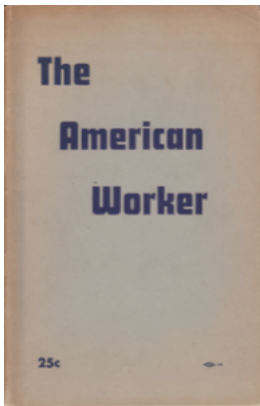
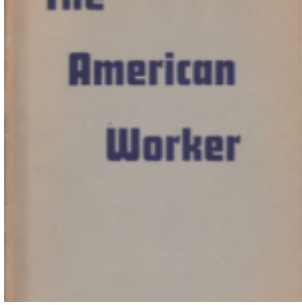


# Searching for the American Worker

August 24, 2023



In 1947 a “little” pamphlet appeared, declaring, “The worker has to work. There is no alternative but to produce in order to provide even the bare necessities of life.” It was printed on half sheets with an unassuming white cover. A dark blue, simple, yet prominent typeface offered three words, each on their own line, the main two at the center of the board, the first slightly toward the left edge: *The American Worker*.

A smudged printer’s mark and “25 cents” appeared below. Recently, I asked an archivist if they could examine an original copy to see if they could discern any words inside the union bug beyond “Trades” on the left, “Council” on the right. They replied, “Even with a magnifying glass it is impossible to read. The only words that I can see are ‘New York.’”

No authors were listed on the cover nor in the table of contents. One would have to thumb through to page 41, at the conclusion of the first part, titled “Life in the Factory,” to encounter the section’s author, Paul Romano; the surreptitious J.H., to whom the “Preface” is attributed, only identified Romano by his last name. The author of the second part, “The Reconstruction of Society,” might not be readily recognizable to those on the left in America or Europe, or who are active in the labor movement, or labor scholars, or devotees of such ephemera. But it should be.

“Ria Stone” was the party name of Grace Lee, who added “Boggs” after marrying autodidactic autoworker James “Jimmy” Boggs in 1953. A Chinese American luminary and Detroit community activist, Grace was born in 1915. As she said repeatedly toward the end of her life and in the superb documentary *American Revolutionary: The Evolution of Grace Lee Boggs*, she was who she was because of “being born female and born Chinese.” For the next hundred years she saw herself as belonging to our society “and responsible for changing it.” While she held a doctorate in philosophy from Bryn Mawr College, no academic institution would employ her. Generations of labor, civil rights, black liberation, and feminist organizers turned to Jimmy and Grace for guidance—including Martin and Malcom.

In the 1940s she lived in a rat-infested basement apartment in Chicago, worked in a defense plant in

Brooklyn, and translated—for the first time into English—a selection from Karl Marx's *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. Published in 1947 as *Three Essays by Karl Marx, Selected from the Economic Philosophical Manuscripts*, the pamphlet was produced via mimeograph, with full letter pages and an off-blue cover. It professed, "We publish ... in this modest form because we are determined to break through the vast conspiracy of silence that surrounds [the essays]," and contained Marx's previously unnoticed, or possibly undiscovered (at least in English) concept of alienation.

*The American Worker* never sold thousands of copies, even with three known reprints and two popular translations. It was never required reading for those from below and to the left, even as it influenced a generation of militants in France and Italy in the 1950s and 1960s, then here again and in Canada in the 1970s, and since. It's most recognizable author—Grace Lee Boggs—mentions it as a footnote and that only toward the end of her life. Phil Singer, writing under the name Paul Romano, remains a mystery.

But what *The American Worker* does speak to is the politics of authorship and representation, complexities of identity and power, with neighboring pamphlets focusing on then-unaddressed matters of youth, housework, and black liberation. What is more, it is still speaking, 76 years after initially appearing, to what workers are thinking and doing, then as well as now.

### **"What the Workers Are Thinking and Doing"**

"This little pamphlet," begins the opening remark, "concerns itself with the life of the working class in the process of production. Its purpose is to understand what the workers are thinking and doing while actually at work on the bench or on the line."

