Party and the Socialist Left Party.

### Denmark’s Growing Class Dealignment



The class composition of leftist votes over the past five decades has shifted toward a smaller share of those who self-identify as working-class. These leftist parties include the Social Liberal Party, the Red-Green Alliance, the Social Democratic Party, and the Socialist People’s Party.

## TWO TAKES ON CAPPUCCINO

■ For some social-democratic parties, the answer lies in getting back in touch with “working-class values” — usually referring to the stereotyped cultural views of people well past retirement age. In Britain, even Labour MPs who supported privatizations, labor market deregulation, and austerity budgets show their proletarian bona fides by boasting of their love of flag and family, or — in the case of one recent Labour leadership candidate — pretending never to have heard of cappuccinos.

This cultural politics venerates hard work and self-reliance as “values”: the current shadow chancellor told welfare recipients that Labour isn’t the party for them (although about a third of the working-age population receive some non-child benefits). Meanwhile, party leader Keir Starmer boasts of his father getting his

hands dirty as a “toolmaker,” even though he owned the factory. In British media, “working-class” has become near-synonymous with the generation that experienced deindustrialization in the 1980s. Faced with the narrow association of “working-class values” with older voters’ prejudices, a second approach, today gaining ground across the liberal left, turns this culture war framing inside out. Broadcaster Paul Mason insists that, while elements of the working class remain rooted in nostalgia for the old mining and manufacturing industries, the Left needs to recognize that its future lies with the precarious, young, and educated and their green, cosmopolitan values.

For Mason, not only have the particular CO<sub>2</sub>-belching industries in which these older workers once toiled become redundant, but the whole idea of basing political identity around work is itself anachronistic. Social media, the massive expansion of communication, and the rise of the “networked individual” with multiple

The class pride and solidaristic values that saw workers strike on behalf of their workmates rather than beat them up for a day's pay were the product of decades of organizing.

overlapping identities have undermined the once-central place of work in defining political allegiances — so why should the Left pointlessly push back against the tide? Both of these approaches portray the working class as essentially on its way out — a remnant of the Fordist past. In each case, its decline is taken for an inevitable product of historical trends (the advance of technology and globalization); in turn, political marketing needs to adapt to a changed consumer base. Yet this also reflects a substantially apolitical approach, especially in its refusal to see how policy choices and political mobilization themselves mold classes and their perception of their own interests.

Right-wing projects of recent decades, on the other hand, have consciously worked to remold the terrain of the class war, whether turning a section of the working class into homeowners and minor shareholders (as per British Thatcherism) or else seeking to fashion a “multiracial working-class coalition” of “hardworking Americans” (in the words of Republican senator Marco Rubio). Throughout four decades of neoliberalism, the Right has not only crushed the labor movement but reconstituted fragments of working-class identity and even material interest around its own project. If the Right is succeeding in at least mobilizing the *language* of working-class politics, why can't the Left do so, too?

## HAS WORK DISAPPEARED?

■ This argument was most famously addressed by French sociologist André Gorz in his 1982 book *Farewell to the Working Class*. In his reading, the nineteenth-century labor movement had its roots in the protection of skilled trades as they were being brought into the factory system: the workers had expertise that their employers did not, and they used this power to exercise control and demand even more. As Gorz presents things, Marxism saw this knowledge from below — the “polyvalent skilled worker” able to oversee the whole production process — as the basis of a working-class takeover of the economy, and thus of the “Marxist utopia” itself. Yet the introduction of a low-skilled Fordist workforce pushed in the opposite direction: this working class did not identify with the job, but rather resisted work and expressed a negative power of refusal.

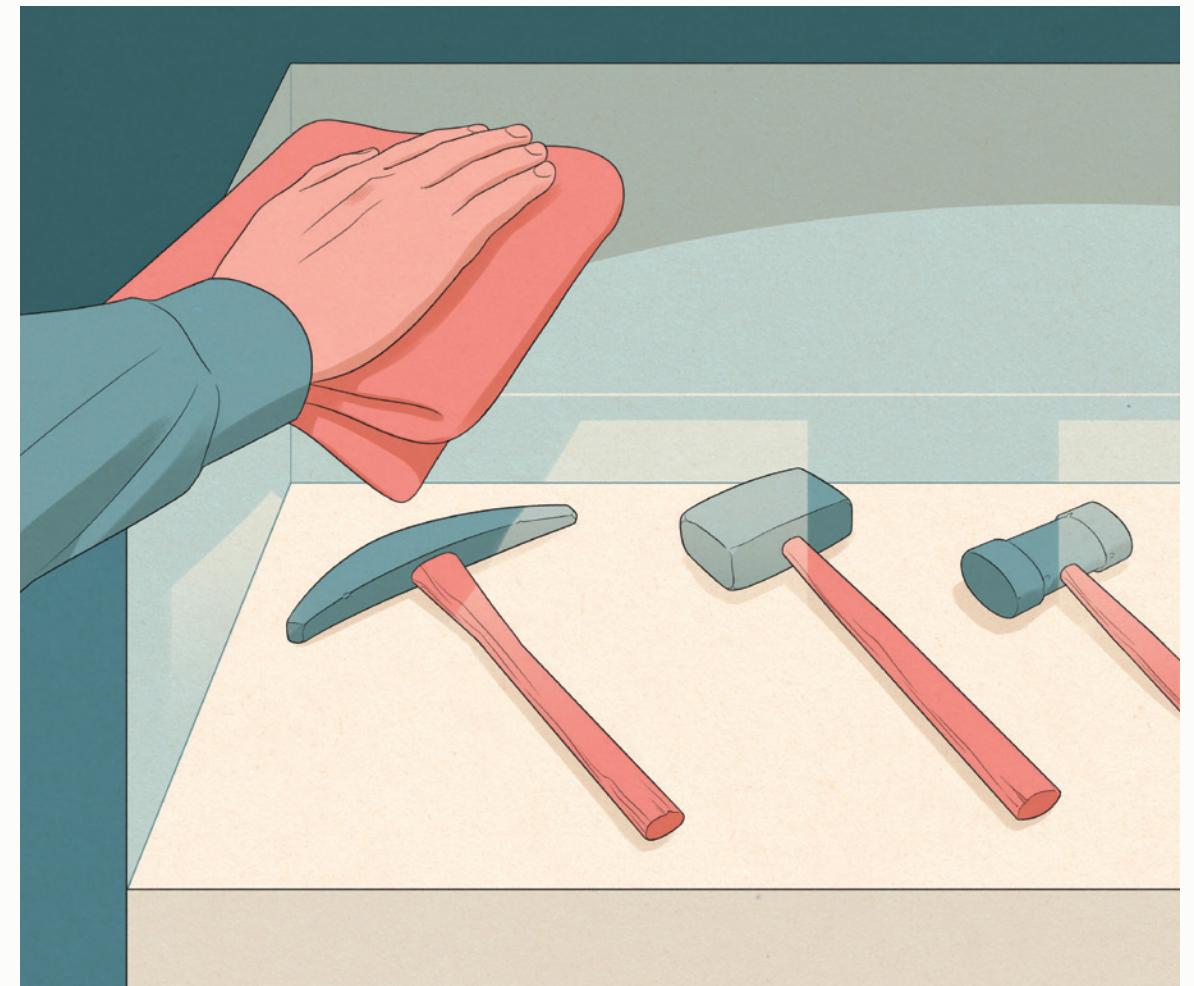
Today, this logic follows, automation does not just devalue skilled labor or turn humans into appendages to machines, but does without them entirely, turning ever-larger masses into extraneous surplus populations.

Gorz explained how the expulsion of workers from the workplace (here identified with manufacturing) dovetailed with workers' lack of interest in making it their own. In his words, “for the mass of workers, it is no longer ‘the power of the workers’ that constitutes

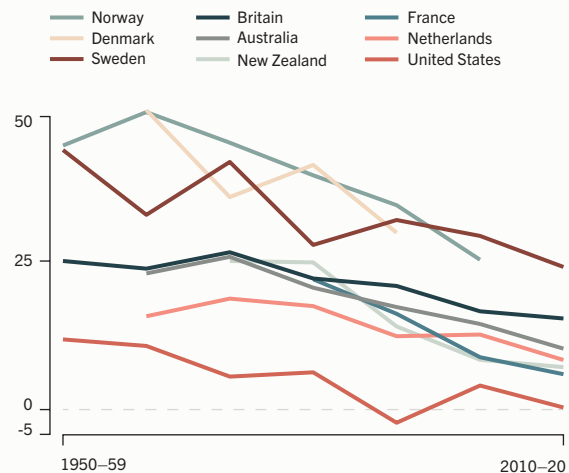
the guiding utopia, but the possibility of ceasing to function as workers; the emphasis is less on liberation *within* work and more on liberation *from* work.” From this flowed a series of demands centered on individual autonomy, reprising classic 1968 themes of breaking with hierarchy and institutions, while also demanding a guaranteed income. For Gorz, to limit the struggle within the factory walls is to misrecognize the reality of popular demands: not to assert the skilled workers' ability to govern production in the bosses' place, but rather to live autonomously. The automation of production is finally making this a possibility: while some central authority will have to oversee the automated

fulfillment of human needs, the mass of humanity will be able to devote itself to leisure and voluntary effort.

Such a world is a nice idea, and a desirable socialist society would surely limit mandatory work. But the identification of technological advance with the formation of a new post-work subjectivity points to a wider problem with this school of analysis. In essence, it sees that certain kinds of workers are becoming or have become obsolete (skilled workers in industrial production), then takes them as representative of the proletarian subject across all previous history, disregarding examples like the one with which we began our narrative. In particular, Gorz's reading bears the mark of the end of the Fordist era, with

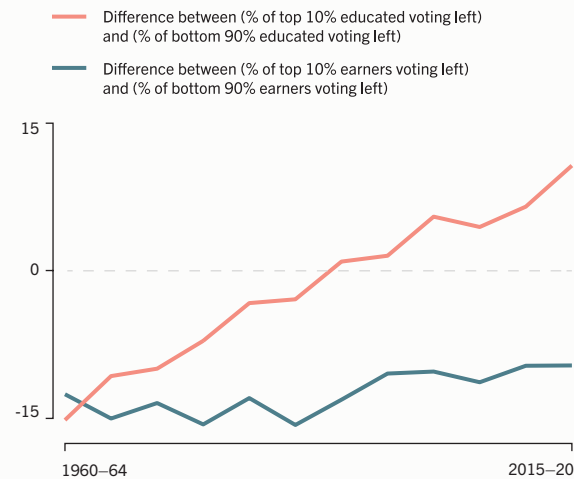


## Shrinking Class Voting in Western Democracies, 1950–2020



This graph plots the difference between the share of self-identified working-class left voters and middle-class or upper-class voters, showing that the linkage between working-class identity and left-wing political affiliation has eroded. On average, 31% more of the working class voted for the Left when compared to voters of other classes between 1950 and 1959. Now, that margin is only 8%. The “leftist parties” represented here are democratic, labor, social democratic, socialist, or green parties.

## High-Education Voters Shift Left, High-Income Voters Stay on the Right



This graph plots the difference in voting tendencies between the 10% most educated residents of Western democracies and the bottom 90%, as well as between the top 10% of earners and the bottom 90%. Here, support for leftist parties is defined by votes for democratic, labor, social democratic, socialist, or green parties.

such defeats for organized labor as the closing of the Longwy Steelworks in northeastern France (1979–80) and the split between blue-collar and white-collar unions at Fiat in Turin (1980); it would soon find confirmation in the British miners’ strike (1984–85).

Without a doubt, both automation and outsourcing have weakened workers’ strategic power to shut down whole arms of production. Even so, most of us still survive by selling our ability to work — even if it’s with weaker employment stability than many workers had in the postwar decades. This itself makes work a deeply political question, which remains the most basic underpinning for all our other choices and opportunities in life.

Predictions of the end of labor are, it’s worth noting, very old. In the 1920s, the rise of home appliances was widely expected to mean redundancy for Britain’s 1.5 million domestic servants, at that time more numerous than workers in any other industry. As it happened, it would take the shock reordering of the economy during World War II to really deplete the mass of servants, though many such jobs were recycled in a different form as au pairs and waiters.

As for manufacturing, the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) held a national conference on automation in 1955 and developed a 1964 report on the “Triple Revolution” that was signed by socialists like

Michael Harrington and Irving Howe. Alongside revolutions in weaponry and human rights, it heralded a “cybernetic revolution” with the potential to liberate humanity from “repetitive and meaningless (because unnecessary) toil.” The problem was, if left up to market anarchy, this risked creating a mass of the permanently unemployed, especially in outlying towns built around industries that no longer existed. The report’s point was that these consequences weren’t inevitable: the state should manage the “costs of the transition” with massive unemployment relief programs, investment in building low-cost housing and public transportation, and retraining workers whose jobs had become obsolete. One could quibble about the distinction between full automation and labor-saving technology that still requires human oversight — the “Triple Revolution” report itself noted the risk of a divide between the haves who kept their jobs and the have-nots who were pushed out of the labor market. And, as scholars like David Spencer have shown, the evidence of an overall trend toward mass worklessness is itself highly contradictory. While decisive agricultural and industrial tasks have been automated, the ever-expanding realm of potential needs, a large low-rights workforce, and the fact that productivity gains have been monopolized by capital mean that, since the 1970s, the average number of hours worked per working-age American has actually increased.

In societies with stagnant economic growth, the low rate of infrastructure investment means that employers today resort more to wage compression than to increasing productivity. In low-investment sectors, there are no gains to be fought over, just the disciplining effect of a precarious labor market and high rents. But a full picture of this phenomenon would also have to include the extreme variations between different sectors, consigning some to the burden of multiple jobs and others to the burden of long-term unemployment.

Post-work theorists rightly point to the need for a more equal sharing of necessary tasks as a means of overcoming the social fallout of industries that do become obsolete. Yet such a perspective is not exactly new, either. The historic labor movement — often slammed by post-work analysts for its “productivist” defense of smokestacks — in fact has a long track record of fighting for shorter working hours.

In 1889, the call for the eight-hour workday was the galvanizing demand of the newly founded Socialist International. In the 1930s, the French workers’ parties, backed by a massive strike movement, imposed a maximum workweek and statutory paid holidays; later, they fought for parental leave.

## FRAGMENTED

■ Work, in other words, is here to stay — but the organizations built around it have been buried alive, as liberalized center-left parties abandon even a rhetorical commitment to specifically working-class interests. Worse, in several countries, openly pro-business parties are mobilizing growing parts of the working class behind their own projects.

We started by noting the tendency for voting patterns to be increasingly governed by educational attainment instead of either income or self-reported social class. Part of the explanation is material, rather than simply a matter of “culture war”: older voters, who are generally less likely to have a college degree and who worked jobs requiring less formal education, are also more likely to be homeowners and draw on financialized incomes that have been supported by governments even through the crisis years.

The expansion of homeownership in Margaret Thatcher’s Britain, selling off council housing at low prices, was itself designed to engineer this outcome, using public resources to cushion the effects of deindustrialization. Yet Tony Blair’s New Labour creed of “education, education, education” is an individualizing rather than a collective approach to the decline of stable and well-paid jobs. Liberal and ex-workers’ parties across the West seek to fashion their vision of aspiration around the “knowledge economy” and the workforce being able to compete internationally. But the experience of recent decades tells us that this is a chimera: we are, in essence, each exhorted to take on ever-higher debts to invest in our future potential as workers, yet we then find that the avenues to realizing this “investment” do not exist.

Gorz’s 1982 suggestion that automation was destroying the working class resonates today because the moment in which he was writing is directly connected to our own present: the oldest workers, as well as the growing masses of the retired, directly experienced the deindustrialization he was talking about, and its cultural

## Work, in other words, is here to stay — but the organizations built around it have been buried alive.

legacy continues to hang over our societies. In some cases, the record of the parties that failed to stand up for these workers when they should have remains fresh in the memory. Where parties of the Left retreated from the working class, even telling it that it no longer mattered or was obsolete, parties of the Right told a large section that it did matter, as “nationals” or as homeowners.

Someone today approaching retirement who began working in the late 1970s would have seen little else — and only the tail end of a once-mighty labor militancy. That the conditions in which they labored often left a legacy of ill health and premature death did not mean that the end of their working years brought any kind of relief — for many, it brought its own array of stress-related disorders and substance abuse.

Such profound humiliation breaks the bonds of solidarity — including and perhaps especially among those who have managed to avoid the worst personal consequences. This has allowed other forces to marshal fragmented elements of the working class, or else to so subdue its electoral turnout as to allow minority class interests to hold office even with only a quarter or a third of the total popular vote. It’s a real achievement, though one with likely volatile results.

This points us to the fundamental weakness of Gorz’s approach and more recent analyses building upon it, including Mason’s *PostCapitalism: A Guide to Our Future* and Guy Standing’s *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*. In proclaiming the rise of new subjects, each tends to naturalize and uniformize what went before, as if the old working class and its expectations were the creation of industrial process and in turn

destroyed by it. For this reason, their static picture of the full-employment, high-pay, “protected” Fordist-era working class, projected backward in time, not only serves as a foil for an alternative future but replaces the real history of working-class organization with a focus on the technological drives to social change. In their haste to leave the defeats of recent decades behind, they overlook the historical reality of work before the Fordist era — and the political action that allowed workers to overcome it.

What is missing from these accounts is the organizing and the bureaucratic institutions that molded a collective working-class life and its worldview, separate from and in opposition to bourgeois society. That meant parties, unions, evening classes, consumer co-ops, and much more: the platform on which workers built the social power that industrial capitalism denied them. This process, beginning already in the late nineteenth century, was part and parcel of building the organizations on which workers’ eventual Fordist-era guarantees relied — in fact, some of the most totemic sectors of strategic industrial might, such as dockers and miners, had been infamous for their use of day-by-day hiring and brawling among workers desperate for shifts.

The class pride and solidaristic values that saw workers strike on behalf of their workmates rather than beat them up for a day’s pay were the product of decades of organizing. Gorz’s portrayal of a working class that has rejected the labor movement’s work-oriented “ethic” is optimistic in the extreme. As Richard Hyman notes in his review of *Farewell to the Working Class*, the unemployed are far from necessarily oriented

toward a rejection of hierarchy and authority — rather, it is a platform of rights and guarantees, not mere desperation, that makes us best able to stand up to employers and stand up for one another.

The post-Marxist belief that an automated, technologically advanced future will produce an egalitarian “networked subjectivity” is rooted in the illusion that the historical socialist movement itself sprung from a reaction to factory exploitation. But this at most created a potential terrain for mobilization: even faced with inequality and injustice, class feeling needed to be actively built, uniting sharecroppers as well as tailors, domestic servants as well as electricians. The fact that workers did not have the same conditions — being divided by industry, by skill, by competing employers — created real difficulties for organizing, and many of the debates in the historical workers’ movement revolved around overcoming such sectional divides.

Today, the Right is reveling in the self-immolation of the parties that once sought to unite workers above these divisions. As well as reframing work and career outcomes in terms of individual achievement, the Right is even mobilizing elements of the labor movement’s own past rhetoric. The call for a “fair day’s pay for a fair day’s work” — once a commonplace ethical challenge to exploitation — is today remade as a veneration of “hard work” as a value unto itself. In this way, the identity of “hardworking families” is detached from the solidarity that ever fewer workers in Western countries have experienced in practice and instead recast in the language of entrepreneurship and “pulling yourself up by your bootstraps.” Today’s generational political divide reflects the variants of this individualized response to class defeat, whether through reliance on assets or seeking a return on one’s educational investment.

The disappointment of the latter has done more to drive politicization over the last decade, and it is also more explicitly connected to the 2008 crisis than the decades-long deindustrialization of Western economies. Today, the well-educated but downwardly mobile are present within left-wing activist ranks in far greater numbers than those twenty or forty years older than them. Yet, in some cases at least, the data from *Political Cleavages and Social Inequalities* points to the possibility of overcoming such limitations — reversing the Right’s remolding of the working class, and polarizing politics around a unifying class subject.

Most illustrative in this case is Brazil, where, in the first elections following the return to democracy in 1988, a long-defeated Workers’ Party received more support among the top 10 percent of earners and the highly educated than among the bottom half of the population. Yet once it reached power in 2002, it used its position in government to refashion its own social base, with programs like the “family wallet” and a sharp increase in the minimum wage allowing it to pick up the support of the lowest paid and least educated Brazilians. By the time of the 2016 election — also thanks to the rival success of middle-class “anti-corruption” activism directed against these same social programs — the national political divide was strongly class-correlated, notwithstanding the strong historical presence of regional and racial cleavages. What’s more, through its clear class alignment, the party was able to steel itself through electoral defeat, firmly oppose Jair Bolsonaro’s far-right government, and set itself in position to return to power.

Such intense polarization is not simply owed to the Workers’ Party’s real successes on behalf of poor Brazilians: in some ways, the middle class rallied against it in spite of its earlier efforts to form a center-left bloc. Yet this experience shows just how central a task it is to build workers’ parties able to illuminate the working class’s collective interests. This is also what will reverse the trend highlighted by Piketty — and resist the pressure for the class to either withdraw from politics or unite behind right-wing visions of “worker identity.”

Building such a common outlook will not be the automatic product of a general process of proletarianization — rather, it demands we organize parties that can connect people’s material hardships to the realistic prospect of political action to change them. To say that working-class experience is plural and inflected by other factors, or to insist that we need to stop providing “analog solutions to the digital era,” provides no answer to the real question: how to rally the social majority in order to capture power.

Workplace organizing remains key to building ties of social solidarity. But we also need demands that can mobilize those who struggle to unionize, whether because they have three jobs or can’t find even one. After all, the fastest route to a society with less work lies in the working class itself — and the rebuilding of parties that can give it a sense of its own power. ■

# Reading Materiel

---

## OPERATOR'S MANUAL

R

READING MATERIEL  
CANON FODDER

BY CHRIS MAISANO

ILLUSTRATION BY  
WESLEY ALLSBROOK

REVIEW OF: *Inequality and the Labyrinths of Democracy* by Göran Therborn (Verso 2020).

“You know what the trouble is, Brucie? We used to make shit in this country. Build shit. Now we just put our hand in the next guy’s pocket.”

That’s Baltimore longshoreman and union treasurer Frank Sobotka, from *The Wire*’s second season. It is a profound moment in the series, signaling that perhaps something had gone deeply wrong in America well before the 2007–8 crash. And while Sobotka is a fictional character, his lament for America’s postindustrial working class finds echoes across the political spectrum, from Donald Trump’s hard-hat minstrelsy to the Green New Deal’s demand for sustainable manufacturing jobs.

It is certainly the case that industrial employment in countries like the United States has dramatically shrunk and will never recover to previous levels. But industry’s relative decline is nothing new. While many people assume that deindustrialization is a late-twentieth-century phenomenon, both employment and output in goods-producing industries has been in relative decline for far longer than that. As countries get richer, higher incomes generate greater demand for services while technological advances lead to labor savings in manufacturing processes. These

structural transformations can be molded by public policies, and the tempo of such developments has varied from place to place. But this is the general trend of capitalist development in the core countries — many developing countries are now becoming service economies without passing through a period of intensive industrialization at all. The rust belts of the Global North are suffering from the loss of their industrial base, but the Perus and Congos of the world will suffer from never having much of one in the first place.

These patterns of development have powerful ramifications on the scope and content of political conflict. The Swedish social scientist Göran Therborn is one of the world’s leading analysts of these dynamics, and his new collection *Inequality and the Labyrinths of Democracy* brings together three of his key essays on the topic. In “The Right to Vote and the Four World Routes to/through Modernity,” Therborn surveys the pathways by which Europe, its various settler colonies, the postcolonial world, and the “reactive modernizers”

## Disorganized Democracy

---

**A coalition of industrial workers and small farmers underpinned democratic politics in the twentieth century. Can workers in a precarious service economy fill their shoes today?**

(e.g., Japan) established modern nation-states and political systems. In Therborn's analysis, Europe's "New World" settler colonies, above all the United States, have taken a long, torturous, and incomplete path to democracy and universal suffrage, despite their democratic pretensions.

While the United States granted suffrage rights to many property-less white men quite early in the country's development, the nation did not become a formal democracy until the destruction of Jim Crow in the 1960s. Even today, the boundaries of membership in "the people" continue to be contested, as the Republican Party fully embraces new restrictions on the effective exercise of suffrage rights and majority rule. And if the aftermath of the 2020 election is any indication, the far right may simply regard any election Democrats win as illegitimate, regardless of how fair or transparent the process is.

It is not surprising that the boundaries of political inclusion have been contested in a settler state defined by the violent conquest of indigenous peoples, racial slavery, and mass immigration. It is also quite clear that racial and national conflicts have long inhibited the development of progressive working-class politics in the United States. Less remarked upon but no less important is a dynamic that Therborn mentions almost in passing. Europe's New Worlds, he notes,

went from an agrarian society to one more or less strongly dominated by so-called tertiary employment. The issue of the franchise and the industrial working class — with its distinctive powers, in comparison with other nonestablished classes, of autonomy, collectivity, skills and disruptive economic potential — was also for this reason never and nowhere posed in the New Worlds — or in the other two regions of global political modernity — as starkly as it was in Europe.

As such, socialist and communist movements tended not to find as strong a footing in Europe's offshoots (particularly its anglophone branches) as they did in the "old continent."

But it is not entirely accurate to claim, as Therborn seems to, that a country like the United States transitioned more or less smoothly from an agrarian to a service economy. Roughly 20 percent of US workers were still employed in agriculture as late as the 1940s, and goods-producing industries accounted for about one-third of employment until the 1970s. These shares also varied dramatically by region, from the Great Lakes industrial complex to the sprawling farmlands of the South and West. Still, Therborn's observation is consistent with the fact that service or "tertiary" employment pulled even with US industrial employment as early as the 1840s, and decisively overtook it by the first years of the twentieth century. For decades, service

employment grew steadily, while agriculture's share collapsed from about 20 percent in 1940, to about 3 percent in 1980, to just over 1 percent today.

While industry's share remained relatively constant from the 1940s through the 1960s, and declined a bit in the 1970s, it then began to crumble in the 1980s. Since that decade, industry's share of total employment has dropped by more than half, from roughly 30 percent to just above 12 percent, while services now account for more than 80 percent. The path has been long and uneven but, at this point, the United States and similar countries are undeniably dominated by the bewildering array of employments and occupations grouped under the anodyne rubric of "services."

In his essay "Dysfunctional Democracies," Therborn astutely reminds us that politics "is never reducible to sociology, but the latter may give useful hints of the limitations and potentials of the former." Indeed, these enormous changes in employment and social structures have significant implications for the future of democratic politics in general and the Left in particular.

A long train of historical-sociological studies demonstrate how organized industrial workers have been the leading edge of democratic and socialist movements around the world. Moreover, nearly all the most successful left-wing movements of the twentieth century were powered by a political alliance of



industrial workers and small farmers, including the Socialist and Farmer-Labor parties here in the United States. These groups, however, have eroded in the face of labor-saving technical change, outsourcing, and other pressures. The erosion of democracy's traditional social pillars may not necessarily condemn us to a bleak future, but it does compel the Left to reexamine our constituencies, agencies, and strategies in the fight for democracy and socialism.

In 1966, Barrington Moore Jr published his classic work *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*, where he made the famous claim "no bourgeois, no democracy." Since then, a number of scholars have effectively demolished the notion that political democracy is the handiwork of the bourgeoisie. In his groundbreaking essay "The Rule

of Capital and the Rise of Democracy," Therborn argued that "none of the great bourgeois revolutions actually established bourgeois democracy." Democratic rights and freedoms did not result from the gradual and peaceful spread of wealth, literacy, and urbanization, but rather from social upheavals caused by war and class conflict.

For Therborn, it is the emergence of the working class and the labor movement that opened the path to democratization, not the rise to power of the capitalist class. To the extent that they exist, basic democratic rights and freedoms are the fruit of hard-fought victories won from and defended against the bourgeoisie. Therborn's argument has been confirmed by subsequent historical and sociological studies of the democratization process. One of the most important works in this

vein is *Capitalist Development and Democracy* by Dietrich Rueschemeyer, Evelyne Huber, and John D. Stephens. In their view, Moore's focus on the bourgeoisie prevented him from appreciating capitalism's most important contribution to democracy: the creation of an industrial working class.

More recent scholarship builds on the basic conclusions that Rueschemeyer, Huber, and Stephens reached in their landmark work. Their arguments were reinforced by Adaner Usmani, whose 2018 study "Democracy and Class Struggle" brings a wealth of new evidence to bear in support of the arguments advanced in *Capitalist Development and Democracy*. Usmani's research shows it is not merely the emergence and growth of the working class, but the

---

## The erosion of democracy's traditional social pillars may not necessarily condemn us to a bleak future.

---

development of circumstances in which it can effectively wield power against elites, that is the key factor in the depth of democracy.

