CHAPTER 8

LABOR'S FORGOTTEN FIGHT

Free time is an objective good in and of itself, and workers clearly deserve more than they're currently getting. Benjamin Kline Hunnicutt, a professor of leisure studies at the University of Iowa, refers to the search for free time as the "forgotten American Dream." Before Americans promoted the work ethic and upward mobility as our national theology, we professed allegiance to an entirely different, more enlightened ideal. "Higher Progress," a term Hunnicutt borrowed from Walt Whitman. Higher Progress mixed religious and early Romantic notions of freedom, painting a picture of humankind as fundamentally burdened by work and liberated at rest. The reward for our labor isn't money, in this case, but the ultimate peace.

But rest and respite are hardly the only benefits, and free time can't be defined simply as the absence of work. Free time is an essential facet of democratic society. It gives us the ability to exercise our rights and enjoy the freedoms we already have. Voting is hardly democratic if people can't get to the polls. Who needs national parks if there's no time to pitch a tent and do a little stargazing? Free time is also a necessary component of any movement for social change. As every activist knows, time scarcity is one of the largest impediments to ordinary people becoming politically engaged. Without time to contemplate the world,

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how can we expect to change it? We need to carve out free time to organize, plot, conspire, and fight.

Early labor history is littered with bloody battles over the physical control of clocks and violent episodes to win the eight-hour day. Yet reducing labor time was less an insurrection and more of a century-long grind. Concern over time has largely been forgotten, pushed aside by demands for higher wages, healthcare, safety, and job security. But we've forgotten this concern at our peril: a major worsening condition for workers has been the intensity, duration, and unpredictability of their working life. When we work, for how long, and at what point in the day or week, is usually beyond our grasp today. The historic struggle for shorter hours isn't just about leisure—it's about control.

According to the Economic Policy Institute, only 15 percent of workers say they are "free to decide" their work schedule. This instability is a growing problem, associated with mental and physical stress, unstable income, emotional turmoil, family conflicts, gender inequity, ecological instability, and overall personal unhappiness. We seem to want the opposite. A YouGov poll in 2015 found that only 15 percent of workers would choose to work a day less in exchange for losing that day of pay. However, if workers could take a day off with no corresponding change in pay, 78 percent would do it. It's not that we don't want to work less; it's that we live in a society where not all of us can afford to do so.[1]

Popular solutions to the time crunch are typically predicated on individuals making new lifestyle choices, and are geared toward the upper echelons of the labor force. "Downshifting" to less rat-race careers, a white-collar take on voluntary simplicity, enjoyed a high-profile moment in the early nineties. Then "work-life balance" became the watchword for overworked professionals. Today, the FIRE movement—financial independence, retire early—promises more leisure through better money management for those who can afford to save.

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A more structural demand is that employers consider employees' lives outside their jobs by offering flexible work arrangements to give workers options about where and when to work. This would be a welcome enhancement to many workplaces, but depending on benevolent bosses doesn't give workers more control over their time. We should simply reduce hours instead. Decreasing hours would bring a number of benefits besides merely reducing the amount of time we have to spend working. It would help create a smaller national ecological footprint, for example, one part of a larger movement to reverse the climate catastrophe.[2]

Many countries, though not the United States, have managed to attain fewer working hours through provisions for guaranteed family and medical leave. This has led some to argue that merely copying and pasting European policies is a strategy for shorter hours, a position with some merit. If we had more legally mandated vacation time, more sick leave and time to care for children and the infirm, and greater unemployment benefits, work time *could* go down. Overall hours reduction is key to developing effective means of care, a particularly time-consuming form of labor, and would recognize that care is a socially important public resource.

More time for care is absolutely essential. One in four mothers return to work two weeks after childbirth, a dangerously early time for both mother and child. More paid leave to devote to care could help combat gender inequality because most care and domestic labor is unpaid, and time-use studies have indicated that women spend nearly twice as much time as men engaged in these activities. Though women have dramatically increased their hours in recent decades, their overwork in the home generally pushes them out of high-income occupations that require and reward extensive hours. This economic penalty against women incentivizes married fathers to work longer hours, often resulting in an even greater

gendered division of labor within the home. One major study by Harvard economist Claudia Goldin on the "last chapter" of gender inequality found that "the gender gap in pay would be considerably reduced and might vanish altogether if firms did not have an incentive to disproportionately reward individuals who labored long hours and worked particular hours."

Those advocating these policies do so under the banner of "choice." If we give people more options for care and family time, the logic goes, we can empower them to control their own time as they see fit. It's important to remember, however, that care work is work, even if it doesn't appear in government statistics. Freeing up hours for parents to do more unpaid childcare does not necessarily increase our sense of free time. Moreover, the political freedom to choose a policy advocating shorter hours does not resolve the fundamental problem. Millions of workers could never afford to choose fewer hours in exchange for more time at home. Choice is only useful if the options are realistically available.