What are workers thinking and doing at work? It was a novel inquiry for 1947 and unfortunately still so in 2023. *The American Worker* begins by providing intimate, all-encompassing, and actual details about the functioning, power relationships, and autonomous nature of workers' struggles in an auto factory—from the workers' perspective. Then this is followed by an extrapolation of the first part, bounded by Marxian concepts and historical-philosophical considerations.

Combining articles in this manner foreshadowed how, in the years to come, many would recognize the intelligence—or "general intellect," to use another Marxian phrase—of working-class people themselves. What would also become apparent is how little academics and so-called official working-class organizations (trade unions, political parties, nonprofits, progressive religious groups, foundations, lefty publications, and the like) understood, and still understand, of everyday life, working life, and class struggle.

Romano's contribution "is directed to the rank-and-file worker, and its intention is to express those innermost thoughts which the worker rarely talks about even to his fellow-workers. In keeping a diary, so to speak, of the day-to-day reactions to factory life." Said diary was kept at the behest of the Trinidadian Marxist author of *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*, C.L.R. James. Romano "hoped to uncover the reasons for the worker's deep dissatisfaction, which has reached its peak in recent years and has expressed itself in the latest strikes and spontaneous walkouts."

Replace the gendered language, substitute the signifier "factory" with office cubicle, social-service nonprofit, hospital, supermarket, warehouse, farm and field, kitchen, coffee shop and bar, school, home, app and online platform. All these workplaces, except the last two, existed in 1947, although they played a relatively minor role in the economy. Rarely were they acknowledged as sites of struggle by labor leaders, political pundits, or captains of industry even as they were vital for

maintaining the accumulation of wealth.

As long as we live in a society “in which the capital mode of production prevails,” as long as work is still the central organizing force of our lives, and as long as work is defined by a deep dissatisfaction with the product produced and the process of production, and isolation from those we work with and even from our own being, then innermost thoughts must be shared, diaries kept.

Grace commented that to read “Romano’s description of the life in the factory is to realize with shocking clarity how deeply the alienation of labor pervades the very foundations of our society. ... The importance of Romano’s document is that it never for a single moment permits the reader to forget that the contradictions in the process of production make life an agony of toil for the worker, be his payment high or low.”

No replacements nor substitutions are needed here. These are imminently present reflections on how workers are alienated, how this alienation extends beyond the workplace and working day to every aspect of our society, how workers are necessary to produce all the goods and services for our society to function, yet their role in the process of production is paradoxical. Besides, alienation persists even with a “fair days wage” or more “generous” compensation—“generous” from the perspective of a capitalist, but still theft from the perspective of a worker.

*The American Worker* offers a “counterposition.” It is the inversion of the assumption made by much of the left that capitalism is the primary actor, that the working class is *always* secondary and reactive. It is the reversal of the dominant perspective, of a particular reading of class relations, toward acknowledging that the daily experience of life in the factory is one of misery and toil, then as well as now. And this is its lasting contribution.

### **“No Other Way of Getting a Hearing”**

The authors, whom we have encountered, and the publishers, to whom we will be introduced shortly, produced *The American Worker* to inquire into the conditions of the working class that toiled in the auto sector in the United States in the years following World War II. Correspondingly, the pamphlet was an intervention into this sector and adjacent sectors, one that sought to empower the workers themselves. Moreover, the centrality of the auto industry to capitalism in the mid-twentieth century is analogous to cotton under slavery, sugar and rubber under colonialism, land under the enclosures, and possibly finance or tech today. The pamphlet, especially in the late 1940s, was to its progenitors the most effective means of communication.

“A pamphlet is never written primarily to give entertainment or make money,” prophetic author George Orwell argues in his introduction to *British Pamphleteers*. “It is written because there is something that one wants to say *now*, and because there is no other way of getting a hearing.” The immediacy of such an inquiry and intervention is only secondary to the simple fact that an anonymous autoworker and Chinese female intellectual could not get a hearing in any other way.

The humble pamphlet has played an oversized role in American history, from the essays of Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Paine to striking slave narratives and abolitionist treatises, from antiwar and antinuke screeds to feminist and queer zines. What began amongst these pages has led to revolutions, wars of liberation, massive social movements, and the emergence of new and subversive identities.