According to Usmani, these capacities are powerfully shaped by the employment structures of a country's economy, particularly the level of working-class employment in what he calls "high-capacity" sectors: manufacturing, mining, construction, and transport. The more a particular country's working class is concentrated in these sectors, he argues, the more capable it will be in fighting for and defending democratic political gains.

Therborn and his followers were certainly not the first to recognize the potential political power of organized industrial workers. As Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels argued in 1848, "with the development of industry, the proletariat not only increases in number; it becomes concentrated in greater masses, its strength grows, and it feels that strength more." Industrial workers' power didn't just stem from their strategic location in the heart of the production process. Historical patterns of industrialization also tended to concentrate workers from the

same or similar workplaces together in urban neighborhoods, thereby enhancing their capacity to form trade unions, political parties, and other forms of organization. Industrial workers have historically been able to combine disruptive potential with organizational capacity in ways that other sections of the working class have not.

This unique combination powered many of the victories that working people in core capitalist countries were able to win in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. If the conditions that made this union possible have passed into history, it stands to reason that the overall workplace bargaining power of the working class has declined.

There are, of course, still plenty of industrial workers in the United States. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, there were roughly 21 million workers in the nonagricultural goods-producing sector in 2019. They are still capable of making a significant impact when and where they stop or otherwise impede production. But manufacturing and other industrial establishments in this country have, to a significant extent, moved out of urban centers and are largely scattered

across suburbs, exurbs, and rural areas along interstate highways, a socio-geographical terrain that seems to make it much more difficult for workers to organize.

None of this is to suggest that working-class organizing is doomed to failure. What it does entail, however, is recognition of the fact that democratic and socialist politics today will necessarily look different than the movements that came before us.

In Therborn's view, neither a gradual increase of organizational and political power nor violent revolution are viable pathways to social transformation today. "Popular egalitarianism has not disappeared," he argues, "but it has become more latent than organized, with sporadic outbursts rather than a continuous accumulation of strength." He points to Chile's ongoing popular movement for political reconstruction as one example of what this might look like. He also leaves open the possibility that "a disruption of the existing party system" could bring fresh ways of fighting inequality and boosting popular power through electoral means.

In any case, the potential for making new advances today seems relatively more dependent on political action than on leveraging workers' location in the production process. The challenge is finding ways to cohere a wide array of sometimes dissonant struggles and demands around an effective political project. It will not be easy, but Therborn has given us valuable intellectual tools with which to do that work. ■

**Arbeider/Arbeit** From the Old Germanic, meaning "effort, need, exertion." Possibly related to the Old Church Slavonic *rabu*, meaning "servant, slave." Others similarly relate it to the German *erbe*, itself derived from the Greek *orphanos* for "orphan" — an orphan would have to work for their income without a possible inheritance (only the fatherless have to work). The first use of *arbeider* as "workman" in Old Dutch dates from the 1200s. Its meaning was always double: it indicated both a pain inflicted on someone and the sorry state they were in. Its association with female reproductive labor was always present. Linguists point at Martin Luther's role in reorienting the meaning of *arbeit* toward a more general term for goal-directed activity rather than absent suffering, an early sign of the Protestant work ethic analyzed by Max Weber. In the late 19th century, the term acquired a general meaning of a growing class of wage laborers — *Arbeiterbewegung* and *Arbeiterpartei* became recurring terms. The term *arbeit* survives, but *arbeiters* has lost some of its relevance.

**Boss** Derived from the Dutch word *baas*, first used in American English somewhere in the 1640s. It was adopted more widely by white Northern workers in the early 19th century, mostly as an alternative to the derogatory *meester* or "master." Its usage was strengthened by the mass abolitionism of the 1850s but was also

meant to distinguish slave labor from free labor. In the 19th century, it was used outside of industrial settings, as in the familiar "party boss." In 1890, the Harvard Encyclopedia described the term as a "familiar slang word for an employer; a manager or superintendent"; at the same time, dictionaries began to record the term's usage to mean "excellent." Twenty years later, Eugene Debs proclaimed that the working class "want no vassals and will tolerate no bosses." By the 1950s, teen slang revived the use of "boss" as a mark of quality; as a colloquial term, the word has survived in both forms.

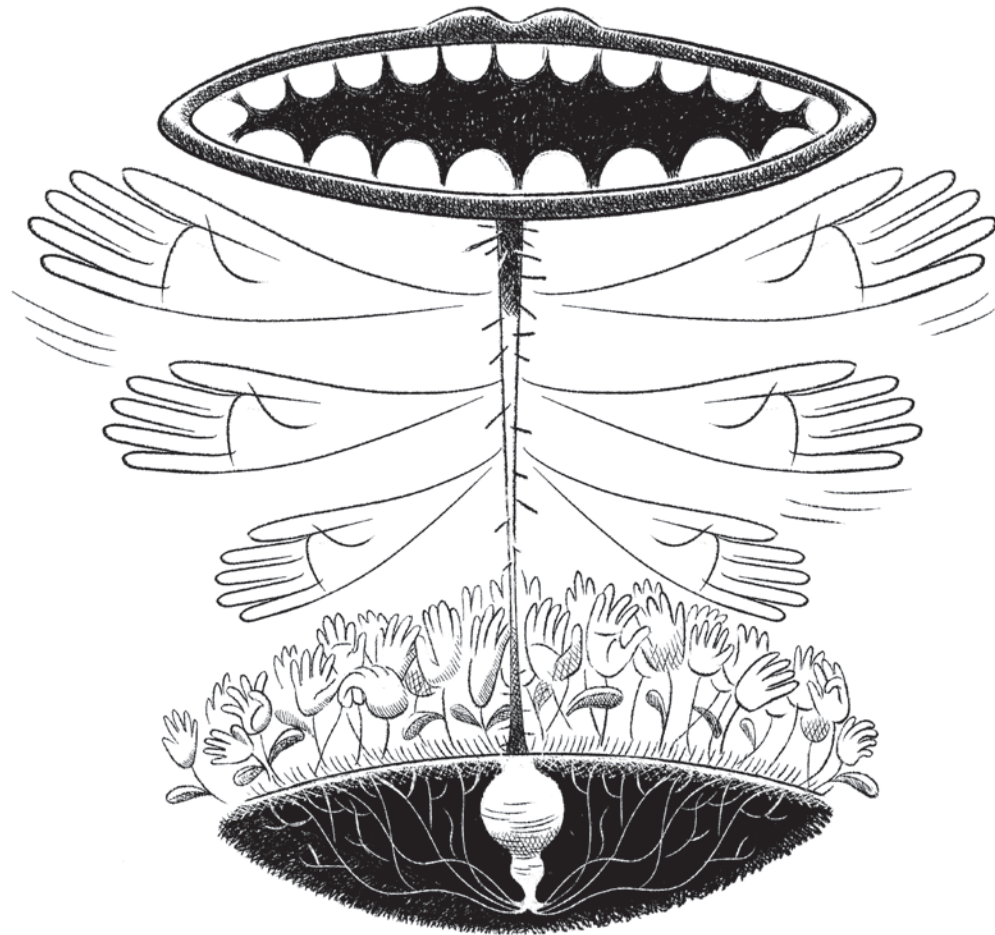
**Capitalism** From the Old French *capital*, from the Latin *capitale*, from *caput* or "head." Its original feudal meaning referred to "main payments," later extended to property that could generate wealth. In the 19th century, "capitalist" often had a distinctly financial and elitist connotation; in the 1640s, it was defined as "the wealth employed in carrying on a particular business." In 1791, it was defined as a "man of money." Karl Marx himself did not use the term "capitalism"; its usage is generally dated to the Second International socialists or social scientists such as Werner Sombart.

---

## What Is a "Proletarian" Anyway?

---

With the rise of industrial capitalism and the workers' movement it created, we created new words to explain a confounding new world.



**Class** From the Latin *classis*, a division according to property between legal subjects in ancient Rome. Raymond Williams claims it entered English somewhere in the 16th century, tied to its plural of “classes” or “classies.” For a long time, its main reference was still classically Roman, then it extended to church organizations and into early modern biology (a “church Assembly,” or a “classis of Plants” mentioned in 1664). In the 17th century, “class” began to take on a more firmly social

meaning, now applied in both biological sciences and general social theory. Internal taxonomies such as “working,” “upper,” or “middle” class date from the early 19th century. Usage of the term “working class” was strengthened by the Chartist movement in the United Kingdom and free labor ideology in the United States. Nonetheless, “class” always retained an element of exclusivity and was often pejoratively applied — think of the “privileged or special classes,” or the snobbish

adjective “classy.” In academic language, “working class” became a generally accepted term in the 1940s and 1950s, strengthened by a sociological profession interested in modern industrial relations. Usage of the more general “working class” has somewhat declined since the 1970s, often replaced by the milder “middle class” in the American case or just “employees” or *angestellten* in the European. The cultural turn in academic scholarship further marginalized usage of the term.

**Employee/Employer** From the verb “employ,” itself from the Old French *emploier* — “to make use of, entangle.” Its original sense is still retained in the word “imply” today.

**Obrero** Similar to the French *ouvrier*, it can be traced back to the Latin *operarius*, itself from *operari*, alluding to engagement in work from the Indo-European *op*.

**Ouvrier** From the Latin *operari*, to “operate” or “work with one’s hands” — *operarius* already denoted “someone who does.” By the middle of the 19th century, the term began to refer to a specific class of industrial workers. During the 1848 Revolutions, it marked a new group of mobile workers who were not attached to old craft workshops. Parties also adopted the term, such as in the Belgian Parti Ouvrier Belge (POB) or the Parti Ouvrier Français (POF). *Ouvriers* became the official self-understanding of the global Francophone communist movement. In 1870, the writer Louis Reybaud could claim that “the most irresistible title was that of the *ouvrier* ... the son of a worker, the worker of the day before, the worker of the day after.” Its usage declined with deindustrialization, indicating its association with heavy industrial labor.

**Patron** From the Latin *patronus* or *pater*; “father,” “protector,” or “master” in Latin legal terminology. Originally a religious term, the word normally denoted saints or icons. In the French Marines, the term



described a specific position of “captain”; a dictionary in 1806 described it as “someone endowed with authority over a certain vessel.” Thirty years later, the word was settling more firmly in an industrial setting. In the 19th century, it became a recurring indication for the employers of wage workers. In 1848, the French patron and capitalist became practical synonyms, in some cases, as visible in the utopian communist Étienne Cabet’s 1848 letter “Aux électeurs de la seine.” In the 20th century, the term became a more generally accepted substitute for “boss.” Its usage has declined since about 1968, when employers have rebranded themselves by other, less paternalistic names and a different managerial culture.

**Proletariat** Originally from Latin legal terminology, from the Latin *proletarius*, it indicated those who only had “proles” or “offspring” to live off. The *proletarii* were the propertyless in ancient Rome, exempted from both fiscal and military duties, who served the state simply by having children. English already had the term “proletarian” in the 1650s, denoting the “lowest or

poorest class of community,” but not immediately connected to modern wage work. Its association with market-dependent workers dates from the middle of the 19th century, taken mainly from French socialist writing that used *prolétariat*, indebted to historians and social critics such as Jean Charles Léonard de Sismondi and Louis Blanc. Its usage has become almost exclusively technical, confined to academic debates and rarely used in general political discourse.

**Scab** Originally a medieval term for a skin disease, from the Old English *sceabb*. The Latin *scabies* — “mange, itch” — hints at the same root. Its meaning of strikebreaker was first recorded in Britain in the early 19th century, derived from an earlier understanding of those who refused to join trade unions, itself related to a Dutch word for “despicable person” first introduced in the late 16th century. Words such as “blackleg,” “knobstick,” or “scalie” often acted as synonyms across the anglophone world. As the Australian labor radical William Lane stated, “the scab, the blackleg, is not a Socialist.”



**Travail/Travailleur** Several etymologies of the term circulate. Some claim progeny in the Latin *trepalium* or *tripaliare*, presumably an ancient torture instrument made up of three pins. Others point at the Latin precedent of *trab-*, meaning “beam” or a component of a granite building. Early modern sources first point at the Old French *travailleur* as a “tormentor.” In feudal times, *tribulagium* would indicate a required service to a lord. In the 15th century, the French historian Georges Lefranc locates its gradual transformation to mean “productive activity.” By the late 16th century, the term began to take on the meaning of “those who work” or were engaged in employment. By the 1760s, *travailleur* acquired a more firmly industrial meaning, as in Voltaire’s Russian histories describing a “worker in a factory.” This usage continued into the 19th century; by 1868, a certain Edmond About could write in his novel *ABC du travailleur* that the state of the travailleur was “the worst ... condemned to eternal abjection.” By the late 19th century, a burgeoning socialist party movement began to officialize the word as a general term for wage earners. By the 1960s and 1970s, *travaillisme* or “workerism” indicated a tendency that sought to emancipate workers from party bosses. Academic use of the word peaked in the 1970s, only to decline steeply afterward. After 2008, its usage picked up again, but it hasn’t returned to its previous heights.



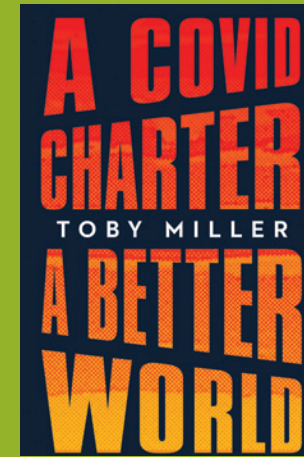
**Wage** From the Old French *gage*, a “pledge, pay, reward,” dating from the middle of the 14th century. The term “wage earner” was only introduced in 1871, an ostensibly less political alternative to the more combative “worker” or “proletarian.”

**Werknemer** Literally “work-taker” in Dutch, meaning an employee. Recent linguists have criticized the notion as ideological, implying that work is “taken” away from an employer by an employee, obscuring the intrinsic inequality that undergirds the relationship between the two.

**Work** From the Old English *weorc*, meaning “something done, a discrete act performed by someone.” In the 1200s, the term came to mean “physical effort” or “exertion.” Its meaning shifted to “labor as a measurable commodity” around 1300, before the British Peasants’ Revolt and before British agriculture itself

switched to wage labor as its general model. Work was then associated with “toil” (just like its close synonym, “labor”), painful exertion, and effort. Its narrowing to meaning little but “paid employment” — as in “hired work” or “paid work” — dates from the development of capitalist relations in Britain, in the 16th and 17th centuries; as Raymond Williams notes, to be “in work” or “out of work” assumed their stable meaning. Activity taken up outside that employment relation — think of “housework” at the time — lost its official association with reproductive activity as a whole. “Workman” and “workingman” came into usage in the 17th century; “workpeople” in the 18th century. “Unemployment,” and the “unemployed” as a distinct category, are generally associated with the crisis of the 1890s; it does not appear in Marx’s *Capital*, which preferred the more subtle *unbeschäftigt* (meaning “inactive” or “not engaged in activity”). In the 19th century, the labor movement took up the terms “work” and “workers” under its own banner of the dignity of labor. “Work” has retained its association with paid employment, even though “working in the garden” or “working on something” still possess meaning outside of employment. Popular culture has seen a surge in reference to “work” (as in Rihanna’s “Work” or Britney Spears songs like “Work Bitch”), mainly after the 2008 crisis. ■

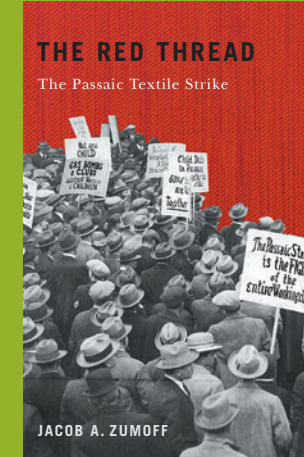
# BOLD Ideas, ESSENTIAL Reading



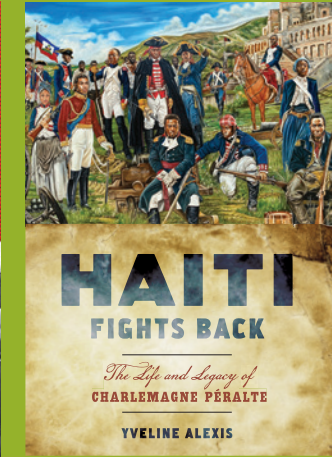
“Toby Miller offers bold governing principles to secure the rescue, perhaps even the thriving, of humans and the planet.... We cannot go on like this.” —Wendy Brown, author of *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Anti-Democratic Politics in the West*  
\$14.95 paper



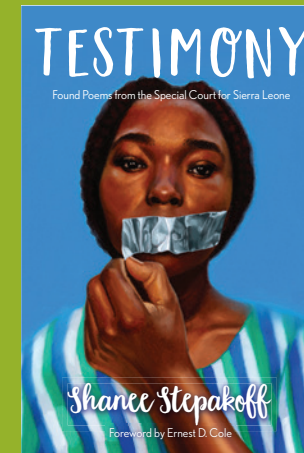
“Carlson and Berglund give an informative and thought-provoking perspective on Indigenous activists’ engagement with social media, providing new and fascinating insights.” —Laurel Dyson, co-author of *Indigenous People and Mobile Technologies*  
\$29.95 paper 14 b/w images



“Zumoff’s work is an important addition to the history of both the American labor movement and the history of the American Left.” —Norman Markowitz, Professor of History, Rutgers University  
\$32.95 paper 20 b/w images



“Yveline Alexis zooms in on Charlemagne Peralte to show the ways in which cacos resistance to the US Occupation of 1915-1934 continues to loom large in Haitian imagination....” —Gina Athena Ulysse, author of *Because When God Is Too Busy: Haiti, me & THE WORLD*  
\$36.95 paper 12 b/w images



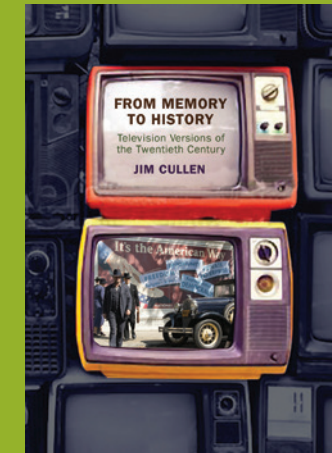
“With this collection [of found poems], Shanee Stepakoff finally breaks the veil of silence that surrounds the unspeakable horrors of Sierra Leone’s long civil war.” —Remi Raji, author of *A Harvest of Laughters*  
\$19.95 paper



“What Walters achieves is an aesthetic of the black female domestic, a study of the representational dynamics of the figure in film, visual art, and literature.” —Kevin Quashie, author of *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture*  
\$29.95 paper 4 color images



“Freedom remains a core concept in modern American national identity. Foertsch’s lively and compelling [book] traces how it rallied postwar Americans to fight for racial equality, personal liberation, and women’s rights from the 1950s to the 1970s.” —Erika Doss, author of *Memorial Mania: Public Feeling in America*  
\$27.95 paper 2 b/w images



“Cullen provides an entertaining and thoughtful account of the ways that we remember and how this is influenced and directed by what we watch.” —Jerome de Groot, author of *Consuming History: Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture*  
\$24.95 paper 8 color images



**Isabella Weber**  
INTERVIEW BY DANIEL ZAMORA

# How China Avoided a Soviet-Style Collapse

**What have three decades of market  
reforms meant for the world's  
largest working class?**

ILLUSTRATION BY DANIEL ZENDER

The single most stunning economic story of the last half-century has been the rise of China. Its state-led development has unleashed an explosive economic expansion unprecedented in modern history.

But the astonishing growth record is far from a triumph of the free market. In *How China Escaped Shock Therapy*, Isabella Weber, an economist at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, offers a compelling and fascinating account of the economic reforms and debates in China over the last fifty years.

She demonstrates how, by choosing an alternative path to the “shock therapy” that swallowed up the ex-Soviet bloc of the 1990s, China has avoided the kind of decline in state capacity that’s made COVID-19 such a disaster for the West.

Mixing extensive historical and economic original research, Weber’s account gives us a rich understanding of the unique path pursued by the Chinese Communist Party and its effect on the world’s largest working class.

**Daniel Zamora** What inspired you to write this book?

Isabella Weber I grew up in West Germany in the 1990s. The history of socialism was mainly told to us through stereotypes of failure, stories of trips to the gray and drab East bringing along gifts of brand-name coffee and jeans. There was a general sense of triumphalism, the end of history. But the story of this book really begins when I was a visiting student at Peking University. Eager to learn about China’s economy, I took classes at Guanghai School of

Management, one of China’s top management schools, and I was struck by the fact that we were studying the same American textbooks I had used in Berlin. It seemed puzzling that China could have an economic system that was clearly different from Germany’s or America’s but still practice the same kind of economics. Upon my return to Berlin, I started working at the China desk of a foundation.

Our Chinese counterparts were acutely interested in the experience of the collapse of state socialism in East Germany. On one occasion, I helped organize a meeting between Hans Modrow, the last premier of the German Democratic Republic, and a high-ranking Chinese delegation. Before the event, I had not even known who Hans Modrow was. He was only in office for a short amount of time. Sitting in that room with the forgotten last East German leader and the Chinese delegation raised the question: Why had history worked out so differently for the two sides?

This led me to research the intellectual underpinnings of China’s economic reforms in the first crucial decade, the long 1980s, usually defined as 1978–1992. Why had China escaped shock therapy, and what was the role of economics in China’s distinct path?

**DZ** We tend to forget how brutal the transition from socialism to capitalism in the ex-Soviet bloc really was. In the end, you argue that this is what explains the sharp economic divergence between China and Russia over the same period.

It has been remarkable that, in the context of the 2008 and COVID-19 crises, the historical reference point has almost exclusively been the 1930s. In fact, the “transition recession” in Russia was deeper and more prolonged than the Great Depression.

Not only did *total* output collapse by more than a third but, by 1995, *industrial* output had fallen to about half the 1987 level. This is probably the most dramatic deindustrialization in postcolonial times. Russia never regained its position as an industrial superpower.

Real wages collapsed to less than 50 percent of what they had been before shock therapy. Life expectancy for Russian men fell by seven years, more than any industrialized country had ever experienced in peacetime. A Lancet study argued that millions of excess deaths occurred in the ensuing chaos, as poverty and unemployment skyrocketed. Drug addictions, HIV infections, alcoholism, childhood malnutrition, and crime all went through the roof as oligarchs looted public assets. By 2015, Russia’s 99 percent were still worse off in terms of real adult income than they had been in 1991. An entire “lost generation” of young people was created, and the foundations for Vladimir Putin’s rule were laid.

To be sure, it’s not clear that the “Chinese cure” would have worked in Russia, but it’s hard to imagine that Russian-style shock therapy in China would not have led to suffering on a scale at least comparable to that of Russia. We have to remember that, in the late 1980s, China was still a very poor country. After more than ten years of reform,

## It’s hard to imagine that shock therapy in China would not have led to suffering on a scale at least comparable to that of Russia.

in 1990, Russia’s real income per adult was still about three times that of China. Even a much less dramatic economic collapse than the one observed in 1990s Russia could have meant a catastrophe of tremendous proportions.

With the benefit of hindsight, we can see that the 1980s mark a major crossroads in world economic history — the inflection point of both the divergence between Russia’s fall and China’s rise and the beginning of China’s reconvergence with Western economies.

**DZ** What were the expectations of those advocating shock therapy?

The idea of shock therapy is based on the logic that short-term pain is necessary. The frequently invoked analogy was that of surgery — the patient has to suffer in the first place to lay the foundation for long-term flourishing. It turned out that, unlike in a surgery performed by a skilled doctor, the pain induced by economic shock therapy was not easily contained. Transforming a

whole economic system is not like cutting out a tumor.

Key to the initial shock was a “big bang” in price liberalization. Letting all prices free overnight was meant to create a rational price system, essential to the neoclassical vision of markets. Macroeconomic austerity — monetary restraint and the slashing of government budgets — was intended to prevent liberalized prices from spiraling out of control.

So much for that theory. Boris Yeltsin’s 1991 “big bang” gave way to sustained hyperinflation. When the value of money is falling into the abyss, there is no way to have a rational market. Exchange relations are then driven by panic and bare necessity, which is a far cry from utility optimization. Russia was left without a functioning market and without planning, often falling back on barter exchanges as a last resort.

**DZ** You seem to argue that market determination of prices was the central aim of shock therapy. Interestingly, we saw this transition with the



**structural adjustment programs imposed on developing countries by the late 1980s. Price controls in particular were targeted. Why is the policy toward prices so important for neoliberals?**

Shock therapy was, of course, not exclusively a policy of transition from state socialism but a much broader policy paradigm famously tried out in Augusto Pinochet’s Chile, imposed in Margaret Thatcher’s Britain, and applied in the form of structural adjustment in many developing countries.

Free prices are the holy grail of the market in neoliberal thinking. While private property, in this outlook, is a necessary condition for the market to work, the market itself is really the free movement of prices — which contain all the necessary information to coordinate the actions of individuals, who are connected through nothing but free prices. This is the deeper intellectual reason why shock therapists believed that an initial “big bang” was needed to set all prices free.



Friedrich Hayek and Ludwig von Mises, for example, were very explicit about this when they launched their attack against carrying over wartime price controls in the 1940s. Hayek warned in *The Road to Serfdom* that “Any attempt to control prices or quantities of particular commodities deprives competition of its power of bringing about an effective coordination of individual efforts.” Von Mises urged in an essay called “Middle-of-the-Road Policy Leads to Socialism” that, if the government only controlled the price of one good, say milk, it would lead down a slippery slope of price distortions that would eventually result in total government control of prices and even totalitarianism.

**DZ** And why is it so important, especially for the working class, to think of prices politically? The conventional wisdom around price controls today is that they lead to shortages, inefficiency, and black markets.

In most of today’s economics, we think of prices as being basically of the same nature. This is the case in neoclassical economics, in large parts of Marxist economics, and in mainstream Keynesian economics as well. The main contestation between marginalists that believe in a subjective-value theory and the labor theory of value of David Ricardo and Karl Marx lies in the general principle of price determination more than in a diverging opinion on the nature of prices for different kinds of goods. There are considerations of different price dynamics for monopoly prices or certain luxury goods where demand rises with rising prices. But there is very little systematic consideration of how some prices are of great importance for macroeconomic stability and growth, nor is there much discussion around the political economy of the prices of particular essential goods.

However, several key historical episodes point to the highly political nature of certain vital prices. The yellow vest movement in France was triggered by the prospect of rising

diesel prices; the Arab Spring was fueled by rising bread prices; and some argue that spiking grain prices played a role in the French Revolution. This is based on a very straightforward logic: if the prices of essential goods like energy and staple food items that make up a large part of the expenditure of low-income households rise, real wages fall dramatically. Price riots are then a form of resistance against being squeezed to the edge of subsistence or below. At the same time, stabilizing or subsidizing essential consumption goods is a step toward decreasing people’s vulnerability toward market fluctuations.

In China, there is a long tradition of what are called “ever-normal granaries.” Public granaries have stabilized prices since ancient times by buying up grain when prices are low after the harvest and releasing grain reserves when supply runs short, especially during famines. As one of the New Deal policies, the United States established the Commodity Credit Corporation following the initiative of Henry A. Wallace, a scheme similar to that of China’s ever-normal granaries.

Since colonial times, commodity price stabilization has also been important for many poor countries that depend on exporting raw materials and agricultural goods. Relatively small fluctuations in prices can bring an economy into disarray when its exports are largely composed of only a small number of commodities.

When the global order was redesigned after World War II, using international commodity buffer stocks to stabilize prices was a prominent proposal supported by, among others, John Maynard Keynes. This proposal was never implemented, but it deserves a revival in the current discussion around making economies more resilient. Instead of retreating to economic nationalism, worldwide buffer stocks of essential commodities present an internationalist alternative. This could include, for example, larger supplies of medical equipment. Such buffer stocks could have helped channel resources to the places where they were most needed to contain the pandemic.

Today, after decades of state-led market creation, China administers the largest public grain stocks in the world. The extremely strict initial shutdown in the early phase of the COVID-19 pandemic was in part enabled by state commercial agencies that helped to re-create markets for food when normal supply channels were interrupted. Another example is the stabilization of pork prices. A swine fever outbreak had decimated pork supplies in China in 2019. To prevent pork prices from rising too fast, the state released supplies from its reserves of frozen pork, and state-owned companies helped organize an expansion of pork imports.

