ALL WORK AND NO PLAY...

Capitalist society incorporates everything that opposes it. Or tries to. It knows only one rule, one commandment: work. Whether it is our ‘jobs’ or our ‘relationships,’ our escape from and our return to the workaday world – at each turn we work like never before. We work at not working and work longer and more intensely.

Forty years ago amidst the terrific expansion of production in the west, the new mass consumer society promised a world of less work and more fun. New technologies such as the burgeoning electronics and computer industries were trumpeted as the basis for a leisurely future in which the humdrum and alienating aspects of work would be eliminated or automated. Paradoxically the so-called ‘personal computer revolution’ not only intensified the world of work, it created new types of work. Leisure as a sociological category was invented and invested by capitalist work. More and more of the rhythms of life were harnessed to the drive for profit and the expansion and intensification of work. In a world that capitalist ideologues interpret as meaningless and nihilistic, work was and is sold as the only meaningful redoubt in an otherwise chaotic and haphazard existence.

Today, amidst the superabundance of mass consumption and runaway environmental destruction, amidst the deadly struggle between neo-liberal capitalist fundamentalism and Islamic capitalist fundamentalism, the world’s self styled ‘leaders’ argue that we need more work. Indeed they say we need to be more flexible toward this fictitious ‘need.’ In regards to this there is no fundamental disagreement amongst them, be they Liberal, Labour, business or union bosses. At most they quibble over the details, and to what extent the every present demands of capitalism for more work should be structured and delivered.

Howard, Blair and Bush say that ‘our way of life’ is threatened. And yet this way of life continues to be just outside our reach and control, forever on the horizon after this bit of anti-terror legislation, and that bit of industrial relations ‘reform’ is pushed through. The real terrorists don’t so much live amongst us, as parade across television screens speaking of a ‘way of life’ they rarely share with the working population.

If we wait for the unions to lead a real struggle against the changes to Industrial Relations we will wait in vain. They seem content with June’s round of demonstrations and TV ads. These ads inevitably sell the union structure as the necessary intermediary in an already established relation: one where workers work and have
little or no control over their daily lives. This story is merely a variation on that other tale of ‘job flexibility’ and the apparent ease of individuals negotiating alone with representatives of management.

Union bosses are reluctant to organise action by workers that might go beyond the unions’ stage-managed opposition. On the 19th of August 1996 some real opposition took place when thousands of workers, students and indigenous people tried to transform a boring ACTU rally into an assault on the Howard government’s first budget. While these people decided to trust in their own power and smash their way into Parliament House, the union bosses were quick to condemn this autonomous action, even before the shrill condemnations from Howard, Beazley and their political gangs came rolling down off Capitol Hill.

In order to oppose these reforms we should not look to the union bosses to initiate or lead such a struggle. Not only have they ably demonstrated that they are not interested in any activity that comes dangerously close to being effective, we have demonstrated that we can act without their dead hand.

Every attack that capitalism carries out against us is also an opportunity – an opportunity to generate crises that both jam the machinery of control and provide us the opportunity to work together to create different ways of living. As much as we oppose the current changes to industrial relations and welfare as attempts to make us work harder and longer for less, we do not find much around us worth defending. The choice is not one between a steady job and casual labour, between award or contract but one between the drudgery and boredom of wage-slavery and an attempt to invent new ways of co-operating that are joyful and fulfilling. In our moments of resistance this is what we start to do. Working with each other to make a picket, occupy an office, make a poster, go on strike – we are already creating new links of creativity and production. These links are ones that are characterised by free participation in which as individuals and as a group we begin to take control of our lives. The challenge is to keep on reclaiming more and more of the everyday that is currently occupied by work; to keep on disrupting the daily order of work and consumption and generate more and more space where we can meet our needs and desires.

A new world is already here if we grasp it!

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Join the picket of Liberal Senator Gary Humphries’ office
Bunda St Civic (between the Canberra Centre entrance and The Holy Grail), Thursday 18th of August 12:00pm