CHAPTER 1

THE HOURS OF INEQUALITY

If you have ever stopped at a Dunkin' Donuts in northern New Jersey, before or after work, there's a chance that Maria Fernandes poured your coffee. She worked at three different Dunkin' locations, often back-to-back-to-back, and was described as a "model employee" by a company spokesperson. From 2:00 to 9:00 p.m. she worked the counter at a Dunkin' kiosk inside Newark's commuter rail station. She then headed to a second shop, open 24/7 in downtown Linden, where she worked until 6:00 a.m. If business was slow, she took a respite by settling into piles of doughnut containers to rest for a few minutes. On weekends she picked up a third shift beginning at 8:00 a.m. at a shop in Harrison, and always took on additional hours when asked. On average she worked about eighty-seven hours per week. Though she worked hard, New Jersey's minimum wage was not enough, and she often fell behind on the $550 rent for her basement apartment in Newark. Between shifts, Fernandes napped in her car, the engine running to keep her warm.

On Monday, August 25, 2014, Maria's shift ended at 6:00 a.m., and the next did not begin for two hours. Grainy security camera footage of a local Wawa convenience store shows her car pulling in and parking just after 6:47 in the morning.

"U can call if you like," she texted her boyfriend just as he got to work. After they chatted, Fernandes tilted back the driver's seat of her white Kia with the engine running, the windows shut, and the doors locked to catch up on sleep.

She never woke up.

A Wawa employee noticed her sleeping in the car and was shocked to find her there—eyes open, foaming at the mouth—when his shift ended hours later. Fumes poured from the car, reeking of gasoline. Fernandes was pronounced dead on site from a mixture of exhaustion and carbon monoxide inhalation. She was wearing, of course, her brown-and-white Dunkin' Donuts uniform.

Fernandes, a thirty-two-year-old immigrant from Portugal, quickly became the face of an endemic problem—overwork and poverty amid great wealth and prosperity. Her name appeared in the speeches of politicians for a time, and her plight made it into the mainstream media. There was even talk of a law in her name that would regulate work hours and schedule predictability. "The death of Maria Fernandes demands a call to action," a union leader wrote in an op-ed just after her death. But no action materialized. Still, the name of Maria Fernandes is revived episodically, when another person dies too early because he or she was working too late, too hard, or too often.

In May 2018 thirty-four-year-old Pablo Avendano was struck by an SUV and killed on his bicycle in Philadelphia while working for the Silicon Valley–funded food delivery app Caviar. Just days after his death, a banner was hoisted near the scene of the accident: "The Gig Economy Killed Pablo." Caviar, following the norm among Silicon Valley startups, classified Avendano as an independent contractor, making him ineligible for company healthcare and union protections, and rendering his family ineligible for any benefits upon his death. To collect money for his funeral expenses, friends launched a GoFundMe campaign, which claimed that he died "working a gig economy job that incentivizes riding a bike in dangerous and inclement weather."

His best friend, George Ciccariello-Maher, penned a piece in *The Nation* that said Avendano had been riding through bad weather for hours the day he was hit. Where others see dangerous conditions, Caviar sees opportunity. The day before, the company texted its couriers an emoji-laden message that read, "When it rains the orders POUR on Caviar! . . . Go online ASAP to cash in!"

But few riders were really cashing in no matter how long or hard they worked or how quickly they got online. Couriers at Caviar made close to ten dollars per delivery until 2014, when the company switched to an algorithm that matched delivery demands with riders. As with other algorithm-based models, such as those adopted by Uber and Lyft, the software transfers power to those who design and own the technology. A 2018 study by JPMorgan Chase found that a flood of gig workers caused the wages earned by platform-based food deliverers to fall by more than 50 percent since 2013. Mirroring this larger trend, corporate profits at Caviar soared but wages per delivery declined, forcing many couriers to work longer hours, leaving them exhausted and overworked in dangerous conditions. As Avendano was the night he died.[1]

In *Working Ourselves to Death*, Diane M. Fassel argues that an increasing number of people are simply "addicted to incessant activity." Bryan Robinson, a psychotherapist and author of the book *Chained to the Desk*, compares "workaholism" to a disease like alcoholism. Other accounts blame our cultural endowment of American individualism, which manifests itself as a self-destructive need to get ahead. These explanations are common ones, but it is unhelpful to attribute a widespread social problem to a singular category—addict, workaholic—that raises far more questions than it answers. Workaholism can't explain why Fernandes and Avendano died.

Are we really just hardwired to work hard? Obviously not. Historical changes in the amount of time we work can easily dispel a psychological explanation. Fernandes didn't want to be sleeping in her car any more than Avendano wanted to be weaving through traffic for an app. Nor, it seems, are the vast majority of workers giving their all out of an irrational commitment.

So what, then, are the social forces that have kept our work lives stubbornly long and unpredictable? For a fuller explanation, let's look at the structure of the economy and recent trends in work time. In the decades leading up to the 1970s, most workers enjoyed a condition they would relish today—declining hours and rising pay. But it didn't last. To find out what happened, we need a better understanding of the complex relationships between rising economic inequality, longer hours, and the American class structure.

Work hours declined precipitously starting in the middle of the nineteenth century. This data has led some to argue that there's a built-in structural bias of capitalist economies to translate productivity gains into increased leisure. This is erroneous. We can attribute the vast majority of that decrease in work hours to trade union pressure and political interventions. It was striking carpenters in Philadelphia in 1791 who inaugurated the movement to win the ten-hour day, a two-hour reduction. And about one hundred years later, on May 1, 1886 thousands of strikers in Chicago, eight of whom were later hanged, demanded "eight hours for work, eight hours for rest, eight hours for what we will," the slogan of the struggle for the eight-hour day. These fights for shorter hours culminated in two major pieces of legislation toward the end of the sloping trend. The Wagner Act of 1935 gave unions the right to bargain collectively with their employer, offering them a clearer avenue to negotiate over hours reductions. The Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 attacked "starvation wages and intolerable hours." It also outlawed child labor and set the standard forty-hour workweek, mandating overtime pay to de-incentivize employers to compel longer hours.[2]

Historian Benjamin Kline Hunnicutt shows that hours dropped so low that workers basically stopped fighting for further reductions even as the context for doing so was perhaps better than ever. Instead, as leisure time grew, American families needed more money to take advantage of these opportunities and began advocating for higher pay more fervently than for fewer hours. Higher wages, in turn, made longer hours more desirable, and workers increasingly sought relatively lucrative overtime benefits to earn more. Still, high rates of unionization and relatively high wages ensured the downward trend in hours continued until about the mid-1970s.[3]