Through market-participating price stabilization of this kind, the Chinese state smoothes fluctuations in essential consumer and producer goods. These procedures complement monetary policy in the stabilization of overall prices. Such a targeted stabilization of essential prices can, in turn, create space for fiscal expansion by releasing inflationary pressures.

**DZ** But wasn’t China on the verge of implementing its own price liberalization and shock therapy in the late 1980s?

Deng Xiaoping famously replaced the Cultural Revolution slogan of “politics in command” with that of “economics in command.” During the 1980s, there was a rapid expansion of exchanges with economists from all around the world. The World Bank and the Ford Foundation played important roles in this regard. Some prominent visitors of the early years were Milton Friedman, the Chicago economist; Włodzimierz Brus, the Polish émigré reform economist and disciple of Oskar Lange; and Ota Šik, the exiled architect of the economic reform plans of the Prague Spring.

Countering Von Mises and Hayek’s attack on any possibility of a rational socialist system, Lange had shown in the socialist calculation debate that rational prices could be achieved under market socialism. This line of reform thinking thus had some common ground with



neoliberalism in its emphasis on getting prices right.

Friedman, in a lecture in China, even went so far as to call Lange-style market socialism a second-best solution that would constitute a big breakthrough on the path to a free economy. So, among the reinstated economists in China, a developing vision for market reforms set price reform at the heart of all efforts and argued that without wholesale price liberalization — in some versions prepared by calculated price adjustments and combined with tax and wage reform — market reforms must fail.

While these academic exchanges were evolving, the discipline of economics was remodeled on the Western example. Ambitious blueprints for price reform were being theorized and drafted, rural reform was sweeping the country, and a reform paradigm of experimentalist market creation was emerging. Rural reforms were, in many ways, very radical. They involved the dismantling of the people's commune — the key social, economic, and political institution of Maoist China.

However, even here it was gradual, in the sense that rural reform proceeded in a way that maintained the commitment of the countryside to deliver a quota demanded by the planning institutions of key agricultural goods like grain and cotton at a set price. But now, households were made responsible for delivering their share of the quota, while they were allowed to produce for the market once that commitment was fulfilled. Moreover, this switch to the “household responsibility system” was tolerated first in an

## The Life of a Worker in Shenzhen

**I've worked everywhere from a coal mine to a banana plantation to a toothbrush factory. I'm a worker in a “workers' state.”**

experimental fashion in rural communities that were not major producers of essential agricultural goods. In expanding the household responsibility system from marginal communes to the countryside as a whole, survey research played a key role.

Students who had spent their youth in the countryside, where they were sent during the Cultural

Revolution, emerged as a powerful force. With the support of key senior leaders, like Deng Liqun and Du Rusheng, they formed the so-called Rural Development Group, which helped to evaluate and systematize the lessons from agricultural reform experiments. Rural reform was the key breakthrough for Deng's reform agenda more broadly, and it brought to the fore

I am from Guizhou province, and I was born in 1980. I am the third of six children in my family. When I was in primary school, I had to work from 5 A.M. until school started at 8 A.M. It was very tiring. I left school in fifth grade. I also felt that there was too much of a burden on my mother.

After I dropped out, I secretly got a job in a local coal mine, where I was paid 450 yuan for fourteen days' work. One day, at 8 A.M., there was a methane gas explosion, and four of us were buried more than twenty meters underground. Rescuers dug toward us from outside, and we dug toward them from inside. We had no food, and the digging was exhausting. It was after 5 A.M. the following morning that we were finally rescued.

All four of us had injuries. I had been struck by a rock on the back of my head. Another person's arm was broken, a third person had some flesh torn from his back,

Zhao Ziyang, who became premier and general secretary. These young intellectuals formed a strong alliance with reform leaders of the revolutionary generation.

**DZ But what exactly stopped China from going further on the path to shock therapy?**

The crucial battle was over the question of how to go about marketizing the core of the urban industrial system that had been set up based on the Soviet ideal of “one large factory.” Unlike the communes in the countryside, each industrial production unit was not meant to be a sustainable economic entity by itself. Simply put, they produced output in response to central

commands at state-set prices, where the price system was set up to redistribute across sectors. Nonessential consumption goods like bicycles, radios, and watches were priced above cost, thus extracting funds from consumers, while essential goods like grain and steel were priced below cost. As a result, the profitability was very uneven — by design.

Reformers argued that the same dual-track system of a market price and a planned price could be introduced to the industrial sector and was, in fact, already emerging spontaneously. Enterprises should continue to deliver their quota while being allowed to bring their surplus product to the market. State commercial agencies that had previously played a relatively passive role hereby became key market creators, connecting suppliers with new customers. Through the dual-track system, production units themselves would be transformed into market-oriented enterprises, with all the institutional overhaul this entailed.

Crucially, for essential industrial inputs like energy and metals that were both in short supply and previously priced below cost, this system resulted in a huge difference between planned and market prices. From the perspective of the dual-track reformers, this underscored the importance of maintaining state control over the quota to ensure the provision of cheap inputs, while the high market prices presented incentives for enterprises to work toward expanding their production by any means. In contrast, the reform economists who focused on getting the prices right saw the greatest possible irrationality in this substantial price

divergence for the same product. Some went so far as to argue that the dual track was worse than the old planned system.

The dual-track system did in fact create strong momentum for growth, but it was also a breeding ground for corruption. In the late 1980s, inequality was on the rise, and the initial euphoria for reform was fading, while the prices on the market track created an overall rise in prices. Social and political tensions were mounting. In this context, the idea of a big bang — of letting go of all prices in one fell swoop while imposing austerity — increasingly seemed like an attractive option that also carried the authority of “Western” scientific economics. Such a program was prepared once in 1986. But it was reversed due to warnings from System Reform Research Institute economists, who surveyed previous attempts at major price reforms in Yugoslavia and Hungary; as well as German and Chinese economists who were familiar with post-World War II transitions that presented a similar challenge.

In 1988, when reform had entered a political deadlock, Deng Xiaoping himself decided to “crash through the barrier of price reform,” arguing in typical shock therapy rhetoric that it was better to endure short-term pain than long-term suffering. In summer 1988, the announcements on state TV of a comprehensive price reform were enough to spark panic. Bank runs and hoarding of durable goods followed. That year, China saw prices spiral out of control for the first time since the revolution in 1949. One of the great economic achievements of

and the fourth person had been hit by a rock on the forehead. Fortunately, none of these injuries was serious. The boss paid our medical expenses but gave us no compensation. My nephew held the boss’s only child, a three-year-old boy, out of a fourth-floor window and threatened to drop him if the boss didn’t pay up. The boss hastily agreed. I received fifty yuan, and the others received one hundred yuan each.

In 1996, I left home in search of work. I first went to Hainan island to look for my elder brother, who was there, but I couldn’t find him. I had to sneak across to the island. I spent a miserable New Year alone living in a brick factory.

I eventually found my brother. He had a child who was just six months old, and I looked after him until he was eighteen months. Then I got a job on a banana plantation. I helped with the weeding, spraying the banana crop, and generally looking after

the Communists in the fight against the Nationalists had been to stabilize prices.

But soon, the Chinese leadership reversed course. Deng Xiaoping, a leader from the first revolutionary generation, was prepared to pay a high price in the name of marketization, but he was not willing to sacrifice the stability of Communist Party rule. Economically, the dual-

track system presented a fallback option for reform after the retreat from a big bang. Politically, 1988 prepared the grounds for the 1989 uprising and the brutal crackdown at Tiananmen Square.

**DZ** Your book seems to depart from mainstream accounts of China’s economic model. It’s often described as a kind

of the trees. My monthly salary was 400 yuan for eight-hour days. I worked from dawn to dusk, and I grew vegetables for myself and my brother to eat. I also raised more than forty chickens. In this way, I was able to save 300 yuan a month to send home.

In 1999, I went to Shenzhen. I didn’t originally intend to go there, but my older sister persuaded me to go, saying that I could earn 600 yuan a month. I thought that wasn’t bad, so I went. Apart from meals, I didn’t dare leave the house, because my identification card had not been processed, and I was afraid of getting picked up by the police for having no temporary residence permit.

In 2000, I handed over 1,000 yuan to get a job at K factory, a Hong Kong – invested company that made electric toothbrushes, foot spas, electric cookers, and the like. It had a workforce of more than eight thousand. The employment

**of combination of Communist one-party state with wild economic neoliberalism – what David Harvey called “neoliberalism with ‘Chinese characteristics.’” Why is this account misleading?**

There are typically two fallacies at work in the “China is neoliberal” argument. First, there is an equation

of marketization with neoliberalism. I do not find this convincing. In the context of European and US history, we would not call the 1960s or 1970s neoliberal, even though markets played a large role in the economies at the time.

Second, these studies tend to either assume a monolithic nature of China’s system that is not realistic or focus on very specific examples,

such as the private tutoring sector, to draw conclusions about the system as a whole. In the course of the reforms of the 1980s, neoliberalism became an important force in China’s political discourse. Previously, the very premise of efficiency and economic rationality had been rejected under the rhetoric of late Maoism. But while neoliberal arguments and a wide-ranging liberalization and privatization agenda were gaining momentum and were pushed quite far in the 1990s, the Chinese state did not give up its control over the commanding heights of the economy — in essential sectors like finance, heavy industry, infrastructure, and ownership of land, as well as in the creation of “national champions,” the roughly ninety industrial conglomerates under the State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission.

Currently, we are observing a huge revival of the topic of public investment in the US policy discussion, in particular for infrastructure. This is heralded by many as an end to neoliberalism. Yet the most far-ranging plans would not bring the United States to the Chinese level of public investment. If we use the same standards for both cases, the United States and China, this should indicate something is off if we are classifying China as a neoliberal economy.

**DZ** How do you then differentiate neoliberalism from what is undeniably a market turn in China? What do you mean by “marketization beyond neoliberalism”?

Neoliberalism is based on the idea of the free movement of prices enabled by private property. This says nothing about the size of the state — the state is meant to establish and police the rules of the market, not to participate actively in the market with its own agenda and with the explicit goal of moving prices in ways it finds conducive to social, political, or economic goals. The Chinese state does the latter.

This kind of market-participating economic governance also means the state is an important driver of commodification. China is probably as marketized as the United States. There seem to be markets for everything, and these markets are highly digitized — including payment — and operate at an extremely fast pace.

Think of the stacking game Jenga. Neoliberal shock therapy says that the old Jenga tower has to first be crushed in order to build an entirely new house from the wooden blocks of the old one — whereas the Chinese “market creation” approach starts by selectively removing blocks from this tower, then moving them somewhere else on the same structure. The tower grows while its structure changes fundamentally. The empty spaces are filled with market activities that unleash a dynamic that eventually transforms the nature of the blocks initially left untouched.

This brings all the ugly side effects of commodification, such as appalling labor conditions in low-wage sectors. The differences between countryside and city have also contributed to massive inequalities. Agricultural reforms led to the

arrangement was working for twenty-six days a month, eight hours a day, for a basic wage of twenty-three yuan per day. There were two shifts, and mealtimes were counted as overtime. We got a new work uniform every six months for free. Management issued one bag of laundry powder and a pair of gloves every month.

At that time, I got to know a man from my hometown, and he had some connections with both the police and some of the company’s managers. He made money by introducing people to the factory. The K factory never recruited workers directly; it got them all through this guy and another person from Sichuan. As a result, most people at the factory came from Sichuan or Guizhou province. Basically, there was no way to get a job there by yourself.

I worked hard there, and I was soon promoted to become the head of my work team. In that factory, the head of a work team

creation of a floating labor force of more than 200 million migrant workers. Gender relations have been regressing as well.

The Chinese model is not to be romanticized in any way. It is certainly not a glorious example of socialism. But it deserves careful study instead of broad-stroke labeling. The distinctive path of

reform I have tried to map in the book has created a new kind of economic system that requires us to rethink many preconceived notions.

**DZ** It’s been expected for many years now that China’s model would collapse. Without entering into wild predictions, do you think China’s economic

oversaw sixteen machines, and each machine had two or three people tending it.

At that time, the canteen food situation was very bad. We often found insects in the rice. I once bit into one, and I never wanted to go to the factory canteen again. But, after eating instant noodles for three days, I was driven back to the canteen. Another problem was that the factory charged us twenty cents for a bucket of hot water. That came to twenty or thirty yuan a month. Everybody was dissatisfied with this.

On one night shift, several workers met me to discuss us all going on strike... ■

Adapted from *China on Strike: Narratives of Workers’ Resistance*, edited by Eli Friedman, Zhongjin Li, and Hao Ren (Haymarket, 2016).

**history should lead us to more skepticism concerning its supposed inability to sustain long-term growth and innovation?**

It feels like the collapse of Communist China has been predicted ever since the revolution in 1949. The notion that China’s Communist Party cannot survive has, of course,

of world labor unrest.” Labor’s share of national income had been declining since the mid-1990s, in line with global trends. This sparked working-class resistance, but it seems to be fading in recent years, as wages are rising rapidly. In 2019, reported cases of labor unrest declined to about half of what they were in 2016, and they fell sharply in 2020. This is not to say that Chinese class relations are harmonious by any standards. But, for the time being, it does not look like China is the global center of working-class resistance.

Mainstream media frequently cites the idea that, if China’s growth slows down by a percentage point or two, that would undermine the Chinese Communist Party’s rule. Last year, at the beginning of the pandemic, we heard once again the idea that China’s government would soon be undermined by dissatisfied citizens. I think these arguments tend to overlook the fact that China has been undergoing more than forty years of reform now and has created a carefully calibrated form of governance. This process has been steered with a focus on economic development and political stability.

The collapse of the Soviet Union was probably the most dramatic regime change in modern history, and the Chinese leadership has studied it extremely carefully. Preventing such a regime change from happening in China is a central tenet of the Chinese Communist Party’s rule, and the leadership has repeatedly demonstrated that it is prepared to do whatever it takes — including outright state violence. ■

WHEN YOU NEED  
YOUR LEFTISM  
A LITTLE MORE...



LUDICROUS



currentaffairs.org

# Cultural Capital

---

CHEAP SEATS



# Fassbinder and the Red Army Faction

As his fellow West German radicals began to embrace ultraleft violence in the 1970s, legendary filmmaker Rainer Werner Fassbinder decided to celebrate another path for emancipation: class struggle in the workplace.



*Eight Hours Don't Make a Day* is not Rainer Werner Fassbinder's most renowned work, but it's certainly the legendary German filmmaker's most politically sophisticated.

The five-part television series revolves around a cast of working-class characters in Cologne: the young toolmaker Jochen, his coworkers, his family, and his girlfriend, Marion. Over the course of the series, the factory workers, led by the popular Jochen with encouragement from the inquisitive and principled Marion, grow increasingly determined to assert control

over the production process and take a bigger share of the profits.

The series aired on West German public television in the fall of 1972. Millions of people who watched it for the tender portrayal of its characters' personal lives were also treated to debates like the following, in which Marion leads Jochen and his coworker Rolf to a conclusion lifted straight out of the *Communist Manifesto*.

Rolf: Of course, the company earns money. What about it?

Marion: Okay, then. How did it purchase a new plant?

Rolf: Well, with money.

Marion: With what money?

Jochen: Its own money.

Marion: Okay, but you can't go buy a new factory.

Jochen: The company just has more.

Marion: And where from?

Jochen: What do you mean "where from"?

Marion: Where from?

Jochen: Where from? Well, that's a stupid question. From selling the stuff. That's where it gets it.

Marion: But where does it get the

stuff it sells? From you, because you made it.

The original script for *Eight Hours Don't Make a Day* culminated in the factory workers going on strike. When a friend suggested that Fassbinder adorn the strike scenes with conspicuous political symbolism like red flags, Fassbinder replied that he wanted "to let people come along slowly." In any case, the scenes never materialized. The series was canceled without much explanation after only five episodes had been filmed, even though the network had paid for all eight.

Fassbinder always suspected the series was aborted because it became, as he put it, "politically more aggressive" in the episodes that never aired. While unconfirmed, his suspicions were reasonable. West German political life was in rapid flux over the course of 1972. Elements of the Left had begun resorting to violence, and at the same time that *Eight Hours Don't Make a Day* was being filmed and aired, the chaos they sowed was mounting.

For that reason, it became difficult to procure public funding for works that seemed to support a far-left worldview. A new law was even passed in 1972, the Anti-Radical Degree, disqualifying radicals from civil service — an explicit response to the escalating violence by the Red Army Faction (RAF), also known as the Baader-Meinhof Group. *Eight Hours* was likely a casualty of this crackdown.

It wasn't the first time Fassbinder had crossed paths with this section of the West German left. In fact,

he was personally acquainted with several members and associates of the RAF from his days in the avant-garde film and theater scene in Munich. Because Fassbinder usually declined to speak openly about these left-wing radicals, they've mostly appeared in passing, if at all, in discussions of his work. But a closer look at the overlapping timelines of Fassbinder's career and the evolution of the West German left shows he was in dialogue with his militant peers throughout his career.

Addicted to both work and cocaine, the quick-tempered and insatiable Fassbinder made more than forty feature films and television series and wrote or directed thirty plays in just fifteen years. Today, he's not widely regarded as an explicitly political artist, since most of his output dealt with other subjects entirely. In his enormous body of work, *Eight Hours Don't Make a Day* stands alone as a testament to the director's cultivated literacy in socialist political ideas and his optimism that they might be of use in the hands of the German public — perhaps even that their aims might one day be realized.

But this optimism was short-lived. When Fassbinder's work touched on left-wing politics in the years to come, his perspective tended to be either gloomy and dejected, as in *Mother Küsters Goes to Heaven* (1975), or cutting and sardonic, as in *The Third Generation* (1979). These later films angered his leftist contemporaries, creating a rift that hadn't healed by the time of his early death. The breach

was so wide that, at one point, Fassbinder found himself at a screening on the receiving end of boos and jeers by radicals who denounced him as a reactionary, to which he allegedly replied, "All leftists are idiots."

What accounts for Fassbinder's political evolution? To understand it, we must trace the arc of the West German New Left, culminating in its embrace of political terrorism.

## "Papa's Cinema Is Dead."

The same month the Nazi regime was defeated in 1945, Fassbinder was born in the Bavarian spa town of Bad Wörishofen.

His parents were middle-class but unconventional, their eccentricities exaggerated by the tumult of war and its aftermath. His father was a self-employed doctor who often worked pro bono in Munich's red-light district, treating and befriending sex workers who drifted in and out of the family apartment along with a rotating cast of acquaintances. The home was so full that Fassbinder's friend and biographer Christian Braad Thomsen says the young boy was sometimes uncertain about who his parents were.

His father left for Cologne when Fassbinder was six, and his mother was intermittently institutionalized for mental and physical ailments. Fassbinder subsequently spent long stretches of time essentially raising himself, casually entrusted to subletters who ignored him. His mother was open about her inattention to Fassbinder, saying later:

I was ten years old when Hitler came to power, and that means I had never known anything except the Hitler period and was completely marked by it, and when, in 1945, I saw how we had all been misused and how it had all been wrong, I realized how problematic bringing up anyone can be, and that I really was quite incapable of bringing anyone up myself, and so I rejected it.

Disturbed by his mother's remarriage, the adolescent Fassbinder grew unruly and was sent to boarding school, from which he escaped to live with his father. As a teenager in Cologne, he wrote passionate love letters to his father's new wife while also making excursions to gay bars — he had affairs with both men and women for the rest of his life, with an apparent preference for male lovers. Though his relationship to them was unusual and complex,

Fassbinder liked both his parents and never resented his upbringing, later casting his mother in several of his films.

Like many other creative and rebellious West German kids during the '60s, Fassbinder was drawn to cinema, which was emerging as the avant-garde medium of choice. In 1962, a dynamic group of young filmmakers, motivated partly by left-wing ideals, had convened at a film festival in Oberhausen, where they produced a manifesto demanding the creation of a “new style of film” that would be experimental and independent, “free from control of commercial partners.” The group adopted the slogan “Papa's cinema is dead.”

In 1966, at age twenty-one, Fassbinder sought admission to the brand-new German Film and Television Academy Berlin (DFFB). More than eight hundred candidates applied alongside him — every countercultural

youth in Germany, it seemed — and only thirty-five were admitted. Fassbinder applied once more the following year, submitting two films he'd made with the financial support of an older lover, and was again rejected.

In August 1967, Fassbinder stumbled into an underground theater in Munich, established six months earlier as an art house showcasing work primarily by the Oberhausen group. Action-Theater, writes Fassbinder scholar Wallace Steadman Watson, was “fifty-nine chairs ... grouped around saloon tables in what one critic called a ‘gloomy dive.’” Under the creative direction of its founders, a married couple named Ursula Strätz and Horst Söhnlein, Action-Theater had been transformed into a venue for avant-garde live plays.

Fascinated, Fassbinder joined the loose collective and was quickly jockeying with Söhnlein for authority. It was at Action-Theater that he collided with the student movement, which at that time was reaching fever pitch in cities across West Germany. And it was at Action-Theater that he came to know a few of those who would push the movement into its next, more violent phase — including Söhnlein and his political friends, future RAF core members Andreas Baader and Gudrun Ensslin.

The Oberhausen manifesto was characteristic of West German youth defiance in the '60s. In prior years, tensions had risen in the youth wing of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), which objected to its parent organization's

rightward drift. By 1961, the entire Sozialistische Deutsche Studentenbund (SDS), or Socialist German Student Union, had been expelled from the party.

Thus, the German SDS was able to chart an independent course as the primary engine for a socialist student movement that was mounted in and morphed throughout the 1960s. It bore no formal relation to the American SDS, but it followed a similar trajectory as the decade wore on, gaining and then losing momentum as sectarian factions earned prominence.

But that happened later. In the beginning, as students began to protest at their universities and in the streets, their movement served as the vehicle for the generation's frustrations with a nation that, rebuilt after the war, failed to live up to the promises of its architects. The left-wing journalist Ulrike Meinhof, a political radical with a soft, cool, and deliberate manner that disarmed her opponents and won her a wide audience, explained the movement's perspective and lofty ambitions on a panel televised in February 1967 called “Authority in Decline”:

Parents have lost their credibility due to their association with Nazism. The Catholic Church has lost its credibility by protecting itself behind National Socialism ... Those representing authority are no longer convincing ... If one has the desire or presumption to educate a population, one must create conditions of real democracy. Then an authentic authority

will be acceptable. The abuse of authority will be annihilated; servility and submission will no longer exist. This is not possible without changing society in concrete terms.

A few months later, in April 1967, a group of anarchists led by the young Fritz Teufel were arrested with great fanfare for plotting to throw bombs at visiting US vice president Hubert Humphrey. When it was discovered that the “bombs” were actually just yogurt and flour, the press dubbed them the “Pudding Assassins.” Later, Teufel would gravitate to the RAF and engage in actual political violence. But for now, the incident only embarrassed the police and popularized the movement further. The youth of Germany were inclined to side with the pranksters and their leader, Teufel — which is the German word for “devil,” enhancing the general aura of mischief — over the clueless authorities.

In June 1967, matters became serious when a student named Benno Ohnesorg was killed by a police officer at a demonstration in West Berlin. A photograph of a young woman protestor kneeling over Ohnesorg's body — strikingly similar to the iconic Kent State shooting photo from the United States a few years later — flooded the press, generating popular sympathy for the young dissidents. The student movement's ranks swelled, and its protests increased in frequency and intensity. This was the political context in which young Fassbinder arrived at Action-Theater late that summer.

### “Stop the Terror of the Young Reds Now!”

If Fassbinder had been accepted to the film academy in Berlin, he would have crossed paths with left-wing radicals and future militants there as well.

“Instead of proving themselves worthy of a grant, the most gifted students turned out to be rebellious left-wingers,” said film student Holger Meins, who, unlike Fassbinder, was accepted to the DFFB's inaugural class in 1966. The new institution, to the consternation of its founders, began to produce works like “The Red Flag,” which portrayed film students running through West Berlin traffic waving (naturally) enormous red flags. Meins appeared in that film and later went on to join the RAF.

Instead, Fassbinder's introduction to the radical left came in the form of Söhnlein, Action-Theater's first leader, and his friends Baader and Ensslin, who were allegedly known to interrupt the group's performances to demand that it escalate from confrontational experimental theater to direct political action. Eventually, this trio would make the transition themselves.

Söhnlein and Fassbinder were both intense figures, prone to creative manias and fits of rage. At first, they got along well: sometime in 1967, Fassbinder moved into the apartment shared by Söhnlein and his wife, the theater's cofounder, Ursula Strätz. As the year went on, though, Söhnlein became jealous of Fassbinder, not only because of his growing influence at Action-Theater

---

**Fassbinder found himself on the receiving end of boos and jeers by radicals who denounced him, to which he allegedly replied something to the effect of, “All leftists are idiots.”**

---

but because Söhnlein suspected Fassbinder and Strätz were having an affair.

One night, mad with jealousy, Söhnlein wrecked the theater. According to Thomsen:

Not a single chair, beer glass, or plank of the stage was left in one piece. Söhnlein tried to lend his destruction of the Action Theatre a political justification. It was not exactly correct for a political activist to be accused of such a petty bourgeois emotion as jealousy.

Thereafter, Fassbinder was the de facto leader of Action-Theater, while Söhnlein increasingly spent time with Baader and Ensslin.

Outside the theater, conflict between authorities and protestors was rapidly intensifying. Alongside Ulrike Meinhof, another leader had emerged on the young left: Rudi Dutschke, a member of the German SDS and an outspoken Marxist who studied labor movement history. As Dutschke became more prominent in SDS and in the public eye, he began to

take aim at the capitalist press. And the capitalist press aimed back.

At the time, the newspaper empire owned by the conservative media tycoon Axel Springer controlled 40 percent of all newspaper circulation in Germany. For months, Springer papers had run scaremongering headlines about the student left. Soon, they began to point the finger at Dutschke in particular, running an article entitled “Stop the Terror of the Young Reds Now!” in February 1968, accompanied by Dutschke’s photograph. In March, Springer papers upped the ante by publishing the headline “Stop Dutschke Now,” along with five photographs of him.

On April 2, two large department stores were burned down in Frankfurt as an act of protest against capitalism and imperialism, an event that dramatically escalated the conflict between the student movement and the West German establishment. The people behind the arson were none other than Horst Söhnlein, Andreas Baader, and Gudrun

Ensslin, who had used bombs made in Söhnlein’s apartment. If the killing of Benno Ohnesorg was the first shot in a real war between the young left and the authorities, the Frankfurt bombing was the return volley.

Segments of the West German left had begun to show their first serious inclinations toward political violence. It may not have been the student movement’s dominant orientation, but neither was it pushed to the margins. Director Klaus Lemke began work on a feature film, *The Arsonists*, inspired by the Frankfurt bombing, which centered on a band of left-wing terrorist youth looking glamorous in sultry makeup and leather jackets. Cinema student Holger Meins made an instructional film about how to fashion Molotov cocktails.

The SPD and the trade unions were spooked by this new tenor and began distancing themselves from the student movement. For his part, Rudi Dutschke was avowedly opposed to such tactics. In fact, it was Dutschke — not

Antonio Gramsci, as is often alleged — who coined the term “long march through the institutions” to describe his preferred strategy for winning socialism. But that political distinction didn’t prevent a would-be assassin from heeding the Springer papers’ call to stop Dutschke in his tracks.

On April 11, a young anti-communist zealot named Josef Bachmann shot Dutschke in the head three times. Bachmann had a copy of a Springer paper with an article about Dutschke in his bag and, when in custody, divulged that he’d been inspired by the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr in the United States one week earlier. Dutschke miraculously lived, though he suffered a debilitating brain injury and died eleven years later of complications. The assassination attempt elicited a ferocious response on April 14, Easter Sunday, when demonstrators attacked Springer headquarters, smashing windows and setting cars ablaze.

Action-Theater quickly prepared and staged a play called “Axel Caesar Haarmann,” a mockery of Axel Caesar Springer, which ran starting in April, as the so-called Easter disturbances were still underway. The playbill read: “This has to do with Springer! (and the rotten democracy which allows him to have power).” Per Watson’s account:

The playbill announced that proceeds would be used to help pay medical costs for the wounded radical student leader Rudi Dutschke and to support the [SDS] legal rights fund. At the end of the



performance Fassbinder stood on stage with a water hose, recalling police handling of street demonstrators. A voice claiming to be that of the theater management announced over the loud-speaker that the production had been shut down and the audience must clear out; those who did not do so actually got doused.

The Easter disturbances and their aftershocks, combined with the May 1968 youth revolt in neighboring France, inspired a crackdown on protestors and their ideological peers from all levels of government. Dramatic emergency decrees were issued, curtailing civil liberties. Police arrested Söhnlein for his role in the Frankfurt arson on June 6, and Munich authorities shut down Action-Theater that same day. Officially, they cited dangerous electrical wiring, but the timing made it obvious that the move was politically motivated.

