How Work Is Killing Us

written by Steve Early | September 14, 2021

A Review of *Worked Over: How Round-The-Clock Work is Killing the American Dream* by Jamie K. McCallum (Basic Books, 2021); *Work Won't Love You Back: How Devotion to Our Jobs Keeps Us Exploited, Exhausted, and Alone*, by Sarah Jaffe (Bold Type Books, 2021) and *Dirty Work: Essential Jobs and The Hidden Toll of Inequality in America* by Eyal Press (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2021)

In 2020-21, Covid-19 threw millions of people out of work, dispatched the more privileged among us to white collar "home offices," and made life on the job a lot more dangerous and difficult for those suddenly deemed "essential" as health care workers, retail clerks, or meat packers. The resulting disruption of existing workplace arrangements—from commuting patterns to face-to-face meetings and on-site supervision—has been the subject of endless newspaper commentary and social media discussion, as pandemic conditions persist or abate. Thanks to the Delta variant, we're now prisoners of a wide-ranging debate about workplace mandates related to Covid-19 testing, mask-wearing, or, better yet, vaccination.

In the midst of this national uproar about new job hazards and workplace rules, three authors—Jamie McCallum, Sarah Jaffe, and Eyal Press– have published important books that examine work and its discontents, in pre-pandemic form. The questions they raise and arguments they make about job satisfaction, inadequate compensation, long hours, and morally injurious employment are a good starting point for post-Covid campaigning for fundamental changes in how work is organized, directed, and externally regulated.

In *Worked Over: How Round-The-Clock Work is Killing the American Dream,* Middlebury College sociology professor Jamie McCallum takes aim at "over-work." McCallum began writing about this problem as an attempt to reconcile an "intense personal work ethic" with his conviction that "we need a mass movement to win greater collective control over work time" and a return to labor's historic fight for shorter hours. As he notes, there has been much ground lost since millions of workers finally won the 40-hour week and related over-time pay requirements, during the union upsurge of the 1930s. "From 1975 to 2016, the hours of all wage and salary workers increased by 13 percent, the equivalent to about five extra weeks of work per year." Today, McCallum writes, "many Americans work close to forty-seven hours per week yet earn far less than they did decades ago. Among full-time workers, nearly 40 percent report working fifty hours per week or more, and about 18 percent say they work sixty hours or more."

Among advanced capitalist nations, the U.S. is now an outlier. "Typically, the richer a country, the less time its citizens spend working." But, by 2018, Americans were working an average of 1,786 hours per year, far more than in any peer nation. Adding insult to injury, we have no minimum federal statutory requirements for paid holidays and vacations, sick days, and paid maternity leave. "More than one hundred countries have a legally mandated maximum length of the workweek—but not the United States."

The timing of McCallum's critique—in a book published mid-pandemic—was potentially a bit awkward. How do you rally workers against longer hours and lack of paid time off, when millions of people suddenly have no jobs at all and much uncertainty about ever being called back? In the author's view, employment insecurity created by the pandemic actually highlighted how little control most Americans have over their work lives, even under normal conditions. "According to the Economic Policy Institute, only 15 percent say they are 'free to decide' their work schedule." The societal result is "mental and physical stress, uneven income, emotional turmoil, family conflicts, gender inequity, ecological damage, and personal unhappiness."

In *Work Won't Love You Back,* Sarah Jaffe challenges what she believes to be the mistaken but widespread notion that work is the key to happiness. According to the author, a leading labor journalist, millions of people end up exploited, exhausted, and alone when they embrace what she calls the "labor of love" myth. They're told, in "a thousand inspirational social media posts" that, if you do what you love, you'll never work a day in your life. In reality, she argues, "we work longer hours than ever, and we're expected to be available even when we're technically off the clock…We're burned out, over-worked, under-paid, and have no work-life balance (or just no life)."

A Culture of Sacrifice

Like McCallum, who profiles frazzled gig workers and order pickers at Amazon, Jaffe finds many revealing examples of workers whose dedication to job or career comes with a high personal price. *Work Won't Love You Back* explores the workplace world of non-profits, the art and tech industries, "intern nation," and even professional sports. In the non-profit sector, Jaffe discovers that many idealists "enter the field hoping to do good while also making a living" only to encounter much pressure to "suffer for the cause," whatever it is. This "culture of sacrifice" encourages "workers to stay long past closing time—in the room with a client, on the phone with a funder, or up late planning a program at home." According to the author, non-profit groups often fight labor standards reform or any improvements in working conditions on the grounds that their cost "would put them out of business." Pitting "their staff against the people they serve, non-profit managers argue that, if more money went to salaries, services would have to be cut."