Social scientists disagree on how exactly to calculate the change in work time since then. The average workweek has remained relatively constant for the past few decades. But we've increased our hours dramatically by working more weeks per year. Juliet Schor ignited a debate about longer hours in her 1991 book *The Overworked American*. When she updated her book a decade later she found the trends had only accelerated. Using data collected by the Current Population Survey, she found that from 1973 to 2000 the average worker added 199 hours (about five weeks) to his or her annual schedule. The surge was staggering for some subgroups within that sample. For example, those in the middle of the income distribution saw an increase of 660 hours per year, a rise of more than 20 percent.[4]

Among Schor's main explanations was that as union strength waned and the state retreated from its commitment to shortening the hours of work, firms were able to restructure jobs as fundamentally longer-hour positions. Increasing employer power eroded a "market for shorter hours," a system in which individual workers were able to negotiate hours or trade hours for time off. Schor also found that workers adjusted their expectations as work time increased. On surveys, they reported satisfaction with their hours despite reporting a preference for shorter hours in previous years. She concluded that workers ended up "wanting what they get rather than getting what they want." Her research overturned the myths that working time today is a matter of individual preference for income over time and that personal choice plays a significant role in determining work time. To put it bluntly: employers decide, employees abide.[5]

Schor was criticized for overestimating the hours trend, and some critics argued that leisure had actually increased during the time period she studied. These scholars relied on time diaries in which survey participants recorded their daily activities in fifteen-minute increments. As such, bathroom breaks or time spent around the water cooler was not counted as "work time." By the mid-1990s, however, even these survey methods showed an increase in work hours. Still, some estimates today show only a modest increase in work time since the seventies. The difference is determined by the data that is used and the way the data is analyzed. When supervisory and managerial workers are excluded, or when women are excluded, the upward trend is less pronounced, because supervisory and managerial workers put in longer hours and men's share of annual hours worked has changed far less than women's share. Including all of the working-age population, not just those employed, creates a steeper increase.[6]

My calculations are based on data from the Economic Policy Institute, a nonpartisan think tank that conducts research and analysis to help inform policymakers. This data shows that the average worker put in 1,664 hours in 1975; that figure rose to 1,883 in 2016, a 13 percent increase equivalent to about five weeks. Though the workweek remained relatively stable over this time, this change reflects an increase in the number of weeks worked per year. Most of the change occurred from 1979 to 2007, during which time hours grew by about 11 percent, the equivalent of every worker putting in an extra 4.5 weeks. Hours declined rapidly in the wake of the Great Recession but fully recovered to their pre-recession high by 2016.[7]

One part of the story is that women have increased their work hours significantly while men's hours have fallen, a fluctuation that explains a good portion of the overall increase in work time.

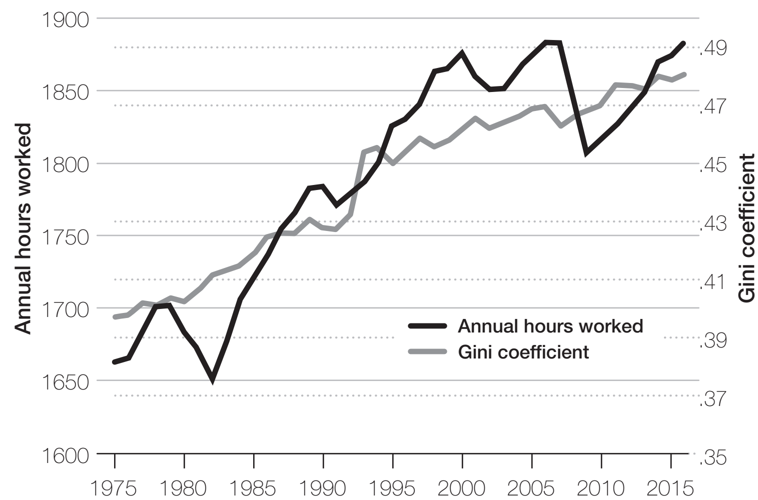
Men still work the most, buoyed by their overrepresentation in careers in long-hour and high-wage legal, corporate, medical, and technology fields, while working women have substantially increased their hours in part-time jobs and in jobs with irregular schedules.[8]

Stories of women who are overworked, underemployed, or who have no control over their schedules dominate this book. But the increase in women's paid work alone isn't enough to explain the historic reversal of the trend toward shorter hours. After all, women entered the paid workforce in comparable ways in our peer countries, and they have actually decreased their hours in the past two decades in the United States.[9]

The overall trends are even more pronounced when we compare the United States to other countries. Typically, richer countries are more productive and work fewer hours. But the United States is different. Americans average 289 more working hours per year than comparisons with peer nations suggest is necessary to maintain our high level of productivity. Germans, for example, produce a comparable level of well-being in much less time. In 2018, the United States was only slightly more productive than industrious Germany, yet Americans worked 31 percent more hours, equivalent to more than two months of work. The gap between how much Americans actually work and how much our wealthy economy predicts we should work, has also widened. We're not *just* overworked. Our tendency to overwork has expanded year after year. And what do we have to show for all those extra hours? We have greater income inequality than any peer country.[10]

Rising hours are the result of, and contribute to, economic inequality. The skyrocketing profits generated by productive workers since the 1970s could have allowed us to work significantly fewer hours without a decline in our standard of living. But instead of being shared equitably, those profits were kept at the top by a small elite. About two-thirds of all income gains

ANNUAL HOURS WORKED AND INEQUALITY, 1975–2016



SOURCES: Author's analysis of Gini coefficient measures from the US Census Bureau, Historical Income Table A-2. Author's analysis of annual hours worked measures from the Economic Policy Institute, State of Working America Data Library, based on data from the CPS ASEC, all wage and salary workers ages 18–64.

from 1973 to 2007 went directly to the top 1 percent of households. Analysis in 2019 by the policy expert Matt Bruenig shows that since 1989 the top 1 percent increased its total net worth by an incomprehensible $21 trillion. During the same period, the bottom half experienced a loss in net worth of $900 billion and now owns less than nothing, meaning more debt than assets. Simply put, most Americans today can't afford to work less.[11]