Sometime between the Springer play and the shuttering of Action-Theater, Fassbinder slipped off to Paris, where he was arrested during the cataclysmic youth revolt there — “whether as a participant or an observer,” Watson writes, “is not clear.” It was an apt metaphor for Fassbinder’s relationship to the Left for the remainder of his life and career.

#### “Some of Them Are Friends of Mine.”

In 1972, Thomsen asked Fassbinder what a movie about the RAF would look like. Fassbinder answered, “I would not make a film at all, because some of them are friends of mine.” Perhaps he had closer friendships with Baader, Ensslin, and Söhnlein than the record suggests. After all, the latter may have been his creative rival, but he was also his flatmate.

Or perhaps Fassbinder meant that, because he had known them and weathered the intensity of that political period alongside them,

---

**If the killing of Benno Ohnesorg was the first shot in a real war between the young left and the authorities, the Frankfurt bombing was the return volley.**

---

he harbored some tender feeling for the wayward young radicals — that they were not, to him, a mere source of fascination and lurid entertainment, as they were for much of West German society. This latter interpretation is supported by an interview in 1974 in which Fassbinder said, per Watson, that “although he would like to make a film about those members of the Generation of ’68 who had turned to terrorism, he could not do so because he did not know how to portray their ‘strength,’ their ‘great intellectual potential,’ and their ‘over-sensitive despair.’”

Whatever affection he may have had for his radical peers, Fassbinder did not follow in their footsteps. By the time the last of the mass student demonstrations occurred in late 1968, Fassbinder had already moved on to writing and directing experimental plays under the title of a new project called “Anti-Theater.” And when, in 1970, Ulrike Meinhof sprang Andreas Baader out of the prison

where he was being held for the Frankfurt firebombing, inaugurating what the press dubbed the Baader-Meinhof Group and precipitating the formation of the Red Army Faction, Fassbinder was already emerging as a major presence in German cinema with subversive homages to American genre films.

When Fassbinder returned his attention to political matters a few years into his film career, the result only showed how divergent his perspective had become from that of his erstwhile comrades. While the RAF was ramping up its activities in late 1971 and early 1972 — publishing pamphlets like “The Urban Guerrilla Concept” and putting its principles into practice by robbing banks and killing police officers in shoot-outs — Fassbinder was laying the groundwork for *Eight Hours Don’t Make a Day*.

Though Fassbinder was no political activist, his pursuits during that time were much more faithful than

his counterparts’ to the original animating philosophy of the German youth movement, the socialist commitments that had first propelled them to split from the SPD. As he developed the script for *Eight Hours Don’t Make a Day*, Fassbinder held exploratory meetings and conducted extensive interviews with factory workers to get a feel for their home and work lives. It was the type of activity one would undertake if one sought to reflect working-class people’s own condition back to them in order to encourage them to stand up for themselves. His approach, in other words, was more Rudi Dutschke than Baader-Meinhof.

The RAF, meanwhile, heavily influenced by armed anti-colonial insurgencies in the global periphery that mapped awkwardly onto the West German situation, had become wholly devoted to a strategy of ultraleft vigilantism. Despite the fact that the minoritarian RAF was primarily focused on terrorizing enemies at the expense of building alliances with potential friends, the group actually garnered a surprising amount of public support at first. A poll even revealed that one in ten people would be willing to harbor an RAF fugitive in their house.

The RAF was certainly more popular than the Weathermen in the United States — a contemporaneous and analogous organization with a similar philosophy that had emerged from the rubble of the American SDS — despite the Weathermen causing far less death and destruction. Unlike American liberals,

---

## Fassbinder’s series gestured down another path: mass participation in class struggle, chiefly in the workplace but also beyond it.

---

German liberals were haunted by regret that they or their parents hadn’t put up a fierce enough fight to prevent the rise of fascism. When the RAF took extreme action against injustice, that group was harder for some to dismiss. Still, popular sympathy dwindled as more people were injured and killed in RAF campaigns.

Ironically, given the probable circumstances of its cancellation, *Eight Hours Don’t Make a Day* proposed an alternative strategic vision for rectifying injustice, one that didn’t rely on a small but militant faction outfitted with bullets and bombs. Even in its truncated version, Fassbinder’s series gestured down another path: mass participation in class struggle, chiefly in the workplace but also beyond it (there’s a subplot about an effort to establish a kindergarten in a working-class neighborhood), with an emphasis on practicing solidarity across lines of difference (another subplot is about overcoming prejudice against an immigrant worker). But distinctions like these were lost in the conservative backlash to high-profile RAF activities.

*Eight Hours Don’t Make a Day* is at times shocking in its frank endorsement of Marxist ideas. The series is peppered with lines of dialogue that echo the language of the Left while also sounding perfectly natural in context. “We have more power than we think,” says Marion, urging Jochen to call factory management’s bluff. “You have no idea how much you own,” says Jochen’s coworker Manfred — referring, in a clever double entendre, to Jochen’s possessions as he’s helping Jochen move apartments, and leading to an explicit conversation about work and exploitation.

The series shows Fassbinder in rare idealistic form. Its existence alone is an expression of genuine hopefulness; there’s really no reason to go to all the trouble if resistance is futile. *Eight Hours Don’t Make a Day* marks a moment in time when Fassbinder’s political perspective had matured *and* when it still seemed possible for that perspective to shape the world. Over the next few years, however, Fassbinder would come to feel that the window of possibility had closed.

The last episode of *Eight Hours Don’t Make a Day* aired in March 1973. Later that year, a US-backed coup in Chile overthrew Salvador Allende’s socialist government, while an international oil crisis provided the pretext for a global financial restructuring in Western capital’s favor. As the ’70s continued, the entire world came to recognize the cold sovereignty of incipient neoliberalism. In West Germany, the RAF became the public face of resistance to it, overshadowing the rest of the Left — which, in any case, had been diminished by two successive waves of repression in 1968 and 1972.

By 1974, the so-called first generation of the RAF — including former popular journalist Ulrike Meinhof and former avant-garde theater scene mainstays Andreas Baader and Gudrun Ensslin — were all imprisoned. Former film student Holger Meins was dead, having perished during a hunger strike behind bars, and the others weren’t long for the world.

### “All Leftists Are Idiots!”

Fassbinder’s *Mother Küsters Goes to Heaven* was released in 1975.

---

**The RAF actually garnered a surprising amount of public support at first. A poll even revealed that one in ten people would be willing to harbor an RAF fugitive in their house.**

---

**The show pioneered a format that suffused the media: a near-worship of the signifiers of wealth, fame, and power.**

It was quite plainly a film about the Left, and the Left hated it. Thomsen describes its reception this way:

The audience at the premiere consisted precisely of the groups at whom the film was aimed, that is, journalists and militant students. The atmosphere was so volatile that the film's dialogue could not always be understood, and a planned discussion between Fassbinder and the audience was completely drowned out in abuse and insults. To the angry question, why the film only dealt with the idiots on the Left and not with its more constructive tendencies, Fassbinder replied bad-temperedly, "All leftists are idiots!" At that there was a deafening commotion in the auditorium, and the discussion had to be broken off.

*Mother Küsters* is indeed rough viewing for a socialist. The film revolves around an old working-class woman, Mother Küsters, whose husband kills his manager at a factory and then kills himself. The vulnerable Mother Küsters

divulges details about her husband's personal life to a tabloid journalist, who twists her words to portray him as a terrible brute. Desperate for understanding, she is befriended by two members of the Communist Party, a man and a woman who are clearly of a higher class. They suggest that her husband's actions actually sprang from egalitarian impulse, but that he expressed his frustrations in the wrong way. He should have taken collective political action instead.

Mother Küsters is persuaded and joins the party herself, even speaking in public at a left-wing political event. But the communists drop her when election season rolls around, their focus quickly shifting from publicizing the abysmal lives of factory workers to electoral campaigning. Bereft and adrift, Mother Küsters is taken in by a young man she'd met at the political event, whom the communists describe as an anarchist. The anarchist explains that the communists are members of a bourgeois party and lack revolutionary courage. If her objective is to convince the world of her husband's decency, to

exonerate his character by indicting the system that ground him down, then what she needs is direct action.

The anarchist talks Mother Küsters into joining him and his comrades in staging a direct action at the tabloid office. When there, the anarchists pull out their weapons and take the office workers hostage, phoning the authorities to demand the release of all political prisoners in West Germany. The police arrive, and Mother Küsters is killed in the crossfire. All told, it's admittedly difficult to see *Mother Küsters* as anything other than the story of how members of a crazed left neglect and exploit a grieving working-class woman and ultimately get her killed.

Fassbinder should have predicted that *Mother Küsters* would offend the Left, but, despite the obvious interpretation, he apparently didn't mean it as an insult. According to Thomsen, who spoke with him afterward, he was taken aback by the harsh response. The episode calls to mind something that happened the year prior: Fassbinder had written a play that sought to explore the heady and challenging notion of how domination binds people in a complex relationship of mutual dependency, a point he made by subverting the categories of oppressor and oppressed. Drawing on a previously published novel, his play featured a Jewish character who oppresses Germans — knowingly and intentionally, as retribution for the Holocaust. He was subsequently roundly accused of antisemitism.

It was the worst controversy of his career, and it took a toll on Fassbinder, who was as sensitive as he was provocative. His substance abuse problems intensified as the dispute wore on. His mental state was already fragile when he began working on *Mother Küsters*, and it appears he immediately made a version of the same mistake, expecting his audience to take things allegorically rather than literally and giving himself no leeway if they failed or refused. That the cinematic style was familiar and popularly accessible, rather than obscure and avant-garde, didn't help matters. It wasn't at all obvious to viewers that they were supposed to be joining him in a thought experiment.

A careful viewing of *Mother Küsters*, especially in light

of everything else we know about Fassbinder's political views and encounters, suggests that it's not an indictment so much as a lament. After all, the communists are presented as quite rational; the viewer is just as convinced as Mother Küsters by their line of reasoning. Their crime is that their rationality burdens them with certain bourgeois practical obligations, which they attend to dutifully while doing nothing for the poor woman. The anarchists, meanwhile, are able to intervene swiftly and dramatically where the communists can't, but only because their irrationality leaves them totally unburdened.

This is a rather profound meditation on the dilemma of the Left: to act decisively, one must risk insanity, and to act sensibly, one must risk inaction and irrelevance.

*Mother Küsters* isn't a sympathetic portrayal of the Left, but neither is it a condemnation. It's a contemplation of the limitations of these two available options, delivered at the precise historical moment when both strategies had proven disastrously ineffectual.

The film's title is a callback to a 1929 German film, *Mother Krause's Journey to Happiness*, a favorite with the '68 generation for its revolutionary optimism. *Mother Küsters* is the dose of pessimism served by that generation's total failure to stop the advance of neoliberalism — or, indeed, to change much of anything. "All leftists are idiots," then, not because some other political ideology was superior, but because the Left refused to appreciate the bind it was in.

When the film made it to America in 1977, the *New York Times* called it a:

witty, spare, beautifully performed political comedy that, according to an early synopsis I have, was supposed to end with Mrs. Kusters being gunned down by the police. Nothing so wild happens — which makes me wonder about the system of checks and balances that is at work within the artist.

Fassbinder had changed the ending for American audiences. Instead of dying in a hail of bullets, Mother Küsters is abandoned when the anarchists lose interest in their half-baked plan. She meets a sweet, elderly night watchman and leaves the tabloid office with him, no longer under any illusions



that politics can change her life but also no longer desperately alone. There was no studio or distributor pressuring him to make this alteration. Fassbinder simply decided to soften the blow.

#### “One of Us?”

As the decade went on, the RAF continued making mayhem, culminating in what was known as the German Autumn in 1977. Ulrike Meinhof had hanged herself in her cell the year before, but the remainder of the first generation were still alive in Stammheim Prison, including Baader, Ensslin, and their comrades Jan-Carl Raspe and Irmgard Möller, who had been living in an urban commune with old Pudding Assassin Fritz Teufel. In April 1977, the first three were sentenced to life in prison.

Two months later, the “second generation” of the RAF killed the head of a major German bank in a failed attempt to kidnap him. In September, they successfully kidnapped Hanns Martin Schleyer, the president of the Confederation of German Employers’ Associations — also a former SS officer, a testament to the inadequacy of denazification — and held him hostage as they demanded the release of eleven RAF members, including the four at Stammheim. The authorities created a well-resourced crisis committee to handle the matter but had no intention of giving a single inch to the RAF.

From the beginning, the RAF had a close relationship with the Popular Front for the Liberation

of Palestine (PFLP). Many of the first generation had fled to Jordan and received paramilitary training from the PFLP after they were briefly paroled following the Frankfurt firebombing nearly a decade earlier. Now, that close relationship paid off: in October, four PFLP members hijacked a flight from Majorca to Frankfurt with eighty-six passengers aboard.

The hijackers flew the plane to Rome to refuel. While grounded, they echoed the original RAF demands and issued a few of their own. The plane then bounced around the Mediterranean and the Middle East, landing in Cyprus, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen. In Yemen, a member of the German crisis team boarded the plane to negotiate. The hijackers then flew it to Mogadishu, Somalia, where German authorities were waiting to ambush them. The hijackers were all either killed or arrested, and all passengers were rescued.

When news of the failed hijacking reached the second generation of RAF members, they killed their hostage, Schleyer. When the first generation in prison heard about it, they killed themselves — supposedly with guns smuggled into Stammheim by their lawyers, though many still suspect that Ensslin, Baader, and Raspe were murdered by German and international authorities in an act of retribution (Möller survived stab wounds and denies having attempted suicide). Fassbinder reportedly believed that his old acquaintances were murdered.

The next year, Fassbinder was asked to submit a short film to the omnibus work *Germany in Autumn*. It was German cinema’s response to the actions of the RAF. If the Berlin film school project “The Red Flag” featuring Holger Meins announced the beginning of a particular era of West German left politics, *Germany in Autumn* marked its completion.

Fassbinder’s contribution is dynamic and strange, consisting of scenes in which he, playing a caricature of himself, argues with both his real-life mother and his lover, berating the latter for his complacent liberalism while browbeating the former into confessing a longing for the strong hand of a führer. This was a far cry from the political lucidity and optimism of *Eight Hours Don’t Make a Day*, or even the misunderstood melancholy of *Mother Küsters Goes to Heaven*. By now, it was well known that Fassbinder had a serious substance abuse problem and that he would frequently devolve into temper tantrums and even violence. He satirized his own inner turmoil in *Germany in Autumn*, depicting himself using drugs, drinking to excess, and crying.

Fassbinder’s final political film, *The Third Generation*, was released in 1979. The opening sequence features a quote from the West German chancellor thanking “the legal experts of Germany for not challenging the constitutional legality of everything. I refer to the operation in Mogadishu, and maybe other things related to Mogadishu,” an apparent reference

to covert actions the government took to neutralize the RAF.

*The Third Generation* finds Fassbinder at his most cynical. The film is more experimental than his earlier political works, with a disorienting soundtrack that often makes the dialogue difficult to discern. The plot concerns an industrialist displeased that demand from the West German police for his computers has tapered off with the decrease in left-wing terrorism. With police support, he sends his former secretary to infiltrate a cell of disaffected would-be radicals, animated more by boredom and malaise than revolutionary zeal, and inspire them to violence. The film culminates with the group, dressed as clowns, kidnapping the industrialist himself, unaware of his role. As they make a hostage video, the industrialist smiles.

As Watson points out, *The Third Generation* is not an oblique reference to the student left, nor even to those disposed to political violence who emerged from it. It’s about “come-lately West German

## Fassbinder satirized his own inner turmoil, depicting himself using drugs, drinking to excess, and crying.

terrorists” who were “active at the end of the 1970s and who, according to Fassbinder, knew little of what had motivated their forebears of his generation.”

“It’s precisely those people who don’t have any reasons, any motivation, any despair, any utopia, who can easily be used by others,” Fassbinder said about *The Third Generation*. The film was not a damning portrait of Fassbinder’s old bedfellows, then, but a darkly comedic jab at their offspring and imitators, as well as a bleak reflection on the pitiful remnants of a movement that sought to transform the world. Snippets of Rudi Dutschke speeches play in the background of the film, twisting the knife in a collective wound.

Most of what is written about Fassbinder takes little interest in his relationship to the Left. This is understandable, since his vibrant and provocative films were primarily concerned with other subjects altogether. But when today’s socialists watch *Eight Hours Don’t Make a Day*, *Mother Küsters Goes to Heaven*, *Germany*

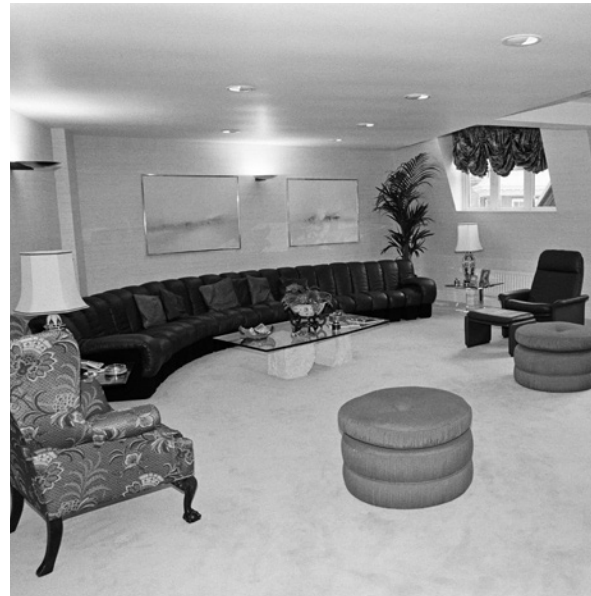
*in Autumn*, and *The Third Generation* — or catch the tendrils of leftist rhetoric and political commentary in many of his other films — they will no doubt be inclined to ask, quizzically: “Was Fassbinder one of us?”

The answer, without a doubt, is that he was. The mixed messages we receive from these works are explained not by fickle political commitments but by Fassbinder’s swelling and then waning optimism as it became clear that his side had definitively lost the battle, if not necessarily the war.

Many on the West German left at the time thought that the director, who by then had become one of the most internationally celebrated figures in Germany, had abandoned them in his pessimism. But perhaps not. Rainer Werner Fassbinder died in 1982 at age thirty-seven from an overdose of cocaine and barbiturates. In his apartment, surrounding his body, were notes for a new film project: “Rosa L.,” about the life of the socialist revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg. ■

# When Our Homes Went *Miami Vice*

As the Reagan era kicked into overdrive, Americans abandoned earthy and organic home decor to turn their residences into cold, sleek totems to upper-class aspiration.



One of the events I remember most vividly from my childhood straddling the 1970s and 1980s was The Week My Parents Redecorated the Living Room.

Around 1985 or 1986, in a single fell swoop, our old living room furniture and decorations vanished. Comfortable leather chairs, deep-pile shag rugs, and dark imitation wood shelving disappeared. In their place was pale pink wallpaper, vaguely ethereal prints streaked with yet more muted pastels, glass-doored black lacquer entertainment centers, a glass coffee table, hardwood parquet floors, and,

most memorably, *brass*. Everywhere. Brass lamps, brass-accented chandeliers, brass kitchen fixtures.

Even at age ten, I felt a rude cultural awakening: our house had gone from looking familiar, warm, and cozy to appearing angular, contrived, and deeply *aspirational*. My home suddenly looked less like the post-hippie clutter seen at the Keatons' house on *Family Ties* and more like the doctor-headed households on *The Cosby Show* and *Growing Pains*.

My family was not the only one to leave messy home decor behind at the peak of the Reagan era. Before

me, I have two Sears Christmas “Wish Book” catalogues — one from 1980, one from 1985. The Sears Wish Book was a unifying cultural force in the era before the internet, uniting both the working class and the rising middle class in a resolutely middle-of-the-road (and white) image of what American homes and families looked like. The glimpses of home decor in the 1980 edition are inevitably reminiscent of the design trends of the previous decade: lots of imitation wood grain, loud patterns on furniture and wallpaper, deep shag rugs,

neo-Victorian and colonial touches in kitchenware and wall hangings.

These 1970s designs were organic — on the walls, one sees prints of birds in flight, with floral motifs on vacuum cleaner bags. Even the appliances are clad in dark-stained imitation wood. In all, these motifs hint at a nation looking backward, or at least one conscious of its own past. But by 1985, this peculiar brand of American working-class baroque had vanished almost completely from the Sears catalogue as well as from television screens, in both commercials and series. Appliances suddenly became sleeker, home decor choices less crafty and fusty.

At the center of these more minimalist design trends trickling down to the suburban middle and working classes was the sociological and cultural phenomenon of the yuppie. Young urban professionals, typically baby boomer couples with one or two kids (or even those with double incomes and no kids at all, i.e. “DINKS”), had become a media cliché by the mid-1980s. Of course, this kind of consumer demographic hairsplitting was itself an explicit ploy dreamed up at think tanks like the Stanford Research Institute (now SRI International).

SRI International's Values and Lifestyles (VALS) questionnaire, devised in 1978 and deployed in the 1980s by many top corporations, was designed to sort consumers into “psychographic” categories to make them easier to target with marketing. The yuppie

emerged both economically and politically as a powerful totem of “achiever”-style psychographics in the 1980s. Even the 1984 election wasn't immune to the trend, with Democratic Presidential contender Gary Hart widely referred to as “the yuppie candidate.”

Central to the yuppie's identity was that “U” in the acronym: “urban.” This meant apartment living instead of the suburban tract home popularized in the first conservative rush of postwar consumer lifestyles. In the first appearance of “yuppie” in print in 1980, *Chicago* magazine's Dan Rottenberg expressly noted yuppies were “rebelling against the stodgy suburban lifestyles of their parents.” VALS-style assessments deemed yuppies adventurous and desirous of new experiences in dining, decor, hobbies, and urban lifestyles. This meant gentrifying low-income urban neighborhoods and putting a unique design stamp on older buildings.

Eventually, these design choices filtered out to the suburban professional and working classes. The yuppie demographic was ultimately key to advertisers not because of its size or any political coherence as a class, but because of both its affluence and influence, culturally magnified by 1980s mass media. Media studies theorist Jane Feuer notes in her book on “television and Reaganism,” *Seeing Through the Eighties*, that advertising journal *American Demographics* admitted “the downscale side of the [baby] boom is much larger,” and that “people are likely to buy products

and services that make them feel more upscale than they are.” Feuer goes on to examine the yuppie as a character on 1980s television and its power as “media image construction” in the hands of marketers and television programmers looking for advertising synergy: “Like so many phenomena of the eighties — including Ronald Reagan himself — the yuppie was a nonexistent phantom figure whose effect as image was nevertheless real.”

Which brings us back to those “downscale” baby boomer suburbs where living rooms in ranch houses were suddenly being made to look like upscale Manhattan or LA or Chicago Loop apartments. It's a dynamic satirized in Tim Burton's *Beetlejuice* (1988), in which a rustic but cozy New England house is reborn — over the protests of the former owners' ghosts — as a chilly Soho loft, brick glass and all. It's the new owners and their cold, uncanny, almost macabre modern decor and art that must be “exorcised” from the formerly warm, wood-accented home.

*Beetlejuice* is a rare example of an American hauntology: ghosts of a world that might have been exist out of phase with the world as it actually is. The ghosts that remained at my childhood family's house? Years of credit card debt for my folks, and the realization that a seemingly anodyne incident from my childhood really meant that the inescapable forces of capital could literally possess our home at any time, and set up shop. ■

## Anthem of the Commoners

Pulp's 1995 hit "Common People" isn't just a Britpop classic — it's a more honest and brutal analysis of class than you'll hear in the media today.



There have been no less than two famous singers from the city of Sheffield born with the last name "Cocker."

The second-most famous of them is the blues shouter Joe Cocker, a moniker that immediately evokes working men's clubs and kitchen sink dramas. It's the kind of name you can stamp onto an album entitled "Sheffield Steel" with a straight face.

"Jarvis," on the other hand, is not a common working-class name. It sounds vaguely French or continental to the English ear — it's *fancy*. There was a character in the 1990s British comedy show *The*

*Mary Whitehouse Experience* called "Jarvis," but he was an aristocratic middle-aged gay man. Which is why it's so surprising that a man named Jarvis Cocker wrote the wildly popular anthem "Common People," one of the few hit songs of the 1990s explicitly about class and class conflict.

"Common People," recorded by Cocker's legendary Sheffield band Pulp, was released in 1995 as the lead single off their fifth album *Different Class*. It was a massive hit in the UK at the height of the Britpop era, though that's probably the least notable thing about it. The story told by its lyrics is by now incredibly familiar to anyone

remotely interested in music: our hero in the song woos a student at Central Saint Martins, a London art college. She comes from Greece to study sculpture and tells him that she wants to "live like common people." (A persistent rumor, denied by all concerned, has it that "Common People" is about the leftist artist Danae Stratou, a contemporary of Cocker's at Saint Martins who is married to *Jacobin* contributor Yanis Varoufakis.)

Genial at first, he takes her on a tour of the sights and sounds of working-class life, growing more and more infuriated by the affectation of the experience, until

he eventually rages at the impossibility of her ever understanding class solely through signifiers and lifestyles ("Smoke some fags and play some pool / Pretend you never went to school.") As the song's orchestra of cheap second-hand synthesizers builds to its peak, he cries: "You will never understand / How it feels to live your life / With no meaning or control / And with nowhere left to go."

Here and on the album *Different Class*, class anxieties are confronted in ways that are sometimes exciting and other times disturbing. In "I Spy," this takes the form of a lurid revenge fantasy at the expense of a rich West Londoner. In "Monday Morning," the subject spends the weekend drinking and dancing to escape the monotony of poverty ("Why live in the world / When you can live in your head?"). In "Live Bed Show," the story is of a couple whose affluence is unable to disguise their falling out of love.

But Pulp was always a very odd group to be fixating on the class war. They weren't street fighters or punk rockers — far from it. They released their first album in 1983 and toiled away as a third-rate indie band until the early 1990s, when they finally blossomed into a retro-futurist synth-pop group with semi-sung, semi-spoken lyrics about sex, clothes, and interiors that cast an eye toward the small details of urban and suburban life, making their songs strange and vivid. A lot of the lyrics are about working-class life, broadly conceived — the first-person tale of teenage

optimism in "Inside Susan" is told from the top deck of a municipal bus, and the incredible 1992 B-side "Sheffield: Sex City" centers on the famous, Brutalist Park Hill flats, while much of 1994's *His 'n' Hers* zeroes in on the culture of distinction in the tawdry new suburbs.

So far, so English. This sort of cataloging of particularly British minutiae goes right back to the Kinks in the 1960s, though it is seldom done as well as on Pulp's obsessive, fetishistic records.

"Common People" is about something else entirely. It can be seen fairly clearly as an intervention into Britpop's warring North/South clichés — in the case of the band Blur, middle-class boys from Essex playing with the signifiers of East End Cockney life, or in the case of Oasis, smart working-class boys from suburban

Manchester pretending they were much stupider and rougher than they actually were. "Common People" lists all the things you can buy, wear, or do in order to live the life, if that's what you want — you can "smoke some fags and play some pool," "rent a flat above a shop."

But what you won't be able to do is make yourself actually poor ("If you called your dad, he could stop it all"). You'll always know it's a temporary condition, with relatives or inherited wealth there to rescue you. Poverty is not, in this song, something you can simulate. It's about having no hope, no prospects, no way out. All the rest is meaningless, and to think that "poor is cool" is insulting — something the Left has too often been guilty of.

The fact that Pulp was able to make such a clear statement

**Pulp was always a very odd group to be fixating on the class war. They weren't street fighters or punk rockers — far from it.**



of what class actually *is*, as opposed to writing a song about the *epiphenomena* of class usually obsessed over by marketers, psychologists, and rock musicians, is partly owed to the band's members being hard to define in terms of traditional class position themselves. Some had parents who worked in factories but most didn't — certainly not Jarvis Cocker. Sheffield is a city of steelworks but also of universities, beautiful parks, and lush Victorian suburbs.

The group's aesthetic was a deliberately nerdy, gawkish one, with Cocker accentuating his thinness and awkwardness. Even their clothes were so horrendously unfashionable that they eventually came out the other end as "retro." They didn't try to be *typically* northern and working

class because they weren't, not quite. But none of them went to private schools and none had inherited wealth, and, like most young people in Sheffield, they spent the 1980s on the dole.