This dynamic becomes most apparent when some of the nation's 12.3 million non-profit workers try to organize at outfits like Planned Parenthood, the Southern Poverty Law Center, or National Center for Transgender Equality. Out of fifty-six Planned Parenthood affiliates, only five were unionized by 2017, when a majority of its clinic workers in the Rocky Mountain states voted to join the Service Employees. As Jaffe recounts, Planned Parenthood management tried to get Donald Trump's National Labor Relations Board to overturn these election results, delaying a first contract until 2019. In the meantime, charitable donations helped fund an anti-union campaign, whose familiar message was: "We are a family. We have an 'open door' policy. We listen to each other."

This same mantra is popular in the more profit-oriented Silicon Valley. There, "the most skilled workers are wooed with high salaries, great benefits, stock options, and fun workplaces, where you can bring your dog, get a massage, play games, and, of course, enjoy the work itself." In media hype about tech companies, no occupational group is more lionized than programmers, whose long and irregular hours "are held up as proof of their romantic commitment to work." Yet Jaffe discovers one sub-set of the programmer workforce—young male video game developers—who've begun to question the grueling hours, heavy workloads, and high-turnover in a global industry which prefers staff who "can dedicate their entire lives to the job," minus any personal distractions.

In the U.K, where labor law, although weakened, is still more worker friendly, Game Workers United (GWU) has gained some trans-national traction, according to Jaffe. One of GWU's targets, a firm called Ustwo, had the chutzpah to bill itself as a "fampany" because it was so committed to being a

diverse, inclusive, and welcoming corporate family. Nevertheless, it was quick to fire Austin Kelmore, the UK chair of GWU, when he dared to criticize management. Brexit, followed by Covid-19, generated even more issues for the new union to organize around: "Workers at some companies were furloughed but asked to keep working without being paid. Others were told they had to go to the office despite lock-downs." EU immigrants who lost their game developer jobs were left uncertain about their visa status, post-Brexit. GWU became a key helper of workers with cases pending before the Home Office or local employment tribunals.

No Dream Jobs Here

In *Dirty Work,* investigative reporter Eyal Press takes readers into diverse U.S. workplaces, where "dream jobs" are in short supply because the labor process itself is so brutalizing or de-humanizing. Among the forms of employment he focuses on–and finds "most ethically troubling"–are slaughterhouse work, drone piloting, correctional psychology, and offshore oil drilling. Recent COVID-related coverage, in the daily press, about meat packing hazards showed how little has changed in this industry since Upton Sinclair's expose, *The Jungle,* a century ago. As Press notes, where public opinion about packinghouse safety has shifted lately, it's often among consumers "more concerned about "buying 'meat' that is organic than addressing the deplorable conditions to which workers in slaughterhouses are subjected."

Press documents, in compelling detail, how poultry plant workers in the rural South face endless speed-up, repetitive strain, sexual harassment, and supervisory bullying. People of color represent 80 percent of the workforce; nearly half comes from low-income households. In a pandemic stricken nation, still hungering for chicken nuggets and big burgers, food processing workers were suddenly deemed "essential." But, under the Trump Administration, even the valiant efforts of local Food and Commercial Workers locals, in some unionized plants, could not secure sufficient COVID-19 protections industrywide. Once ill or injured, hourly employees were as disposable as ever. Among the kill floor workers interviewed by Press, most dared not complain, lest they be fired and quickly replaced by other un-documented immigrants plucked from a large pool of cheap, unskilled labor.

As the author shows in a chapter entitled, "Joystick Warriors," drone pilots for the military end up with blood on their hands figuratively, rather than literally. Some view their shadowy role in targeted assassinations, via Hellfire missile strikes, as critical for our "homeland security." Others profiled in *Dirty Work* discovered that remote killing, no less than direct combat, can be a later source of stigma, shame, PTSD, and moral injury. Heather Linebaugh, an Air Force veteran involved in drone operations for three years, took to the pages of *The Guardian* to reveal the "depression, sleep disorders, and anxiety" that she and other drone surveillance analysts experienced. Two of her former colleagues committed suicide, she reported. As Press shows, former members of the military, with service-related mental health conditions, at least have access to specialized and often innovative treatment at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).

Yet most poor and working-class Americans with mental or emotional problems receive little care, of any quality. Those afflicted are often convicted of crimes and then end up warehoused in prisons, where their treatment, according to Press, ranges from "routine neglect to flagrant abuse." During Press's tour of the prison-industrial complex in Florida, we meet correctional psychologists who, at great personal risk, tried to blow the whistle on guards guilty of mistreating mentally ill prisoners. In "total institutions which enabled abusive staff to exercise unchecked power," this was no easy task. Correctional officers, already suspicious of their "hug-a-thug" colleagues, were well positioned to leave mental health counselors in exposed situations, to intimidate and silence them. For Black prison guards, "an added moral tension existed—the discomfort of working in a system that disproportionately harmed their own communities."