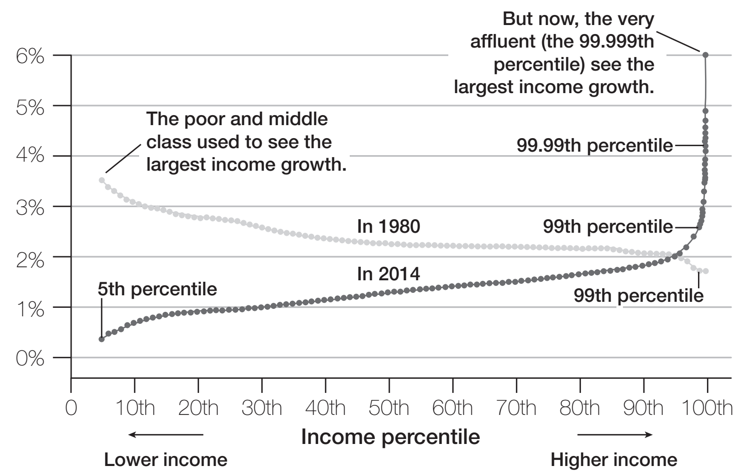
The graph above plots the classic measure of economic inequality, the Gini coefficient, alongside the number of annual hours worked. A Gini measure of zero expresses perfect equality, whereas a value of one signifies absolute inequality. Side by side it is easy to see a strong correlation between the two trends. As economic inequality increases since 1975, the amount of work we do each year does as well. Within the general trend, however, the two variables fluctuate together. The downward spike in 2007 shows the trends at the onset of the Great Recession, after which point both recover and rise again. It's important to remember that the drop in hours during that time doesn't signal a leisurely respite from hard work, but rather a quick slashing of work time by employers in the midst of the crisis.

Inequality helps maintain long and unpredictable hours because it creates precarious work, forcing people across the wage scale to put in more hours either because their wages are so low or because they're afraid the boss might see them leaving the office early. The relationship also exists from the other direction: long hours also drive income inequality because the pay that elites take home is so high at the top of the wage pyramid that it pulls the working rich away from everyone else.

In the past forty years CEO pay soared by an inconceivable 1,070 percent, and productivity increased by 70 percent, but hourly wages of average workers limped forward just 12 percent. From 2016 to 2017 average CEO pay rose to $18 million, making the CEO-to-worker pay ratio 312 to 1. Try to imagine someone working 312 times harder than someone else, or being 312 times more deserving, and the criminally disproportionate nature of our polarized economy becomes clearer. Anyone who tries to pin the blame on lazy workers will need to contend with this basic math.[12]

The graph above, produced by Thomas Piketty, Emmanuel Saez, Gabriel Zucman, and the *New York Times*, depicts the change in income between 1946 and 2014, illustrating the decades-long trend toward top-heavy rewards for the superrich. The light gray line, labeled "1980," shows the change in income from 1946 to 1980. Just a few decades ago, the incomes of the middle class and the poor were rising faster, in percentage terms, than the pay of the wealthiest Americans. The dark line charts the growth from 1980 to 2014, which is mostly flat until it jolts dramatically

THE INEQUALITY OF INCOME GROWTH

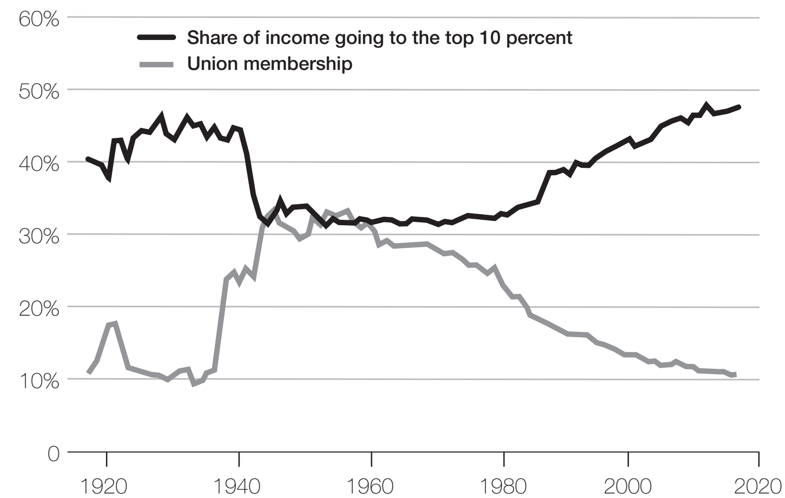


NOTE: Inflation-adjusted annual average growth using income after taxes, transfers, and noncash benefits. Sources: Thomas Piketty, Emmanuel Saez, and Gabriel Zucman. Charts by Jessia Ma and Stuart A. Thompson from the *New York Times*. © 2017 The New York Times Company. All rights reserved. Used under license.

upward at the end, illustrating the shocking gains that have recently gone to the richest Americans. Recently, only a sliver of the most affluent families have received such large sums. And as working families have been left behind, the main way they've tried to keep up is by increasing their work hours.

Most Americans lost their piece of the pie because they lost the power to take it. The destruction of labor unions is the crucial omission in most explanations of inequality and the return of protracted hours. When unions were strong, wages rose with productivity. Today, American workers are being denied the profits they are generating because they have no strong organization to demand their fair share. As a direct result, wages across the board have stagnated, social inequality has deepened, and

AS UNION MEMBERSHIP DECLINES, INCOME INEQUALITY RISES



SOURCES: Data on union density follows the composite series found in *Historical Statistics of the United States*, updated to 2015 from uninostats.com. Income inequality (share of income to top 10 percent) data is from Thomas Piketty and Emmanuel Saez, "Income Inequality in the United States, 1913–1998," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 118, no. 1 (2003), and updated data from the Top Income Database (updated June 2016), from the Economic Policy Institute.

intergenerational mobility—what we commonly think of as the American Dream—has been stunted.

The graph above helps us understand why. It illustrates the relationship between union power and inequality. As union organization spikes after the Great Depression, the share of income going to the top 10 percent nose-dives. Things flatten out for a few decades in the middle of the twentieth century, as the middle class blooms. Then, as attacks on labor become fiercer in the early 1970s, the rich once again regain power, and as a result they take more of the money that had been going to workers. This graph demonstrates a fundamental truism about American life today—class power, not "the market," is the primary factor determining what society looks like. When workers are in unions they have more power, make more money, and work fewer hours—and the rich get less. When workers lose their union power, it's the reverse.