An agenda to reduce hours overall is more effective. To realize this possibility, workers must regain the power to control, reduce, and improve the quality of the time we work. We need a mass movement to win particular policy changes that can allow us to exercise greater collective control over work time—a return to labor's forgotten fight. Such a movement would be aimed at not only reducing but also controlling the time we already work, a quantitative and qualitative shift. Now, what might such a time agenda look like today?

In a precarious economy with a dwindling safety net, hours reduction represents an issue with the potential to cut across race, gender, and age lines, even uniting unions with community and social justice groups, thereby presenting strategic opportunities for workers to build a new social movement unionism. A shorter hours movement—with no or very little reduction in

pay—would require a few related puzzle pieces to come together. The foundation would be an active workers' movement that can sustain a long struggle. It's a high bar. Working people's organizations are severely weakened, yet they are still our best hope for large-scale social change. Workload is a constant concern of average workers, though it almost never makes the agenda of the trade union movement, pushed out by other important concerns such as pay and benefits. Marx argued that high levels of economic prosperity—as we have here in the United States—would lead societies to define real wealth as free time, or "disposable time." Unfortunately, workers too often feel that their lives are disposable, useful only so long as they generate profit. It's about time we take up the fight to reduce work time, and in the process to revalue workers' lives. Below I suggest a few ingredients that might form a kind of recipe for work time reduction.

Spread It Around

Work-sharing programs constitute the most robust policy vehicle to spread work around, maintain or elevate workers' incomes, reduce unemployment, and avoid layoffs. We have far too much work already, so let's spread it around. Work-sharing policies could redistribute our unfair allocation of work time. If many in one group are overworked but those in another group are demanding more hours, as stories throughout this book demonstrate, then work-sharing is well suited to address the problem. The idea is simple enough. During economic downturns, employers and employees agree to reduce the labor hours of a firm's workers as opposed to laying off a select few. Such programs essentially spread the income losses that occur during recessions or downturns across a wider group of people, preventing more damaging consequences, like the loss of a job. The practice dates back

to the campaign to win the eight-hour day. Samuel Gompers, president of the American Federation of Labor, said, "So long as there is one man who seeks employment and cannot obtain it the hours of labor are too long."[3]

At various crisis points throughout history, the US government-imposed work-sharing programs to guard against widespread unemployment. Such policies were hotly debated in public, placing work time closer to something we can control on a large scale. The practice was a common antidote used by the Hoover administration to combat joblessness and underemployment amid the Great Depression. In 1938, the Fair Labor Standards Act attempted to spread out employment by mandating a forty-hour workweek for most nonfarm industries, plus time and a half for overtime. Then in the 1960s, fear of automation and the large baby boomer generation caused another uptick in bargaining down hours to avoid unemployment.[4]

Work-sharing has occasionally been not just a policy instrument but an act of solidarity. Labor organizer and writer Sam Gindin recalls that work-sharing was a common response to any proposed layoffs in automobile manufacturing. In the late 1970s, the auto unions in the United States and Canada negotiated significant work reductions through paid holidays and four-day weekends, which allowed plants to employ more people, even as they operated six days per week. By the 1990s, the unions were fighting for even greater reductions in work time, occasionally at the expense of wages. Gindin told me:

> In our early agreements at Ford, if there was a layoff, everybody would just go down to working 20 percent less. You'd all work four days a week instead of five, instead of some people being laid off. And it was a sense of solidarity that was kind of emerging out of the organizing. Whereas the companies had been arguing that

> higher wages threatened jobs, that it is the companies who create jobs and the workers who are the barrier, we said, "We're creating the jobs, you guys are just laying off people all over the place." And we got a lot of public support because of that emphasis on work time.

But work-sharing is better as a law than as a private bargaining issue. As the Great Recession struck, work-sharing claims increased tenfold, and between 2010 and 2014 eleven states created new programs. As a response to increased need, the Obama administration passed a federal work-sharing program in 2012 that sought to increase these programs by ensuring that employees whose workweeks were reduced by at least 10 percent would be eligible for a proportional amount of unemployment compensation, encouraging employers to shorten workers' hours rather than reduce the number of workers.

Overall, however, work-sharing programs have been underutilizedin the United States, compared to Europe, during corresponding periods of economic distress. In Germany, for example, the *Kurzarbeit* system enabled German firms to avoid layoffs and promote legitimate flexibility of hours to save jobs in 2008 and 2020, insulating workers from some of the crash-induced financial pains of the Great Recession and the coronavirus crisis. Rather than allowing widespread layoffs, the federal government in the United States should have utilized existing legislation to subsidize work-share programs as soon as the magnitude of the COVID-19 pandemic became known. Work-sharing legislation is a clear tool in crisis management and a pathway to shorter hours, but, as a temporary measure, it can't be the horizon of hope for dealing with work time.[5] Rather than just reallocate work time, we need a bold plan to reduce it, which will require more people being able to live with much less of it.