A pamphlet is a means, a method, a material object, and it is a social document. *The American Worker*, Grace reflected in the second part, “is a social document describing in essence the real existence of the hundreds of millions who constitute the basis of our society. The cultural life and

philosophy of every society has always been determined by the life of the working class at its base. But except in periods of revolution, the world is wont to forget this."

In 1947 the world struggled to remember and to forget. *Three Essays by Karl Marx* and *The American Worker* appeared two years after Orwell wrote "You and the Atom Bomb," popularizing the term "Cold War." It appeared the year that India and Pakistan won independence from Britain and Jackie Robinson first played major league baseball. It appeared the year that the International Monetary Fund was founded and the most anti-union, anti-worker legislation in American history passed in the form of the Taft-Hartley Act. What was remembered in the factory was purposely forgotten in the corridors of power, and a new class offensive from above, from capitalism's perspective, was launched.

Nevertheless, the "real existence" and "cultural life" of our society must be laid bare. In the Cold War era, *The American Worker* attempted such a task and is part of a long, still unfolding, chronicle of such interventions.

### **"The Class to Whom the Future Belongs"**

In 1880 Karl Marx published a survey of 101 questions titled *Enquête Ouvrière*, seeking "the support of all workers in town and country who understand that they alone can describe with full knowledge the misfortunes from which they suffer, and that only they, and not saviors sent by Providence, can energetically apply the healing remedies for the social ills to which they are a prey." In 1938 *The New International*, a "monthly organ" of the Socialist Workers Party, of which Grace and her cohort of revolutionaries were members at the time, republished the questionnaire from the French as *A Workers' Inquiry*.

C.L.R., along with Raya Dunayevskaya, who was born in the Russian Empire and once served as Leon Trotsky's secretary, were the intellectual heads of this regiment. Although Grace has often been relegated to a tertiary role, the three are more accurately revealed as a triumvirate. As Grace with "Ria Stone," C.L.R. wrote under "J.R. Johnson," Raya as "Freddie Forest." Wielding party names resulted in the moniker Johnson-Forest Tendency. The group around the three utilized "Tendency" while still members of various workers parties, which was changed to Correspondence Publishing Committee shortly thereafter, when they became a fully independent entity.

Marx's confidence in the working class, its ability to understand life inside and beyond the factory gates, and that "they alone," "only they," can provide healing remedies for social ills, is reflected in the political and practical approaches of Johnson-Forest and Correspondence. Grace referenced Marx's survey in a footnote in the later pages of *The American Worker*: "See, 'A Workers' Inquiry' by Karl Marx in which 101 questions are asked of the workers themselves, dealing with everything from lavatories, soap, wine, strikes and unions."

Workers' inquiry cleaves into two different approaches: that of the questionnaire and that of first-person narratives in the style of *The American Worker*. Both methods seek to present the "exact and positive knowledge of the conditions in which the working class—the class to whom the future belongs—works and moves," as Marx reflected on his contribution.

Such knowledge begins with direct experience and was recorded in diaries. As Grace wrote in *Living for Change: An Autobiography*, "Phil Singer, a young GM worker, was always talking about the frustrations of the rank-and-file worker in the plant. C.L.R. proposed that he keep a journal of his experiences." Excerpts of what was to become the final pamphlet were first published in an internal bulletin, and this "rough draft" was circulated among members of the Tendency and to the workers to whom they were in regular communication. Johnson-Forest printed and circulated *The American*

*Worker* without acknowledging their parentage or providing any contact information to allow further correspondence in the 1947 edition, or at least the three copies I have examined. This has allowed the pamphlet to function both as a stand-alone document as well as one of the most robust expressions of the positions and politics of the group.