Unions reduce inequality not only by raising the wages of the lowest-paid workers, but also by placing constraints at the top—by taxing the rich, fighting against absurd compensation packages at the peak of the income ladder, and decreasing the overall percentage of upper-level managers within firms. Yet their ability to do so is determined by the ability to help elect politicians sympathetic to labor's cause. And their influence in this regard has been deeply eroded. In the 2016 election, corporations outspent labor sixteen to one, according to the Center for Responsive Politics. It also found that whereas unions spend $45 million a year lobbying Washington, business elites spend $3 billion, more than sixty times as much. These numbers should make any notion of an equivalency between Big Labor, which really doesn't exist anymore, and Big Business, which has never been healthier, seem laughable.[13]

About one-third of US workers carried a union card at midcentury, and inequality decreased as unionization increased. During these prosperous (and anomalous) decades, unions helped keep the wages of ordinary workers high and also put a ceiling on what bosses took home. Moreover, high union membership helped elect politicians who favored, or at least dealt with, organized workers, providing broad support for unions. Republican Dwight Eisenhower's midcentury platform promised to increase unemployment benefits, create laws making it easier to join a union, and eliminate sex discrimination to ensure equal pay for equal work. As president, the five-star general addressed the American Federation of Labor, assuring the assembled crowd that "only a fool would try to deprive working men and women of the right to join the union of their choice."

Well, the number of fools grew and grew. And then it exploded in the 1970s. Although the weapons used to fight the union wars changed—companies stopped hiring armed thugs and relied more on lobbyists and lawyers—the answer to corporate woes was still union-busting. Nevertheless, throughout the midcentury, absolute union membership continued to rise even as union density, the proportion of worker members, declined.

Early in the neoliberal period, many workers still won shorter hours. In 1976, the United Automobile Workers won twelve new paid personal holidays, inspiring confidence in a new shorter hours movement. "The four-day week is inevitable," said UAW president Doug Fraser in 1978. "The only question is, How fast do we get there?" That was the question when, that same year, 700 unionists attended the first All Unions Committee to Shorten the Work Week conference in Detroit. "Across the country, in shop and union after union, a mighty demand for shorter hours is developing," said UAW Local 22 president Frank Runnels in his opening remarks.[14]

The conference brought together union members committed to reinvigorating labor's forgotten cause of less work for more money. They gathered to promote a legislative agenda for shorter hours across all industries, prohibit compulsory overtime, and persuade unions to bargain over hours during contract negotiations. These steps would ease unemployment by spreading more work around. "The forty-hour system has built a wall around our jobs . . . that wall has locked out ten million people," Runnels said. "It is time to tear that old wall down!" By today's standards, however, the wall wasn't impervious.

By that time many unions had secured every existing holiday as paid time off, and they were fervently creating more paid leave any way they could. The UAW more than doubled its number of paid personal holidays in its 1979 contract, taking them to twenty-six. Many other industrial workers won seven weeks of paid vacation for their members. The United Steelworkers of America even secured a thirteen-week sabbatical for high-seniority workers. Reporting on the conference, the *New York Times* argued that unions were committed to a "less-work ethic."

Subsequent attacks against unions, however, were major drivers of extended work hours. President Ronald Reagan's firing of 11,000 striking air traffic controllers in 1981, even after the union broke ranks with the wider labor movement to back his election campaign, was truly a turning point. The controllers' unmet demand for a four-day week helped push the stalemate toward a strike, even though federal workers didn't have the right to a work stoppage. Though the union was convinced it would win handily, Reagan held strong against the workers. Their mass firing, and even the arrest of some leaders, reverberated like a warning shot throughout the union movement. The following year, General Motors workers, who had been among the most successful at shortening hours, lost every paid personal holiday they had won over the previous few years. Throughout the eighties, with their bargaining power crippled, workers sacrificed time off in exchange for maintaining wages. Autoworkers at Chrysler, Ford, and GM lost two to three weeks of paid vacation. Rubber workers lost one week of time off, and the steelworkers' union even sacrificed its thirteen-week sabbatical program in certain places across the country.[15]

Nonetheless, American workers have continued to report increasing desire to join unions but have found far less success doing so. In 2019 public support for unions hit a fifty-year high, with a 64 percent approval rate. In other words, workers lost their voice at the same time a rising number of them said they wanted it. The same year, private sector union membership, which has historically had the largest impact on workers' livelihoods, clocked in at a dismal 6.4 percent, about the same level it was during the first year of the Great Depression. Unions not only promoted widespread pay equity; they also moderated the working day.[16]

As union strength has waned, the main mechanism that gave average workers shorter hours has ground to a halt. And as earnings have fallen, workers have made up the difference by working longer hours. Without a strong counterweight to business, workers have had to abandon their longstanding mission—less work for more pay—and instead accept the opposite. Today, wages are down and hours are up. Workers in countries with stronger unions tend to work fewer hours and enjoy longer paid vacations than those in countries where unions are weak. A recent study by Project: Time Off shows that Americans worked during more than 700 million of their earned vacation days in 2017 because they feared they'd be labeled lazy, grounds for replacement in the no-rest culture, earning us the moniker "no-vacation nation." These changes have thrown the working life for many Americans into a tumult.[17]

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On the back of Amanda's ecru-colored Chevy is a bumper sticker that says, "The Labor Movement: The Folks Who Brought You the Weekend." When I point it out she feigns ignorance. "You mean like a two-day break? In a row?" she asks, sarcastically. "That'd be nice, but that's not really how we live."

Amanda is fair-skinned, with light hair and a welcoming smile. She wears small wire-rimmed glasses that sit loosely on her face and jostle around when she talks. Hers is a peripatetic life. In the time I've known her she has moved five times in five years—often dependent on the kindness of friends to keep her family from going homeless. It seems that just as often she and her family are offering the less fortunate around them a place to crash as well. A mutual acquaintance once described her as "the neighbor we need but don't deserve."

Years ago, when I was at her home, her son, Kaleb, was performing his "rain dance" in their living room, in the Lemon Fair Valley of Weybridge, Vermont, whirling his body from side to side, arms raised to the sky in exaggerated prayer.

"Boy never sees his dad except in bad weather," Amanda explained. "So he started doing this to get it to rain. It's not lookin' good today though," she said, half smiling, squinting into an eye-blue cloudless sky.

Kaleb's father, Tom Heustis, lives nearby, and is a dedicated part of Kaleb's life. But work as a manure spreader on local farms keeps him busy seven days a week. Except when it rains. The combines don't function well in inclement weather, but it does mean working double time when it relents. After all, as Amanda adds, "It's not like the cows stop producing."

It might seem like an ancient rhythm of work, in accordance with the dictates of nature and the elements. But Tom's predicament is all too modern. Low-income workers today are not trading lower wages for more free time. Those earning $25,000 a year spend only about twenty minutes less per day on paid work and childcare compared with those making $100,000. In other words, low-income families aren't in their economic predicament because they don't work hard. They simply earn less money while doing so. Low wages also mean that increasing work hours is a pathway to only marginally higher incomes. In mainstream economic theory, bad pay would discourage the poor to work, causing the hours of labor to drop. But it would also induce employers to raise wages to attract employees. The theory holds true in Europe to some extent, but Americans have consistently proved it wrong. The loss of workers' bargaining power has meant that despite bad working conditions and low compensation, US workers have had to accept long hours as a condition of making ends meet.[18]

"Every little bit counts," Amanda says. "We can't afford to stay home. Even when we're sick."