Universal Basic Services

In order for significantly shorter hours to be feasible in the long run, they must be implemented in conjunction with other policies that create a foundation for all Americans, working or not. A Universal Basic Services (UBS) platform would provide free, unconditional access to healthcare, education, childcare, transportation, shelter, and adult social care. Rather than relying on profit-based, private companies to meet shared human needs, UBS would create public systems focused on efficiency and collective well-being.[6]

The recent fascination with universal basic income has prompted a renewed interest in ways to increase social well-being by decoupling income from work. A more cost-effective and fair way to do this would be simply to fund universal access to social services with our taxes—let's make survival an unconditional social good. A report by Autonomy, a think tank based in the United Kingdom, suggests the "economic security" of accessible basic services creates a "social wage" that "could allow for the voluntary reduction of working time on the part of individuals." Currently, employment and wages largely determine workers' ability to gain access to and pay for basic services that they need to survive. If services like food and medical care were guaranteed, there could be more opportunity to reduce work hours because we would need to work less to pay for our essential life maintenance. A comprehensive UBS program may seem like magical thinking, but it's not a zero-sum game—and part of the groundwork is already in place. There have long been experiments across the world, including in the United States, that enacted fare-free transport, and many places offer free healthcare and education.[7]

Medicare for All in the United States was perhaps the most divisive plank of the progressive 2020 Democratic hopefuls, even

though the majority of Americans on the left and right now support it. During a 2019 meeting on Medicare for All, Michael Lighty, a leading expert on healthcare policy, asked the question with which he begins most such gatherings: "How many of you would like to avoid ever talking to a health insurance agent again?" Predictably, every hand went up. Yet many raised concerns that included comparisons to other countries with free healthcare systems. "They say Canadians hate their public system," Lighty countered, "but you don't see them marching in the streets for Aetna." When pushed on the cost of free care, Lighty provided data that showed universal healthcare is $5 trillion cheaper than our current system, and provides a far higher quality of service.[8]

A Medicare for All program is a strategic part of the fight for shorter work hours and better schedules. Healthcare is closely tied to work hours, as 49 percent of Americans get healthcare through their employer. Minimum hour eligibility requirements for coverage and high out-of-pocket expenses keep workers locked into long-hour work schedules just to receive medical care. As the coronavirus pandemic began taking its toll, many low-wage workers lost their healthcare as a result of losing their jobs. They were then forced to risk their own health, and that of others, by looking for more work under dangerous conditions. Amid the chaos of those early days of the outbreak in the United States, many people quickly realized that paid sick leave, work sharing, banked vacation time, fair scheduling laws, basic income, and Medicare for All would be necessary to save lives and stave off complete economic ruin. Employers and government agencies typically viewed these things as temporary solutions to an emergency, but they are exactly the policies that should be permanent features of our economy.

Bargaining over healthcare and related benefits is a driver of stagnating wages and long hours. Since the seventies, unions

have negotiated higher benefits, such as healthcare, instead of wages, driving up the fixed cost per worker. This incentivizes employers to press for longer hours from workers rather than hire more workers who require benefits. The value of fringe benefits ballooned over the second half of the twentieth century, rising from 17 percent of pay in 1955 to 36 percent in 1987. As of 2018, fringe benefits make up an average of 46.6 percent of pay. And in some cases, when benefits are scaled back by management, we are forced to work longer to pay for basic needs.[9]

For the past two decades, healthcare has been a constant drag on contract negotiations, as employers continue to shift healthcare costs onto workers. Healthcare disputes have thus become the leading instigator of strikes, lockouts, and concessionary bargaining. During strikes, employers often freeze health insurance and pension benefits to try to force workers to concede, as happened to Cheryl during the GM strike. And as Chuckie noted in the previous chapter, when unions are forced to bargain over maintaining workers' health coverage, they lose opportunities to get higher wages and other benefits.[10]

A Medicare for All system would cost employers the powerful leverage they hold by controlling access to workers' healthcare, and unions could focus on bargaining for other benefits such as higher pay and shorter hours. Workers who want to transition to shorter hours would not have to worry about losing coverage or not being able to afford out-of-pocket expenses, as medical care would be guaranteed. Historically, unions have often opposed universal healthcare because they've held out the prospect of coverage as a benefit to attract new members. Yet, as veteran labor journalist Steve Early notes, workers have also struck to fight for a tax-supported universal healthcare system, not merely coverage for their own members, and there's no reason why they can't again. What a boon it would be to the labor movement if unions fought for, and won, a society-wide gain. "Universal" means everyone in, no one out. For this reason, campaigns for

universal services incubate strong movements to defend the commons. Nowhere is this more visible than in recent teacher strikes to improve public education.[11]

Striking for the Common Good

As always, we should learn from our teachers. In 2018 teachers in Mingo County, West Virginia, began to shut down their schools, demanding higher pay. Eighth-grade history teacher Jay O'Neal remembers the moment vividly. "We were trembling, some of us excited, some of us afraid, all of us a little unsure what might happen."