When class is defined by the British media as little more than one's accent plus geographic location and then wielded as a cudgel to beat a young and propertyless left over the head, cultural products like "Common People" and *Different Class* have an enduring relevance. What this music did was to tell people two hugely important things. One was addressed to the working-class people who don't fit in — who don't play pool or smoke fags, who don't talk in Cockney or Manc accents, who might be uninterested in sports or pints, who *might not even be heterosexual* —

to tell them that none of this had anything to do with social class.

The other was directed toward those who would cosplay class, either on the basis of something they once were or something they'd like to be — a niche marketing category, not something that *happens* to you, defines you, and can one day even destroy your life. That's how it came to be that the most important song about class made in the 1990s was by someone who dressed like a 1970s geography teacher and had the name of a comedy character — someone who, not coincidentally, never once sang about class again.

After the song became a hit and finally made him a star, Jarvis Cocker was no longer working-class, and so he said nothing more about it. If only others had the same restraint. ■

---

**The most important song about class made in the 1990s was by someone who dressed like a 1970s geography teacher and had the name of a comedy character.**

---

## China's Slacker Superstar

---

**From America's Kurt Cobain to China's Lelush, pop stars earn their adoration not only from performing but from *refusing* to perform.**

This April, a strange story broke across the internet about a young, Mandarin-speaking Russian man known as "Lelush" who'd spent months on a Chinese reality television show, apparently against his will.

The show, *Produce Camp 2021*, was the fourth season of a franchise that first began in South Korea in 2016 and has now expanded to Japan as well. The premise is familiar terrain for reality show fans: aspiring pop stars jostle for the chance to form a boy or girl band (each season is gender-segregated), with participants whittled away through

competitive song-and-dance routines. Each week's survivors are decided by audience vote.

Lelush, born Vladislav Sidorov, ended up on *Produce Camp* — so the story goes — because he had been hired as a behind-the-scenes translator for the show's international contestants. A producer, taken with his good looks, put him in front of the camera instead, and Lelush — having realized too late that boy band boot camp was not his jam — began to intentionally sabotage his chances of victory.

He rapped sullenly, danced badly, and refused to smile.

Alas, unfortunately for our unwilling star, his tactics backfired — week after week, the viewers voted for Lelush to stay.

"Lelush is just like me at work, or every other laborer whose soul has withered as a result of their corporate job," wrote one *Produce Camp* fan on Weibo who was quoted in an article at RADII China, the English-language youth website. Lelush's apathy resonated with a generation of young Chinese citizens who, like so many of their global peers, live with the reality of skyrocketing rents, stagnant wages, unsatisfying jobs, and a pop scene that has been

---

**“Lelush is just like me at work, or every other laborer whose soul has withered as a result of their corporate job.”**

---

focus-grouped and vertically integrated to death. “Becoming a boy band member is not my dream,” Lelush told his viewing audience, who nevertheless continued to punish him with their love.

With his slacker attitude and greasy blond hair, Lelush brings to mind an earlier, American pop idol, Kurt Cobain, who likewise channeled the despondency of his audience. For his fans, Lelush embodied a generational malaise with its roots in material conditions. Cobain did the same, even if his chosen musical genre, punk rock, was intended to put Nirvana at odds with the kind of manufactured pop peddled on shows like *Produce Camp*.

Popular music, which has part of its origins in the music of African people who were enslaved in

North America, has always carried with it a righteous resistance to work. Sometimes, that resistance is more or less explicit, as in the wily blues of Bessie Smith, whose 1929 song “My Kitchen Man” celebrates a lover who quits his menial job at “Madam Buff’s” in order to have more time to pleasure her: “Wild about his turnip top / Like the way he warms my chop.” One can trace a line straight through from Bessie Smith to Prince — “Raspberry Beret” pays homage to slacking off a job at “a five-and-dime” in order to tryst “down by old man Johnson’s farm” with a new girl.

This strand of pop might be called the libertine tendency, and its values and affect differ from the slacker tendency, where resistance to work — including the work of being a pop star — is figured in

terms of feeling and doing less. But neither impulse would exert the fascination it does if pop didn’t also contain, even with its anti-work roots, the opposite propensity. In this case, the toil and sweat of the musician or pop star (the two are not synonymous) are taken as proof of their commitment to the art form. This, in turn, becomes a reason for the music industry’s ruling class, its major label owners and reality TV production companies, to exploit the labor of their contracted talent. Hard work, these bosses counsel, will reap its own reward — the lie is the same as it ever was.

For young people in today’s China, North America, and elsewhere, who have inherited a world of increasing wealth disparity and eroded labor conditions, the myth of class mobility is even more bitter.

There is no “getting ahead,” just a cycle of insecure work and permanent debt. Contemporary work is hyper-surveilled: it’s hard to imagine taking off down to old man Johnson’s farm when an employer expects you to be reachable twenty-four hours a day — and worse, to enjoy it, because work is meant to represent the totality of your life’s meaning. No wonder Lelush looked so miserable on *Produce Camp*; no wonder his signature song was called “Jackpot.” When survival feels like a lottery, it’s up to us to organize collectively, so that we all win. ■



## Blue-Collar Jocks

---

**In the 1970s, sports movies were funny, bitter comedies about working-class jocks taking aim at both the front office and the rich.**

One of the many great things about 1970s sports films is the irreverent way they treat the national anthem. In most of these movies, some poor singer or band has to struggle through our notoriously awful “Star-Spangled Banner” before the big game can start, every time giving the lie to the idea of an American people standing together as one.

While the song drags on, we generally see a montage of the players and the crowd, in a series of ragtag groupings, not at all united in the supposed land of the free and home of the brave. The

shots remind us of all that has come before in terms of bitter tensions, working-class rage, racial hatred, gender hostility, the failing economy, and, often, the increasingly corrupt world of sports.

Check out the opening ten minutes of *North Dallas Forty*, featuring the agonizing, hobbling, groaning wake-up routine of an aging pro football player (Nick Nolte) as he gets his half-destroyed body moving by popping pain pills, guzzling beer, and smoking marijuana. In such contexts, “The Star-Spangled

Banner,” with all its spurious glory, takes on even more discordant notes than usual.

It’s startling now to watch these popular films hit all their formulaic marks alongside an aggressive social commentary that makes modern cinema look timid and weak. The films I’m talking about include *Fat City* (1972), *The Longest Yard* (1974), *The Bad News Bears* (1976), *Rocky* (1976), *Slap Shot* (1977), *Breaking Away* (1979), and, if you allow for dystopian sci-fi elements, *Rollerball* and *Death Race 2000* (both 1975). They all reflect facets

---

**Sports are played against the backdrop of an industrial economy in collapse, with unemployment surging and infrastructure crumbling.**

---

of America's long, bleak 1970s recession. Sports are played against the backdrop of an industrial economy in collapse, with unemployment surging and infrastructure crumbling. As the nation stumbles and falls, the corporate vultures in the front office are circling, ready to pick the bones clean.

Representing those elements in a clear-sighted, often harshly realistic way, the films tend to be shot on location in shabby, degenerating cities and towns, like the comedy *Breaking Away*, filmed entirely in Bloomington, Indiana, in order to emphasize the class war between the affluent Indiana University out-of-towners and the hardscrabble local kids

who are sneered at as "cutters" — children of those who once worked the now-abandoned quarries.

Even the lightest of the sports comedies are tough-minded, shot through with equal parts angst and melancholy. Take *The Bad News Bears*, an enormous hit that is as "feel-good" as a 1970s sports film can get. Its seemingly low-stakes emotional impact hangs on whether Morris Buttermaker (Walter Matthau), a shambling, middle-aged, alcoholic pool cleaner who was once a mediocre Minor League ball player, can coach the worst team in Little League Baseball history to victory. In return, he gets an extra couple of bucks a week paid under the table.

These films' protagonists are almost all natural-born losers wrecked by life, so hugely flawed that any act of competence, courage, or decency becomes thrilling. If they've ever attained celebrity for their athletic skills, those days are going fast or long gone, as is the case in the gritty, profane, and hilarious comedy *Slap Shot*, starring Paul Newman as a former minor league hockey star and current coach of a failing team. Newman's character is just another aging player trying to coast on his former glory a little while longer. But the owner has already sold the team as a tax write-off, and the town in which it's based, a blue-collar Pennsylvania community, is dying, too, as its mill closes. The

desperate gambit to save the team is lost before it even starts, and it involves a turn toward bloody, crowd-pleasing hockey violence, led by the beloved Hanson brothers, teenage nerds in thick, taped-up glasses who become berserkers on the ice.

As in most 1970s sports films, the violence here is cathartic but complicated. The joy of finally getting to inflict some pain instead of just having to take it is tangled up in the exploitation and degradation of athletes' genuine skills. In such grim contexts, "victory" is highly contingent. It can mean that, technically, you "win," but in a way that's indistinguishable from a loss. You might make so little money that you're sent right back to dead-end laboring jobs to pad out your poverty wages, as with the low-level alcoholic prizefighter Billy Tully (Stacy Keach) in John Huston's annihilating *Fat City*. After a grueling comeback fight, Tully can hardly believe the size of the meager cut his manager gives him: "Only a hundred dollars? That's all my sweat and blood is worth?"

Or you might lose the fight or game outright but win in other ways, recovering some semblance of courage, pride, and loyalty to your comrades (teammates, that is) — and, most important, seizing the opportunity to defy your oppressors, who generally take the form of the other team and their powerful backers. The other team, in these films, is almost invariably wealthier, better looking, and arrogantly accustomed to winning

in life as well as in sports. *The Bad News Bears* sets the standard for this when, in the end, the smallest but fiercest kid, Tanner Boyle, who is always spoiling for a fight that he unfailingly loses, throws the team's tiny second-place cup at the winners and shouts, "You can take your apology and your trophy and shove 'em straight up your ass!" Which emboldens even his sickliest, most spiritless teammate, Timmy Lupus, to pipe up with "Just wait till next year!"

These films show our team's lives as so nearly hopeless that winning represents a brief shot at redemption that may never come again. You can at least lose extremely well, with ferocity and style, kicking in the teeth of a few of your oppressors, making a bloody mark in the world. At the end of *The Longest Yard*, set in a prison run by a sadistic, football-obsessed warden (Eddie Albert), Paul "Wrecking" Crewe (Burt Reynolds), an ex-football star and generally worthless louche bastard in the outside world, redeems himself in prison by coaching the convict team to an ugly win over the brutal semiprofessional gang of guards in an all-out, gouging, bone-breaking, no-mercy, one-time-only game.

As Crewe limps off carrying the game ball, headed back to prison for twenty years on a new charge trumped up by the warden, one of the goon-guards shouts in his face, "You are fucked," and Crewe answers calmly, "Not today." It's the perfect motto for these grimy, wonderful films. ■

polity **20% OFF**

Go to [politybooks.com](http://politybooks.com) and use code JAC43\*

**Deep Adaptation**  
*Navigating the Realities of Climate Chaos*  
Edited by Jem Bendell & Rupert Read

"I recommend this book to all."  
Satish Kumar, Editor Emeritus for *Resurgence & Ecologist*

Jul 2021 | PB | 978-1-5095-4684-8 | \$19.95 | \$15.96

**New Pandemics, Old Politics**  
Alex de Waal

"Deeply learned and compassionate"  
Sulmaan Khan, Tufts University

Jun 2021 | PB | 978-1-5095-4780-7 | \$22.95 | \$18.36

**Capitalism and the Death Drive**  
Byung-Chul Han

"Incisive and often disturbing meditations take the reader to the dark heart of contemporary neoliberalism."

William Davies, author of *Nervous States*

Jul 2021 | PB | 978-1-5095-4500-1 | \$16.95 | \$13.56

**The Wealth Hoarders**

*How Billionaires Pay Millions to Hide Trillions*  
Chuck Collins

"A primer to the secrets of the money river."  
Nicholas Shaxson, author of *The Finance Curse*

Apr 2021 | PB | 978-1-5095-4349-6 | \$22.95 | \$18.36

**Post Growth**  
*Life after Capitalism*  
Tim Jackson

"Empowering and elegiac"  
Yanis Varoufakis, author of *Another Now*

May 2021 | PB | 978-1-5095-4252-9 | \$19.95 | \$15.96

# *Lifestyle Environmentalism Will Never Win Over Workers*

*And those are  
exactly the people  
we need to save  
the planet.*

Matt Huber

**D**oes the working class have a material interest in saving the environment? Could we harness such an interest to confront the owners of capital responsible for the crisis?

If you listen to much of the environmental left today, it would seem the answer is a resounding no — especially for the working class in the Global North. German climate justice campaigner Tazio Müller recently said, in no uncertain terms, “The Global North is essentially a global labor aristocracy.” Far from having an interest in saving the planet, Müller thinks “the

material interests of the vast majority of people in the Global North” lie in the “continued destruction of the biosphere.”

Self-described degrowth communist Bue Rübner Hansen speaks of “labor’s intertwinement with fossil capital” and suggests the working class participates in an “imperial mode of living.” Hansen asserts that the working class must accept unspecified changes to save the climate: “the end of fossil capital will entail a substantial transformation of working class habits, preferences, and consumption in the Global North.”



For degrowth scholar Jason Hickel and others, the real class struggle is not between workers and capital but between geographical regions: North and South. They argue that rich countries engage in “imperial forms of appropriation” and that the working class is complicit in their consumption. “This pattern sustains high levels of income in the Global North,” Hickel et al. claim, “and preserves levels of material consumption well above equitable and ecologically sustainable levels.”

Symptomatically, they do not differentiate income based on wages versus capital ownership in “high-income countries” — at one point narrowly focusing on wage differentials between South and North. All income, whether it flows to capital or labor, is assumed to be a form of ecological imperialism. In other words, everyone in the Global North, worker or capitalist, is complicit in the planet’s destruction.

At the root of this politics is a form of “lifestyle environmentalism”: the assertion that modern consumer behaviors are the primary driver of ecological problems. If ecological damage is blamed on consumers and workers just trying to survive, and not capitalist for-profit producers, a working-class politics of material gains is simply impossible — and class-struggle politics as we have known it is dead.

For many on the eco-left today, the problem with the working class in the Global North is that they simply have too much. They must, according to the degrowth slogan, “live better with less,” eerily similar to the austerity slogan of “do more with less.”

As Leigh Phillips has argued, it would be relatively straightforward to assert that the planet’s working class has a shared material interest in increasing their income, especially in the Global North, where the working classes have seen nothing but wage stagnation, mounting debt, and eroding economic security — in other words, class solidarity from Ohio to Manchuria.

However, when the wages and incomes of Global North workers are themselves seen as imperialist and ecologically destructive, the logic for degrowth is clear — working-class material interests are at odds with the planet’s, and thus, any material victory for them comes at the Earth’s expense.

Is there any way out of this apparently intractable conflict between the working class and environmental politics?

## Ecology Is Already at the Heart of Marxism

**K**arl Marx and Friedrich Engels’s core definition of the working class is inherently ecological in that it’s rooted in bodily survival. As Stefania Barca puts it, the working class is defined by “a unique and global process of violent separation from their means of subsistence.”

The very formation of the working class under capitalism begins with the expropriation of the direct producers from the ecological basis of all life — the land beneath their feet. It is this separation from the land and

ecological subsistence that forces the working class to sell their labor to survive. This mass proletarianization ecologically defines contemporary global capitalism. For all of human history, the majority of producers still accessed some of their subsistence directly from the land. Now, for the working class, the ecological means of life (food, energy, shelter, and more) must be accessed through the market.

Yet, for many environmentalists, this market dependence is a source of “ecological privilege” and “ecological footprints,” where working-class spending is traced back to ecological destruction. It is no surprise that the declarations calling upon Global North workers to scale down and consume less come from the professional classes: academics, scientists, journalists, and staff activists in the NGO “third sector.” For these professionals among the upper third of the income distribution, a politics of *less* — reductions and degrowth — has some appeal.

However, for the bottom two-thirds of society, market dependence creates various forms of stress, anxiety, and unfreedom wholly contingent upon their financial situation. For the working class, unlike both professionals and capitalists, simply provisioning basic material needs is a daily struggle — and not one they should feel guilty about.

A survey conducted before the COVID recession revealed 70 percent of Americans have \$1,000 or less in the bank. During the pandemic, it was reported that between 30 and 42 million Americans were going hungry, as long lines formed at food banks all over the country. In January of this year, 66 percent reported they were concerned about affording basic medical care. Pretty bleak for a supposed labor aristocracy.

If ecology is, at its core, the reproduction of life, it is straightforward to say that the working class has a *material ecological interest* in winning more secure access to life’s basic necessities. In fact, the very sectors of the economy we need to transform in order to solve climate change and ecological breakdown — energy, food, housing, and transport — are all at the core of these needs. A material gain for them here means a victory for the planet’s survival, not its demise.

Appealing to these interests — and not shaming workers for their lifestyles — can build the popular power to take on the real source of ecological crisis: private production for profit. Such a program can wed the interests of working-class life with planetary life as a whole against capital.

## The Green New Deal as a Working-Class Program

**P**rior to the political convulsions of 2016, you would be hard-pressed to find anyone proposing a working-class environmental program. Policy wonks feverishly debated whether cap and trade or carbon taxes were the best method to solve the climate crisis. The fact that neither garnered popular support didn’t seem to matter.

Yet, even on the Left, the most radical assessments also adopted a commonsense politics of “do more with less.” It took 2016 to finally wake us up.

Having united behind the 2016 Bernie Sanders run, it was Donald Trump’s terrible victory a few months later — combined with Hillary Clinton’s incompetent campaign — that marked crisis for Third Way environmental politics. Then, in France shortly thereafter, the revolt against Emmanuel Macron’s regressive carbon tax only helped bolster the case for a new approach to climate politics.

A consensus formed on the climate left that we needed to construct political demands that were less about wonky market fixes and more about delivering real benefits to workers. In early 2018, climate activists were arguing that the Green New Deal (GND) could be the “Medicare for All of climate change.” The urgency was intensified by the famous October 2018 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report, which suggested that limiting warming to 1.5°C required “rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented changes in all aspects of society.” Workers, instead of being shamed for shopping, would now be invited to help found a society that would not only save the planet but also bring jobs, income, and security.

The GND exploded onto the scene in mid-November 2018, when Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez teamed up with the Sunrise Movement to occupy the office of Democratic Party leader Nancy Pelosi. This sit-in for a GND — with signs reading “Green Jobs for All” — created massive media attention and excitement in the climate policy community.

It is notable that Ocasio-Cortez chose climate as her first policy intervention. She understood that the scale of the crisis contained all the elements of resurrecting a left working-class agenda: confrontation with corporate power, redistribution from the rich, and massive public

*It is no surprise that the declarations calling upon Global North workers to scale down and consume less come from the professional classes.*

investment based on a jobs guarantee. In February 2019, she and Senator Ed Markey introduced the non-binding Green New Deal resolution that centered on “guaranteeing a job with a family-sustaining wage, adequate family and medical leave, paid vacations, and retirement security to all people of the United States.”

The GND resolution was meant to build a broad program on which 2020 presidential contenders could campaign. While several candidates proposed ambitious climate plans — most notably, Governor Jay Inslee made climate his signature issue — only Bernie Sanders’s Green New Deal effectively channeled the energy of the youth climate movement into an authentic social-democratic program proposing a “wholesale transformation of our society.”

Sanders not only promised to decarbonize the energy system but also to create 20 million new jobs in the process. And, unlike earlier climate proposals, his took seriously workers’ economic concerns with an aim of “saving American families money by weatherizing homes and lowering energy bills.”

More important, and rectifying a glaring weakness in Ocasio-Cortez’s resolution, Sanders insisted on class-struggle politics against the fossil fuel industry. His plan stood alone in its confrontational language and, echoing Franklin Roosevelt’s famous 1936 speech, repeated in countless campaign rallies:

We need a president who has the courage, the vision, and the record to face down the greed of fossil fuel executives and the billionaire class who stand in the way of climate action. We need a president who welcomes their hatred.

More radical visions of the Green New Deal — like that of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) — propose a fundamentally new relation to life itself. The organization’s ecosocialist program aims to “decommodify survival by guaranteeing living wages, healthcare, childcare, housing, food, water, energy, public transit, a healthy environment, and other necessities for all.”

On that front, newly elected DSA members Cori Bush and Jamaal Bowman recently introduced a major public power resolution, “Expressing that the United States must establish electricity as a basic human right and public good.” This kind of mass decommodification via public goods is what addressing — and not dismissing — working-class environmental interests looks like.

## The Green New Deal Falls Short

**B**

ut even as the Sunrise Movement, DSA, and the larger climate movement got behind the Sanders campaign and his Green New Deal, it wasn’t enough for him to win. This loss had unavoidable implications for the entire Green New Deal project that had gained such momentum between 2018 and 2020. And we can’t ignore the lessons.

First, the GND was certainly a breakthrough for environmental politics in its assertion of a working-class program. Yet we should keep in mind a difference articulated by British trade unionist Andrew Murray between a “class-focused” and a “class-rooted” politics. The recent resurgence of the Left is clearly a politics for but not necessarily of the working class.

This was decidedly the case with the Green New Deal. It was a brilliant policy framework but still one formulated by academics, think tanks, and NGO professionals — a politics of the professional class, for the working class. It’s hardly controversial to note that most of the energy behind GND organizing was driven by aspirant professionals — high school and college students involved in the Sunrise Movement, Zero Hour, and the student climate strike.

Although Sunrise boasts an army of young activists and employs militant language, it was itself born from the environmental NGO complex — its origins include a \$50,000 grant and office space from the Sierra Club Foundation in 2017. It also runs a political action committee that raised \$2.3 million in the 2020 election cycle.

The second most important lesson was that much of the organizing between 2017 and 2020 was predicated on the intoxicating promise of the Left winning state power — particularly at the executive level. Prior to defeat, Sam Gindin and Leo Panitch excitedly described the Corbyn and Sanders movements: “Nothing like this has happened in at least three generations.” They speculated about what a “socialist-led government” would face and suggested that much of the Left was still marked by a “failure to prepare adequately for the challenge of transforming state apparatuses.” Similarly, Mike McCarthy, writing in *Jacobin*, warned that “our first 100 days could be a nightmare.”

Now, the nightmare is simply the harsh electoral realities of defeat even after so much promise. And since



the entire GND program had to be delivered through the state, there’s no one at the top now to push it through. This state-directed design was so alluring because it is hard to imagine winning such a large-scale transformation without the coercive and fiscal power of the government. After all, it was the state that delivered the original New Deal — including tremendous new investments in energy infrastructure.

Finally, the entire theory of change behind the Green New Deal was simply backward all along. Sanders had promised that, once in office, he would awaken the sleeping giant of the working class and build an extra-electoral mass movement to confront Wall Street, health insurance conglomerates, and the fossil fuel industry. It was unique that the “organizer in chief” understood that he alone could not implement his agenda.

Yet even Sanders himself probably suspected that the odds were stacked against him — winning state power *before* achieving mass working-class organization is not how it works. The required armies of

disillusioned-but-now-politicized working-class voters did not turn out in the primaries as we hoped. Quite the opposite — the threat of Sanders and disgust at President Trump led to a turnout surge among suburban liberals. Too much of the existing working class is still beset by apathetic (but understandable) cynicism, or what the late Mark Fisher called “reflexive impotence”: “[People] know things are bad, but ... know they can’t do anything about it.”

It is clear that a working-class politics, let alone a “socialist-led government,” cannot be conjured from nothing. We will need to build capable working-class organizations first (strong unions, media, and other infrastructure) before we can expect to vie for state power. There are still no shortcuts to building power. And the Green New Deal and Sanders’s campaign — although promising and exciting — were always shortcuts.

But, given the brutal timeline we face with climate change, they were shortcuts worth pursuing.

## Ecological Unionism and the Just Transition?



fter the Sanders loss, it has almost become cliché to assert that the only path remaining to rebuild the Left goes through the labor movement. This is as true to the environmental left as anything else.

Even after decades of defeat, the most powerful existing institutional infrastructure on the Left is still trade unions. And on that front, there are some encouraging signs. Major strategic unions like the American Federation of Teachers and the Service Employees International Union have already endorsed the Green New Deal. The Massachusetts Teachers Association even called for a national teachers' strike to demand the program. Of course, there is also the long-standing BlueGreen Alliance attempting to forge unity between the union and environmental movements.

Earlier this year, DSA's Ecosocialist Working Group made a sound strategic decision to partner with unions in a struggle to pass the PRO Act. This campaign is based on the premise that only a strengthened union movement can win a Green New Deal.

But the more inconvenient truth is that there are still many unions that oppose not only the GND but key climate demands like shutting down the Keystone Pipeline or phasing out coal-fired electricity entirely.

It has become a habit on the climate left to call the “jobs versus environment” narrative a false dilemma or a cynical tactic of the bosses. This is true, but it is also evidence of the extremely underdeveloped welfare state in the United States. It is not as if neoliberal austerity offers much of a safety net to workers when coal mines or power plants are shut down. It is, again, proletarian insecurity that causes workers and unions to choose jobs over the environment.

The standard left response to this dilemma is to simply shout “just transition” — the idea that displaced workers in dirty industries should be given support to transition into new, cleaner industries. The problem, though, is that much of the fossil fuel workforce has never heard of it, and communities hollowed out by coal mine or power plant closures don't believe it.

We should not forget that the whole idea of the “just transition” came from the legendary union leader and environmentalist Tony Mazzocchi of the Oil, Chemical

and Atomic Workers Union. Instead of vague assurances of “retraining” — a promise Bill Clinton made but did not keep when he passed the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) — Mazzocchi modeled his idea on a policy enacted during the last hurrah of the New Deal: the GI Bill. Over nearly three decades, that legislation helped more than 13 million former soldiers find civilian employment or pursue educational opportunities.

Rather than sloganeering, a real just transition would need a massive public-sector effort like this to actually convince affected workers — and that requires state power.

Just transition politics also asserts a limited vision of what working-class power can achieve. It imagines workers as “victims” in need of support. This is undoubtedly true for fossil fuel industry workers in a climate-stable world, but a real working-class strategy to win climate action must position workers and unions as powerful agents of transformation.

As Sean Sweeney and John Treat of Trade Unions for Energy Democracy argue, we need to treat unions less as partners in “social dialogue” with capital and the state, and more as agents of “social power” willing to use disruption, strikes, and mass political education to force the scale of changes needed.

A union-based climate strategy should also recognize what the labor movement has always understood: certain sectors of the economy are more strategic to organize in than others. Jane McAlevey recounts how the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) focused on steel and coal in the 1930s, and today, she proposes a focus on health care, education, and logistics.

For climate, it is clear that any rational pathway to 100 percent decarbonization goes through the electric utility sector. This “electrify everything” strategy means cleaning up electricity and electrifying residential heating, transportation, and industrial heat. Yet few GND activists have pointed out that the electric utility sector is already one of the most unionized in the entire economy — the electric power generation, transmission, and distribution industry had a 24.5 percent union membership rate in 2020. This could be our strategic sector.

These workers are represented by unions like the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) and the Utility Workers Union of America. The GND movement, if it wants to get serious, should try to win these unions to their side in order to transform the

## *The recent resurgence of the Left is clearly a politics for but not necessarily of the working class.*

very strategic sector at the core of the problem. One IBEW member has already proposed a rank-and-file strategy for a Green New Deal.

Such a union-based climate strategy in the electricity sector would have to clearly assert one major plank that might be tough for many GND activists to swallow: the need for nuclear power. While there is no safe climate future with coal-fired power plants in operation, the electric utility unions clearly support maintaining the nuclear power sector, one of the largest sources of both zero-carbon electricity and well-paying, unionized jobs.

The debate over nuclear power is often overly technical or economic and ignores these strategic, class-centered considerations. While “100 percent renewables” is the slogan among environmental NGOs, a pro-nuclear climate politics might have a chance at building solidarity with actually existing electrical unions. We don't win public power, or a stable climate, without them.

On the other hand, the renewable energy industries like solar and wind, beloved by so many environmentalists, are notoriously nonunion. For solar photovoltaic energy, it's 4 percent union density, and for concentrated solar and wind energy, it's 6 percent — plus, both sectors are run almost entirely for profit by private capital. Instead of obsessing over these industries, the GND movement should engage with the electricity unions, arguing that, unless a long-term strategy ensures the energy transition is controlled by project labor agreements and union labor, the unions will be destroyed by a form of “green capitalism.”

## Planetary Solidarity

In the apex of working-class power in the early-to-mid twentieth century, it was not only asserted that the working class had material interests in the abolition of capitalism, it was also taken for granted that the proletariat was the *only* class that could deliver liberation for humanity as a whole. In Ellen Meiksins Wood's words, it was “a class which contains within itself the possibility of a classless society.”

This socialist goal of human liberation — nothing short of uniting humanity — takes on new meaning in the age of ecological crisis. The working class, as the vast majority of global capitalist society, could now play the role of forging a material interest in species survival.

