Anti-Work: From “I Quit” to “We Revolt”

Strategizing for 21st-Century Labor Resistance

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Contents

In fall 2021, word spread about a revolt against work sweeping the United States. Yet what does it mean, practically speaking, to take action against work itself? Today, as some look to unionizing efforts with renewed hopes while others scramble to respond to the latest assaults on workers' autonomy outside the workplace, that question remains unanswered.

Two years of the COVID-19 pandemic have transformed the landscape of labor in the United States. Out of a workforce of 153 million, well over a quarter of workers quit their jobs in 2021, and the trend continued into 2022. Propelled by rage and desperation and amplified by a notorious Reddit page, anti-work sentiments achieved widespread exposure in late 2021, at the same time that economists were talking about a supposed "labor shortage."

One would think that these conditions would be favorable for labor organizing. Yet despite high expectations, a real strike wave has yet to emerge. The breakthrough vote to create the first Amazon union inspired optimism about the prospects for a renewed labor movement in the United States, but we are a long way from a return to the heyday of union organizing—and when labor unrest does emerge, it may take entirely different forms, as foreshadowed by "the great resignation."

What does it mean to be "anti-work"? How should we understand today's anti-work sentiments in their historical context? How is workplace resistance changing alongside work itself, and what strategies are likely to serve us in these new conditions?

I. Work and Anti-Work

It's one thing to hate your job—and having to work—and the system that compels everyone like you to have to work. It's another thing to take your labor out of that system and put it towards creating a world in which no one ever has to work again.

When we say **work,** we mean **all activity that is dictated by the imperative to turn a profit,** whether for oneself or someone else. It's important to define work this way, because we're not just talking about wage labor—we're also talking about slave labor, prison labor, unpaid housework, internships, and a wide range of forms of self-employment and self-marketing that are just as alienating as working under a boss.[1]

In this society, nearly all power is distributed according to the imperative to turn a profit. And since the essence of profit is *the concentrating of wealth in fewer hands,*[2] it should be no surprise that the disparities in our society are intensifying so rapidly. Yes, the "standard of living" has arguably improved—if we set aside the impact on the biosphere and future generations—but there have never been such tremendous gulfs between the wealthy and the poor.

When we say **anti-work,** we don't mean an abstract political position disapproving of work; we mean **a practice that actively abolishes the necessity to work,** the way that anti-matter annihilates matter. In other words, an activity aimed at doing away with all the mechanisms that

[1] The fact that self-employed workers tend to experience a greater degree of autonomy *within the confines of the economy* may induce them to identify with their work, but it doesn't make that work less alienating—it just gives them a stake in their own alienation. They still can't use their time and resources for any purpose other than to pursue a profit without the economy rerouting resources away from them.

[2] To turn a profit means to come out of an economic exchange having gained proportionately more power over the aggregate resources of society as a whole. By definition, one can only profit at others' expense. Two parties may both *benefit* from an economic exchange, but if they both *profit* as well, someone somewhere else has become poorer in relation to them.

serve to concentrate power—from debt to intellectual property rights and the prison-industrial complex. All the things that force us to keep putting our noses back to the grindstone when there are so many *other* things we'd prefer to be doing.

> Another century like this—another century of work—and our species will be done for, along with countless others. Work—which is to say, all activity that is determined by the necessity to make a profit for someone, rather than chosen on account of its intrinsic value—is precisely what prevents us from fulfilling our needs.
>
> —What Work Steals from Us

Taking Our Lives off the Market

The social order that forces you to sell your time and labor to the highest bidder is squandering your potential, just as sure as it is grinding cows into hamburger and reducing rainforests to junk mail. You are justified not wanting to waste the irreplaceable moments of your life toiling to enrich bosses and investors.

On the scale of the planet, the name for the problem is **capitalism;** from the vantage point of the individual, the name for it is **work.** Your personal struggle to resist work is a microcosm of our species' struggle to escape the global feedback loop that is propelling us into oppression, war, and ecological catastrophe.

Yet across practically the entire political spectrum, people celebrate work for its own sake, taking for granted that "productivity" is inherently good quite apart from the questions of what drives it, who controls it, and what it leads to. There's always going to be somebody who wants to yoke *your* productivity to *their* agenda.

