

The meaning of work is once again on the social agenda and gaining increasing relevance for contemporary political struggles. There are perhaps

by Jeff Shantz

## Abolish Work!

two principal, but very different, impulses for an emergent transformation of work. First, radical social movements—most significantly ecology—raise concerns about productivism and the coercive character of capitalist jobs. These social activists are rethinking the very character of work, some going so far as to advocate the end of jobs altogether. Second, the cybernetized restructuring of global capital seems to be bringing about a “jobless recovery” with high levels of institutionalized unemployment. Anxiety, desperation, and reactionary politics are increasingly becoming the most common responses to this transformation of work.

I argue that the radical approach of work abolitionism provides an important impetus for rethinking social relations more broadly in this age of global injustice and ecological collapse. Struggles against the imposition of work, whether against workfare, sweatshops or telework, are inseparable from struggles for a world without exploitation. By seeking less rather than more work in our lives, we can offer a defiant alternative to the desperation of futurists who bemoan “the end of work” while never daring to dream the end of capital.

### From Work to Jobs to Leisure?

The job is a social artefact, although it is so deeply embedded in our consciousness that most of us have forgotten its artificiality or the fact that, through history, most societies have done fine without jobs.<sup>1</sup>

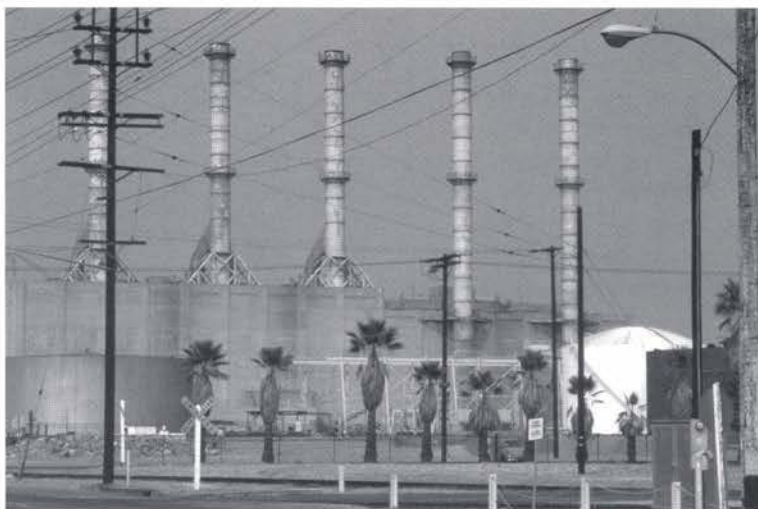
Through industrialism, work—the act of engaging in specific tasks to meet direct needs—became transformed into jobs, i.e. “to work for wages.”<sup>2</sup> Numerous authors have discussed the historic emergence of “jobs,” relating this transformation to enclosure of common lands and the separation of home life and work life as people left villages to work in urban factories.<sup>3</sup> They argue the new job-work gradually contributed to the destruction of traditional social relations and served to undermine prior ways of living.

According to futurists such as William Bridges and Jeremy Rifkin, we have recently entered a new period in the transformation of work. Rifkin claims that “the global economy is in the midst of a transformation as significant as the Industrial Revolution.”<sup>4</sup> He suggests that we have entered a “new economic era” marked by a declining need for “mass human labour” due to cybernatization. As computers, robots, and telecommunications networks and other cybernetic technologies replace human workers in an increasing range of activities, we enter “the early stages of a shift from ‘mass labor’ to highly skilled ‘elite’ labor accompanied by increasing automation in the production of goods and the delivery of services.”<sup>5</sup> Bridges suggests that changes in technology and the global market have transformed work relations so extensively that the very idea of “jobs” will soon disappear. He argues that each increase in productivity seems to make jobs redundant; the cybernetization of capital, for example, has already eliminated many jobs. Corresponding to this may be a shift in peoples’ perceptions of work. More and more, people are “searching for alternatives to jobs and job descriptions.”<sup>6</sup> Rifkin proclaims that the “jobs” question is “likely to be the most explosive issue of the [present] decade.”<sup>7</sup>