For many on the eco-left, the working class is ill-equipped for this task precisely because of its reliance on the market to survive. Workers, they believe, are too alienated from nature to know how to save it. Thus, the project of saving humanity means returning to a localized agrarian society based on small-scale production.

Yet perhaps it is precisely the “rootlessness” of the proletarianized working classes that gives them the unique perspective to look *beyond* the local, the parochial, and the community; perhaps this rootlessness gives the “universal class” the capacity to think about *planetary solidarity* and human emancipation.

There is no solving climate change without global coordination and large-scale planning. If we believe this coordination should be achieved democratically, we ought to return to the conviction that the majority of humanity, even in the Global North, might still be our best hope for getting us there. ■

# The Tumbrel

---

## KEYING THE BOSS'S CAR

T

THE TUMBREL  
GIRONDINS

BY MEAGAN DAY



## The Problem Isn't Classism, It's Class

---

**Under capitalism, prejudice against workers is common. But it only adds insult to a deeper, more profound injury.**

In 2011, higher-ups at the pharmaceutical distribution giant AmerisourceBergen amused themselves by circulating an email poking fun at some of their customers. It adapted the *Beverly Hillsbillies* theme song to the intensifying opioid crisis, with new lyrics imagining “Jed, a poor mountaineer” who “barely kept his habit fed” driving a crew of Appalachian “Pillbillies” across state lines to stock up on “Hillbilly Heroin” at unscrupulous pain clinics.

In AmerisourceBergen’s corporate offices, working-class drug consumption habits weren’t merely a source of entertainment but a matter of professional interest. The company is one of

the nation’s top distributors of drugs like OxyContin, and it’s alleged, in multiple state lawsuits, to have worked directly with pill mills — what the parody lyrics called “cash ‘n carry” clinics — to increase opioid sales. Executives and team leaders also referred to “hillbillies” and “pillbillies” in ordinary business-related correspondence.

These emails, presented at trial in opioid-ravaged West Virginia earlier this year, earned the company bad press in the *Washington Post* and other mainstream outlets. Social media onlookers condemned the corporate culture at AmerisourceBergen as distasteful, ugly, *classist*.

“Classism” isn’t exactly a household term, but it has its partisans. It describes an array of social practices linked to offensive attitudes that are, as the AmerisourceBergen episode illustrates, real and common. Anyone who’s been privy to the casual conversations of the rich knows how pervasive class prejudice is, and everyone else can easily imagine it. That makes “classism” a tempting addition to our rhetorical arsenal.

But the word also has disadvantages, chief among them an emphasis on insult over injury. At best, it functions as a convenient shorthand for social oppression. At worst, though, “classism” mystifies the nature of



capitalist domination and elicits solutions that clean up economic elites' image without interrupting the process of exploitation that gives them power.

Talk of classism is primarily initiated by conscientious liberals who are repulsed by epithets like "pillbillies" and earnestly want all forms of bigotry and negative stereotyping to end. Their natural inclination is to add "working-class" to the list of identities that should be respected and celebrated.

But class is not primarily an identity. While capitalist society does boast distinct class cultures, they rest on a material foundation, not an ideological one. All pride, shame, and disrespect aside, the fact is that a small minority owns nearly all of society's productive assets. This situation produces a highly unequal relationship

---

**Respect is always desirable, but it's a far more modest goal than equality.**

---

between that minority and everyone else who has to sell their labor to capitalists — always for less than it's worth, the difference being kept as profit — in order to survive.

On top of this direct exploitation, many capitalists line their coffers by preying on workers, taking advantage of the externalities created by the foundational dynamic. They include corporate landlords, health insurance providers, and pharmaceutical distributors like AmerisourceBergen that intentionally place products in regions already distressed by outsourcing and austerity, where the working class is especially susceptible to drug abuse.

Class attitudes arise from the exploitation at the heart of capitalism and the material inequalities it perpetuates, not the other way around. For various political and psychological reasons, the wealthy minority seeks both private affirmation and public justification for its domination of the working-class majority, which gives rise to all kinds of nauseating ideas about its inherent superiority. But these are just rationalizations — class domination is happening under capitalism regardless of people's impressions of one another.

Theoretically, we could make all outward expressions of class prejudice taboo, but many wealthy people would probably still harbor private biases that justify their advantages. Even if we *could* somehow instill in the hearts and minds of all elites a genuine respect for everyone else, such

superior values can never be realized as long as private ownership continues to serve as the basis of our economy.

Imagine that AmerisourceBergen executives learned to keep a lid on their bigoted opinions. Now imagine, more fancifully, that the company was able to actually root out deep-seated class bias through educational seminars and hiring initiatives focused on recruiting people from working-class backgrounds. (Indeed, some firms in the rapidly growing cottage industry of corporate diversity include trainings on class prejudice in their programming.)

If the corporate culture were thus transformed but the business model remained the same, there would be fewer crass emails, but outcomes for executives and consumers would not meaningfully change. That's because AmerisourceBergen doesn't exist to realize its executives' cultural values. Like all corporations, it exists to generate profit. Its activities throughout the opioid crisis don't derive from executives' desire to hurt and humiliate people of a lower social rank, but from the company's rigid mandate to produce maximum value for a long list of shareholders including BlackRock, Vanguard, and JPMorgan Chase.

Respect is always desirable, but it's a far more modest goal than equality. We shouldn't limit our ambitions to better decorum in the face of class difference. Instead, we must understand class as a form of difference that should not, and need not, exist at all. ■



## The Return of the Company Town

---

The Second Gilded Age is starting to look more and more like the first.

A navy blue "Y" logo flies high over Lincoln Yards like a banner of arms. Next to it: a twenty-foot-tall spark plug sculpture that seems intended to glorify "innovation" as the lord of the manor. The North Branch of the Chicago River could even pass as a moat — half of one, at least — when the glass-and-steel towers begin to rise on this fifty-five-acre swath of vacant lots over the next decade.

It's tempting to peg the \$6 billion neighborhood-to-be on Chicago's North Side as the second coming of a feudal estate. But on closer inspection, Lincoln Yards doesn't evoke medieval Europe as much as the dregs of late nineteenth-century America.

That's because this fiefdom of the near future is a capitalist one, a planned community built and run by a single corporate entity — in other words, a company town. Once all but extinct in the United States, they're becoming relevant again in the era of tech monopolies, utopian urban planning, privatization under neoliberalism, and, most recently, the COVID-fueled decline of mass transit.

Just ask Andy Gloor, CEO of Sterling Bay, the real estate developer behind Lincoln Yards whom the *Chicago Tribune* recently described as "changing the face of Chicago."

"I think you're definitely going to see old company towns come back," says Gloor. "It was a trend going into the pandemic, but it's only going to accelerate now, because there are enormous benefits to having people in close proximity to work."

Benefits for whom, exactly?

### Dark Satanic Mills

"I owe my soul to the company store," crooned Merle Travis in "Sixteen Tons," a folk song lamenting a life of debt peonage in a Kentucky mining town.

By the time Travis popularized the tune in the 1940s, company towns were on the wane due to the rise of

organized labor and worker advancements during the New Deal. But amid their heyday in the Gilded Age, nearly three thousand company towns dotted the United States, and an estimated 3 percent of the population made their livelihood in them, according to Hardy Green's 2010 book *The Company Town*.

Historically, company towns emerged as an economic force during the Industrial Revolution in the post-Civil War era, especially in heavy industries where resources were remote or on the frontiers. American coal barons, cotton kings, and steel moguls would buy cheap land and build "exploitationvilles" near factories or mines with little infrastructure — or oversight.

Workers' daily lives were relentlessly bleak, plagued by low wages, ramshackle housing, dangerous working conditions, and a lack of personal or financial freedom.

In towns like Lynch, Kentucky, constructed by the U.S. Coal & Coke Company, a subsidiary of U.S. Steel, managers ruled like kings. Your boss could double as your landlord, banker, mayor — even grocer. Workers were locked in because they'd been paid in "scrip," a form of credit that could only be used to pay rent or buy goods in company-owned general stores with a drastic markup. An 1881 investigation into the H. C. Frick Coke Company by the state of Pennsylvania, for instance, found that it made \$160,000 in annual profit from its company store (about \$4 million today).

Not all company towns were the kind of "dark Satanic Mills" that William Blake famously described in his poem "Jerusalem." Some robber barons tried to carry out a utopian vision of bucolic model towns for their workers, but they always ruled them with a heavy-handed, "father knows best" philosophy.

Merchant Francis Cabot Lowell, for example, observed the worst of industrial Britain firsthand and called its factories the "great corruption of the highest and lowest classes." Determined to do better when founding a company town for his textile company in the 1820s — Lowell, Massachusetts — he recruited unmarried farm women as factory workers. He housed them in supervised boarding houses, where they were required to attend church services and lead "a moral life."

Factory bells woke the women up at 4:30 A.M., and within twenty minutes, they had to rush to the mill for work.

#### Well-Wishing Feudalism

One of the most famous of these civic experiments was Pullman. In the late 1870s, wealthy magnate George Pullman purchased several thousand acres of land on the South Side of Chicago near Lake Calumet and constructed an

entire suburban settlement surrounding his train car manufacturing facilities. Pullman envisioned his namesake as a pastoral alternative to the filth and squalor of tenement housing that many immigrant workers endured in the industrial neighborhoods of Chicago — for both their protection and his profit.

"I want the people who work at Pullman to have the advantages of seeing the best," he said. "I want no cheap, crude, inartistic work in any department. I have faith in the educational and refining influences of beautiful and harmonious surroundings, and hesitate at no reasonable expenditure to secure them."

It's true that, from the outside, the town was a beautiful place. Pullman had hired local architects and landscape designers to create an orderly, clean community filled with paved streets, modern sewers, a library, a school, a church, shops, and handsome red brick homes.

But an endless number of strings came attached to living there. Democratic elections were nonexistent, and taverns were

outlawed (though outside visitors could drink at the only bar in town, at Pullman's hotel). The library charged a membership fee, and the town's only church sat largely empty because most congregations couldn't afford to rent it. Everything was regulated, to the point that worker-tenants were required to place decorative flowers on their windowsills and wipe their feet before entering their homes. When some workers began agitating for a union, company spies were planted to report any attempts to organize.

Pullman also demanded rent prices that were 25 percent higher than usual for the area, and that didn't change after the Panic of 1893's economic crisis, when he cut wages by a quarter. By April of 1894, some families lived on the brink of starvation. Economist Richard Ely observed that Pullman's system was "well-wishing feudalism, which desires the happiness of the people, but in such a way as shall please the authorities."

Eventually, the workers rebelled. In 1894, they walked out and embarked on a high-profile strike that coincided with a nationwide boycott thanks to the American Railway Union (ARU) and their leader, Eugene Debs, who called George Pullman "the plutocrat with a soul so small that a million of them could dance on the little end of a hornet's stinger."

The uprising was violently crushed by the National Guard, and its leaders were jailed, including Debs. George Pullman had won the battle but eventually lost the

## The lords of global capital are once again returning to the ol' company town — this time with PR-friendly euphemisms such as "live-work-play communities."

war. A few years later, the Illinois Supreme Court ruled that Pullman had to break up his empire — either by selling the company or the town. He chose the latter, and by 1907, all Pullman residential properties were sold to private owners.

#### Corporate Colonization

Perhaps it's fitting that, in our Second Gilded Age, the lords of global capital are once again returning to the ol' company town — this time with PR-friendly euphemisms such as "live-work-play communities."

Look no further than the giants of Big Tech, who are increasingly leaving behind Silicon Valley's leafy corporate campuses to build their own full-size Pullmans. Amazon, which has gobbled up a lot of Seattle real estate, now controls an entire 11.6-acre square block of Arlington, Virginia, outside Washington, DC, where it intends to build its long-promised HQ2.

Facebook is in the planning phase for its own corporate city-state, a "Zuck-burg" called Willow Village

in Menlo Park, California, that promises homes for workers, hotels — even its own town square. The sprawling new twenty-four-acre office building features a "main street" simulacrum meandering through the middle of it, and workers can stroll through a terraced area called "the Bowl" resembling a botanical garden.

In September, Google announced plans to remodel forty acres of its Googleplex headquarters in Mountain View, California, and turn them into 1.3 million square feet of office space, 30,000 square feet of retail, 1,850 housing units, and 20,000 square feet of civic and event space, as well as parks, a recreation center, and an aquatic center. Google also has an ambitious fifteen-year master plan to export that model onto other parts of the \$14.5 billion in real estate it owns in California and a dozen more states.

They're not the only ones.

Sterling Bay is among the growing cadre of big developers attempting to graft the Silicon Valley-style

company town onto blighted areas of major cities. The term “gentrification” gets thrown around a lot, but developments like Lincoln Yards are arguably more akin to corporate colonization.

Float a few miles south on the Chicago River from Lincoln Yards, and you stumble upon a construction site that’s the future home of 13 million square feet of glittering luxury apartments, office space, and storefronts. It’s called The 78: an entirely new neighborhood created whole cloth to join the existing seventy-seven Chicago officially comprises. The Related Companies, the brains behind The 78, also conjured up Hudson Yards — a skyscraper-filled

megadevelopment deemed a “billionaire’s fantasy city” by *New York* magazine.

It’s no coincidence that the “yards” branding is becoming ubiquitous. Sunnyside Yard is coming to Queens. The Navy Yard to Philadelphia. The Shipyards to Jacksonville, Florida. It’s not because everyone loves ships or trains but because these graveyards of the industries of the past have no property owners to displace — fewer preservationists or NIMBYS to deal with.

They’re essentially blank slates. And what a profit-driven company imagines — naturally — is a neighborhood designed to maximize capital. Only 500 of the proposed 10,000 housing units for

The 78, for instance, are designated as low-income, which is why local organizer John McDermott has described it and Lincoln Yards as “essentially gated communities without the gates.”

Gates aren’t needed when the surroundings are so alluring. The conceptual renderings surrounding the Lincoln Yards building site depict crowds of smiling residents walking through verdant parks or on boardwalks with upscale riverside restaurants. Who would want to leave such a place?

As Green puts it, “All of this may sound idyllic, until you realize that workers need never go home — or stop working.” ■



## Workers Didn’t Bring Us Fascism

From Berlin to the Ruhr, the organized working class resisted Hitler’s reactionary appeals.

When the young Eric Hobsbawm, already a fully paid-up member of the Communist Party of Great Britain, was conscripted into the army shortly after the outbreak of war in 1939, he got to know, for the first time, genuine members of the British working class. He got along with them well enough, but he was shocked by the vulgarity of their banter and taken aback by the crudity of their political opinions. He felt that they were “complete raw material, for us as well as for fascism.”

As would be expected of a company in the Royal Engineers, the men were mostly “carpenters, bricklayers, painters etc.,” he noted. Some of them listened to

the Berlin propaganda broadcasts of William Joyce, “Lord Haw-Haw,” and appeared to believe his antisemitic diatribes; but others enthused about Robert Tressell’s novel *The Ragged-Trousered Philanthropists* and thought socialism was a good idea. He concluded that the working class would not find its way to socialism without strong ideological leadership (a typically Leninist point by the young Communist) and a powerful institutional base.

Hobsbawm, who had spent his formative years in Germany and Austria, was well aware that the Nazis had won over a substantial portion of the working class to their cause. Adolf Hitler had

portrayed himself as a simple man of the people and pledged to overthrow a democratic political system that had only led to mass unemployment (35 percent of the workforce in Germany in 1932), political paralysis, and national humiliation. He would replace it with a “people’s community” that knew no social barriers and would unite all Germans behind a unified and purposeful leadership.

But Nazism, in fact, didn’t hold much appeal for the great mass of the German working class. The Nazis won their highest national vote in a free election in July 1932, 37.4 percent. It was enough to make them the biggest party in the Reichstag, the national legislature,

HUMAN KINDNESS  
FOUNDATION



A new voice from the publisher of Bo Lozoff’s books

Forceful, vivid, and utterly captivating. Every voice is fully alive, opinionated, smart, honest, articulate, and human...

- Lydia Davis, writer, MacArthur Fellow, Man Booker International Prize

In his many years of incarceration, William “Mecca” Elmore realized that words are more powerful than bars. This is also a love story dedicated to resistance, resilience, hope, unconditional love, and humility.

- Jaki Shelton Green, North Carolina Poet Laureate

Beautiful! A revealing oral history that opens up the world inside our prisons.

- Timothy Tyson, Author Blood Done Sign My Name & The Blood of Emmett Till

A view from deep inside the prison system that helps us understand what needs to happen at the individual and systemic levels for any possibility of change to arise. Heartbreaking and heart-opening, ... Its insights into the process of healing for formerly incarcerated men and women should make it required reading

- Belvie Rooks, writer, educator, and human rights activist

Directly from the publisher at  
[www.humankindness.org/product/prison-from-the-inside-out/](http://www.humankindness.org/product/prison-from-the-inside-out/)

Available on Amazon, BarnesAndNoble,  
and from your local bookseller via IndieBound.org

ISBN: 978-0-9614444-8-8 (print) 978-0-9614444-9-5 (eBook)

Pages: 390 6x9 softcover, 6 B&W photo pages

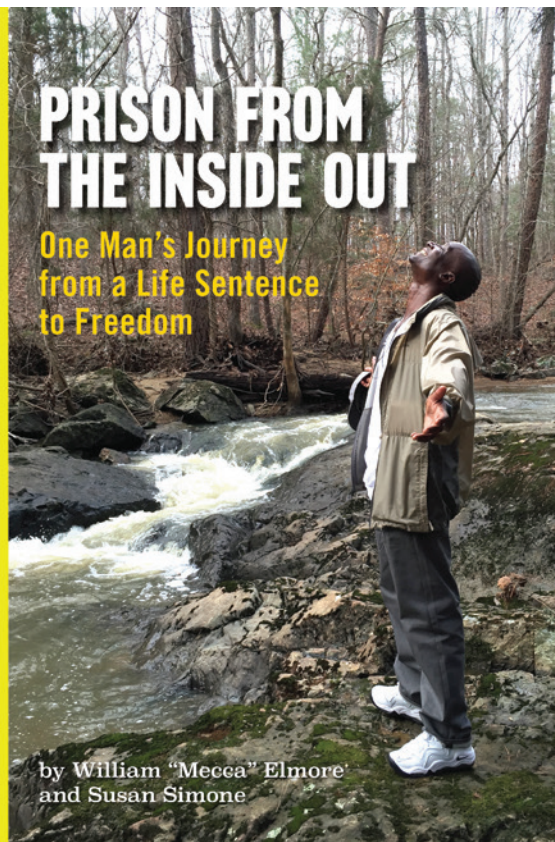
Price: \$19.95 (print), \$9.99 (eBook)

Wholesale distribution via Ingram

[www.PrisonFromTheInsideOut.org](http://www.PrisonFromTheInsideOut.org)

## PRISON FROM THE INSIDE OUT

One Man’s Journey  
from a Life Sentence  
to Freedom



by William “Mecca” Elmore  
and Susan Simone



and it's true that some 40 percent of those who voted for them were working-class. Workers were also the largest social group in the Nazi Party membership. But almost half the entire adult population of Germany was officially categorized as working-class, so that workers who belonged to the Nazi Party or voted for it were a small proportion of the class as a whole. Moreover, they were overwhelmingly rural laborers or employees in small firms that were not unionized.

In Germany's industrial heartlands, from Berlin to the Ruhr, where trade unions and labor organizations were strong, the Social Democratic vote held up well, despite a limited number of defections to the Nazis, and the Communist vote actually increased in those years of Depression. The organized, industrial working class was heavily *under*represented among voters and supporters of Nazism in Germany, and the same applied to Benito Mussolini's Fascist movement in Italy, which had,

after all, begun as a violent response to socialist workers' occupation of the factories immediately after the end of World War I.

A century later, advanced industrial societies look very different. Traditional heavy industries such as coal and steel, mining and manufacture, have undergone a massive decline, and with them the trade union organizations that once provided the backbone of the labor movement. Marxist thought had, from the very beginning, treated the industrial working class as the social basis for a revolutionary transformation of society. The widening gap in living standards between manual workers and the middle classes would radicalize the former, who would embrace the principles and practice of socialism. But in 1978, Hobsbawm, by now a prominent professional historian, delivered a highly influential address called "The Forward March of Labour Halted?" in which he pointed out that the traditional proletariat was now

declining in numbers as advanced economies made the transition into service-based, postindustrial societies. The British Labour Party would not come to power unless it forged a strong alliance with the progressive elements of the middle class. The same held true of the United States, where the labor movement had provided vital support for the Democratic Party in the decades following Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal.

"In Britain," Hobsbawm said in 1978, "the typical Labour candidate between the wars was a miner or railwayman. Today, he or she is much more likely to be someone described as a 'lecturer.'" The same held true, in broader terms, of the party's ordinary members and followers. The vast social transformations that have swept across Europe and North America in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries included rapidly rising levels of education, improved living standards, and increased life expectancy as well as the continuing decline of the traditional industrial and

manufacturing sector and the transformation of the economy from low-tech manual labor to high-tech services, engineering, and communications requiring high levels of education.

Labor unions were one of the main casualties of this transformation, their decline sped up not only by structural factors but also by increasingly hostile government interventions in the service of a neoliberal, deregulated economy promising a "trickle-down" effect on incomes that never actually happened. Globalization and automation have inflicted serious damage on the employment and wages of the less educated. The sweeping social changes of the last half-century have largely left the old working class behind. Union membership in the private sector has declined from around a third in the 1940s to just 6.3 percent today. In 2020, the percentage of American workers belonging to a union was 10.8 percent, compared to 20.1 percent in 1983.

Outsourcing and international competition have turned manufacturing areas into "rust belts" as factories, steelworks, and automobile plants have closed, throwing working-class men out of work. Despair and disorientation have fueled a massive epidemic of addiction and suicide. Even before COVID-19, life expectancy for white Americans without a college degree — some 38 percent of the working population — was declining.

For many of these white workers in particular, Donald Trump's

slogan, "Make America Great Again," has had a real impact and spoke to their experiences. From the levying of protectionist tariffs on cheap imports to the building of a wall to keep out immigrants, from the promised rollback of racial equality legislation to an "America First" foreign policy, Trump tapped into anger about "political correctness" and working-class contempt for professional elites — for doctors, lawyers, and academics — providing fertile soil for a populist crusade against scientific and medical opinion on issues such as climate change, disease prevention, and the spread of conspiracy theories.

The situation in Germany in the early 1930s was, in crucial respects, very different. Contrary to popular belief, racism played very little part in the rise of Nazism, because there was no major racial minority in Germany. Jews formed less than 1 percent of the population, a tiny proportion, and for most workers, Nazi antisemitism was of little importance at the time.

Schooled in the vibrant and densely woven cultural world of the socialist and communist movements, the great majority of German workers heeded the warnings of their great leader before World War I, August Bebel, who declared that "antisemitism is the socialism of fools"; the enemy was not Jews but capitalists. There was some low-level antisemitism in the Catholic Centre Party, though it was of a religious rather than a racial nature. The conservative, Protestant German National

People's Party was more strongly antisemitic, but no political movement even came close to matching the virulence and intensity of the Nazis' hatred of Jews. The Nazis found that antisemitic propaganda won them few votes in the 1928 elections, when they received less than 3 percent of the national vote, so they downplayed it until they came to power.

What destroyed the German labor movement was not Nazi propaganda but unemployment. In 1920, the unions had easily defeated an attempted far-right coup attempt, the so-called Kapp Putsch, by staging a general strike; in a period of full employment, this quickly brought the country to its knees and forced the insurrectionaries to give up. In 1932–33, the level of unemployment was so high, and its duration so long, that going on strike was pointless, with dozens of out-of-work people ready to step into every job vacated by a striker, and struggling employers reluctant to make new hires anyway. In addition, the labor movement had been deeply divided since the murder of Communist leaders Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg by Social Democratic government troops early in 1919. Concerted action to stop Hitler was impossible in the early 1930s, not least because the Social Democrats were tacitly supporting the austerity policies being imposed by the conservative government of the day, including drastic cuts to unemployment benefits.

---

## What destroyed the German labor movement was not Nazi propaganda but unemployment.

---

---

**Both in the Weimar Republic  
and in today's America, it's  
the weakening of the labor movement  
that has opened the way  
for democracy's enemies.**

---

It was, above all, Communism that attracted the unemployed in Germany, as the slump deepened and offered them a radical alternative to the existing political and economic system. Communism promised a world of equality without exploitation, where workers would be fully valued as human beings. It was an illusion, of course, as the millions forced to live and, in many cases, to die under Joseph Stalin's Soviet dictatorship were already discovering. The Communist vote continued to rise, even as the Nazi vote started to fall, in the November 1932 elections, making the task of bringing the Nazis into government more urgent for conservative and military elites than ever.

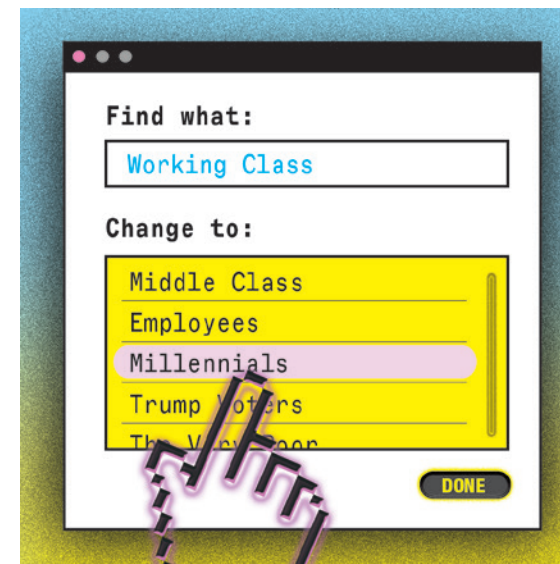
Both in the Weimar Republic and in today's America, it's the weakening of the labor movement and the decay of trade unions that has opened the way for democracy's enemies. Germany's Social

Democrats, the most committed defenders of the Weimar Republic, lost support to the Communists not least because of their many compromises with governments that used austerity as a means of lessening the impact of the Depression. In a similar way, neoliberal politics in the twenty-first century has shattered traditional labor loyalties and rendered working-class voters vulnerable to right-populist appeal.

Indeed, in a post-Communist, postindustrial world, it's right-wing populism that seems to offer the alternative to a democracy that has failed what remains of the working class. But it's a very different future that right-populists like Trump proffer. While the Nazis rejected German conservatives' nostalgia for the Kaiser's Germany, which they blamed for the loss of World War I, and held out the promise of a brave new world of Nietzschean superheroes, modern

technologies, and a rejuvenated, remodeled Germany, today's right wing in the United States proposes a future based on nostalgia for the past, where white supremacy is restored, foreign immigrants are kept out, government interference is banished from everyday life, and lost industries are magically brought back to life.

What's actually needed are solutions that are real rather than rhetorical, and policies that are directed toward genuinely improving the life chances of those most vulnerable to the Right's empty promises. Eric Hobsbawm's warning that the working class could go either way politically may have been uncannily prescient, but there was, and is, nothing inevitable about its capture by the populist right. ■



## White-Collar Media

---

For most of the news media, the life and struggles of the majority class just aren't newsworthy.

“Black Chefs Are Landing More Cookbook Deals. Is That Enough?”

“When Will New York Elect a Female Mayor?”

The *New York Times* has questions. Yet even in this carnival of conspicuous inclusion and advocacy, most women, black Americans, and humans in general go unrepresented. That's because the experiences and perspectives of the working class remain strikingly absent in what Noam Chomsky refers to as the “prestige media,” which has only gained salience since the late 1960s.

This has happened for material reasons, as Christopher Martin wrote in his 2019 book, *No Longer Newsworthy: How the Mainstream Media Abandoned the Working Class*. As newspapers increasingly became part of publicly traded, larger companies, their business model changed; rather than profiting from building a mass audience, revenues instead depended on advertisers, who wanted an upscale readership. Now, apart from tabloids or local TV news, almost every media outlet courts the upper or upper-middle class. No longer

subject or target audience, the working class appears in the media very little and mainly as a problem, often wrongly specified.

Story conversations with editors at glossy women's magazines always make this painfully explicit. As a writer, I've been told by editors at teen magazines that “our readers wouldn't relate” to articles on the high risk of workplace injury for adolescents because “our readers” are too well-off to have jobs. Other women's magazine editors have declined stories on problems faced by women working in retail, using

the same language (“our readers wouldn’t relate”). This might sound self-defeating on the gatekeepers’ part: Don’t they want their magazines to appeal to the majority? But it’s rational — their advertisers want the most upscale demographics, with the most disposable income.