If all this wasn't obvious already, the pandemic made it crystal clear that function of the market is to force people to sacrifice their lives for others' benefit. Usually, this takes place piecemeal, across decades, though workplace hazards sometimes speed the process; in the COVID-19 era, millions of people have lost their lives wholesale, forced to keep working until they contracted the virus and died.

Some attribute the subsequent rash of quittings to the pittance that Trump and then Biden conceded to laborers during the pandemic, but that hardly explains it: countless potential workers passed up a great deal more money in the workplace than they ever received from the government. Rather, it appears that the pandemic compelled millions to ask themselves whether they really wish to sacrifice their lives for the benefit of the economy—and many concluded that it was not worth it, neither wholesale nor piecemeal.

Quitting your job can be a form of labor resistance, just like going on strike. As a point of departure for social change, the hatred of work is at least as promising as the desire for higher wages. Rather than simply negotiating better terms on which to sacrifice our time and our potential on the altar of economic imperatives—or simply going from one job to the next, seeking temporary solutions to structural problems—we need to take our lives back altogether.

> Our resistances to discipline, to seduction, to extraction, and to work take diverse forms, from stopping work to working for free. [These] resistances are directed against governments, against management, against planners, against media, against

wars, against authority, against surveillance, against representatives, and against dominant values.

—A Ballad Against Work

A Very Brief History of Anti-Work

"He that works for another, either for Wages, or to pay him Rent, works unrighteously, and still lifts up the Curse; but they that are resolved to work and eat together, making the Earth a Common Treasury… lift up the Creation from Bondage, and restore all things from the Curse."

—Gerard Winstanley, in The True Levellers Standard Advanced, 1649

Opposition to work is not new. Ever since the ruling class began forcibly separating people from the land base we all rely on for survival, people have resisted work and the institutions that impose it. When you picture the average adherent of anti-work politics, it's easy to visualize a dropout from the 1970s, a punk rocker from the 1980s, a dissatisfied office worker from the 1990s, or perhaps a contemporary remote worker struggling to participate in a Zoom meeting while her toddler lays waste to the living room.

These stereotypes are much too narrow. Anti-work is for everyone—it always has been.

From the very beginning, opposition to work emerged alongside work itself. In The Right To Be Lazy, Paul Lafargue cites Herodotus to trace opposition to work all the way back to ancient Egypt, Thrace, and Persia. Later, between the 14th and 17th centuries, the Free Spirits, the Ranters, the Diggers,[3] and a wide of range of other movements resisted the enclosure of the commons and the imposition of work.

The "liberation of labor-power"—that is, the expropriation of the peasantry from the common lands—was not sufficient to force the dispossessed proletarians to accept wage-labor… the expropriated peasants and artisans did not peacefully agree to work for a wage. More often they became beggars, vagabonds, or criminals. A long process would be required to produce a disciplined work force. In the 16th and 17th centuries, the hatred for wage labor was so intense that many proletarians preferred the gallows rather than submit to the new conditions of work."

—Silvia Federici, Caliban and the Witch

As fierce as they were, the Luddites who became famous for smashing industrial machinery at the beginning of the 19th century were just a late-breaking echo of even more powerful movements that rejected work itself.

At the same time that people in Europe were resisting the transition to the modern work-based economy, fierce struggles against enslavement, displacement, and other forms of colonial violence were taking place across the so-called New World. We should understand revolts against

[3] It shows the continuity of these movements and their ambitions from one century to the next that the San Francisco Diggers could take up the original Diggers' standard over 300 years later without departing significantly from the economic principles of their namesakes. ⊠

slavery and Indigenous struggles against the imposition of settler society as *struggles against work,* as well—and these took place on a much greater scale than the resistance within Europe.

Nor did these struggles end with the abolition of slavery and the conclusion of the initial phase of colonization:

> "Experience demonstrates that there may be a slavery of wages only a little less galling and crushing in its effects than chattel slavery, and that this slavery of wages must go down with the other."
>
> —Frederick Douglass

At the high point of the 19th-century labor movements, workers sought to regain control of their labor power itself and to transform the society that limited their options regarding what they could do with it. In the 20th century, these movements were channeled into negotiating the price at which laborers would sell their lives and the conditions in which they would do so. At the same time that bureaucrats were taking over the unions and reorienting them towards stabilizing the capitalist economy rather than destroying it, ordinary workers began to accept higher wages and more access to consumer goods in return for giving up self-determination in the workplace.