Despite this, or perhaps because of it, Amanda reluctantly became a leader to change the status quo. As a perpetually exhausted working mother, she thought people like her needed a break. As a healthcare aide, she *knew* they needed one, at least when they were sick. So she helped jump-start a movement to win paid sick days for all Vermonters, a movement that I enthusiastically joined. Amanda spent years of her scant "free time" going door to door, lingering into the small hours of the night in church basements talking with elected officials, speaking at local events, and attending endless meeting after endless meeting, her two kids running circles around the room or sleeping in the car.

During a press conference at the statehouse in Montpelier to advocate for a bill that would guarantee paid sick leave, Amanda testified, "The current system forces us to choose between going to work sick or losing our income or even our jobs."

Amanda's father was a home health aide too. But she makes far less than he did for the same work in the same region of the country. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, from 2006 through 2016, 2.8 million jobs were added in the healthcare sector, a rate seven times faster than the rest of the economy. Thanks to aging baby boomers, the demand for home health and personal care aides will continue to outpace the sector's explosive growth. Despite this high demand, average wages hover around $11.12 per hour, keeping caretakers tethered to the federal poverty line. To make extra money Amanda moonlights as an online travel agent, booking foreign trips for far richer clients, a luxury she herself will never afford. She describes this reality as "either really ironic or really screwed up, not sure which."[19]

Her paid work routine, which involves home visits to the elderly and indigent, racks up close to sixty hours per week. But the nature of her work requires that she be on call most nights, and her regular work schedule is often decided by the erratic lives of those she cares for, many of whom also have jobs with unpredictable time requirements or long hours. In her words, she's "always on." We typically associate this condition with those high-octane lawyers and traders and executives sleeping with cell phones under their pillows, never out of touch or offline. But it is worse for low-wage workers, whose lives are consistently disrupted for little reward.

"I spread myself so thin," she said. "I am hurting myself, I am hurting my family, I am a blight on the community. I do have to ask people to borrow money. . . . What I'm doing should be really rewarding, and it should be helping me thrive in my life. But I'm not."

"Precarity" is the condition of living in perpetual instability. The term is usually shorthand for the low wages, inequality, disappearing safety nets, and insecurity that so many experience when working in the parlous conditions of today's capitalist economy. Workers whose lives fit this description, a growing mass to be sure, have even been dubbed with their own portmanteau, the "precariat," a nod to Marx's proletariat. Although research has tended to focus on the economic dimension of precarity, the condition has also entailed an increased volatility in work hours and in the unpredictability of schedules, such that time should also be considered a fundamental dimension of precarious work.

Inequality has contributed to job polarization, which expands the number of workers who are competing for low-wage jobs, driving down wages, schedule predictability, and job security. Inequality has also created precarious jobs through what economists call "monopsony," the growth of the market power of bosses. Most people know that a monopoly is a market where there is just one seller. Because firms with monopoly power do not have to compete with other businesses for customers, they are able to set the price at which they sell their products. A monopsony, on the other hand, is a market where there is just one buyer. Firms with monopsony power are thus able to set the price at which they buy their inputs. In the case of labor markets, this means the wages they pay their workers. Monopsony power also allows employers to dictate the hours of labor, and bosses benefit from overworking employees, hiring more temporary workers, and having nonstandard work schedules because such policies reduce labor costs.

Precarity entails a paradox of time. While some are burdened by the time squeeze of excessive work, others spend their nonworking hours—which sounds a lot like leisure—searching for more work to cover their basic needs, commuting to and from work, juggling work schedules to maximize hours, or taking potentially lethal naps between shifts. Almost half of hourly workers who make less than $22,500 a year work either a night shift or an irregular shift, compared to less than a quarter of those who make $60,000 or more. Whereas exorbitant bonuses have greatly incentivized long hours at the top, excessive and irregular hours characterize life for those at the bottom.[20]

In the years since I've met Amanda, some things have changed. In 2017, the paid sick days legislation passed. It involved some compromises, but as a result of her efforts, nearly all Vermonters are now eligible for one week of paid sick leave per year. Her family is changing too. Newly a teenager, Kaleb has gone to work with Tom on farms. He spends most of his weekends and after-school time making money under the table, which he can use for himself or to chip in on family expenses. He still does his rain dance. But these days it's so that he himself can get a day off.

Amanda's family is indicative of many who, like her, work exceedingly hard and don't move ahead. She seems resigned to this fate. "That's probably never going to happen because I'm always going to be in the laborer role. I'll always be working for somebody else," she said. Is the situation less precarious for those a rung or two above her on the income ladder?

When Dairrai Doliber begins her morning as a high school social studies teacher, she's often exhausted from lack of sleep, especially if she was at her second job the night before. She stocks shelves at a local fashion retailer until 10:00 p.m., and skips dinner before crashing into bed. She's also working on her master's degree, which she hopes will increase her salary once she's done. At thirty-three, Dairrai, who lives outside Detroit, says she always thought she'd be better off, especially considering she has a solid job doing what she loves.

"I never thought I'd need two jobs to survive as a teacher," she says, adding "a *union* teacher."

Dairrai knows her situation is not unique. She teaches about American history, politics, and culture, and understands the recent changes that have created her situation, even if she thought she could beat the odds. "I thought I would be able to work my way out of the hole, but that's not really happening," she says. After school, Dairrai jumps in her car and drives to her second job, eating an off-hours meal in her car in the parking lot right before her shift starts. "I can't remember the last time I had a day off," she says.

Dairrai sometimes runs into her students and their parents when she's working the register. She's not embarrassed by her situation because she's only doing what's necessary to get by. But she feels at times that it might undermine her credibility as a teacher in the eyes of parents. "Parents want to talk about school when I'm at the other job, and it just gets awkward." Teachers are now about three times more likely than the average full-time US worker to hold down a part-time job, yet on average they earn about 20 percent less than other college graduates. Troubling as all this is, there's another dynamic at play. While Amanda and Dairrai are dealing with excessive hours, others are struggling for more.

