

SLACKERS, SABOTAGE, AND SHORTER HOURS: CULTURAL POLITICS AND THE CLASS STRUGGLE

Today, as the capitalist class and its electoral representatives work to put the last nail in the coffin of organized labor via the Supreme Court case *Janus vs. AFSCME*, we are starting to see the beginnings of an uptick in strike activity around the country taking place outside the structures of official unionism. The most prominent recent example is the West Virginia teachers' strike, which made wage gains for all public employees in the state without a contract and without legal protection for their strike or for that matter, for collective bargaining.

All this in a state that is already post-Janus, that is, a "right to work state" in which public sector unions can't automatically collect dues via paycheck deductions and thus can't take their own institutional existence as a given. What the workers did have, though, was a tight labor market and a deep culture of labor movement solidarity. Inspired by their fellow workers, teachers in Arizona, Oklahoma, and Kentucky are now also engaging in unlawful walkouts to demand an end to austerity for them and for their students. Teachers have been accused by elites for years of not working hard enough, and yet the WV strike that inspired the rest did not invoke a moralism about work and sacrifice, but instead deployed the symbolism of coal miners and militant resistance.

Words like "wildfire" and "strike fever" are garnering New York Times headlines for the first time in decades. Labor analysts are reminded once again that historically and analytically, strikes and other forms of militant working class collective action *precede* the union as an institution. So in a moment of increased strike and direct action activity by workers around the conditions of production and, among young students, their own conditions of reproduction, just as the last remaining official legitimate structures of American unions are being dismantled and destroyed, it's more important than ever to consider the cultural politics of labor solidarity and horizontally infectious militancy that both fuel and transcend the official structures of unions and collective bargaining.

ARONOWITZ: CULTURE AND THE REFUSAL OF WORK

My work on the question of the labor movement vs. unions is fundamentally rooted in the work of labor and cultural theorist Stanley Aronowitz and two key analytical presuppositions: one, that within capitalism, there are always two opposing logics at work: the logic of capital and the counter logic of the working class, and two, that you can bust a union but it's not nearly so easy to bust a culture. Both of these points speak to the question of power: how the working class has gained power, how capital has responded to it, the role of unions in building and sadly in dissipating it, and what I'd like to focus on here—the relationship of culture to working class power, or, in other words, the cultural politics of the class struggle.

Aronowitz's analysis posits the working class as a self-constituting subject and not a passive object of the logic of capital. Deconstructing capital logic analysis and the idea that living labor is invariably completely subsumed under capital, he says in 1992's essay "Why Work?": "the logic of subsumption is no more than a tendency. Just as the law of the *tendency* of the rate of profit to fall has its counteracting causes, the theses of degradation of labor, industrialization of culture, and state integration must be seen as theoretical and historical generalizations that are fought day to day by workers, popular movements, and individuals. My thesis here is that the configuration of capital—including the social organization of labor, the application of machine technologies to the production process, the production of ideology and culture (and therefore consciousness)—cannot be deduced from social 'scientific' formulae according to which the entire social world appears to be a function of capital accumulation."

He goes on: "Instead, *I argue for the relative autonomy of labor, culture, and consciousness within the broad framework of Marxist theory of capitalist development.* That is, I take the aphorism that 'all history is the history of class struggle' seriously. If this is the case, then the doctrine of subsumption must not be taken as an empirical description; rather it is a powerful tendency that becomes an aspect of the mode of production, but is counteracted both by the historical cultures of the working class (which have their roots in precapitalist social formations as much as the culture that arises from the labor process itself), and by the formal and informal organization of the working class, which restrains the subsumption process and causes its retardation and deformation."¹

¹ Aronowitz, *The Politics of Identity: Class, Culture, Social Movements*. New York: Routledge, 1992, p 83

The stakes here are the meaning and uses of radical theory itself. As Aronowitz puts it: “Political economy ends when theory seeks to specify the conditions of transformation.”