While labor movements were slowly pacified, capitalist globalization enabled corporations to outflank them via overseas outsourcing.

That's how we got where we are today. Capitalists have already extracted the vast majority of the profit that can be squeezed out of the vanishing middle class. Having already colonized the future via credit and debt, profiteers have shifted to speculation—witness the craze for cryptocurrencies and NFTs. Technological advances have made laborers less and less essential to industrial production, flooding the service sector and creating a precarious population that is increasingly treated as expendable.

Today's economy offers laborers more "autonomy," but only in the sense that workers have to constantly do their own footwork to reestablish the terms on which they sell themselves to capitalists as the economy changes more and more rapidly. Practically nobody who takes a job today—with the sole exception of the Supreme Court justices—expects to hold that job for the rest of his or her life.

It is becoming difficult to rake in profits from an immiserated population that already has difficulty paying its debts. The end point of this process will be war—a world in which desperate populations are held in line by repression and states compete to acquire resources via brute force rather than economic competition. In Syria and Ukraine, we can catch an ominous glimpse of the future.

In these conditions, it's naïve to seek to return to the times when unions would stabilize the capitalist economy by negotiating wages high enough for laborers to afford to purchase back some of the products of their labor. Stability is off the table—both for individual households and for the global order as a whole. We should understand the mass quittings of 2020–2022 as an outgrowth of the same unrest and anger that produced the George Floyd Rebellion.

Just as it was necessary to force people into the working class at the beginning of the era of modern capitalism—and many chose to be layabouts, criminals, or revolutionaries instead—we are arriving at the end of that era, when it is clear that it can only end in disaster, and once again, opposition to work itself is back on the agenda.

> The most visible aspect of this social struggle has been generalized labor refusal, what economists are calling The Great Resignation, which has seen over 30 million Americans quit their jobs in 2021 alone. But The Great Refusal can also be seen in a huge increase in more traditional labor action and organizing; in instances of mass looting divorced from more obvious movement and riot contexts; in the breakdown of school grading and testing regimes; in a broad expansion of mutual aid; in an even broader recognition of the psychic violence and alienation of everyday life intensified and made painfully visible by the pandemic, and a concomitant acceptance of mental health care, laziness, and pleasure seeking; in a general open hatred of work.
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> —The Interregnum

Anti-Work on a World Scale

We will not understand the scope and scale of contemporary anti-work struggles unless we factor in prison strikes, workplace theft, looting and other refusals of capitalist models of consumption, and a wide range of other forms of resistance taking place all over the world. As the old labor movements plateau or recede, we need to sensitize ourselves to the current strategies via which workers are asserting themselves in order to ensure that we are not looking for outmoded forms of struggle while missing the resistance taking place under our noses.

Some proponents of old-fashioned industrial union labor tactics have shifted their attention to India, Bangladesh, and China in recent years—arguing that the old union model will still serve to organize the industrial proletariat, provided we look for it on other continents. Yet in a globalized economy structured according to neoliberal principles and white supremacist logic, the working classes of the Global South will not be able to reprise the history of the European working class simply by forming unions, winning rights, and negotiating wages. The mechanisms via which unionized workers joined the middle class in Europe and the United States no longer exist; they were the consequence of an informal peace treaty capitalists struck with the white working class in the process of channeling labor struggles into reformism, all of which was financed with wealth extracted from the Global South in the first place.

The majority of Indian workers remain informally or precariously employed. Factories have been moved to places like Bangladesh only because capitalists can treat those workers as disposable—to the extent of letting thousands die in factory collapses. In China, a self-described communist government has focused on repressing exploited laborers while creating the conditions for billionaires to amass fortunes in much the same way they do in the United States.

It is a mistake to imagine that labor movements in more recently industrialized nations simply lag behind those in Europe and the United States in some sort of inexorable historical process. For the most part, these movements are much more powerful than the labor movement in the United States, but they face dramatically more difficult challenges. If anything, as labor becomes more precarious worldwide, workers in the United States should be learning from the struggles and strategies of their peers in the already precarious Global South. The status of workers in India is not "developing" towards the standards enjoyed by workers in the United States and Europe; the conditions of workers in the United States are slowly deteriorating towards the conditions that laborers currently face in India.