Terrence Wiggins was working full time in the grocery department at Target when a scheduling conflict arose in his family. His sister had a newborn baby, which meant Terrence was left to care for his other nephew, who has cerebral palsy. Terrence now had to be at the bus stop to help his nephew get home from school, which meant the night shifts he was working weren't possible anymore. Target agreed to give him a day shift, but the store cut his total hours for the week to eight. In addition, he never knew which eight it was going to be, as his schedule was constantly being adjusted until just days before his shift, making the search for other jobs impossible. Target uses a high-tech scheduling algorithm to assign shifts to workers. The software accounts for myriad factors, including the weather, to determine the exact minimum number of hours that are necessary to meet projected sales goals. The result was that the store where Terrence worked was always filled with workers, most of whom were scheduled for short shifts or had their shifts extended or shortened with little to no notice.

Months later, Terrence got his hours back up to twenty, which was still only half of what he needed to earn. He took on a second job as a security guard at Ross, though almost immediately Target increased his hours to more than forty per week, so he quit the security gig.

In his second week back at Target full time, however, management sent him home early halfway through his shift. "I need all the hours I can get," he explains, "but I also need to be able to plan my life, to take care of my family. My work schedule made that impossible." Like many low-wage service sector workers with caregiving responsibilities, Terrence was forced out because of scheduling conflicts, and he eventually had to quit working at Target.

There are 6.4 million workers like Terrence in the United States. I met dozens of them while writing this book. They want full-time hours but are stuck in part-time jobs, often with schedules that are unpredictable or insufficient to provide a stable living. Involuntary part-time work declined after an all-time high during the 2008 crash, though economists have demonstrated it is still 40 percent higher than is normal for this point in the recovery. But even full-time workers aren't insulated from this unpredictability. Forty percent of hourly wage earners get one to two weeks' notice about their schedules and almost one-third get three days or fewer. Research by sociologists Daniel Schneider and Kristen Harknett have shown that this "temporal instability" is strongly related to psychological distress, poor sleep quality, and unhappiness, even more so than low wages. Even a modest adjustment of scheduling stability has significant beneficial health outcomes for workers.[21]

Inequality and low wages are the wellspring of precarious life. People like Terrence live their lives by the hour, while those at the top can really plan a future. The stories above capture the precarity of life at one place in the labor market, a place where family and personal tragedies are too private or too commonplace to make headlines. In fact, when long hours are invoked in popular discourse, it is usually not the victims of the trend who get the spotlight, but the heroism of the rich who are supposedly doing all the work.

•

Martin Thompson likes to joke that he once considered moving into his office full time, but the inability to bathe regularly kept him from following through. "Besides, I'm not that young and dumb anymore," he explains. "Or at least not that young." At forty-four, Martin is less adventurous than he once imagined he would be. In his twenties, he was a familiar face on the Central American hitchhiking scene, and never wanted to settle down. Now, however, as a self-described "white-collar work addict," he's more or less wedded to his job. He's also a self-described "labor lawyer," but his practice mostly revolves around defending corporations from labor unions. "We work with employees, so that's what we call it," he told me. "Not everyone sees it that way, I guess." His income places him in the top 10 percent of earners in America, and he's able to support his young family of four. But there's another data point that signals his wealth, which he is not shy about sharing. "I work more than anyone else I know," he explains. "That's how it is today. We [high-income earners] work more. It makes a big difference."

In the past century the rich were largely defined by their plentiful leisure. Recall that "banker's hours" was once slang for the short workweek enjoyed by the top wage earners in society. Thorstein Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, the classic examination of turn-of-the-century wealth, offered a vivid portrait of an upper crust committed to "conspicuous consumption," strategic buying practices to confer status and honor. But whereas idleness and leisure were once markers of having made it, today the rich acquire prestige through flaunting their extreme commitment to work. And they do have bragging rights. In absolute terms, the top 20 percent of income earners log more work hours per year than anyone else.

But flexing their commitment to work is highly performative, intended to justify undeserved wealth. When she got the job in 2012, Yahoo CEO Marissa Mayer announced that she would work through her maternity leave, sometimes putting in one-hundred-hour weeks. To make sure no one thought she was kidding, she built a nursery next to the office right after she ended the telecommuting option for Yahoo employees. Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg, author of the corporate feminist manifesto *Lean In*, gloated about pumping breast milk while on conference calls and returning to work after the kids were tucked in to bed. Alphabet CFO Ruth Porat claimed she made client calls from the hospital delivery room bed, and it's often noted that she flips New York City real estate in her "spare time."

Does this incessant activity legitimate the existence of a ruling class? These days the working rich derive more of their income from wages, not capital. The top 1 percent in 1920 made 40 percent of its income from wages, but by 2000 that figure had doubled to 80 percent. Are the well-off really today's "working class?"[22]

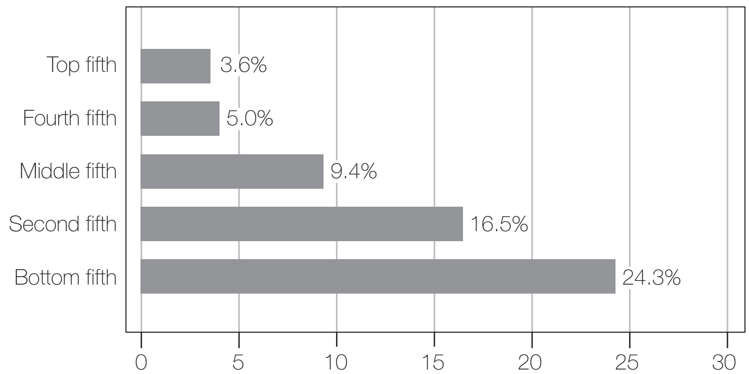
Not quite. Economists Peter Kuhn and Fernando Lozano studied four decades' worth of work and leisure trends. They estimate that in 1979 the bottom 20 percent of earners were far more likely to put in more than fifty hours a week than the top 20 percent. But by 2006, the situation had basically reversed. It appears these trends have continued ever since, resulting in a leisure gap that mirrors the inequity between the top and bottom of the economic ladder.[23]

Kuhn and Lozano's explanation was simple. As a result of skyrocketing fortunes at the top tenth of the income spectrum, investing one's time in extra work generates an exceptional return. You look better to the boss when it's time to dole out bonuses, promotions, and better job offers because of a workplace culture that values loyalty and rewards long hours through performance-pay schemes. As Martin Thompson explains, "When the end of the year comes around, it pays to be the last guy at the office. Literally." Kuhn and Lozano showed that salaried men who logged fifty-five hours per week in the early 1980s earned 10.5 percent more than their equivalent working a standard workweek. Twenty years later that gap had more than doubled, to 24.5 percent. For the well-off, in other words, work time is more valuable.[24]