CAPITAL LOGIC AND THE COUNTER LOGIC OF LABOR

The logic of capital is to subsume living labor and make it an inert and passive object among other objects of the process of producing surplus value. But an oppositional logic of life, of vitality, of spontaneity— what Stanley calls a counter logic of “the erotic, play, and the constituting subject”— always exists, on its own terms. It always subverts and escapes the imperatives of accumulation. Stanley puts it this way: “The logic of labor ... is to seek every opportunity to transform work into play, or more precisely, *to make as large a portion of working time unproductive from capital’s point of view*. The insertion of the erotic into working life violates the cultural norms of capital, which historically demanded the strict separation of eros and civilization...”²

Because the two classes are antagonistic subjects that face each other at the point of production and reproduction with mutually contradictory interests— one wants to work less and live more, the other pushes for every speck of the lifeworld to become nothing more than an inert factor in production— then reality in capitalism is shaped by the indeterminate outcomes of their struggle. Indeterminacy is a key concept here, and its deployment shows clearly the postmodern moment in this kind of analysis: “In order to...allow for the undecidability of historical development, to *show its jagged side*, we must have another starting point— namely, the notion that the working class is self-constituting as much as it is constituted by capital... we must investigate the specific praxis of the working class, assuming that the praxis of capital is accumulation through exploitation.”³

Of course, a seminal description and analysis of this refusal is in Aronowitz’s *False Promises*, first in the “Unsilent Fifties” chapter and most famously in the chapter on the 1973 wildcat strike at GM’s Lordstown, Ohio plant.

In Lordstown, the counter logic of labor took center stage, not just in the plant but in elite panic the nation over. Sadly, in a story reminiscent of

² Aronowitz, *The Crisis in Historical Materialism: Class, Politics, and Culture in Marxist Theory*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981, p 121

³ *Ibid* p. 173

Dan Georgakas's work on the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement, the union's bad cultural politics, their disavowal of the countercultural logic of the workers themselves, set them up for failure. (Another similarity is the way that the racialized workers— blacks in Detroit, hillbillies in Ohio— were both the most militant and the most discriminated against.) And in both cases, instead of leveraging the in-plant radicalism to build power, the union focused on pay and job security rather than the issues of unbearable tedium, authoritarianism, and speedup that the majority of young unskilled members, heavily influenced by the counterculture, were most concerned about. Thus, it frequently “bargained away these workplace issues to retain its ability to deliver on economic benefits and job security.”

Postwar labor peace had depended on the cooperation of industrial unions in disciplining anti work rebellions and gaining higher wages but also ensuring stability and a predictable investment climate. The thing is, workers, as we learn in the mighty *False Promises*, rejected that deal. The unions kept chasing it.

With workers willing to exercise power at the point of production, union stabilization actually benefited capital: “unionization, while raising the nominal wage, helped capital to discipline the working class by insisting that its logic predominate over the workers’ logic of freedom and unwork.” Meanwhile, the company’s strategy was to get militant employees to quit rather than foment job actions, to provoke strikes “to cool things off rather than risk in-plant strikes which disrupt production” and to put an end to the unauthorized slowdowns and sabotage that were plaguing GMAD’s push to produce 100 cars per hour (up from 55).

One worker insightfully described a strike this way: “everybody gets drunk and blows off a lot of steam. It would be better to sit down on the job and make them pay our wages. Last night we maintenance welders were given a direct order to repair an electric motor. We refused...we didn’t wildcat because we knew the company wouldn’t talk to us if we were on the outside. We simply sat down by the machines. In a few minutes...they took back their direct order for us to do electricians’ work.”⁵

Sabotage, or striking on the job: this is how unskilled workers exert power and make effective demands. But the contract/service union model

⁴ Ibid p. 177

⁵ Aronowitz, *False Promises: The Shaping of American Working Class Consciousness*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1992 (1973), p 48

discourages this spontaneous exercise of leverage, channeling discontent into grievances (which the company could always wait out and then trade for a reinstatement of the inevitable drunk or belligerent worker). Most important, spontaneous resistance to the speedup is restricted by the very existence of the union contract. A contract assumes a stable subject identity, the responsible agent who is willing to make promises about the future via a legitimate representative. Stanley's critique of all this— discipline, responsibility, representation— and his focus on power, resonated with his thinking through of the insights of poststructuralism in terms of Marxism as well as with his own experience as an industrial worker and organizer.