In this context, any anti-work movement stands to gain from adopting a more global perspective. In fact, there are longstanding anti-work currents to draw from overseas. Published in India in 1997, the anti-work manifesto A Ballad Against Work offers a sophisticated analysis of resistance, drawing on reference points in a variety of industries; one can also find more contemporary examples of spirited anti-work resistance in India as well. In Russia, antijob.net has been doing what the anti-work reddit page does for fully two decades with considerable success. In China, disillusioned young people have famously embraced a movement roughly translated as "lying flat" in defiance of the pressures of the economy.

If we really want to abolish work—not just to cash in our individual privileges to avoid working until we can hold out no longer—we have to make common cause with everyone else around the world who hates working. As war rages in Ukraine and another Cold War looms with China, our mutual hatred of exploitation offers all workers a point of departure towards global solidarity against those who would divide and rule us. It might indeed be our only hope.

II. Strategizing for 21st-Century Resistance

What would it take for the anti-work movement to become a threat to workforce participation, rather than a pressure valve for blowing off steam? To build an on-the-ground analysis, we solicited input from workers around the United States.

Case Study: Postcards from the "Labor Shortage"

> "About 5 million Americans have exited the labor force since the pandemic began. Goldman Sachs estimates that about 3.4 million are likely gone for good."
>
> —"'Antiwork' movement may be long-run risk to labor force participation: Goldman Sachs"

First, we spoke with food service employees in several mid-sized cities in the Rust Belt.

> The restaurant I worked at until recently has had a hard time staffing because there are less workers available. A lot of people left the service industry during the pandemic because it made working conditions worse and more dangerous. Also, it's often women doing that work, and a lot of women had to stop working during the pandemic to take care of their families—both because school and childcare have become unreliable and because the pandemic has isolated, debilitated, and disproportionately killed the elderly.

> At least where I live, the drug epidemic has had a tremendous impact. In certain industries, if you need a worker who is not addicted to opioids or alcohol, the pool shrinks. So you could say that another factor in the "labor shortage" is that, as a consequence of impoverishment and despair, part of the working class is becoming unemployable.

Rebelliousness also plays a role here. Once a person has been unemployed for an extended period of time, it can be very difficult to tolerate the level of disrespect that employers casually show for employees. Our society doesn't have a system to reintegrate feral adults back into the workplace. I think that rightful anger at being treated disrespectfully, combined with "help wanted" signs everywhere, accounts for a lot of the casual rage-quitting this past year.

Previously, if you rage-quit a job, when you applied for your next job, you'd have to explain that gap. I remember once, when I was re-entering the job market after a period of militant unemployment, an employer looked at my résumé and told me, "When I see a gap like this, I assume jail or rehab." By contrast, if you quit a job right now, you can tell your next potential employer that you're just re-entering the job market after the lockdown. Things like that are invisible to macro-economists, but they make a big difference to workers on the ground.

A lot of my favorite restaurants and the comic shop by my house have cut back their hours for lack of staff. The Targets and Sheetz stores here are paying a few dollars more per hour than before and most stores have hiring signs in the windows. But I don't see a *labor* shortage so much as a *cheap labor* shortage. There's an ice cream shop in town that promised full-time hours at $15 an hour and they received hundreds of applications.

One cause of this may be that Amazon expanded in 2020, hiring a lot of warehouse workers at $15 an hour. That's a rock-bottom wage for warehouse labor that breaks your body, but it's a substantial pay bump for people who were previously working customer service. Warehouse work is supposed to pay at least $25 an hour—but if you're choosing between $8 an hour at McDonald's and twice that at Amazon, it's an easy choice—at first. The burnout rate at Amazon is notoriously high.

Looking at the Amazon model, we could ascribe part of the "labor shortage" of 2021–2022 to a disruption in the economy and in worker expectations as capitalists experiment with ways to *intensify* the extraction of profit per labor hour, rather than just paying the lowest wage possible. Henry Ford did something similar a century ago. In order to convince workers to do soul-destroying assembly line labor instead of skilled craftwork, he was forced to pay them more; as a result, he streamlined the mass production process—and generated a new market for his commodities.