Individual or Collective Solutions?

What can workers do about any of the workplace issues illuminated by McCallum, Jaffe, and Press? For one concerned tech worker profiled by in *Dirty Work*, just quitting was the most he could do to protest objectionable employer behavior. (Of course, his PhD, highly marketable skills, and savings from a Google salary and stock options guaranteed a softer landing than ex-prison employees might expect.) McCallum and Jaffee are both understandably skeptical of such individual, rather than collective, solutions. As McCallum points out, a problem like "overwork is not a personal failing that can be resolved by life-style changes" involving "smarter time management, different professional choices, or better balancing of family and work matters." However, as he also notes, 'collective action takes time and when workers have less of it, they are less prepared to fight back."

Any larger-scale movement for universal healthcare, shorter hours, more paid time off, or predictable schedules will need far more workplace activists like Rebecca Wood, an Uber Eats driver in Charlottesville, VA who is a single mother of a child with cerebral palsy. Or Terrence Wiggins, a Target employee in Pennsylvania, struggling to make ends meet, while working retails store hours too unpredictable to provide a stable living. Wood and Wiggins, like the activists profiled by Jaffe, discovered what she calls "the pleasures to be found in rebellion, in collective action, in solidarity, in standing shoulder to shoulder on the picket line, in carving out spaces and times to be with other working people and to change the conditions of their labor."

As McCallum recounts, Wood became a health care reform activist, first as a defender of the Affordable Care Act, next as a Bernie Sanders supporting advocate of Medicare for All, and then as a volunteer at free medical clinic for low-income Virginians. Wiggins got involved in a group called One Pennsylvania, which sought local legislation requiring that employers give workers more advance notice of schedule changes. In December, 2018, his active participation in organizing meetings and public hearings helped persuade the Philadelphia City Council to pass a Fair Workweek Employment Standards Ordinance. As a result, the employers of 130,000 local retail, hospitality, and food service workers must give them "more regular schedules, including two weeks advance notice; 'predictability pay' to make up for departures from posted schedules; and a guaranteed nine-hour minimum rest break between shifts." In response to a national "fair scheduling" campaign, nearly ten other cities, including Seattle and San Francisco have enacted similar ordinances.

McCallum acknowledges that winning—and then enforcing–such legislation without a heavily unionized workforce is not easy. One of Jaffe's case studies shows what can be accomplished by a group like United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA), which has had collective bargaining rights for decades but only more recently began to employ membership mobilization and community-labor alliances to enhance working conditions and political clout. Readers of Jaffe's book meet Rosa Jimenez, also a single mother, high school teacher, and picket-line veteran of UTLA's week-long strike two years ago. Long before that walk-out, Jimenez joined Progressive Educators for Action, which pushed the union to become more active on issues of racial justice, policing and immigration, and curriculum change. In 2014, after reformers won leadership of UTLA, rank-and-file teachers, like Jimenez were officially encouraged to take on new roles. They became part of a Parent Community Organizing Committee and a coalition called Reclaim Our Schools LA, with local allies like the Alliance of Californians for Community Empowerment.

In 2019, thirty thousand UTLA members walked out to make contract gains that included higher pay, the hiring of more school nurses and counselors, smaller class sizes, reduced standardized testing, a cap on charter schools, the creation of more campus "green spaces," and fewer random searches of students by security personnel. As Jimenez told Jaffe, the settlement was "way more than I could have imagined." In the nation's second largest school district, UTLA members were

able to expand the scope of union bargaining, beyond the usual “bread and butter” issues, because “we were not just going out for ourselves, we were going out for our students,” Jimenez explained. “We now have a sturdy ground to stand on with what we’ve learned about organizing, to build coalitions, to work with students and parents in a meaningful way.”

In contrast, Eyal Press offers few such glimmers of hope in the grim occupations that he reports on. Prison guard unions, like labor organizations representing police officers, are not well known for building strong ties with the communities their members “serve.” They are more apt to be devoted lobbyists for building more correctional facilities and putting more people in them. Meanwhile, as Press observes, “more privileged Americans are spared any involvement in such dirty work” because “it can be outsourced and allotted to people with fewer choices and opportunities.” Although the author himself has clearly helped “tear down the walls and barriers that keep what happens inside prisons and industrial slaughterhouses hidden” and, through his reporting, also penetrated “the secrecy that envelops the drone program,” he believes that “the problem is not a dearth of information but the fact that many choose to avert their eyes, not only from dirty work, but also from those who get stuck doing it.”

Viewed as a whole, however, the workplace arrangements critiqued by these authors have many problematic features in common. Not everyone who experiences them has the option or the inclination to look the other way, as demonstrated by all the creative forms of shop-floor resistance their books so helpfully describe.