In addition to a newspaper and, eventually, full-length books, Correspondence published three additional pamphlets in quick succession: the journey of Si Owens, writing as “Matthew Ward” and then “Charles Denby,” from the American South to the North in *Indignant Heart: A Black Worker’s Journal*; an account of youth “delinquency” and student strikes in *Artie Cuts Out*; and *A Woman’s Place*, on housework, credited to Marie Brant and Ellen Santori, party names of Selma James and Filomena D’Addario respectively. Appearing between 1947 and 1953, these were their interpretation of workers’ inquiry and were produced using a “collaborative approach.” How collaborative were these projects? How did power operate between those involved, between workers and intellectuals? These two questions have been appropriately raised by scholars and admirers alike.

Often, the complexities of authorship and attribution were difficult to disentangle at the time, even more so 75 years later. J.H. was Johnny Zupan, a militant and a member of Johnson-Forest, who, according to Martin “Marty” Glaberman, “came to Detroit during the war, got a job at Ford ... , and very quickly became a steward and a committeeman.” However, to whom do we credit “Life in the Factory”? To Romano or Singer, to Grace and Marty, to the militants of Johnson-Forest, to a collaboration between them?

The anonymity and independence are part of the pamphlet’s enduring allure, while the relationships that extended outward from Johnson-Forest toward militants in auto factories and other industries in different places, at other times, is part of its lasting influence. One introduction declared, “The name Romano will stay in the history of proletarian literature.”

### **“The Way in Which This Pamphlet Is Making Its Way in Europe”**

“The merits of this small pamphlet are much more profound,” declared the foreword to “L’ouvrier américain,” which appeared in the first issue of the French journal *Socialisme ou Barbarie* two years after it appeared in English. Romano’s contribution was serialized in the first issue through its the fifth–sixth double issue; the section authored by Grace appeared in its seventh and eighth issues. In their “eyes, it is not by accident that such a sample of proletarian documentary literature comes to us from America, and it is also not by accident that it is, in some of its deepest aspects, the first of the genre.”

Between the publication of the English edition and the French translation, Grace traveled to Europe, following an earlier journey by Raya. While there, she met with a cohort similar to her own. A year later the French group would launch *Socialisme ou Barbarie* and draw upon *The American Worker* for its own inquiries and to construct francophone “proletarian documentary literature.” It is difficult to grasp the immense influence the *Socialisme ou Barbarie* group had on European workers movements and the worker-student movements that peaked during the May 1968 uprisings in Paris.

In Italy similar movements were stirring, and “L’operaio americano” appeared amid the pages of *Battaglia Comunista* in febbraio-marzo of 1954. The Italian forward read, in part, “It is the America of the factory: an unknown America whose history is made of strikes, exploitation, and proletarian misery. The protagonists of this story are the workers, and Paul Romano is a worker who writes about the life of the workers.” Romano’s protagonists shared their stories for the struggles on the factory floor and in the streets. As autonomous workers’ actions circulated in the automobile plants of Detroit, Michigan; Linden, New Jersey; and Boulogne-Billancourt, France, similar struggles were occurring in the Italian automobile capital of Turin.

*The American Worker* pamphlet resonated with French militants, intellectuals associated with Italian *operaismo* (translated as “workerism”) and student movements in both countries, and reverberations can be felt in autonomist movements across Europe. European interest in the pamphlet always surpassed the attention it received in America, as Raya reflected in 1954: “The way in which this pamphlet is making its way in Europe (it has been translated into Italian and there will soon be a German translation), the way in which it is being received, is nothing but a sign of what is vital and what is important in American life.”

Raya was elated that the octogenarian Dutch astronomer and “council communist” Anton Pannekoek wrote to share how “pleased” he was with the pamphlet. Pannekoek was the main theorist of a Marxian current that advocated direct democratic control of workplaces and society via workers’ councils rather than by a party apparatus, dubbed council communism. But her enthusiasm was inflated, as no German translation appeared, and the pamphlet was never republished, from what I can tell, in the United Kingdom or elsewhere on the continent then or since.