If Ford *rationalized* the production process—making it more efficient by escalating demands on workers and rendering previously essential personnel obsolete—then today, we are seeing the same thing in the *distribution* process. Capitalists have shifted to "just in time" production, and now something similar is taking place on the consumer end of the economy: Netflix rather than

movie theaters, delivery drivers rather than malls. The introduction of self-driving cars and the like could accelerate this process dramatically.

If employers like Amazon offer increased wages, but these jobs come with increased workplace turnover, the net result will not benefit the working class. Instead of the job security that the Fordist era offered our grandparents, we will end up working only when it is most profitable for prospective employers, and many of us will go jobless the rest of the time. In this context, not identifying with one's job—and quitting whenever one gets fed up with it—will be merely redundant, already factored into the equation as a way of keeping the workplace efficient. An *anti-work* movement worthy of the name will have to go beyond quitting to seize back from the ruling class the resources we need to build stable, secure lives.

Case Study: The IATSE Strike that Never Was, 2021

Some 60,000 workers in the entertainment industry were set to strike on October 18, 2021. They would have been the most numerous group to participate in what some optimistically called "Striketober." At the last minute, the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE) reached a tentative agreement with Hollywood producers, averting the strike. What happened instead tells us a lot about labor struggles in our era.

> In October 2021, I was working on a big-budget TV production when buzz spread about a potential nationwide strike by IATSE, the stagehands' union. With news outlets reporting on the labor shortage, workers across the country were in a better bargaining position than they had been in years. Yet the strike never happened.
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> I've heard similar stories from other industries. Why haven't workers been able to capitalize on this situation? Take this for what it is—an anecdote, not an in-depth investigation.
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> Film is a notoriously chaotic and demanding industry. Labor conditions that documented workers rarely tolerate in the US are standard, including shifts of 14, 16, or even 20 hours; six-hour turnarounds between call times; no breaks during workdays; work weeks of 80 hours or more; and months without a single day off. People sometimes die of exhaustion on set or from bad safety practices exacerbated by insufficient rest—or are accidentally shot by A-list celebrities who have no business handling firearms.
>
> Workers put up with these conditions because it's fairly well-paid union labor. It's hard to say no to a seventh day at work when it's paid at double time, especially if turning it down means losing your spot in the production. If you can make it into the union, film work is a rare opportunity to grind your way into six figures without a college degree.
>
> IATSE—the International Alliance of Theatrical and Stage Employees—represents over 150,000 workers in the US and Canada. Working conditions vary widely from one production to the next. When streaming services like Netflix got off the ground

in the late 2000s, the higher wages and more reasonable hours associated with traditional film production didn't transfer to the "new media." Producers argued that they were wagering on a new format and weren't sure how profitable it would be, so they had to restrict budgets—starting with workers, of course. More than a decade later, the "new media" has proven extremely profitable, but the discrepancy in compensation and conditions remains.

With production booming and more jobs available than workers, fall 2021 was the perfect time for IATSE to push for a better agreement with streaming services. This almost led to a historic strike involving 60,000 film workers. Many radicals outside IATSE were excited about the potential that this might set off a wave of strikes and other actions.

Yet—as has occurred over and over—producers and union bureaucrats dodged the strike, arriving at an eleventh-hour deal. Unsurprisingly, many rank-and-file IATSE members were not pleased with this deal. It did very little to improve conditions.

My fellow employees' attitudes about this varied. A strike would have meant lost work and lost wages; no one wanted that. But many long-term IATSE workers were fed up with years of dealing with the same conditions. They would have been happy to stick it to the producers' association. I didn't see much sympathy for the union leadership among my colleagues.

What if a strike had happened? When production ceased, the production companies would try to bring in scab labor—easy in Los Angeles and other film hubs like Atlanta, but more difficult elsewhere. The production I was working on was outside of any major film hubs. These trades are specialized, and it's not always easy for producers to find qualified set carpenters, decorators, makeup artists, and camera people who aren't in the union or who would cross a picket line. They would try to piece together a motley crew and continue working.

