

Excerpt from 'The Jobless Future'

Shorter Hours, Free Time & the Dogma of Work

By Stanley Aronowitz & William DiFazio

Even when one-third of the U.S. labor force was officially unemployed throughout the 1930s, and many workers were on short-time schedules, they still blamed themselves for their joblessness. There was no dignity for those who could not find jobs; the conventional wisdom, shaken for more than a decade but not displaced, was that there was "always" plenty of work for those who wanted it.

This homily derives from the larger American ideology according to which there cannot, by definition, be a disjunction between broad economic growth and jobs. Individuals, not the economic and social system, are ultimately responsible for their fate; the market adjusts itself at a level approximating full employment, and any joblessness is "frictional" -- that is, temporary -- for responsible and able-bodied individuals. This key precept of the dominant ideology resumed its virtually uncontested hegemony after World War II, when official statistics recorded jobless rates of less than 6 percent until the early 1980s.

There are, of course, exceptions to the universal principle of paid labor as the sole path to male (and, increasingly, female) dignity, but these turn out to be only variations on the theme that work is a "need." One may retain "dignity" if income has been "earned" through past usury or ownership of business. Unwork becomes dignified only if income is derived from retirement or disability. The implicit assumption is that the retired and the disabled would have remained in the paid labor force if they were able-bodied or younger. Retirement is still considered a reward for a lifetime of faithful paid work, although some research has contended that relatively few retirees in the United States prosper unless they have income acquired through labor or property in addition to their Social Security benefits. From the standpoint of the conventional ethic, paid labor is considered optional for women.

....

Contrary to the ideologically conditioned theory shared by sociologists, psychologists, and policy analysts that "nonwork" produces, and is produced by, social disorganization and is symbolic of irresponsibility and personal dysfunctionality, recipients of guaranteed annual income who are relieved of most obligations to engage in labor do not fall apart. The incidence of alcoholism, divorce and other social ills associated with conditions of dysfunctionality does not increase among men who are not working. Nor do they tend to experience higher rates of mortality than those of comparable age who are engaged in full-time work. Given the opportunity to engage in active nonwork, they choose this option virtually every time.¹ For example, East Coast longshoremen who are not working but receive adequate income find many things to occupy their time. Many spend more time with their families, some engage in side businesses, and others take up hobbies or fix up the house. They retain their community and much of its culture. Most important, they are happier because they do not have to labor every day at a hard, often life-threatening job where the dangers associated with loading and unloading cargo are compounded by the need to handle materials that are frequently hazardous to their health.

Because of the pleasures of nonwork -- work in the specific sense used here, paid labor under a hierarchical management system -- the men are not pleased to be called in to put in a day's labor. Most of all, they have regained "free" time. This freedom, perhaps more than the activities in which they had become absorbed as an alternative to paid labor, fulfills the premier promise of technological

displacement that in its earlier ideological expressions was heralded by the labor movement and intellectuals as the main historical benefit of industrialization. An alarming number of workers, both intellectual and manual, surrender nearly all their waking and even dreaming hours to labor. The by now ancient slogan of the movement for shorter hours -- "eight hours work, eight hours sleep, and eight hours to do with what we will" -- has been abandoned. The notion of free time is as distant from most people's everyday experience as open space. Labor has been dispersed into all corners of the social world, eating space and time, crowding out any remnants of civil society that remained after the advent of consumer society, and colonizing the live world. We are able neither to play; unlike the older industrial model where labor was experienced as an imposition from above, the dispersal of work makes the enemy invisible because labor is now experienced as a compulsion dictated by economic anxiety more than by the "need" to work.

The Need to Reduce Working Hours

There has been no significant reduction in working hours since the implementation of the eight-hour day through collective bargaining and the 1938 enactment of the federal wage and hour law. Since then, we have witnessed a slow increase of working time despite the most profoundly labor-displacing era of technological change since the industrial revolution. People are laboring their lives away, which, perhaps as much as unemployment and poverty, has resulted in many serious family and health problems. In turn, lengthening of working hours has contributed to unemployment and poverty among those excluded from the labor system.