The counterculture he describes threw capital into crisis, which Stanley says was “a result of an *oppositional cultural logic* of the working class and the middle strata, the movements of women and youth that refuse the authoritarian logic of capital accumulation.”⁶

This refusal that panicked elites called the “Lordstown syndrome” and the “crisis in the work ethic” was happening all over a seemingly affluent society— one in which high wages were supposed to have purchased employers a measure of labor peace. We are still living in the wake of capital's vicious counterattack on the sixties and early seventies era countercultural refusal of work discipline, when the American working class broke the wages-for-productivity deal (itself an attempt to manage the mass uprising unleashed by Depression-era austerity) and pushed up wage rates and transfer payments while simultaneously refusing work discipline on the assembly line, on campus, and, among women, in the home. Capital's counterattack was effective— wages are down, profits are up. The working class has been severely weakened.

Nowhere was this clearer than in a 2010 New York Times article about the Lordstown plant, which highlighted the way in which the plant's workers— one quarter of the number working there in 1972— no longer have any problem making concessions and who “said it was their responsibility to accept sacrifices the company needed them to make.” Unlike their predecessors, who filed nearly 15,000 grievances per year, picketed their local union hall, walked off the job, slowed down on the job, and sent intentionally damaged Chevy Vegas off the line, today's Lordstown workers, claims the article, are just so glad to have a job that 84% of the local had recently voted

⁶ *Crisis in Historical Materialism*, p. 174

yes to hundreds of millions of dollars in concessions, to outsourcing, and to a two tier wage system in which incoming workers earn half what the workers already at the plant make. The militant culture of UAW Local 1112 had, by 2010, been thoroughly defanged.⁷

And although this defeat of a militant culture was wrought through outsourcing, union busting, austerity oriented monetary policy, and the desperation among workers it was all intended to produce, culture is not an epiphenomenon of “real” capitalist dynamics but is absolutely central to it. Simply put, without the refusal of work, of subsumption, of the logic of accumulation, there is no class struggle. Working class resistance to work— a cultural resistance— forces capital to respond, always. The post 1973 response to midcentury worker militance has been brutal. But if you take these ideas seriously, the game is far from over.

The counter logic of labor inevitably persists, visible every day in the form of “subterfuge” and the incessant refusal to work, or, in Aronowitz’s formulation, *with rhythms of labor that remain oppositional to accumulation*. In this regard things like coffee breaks and the kind of behavior that management journals incessantly bellyache over— porn, phones, social media, etc.— become important indices of on the job slowdowns. The perspective described here invites us to see how central these activities are to the cultural politics of a radical strategy for labor. The study of these subterranean strategies, whereby workers resist being subsumed, is one of the richest and potentially most productive areas of the cultural studies of labor. It should be studied far more, though: in Stanley’s words, “the study of the counter logics to capital is long overdue.”⁸

The work of Harry Cleaver is especially powerful on the question of how these subterranean anti-work currents swirl below the surface, available for mobilization. He contends that ocean waves are the most apt metaphor for the signs of cultural resistance afoot within the now-globalized and increasingly connected working class (which for him includes both the waged and the unwaged). He elaborates: “Currents are masses in motion...Everything is in motion, nothing is stable, deterritorialization is virtually constant, there is no “safe haven”, no “secure foundation” other than familiarity with the ever rushing, ever changing flow. Yet nomadic whales sing and dolphins play as they traverse thousands of miles of ocean. All of these characteristics are evocative of the behavior of those forces in opposition to capitalism... They

⁷ “A Once-Defiant UAW Local Now Focuses on GM’s Success,” NYT, Jan 5, 2010.