As it turned out, even though the strike was called off, the production began to face a labor shortage. A new wave of COVID-19 sent multiple people home to quarantine every day. Other employees got sick of working all day every day and no-showed. Still others, non-union hires being paid at union rates, didn't have the necessary skills and were fired or left after a few days. The hourly rates weren't high enough to bring people out from Los Angeles, or even to attract many skilled local workers. Remember, all this was taking place in a context in which there was a labor shortage all around the United States.

So what happened was less drastic than a strike, but it was similar in that some amount of skilled union labor was replaced by less skilled, non-union labor. I'm not saying that the non-union workers were scabs—rather, my point is that the whole situation illustrates the neoliberalization of the workplace, the individualization of labor and also of contemporary workplace struggle, in ways that are not necessarily promising. A strike, authorized or not, would have been an opportunity for us to do something collectively, to develop our relationships in a struggle. Instead, people dropped out one by one because they could coast for a while or find better paying work elsewhere. While these actions in aggregate do have an effect on supply and

demand in the labor market, putting employers in a tighter spot and giving workers more leverage in negotiation, they don't do much to oppose capitalism as a whole or to foster autonomous resilience.

In short, we continue to confront the economy more and more individually, even in a unionized workplace. I don't mean to glorify mainstream business unions like IATSE: the union bureaucracy was the chief obstacle to a strike happening, and that's probably true across most of the industries that are still unionized. Anything we do together will have to emerge from the grassroots in defiance of the leadership. It will require a new model.

The new visibility of anti-work sentiment offers a point of departure, but it's not a solution all by itself. Always dynamic, capitalism has been changing especially rapidly since the pandemic. It's easy to imagine today's anti-work sentiment reappearing as tomorrow's market innovations—more remote labor, additional modes of exploitation (for example, producing online content, or monetizing people's desperate need for connection), new ways to glamorize the thinly-veiled precarity of gig work, freelancing, and the like. We need to figure out how to reinvent the strike, too, or some other form of collective resistance.

Case Study: The Columbia Graduate Student Strike, 2021–2022

In December 2021, the strike by the 3000-member graduate student worker union at Columbia University was reportedly the largest strike action in the entire United States.[4] This hints at the extent to which old-fashioned mass union militancy has receded since its heyday in the 20th century. We explored the full history of this strike and its implications in "Columbia's Graduate Worker Union Struggle, 2004–2022."

In some ways, graduate students are emblematic of the new shape of the workforce. Graduate student worker organizing occupies what a grad student might call the *liminal space* between school and the workplace: graduate students are workers, but they have yet to join the workforce proper. They are not the only workers whose jobs are fundamentally temporary and transient; today, there are entire industries that will no longer exist by the time the next crop of graduate students receive their diplomas. Universities justify the low wages they pay grad students on account of their supposed future employment prospects—which in fact will only be available to a small number of graduates in an increasingly competitive market rapidly being reshaped by austerity measures. In this regard, the pyramid scheme of higher education is a microcosm of the pyramid scheme of capitalism itself.

At the same time, seeking to defend the security of a particular demographic of student workers without concern for other workers or students is itself a doomed venture. Graduate students are not essential to the industrial economy in any strictly material sense. Any leverage they might exert will derive from the pressure that they are able to apply on the economy in concert with others who are impacted at least as badly as they are by austerity and precaritization. In a time when the global economy is structured to make workers in practically any industry replaceable, building solidarity across demographics and contexts is a strategic as well as ethical necessity.

[4] In fact, considerably less than all 3000 members were participating in the strike at any one time.