While it is undoubtedly the case that those at the poles of the income spectrum are working longer for different reasons, the rich are not completely sheltered from precarity either. Corporate downsizing since the Great Recession has emphasized the here-today-gone-tomorrow nature of even good jobs. The "long-hours premiums" described above rose alongside inequality of earnings *within* high-paying occupations. This inequality drives competition among employees who fear their own disposability during slumps as they see their peers moving ahead. This fear translates into working longer and longer. And of course, the higher the wage, the greater the opportunity cost to not working.[25]

When commentators write about today's working rich, they often use data on weekly hours and tend to write exclusively about

PERCENT CHANGE IN
ANNUAL HOURS OF EARNERS, BY WAGE QUINTILE



NOTE: "Earners" includes adults ages twenty-five to fifty-four who reported any wages or hours worked during the reporting year. Source: Economic Policy Institute.

men. It is true that high-earning men top the charts in terms of long workweeks, and they are now the most likely to put in more than fifty hours per week. But focusing on this statistic alone gives a skewed perception of what's really going on.[26]

The graph above tells a different story. The largest shift in recent history has been the increase in the annual hours worked by low-wage workers, who are now working 24 percent more than in 1979. Women are significantly overrepresented in this category. They make up seven in ten workers at jobs that pay under ten dollars per hour, where volatility in hours and earnings are the most extreme. Meanwhile, the highest earners increased their annual hours of work only 3.6 percent. Despite the popular focus on hardworking male professionals, it is low-income workers who have increased their annual hours the most, and who are leading the trend.[27]

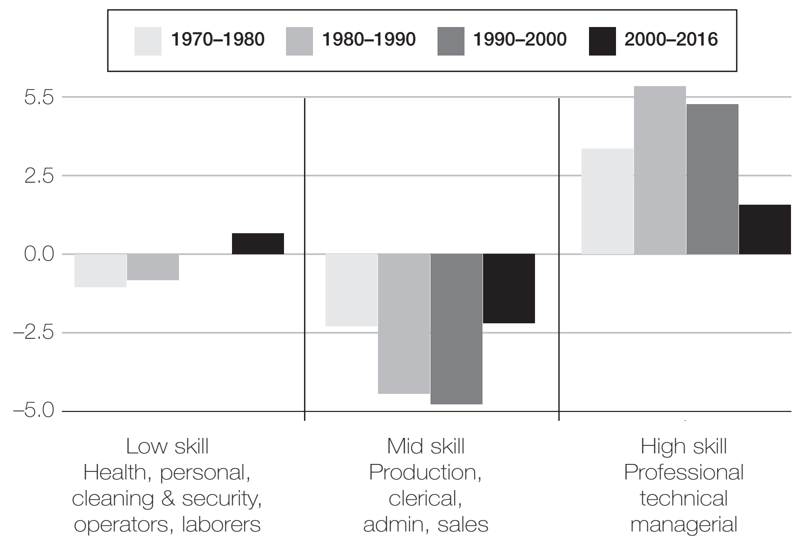
Among the top fifth of earners, rising hourly wages account for nearly all of the growth in annual earnings over the past four decades. For the vast majority of low- and middle-income workers, however, annual earnings growth has been the result of working longer hours. This means the rich have pulled away from the rest because of much higher compensation, not more time at work. Even as average workers have dramatically increased their hours, they have actually fallen farther behind. Between 1979 and 2014, incomes of the households in the top 20 percent rose by 95 percent. For households in the bottom quintile, who increased their work time the most, incomes only grew 26 percent. The most significant change for low-wage workers was that they increased their weeks worked per year, but for the rich it was hours in a week. What explains this difference?[28]

Martin has an answer: "We take vacations and they don't."

He has a point. Having the choice to take a vacation is determined by social class. Only one-third of low-wage private-sector workers receive paid holidays or vacation, compared with almost everyone in the top 10 percent of wage earners. High-earning workers tend to work longer hours for defined periods of time. And they are far more likely to be allocated significant chunks of time off, even if they choose to forgo it or to write work emails from a deck chair on a cruise ship. They plan their schedules, their time off, and their family life. In other words, they're able to control when they work a lot and when they don't. This stands in stark contrast to those at the bottom, who are always on yet worse off. Hard work at long hours isn't a viable pathway to getting ahead for most workers today. Why not?[29]

Americans tend to link hard work and reward. A survey by the Pew Charitable Trusts found that 73 percent of Americans say working hard is vital to "getting ahead in life." Such belief is closely linked to income. Across the globe, high earners believe that hard work leads to success, and Americans believe it far more than any peer country. Seventy percent of low-earning Americans believe in the uplifting power of work too, more than do the rich in almost every country surveyed.[30]

CHANGES IN OCCUPATIONAL EMPLOYMENT SHARES AMONG WORKING AGE ADULTS, 1970–2016



NOTES: Figure uses March Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement data for earnings years 1963–2017. Source: David Autor, "Work of the Past, Work of the Future," NBER (working paper no. 25588), February 2019.

But today hard work and upward mobility are further apart than ever. A good way to illustrate this bifurcation is to look at how American work time is divided across the economy.[31]

The figure above, by economist David Autor, depicts hours worked, not the number of jobs. In the early 1970s Americans worked roughly the same percentage of hours in each group: 31.4 percent of total hours were in low-skill occupations, 38.4 percent were middle-skill, and 30.2 percent were high-skill. Since then, the overall time spent working in middle-skill jobs fell precipitously, from 38.4 to 23.3 percent of hours. From 2000 to 2016 Americans have spent more aggregate time at low- and high-skill jobs. This polarization suggests that the middle class is joining the upper class, which, Autor claims, "is not something economists should worry about." By and large, however, as he notes, workers without a college degree don't enjoy that kind of upward mobility. Instead, as midlevel blue- and white-collar jobs have declined, non-college-educated workers are being pushed into generic low-wage work for which they're overqualified and underpaid. Getting a college degree is hardly the answer—by 2028 almost two-thirds of all jobs won't require one. Improving conditions for American workers in the immediate future requires making routine low-level jobs into better-paying jobs and decreasing our reliance on paid work in general.[32]

Middle- and low-income families like Amanda's, Dairrai's and Terrence's depend more on wages from work than any other source of income, whereas people like Martin Thompson benefit from activities that aren't direct outcomes of actual labor time, such as income from stocks, rents, pensions, and bonuses. The Great Recession increased the necessity of longer hours for those in the middle- and low-income segments of the labor market because it became the main way for them to regain their wealth and assets that were lost in the crash. By and large, however, the hours weren't available. This inflated the pool of the involuntarily unemployed, and the result was that workers fell further behind.