⁸ Aronowitz, Stanley. *The Crisis in Historical Materialism*. Palgrave Macmillan. London, 1990, p. 248.

are fluid, often changing and only momentarily forming those solidified moments we call “organizations” ...But, it is worth remembering that oppositional movements on the surface of society are like the surface currents of the oceans—they only involve a small percentage of the total mass. Most currents of opposition run deep, below surface appearances ... when such deep currents surface in surprising, massive upwellings of social struggle they can nourish wider conflict and change the world... In every case the biggest mystery and the hardest thing to explain have been what was going on in those invisible, deep, but rich currents of struggle that made possible and led to their sudden, explosive and world changing upwelling. Thus the importance of the various kinds of study that have sought to understand these largely invisible forces, e.g., analyses of everyday life ... [and] of certain aspects of popular culture.”⁹

Robin D. G. Kelley’s work is foremost among those historians who do study the counter logics not always visible on the surface. *Race Rebels*,¹⁰ his study of everyday insubordination among African-Americans, rejects “the tendency to dichotomize people’s lives, to assume that clear-cut ‘political’ motivations exist separately from issues of economic well-being, safety, pleasure, cultural expression, sexuality, freedom of mobility, and other facets of everyday life.”¹¹ Instead, he traces the everyday life politics in which workers refuse to be subordinated to the imperatives of production. In “Shiftless of the World, Unite!” Kelley recounts his own experiences working at McDonalds, where he and his young co-workers employed countless creative, below-the-radar strategies to take back time from the boss—to transform alienated labor-time into free time and to transform their bodies from interchangeable instruments of labor to personally stylized instruments of pleasure. This has been a prominent feature of African-American strategies of negotiating exploitative, racist workplaces, says Kelley, and to deny its political significance is to miss the true extent of black working-class resistance.

Similarly, in his attempt to solve “The Riddle of the Zoot,” Kelley argues that Malcolm X’s youthful “participation in the underground subculture of black working-class youth during the war was not a detour on the road to political consciousness [as Malcolm interpreted it himself] but rather an essential

⁹ Harry Cleaver, “Deep Currents Rising: Notes on the Global Threat to Capitalism,” in *Subverting the Present, Imagining the Future: Insurrection, Movement, Commons* (New York: Autonomedia, 2007)

¹⁰ Kelley, Robin D.G., *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class*, New York: The Free Press, 1994.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

element of his radicalization.¹² For Kelley, the language and culture of zoot-suited, fast-talking (as opposed to the slow-talking Sambo stereotype) hustlers “represented a subversive refusal to be subservient.”¹³ The subculture of zoot suits, hep cat slang, and hustling for easy money, privileged pleasure over work, collectively dodged the wartime draft, challenged the sanctity of private property, and managed to carve out space for an alternative to alienated labor in a racist system. Malcolm and his friends refused work from capital and insisted on constituting time on their own terms. And significantly, although Malcolm himself came to understand his involvement with the hipster criminal subculture as nothing more than “ignorance,” the police, the white press, and white soldiers saw the black youngsters, in their lack of patriotism and their disinterest in “honest” work, as an explicit menace.

SHORTER HOURS— TECHNOLOGY AND LABOR SUPPLY

This kind of radical cultural analysis is especially important to consider today as the left currently eats itself alive in debates about class and labor vs. culture and identity. These debates have their roots in some ways in the new left critique of Marxism, especially of what was seen as its authoritarian iterations, but even more in the debates around postmodernism and identity politics that emerged in the 1980s. Aronowitz was particularly well suited to think through what the deconstruction of Enlightenment metanarratives meant in terms of Marxism. And a postmodern critique of representation and identity certainly resonated with his own understanding of the false promises of those union leaders who would “represent” the workers by being “responsible” subjects— signing contracts and then being responsible for enforcing the discipline enshrined in them.