Articles about how to navigate daily life are always pitched to the comfortable. This bias has been painfully obvious in the barrage of coverage on “everyone” working from home last year. The *Times* even devoted a whole section, “At Home,” to lockdown life. Often written in a grating first-person plural (“we’re decluttering”; “we’re trying harder jigsaw puzzles”), it seemed to be written for people whose only pandemic problems were anomie and ennui. You’d never

guess from this section — or from other media — that most people’s jobs couldn’t be done remotely. In fact, 60 percent of American workers’ jobs had to be performed in person, which meant they either lost their jobs or went to work, never mind the deadly and infectious plague.

Lockdowns and COVID-19 risks have eased up, but media-class blinders have not lifted. Newspapers tackle the real questions: What are “we” going to wear now that “we” are back at the office? The *Wall Street Journal* has advice on how to ease children’s anxiety about sleepaway camp — they didn’t go last year, so they might be nervous about being away from home! — a largely upper-middle-class childhood experience that costs thousands of dollars.

---

**You don’t have to be famous, important, or contribute to our society for the *New York Times* to include your wedding in its Style section — but you do have to be rich.**

---

The institutions of the ruling classes attract all the media attention, too. Nationally known journalists like Bari Weiss and Caitlin Flanagan have called long-form attention to private school parents’ distress over what they view as excessive wokeness in the curriculum, focusing on the most exclusive and expensive urban private schools in the country. Every minor scandal at an Ivy League college is covered in the *New York Times*; the week I wrote this, Yale law professor Amy Chua was in the paper, charged with having drunken parties at her house.

Even the major events in working-class private lives aren’t noted by the media. You don’t have to be famous, important, or contribute to our society for the *New York Times* to include your wedding in its Style section — but you do have to be rich. A person working a normal job may appear only if the job and relationship conform decorously to class and gender expectations (for example, female preschool teachers marrying male hedge fund managers or other financiers are often featured).

The working class is mostly eclipsed by the tonier sorts, but also by the elite media’s preference for coverage of the very poor: prisoners, the homeless, and the chronically unemployed. Stories about homelessness routinely attract Pulitzer Prizes. It’s a human rights scandal — and a horrible indictment of capitalism’s cruelty — that anyone in the world’s richest

country is homeless. But workers, a much larger group of people, have problems that seem to attract no such attention.

The working class is politically overlooked, too. First, from 2016 to 2020, the “white working class” was constantly blamed for Donald Trump’s election, even though a wealth of data showed that Trump’s voters swung upper income and were mostly professionals and small-business owners. According to a 2020 analysis by political scientists from Vanderbilt and Duke University, only 30 percent of Trump’s support came from white workers, and their support was probably not decisive in his 2016 victory. Trump’s support among this demographic was, after all, comparable to that of other recent Republican candidates.

Part of the media’s problem was confusion over the meaning of

---

**The working class is mostly eclipsed by the tonier sorts, but also by the elite media’s preference for coverage of the very poor: prisoners, the homeless, and the chronically unemployed.**

---

“working class.” In one unfortunately typical example, a CNN investigation of the “white working class” included a woman in West Virginia who owned a tire shop. She may well be struggling — owning a small business is hard, and many fail! — but she does not work for wages. At the heart of such misspecification is an elitist prejudice. Media professionals, confronted with ignorant fools marinating in misinformation and bigotry, assume these knuckleheads must be working-class. They’ve underestimated, as so many do, the prevalence of the high-end, low-information voter.

Can the working class once again become the subject of history’s first draft? One way is for its members to make news through their own political efforts. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, a socialist bartender elected to

Congress in 2018, reelected last year, and now fighting for COVID relief, Medicare for All, and other working-class priorities, attracts plenty of coverage. Not only is she the subject of fashion shoots and profiles in glossy women’s magazines, news organizations send out special bulletins if she makes an endorsement in an election. And when Amazon workers tried to organize a union in their warehouse this spring in Bessemer, Alabama, although they didn’t succeed, they did attract extensive media coverage.

Even the mainstream media will report on the working class when it strikes at a newsworthy political foe, as the Bessemer workers have, or wins big, like AOC. ■

JACK SAUNDERS



WE BUILT THE

# Golden Age

The culture of British trade union militancy in auto plants like Austin Longbridge wasn't the "natural" result of a Golden Age of capitalism — it came from organizing.

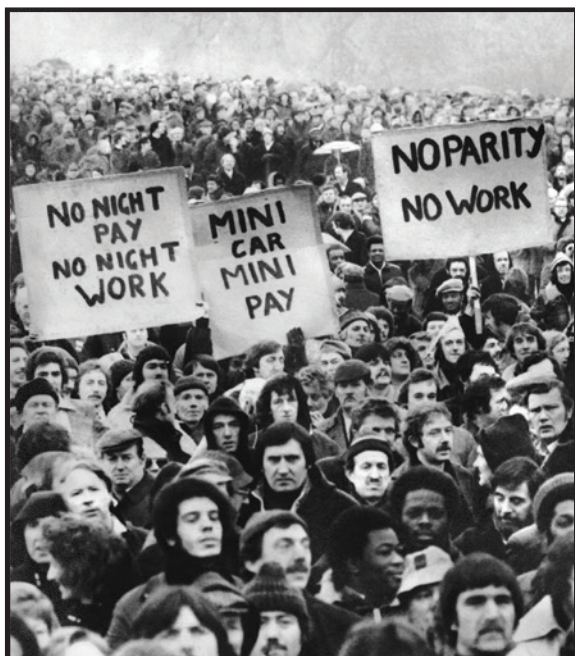


In England's second-largest city, Richard Albert "Dick" Etheridge was a legend in the trade union movement. There, Etheridge, a lifelong member of the Communist Party of Great Britain, sat for nearly thirty years as the works convenor — the chief shop steward — at Birmingham's biggest auto plant, Austin Longbridge, from which twenty thousand workers churned out thousands upon thousands of the iconic Mini car.

The Longbridge plant had become a byword for industrial militancy by the time Etheridge stood down as its convenor in 1975. The plant is often the first place that comes to mind when Britons of a certain age reminisce about how "the unions ran the country" back in the 1970s. Built in 1906, it was the kind of place that racked up hundreds of walkouts, sit-downs, and strikes, year after year, as workers and bosses fought out disagreements great and small. The union wielded so much power that company bosses liked to joke that Etheridge's successor, Derek "Red Robbo" Robinson, would "run the factory and use the managers as consultants."



# Precarity Was the Worm



Yet, like most British auto firms, Longbridge was not exactly a union fiefdom when Etheridge came to work there as a thirty-one-year-old in 1940. Although British trade unions had established a significant presence in the industry in the wake of World War I, they lost much of that power after the 1926 general strike's defeat. Companies like Austin, Morris, Rootes, and Standard, as well as the UK branches of Ford and General Motors (Vauxhall), all successfully pushed union activists off their production lines, largely restricting membership to a craft worker elite.

At the beginning of the war, union density among car workers stood at just 24 percent, and one in ten among the semi-skilled. Autoworkers

generally recalled interwar firms as being “hire-and-fire” employers, where you might get sacked on the spot for annoying a supervisor or saying the wrong thing in front of a company spy.

Under pressure from the British government, employers played nice with the unions during World War II. However, as soon as the war ended, management resumed hostilities, using the shut-down during the particularly bad winter of 1946 as an excuse to push out “troublemakers,” especially those known to have communist sympathies. At Austin, management carried out a couple of big purges, firing more militants in 1951 and 1953. It was only in the following decade that the union organization there finally managed to fully entrench itself, declaring the factory 100 percent union—a “closed shop”—in 1964.

The idea that it took two decades after the war to establish this kind of hegemonic union culture among *the* classic subject of the era’s capitalism—the autoworker—cuts across stereotypical images of the “traditional working class,” even on the Left. We tend to think of the great cultures of class solidarity of the postwar period as having been almost a natural phenomenon that accompanied that phase of capitalism. It is as if they simply appeared at the appointed time as an organic outgrowth of large manufacturing workplaces. From this viewpoint, the collective rights to bargain and organize workers that accumulated during the thirty-year postwar boom seem like the product of a particular regime of political economy, rather than the organizing strategies and agency of workers themselves.

This perspective often emphasizes, too, the inevitability and permanence of the defeats subsequently experienced by the European and North American labor movements. We attribute the various features of an earlier time—“good union work,” with job security, collective bargaining rights, and benefits—to a fleeting postwar settlement, and we associate their absence in subsequent decades with the rise of neoliberalism and the emergence of the twenty-first-century “precariat.” Beset by

all-powerful bosses, insecure economic conditions, weakened class consciousness, and the supposedly fractured politics of postmodern identities, the kind of combative solidarities that Etheridge and his comrades constructed at Longbridge became virtually impossible to re-create.

Yet precarity was the rule rather than the exception for twentieth-century workers, and the vast majority of labor organizing had to be done under conditions similar to those that confront union activists today. When Etheridge arrived at Longbridge, his employer reserved the right to dismiss employees at will, even for trivial offenses like rudeness to a supervisor. The company did accept some unobtrusive forms of collective bargaining,

adhering to the national Engineering Employers’ Federation’s agreement with the officials of the engineering unions. But in practice, it used piece rates to set pay unilaterally, and it sought to victimize any union activists who made life difficult for the bosses.

Longbridge plant workers demonstrate during the Winter of Discontent (1978–79), a period of labor militancy. Margaret Thatcher was elected that spring. On p. 106, a worker throws himself to the ground in front of a truck at the Longbridge plant during a 1956 strike against proposed mass layoffs.



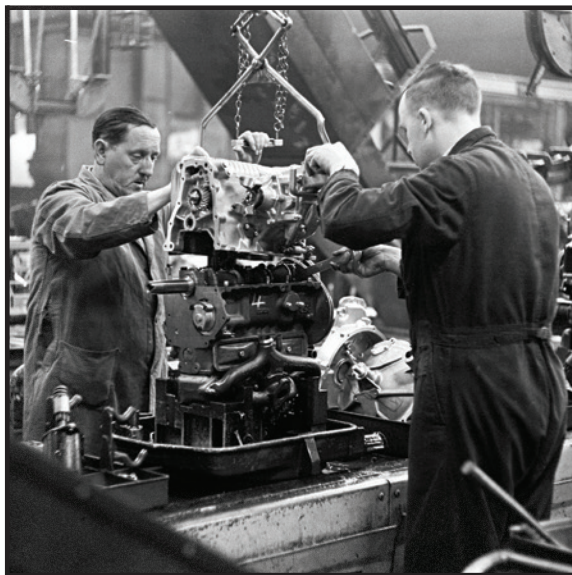


## The Union & the Workers

So, how exactly did it come to pass that Longbridge—and most other similar workplaces in the UK auto industry—developed such powerful factory union movements? And what might contemporary union organizers find interesting about the process?

Economic and political circumstances certainly did play a role. World War II and the period of reconstruction immediately afterward created tight labor markets that facilitated in-factory activism. Successive postwar British governments pursued “full employment” policies that generally kept unemployment below 3 percent of the working population until the 1970s. High employment reduced the threat of being out of work for labor militants and made workers less cautious about the dangers of losing an industrial dispute.

The threat of the blacklist and permanent unemployment remained in place for workers who had been identified as “ringleaders.” In general, however,



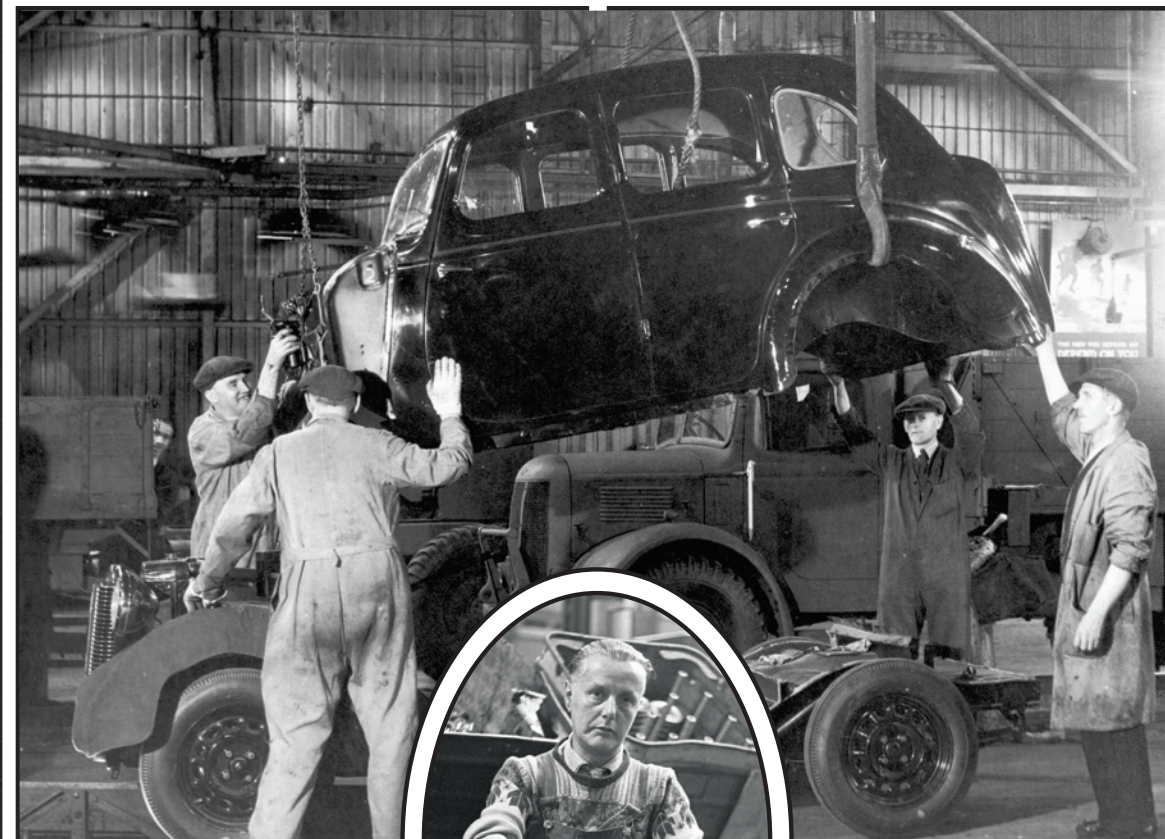
workers possessed greater leverage in postwar economic conditions. Britain's governments of the time also tended to favor collective bargaining as the most efficient way of organizing industrial relations.

Crucially, though, while the postwar settlement did create more favorable conditions for organizing, this did not automatically translate into class power on the ground. Even if national collective bargaining agreements made it more likely that terms and conditions for workers would meet some minimum standard, and labor shortages made it less likely that your employer would fire you, it did not follow that workers had much agency in their day-to-day working lives. Having your basic wage rates periodically negotiated by a full-time union official was better than nothing, but supervisors could still behave like petty tyrants at the point of production, and low “piece rates” — bonuses paid for working faster — could still turn any factory into a de facto sweatshop.

The key to wielding collective power in everyday working life did not lie in empowering the union's national leadership to negotiate on their behalf, but in building organization and solidarity on the lines and in the workshop. It was about building the real capacity for direct action among the workforce.

This was, of necessity, a painstaking and time-consuming process. As in our own time, workers in the classic era of union power had to confront multiple factors that potentially cut across the formation of collective interests and class consciousness. There were strict divisions between skilled and semi-skilled workers, and this was a line that the largest engineering union — the Amalgamated Engineering Union (AEU) — tended to reinforce, with its different sections (and even different-colored union cards) for “craftsmen” and “workers.” Class fractions could separate laborers from lineworkers and lineworkers from craft workers.

Production incentives and personal advancement often led workers to take a more individualistic path toward improving their working lives. Peter Vigor, a fitter at GM's Vauxhall Plant in Luton, told



the historian Len Holden that work discipline back in the 1940s “didn't come from the management, it came from the people themselves.” As Vigor recalled, the low piece rates at Vauxhall led workers to push for faster-paced production. His coworkers used to “shout out ‘cuckoo, cuckoo’” when they caught him slacking off, “because they said I was fouling the nest.”

Individual motivations and subtle variations in fractional class status were one of several powerful forces pushing workers away from more combative forms of collective solidarity. Patriarchal gender norms also pushed women workers — who accounted for one in ten of the auto workforce — to the fringes of union activism. Informal “color bars” excluded black and South

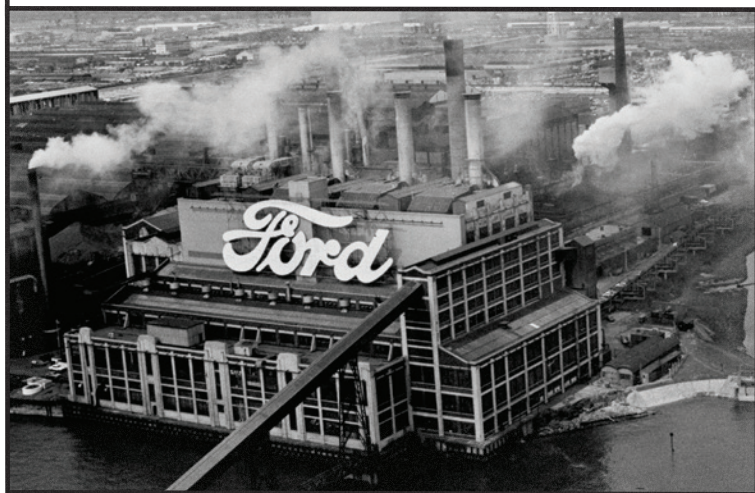
Asian workers from better-paid manual roles and undermined union rights among the worst-paid sections of the workforce. It was far from inevitable that strong shop-floor union cultures would emerge, even if external conditions had become a little more promising after the war.

The ways in which Etheridge and his comrades elsewhere in the UK auto industry set about organizing turned this diversity into something of a strength, with decentralization and autonomous decision-making as the key. Historically, Britain's trade union movement traveled light in terms of

Photographs from the Austin Mini production line at Longbridge, March 10, 1963.

paid officials. The three biggest unions in the motor industry – the AEU, the Transport and General Workers' Union (TGWU), and the National Union of Vehicle Builders (NUVB) – employed a few local and regional officials but rarely paid dedicated “organizers.” For active recruitment, they depended for

## Against Arbitrary Rule



For assembly-line workers and machinists, early organizing centered chiefly on contesting the piece rate. Piece rates could act as a hard brake on collective solidarity, encouraging workers to discipline one another's productivity to keep things moving and get a bigger bonus. But they could also be an obvious and immediate way in which to contest the authority of the bosses. Every time the company introduced a new work task, the rate at which the task would be paid, whether the job was “tight” or “loose” (hard or easy to make money on),

and whether it was fair in relation to other jobs could all serve as natural discussion points for the work group – and potentially as a source of dissent.

Most of all, piece rates were something small that people talked about anyway and that active union members could affect almost immediately. Peter Nicholas worked at another Birmingham auto factory, making components for Rover, the manufacturers of the original Land Rover. He remembered listening to his coworkers complain about bad new piece rates during breaks and interjecting to add his perspective: “Look, unless you want this arbitrarily imposed on you, you need to get organized.”

Nicholas reappeared with a pile of union cards at the next lunch break and led his coworkers through some basic trade-union logic: “No good you being in the union unless you've got some representatives.” The group then elected a shop steward.

the most part on “lay officials,” individual members who were working on the job and took on additional organizing responsibilities as shop stewards and dues collectors.

Unions conducted most of their recruitment within the factory, through face-to-face discussions, not generally through agitprop literature or paid outsiders. “The union,” as far as most new members were concerned, was not a logo or an institution, but a body represented personally by one of their coworkers – someone they knew, someone who usually worked a few feet away. In this manner, individual workers set about transforming life within their own workshops above all else.

Above: The Ford Dagenham factory was the site of substantial industrial action, including a strike that triggered a three-month shutdown in 1971. Opposite: In 1968, sewing machinists at the plant went on strike to protest wage disparities – ultimately leading to the passage of the Equal Pay Act 1970.



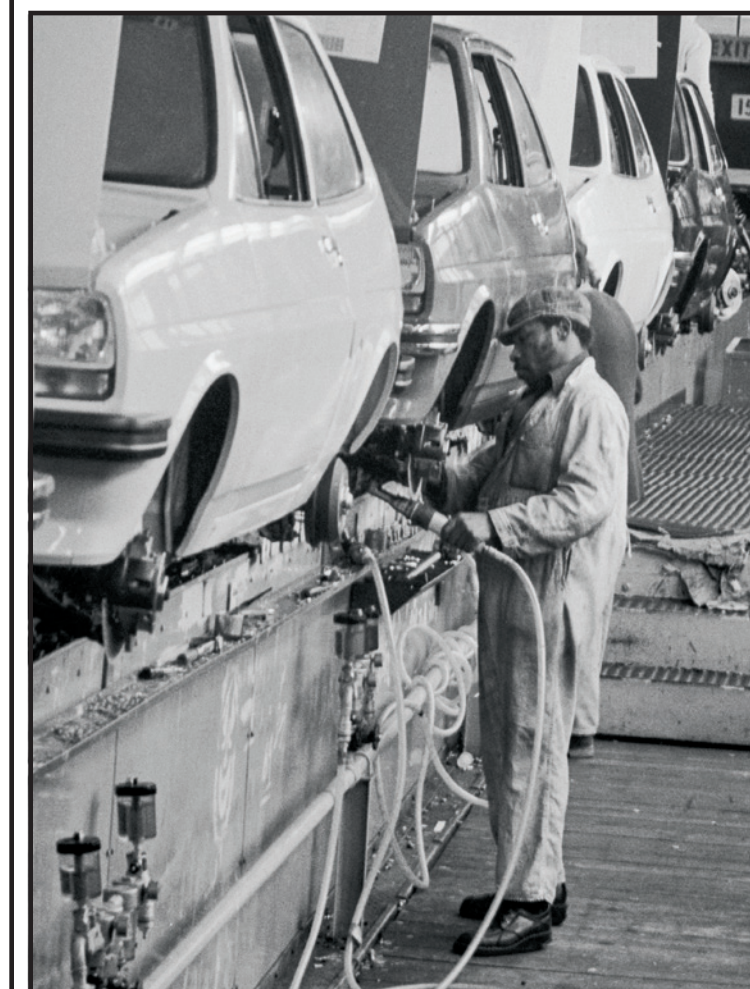
In his previous job – at Longbridge, as it happens – Nicholas had been fired and blacklisted for union activity. His next move was to remind his new members what firms like Rover were really like:

agitational material or endorsement by local or national bigwigs. Shop stewards like Nicholas did the bulk of the work – people who went “union crazy” within their own workshops.

This company has got a long record of anti-trade-unionism. If in any shape or form these lads [the stewards] are touched by the company by means of suspension or sacking, I'm not advising the use of procedure. The only way you would protect them is, whatever they do to them, they'll do to you. In other words, if they sack 'em, you go out till they're back ... if you want any future ... and you let any of these four lads be victimized, and you don't defend them, you might as well forget that you filled a form in.

Nicholas took a small thing – the piece rate for one job – and used it to walk his coworkers through the whole logic of his union activism.

His organizing activities were a microcosm of what happened across the UK auto industry. Factories were not unionized in one big sweeping campaign, but workshop by workshop, line section by line section. No union ever mounted a single brilliant drive through



The issues that brought people in were always intensely local and intensely personal to the people involved. They would vary from one work group to another. For pieceworkers, it was often an argument over piece rates that stimulated organizing. On the other hand, for “dayworkers” (those on a flat hourly rate), it would often be a collective rejection of excessive work norms, or irritation at a particularly obnoxious supervisor.

Since organization was built from the ground up in this way, various features ended up being baked into the factory cultures of British autoworker trade unionism. Decentralization was one — work groups elected *their* shop steward and tended to make their decisions in small groups by a show of hands, usually during tea or lunch breaks. Everything was workplace-based, and the union seldom did things on your behalf. The union was never a service for which you paid a subscription — merely a vessel for workers’ own self-activity.

This meant there was a lot of autonomy for the shop steward and their shop, a tendency that helped unions to organize across diverse groups of workers. Workers, skilled and unskilled, high-paid and low-paid, could each elect their own stewards and make their own demands, without necessarily having to agree about what they wanted with their union leaders. Sometimes, this pattern of organizing could provide marginalized groups with sufficient freedom to challenge structural inequalities that their unions would have preferred to ignore.

At Longbridge in the mid-1960s, low-paid laborers in the factory’s East Works, the majority of whom were Afro-Caribbean migrants, used their shop organization to challenge racist barriers to job advancement, much to the irritation of many other trade unionists in the factory. Similar forms of organizing lay behind the famous 1968 sewing



machinists’ strike at Ford’s Dagenham Plant, where strike action by just one small section of the workforce forced the British government to legislate on equal pay for women.

The pattern of organizing that transformed the UK auto industry over the course of twenty years from being union-hostile and unevenly organized into an industry that was virtually 100 percent union has important lessons for contemporary union activists. We tend to think that work and class have changed so dramatically over the past forty years that everything being encountered today is novel. Yet much of what we experience — precarity, anti-union employers, company spies, the potential for different ideas, identities, and values competing for space with collective class consciousness — would be extremely familiar to mid-century organizers in the UK and across Europe and North America.

In the 1930s, the auto industry was a new sector on a global scale, certainly compared to heavy engineering, textiles, or coal mining. It took time to build trade union cultures that were sufficiently robust to withstand some of the brutal practices employed by these difficult employers. The agency of ordinary workers was crucial.

UK autoworkers were never passive recipients of the good word of “trade unionism.” They were hardly ever recruited by paid “organizers” — unions helped them to create their own organizations, brick by brick. Factory union cultures were built not on the idea that unions *in general* win better pay and benefits, but on the specific priorities and immediate actions that small groups set and took through intimate personal meetings. Talk, organize, weigh the risks, back one another up, act together, win something, realize your strength — that was the basic formula. ■

# Leftovers

## FORCED OVERTIME

# Dentists of the World, Unite?

The middle class isn't going away — and we're not sure they'll help us.

In the history of the socialist movement, the most cutting epithet ever deployed is not “class traitor,” “counterrevolutionary,” or even “renegade.” It is “dentist.”

In the 1960s, in the course of a debate with some student radicals, *Dissent* founder Irving Howe famously lost his temper. But it wasn't the actual yelling that made the event so memorable — it was the particular insult he leveled at the young radicals. “You know what you're going to end up as?” Howe said. “You're going to end up as a dentist!”

A few decades earlier, Leon Trotsky had dismissed Socialist Party of America leader Morris Hillquit as “the ideal Socialist leader for successful dentists.” Joseph Stalin didn't like dentists either. After the assistant of Adolf Hitler's dentist identified the führer's burned remains, Stalin had her imprisoned for most of the next decade.

The reason “dentist” is such a good insult for socialists is that it is an occupation that, perhaps more than any other, encapsulates the middle class. Dentists are

highly educated but certainly lower in status than medical doctors. They are often small employers who work in their own firms. And they are generally affluent.

Though socialists' main opponent is obviously capital, the middle class — as exemplified by dentists — causes no small amount of agitation. Yet, as much as socialists have dismissed the middle class — in America, a slice of the population tens of millions strong — the socialist movement has also spent quite a bit of time discussing how to bring in the ones who are sympathetic to our objectives.

## Finding the Middle Class

The problems that the middle class poses for socialism can generally be divided into three different categories: the genealogical, the political, and the theoretical.

The genealogical problem concerns the surprisingly middle-class origins of socialism itself. Socialism, after all, is older than the working-class movement that underpinned the ideology for most of the twentieth century. And its modern origins are with middle-class reformers like Henri de Saint-Simon and Charles Fourier. Vladimir Lenin famously argued that socialism comes to the working-class struggle from *without*, and, as a matter of historical fact, he was more right than wrong. This has often been an embarrassment for a socialist

movement anxious about its working-class bona fides.

The second problem is political. As socialists gained strength in democratic countries, they inevitably began building political parties to contest elections. These formations, in attempting to win majorities for socialism, then branch out beyond their working-class base and try to win over layers of peasants or middle-class voters, becoming a mass party rather than a class party. But in doing so, they lose their particular connection to the working class — ceasing to point to class as the most important political identity of their members. As Adam Przeworski put it, “the process of organization of the masses disorganizes the workers.”

The final problem the middle class poses for socialists is definitional. Who, besides dentists, is really in the middle class to begin with? The question goes to the very heart of socialist theory. Since Karl Marx, the basic idea of socialism is that capitalist societies are organized into two polar classes: capitalists and workers. The middle class is something of an embarrassment to this scheme, particularly in wealthy countries today. Over the course of the twentieth century, the middle class in capitalist countries has clearly grown in size, and its form hasn't been the small shopkeeper who occupied most of Marx's attention in his discussions of the subject.