What eventually happened was something none of his colleagues had imagined—a wave of strikes broke out in schools across the nation, concentrated in rural Trump country, earning the movement the moniker Red State Revolt. One by one, schoolteachers in West Virginia, Oklahoma, Denver, New Mexico, and Kentucky began walking out. As the strikes kept going through the end of the school year, I interviewed teachers in North Carolina.

One Wednesday in late April, Kristin Beller, a kindergarten teacher and president of the Wake County branch of the North Carolina teachers' union, called her school's central office to check on the number of personal days teachers had requested that week. It was three hundred, a normal amount. When she called back on Monday, there were eight hundred requests. The next day there were 1,200, at which point she was told the office was no longer allowed to speak with her. Three weeks later, on May 16, the first day of the legislative session, around thirty thousand teachers were marching on Raleigh, each having requested a personal day to attend the protest. The annual "advocacy day" held by the North Carolina Association of Educators (NCAE) typically draws about four hundred people.

That year, so many teachers requested the day off that superintendents in forty-two of the state's 115 districts were forced to close schools, a movement that piggybacked on months of strikes across the country.[12]

What do these upsurges have to do with movements for shorter hours, which none of the strikes were explicitly demanding? Common to all the strikes was an attempt to use unions as vehicles to intervene in political debates outside the workplace. In North Carolina teachers began organizing at the Moral Monday protests, which brought tens of thousands of citizens to the statehouse in Raleigh each week to participate in civil disobedience actions. The premise of Moral Mondays was to unite a spectrum of political viewpoints under a universalist agenda for healthcare, education, voting rights, and reproductive freedom. Local teachers began independently canvassing at the events and built a list of hundreds of rank-and-file educators. A core of that group was largely responsible for the success of their mass sick-out. Virtually every strike has examples like this.

In Kentucky, Tia Kurtisnger-Edison had buried one of her own students, who was killed in a drive-by shooting in 2018. As a teacher and member of a local Black Lives Matter chapter, she appealed to her union in Jefferson County, where more than half the students are black and brown and 70 percent are on free lunch, to oppose a local stop-and-frisk "gang bill" that was making its way through local government. When her union said no, she organized her fellow teachers to walk out anyway and shut down their schools—six times. "We knew how to sick out," she said, referencing lessons learned from other teacher strikes. Her union's president appeared on local news shaming teachers for the unauthorized strike, and the governor has subpoenaed the names of all those who took part. "There's more of us than them," she said, seemingly confident in the ability of her coworkers to keep the pressure on the bill.

Gillian Russom is a history teacher in Los Angeles. Her union, the UTLA, thinks it's no coincidence that the anti-tax policies that made California schools forty-fourth in the nation for funding coincided with an influx of students and teachers of color since the 1970s. This is exactly why her union has developed a racial justice platform that uses the school as a launchpad for addressing issues related to racism in the community.

When a father of one of her students was detained by immigration police as he dropped off his daughter at school, the union immediately joined a successful campaign to save him from deportation. "Our union organizing doesn't happen in a silo," Gillian said, explaining that her union also worked alongside student organizers. In a public setting, it's technically illegal to have "nonmandatory" demands on the table when workers vote to strike. After they're on strike, however, workers can make any demands part of the conditional deal to go back to work. "They will tell you that you can't bargain over this or that demand," Gillian said at a public forum in Chicago. "You can get 'em if you go on strike for 'em."

When their contract was settled and teachers went back to work, they had successfully baked into their contract a set of policies that supported issues in their local community—ending random searches of students by school police, starting an immigrant justice fund to support families facing deportation, freeing up public green space for local families on their school campuses, and creating affordable housing out of unused district buildings. Bargaining for the common good recognizes that schools are social and political institutions embedded in communities that can either choose to support or oppose local reform movements.

The overarching demand made by striking teachers was to reclaim funding for public education. On the surface, this would appear to have nothing to do with control over time. However, teachers have longer workweeks (around fifty-three hours) than

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most Americans. Teachers typically log seven of those hours at home, long after they've left the classroom, often fulfilling duties imposed upon them because of a lack of school funding. Almost all teachers in the United States report buying school supplies for their students, attempting to fill in the gaps left by slashed education budgets.[13]

Many teachers across the country were pushed to strike because they were unable to survive by working only one job. I interviewed a handful who moonlighted as salesclerks, waitresses, or Uber drivers, or who ran small businesses out of their homes just to get by. It has long been common for teachers to take summer jobs, but juggling multiple jobs at once is new. During the 2015–2016 school year, almost 20 percent of public schoolteachers worked another job, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. That's an even higher percentage than what was reported at the peak of the Great Recession in 2008. Teachers are now about five times more likely than the average full-time US worker to hold down a part-time job.