As vibrant as much of the young left is today, sometimes the level of thinking about culture and class feels like it could use some of the sophistication of Aronowitz, Cleaver, and Kelley. On one side of today’s race/class or culture/class debate, there is an almost absurd insistence on some kind of hypostatized cultural authenticity as the locus of politics, on the other a correct indictment of this position as a bourgeois class politics but a correction that too often veers into oversimplified notions of base and superstructure.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 163.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 166.

Still, in terms of the politics of work, good signs abound. The idea of a post work society is gaining steam. The critique of overwork is becoming a central part of contemporary progressive and left discourse, especially among the young. Ideas like the guaranteed annual income and a reduction of work hours, are becoming practically mainstream. People are talking about technology replacing human labor—a problematic that Aronowitz and Bill DiFazio laid out twenty five years ago in *The Jobless Future*— and debating what this means for labor under capitalism, left strategy, and human liberation.

But here's the problem. The discussion of these issues is too often oddly voluntarist in a way that Aronowitz and DiFazio's work was not. The idea among too many contemporary left writers (and also among mainstream liberals who are interested in the potentially liberating aspects of technology) seems to be that if we just all wanted it enough we could reduce the hours of work, or in another iteration, that once socialism (or the happy worker cooperative or whatever the dream is) happens, the machines will do the work without the attendant unemployment or desperation that accompanies the technological displacement of labor today. The thing is, none of this constitutes an actual theory of how wages— either private or social— rise, or how working hours are reduced, or especially, of how and why technological innovation in production happens.

This is a question not just of theory but also of strategy. And the strategy that Aronowitz consistently advocates, over both social democracy and workers control, is the demand for shorter hours of labor. For one thing, the only way hours of labor have ever been reduced was via the shorter hours movement. And of course, labor's ability to make effective demands on capital— about wages, hours, safety, or anything else— is a function of its power. So it's useless to talk about reducing work hours without talking about working class power. The fundamental reality is that fueled by the countercultural refusal of work, the push to work less— when made both informally and formally— is precisely what makes for less work.

The basic dynamic proceeds thus: a reduction in the hours of labor reduces its overall supply relative to capitalist demand, and does so in a solidaristic or wall to wall way rather than in an exclusionary and thus both discriminatory and unsustainable way (as in the old craft union model of raising wages via restricting labor supply). In doing this, the refusal of work drives up wages, through the rise in the price of the commodity, labor, that is scarce relative to demand for it. The tight labor market and attendant high wages push capital to innovate and invest in labor-displacing technology: in Aronowitz's words,

“capital tries to offset labor militancy or the results of labor shortages under the intensive regime by technological change.”

Only when workers resist managerial imperatives of efficiency and refuse work are employers incentivized to automate. And as Stanley and Jonathan Cutler argue in the introduction to the collection *Post-Work*, the labor movement could then push for further reductions in the work day, week, year, or lifetime, since the key driver of worker leverage is just that supply be kept low relative to demand, whatever its level. A tight labor market gives workers leverage vis a vis employers, and it's always relative. We too often forget that the labor movement itself can tighten this market through a restriction of labor supply.

WOBLIES: THE ORIGINAL SLACKERS

In order for shorter hours to become the central demand of the labor movement once again, the jobs fetish or what C. Wright Mills calls the labor metaphysic, must be abandoned in favor of a countercultural sensibility that privileges life over work. A pro-work culture simply cannot produce an anti-work movement. In fact, Aronowitz says that we need to get back to the labor movement models of the Knights of Labor and the IWW, organizations that both explicitly pushed for less work and shorter hours using a solidaristic and decentralized strategy.

The Knights, which in some ways prefigured the IWW, and which were rooted in older Irish organizations, operated on the basis of side by side solidarity: the Knights originated the idea that “An Injury to One is an Injury to All”. The IWW grew from and radicalized this sensibility and thus made the sympathetic strike a central strategic logic.

