BUT WE HAVE TO, SO WE DO IT REAL SLOW

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On Anti-Work, Mexican(-American)s and Work

By Noche

INTRODUCTION

I wrote this short essay 5 years ago at a time when anti-work was not as popular a position, or sentiment, within the radical milieu. My intention with this piece was to highlights elements of anti-work / refusal of labor that already exist among Mexican(-American)s in the so-called United States. And by doing this extend the critique of work beyond the white radical milieu of the North American Anglosphere. The critique of work is now (thankfully) more widespread, and I hope that others take up the task of extending the critique of work because the pandemic has verily cleared the fog of pro-work propaganda: most of us learned first-hand that our work, deemed essential or not, has always been activity which exists for the immediate benefit of others and not ourselves. We barely float by, physically & mentally, while capitalists retreat further into their well-protected bubbles of wealth (even into space). It's time we reclaim our time, energy & activity. Time for communism & anarchy…which always also means the *abolition of work*.

Noche

Tovaangar, so-called Los Angeles

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In Los Angeles to be against Capital typically presents itself in a pro-work/worker position. The problem is never work itself, the nature of work or that work is waged but instead what is desired is extending a sphere of work that is unionized and bolstered with higher wages. Take for instance the CLEAN Carwash campaign[1], where carwash workers (whom are mostly immigrant men) have been unionized under the representation of United Steelworkers Local 675.[2] Though this move one is that brings much needed betterment of working conditions and wages for these workers, what is ultimately not brought up is that the work of a car wash workers can and has already been automated. But the fading labor movement seems to be no longer concerned with the overthrow of capitalism nor the abolition of work. That dream is a dream that has been lost along with the labor movement itself.

The expression of an anti-work position has either been minoritarian or unheard of. In a city where working conditions for immigrants can be well below the legal standards set forth by the State and the Federal Government, the push for more protections and rights within the workplace takes precedence. An anti-work affect (rather than a bonafide position) among Mexican immigrants and/or Mexican-Americans is usually to be found in cultural forms and do not often take on explicit anti-political, or anti-capitalist forms. That said, the playful, tongue-in-cheek cultural forms are plentiful, the other mentioned forms are few and far in between.

1 www.cluejustice.org/campaigns_carwash
2 www.usw675.org

ANTI-WORK / ANTI-CAPITALIST : AN INTRODUCTION

My first encounter with an explicit anti-work position came from Chicanx friends who I had met in 2001 who were heavily-influenced by the French Marxist theorist Guy Debord and the Situationist International. In 1953, a young Guy Debord painted on a wall on the Rue de Seine « NE TRAVAILLEZ JAMAIS » (tr. Never Work). A statement that was difficult for me to understand conceptually at the time but which I immediately gravitated towards (*who as a youth looks forward to a lifetime of work ahead of them?*) Previously, all the anarchist literature I had read on work concerned themselves with how wage labor was theft of our time & of our labor-power and that the solution was not the abolition of work per se but worker self-management. [Think of all the nostalgia that some Left-Anarchists still have for the revolution lost by the anarcho-syndicalists during the Spanish Civil War.]

Anti-work was a scandalous position growing up in a Mexican household where what was prized was the opportunity to find well-paying work, as well as a hearty work ethic. Though the starting point for Guy Debord's opposition to a world of work was not a beatnik, bohemian-lifestyle refusal common to the 1950s, but rather a rejection of the bleariness of life under capitalism and part of a whole project to overthrow what they called The Spectacle and to once again make life a joyous.

The critique of work can be found elsewhere throughout history including Paul Lafargue's "*The Right to be Lazy*"(1883) written by Karl Marx's son-in-law; in the unfortunately notorious post-left Anarchist Bob Black's "*The Abolition of*

Work"(1985) and Gille Dauve's "*Eclipse & Re-Emergence of the Communist Movement*" (1970) where he clarifies what the abolition of work could mean and says "what we want is the abolition of work as an activity separate from the rest of life." He further explains that the issue at hand is not whether we are active or not, but rather that under capitalism what we do is abstracted into two spheres, both alienated: work-time and leisure-time. This (anti-state) communist critique of work notes that the liberation from Capital is not the liberation of labor but the liberation from labor as it now exists. Currently we assume only those activities which are paid a wage have value and that only those things which are productive, in the capitalist sense, are necessary to human life.