Because the movements of the 1960s and 1970s circulated, emerged, and reemerged, so did pamphlets containing first-person narratives and novel ideas. As a result, Facing Reality, the group led by C.L.R. and Marty after Correspondence, reprinted the original in 1969 without modification beyond adding their moniker and Detroit address, and apparently without fanfare. The same year, *Life in the Factory* was published as a stand-alone pamphlet by the Boston-based New England Free Press. It is likely that the Free Press edition appeared because of the personal investments of one of its printers, Don McKelvey, who also reprinted works by Jimmy Boggs, Marty, and others. Notably, the press made its money as the first publisher of the women’s liberation classic *Our Bodies, Ourselves*.

Then, in 1972, Marty brought out his own version, under Bewick Editions, named for the street on which he lived. This was done, as with the 1969 editions, to introduce the pamphlet to a new generation of militants, and an introduction was added:

The pamphlet appears as two contributions side by side—that of a worker and that of an intellectual. This was viewed at the time that the pamphlet was first published as a necessary weakness. The fusion of worker and intellectual into one totality (as in a popular working-class press) had not been achieved by any Marxist group. But at the same time that *The American Worker* was evidence of that separation, it was also evidence of the attempt to overcome that separation, if only in the formal placing of the two articles side by side.

Although Marty commented on the separation between workers and intellectuals, which is based in the division between mental and manual work under capitalism and unfortunately exacerbated by left politics, he seemingly forgot his own identity—that of a worker-intellectual who was employed on the assembly line and as a machinist, became an organizer and activist, read political economy and philosophy, and wrote vital contributions on working-class life and politics. Brooklyn born and a socialist in his youth, as an octogenarian he would drive hundreds of miles to teach “Marxism or Socialism” to militants in Toronto and Youngstown as well as to the League of Revolutionary Black Workers in Detroit. Marty, as many others of his generation and our own, represents the “overcoming [of] that separation.”

By the mid-1970s, Canadian radicals in New Tendency obtained copies of the pamphlet as a result of Marty carrying them across the border, and they appeared on the bookshelves of those who would go on to launch the International Wages for Housework Campaign and the journals *Zerowork* and *Midnight Notes*—members of whom now make up the intellectual avant-garde of contemporary American revolutionary movements. Marty produced sufficient copies in 1972 that they are still in circulation and easy to come by, via the book trade.

However, neither of the 1969 versions nor the 1972 edition with Marty's introduction mention Romano, who he was, and what became of him.

### **"Paul Romano, a GM Worker"**

Romano's identity remains elusive. In the thousands of pages of correspondence between C.L.R., Grace, Marty, Raya, and their compatriots, Romano isn't mentioned. He doesn't appear in their voluminous published works or innumerable interviews. Details are scant in autobiographies, both published and languishing as manuscripts, and subsequently biographers have had little to draw upon.

In her 1998 autobiography, *Living for Change*, Grace identified Romano as "Phil Singer, a young GM worker," and two years later she referred to him in an interview as "Paul Romano, a GM worker, [who talked] about both the positive and negative of the plant." Romano, in the pamphlet itself, offered that he was in his "late twenties" in 1947, and I assume that he worked at the Linden, New Jersey, General Motors plant. Other scholars and commentators have been similarly vague on details.

Close examination of "Life in the Factory" doesn't provide much fodder either; however, it does afford other avenues for inquiry. According to Romano, "The rough draft of this pamphlet was given to workers across the country. Their reaction was as one. They were surprised and gratified to see in print the experiences and thoughts which they have rarely put into words." Then, how was the draft circulated and how were the workers reactions recorded?

In the July 31, 1947, edition of the Internal Bulletin of the Johnson-Forest Tendency, a "Phil Romano"—not Paul Romano, not Phil Singer—first appeared, with, "I want to give my ideas ... as a rank and filer." Then, in the September 4 edition, Grace offered, "The following article will appear as a supplement to the forthcoming pamphlet by Phil Romano on the American worker today."

With bulletins appearing weekly, two editions later in the September 29 copy, the pamphlet was announced via advert: "Watch for the forthcoming pamphlet - Now On The Press: The American Worker!" Within the pages of this issue Phil Romano appears apparently for the last time. Reminiscent of his words in the forthcoming pamphlet, he declares, "My point of departure is always the worker on the machine at the very point of production." Thus concludes a debate on the "trade union question," where Phil Romano aggressively criticizes, and rightfully so, an intellectual figure in the Tendency in which he was part. Is this possibly the reason for his subsequent absence?