This is the actual meaning of “One Big Union”— the IWW idea was never that all workers would be represented by a singular union apparatus. Instead, originating also from what was called Larkinism in Ireland and the UK and the “new unionism” it inspired, One Big Union referred to the sympathetic strike— the spread of spontaneous shutdowns, slowdowns, and sabotage, like wildfire, from one shop to another. According to Irish organizer Jim Larkin’s “doctrine of tainted goods,” workers organized in solidarity would not touch, especially on the docks, cargo that was coming from a struck shop or port, until the workers there won their demands.

Culture was the fuel for this strategy: a solidaristic, militant, anti-Protestant work ethic that made its way into the Wobblies through Larkinism on the docks and through the Irish in the anthracite coal mines of eastern Pennsylvania and their secret society, the Mollie Maguires, as well as working class supporters of the late 19th century Land League, and that accompanied these immigrants and their children to the silver and copper mines of Montana and Colorado and the militant Western Federation of Miners that they formed there. The WFM was, of course, the most significant root of the Industrial Workers of the World and especially of its uncompromising deployment of the tactics of direct action and sabotage and its refusal to sign contracts or engage in electoral political struggles.

The refusal to sign contracts was key: instead of the union taking on a unified subject identity able to represent, to sign, and ultimately to enforce the discipline of the contract, Wobblies refused to agree to ever give up the potential power to strike or slow down at the busy times or over spontaneous shop floor issues. The organization embraced the countercultural refusal of work and explicitly linked it to the ability of workers to control the supply of labor to the market and thus gain both power and freedom.

Instead, the IWW used sabotage, or the “collective withdrawal of industrial efficiency,” as a main tactic, and in exhortatory pamphlets Wobbly intellectuals encouraged workers to “slacken up” their efforts on the job as a means to gain leverage with respect to employers. IWW organizer Big Bill Haywood put it this way: “when we strike now, we strike with hands in our pockets.” This slow down— also known as striking on the job— and the transvaluation of Protestant work values that fuels it, is, I argue, the essence of the American version of syndicalism— a libertarian, anti-statist logic of direct action at the point of production that Howard Kimeldorf demonstrates, in *Battling for American Labor*, has been enduringly popular among American workers, no matter what union they do or do not join.

AN ANTIWORK CULTURE

Wobblies were the first Americans to be called “slackers” and were relentlessly repressed as such. In fact, the Palmer Raids were also known at the time as the “slacker raids”— a series of WWI-era searches, arrests, mass trials, and convictions led by the organization that would become the FBI (and its special agent in charge, J. Edgar Hoover)— and targeted the IWW explicitly. This was the moment that the term “slacker” came into common parlance,

as a word for a draft dodger and on-the-job saboteur. From the start, the refusal of work has been linked explicitly with a threat to the nation state. The Wobblies refused both to fight in what they saw as a war to save a brutal exploitative British empire (they were mostly Irish, after all) as well as to submit to capitalist work-discipline.

Refusing to internalize bourgeois ideology about nation, work, and life, they collectively lived an alternative set of social relations centered around common public spaces and common pool resources. Disparaged in the popular press as meaning “I Won’t Work” and “I Want Whiskey,” the IWW was the only major American union consistently devoted to an anti-productivist logic, one that roundly rejected capitalist work and the ideology that sees it as a social or moral good.

According to historian Franklin Rosemont:

“In bright contrast to the AFL unions, which were glad to settle for “a Fair Day’s Wage for a Fair Day’s Work,” Wobblies developed a critique not only of the work ethic but also of work itself...Wobblies knew too much about work to be ‘workerist.’ Their constant emphasis on shortening the hours of labor; their defense of “The Right to Be Lazy” (the title of a popular pamphlet by Marx’s son-in-law, Paul Lafargue) and even their advocacy of “sabotage,” in the original sense of the word— signifying slowdowns on the job and other forms of workplace malingering— suffice to distinguish them from the middle-class Socialist and Communist intellectuals who so often glorified the misery known as work.”¹⁴