After Marx, socialist thinking about how to define the middle class coalesced around two approaches. The first defines

almost *everyone* as middle class. This approach was exemplified by the Greek Marxist Nicos Poulantzas, who argued that anyone not engaged in manual labor producing surplus value was outside the working class. Based on his definition, the working class in the United States today is a mere 15 to 20 percent of the population. Ironically, Poulantzas agrees with the Babbitry who insist that the United States is fundamentally a middle-class country.

The other approach is to deny that the middle class is any kind of problem for socialists and insist that professors, engineers, and attorneys are fundamentally workers, simply because they work for a wage. While one must admire the willingness to bite the bullet with this position, it's not sustainable. The problem isn't that these occupations have living standards that are higher than those of most workers. There are plenty of undeniably working-

class jobs that, largely because of powerful unions, pay extremely well. The problem is that class isn't determined simply by the size of your paycheck, but nor is it determined simply by the fact that you receive a paycheck, as opposed to rent or dividends from a business.

These opposing methods of defining the middle class are both unsatisfactory. That fact might suggest it's rather like the Supreme Court's definition of pornography — we know it when we see it. In practice, this approach is employed quite often. There is no shortage of socialists who simply call politics they don't like “middle-class.”

A more rigorous approach is available, however: the Marxist theorist Erik Olin Wright's account of contradictory class locations. Wright's great insight was that class is multidimensional. Rather than being simply defined by one attribute, like receiving a wage, class

**The reason “dentist” is such a good insult for socialists is that it is an occupation that, perhaps more than any other, encapsulates the middle class.**

involves two major dimensions: ownership and authority.

“Ownership” means ownership of the means of production in the traditional Marxist sense. Capitalists are capitalists because they control investment and make decisions about how the means of production can be used. Top corporate managers, like CEOs, obviously make these decisions as well, and thus ownership should be interpreted not in the legal sense but rather in the broader sense of control over the means of production. “Authority” refers to relations within the firm. Capitalists (and top managers) are distinguished by the fact that they give orders, which are ultimately backed up by the threat of unemployment. Workers are distinguished by the fact that they follow orders.

If class is defined by these two dimensions, then both capitalists and workers are fairly easy to understand. Capitalists own (or control) productive property and give orders, and workers don’t control productive property and follow orders.

Yet there are also groups whose attributes don’t line up so nicely.

Unless they are management, doctors in a hospital, for example, don’t get to make decisions about major capital expenditures — but they also have a tremendous amount of autonomy on the job, such that their position can hardly be described as following orders. While they may not directly hire or fire themselves, for the most part, they do often give

orders to nurses or other staff. This is why Wright describes their class location as contradictory. It has attributes that we associate with both of the major classes in society.

Wright’s theory is useful because it recognizes what is distinct about much of the middle class without sacrificing the basic Marxist theoretical commitment to a polarized class structure. It’s also politically useful for the way it lays out a rigorous approach to the possibility of class alliances. As Wright himself put it:

the possibilities of a viable socialist movement in advanced capitalist societies depend in part on the capacity of working-class organizations to forge the political and ideological conditions which will draw these contradictory locations into closer alliance with the working class.

This is a particularly pressing question in the United States today. As many liberals have delighted in pointing out for some time now, political polarization along educational lines has become incredibly intense over the last few decades. Today, college-educated Americans are more liberal than ever before. And this liberalism is not confined, as some socialists like to imply, to support for causes like anti-racism or other forms of nonclass oppression. Support for redistribution among the highly educated has grown steadily, particularly over the last decade. From Medicaid expansion to the

minimum wage, college-educated Americans have learned to love the welfare state as never before.

But that’s not to say it’s all going to be smooth sailing. Wright’s arguments help clarify both the opportunities and dangers this situation presents for the Left. Because of the contradictory positions of much of the middle class, dynamics like educational socialization can play an outsize role in shaping the political preferences of members of the class. This is very different from capitalists, in particular.

Though capitalists educated at elite colleges may have impeccably liberal ideas about gender or race, as a group, they will never embrace a generous welfare state and strong labor unions — no matter what their professors or peers told them in college. But, for much of the new middle class, their political preferences are not nearly so determined by their class position. For them, the well-documented liberalizing effects of education play out in full.

This presents an opportunity to the Left, particularly in the electoral sphere. There is simply no denying that the middle class has played an important role in left-wing advance since 2016. The highly educated have been crucial to many victories in the past few years, from Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s rise to the expansions of Medicaid in several state referenda.

At the same time, the crucial role socialization has played in the middle class’s move to the left

presents a real danger. After all, that socialization is something the vast majority of workers are excluded from. Activists who talk endlessly about “bodies and spaces” might vote the right way on redistribution, but their vocabulary and etiquette radiate a privilege from which workers are excluded. A Left whose politics are rooted in the left-wing ideology acquired through socialization at elite universities is one that cannot help but repel workers — particularly when it is not yet powerful enough to deliver real benefits to them.

## Hegemony Now

The middle class, it seems, is still a problem for socialists. The question of how the working-class movement operates in alliance with other classes is an old one — though, in the wake of phenomena like Occupy and the Bernie Sanders campaigns, it feels new to us.

Today, “hegemony” is a word associated with precisely the milieu of highly educated radicals. But before it was a piece of academic jargon, it was a term in the socialist movement that described how some classes lead other classes politically. Lenin and Trotsky used the term in this sense to describe how the Russian working class could lead the peasantry in a revolutionary struggle against Tsarism, and it was this usage that Antonio Gramsci began working from in his famous *Prison Notebooks*.



For Gramsci, hegemony was not primarily a story of capitalists bamboozling workers with culture, but of the proletarian movement developing policies capable of uniting other classes, primarily the peasantry, against the ruling class. This kind of leadership ultimately depended upon the leading group’s place in the “decisive nucleus of economic activity.”

This begins to shed light on the tasks of socialists in relation to the middle class today. Winning over sectors of the middle class is simply necessary for a socialist movement attempting to build electoral majorities. For that reason, writing off the middle class, while often satisfying, is in fact politically backward.

Instead, the socialist movement needs to try and win sections of the middle class to working-class politics, premised on the strength and combativity of the organized working class. In other words, the battle is not against the middle class itself, but against conceptions of politics rooted in middle-class socialization — language, rituals, oration — rather than working-class power.

Navigating a moment of working-class weakness and a middle class moving left presents a host of challenges to the socialist movement. Winning sections of the class to supporting a workers’ movement will no doubt be difficult, but it shouldn’t be like pulling teeth. ■

# The Ragged-Trousered Philanthropist

Robert Tressell was a great writer whose class position meant he died without knowing the appreciation of his work.

Robert Tressell, the author of the classic socialist novel *The Ragged-Trousered Philanthropists*, was one of the most influential writers in twentieth-century England. Yet, for decades after his death, hardly anyone knew who he was. He died February 3, 1911, in Liverpool Royal Infirmary, and was buried a week later in a pauper's grave. The book he worked on for the final five years of his life had never been published — and, as far as he knew, it never would be.

Tressell's resting place was only rediscovered in 1968, an overgrown patch of what is now Walton Park Cemetery. In 1977, Liverpool workers marked his resting place — and those of the dozen buried alongside him — with a gravestone and a William Morris poem, "The Day Is Coming." But Tressell's day may never have come, had it not been for the research of Hastings historian Fred Ball, who spent many years on a "bewildering" search uncovering facts about the author's life.

Before Ball, the only widely known description of Robert Tressell came from the poet Jessie Pope, who had received the manuscript for *Ragged* from Tressell's daughter, Kathleen, and arranged for its first publication by Grant Richards in 1914. Tressell, Pope wrote, was "a socialistic working-man" and "a house-painter and sign-writer who recorded his criticism of the present scheme of things until, weary of the struggle, he slipped out of it."

Ball first began researching Tressell after he heard that Mugsborough, the fictional town in which *The Ragged-Trousered Philanthropists* is set, was in fact his own native Hastings. He inquired about Tressell at the local library but discovered that no biography existed. In fact, there were no books referencing Tressell or the background to the novel at all. So, in 1942, he published a letter in the *Hastings & St. Leonards Observer* — as he was

later to find out, the *Obscurer* of Tressell's book — seeking information about the man and his life.

The correspondence he received set him on many paths at once — sometimes appearing contradictory and other times actually so. He discovered an article written in the *Daily Worker* in the 1930s identifying Robert Tressell by another name, Robert Newland. This first introduced the idea that the book had been written under a pen name. A 1920s article in the *Painters' Journal* confirmed that, just like the book's protagonist, Frank Owen, Tressell had been a painter himself. But it didn't provide a full account of his life.

It was only after many years of research that Ball found out Tressell's real identity. By this time, after World War II, he had acquired the original handwritten manuscript for *The Ragged-Trousered Philanthropists*, discovering that the version published in 1914 had been, in Ball's words, "mutilated." Tressell — whose name, to add to the confusion, was spelled "Tressall" by the publisher — had written a 1,700-page tome that was much more detailed and radical than the version many had read.

In addition to writing two biographies that described his search for the real Robert Tressell — *Tressell of Mugsborough* in 1951 and *One of the Damned* in 1979 — Ball managed to get the original version of *The Ragged-Trousered Philanthropists*



published by Lawrence & Wishart. By this time, he had established that Tressell was not, in fact, originally from England but had been born in Dublin in 1870, and he had correctly identified the name under which he lived most of his life: Robert Noonan.

## Irish Roots

Tressell's Irish upbringing was the source of considerable confusion for Ball. He had lived two rather different lives, and even within those, there were contradictions. Tressell was born the son of Samuel Croker (whose name he first used) and Mary Noonan at 37 Wexford Street in Dublin, where a plaque today hangs in his honor. Croker, an inspector with the Royal Irish Constabulary and later a

magistrate, was a man of considerable means. "What happened to my working-class writer?" Ball wondered in his works.

But Tressell was an illegitimate child. Mary Noonan was not Croker's wife. She was, as the phrase at that time went, his "kept woman," a mother of four children who lived in Dublin's rough red-light district. Croker, for his part, was eighty at the time of Robert's birth and would die not long after. As we now know, some of Ball's assumptions about Tressell's Irish childhood were inaccurate. Many years later, the research of Bryan MacMahon would reveal that the boy had spent much of his early years in various parts of England and was not, as Ball assumed, unfamiliar with the country until the 1900s.

Tressell received a good education — speaking seven or more languages, by some accounts — but very little of the inheritance passed to his mother reached him, with the vast majority being spent or going to his sisters and other family. He had much of the experience of an elite upbringing but without the means that so often came with it.

This would go some way toward explaining the first notable action of Tressell's young adulthood. Living in Queens Road, Liverpool, and working as a signwriter, he was convicted in May 1890 of stealing silver from a shipping magnate. He spent months in prison before departing shortly after for South Africa, where he settled first in Cape Town and met and married Elizabeth Hartel, with whom he had his daughter, Kathleen. Their marriage does not appear to have been a happy one, and Tressell was divorced and living with his daughter in Johannesburg by 1894.

His workmates in Johannesburg remembered Tressell as a “wild Irishman.” This is where we get the first sense of his involvement in politics — not in socialism, as such, but in republicanism. He is said to have regularly worn the green sash of the United Irishmen. His membership card — signed “RP Noonan” and bearing the slogan “Live Ireland, Perish Tyranny” — survives in the archives of the Trades Union Congress in London.

Tressell was to come to know a number of prominent Irish

republicans, including John MacBride, who would later be executed for his role in the 1916 Easter Rising. It seems likely that Tressell himself read the works of revolutionary James Connolly. He was certainly familiar with the writings of Michael Davitt, founder of the Irish National Land League, who visited South Africa on a solidarity delegation during the Boer War. The sections in *The Ragged-Trousered Philanthropists* that reference the ownership of land by the rich and the plight of their tenants strongly echo Davitt. It is not the only green shade in Tressell's book: the 1907 Belfast Dock strike, led by Connolly's longtime comrade James Larkin, is also referenced. Tressell must have been fascinated reading about the role of his father's Royal Irish

Constabulary in that dispute, first in repressing workers and then in mutinying on their behalf.

Whatever his other inspirations, South African historian Jonathan Hyslop has established that Tressell considered himself a socialist by this stage and became active in the local trades council. But his stint in the Cape would impact his life in other ways. While in the country, he contracted tuberculosis — a condition that was to hamper him for the rest of his days. Tressell decided to leave South Africa in 1901 and return to England with his sister Adelaide and her son, Arthur, a child Tressell considered almost his own and the inspiration for Frank Owen's son Frankie in his book. Tressell's other sister

Mary Jane was based in what she described as “dear, sunny Hastings,” and with its seaside climate reputedly good for bronchial conditions, it was there that Robert Tressell settled next.

## The Real Mugsborough

The Victorian era had been Hastings' heyday, with rail extended to seaside towns across Britain. Tressell arrived at the very moment this period ended, in 1901; the population was falling, there was little demand for building work, and even its more illustrious neighbor, St Leonards-on-Sea, was generally felt to be in a state of decay. Plans to make Hastings into a port city with a grand new harbor were abandoned in 1897, leaving an unfinished harbor arm that offered an enduring symbol of its decline.

The early twentieth century was a time of rising inequality, as stagnant wages paved the way for soaring profits. This was felt even more acutely in Hastings, which offered an exile for high-society types from the South of England and London while providing little by way of decent jobs for workers. In November 1901, the *Hastings News* forecast a bleak winter for the town's children, with “visions of relief funds and soup kitchens.” Artisans were out of work, it said, “with painters, as usual, being the chief sufferers.” Hardly the welcome Tressell would have wanted.

He found his first job in Hastings with Bruce & Co, the building contractors that offered the

inspiration for Rushton & Co in *The Ragged-Trousered Philanthropists*. According to Fred Ball's research, a great deal of what Tressell writes in the book is autobiographical. The company was indeed owned by a tyrant who once fired a worker for addressing him in the street. It did also have a toady foreman, similar to the character variously called Misery, Nimrod, or Hunter, with whom Tressell had a fractious relationship. The secretary of the light refreshment fund absconded in real life, too — and the apprentice, Bert, was a real boy named Bill Gower, whose testimony in later years provides us with the picture of Tressell's working life we have today.

Little had been known until then about Tressell's talents as an artist, but Gower's testimony helped to illuminate this aspect of his life. It was discovered that he had been a master sign maker — painting one for another building company, Adams & Jarrett, that lasted until the 1960s — as well as a decorator of fine rooms. The famous Cave from the book is likely an amalgam of a number of jobs in the wealthy Upper St Leonards locales of The Green and Hollington Park Road. We also now know that Tressell worked on a Moorish room, as Frank Owen did, in the Val Mascal in Gillsmans Hill between 1903 and 1904.

Although its introduction maintains that Tressell meant “no attack on honest religion,” *The Ragged-Trousered Philanthropists* is distinctly anti-clerical in its outlook, mocking the false piety of

the ruling classes and excoriating their use of religion to manipulate workers. “[T]he vicar goes about telling the Idlers that it's quite right for them to do nothing, and that God meant them to have nearly everything that is made by those who work,” it says in one memorable passage. “In fact, he tells them that God made the poor for the use of the rich.”

It is therefore ironic that Tressell's best-known work is a mural that adorned the wall of St Andrew's Church on Queens Road. The church is now gone, but a portion of the mural was saved and restored and is on display in Hastings Museum. Beautifully intricate and clearly inspired by William Morris's Arts and Crafts movement, its inscription is a psalm from the King James Bible: “Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path.” It's a sentiment many workers over many decades would apply to the writings of Robert Tressell.

Tressell's attachment to his craft can be gleaned from his chosen pen name, a reference to a painter's trestle table. It was more than a means to earn a living or a mere functional task — it was a vocation. As the 1920s *Painters' Journal* article remarked,

He loved Art for Art's sake. He shared with William Morris and Walter Crane a desire to give to the world the best that was in him, so that the beauty of his work should be an inspiration to all in striving for what is most beautiful . . . Nothing distressed



him more than the scamping of his work. He, like the rest of us, was not permitted to do his best. Everything was sacrificed to the god of profit.

### A Socialistic Workingman

Tressell's debt to William Morris did not end with art. Morris's *Manifesto of the Socialist League* had a profound impact on Tressell's socialism, and many echoes of its politics can be found in *The Ragged-Trousered Philanthropists*. Bill Gower recalls that Tressell would recite from Morris's works, as well as those of Charles Dickens, Percy Shelley, Lord Byron, and Jonathan Swift, and make their books available to his fellow workers.

Within *Ragged* itself, there is only one clear reference to socialist literature: Robert Blatchford's *Merrie England* and *Britain for the British*, hugely popular texts of the early twentieth century. At the time Tressell settled in England, socialist politics were on the rise, with the number of parties and organizations growing each year. Hastings, however, lagged behind. In 1906, just as the Labour Party was making its first electoral breakthrough, the town was caught in an election between a Liberal and a Tory, with no socialist on the ballot.

Tressell records this election (and a subsequent 1908 by-election) in *The Ragged-Trousered Philanthropists*. Hastings was one of the only seats to go Tory in 1906 in an otherwise good year for

the Liberals, electing another Irishman — millionaire financier and tire magnate Harvey du Cros. Two years later, it returned his son Arthur in his place. Interestingly, Tressell reverses these fortunes in the book, awarding the seat to the Liberals.

This, Ball says, was a wry comment on the interchangeable nature of the two pro-capitalist parties. In *Ragged*, Tressell writes about how the two candidates come together after the election to toast each other's fortunes. It transpires that this, too, was describing a real event: the *Observer* records a dinner between Tory and Liberal supporters after the election at which the health of the king and the prosperity of the empire were toasted by all.

It was after this 1906 election that Tressell came together with leading figures from the local trades council to form the Hastings branch of the Marxist Social Democratic Federation (SDF). The chairman of the trades council and an early SDF activist, Fred Owen, is believed to be the inspiration behind the name of Frank Owen in the book. But Tressell knew other prominent Hastings socialists well, too — Alf Cobb was at that time a well-established labor leader in the town who organized in support of strikes alongside Tressell.

Putting his talents to good use, Tressell designed and made the Hastings SDF banner, which was later to be adapted for the Independent Labour Party. The burning injustices of class society had, by this time, made Tressell an

impassioned evangelist for the socialist cause. One such example, again recorded in *The Ragged-Trousered Philanthropists*, was the 1905 case of a man who had murdered his children rather than see them starve. In the book, Frank Owen briefly considers this fate for his own family, remarking that it might be a kinder end than the one the system had in store for them. This fear of the workhouse animated both Tressell and his protagonist throughout their respective journeys.

The development of Tressell's Marxist politics can be seen in an anecdote Ball records from one of his workmates. "How much do you earn?" the man asked Tressell, before being impressed by his answer. "Well," Tressell said, "you asked me what I earned, not what I got paid." By 1906, when Tressell set about writing his book, the concept of expropriation was on his mind. The belief that wealth was created by the rich and given away to the working class had to be tackled. The truth was, it was the workers who sustained the idle elites with their labor, not the other way around. If anyone were the philanthropists, it was them.

### The Philanthropist

It has often been said that *The Ragged-Trousered Philanthropists* was the first working-class novel. This may be wide of the mark in global terms, but it is not far from the truth for England. As Ball wrote:

It was the first English novel I'd ever seen in which men at



work was the basic setting, and the working class the central characters, and treated as real people, the kind of people I had been brought up among, and not as "comic" relief.

Robert Tressell, in this sense, belongs in the same bracket as Ireland's Seán O'Casey, America's Jack London, and Russia's Maxim Gorky: great writers from working backgrounds who gave voice to their class at the turn of the twentieth century. In his focus on dialogue, Tressell is probably most similar to O'Casey — yet *Ragged* is a distinctly English novel in its sensibilities, its character, and its humor. And it is all the better for it, as there are few more tragic Irishmen than ones who cannot adapt to their exile. Perhaps in its original title — "The Ragged-

Arsed Philanthropists" — Tressell finally found the common ground between his two homelands.

*Ragged* draws on deeper traditions, too, which shine some light on the depths of Tressell's education. Schooled in classics, his is one of the great Socratic novels, built around a basis of argumentative exchange that seeks to prod and probe the limits of class consciousness among working people in the same manner Plato describes in his dialogues. Beneath this literary style is a deeper message about socialist politics that will reach anyone involved in the struggle for a better world: experience alone does not guarantee consciousness; pedagogy, too, is required, and oftentimes direct confrontation with reactionary ideas.





*The Ragged-Trousered Philanthropists* may, in fact, be the best example of socialist educational literature in the English language. And it achieved this in utter defiance of the literary wisdom of its time: that novels should tell stories rather than teach. A number of its chapters were specifically designed for the latter purpose. “The Great Money Trick” set up the problems with capitalism as a system and explained the theory of surplus value; “The Oblong” described its social structure; and “The Great Oration” outlined an alternative, in the voice of socialist orator Barrington, that was durable enough to withstand the skepticism of revolutionary ideas by ordinary people as well as the powerful.

Tressell’s contribution was borne of his unique perspective. He was at once a worker who lived the experiences he writes about in the book and a child of the ruling classes who had been exposed to a life beyond the turgid slog. This made him an outsider, and that perch from which he could at times be seen to judge workers had its drawbacks. There is an unusually strong thread woven into English socialism of sectarians for whom the working class is a constant disappointment. While Tressell was not one of these, he did offer them some degree of comfort. But his perspective is redeemed by the fact, as Raymond Williams noted, that his experiences demonstrated the suffering of the working class “wasn’t an immutable law of life but a specific

social condition.” And he set about trying to persuade his colleagues — in life as in literature — of that fact.

If Robert Tressell occasionally seemed to portray workers as conservatives, it was a reflection of the undercurrent of bitterness that at times seized upon the book’s plot — and it was a well-deserved bitterness. Tressell took to writing *The Ragged-Trousered Philanthropists* after 1906 because, due to his failing health, there was little else he could do. He worked throughout the day, often exhausted, and recorded his experiences at night. All the time, he feared ending up in a workhouse, unable to prevent his daughter from becoming a ward of the state. It was a brutal end for a person of such intelligence, talent, and decency.

Once again, Tressell managed to find purpose even in bitterness. The blunt, descriptive names he gave to the book’s characters — “Misery” for the foreman, “Crass” for his assistant, “Slyme” for the untrustworthy wretch, “Grinder” and “Didlum” for the businessmen, “Sweater” for the mayor — could be criticized for a lack of subtlety. But they are, in fact, one of *Ragged’s* great strengths, a clarity that allows readers to dispense with the social fictions often associated with men of high status and learn to hate the despicable.

If Tressell himself made good use of his bitterness, surely we should feel some of it less forgivingly on his behalf. His final months were

spent in pain, the cost of a life at work and a lack of decent medical care. Robert Tressell died a pauper, having seen his book rejected by penny-pinching publishers. He must have felt, in his final moments, that his life was a failure. It is the nature of capitalism to separate the work from the worker, to elevate the former while treating the latter as expendable. But even in these terms, Tressell’s fate was particularly cruel.

Some have argued that *The Ragged-Trousered Philanthropists* won the 1945 election for Labour. This seems unlikely. It did, however, make a million or more socialists in the century of its existence, often finding its way into the hands of people just progressing from a belief that the system is fundamentally good but in need of reform to seeing it as fundamentally wrong. This is the bridge all radicals must build if our visions are to be realized, and Tressell provided the bricks and mortar.

Thinking of his fate, I am reminded of Stephen Jay Gould’s quote about Albert Einstein, that his existence was not as remarkable as “the near certainty that people of equal talent have lived and died in cotton fields and sweatshops.” Robert Tressell is proof of this — a truly great writer whose class position meant he died without knowing the appreciation of his work.

How many more never even had the chance to have their stories memorialized by history? ■



## Remembering Michael Jamal Brooks

Michael sought to make the world rather than be made by it.

I had drafted my usual spiel for this section — a joke, some accounting of our successes, and an appeal for your support — when I took note of our issue’s on-sale date. This edition will hit newsstands on July 20, 2021, exactly one year since the sudden death of our friend and comrade Michael Brooks.

I got to know twenty-nine-year-old Michael back in 2013, when *Jacobin* was just getting on its feet and he was working at the *Majority Report*. That show’s host, Sam Seder, told me that he had first met Michael the year before. Michael had roots in New York but spent his formative years in Western Massachusetts, and he was returning to the city and looking for a job.

Sam needed a producer, met Michael for a drink, and was “immediately struck by his intelligence and his sense of humor and decided to hire him — despite his ominous warning that he’s ‘not great with details.’”

That might not have been the best trait for a producer, but Sam had found someone with a special talent for commentary and comedy. Before long, Michael became something of a cohost on the *Majority Report*, helming the broadcast most Thursdays.

It was confusing to me at first. I would be invited to appear on an outlet that I regarded at the time as progressive but in a liberal way, and I’d have a host ask me about everything from Grenada’s New

Jewel Movement to the decline of the South African Communist Party to why the Meidner Plan didn’t end up working in Sweden.

I don’t remember exactly how Michael identified politically at that time, but I do know he was more intellectually curious than most socialists I’ve met. Michael was fascinated by the world and by the movements people built to change it. He was hungry to cultivate a milieu of people who were both politically committed and loved life.

Michael wasn’t afraid of controversy — he was happy to give a platform to guests who criticized the Left’s less productive pieties. But he wasn’t a shock jock either. Michael could “get away with” controversies because of how he

mixed his comedy with earnestness. He truly cared about improving the lives of working people, fighting all forms of oppression, and building international solidarity. There was no contradiction between his criticisms of left-wing “race reductionism” and the fact that he went out of his way to elevate black and brown leftists new to the media scene.

Of course, there were his skills as a performer — his ability to do political comedy that was, well, actually comedy. As Sam put it, “I need less than one hand to count how many people I’ve come across who had Michael’s skill in crafting a funny impression or character that was not only a vehicle for political satire but satirical in its essence.”

In recent years, Michael’s politics shifted into more confident socialism. He never abandoned his humanism, his spirituality, or his silent meditation retreats, which made him stand out in the sometimes-soulless landscape of political discourse. But he married the warmth he brought from these endeavors with a sharp analysis that recognized the centrality of class and the need for organization. The interplay between these perspectives was behind his vision of the Left: one that could speak plainly to the aspirations of working people but never lose its grander ambitions to change the world.

Branching out from his work at the *Majority Report*, Michael started building *The Michael*

*Brooks Show* (TMBS) in 2017. It quickly became an important voice on the Left, reaching almost 130,000 YouTube subscribers in his lifetime and hosting luminaries such as Noam Chomsky, Cornel West, and Adolph Reed. TMBS was a radicalizing force for huge numbers of mostly young people who were rightly contemptuous of the political establishment but only beginning to discover alternatives. In this way, Michael reached out to an audience who did not come from the traditional left — but who soon discovered they believed in its values.

Michael and I started brainstorming a Jacobin YouTube channel together shortly before Donald Trump’s election, though our plans only started to come to fruition last year. At first, you could say there was a material incentive behind the partnership for him. Back in 2016, having a foothold on another platform would give him some independence from the already-established *Majority Report*, much as he loved Sam and the show. However, by 2020, TMBS was growing at a breakneck speed, and Michael was both financially secure for the first time and overburdened with work.

I asked him why he still wanted to go forward, and his answer was simple: he wanted to help build institutions that would last. Michael believed in harnessing the abilities of large numbers of people, in developing them as protagonists for a greater project, rather than relying on a handful of talented individuals.

So, in April 2020, we launched *Weekends*, a Saturday show that he cohosted, and we were slated to introduce a weeknight broadcast called the *Jacobin Show*, which would be spearheaded by Michael but feature regular guests from the *Jacobin* team and beyond. He hoped to train his colleagues into a group that could take over from him within a year and a half. We had plans to build a studio after the pandemic ended, too, offering a space for TMBS and *Jacobin* broadcasts as well as movement use.

This dream of a vibrant community nurturing left media was fundamental to Michael’s work. Not because he aspired to be an “influencer” with a large individual platform, but because he knew how important it was to build the kind of bonds that you can’t have political action without. It would be easy to attract passive consumers behind a “product,” but far harder to help foster real change.

Victor Serge once said, in a line I discussed with Michael, that “the only meaning of life lies in conscious participation in the making of history.” Now that he’s gone, that sounds almost wooden. Michael sought to make the world rather than be made by it — that much is true — but I’ll remember more than his politics. I’ll remember someone who was deeply human; someone who made an impact in those parts of life that politics never quite solves. ■

# J

**“Christ didn’t choose the rich to  
preach the doctrine. He chose  
twelve poor workers — that is, he  
chose the proletariat of the time.”**

**— Fidel Castro**