Shorter hours is a perfect "common good demand," associated with a range of benefits beyond the workplace. Common good bargaining views unions as powerful social institutions that are accountable to more than just their own members, championing universalist demands.

In 2018, the German trade union IG Metall struck to win a twenty-eight-hour workweek for its members, in part by operating under the framework of the common good. Union leaders argued that shorter hours would allow them to spread the work, as well as to confront "social problems," such as providing childcare and caring for sick family members. A similar rationale informed the strikes at the start of the coronavirus pandemic. As a few large firms retaliated against workers for wearing protective clothing or for unionizing at their workplaces, resentment quickly turned into action. Thousands of workers went on strike throughout March and April 2020 to enforce public health

guidelines in their workplace and keep essential services flowing safely—for the good of all of us. This example is one to follow as it explicitly embeds concerns about work time with a concern that transcends the workplace in collective bargaining agreements. We should do the same for concerns about technological innovation.

Robots for the Common Good

Concerns about "the future of work" are of a speculative nature: what will the future look like? A focus on the "future of workers" instead tries not to predict the future, but to restructure it. Robots won't liberate us from toil or save us time unless society has greater control over their use and technological innovation is explicitly geared toward social good. Automating jobs away is not the same thing as saving time or reducing work. The reason the full potential of automation can be best realized under actual democracy is that the gains to be had from replacing workers would be shared society-wide, whereas capitalism limits automation's applicability only to where it can make companies more profitable.

One way to do this might be to link robot-induced productivity to a "leisure dividend." During the midcentury decades, technology-driven productivity increased faster than today, but lower-wage workers reaped the gains from it even more than those at the top thanks to strong unions. In this way, we reduced overall inequality and helped truncate the workweek. In 2019, the AFL-CIO tepidly advocated a proposal for a four-day week at thirty-two hours, based largely on a leisure dividend from technology.

Workers could bargain for contracts that guarantee a wage increase and/or the option to receive productivity gains in paid time off. As firms become more automated and productive, and

therefore profitable, workers would have a solid justification to demand a greater portion of the surplus. But automation doesn't equal work reduction unless workers have a union or some other time-sharing mechanism. And productivity alone isn't the best bet if the goal is shorter hours. The overall sluggish growth of productivity throughout the seventies and eighties, alongside the intensified deployment of labor-saving technology, presented a curious paradox, which famously prompted economist Robert Solow to quip, "You can see the computer age everywhere but in the productivity statistics." This doesn't mean that productivity isn't important. If all of our productivity gains could be converted into time off instead of pay and consumption for the next twelve years, we could reduce our standard workweek by 20 percent. We would maintain, not improve, our current standard of living, but produce it quicker. This would be a welcome decline in hours, but the change is not significant enough.[14]

There are drawbacks to tying leisure to productivity increases, however. Some sectors of the economy are easier to make more productive than others. Producing more widgets per hour seems like a good thing. But making nursing or teaching more productive—by treating more patients or teaching more students per hour—has obvious risks. It would be unfair to reward only people in the most productive industries with more free time. This inequity could be mitigated through a federal policy to distribute productivity gains broadly, not just to those workers who happen to be in firms or sectors that are well positioned to increase efficiencies. The Alaska state government pays each of its citizens a dividend from its oil reserves, though not everyone, obviously, works in the petroleum industry. Alaskans consider it a public resource.

Using productivity gains to produce leisure can be part of a strategy to reduce our workload. But for it to be most effective, it must be tied to a larger political movement to transcend the limits of capitalist society. Demanding shorter hours should help us

decide when and how much we want to work, and also animate a vision of the future in which work plays a wholly different role in our lives. The logical conclusion of the demand for shorter hours is not zero work—it's control over labor time. For this reason, champions of automation usually have a lot in common with democratic socialists. Shorter hours is a bridge to larger political change, which is the real reason elites oppose it so vigorously. I'd like to elaborate this final point by way of a brief anecdote from my own life.

Time After Capitalism

In my early twenties I did a short stint as a longshoreman, unloading cargo containers on the Seattle shipyards. My designation as a "casual" required me to show up at the hiring hall hours before the shift, and then wait to see if my number was called. Seattle longshoreman had struck several times against the maritime companies to try to regain control over the hiring process and stop casuals from working on ships because we were nonunion, at-will employees. My very presence there was the product of a historical defeat, though by that time it was recognized as the industry's modus operandi. It was the only job I ever had that required a strength test, and to this day I can't believe I passed.