However, Rifkin’s analysis remains

productivist, arguing that a shortened work-week could be beneficial for capital in allowing for a doubling or tripling of productivity. Rifkin never questions the legitimacy or the desirability of capitalist relations. Indeed a major reason for his concern over “vanishing jobs” is that the transformation threatens a capitalist collapse through a weakening of consumer demand. Rifkin’s main desire is to see an increase in the “purchasing power” of workers so that “[e]mployers, workers, the economy, and the government all benefit.”<sup>8</sup> Like the “structural-functionalist” sociologists of old, Rifkin’s primary concern is with the possibility of “strain” in the system and the alleviation of any such strain. He worries that the decline of jobs could threaten the foundations of the modern state by destabilizing social relations which previously rested on a shared valuing of labour—what he calls the heart of the social contract. Rifkin even fears that a crisis in jobs will open the door to renewed militancy and to extralegal political action.<sup>9</sup>

In like fashion, Bridges’s optimism over possibilities for the transformation of jobs speaks only to the strata of well-skilled, well-paid workers in an increasingly polarised workforce. Bridges never challenges the hegemony of capital in structuring which responses to the “death of the job” are politically possible. He leaves “employee(s)” as an intact category and as a group of workers facing such unsatisfactory and increasingly tenuous options as freelance work, part-time work, or piecework. The so-called “decline of the job” means that those who are working have more work to do; as a result, more and more people are simply not working. But what Bridges fails to consider are questions about what is being produced, how, by whom, and for what purposes. Nor does he discuss what happens to those newly “liberated” from work: the jobless.



Furthermore, autonomist Marxists have argued that the cybernetization of capital will not usher in a leisure society, but will instead encourage an enlargement of the work realm. They claim that labour displaced from primary and secondary industries would be reabsorbed by “the tertiary, quaternary, or quinary sectors as farther and farther flung domains of human activity are assimilated within the social factory.”<sup>10</sup> Cybernetized capital, through the commodification of expanded and novel realms of human activity, can maintain wage labour, “incessantly recreating its proletariat, unless it is forcibly interrupted by the organised efforts of workers to reclaim their life-time.”<sup>11</sup>

### Work Abolitionism

More radical than the Marxist futurists are those who advocate the abolition of work. Believing that a “job” signifies a dependency relationship disguised as independence (the “freedom” to consume), work abolitionists call for workers of the world to relax. They gleefully reject what they call the Leftist mantra of full employment, which results in further

integration of the working classes into capitalism through preservation of jobs at all costs.<sup>12</sup> Abolitionists draw on traditionally anarchist or libertarian sensibilities that move beyond the reductionist contortion which has equated work with jobs. Instead, they emphasize creativity, self-determination, and conviviality of relations. “Jobs” are seen to restrict peoples’ capacities to care for themselves and those within their communal/ecological groupings, and are therefore rejected as a basis for radical activist convergence.

Work abolitionism suggests a movement simultaneously “of class” and “against class”, i.e. against the commodification of creativity and performance. The category “jobs” speaks to the compulsory character of involvement in capitalist production—production enforced via relations of economic and political control and power. In order to receive sustenance in a capitalist system, people must sell themselves. This is the imperative of wage labour: work is not done for its own sake but for secondary effects, such as wages, which are not characteristic of or inherent to the work itself. In other words, jobs

form a condensation point for complex relations of power around the trading of time for money, or what Zimpel quite poignantly refers to as “a transaction of existential absurdity.”<sup>13</sup> Jobs are characterized by an extension of organizational control *over* people: “employees” signify a system of domination practised through forms of discipline which include surveillance and time-management. The regimentation and discipline of the job serves to habituate workers to hierarchy and obedience while also discouraging insubordination and autonomy. Jobs as regimented roles replace direct, creative participation and initiative through arrangements of subservience. Bob Black argues that employment is capital’s primary and most direct coercive formation; one that is experienced daily.