And they made the case in song, in art, in soapbox standup comedy. The IWW produced some of the most memorable and influential pieces of radical American culture: from the song, Hallelujah I’m a Bum to the sabo-tabby, wise to the politics of labor supply, exhorting workers to “slow down, the job you save may be your own,” to the Mr. Blockhead cartoons mocking squares who internalize capitalist ideology, the Wobblies, especially the hobo migrant workers in the west, crafted an anti-work, anti-responsibility, pro-freedom ethic out of the folk culture and resistance of workers themselves. Among the Wobblies and those inspired by them, the counter logic was not just in effect but conscious and visible.

¹⁴ Rosemont, Franklin. *Joe Hill: the IWW and the Making of a Revolutionary Working Class Counterculture*. New York: PM Press, 2003.

The Wobblies' slacker orientation was explicitly a strategy to restrict labor supply, as laid out in pamphlets and speeches on sabotage written by Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, Big Bill Haywood, Frederick Sumner Boyd, and other key figures, but for its proponents, freedom was also an end worth pursuing in itself. Consider that *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*, one of the most important odes in the US to the freedom from work and from the scarcity that perpetuates it, was first popularized by hobo, IWW organizer, and friend of Joe Hill "Haywire Mac," aka Harry McClintock. (McClintock claimed to have written the song but it's more likely that he adapted it from a song that had already been around— many IWW songs were either adaptations of old Irish songs or sabotaged versions of the patriotic songs sung by Salvation Army bands sent to "hobohemian" areas to drown out militant soapbox speakers.) McClintock, who also popularized "Hallelujah I'm a Bum," had worked freight ships going to and from Hawaii, as had iconic Wobbly songwriter Joe Hill, and McClintock's oft-told story of "full-time beachcombing" in a shack on the beach at Hilo with Hill, true or not, links the IWW hobo figure in yet another way to the tradition of slacking in American life, which had as one of its foundations the surfer and beachcomber, inspired and instituted by the early 20th century "beachboys"— ukulele-playing surfers— in Hawaii.

In the *Candy Mountain* song's lyrics we hear the IWW dream/celebration of the working-class refusal of work under capitalism:

In the Big Rock Candy Mountains,
The jails are made of tin.
And you can walk right out again,
As soon as you are in.
There ain't no short-handled shovels,
No axes, saws nor picks,
I'm bound to stay
Where you sleep all day,
Where they hung the jerk
That invented work
In the Big Rock Candy Mountains.

Abundance free of the repressions of work and the repressive state is the dream (not to mention a little revenge on "the jerk who invented work.") The IWW and its fellow travelers refused the notion that the interests of capital and labor are one and the same. In fact, the preamble to the IWW constitution begins with the statement that the employing class and the working class have nothing in common. What the IWW hobo and the slacker ethos adds to this basic antagonistic Marxist image is the rich, living substance of the

opposition— where capital demands the asceticism of work and more work, the working class insists on the hedonism of play and free abundance.

Even more explicit in articulating the dream of free stuff without work or responsibility is McClintock's "Hallelujah I'm a Bum":

Rejoice and be glad for the Springtime has come
We can throw down our shovels and go on the bum
Hallelujah, I'm a bum, Hallelujah, bum again
Hallelujah, give us a handout to revive us again

I don't like work and work don't like me
And that is the reason I am so hungry
Hallelujah, I'm a bum, Hallelujah, bum again
Hallelujah, give us a handout to revive us again

The welfare state has been under attack for decades, seemingly because Americans don't embrace this fantasy much anymore— the "give us a handout" line hasn't been very popular lately. But if we look more closely, we'll see that the attack on handouts in the form of welfare payments may just be motivated precisely by the "bum" dream to which McClintock and his comrades shamelessly and joyfully give a voice. Because although the work ethic is what tends to get articulated on the surface of the American anti-welfare discourse, the subterranean tendency is something else entirely.