One day we had to recover some debris from the top of a shipping container that had been stacked on top of another one. It was miserable, with rain and cold wind, a quintessential Seattle morning. I volunteered to take the ladder up, eager to prove myself worthy to my coworkers, all of whom could probably tell that I was not cut out for this work and would not last long. (They were right.) As I approached the middle of the ladder I could feel it bow under my weight and sway in the wind. I paused for a split second.

"You got this!" one of the guys yelled from below.

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I made the first recovery pretty quickly, came back down, and immediately got back up to continue the job. I repeated this a number of times with Stakhanovite exertion, hoping to impress the guys holding the ladder. After a few ups and downs, someone grabbed my arm when I touched the ground. "Relax," he said. "Take it slow."

"I'll be careful," I said, assuming he was looking out for my safety.

"I mean we're paid for our time here," he explained, "not for the work." Others were watching our interaction and nodded approvingly.

In an instant I could tell I had simultaneously violated an important code of their workplace and embarrassed myself. Despite the burly builds that predominated, strength and physical prowess were hardly the main points of pride on the docks. There was a larger principle at play—not being a sucker. We were hired for eight hours, not to complete a set lump of work. If we worked too quickly, the company would give us more work to do without extra pay, or reduce our hours or threaten layoffs. If we worked too slowly, we would stand out and face reprimand. What fundamentally distinguished experienced workers from newbies like me was not only a physical capability or technical competency but an understanding of the entire work and management process. What many would have identified as a poor work ethic and classic foot-dragging was actually a strategy to retain a sense of dignity, to maintain safety, and exert a degree of control. I was not only endangering myself by working unnecessarily fast—I was a sucker.

The philosophy on the docks was not so much a work ethic as it was a time ethic. There was the coveted night shift, colloquially known as the hoot owl, where wages were such that it was commonly said you worked five but were paid for eight. There was even a movement within the rank and file to get rid of overtime on the basis that it was "scabbing on the unemployed," a solidaristic

impulse that harkened back to the heyday of communist labor radicalism. And there was a plodding rhythm to the workday, not a frenzied race.

About a decade later I found myself risking my safety again, this time in actual race mode, as a bicycle messenger. The job entailed the opposite kind of time-consciousness. More deliveries meant more money. And speedier riders received larger tips. There was therefore an obvious incentive to ride dangerously through Manhattan's treacherous streets, dodging taxis, buses, garbage trucks, and pedestrians. The work philosophy and point of pride was completely individualistic. The job rewarded those who worked the fastest, took the biggest risks, yet managed to survive the inevitable roadway mayhem. By and large, the modern workplace produces the second philosophy, a work ethic. But it is the first, an ethic of collective time-consciousness, that we should rediscover. The docks provide a good place to start.

In Tony Kushner's play *The Intelligent Homosexual's Guide to Capitalism and Socialism with a Key to the Scriptures*, an Italian American dockworker from Brooklyn, Gus, invites his adult children back to their home in Carroll Gardens to explain why he is going to kill himself. A committed communist until the end, Gus helped longshoremen win a guaranteed basic income, a struggle based on the real history of the East Coast dockworkers' union. But it wasn't enough; he's got the old-time religion. Gus has been increasingly plagued by the fact that the working class was unable to fulfill its historic mission as the handmaiden of proletarian revolution. To make matters worse, his children are in fealty to a system he spent his entire life trying to destroy. "What you call progress, I call the prison rebuilding itself," he tells his daughter, Empty, a labor lawyer. Toward the denouement, he delivers a righteous panegyric that captures his sense of accomplishment, even in defeat: "We did something that no one appreciates. It was working class guys, working class, with no politics, no training, facing down their own fears of being called

bums and featherbedders, and crooks! And insisting not only on a worker's right to a wage! But a right to a share in the wealth! A right to be alive! A right to control time itself!"

The demand to "control time itself" is a double entendre. The longshore unions were shockingly successful at winning vacation days, long weekends, overtime pay, and even a basic income that allowed laid-off union members to continue drawing a wage, thus avoiding poverty. In general, my experience of the time-consciousness of my coworkers on the docks bears out in the larger ethnographic studies of this workforce. But Gus's demand also refers to the destiny of humankind under worker control. Those on the left understand the working class to be the historical agent of change that will transcend capitalism. With their hands on the instruments of mass production and service provision, they are particularly well positioned to launch a revolution against business owners, a battle that will literally change the course of human history and the type of society in which we live. Gus feels it is the right—no, the *duty*—of his coworkers and others like them to fulfill this sacred mission. And when it appears that it will fail, when the forces arrayed against them are too strong, he simply cannot bear to watch the alternative ending.

The starring role in which workers have been cast in this historical drama—both in Kushner and Marx—has often perpetuated the great misunderstanding that socialists fetishize hard work. This is not the case. Marx argued, "The realm of freedom actually begins only where labor which is determined by necessity and mundane considerations ceases . . . the shortening of the working day is its basic prerequisite." Never one to shrink from a contradiction, Marx thought that workers should abolish work. Should we?