MEXICAN-AMERICANS & WORK

That said there is no shortage of cultural output from Mexican immigrants, or Mexican-Americans (some of whom identify as Chicanx) that takes a swipe at the way work is made necessary to our social reproduction.[3] Take for instance a comedic song from "*Up In Smoke*" (1978), where the character Pedro de Pacas sings a song trying to upend notions of popular Mexican-American identity and says, "Mexican-Americans don't like to get up early in the morning but they have to so they do it real slow."

Here we catch a key moment in the subjectivity of the racialized Mexican-American worker caught up in a world where labor is managed and controlled by borders. There is an understanding that work and the preparation for work is drudgery but also that the refusal of work might be impossible; this refusal is acknowledged but it gives way to a sabotage on social reproductivity, a *slow-down*.

The spectacular production of the Mexican as a worker in the USA (or as a Mexican-American) is often tied up in a binary of either being hard-working; job-stealing; or lazy and welfare-scheming. As seen by the words used by Donald Trump during his presidential campaign, there is also the perception of the Mexican as a dangerous criminal, forming a trinity of prejudice that returns when it suits the need of nativist, racist politicians. This type of characterization was first seen when the U.S. forcefully annexed the so-called American SouthWest from México and bandits like Tiburcio Vasquez haunted the minds of the waves of Westward-bound Anglo-Americans. In 1954, this showed up as *Operation Wetback* where the INS (which later becomes ICE) enacted indiscriminate round-ups of Mexican laborers to put a chilling effect on undocumented migration of laborers into the USA. Laborers need only "look Mexican" to be deported and many of those deported were in fact U.S. citizens.

3 DEFINITION: all the labor that needs to be done so that workers are prepared to work the next day. this work is often un-paid though it is necessary for any work to be done under capitalism. examples: doing the laundry, child-care, sex, dish-washing, food preparation, commuting.

To posit an anti-work position and to take into account the racialization of workers in the USA looms as an impossible task. Often immigrants internalize a work ethic that can be as entrenched as that of right-wing Anglo-Americans that erroneously describe the USA as a meritocracy. This is more necessity than reaction by Mexican immigrants under racialized capitalism since they are often forced into the most grueling of work that most native-born, or Anglo-Americans, will simply not take on: picking of fruits & vegetables, construction, food service, child care, landscaping, etc. We work hard because we have to and we make a self-serving mythology around it where we are the hard-working ones but everyone else is the not-harding-working ones, where notably elements of anti-blackness come to the fore.

To further the myth of the hard-working immigrant, that does not threaten the colonial-capitalist social order of the USA, is to strip immigrants of the agency to express refusal, resistance and revolt. In a time where nativist racism is peaking once again, we must realize that this myth proliferation is no safety net against ICE sweeps or other racist violence. There is no pride in presenting ourselves as hard-working, since under capitalism working hard merely means we are putting in more labor for the same amount of pay. In effect, we are lowering our wages by putting in more work than is expected and making ourselves hyper-exploited. If we were to collectively express our reluctance or refusal to work beyond the bare minimum we could begin to flex the capacity of our labor power across industries. (An inspiring moment of this kind of flexing was the general strike on May 1st, 2006 where immigrants largely self-organized a strike to show how much their labor is integral to the functioning of U.S. capitalism; in Los Angeles 1 to 2 million people took to the streets & over 90% of LA Port traffic was shut down.)

And as it has been noted, more and more Mexicans are returning to Mexico than coming into the USA, the payoff for this hard-work is in decline[4]. I've heard amongst friends and family that many recent Mexican immigrants find that the work they encounter in the USA is either too dangerous, too difficult or too hard to find.

A WAY OUT?

But this desire to be the most hardworking Mexican in the world wasn't always the norm. In British historian E.P. Thompson's 1967 text "*Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism*" he mentioned how economic-growth theorists viewed Mexican mineworkers as "indolent and childlike people" because they lacked discipline. For instance, he notes from a book on the "*The Mexican Mining Industry, 1890 – 1950"* that Mexican mineworkers had:

4 www.pewhispanic.org/2015/11/19/more-mexicans-leaving-than-coming-to-the-u-s/

> "[a] lack of initiative, [an] inability to save, absences while celebrating too many holidays, [a] willingness to work for only three or four days a week if that paid for necessities, [and] an insatiable desire for alcohol…" (Bernstein)

It seems that time changes little. Of course, in many ways we always knew that we don't really want to go to work and that we only have disdain for those who don't have to because we are not them. That we enjoy the winter break where we fill up on tamales, cervezas and spend the evenings talking about what we'd really like to be doing and dreams for the future. Even the Left's obsession with the mythologized collective worker that is socially-responsible, punctual and whom identifies with their work is largely a fabrication of the dead worker's movement.[5]