Although, why would the Tendency circulate drafts of the pamphlet, supposedly via the bulletin, to collect reactions from workers but then not identify themselves or provide contact information in the pamphlet itself? Why advertise the pamphlet within an internal bulletin with limited circulation and not within the larger party formation they would join a few weeks later, or within the larger left and labor movements of the time?

With this way foreclosed for the moment, another avenue of inquiry is the writing process itself and which of these figures, or the others we have encountered, is or are in fact the author or authors. Romano reports that he kept a diary that served as the source material for the pamphlet. Other worker-authors in the Tendency's orbit were given a shoe box, where notes were kept until they were assembled into a final form. Others still used the "full fountain pen" method as suggested by Raya. Upon C.L.R.'s death, Marty reflected that this method meant "Workers were interviewed, their words typed up and brought back to them for verification, and published as small articles or letters to the editor." Who typed these words? How veracious was the verification? How was the relationship between workers and intellectuals mediated?

It has been suggested in whispers between devotees that Marty and Grace wrote the text, drawing on the diary itself. Textual analysis implies the same. Neighboring pamphlets suffer from similar irregularities. However, the Tendency was a collective endeavor, where even single-authored works received considerable input and contributions from other members. The use of party names, while a security measure against state repression, also allowed for a flexibility of authorship. Besides said flexibility, collaboration allowed a resource-deprived Tendency of minor Marxian figures to produce material still relevant decades hence. Or possibly answers lie in the archives that contain materials not yet fully examined. These answers are too important to leave to the “gnawing criticism of mice” or the fading memories of those still living.

Possibly the most productive avenue remaining is biographical. Phil Singer the individual becomes Phil Romano in the bulletin and then Paul Romano, a GM worker, in *The American Worker*. While there is no Phil or Paul Romano in the census record that would match the provided description or possible dates of birth, two Phil Singers appear: one out of Chicago that would be far too old; another a “truck driver,” according to the 1940 census, from the Brownsville neighborhood just bordering Crown Heights in Brooklyn, New York, born around 1917, meaning he was in his late twenties at the time the pamphlet was published.

Knowing some of Marty’s history—born in 1918, grew up in the Crown Heights neighborhood in Brooklyn on the border of Brownsville, a red diaper baby who joined the local circle of the Young Peoples Socialist League at thirteen rather than get bar mitzvahed—further draws our attention to this second Phil Singer. Phil lived at 1848 Pitkin Avenue, just a 15-minute walk from Marty’s childhood home on Saratoga Avenue. The surrounding districts were a hot bed of socialist and Jewish radicalism. Phil was a year older than Marty, both sets of parents were Russian-Jewish immigrants. Phil died young in early 1968, leaving behind three children.

Was Paul Romano a collective being forged from the diary of Phil Singer and the minds of C.L.R., Marty, and Grace? Did Phil have a falling out with his comrades in the Tendency? Did he retreat into personal life or adopt a different political line? Could there be a record of Phil in a dusty archive, on a membership list along with Marty? Or might one of his children have a vague memory of their father, truck driver turned GM worker?

### **Searching for *The American Worker***

Now, we find ourselves searching for *The American Worker* 76 years after it first appeared, after its authors, conveners, many of its publishers, and some of its adherents have passed into the historical record. So, it is in said record that we must continue our search before rummaging through living memories of class struggle.

Might we find Phil Singer? Might we find that Romano is a collective being, born of the factory with working-class parentage and raised on heterodox Marxism and a reconstructive vision of society?

What about the “innermost thoughts” and diaries “of the day-to-day reactions to factory life” of workers today? How can *The American Worker* guide those organizing in Amazon warehouses, Starbucks cafes, and essential services? How can it aid those who experience “agony in toil”?

While the search for *The American Worker* is about the pursuit of the identity of one of its authors, the politics of authorship and representation, and the complexities of identity and power, it is likewise about the movements that it has touched and influenced and all the movements it could.