In fact, the resentment against welfare payments can be seen as a *displacement* of a widespread aversion to work. If Americans really did love work and find their true place in the world in it, they would not be so unwilling to allow someone else's imagined leisure to be paid for out of their own paycheck. The wage itself indicates that work is a sacrifice; the unwillingness of so many Americans to give up some of those increasingly hard-earned wages to support the non work of someone else (especially as that someone else is frequently framed as a racialized Other) is evidence not of a strong work ethic but of precisely its opposite. The Big Rock Candy Mountain— abundance without toil— is the dream. But for most Americans, if they can't have it, they don't want their work to pay for someone else having it. But the Wobbly dream of One Big Union advocated free abundance for everyone in The Big Rock Candy Mountains— and the IWW used the solidaristic, antiwork, slacker tactic that could actually make it real.

Sadly, the IWW's prominent place in the American labor movement didn't survive the repression that, for all intents and purposes, put an end to it.

(Ultimately, it was the fact that organizers like Jim Larkin and others were actually sabotaging the Allied war effort and that Irish workers were centered in key wartime industries— the wave of strikes around WWI were called “munitions strikes”— that brought on the full destructive power of the newly imperial American state upon the IWW.)

Still, the IWW was, it is widely acknowledged within labor history and on the American left, the most militant, creative, and influential labor movement formation of the twentieth century— shaping not only the tactics of the CIO period of sit-down strikes and industrial organization, the “Cultural Front” of the American Communist Party, but also the post-WWII “on the road” youth counterculture, and the radicalism of student groups like SDS and the editors of *Radical America*. And the demand for shorter hours remained central to rank-and-file worker concerns throughout the twentieth century, even after it was roundly abandoned by the leadership of the American labor movement once the 40-hour week was won.

Abandoned despite the fact that according to David Roediger and Philip Foner’s *Our Own Time*, the seminal study of the movement for shorter hours within American labor, “the length of the workday has historically been the central issue raised by the American labor movement during its most dynamic periods of organization.” The authors demonstrate the way in which the shorter hours demand, both as a means to share the work during times of high unemployment and as a means to the enjoyable life that capitalist “progress” can technically make possible with a minimum of toil, has been the most inspirational that the labor movement has ever put forth.

Roediger and Foner assert that the shorter hours demand has been the most *solidaristic* demand ever put forth by labor as well: “Reduction of hours became an explosive demand partly because of its unique capacity to unify workers across the lines of craft, race, sex, skill, age, and ethnicity. Attempts by the employing classes to divide labor could be implemented with relative ease where wage rates were concerned...With regard to hours, the situation was different...thus the shorter working day was an issue that could mitigate, though not completely overcome, the deep racial and ethnic divisions that complicated class organization in the United States.” This is so important because the divide and conquer strategy of capital vis a vis the working class— between men and women, black and white, immigrant and native-born, waged and unwaged— is a key means for employers to keep wages and worker power to a minimum.

Reduction of working hours is the key to working class power. And countercultural worker militance, among Wobblies, hippies, and others, shows us that in the struggle to reduce hours and thus raise wages, a liberatory culture is labor's strongest and most resilient weapon. It inspires collective action and it is inherently solidaristic. Anti-work counterculture has fueled the most militant moments of the American labor movement, and the most influential, because it speaks to what is truly essential in the class struggle. In Stanley's words: "the fundamental human struggle is over time— to reduce the amount of necessary labor required for the reproduction of life and to obtain thereby freedom from alienated labor, the use of which is a measure of individual and collective freedom. A *radical cultural politics* ruptures the traditional liberal and Marxist orientations— both of which, in this respect, are heirs to the Judeo-Christian doctrine according to which social personality and socially sanctioned normative behavior privilege work."¹⁵

These radical cultural politics live on, even as we've all been relentlessly sped up over the past decades, in the subterranean desires and practices of the American worker. They remain available to be mobilized by a labor movement reinvigorated with its own best, most solidaristic, most militant, and most life-affirming history.

¹⁵ *False Promises*, xi