Marxists might object that work abolitionism does not necessarily transform capitalism. After all, even some neo-liberal post-industrial theorists write about the “abolition of work” and they see it as the result of the application of innovative technological resources within capitalist relations—not as a destruction of those relations. At its most dramatic, the



neo-liberal “abolition of work” presents a leisure society enabled through the development of artificial intelligence and robotics. These are not acceptable alternatives. Among the prerequisites for ecological change is a reduction both in the amount of work being done and in the character of what work is done. Ecological lifestyles could not be constituted without the outright cessation of capitalist production. Only the end of production can bring about the end of nuclearism, weapons production, clear-cutting, toxic waste production—the variety of harmful applications to which nature is commonly subjected. Moreover, much work is useless. Here I include the defence and reproduction of work relations in political (ownership and control) and economic (circulation and consumption) forms. Radical politics can no longer ignore the question of jobs; indeed, returning to this question must be the starting point for reformulating radicalism, at least along green lines.

### Political Movements to Abolish Work

Of course, anti-work themes are not new. They find antecedents in Fourier and Lafargue, and even in Marx’s critique of alienated labour.<sup>14</sup> Earlier Wobbly (Industrial Workers of the World) demands for a four-hour-day may be understood as an expression of opposition to the extension of capitalist control over labour and the reduction of workers to one-dimensional class beings. The shortened workday opens up creative time outside of capitalist discipline and command and expands the time available for “frivolous” undertakings (including bringing about the end of industrial capitalism). It is an assertion by labour of its own project, counter to that of capital—much like workplace rebellion and workers’ self-determination can be read as reasonable

responses to the uncertainty of emerging conditions of (un)employment.

The mythic use of the general strike by Wobblies might also be understood in this. Anarcho-syndicalists have long argued that for co-operative, community-based ways of living to endure, workers will have to stop producing for Capital and State. In other words, class is only abolished through not working. A broad-based withdrawal of labour—the general strike—would force the megamachine to grind to a halt, left to rust.

Historically, unions have responded to technological changes and increases in productivity with demands for a shortened work-week. However, Rifkin reports that the union officials with whom he has spoken are “universally reluctant to deal with the notion that mass labour—the very basis of trade unionism—will continue to decline and may even disappear altogether.”<sup>15</sup> Mainstream unionists have been incapable of radically rethinking their politics to address the transformation of jobs. They have offered no alternatives to the neo-liberal perspectives on unemployment, particularly mass retraining—a strategy that simply reinforces dependence upon elites. Such failures to adapt—or to even remember their own radical histories—reveal the challenges workers within traditional unions face in the contemporary context.

In comparison, work abolitionists find the “end of work” to be the start of some truly liberating possibilities based on worker and community self-determination. Abolitionism conceives of work more as craft or play, and a task that is performed through democratic, participatory means. While bosses of all sorts try to convert our labour, and the world’s resources, into their value, work abolition holds out a vision of “self-val-

orization” in which we free our labour to meet our own needs. Self-valORIZING acts use time for work and activities which value ourselves and our relationships with each other and with nature. Capitalism, by contrast, encloses us in commodified time. Perhaps more than other activists, work abolitionists have increasingly come to understand jobs, under the guise of work, as the most basic moment of unfreedom. The struggle for new social relations begins with the struggle against capitalist work.

#### Notes

- 1 William Bridges, “The Death of the Job,” *National Times*. Sept. 1995: 44.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958); E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963); Bob Black, *The Abolition of Work and Other Essays*, (Port Townsend: Loompanics Unlimited, 1995); Bridges.
- 4 Jeremy Rifkin, “Vanishing Jobs,” *Mother Jones*, October (1995): 58-64. 60.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Bridges 46.
- 7 Rifkin 58.
- 8 Ibid. 64.
- 9 Ibid. 60.
- 10 Nick Witheford, “Autonomist Marxism and the Information Society,” *Capital and Class* 52: 85-125. 106.
- 11 Ibid 108.
- 12 See Black.
- 13 Lloyd Zimpel, ed, *Man Against Work*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974).
- 14 Antonio Negri, *Marx Beyond Marx*, (New York: Autonomedia, 1991).
- 15 Rifkin 64.