"Fuck work!" is often the clarion call today from the antiwork left. The phrase evokes a transgressive desire that derives its power from wishing to undermine an unjust social convention. Most of us can, even on good days at the office, empathize with

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"fuck work." But the stance would be greatly aided by an in-depth analysis of a mass movement struggling against work in general. The problem is that work abolition tends to glorify the possibility of free time yet sidestep the issue of controlling it. In that sense, being antiwork offers a kind of psychic release, an escape from the mess of social life, but it does not offer a vision beyond work. A push for shorter hours, by contrast, tries to build an alternative from the inside out. "Fuck work!" is a better bumper sticker than a clarion call. Shorter hours are something that workers can really fight for.

After seeing Kushner's production, I was finally able to digest the lesson the docks had to teach: time isn't money; it's power, control, and justice. And those with the power to control labor also control time. Throughout this book are stories of workers fighting back. They rebelled against Taylor's stopwatch. They resisted algorithmic domination. They fought in welfare offices and in the streets to end brutal workfare policies. They turned the tools of the gig economy against itself, and struck to control the uses of automation in the heart and soul of the old industrial factories. Sometimes they won, making small advances against all odds. Just as frequently they were blacklisted, beaten, dragged off in handcuffs, or threatened with unemployment. This generalized resistance, sometimes called class struggle, has shaped how and how much we work. Although a movement for shorter hours has been off labor's agenda for some time, there's plenty of evidence that workload is a major problem, and much to suggest that if workers controlled labor time, the world would be a better place to work and live. I'd like to propose a return to a movement for work reduction, the initial inspiration for trade unionism—a movement to control time itself.

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Struggles for control of labor time have a common ancestor in the politics of socialist unionism. The ceaseless conflict

between work time under capitalism and the time necessary to satisfy human needs provides an opening for an alternative politics of time. "A political strategy centered on the reduction of working hours may be the main lever with which we can shift the balance within society," wrote the philosopher André Gorz, who saw shorter hours as the basis for socialist revolution. "And this would mean the extinction of capitalism."

It was socialists within the rank and file of the trade union movement who originally fought for the ten-hour day, the eight-hour day, the weekend, and increased paid holidays. This was not won by tying free time to productivity but by fighting for the widespread redistribution of wealth. Exhausted workers wouldn't revolt, they thought. Historian Benjamin Kline Hunnicutt quotes the socialist Mary Marcy: "It is obvious that men or women working from ten to sixteen hours a day have little strength or leisure for study, or activity in revolutionary work. . . . The eight-hour day . . . would insure us leisure for study and recreation—for work in the Army of the Revolution."[15]

Today, socialism is back. At least forty-six democratic socialists won primary elections in 2018, and the membership of the Democratic Socialists of America went from seven thousand members in 2016 to almost sixty thousand in 2020. The socialist revival has come with a wave of support among young people for unions and greater economic democracy.

Record levels of inequality, economic backsliding among millennials, a not insignificant number of leftist memes, and the popularity of Bernie Sanders, the avuncular socialist from Vermont, have spurred a renewed interest in American socialism. A recent Gallup poll shows that 43 percent of Americans think "some form of socialism" would be a "good thing for the country." Moreover, our understanding of socialism is slowly becoming more sophisticated. A Gallup poll found that in 1949, 34 percent of respondents thought socialism meant "government ownership or control"—of businesses, utilities, and "everything." Only 12

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percent associated socialism with "equality." In September 2018, Gallup found that the percentage of respondents who associated socialism with equality had gone up to 23 percent, while only 17 percent said they viewed socialism as signifying government ownership or control. Additionally, 10 percent of respondents said they associated socialism with benefits like free social services and universal access to medicine—that same number was only 2 percent in 1949. And yet the primary fear of those opposed to socialism, according to a 2019 Pew survey, isn't Venezuela or bread lines or Stalinist labor camps—it's anxiety about a declining work ethic.[16]

Years ago I set up a weekly Google Alert for the phrase "work ethic." This service monitors the web for mentions of the phrase in English-language newspapers, magazines, and other formats, and then sends them as an email digest once per week. I have read thousands of these articles over the years. As individual stories, they are only moderately interesting. A significant percentage of the stories written in American newspapers and magazines that contain the phrase "work ethic" are about sports, as star athletes are routinely praised for their tireless practice-makes-perfect commitment. Others say the same about politicians, and a good portion are op-eds by elected officials or business leaders complaining about the pathetic state of the work ethic among today's youth.

Taken as a whole, however, they illuminate a severe anxiety about a fundamental precept of the American civil religion. The work ethic is a tent pole of national identity politics. Reading between the lines, across the media, or even just skimming the headlines, gives one the impression that we are a nation under attack. And socialists are often considered the front line of assault.