The anti-state communist theory journal, Endnotes, states that:

> "the supposed identity that the worker's movement constructed turned out to be a particular one. It subsumed workers only insofar as they were stamped, or were willing to be stamped, with a very particular character. That is to say, it included workers not as they were in themselves, but only to the extent that they conformed to a certain image of respectability, dignity, hard work, family, organisation, sobriety, atheism, and so on."[6]

Too often we are given the lie that the way to progress is to submit to the rationalization of the capitalist system; that we simply need to awaken the sleeping giant which represents the possible Latino voting bloc; that the rich are rich because they really know how to handle their money; that if only we could sway Congress to push immigration reform; if only we could get universities to tell us back our histories or to enroll us at all…but really the way out is to abolish the social relation that is capitalism….that protects itself by way of the State; that protects itself with borders, police and a standing army; that controls the way we envision our lives with careers, time management and gender roles; that makes into a commodity even the way we choose to spend our not-working hours, which yet are still spent preparing or recovering from those working hours.

5 tr. The ideal worker / Damn! it seems the company isn't making the profits that it should be…well, say no more! : tomorrow I will quit without any kind of compensation or anything… how would I dare protest! I'd rather call the anti-riot police and have them split my head open!

6 *"A History of Separation"* by Endnotes

¿PERO CÓMO RESISTEREMOS POR MIENTRAS? / HOW CAN WE RESIST RIGHT NOW?

Or we've been resisting this whole time /

Thinking back to the 90s when the ditch party was both an escape from the terrible LAUSD as well as a form of resistance to the most alienating of compulsory schooling: in many ways these teens that would not show up to school and party instead contained much more awareness of the society around them than the kids that would instead get 'straight As' and then study Chicano/a Studies. These kids implicitly understood the pipeline that the LAUSD was to low-paying, entry-level service work where they would have to do much more rule-following, guideline-abiding, button-pushing, uniform-wearing than critical thinking. It was as though they were able to envision the no future we currently find ourselves in

So many of us already partake in the public secret(s) of our resistance to work:

- we slack off at work, which in Marxist terms could be seen as a way of raising your own wage since you are putting in less labor for the same length of time.
- we steal from work and thus make our time at our workplace much more worthwhile, and even get some nice gifts for friends and family.
- we sabotage the flow of productivity by working real slow, or by shutting down the internet, or by talking to our coworkers about not work-related things, or by not working at all and taking a nice siesta.

- we call in sick when we're really not sick at all or really we're just too hungover from the rager the night before.

A world without work seems like an impossibility, a utopia, an unlikely dream especially when most of our waking time is spent thinking about how we're gonna pay the rent, the power bill, car insurance, possible student loans, more probable credit card debt or the bar tab…but a world without work is also a world without capitalism….a world of communism.

That world is a world without wage labor, without patriarchy, without race, without class, without a state, without police; where we would decide our lives on our own terms without the limitations of value production, without the control of borders, without Monday mornings, without social death, without artificial crises, where we won't have to suffer the indignities of being harassed by the boss, a world beyond accounting, a world where what we do will not define who we are to each other. For a world without measure!

SUUGGESTED FURTHER READING:

"Work Sucks" by Kassandra Vee:
https://thenewinquiry.com/work-sucks

"Capitalism & Communism" by Gilles Dauvé:
https://libcom.org/library/capitalism-communism-gilles-dauve

"A Ballad Against Work" by Kamunist Kranti:
https://libcom.org/book/export/html/16893

"A Few Clarifications on Anti-Work" by Bruno Astarian:
http://www.hicsalta-communisation.com/textes/__trashed

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ONDA.LA brings a vicious, non-moralistic anti-capitalist perspective to Los Angeles. ONDA knows the cops cannot be reformed; that education is never a way out of a pit dug by racist capitalism. LA ONDA knows how to recognize the racist, sexist, heteronormative, homophobic, transphobic, and anti working-class aspects of the city. We know that politicians will always cut us short whenever they can; that the question of violence is not a question at all; that decolonization is not a metaphor but a threat backed by material violence; that the legal system offers nothing compared to revenge; that none of us are pure nor that we should be; that knows work is a drudgery imposed; that knows that the bad days will end.

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All Live from Occupied Tongva-Gabrielino territory.