From the 1970s to 2000, a significant portion of inequality could be explained by what economists call a "labor-income" phenomenon, meaning that how much work you did mattered a great deal. Since 2000, however, the importance of "capital income" has become increasingly important to those at the very top. In other words, even as the rich are working more, their wages are often a complex mixture of earnings that are clearly not the result of more time. Differences in hours of work cannot explain why those in the top 1 percent have gotten so incredibly rich because there simply aren't enough hours in the day to account for their gains. For them, expecting to get ahead merely by going to work each morning might appear quaint, like collecting your morning milk from the door.[33]

Forty years ago, workers who put in fifty hours or more per week earned 15 percent less per hour than those working a normal nine-to-five job. Today, it's the reverse. Employees working fifty hours per week earn almost 10 percent more than those working a more traditional workweek, according to sociologists Youngjoo Cha, Kim Weeden, and Mauricio Bucca. The ability to get ahead by working long hours, however, is determined by class power. A study led by sociologists Annette Bernhardt and Ruth Milkman found that thousands of low-wage workers they surveyed worked more than forty hours in the previous week but were not paid the legal overtime rate for the extra time. This reality challenges our collective fantasy that hard work is still the gateway to the American Dream.[34]

Do the rich work hard? Sure, more than any other group they easily secure steady full-time jobs that pay handsomely. And they report higher work satisfaction than any group as well. If overwork was only a problem for the high-earning classes, confined to Wall Street trading floors or Silicon Valley campuses, it would hardly register as a social complaint. But when the rich are overworked, they drag the rest of society along with them, a snowball effect of weird and excessive work times. When people like Martin Thompson are threatening to occupy the office all night, who will deliver them food and care for their children?

The answer is people like Gina Sferra. Gina made good on the threat Martin balked at; she moved into her office about two years ago and has barely left since. Gina runs Tip Top Child Development Center, a 24/7 childcare facility in Las Vegas. The night I spoke with her there were approximately eighty sleeping children in the ten-thousand-square-foot space, getting picked up or dropped off all night and all morning. Casinos provide a steady stream of children whose parents work long and odd hours. But only half of her clients are employed by the casinos.

"It's not a casino problem," she explains. "This place exists because of the way people work, pure and simple. I'm in business because people are always working. Nonstop."

Parents often break down in tears of relief when they are told the facility will accept their child. She has flight attendants, lawyers, and nurses who drop their children off for days at a time when they're out of town for business or simply working long consecutive shifts. She points out that retail jobs, in particular, create havoc for childcare schedules, and thus parents in retail jobs account for much of her business.

The incredible success of her business model is tied to the fact that Gina has ingeniously tailored her career to the precarity of modern America. She has a lot of experience with balancing children and work. She got pregnant in high school, never married, and has a five-year-old foster son. Her twenty-two-year-old daughter, Alexis, is the assistant director of Tip Top, and also works for a local family caring for their child three days in a row while the parents work or catch up on sleep. Alexis insists that Gina take a break now and then, so they've worked out a compromise—Gina returns home for twenty-four hours per month; the rest of the time she's at the facility.

"We are a Band-Aid solution," Gina says. "I'm not sure it's healthy for people to have these kinds of chaotic lives." She considers that for a moment and adds, "Then again, look who's talking."

The differences in Martin's and Gina's lives are often theorized in class terms by social scientists. In the late 1970s, Barbara and John Ehrenreich coined the term "professional managerial class" to categorize the teachers, engineers, nurses, doctors, lawyers, managers, and technology workers who were making up a growing part of an increasingly white-collar economy. Their sociological analysis argued that such a class functioned as a buffer between the rabble in the factories and the elites who owned everything. Their initial analysis understood the PMC, as it is commonly abbreviated, as a conservative force in society, hobbling the formation of a unified social class of the exploited by dividing the factions that serve the ownership class.

They later revised their analysis, however, in response to a growing progressive cohort within the PMC who understood their predicament and were actively struggling alongside working-class people. Moreover, as a college education became more common and no longer distinguished the working classes from the middle, the PMC began to look much more like a demographic within the working class. "The center has not held," the Ehrenreichs wrote, "and the PMC lies in ruins." Therein lies the possibility for an alliance between downwardly mobile professionals and the rest of the working class, however schematic it might be. Today, many professionals are overworked and worked over too. They can see their prospects dwindling, soon to face many of the same pressures of working-class Americans. In other words, many professionals—people like me, and undoubtedly like many of you, dear readers—occupy a contradictory and precarious social position. To argue that such a class alliance could emerge, organized around the goal of decreasing labor time, is not to ignore those contradictions, but to focus on them.

These contradictions were brought into sharp relief for me personally when I was ordering coffee in California on a research trip. The young woman at the register was visibly harried, to the point where I had to ask her if she was okay. She nearly broke down at the question, then immediately took advantage of the situation. "I'd be a lot better if you'd give me a ride to my next job," she said, pleading. "I start in fifteen minutes. I can't be late." A few minutes later we were in my car headed for the heart of Silicon Valley. Admittedly, I knew it would be a valuable anecdote. But I was surprised at the extent to which it fit neatly into the narrative stream of this book.

Carmen had taken a job as a Starbucks barista only a few months earlier to supplement her income as an adult caregiver after her client decreased her hours. Then, after a few weeks, her client increased her hours again, and she was now struggling to make both shifts work. Because the money makes a difference. Her life is the essence of the precarity paradox. Juggling two jobs and the sole responsibility of a young child, Carmen finds that her free time is nonexistent. She can make enough money to cover her expenses—if she gets the hours she needs at work, which too often does not happen. Yet the labor required to meet her basic needs incurs other expenses, like transportation and time away from her daughter.

As she's changing her clothes in the car to prepare for the next job, she mentions that her client's business offers its employees free transport to and from work.

"Google Bus?" I ask, and she nods her head. I was familiar with that system, which is why I was driving that day. I had barely pulled to a stop before she was out the door, briskly walking up the driveway toward her client's home.

Carmen's precarious work routine is like that of many others around the country, but it is especially prevalent in Silicon Valley. A Janus-faced economy driven by the likes of Apple, Google, and Facebook creates a "winner take most" system where superstar firms hoard their wealth, pushing others to work longer and harder. It's fertile ground for an at-will pool of laborers who suspend their lives for work where the hours are long, inconsistent, and often still not enough.

Inequality alone, however, can't fully explain recent trends toward long hours and inconsistent work arrangements. Economic inequality begets hours inequality, which in turn drives more economic inequality. But it's hardly an impersonal cycle. Most workers weren't set to work at a faster and faster clip by economics in the abstract, but by managers. The time we work, including the pace and intensity, is as much the product of labor relations as anything else. Thus, it's worth exploring how managers got so much control over our time in the first place.