Therefore, there is an urgent need for a sharp reduction in the workweek from its current forty hours -- a reduction of, initially, at least ten hours. The thirty-hour workweek at no reduction in pay would create new jobs only if overtime was eliminated for most categories of labor. And, although some people may prefer flexible working arrangements that are more compatible with child-rearing needs or personal preference, the basic workday should, to begin with, be reduced to six hours, both as a health and safety measure and in order to provide more freedom from labor in everyday life. Finally, we envision a progressive reduction of working hours as a technological transformation and the elimination of what might be termed makework in both private and public employment reduces the amount of labor necessary for the production of goods and services. That is, productivity gains would not necessarily, as in the past, be shared between employers and employees in the form of increased income, but first in fewer laboring hours.

Obviously, restricting laboring hours raises some important questions: How do families maintain their living standards if income is substantially reduced by restricting overtime and other work-sharing arrangements? Will people use free time to develop their capacities or will time be absorbed destructively? Who will pay for work-sharing? Is it feasible in a global economy where capital moves freely in search of cheap labor? ...

An End to Endless Work

At a basic level, our proposals involve much more than an effective legislative struggle. They also require a significant effort to pose alternatives to the values that have propelled American cultural ideals since the end of World War I. The persistence of the old values, many of them crucially tied to the period of American economic expansion and world dominance, has constituted one of the most significant tools in the arsenal of insurgent conservatism. The conservatives have been able to mobilize

working-class and professional constituencies with a populism that is based on resisting the implications of change.

Like many who have come before us, we believe that among the crucial tools of domination is the practice of "work without end," which chains workers to machines and especially to the authority of those who own and control them -- capital and its managerial retainers. To be sure, labor did not enter these relations of domination without thereby gaining some benefit. In the Fordist era, as Hunnicut has brilliantly shown, organized labor exchanged work for consumption and abandoned its historical claim of the right to be lazy, as Paul Lafargue put it.² Here, within limits, we affirm that right but confess another: the freedom of people emancipated from labor to become social agents.

Needless to say, we reject the idea that liberal democratic states have already conferred citizenship and that apathy is the crucial barrier preventing many from participating in decision-making. Such optimism, unfortunately promulgated by many intellectuals of the left as well as the right, blithely ignores the social conditions that produce "apathy," especially the structural determinants of disempowerment, among them endless work. Nor are we prepared to designate the economic sphere, including the shop-floor "rational-purposive" activity that on the whole has been effectively depoliticized and functions only in terms of the perimeters of instrumental technical rationality.

Management's control over the workplace is an activity of politics. There are winners and losers in the labor process. To render the workplace rational entails a transformation of what we mean by rationality in production, including our conception of skill and its implied "other," unskill transformation of what we mean by mental as opposed to physical labor and our judgment of who has the capacity to make decisions under regimes of advanced technologies.

Politics as rational discourse -- as opposed to a naked struggle for power -- awaits social and economic emancipation. Among the constitutive elements of freedom is self-managed time. Our argument in this book is that there are for the first time in human history the material preconditions for the emergence of the individual and, potentially, for a popular politics. The core material precondition is that labor need no longer occupy a central place in our collective lives, nor in our imagination. We do not advocate the emancipation from labor as a purely negative freedom. Its positive content is that, unlike the regime of work without end, it stages the objective possibility of citizenship.

Under these circumstances, we envision civil society as the privileged site for the development of individuals who really are free to participate in a public sphere of their own making. In such a civil society, politics consists not so much in the ritual act of selection, through voting, of one elite over another, but in popular assemblies that could, given sufficient space and time, be both the legislative and the administrative organs. The scope of popular governance would extend from the workplace to the neighborhood. For as Ernest Mandel has argued, there is no possibility of worker self-management, much less the self-management of society, without ample time for decision-making. Thus, in order to realize a program of democratization, we must create a new civil society in which freedom consists in the first place (but only in the first place) in the liberation of time from the external constraints imposed by nature and other persons on the individual.

The development of the individual -- not economic growth, cost cutting, or profits -- must be the fundamental goal for scientific and technological innovation. The crucial obstacle to the achievement of this democratic objective is the persistence of the dogma of work, which increasingly appears, in its religious-ethical and instrumental-rational modalities, as an obvious instrument of domination.

Footnotes:

1. William DiFazio, Longshoremen (South Hadley, MA: Bergin and Garvey, 1985)

2. Paul LaFargue, The Right to Be Lazy (Chicago: Charles Kerr, 1907)

This book is available as a \$17.95 trade paperback from University of Minnesota Press, 1994.