But the work ethic wouldn't necessarily diminish in a socialist America. After all, if workers had more control over production and services, and profited more from it, they'd likely invest far more interest in making sure it was done right. Capitalism wastes

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our energy and steals the fruits of our labor. Socialism would allow workers to plan out how much work needs to be done to satisfy not corporate greed, but human need. We need a new kind of work ethic that values our labor for how it can satisfy our needs most efficiently, not one that lionizes a commitment to overwork.

In a socialist system, the productive capacity of society is our commonweal. Such an organizational structure could provide workers with a degree of control to effect changes in work hours if they so choose. Today's employee-owned firms still need to compete in the capitalist market and could potentially be at a competitive disadvantage if they decide to lower hours but their peers do not. For this reason, expanding the density of worker ownership within certain sectors would be a strategy to offset the problem of competition, allowing firms to experiment with new work schedules as an industry rather than just as a company. Technically, small business owners already enjoy the autonomy to decide their hours, and most data suggests they work, on average, more than nonbusiness owners—sometimes twice as much. Simply having discretion over their time isn't enough to lower hours. That's because their autonomy is constrained by factors outside their discretion, such as competition and the costs of having employees. Our choices, in other words, are only as real as society permits. If we want individual autonomy, we need a large-scale change that promotes shorter hours as a collective good.[17]

Let's return to Marx's famous remark about free time and the need to work: "The realm of freedom actually begins only where labor which is determined by necessity and mundane considerations ceases." He further argues this realm is realizable only under conditions in which workers themselves can regulate the working day, "bringing it under their common control, instead of being ruled by it." Only beyond the "realm of necessity," during which time we must produce what we need to survive, can true freedom "blossom forth." He then seems to put a point on it, saying, "The shortening of the working-day is its basic prerequisite."

The logical conclusion is pretty seductive: human freedom means the progressive abolition of work to its barest necessity.

There's a definite virtue to that possibility. But the real power of Marx's formulation is not that it provides answers, but that it raises the questions that any truly democratic society must grapple with: What are the things we can't go without—food and shelter, or also education, art, and travel? What makes life worth living? Who decides? How can we spend our days? These are exactly the questions we can't answer in capitalist society because human needs and desires are subordinated to the dictates of the ownership class, for whom we must work when they want us to work. Marx's distinction between freedom and necessity is helpful, but it nevertheless poses a profound quandary: since we must labor to sustain life, how can we get free?

One final allegory from labor history is instructive. In 1912 a strike broke out in Lawrence, Massachusetts, a mill town where immigrant women were predominant. A local law had reduced the workweek from fifty-six to fifty-four hours for women, but unlike previous such reductions, it included a proportional pay cut. The subsequent strike soon grew to twenty thousand, uniting workers from forty nationalities, as workers in other mills walked out in solidarity. Strikers, who went without pay for nine frigid winter weeks, shipped their hungry children to sympathetic families out of state, partly to care for them, partly to humiliate the local government. It worked, and management eventually settled for a 20 percent pay increase. The event became known as the Bread and Roses Strike, because the workers' demands included more than just wage increases, but respect, dignity, and more free time. James Oppenheim's eponymous poem inspired the slogan:

Our lives shall not be sweated from birth until life closes;
Hearts starve as well as bodies; give us bread, but give us roses!

The point was that the *necessities* of life aren't just for survival under socialism, but for human flourishing in a broad sense—roses. Capitalism has managed to define "necessity" as the

requirements of a growing economy, rather than about human need. Socialist time-consciousness is different because it allows us to redefine the realm of necessity, rather than have it dictated to us. The need to work isn't actually the limit of freedom, but the condition that allows us to consider the society we must fight for to be free. The blurriness between the realm of necessity and freedom doesn't negate the goal of vastly reducing drudgery and unpleasant work, which is an absolute good. The blurriness does challenge the notion of freedom as merely the absence of work. Free time is the presence of collective control—the real autonomy to decide what we do and when.

Three-quarters of the way through Kushner's play, Gus's son, Pill, looks at his father. "In some way, history's just another kind of timetable, just, you know, another clock we have to punch, or break. Maybe the socialists felt free of that pressure in Marx and Lenin to force the revolutionary moment, to disrupt history?" He continued, "I've wanted to ask you: in 1973 when you guys won the Income, you must've felt . . . Free of the clock, for the first time in your lives . . . That must've felt amazing."

"It was. We had . . . so much time on our hands," Gus said. "To talk about stuff, to think over stuff. For a remarkable moment."

Withholding labor, as in a strike, is a form of power, but one that is exercised only intermittently. Real control of work time changes the quotidian experience of daily life, and that's why socialist politics offers such transformative potential. While reducing our workload to a minimum is indeed a goal, we must reorganize and control that which remains, exercising degrees of freedom within the realm of necessity. Doing so brings us far more control over our time, an essential condition of freedom in a real democracy.

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