> One of the funniest recurring chants that marks the pickets and demonstrations is "WE HAVE TEETH!" This alludes to our demand for dental insurance, and has the advantages of being funny, universal, and intimately relatable. There's an undercurrent of irony, though, in the way it plays on its metaphorical meaning. For something to "have teeth" means it has force behind it. To say we have teeth is to convey that we are making a threat that we can follow through on, that we're *not fucking around.*
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> One of the ways to deal with anxiety is through laughter. The humor in this chant is twinged with anxiety—we have teeth, sure, but does our struggle? Does our strike have the force behind it to force the university to meet our demands? And even if we do win, does our collective power as students, workers, future academics, etc. have enough "teeth" in it to matter as neoliberal forces drain the universities of resources and austerity advances on multiple fronts?
>
> Myself, I've never had dental insurance in my adult life. Ever waited in line at the monthly poor people dental clinic for hours, only to be told at the end that your number didn't come up? Yeah, I have—more than once. So the idea that I could get a PhD and go to the dentist too sounds pretty appealing. But is this a prelude to a more secure dental life? Or the last gasp of a movement that is unlikely to secure us a ticket back into a dentist's chair after graduation?
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> I think the answer depends on where we see our power and whether we strategize accordingly. Can we shift our focus from seeing our (precarious, replaceable) labor itself as the source of our strength, in order to concentrate on building a collective capacity to disrupt the everyday functioning of capital in the university and beyond? A single day of physically disrupting students, workers, and deliveries seems to have made more impact than five weeks of striking, judging by the university's communications and also by the announcement, during the following day's bargaining, of the biggest economic concessions that Columbia has ever made.
>
> There's a lot that we can learn from this. In this brave new world, our labor may not be the source of our power. But the relationships we make in the course of standing up for ourselves—across the lines of position, workplace, and identity—could be the basis for a strike power that exploits the vulnerabilities of infrastructure by targeting bottlenecks in the flow of people and economies. Our enemies are more concerned with preventing us from building collective power than they are with any particular economic concessions. They know that it's worth a short-term investment to preserve their rule in the long term. They've done it before, buying off whole generations just long enough to regain control.
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> As the climate collapses, mass surveillance encroaches, economic disparities intensify, and fascism rears its head, time isn't on our side. We can't just shut down our workplaces; we have to shut down the whole economy. That's what it'll take to strike *with teeth.* And our teeth—not to mention our lives—depend on it.

At the opening of 2022, the Student Workers of Columbia reached a tentative agreement with the administration of Columbia University, voting to end one of the longest strikes in the history of graduate worker organizing. After over nine weeks on the picket line, strikers forced

the administration to concede to many of their major demands. Yet the strikers were only able to achieve this limited victory because they had already taken on and defeated the union bureaucracy that sought to stop them from confronting the administration. Their victory shows that workers who seek to assert their interests in the workplace have to start by fighting for self-determination and grassroots power within workplace organizing itself.

Rousing Conclusion: The Meaning of Anti-Work

The waning power of unions over the past half century is not simply the result of a failure of will. There are structural reasons why union organizing has produced diminishing returns. When we set out to stand up for ourselves, it's always tempting to try to replicate the models we are familiar with from previous generations—even though it was the failures of those models that put us where we are today. New conditions demand new strategies.

Such strategies could take many forms. For example, using the internet, we could build networked movements extending far outside the workplace to defend workers in particular industries through pressure campaigns, boycotts, sabotage, and other tactics that anyone can participate in, employed or not.

For people outside particular sectors of the economy to have a stake in such struggles, however, these movements will have to address the needs of the unemployed and precariously employed, as well, not just preserve the status of workers who are still fortunate enough to retain relatively stable employment. The power of the George Floyd uprising and similar movements outside the workplace offer a point of departure. Drawing on the high point of the Occupy movement in 2011, we can imagine that the most powerful labor movements of the future will be anti-work uprisings that take place outside of particular workplaces, in a common space that all can share. In a follow-up to this article, we will explore what the general strike could look like in the twenty-first century and how our movements could become capable of catalyzing such strikes.

> It has been a joy to debate this subject, compose this essay, and work together to publish it—precisely because it is not work. Everything that our collective has accomplished together over the past three decades—and it is a lot—has proceeded from our decision to refuse, wherever possible, to sell our time, energy, and creativity on the market. One of the chief deciding factors in the scale of social change we will see in our lifetimes is whether people like you invest your time, creativity, and resources in changing the world or in merely attempting to better yourself on an individual basis.
>
> **Let's find each other and see what we can do together outside the logic of the capitalist economy. This is the starting point of *anti-work*.**

Further Reading

- The Interregnum—The George Floyd Uprising, the coronavirus pandemic, and the emerging social revolution
- The Mythology of Work—Eight Myths that Keep Your Eyes on the Clock and Your Nose to the Grindstone
- Report from the Shop Floor—How the Unions Lost Their Teeth
- "The Surrealists' War on Work" by Abigail Susik
- "Well, I Quit"—Anti-Work Discourse Against the Neoliberal Utopia
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