

Work and Life

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Work. We are unsure how we feel about it. We hate it. We love it. We know that work can give our lives meaning, but know also that work can be meaningless. We think everybody should work. We wish we didn't have to. We look forward all year long to vacations and enjoy coming back to work. Work is punishment *and* it is something that we really need to do if we are to realize our human capacities--even if we don't need the money. Work is not "free time," but we feel good when we do a good job. It takes time away from our families, but we need to buy the groceries and set a good example too. And we enjoy the activity and the people we work with--sometimes at least. The celebration of Labor day provides a good opportunity to stop and think about work and about workers, about how work fits into life.

The powerful set of photographs by Sebastiao Salgado, currently on exhibit at the Honolulu Academy of Art provoke some thought. Salgado conceived his study as "an homage to workers, a farewell to a world of manual labor that is slowly disappearing, and a tribute to those men, women and children who still work as they have for centuries." The photographs-- of cane workers in Cuba, fishermen in Galicia and Sicily, weavers in Bangladesh, goldminers in Brazil, and Shanghai bicycle workers, to name but a few-- are moving. One is instantly struck by the faces of the men and women, faces which express heroism and exhaustion, perseverance and courage, exploitation and too often, brutalization.

The exhibit is part of the statewide commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the state's 1946 sugar-worker's strike. No state has a more interesting and honored labor history and perhaps this is the place to begin our thinking about work and workers.

Before the arrival of Captain Cook, work and the activities of a human life were continuous, an even flow between the taro patch, the rearing of children and the activities of leisure: story-telling, art, music, and sport. There was no money and no one worked for a wage--or went hungry. It is hard not to be a bit nostalgic about this, but we can be sure that it could not last. With the plantation, work changed. So did life. In part because of the horrendous depopulation of Hawaiians, and in part because Hawaiians could avoid the harshly disciplined labor of the plantation, the plantation workers would be mostly immigrants who had left depressing situations in their native lands in hopes of a better life in Hawai'i, altogether some 400,000 people.

On the plantation, ethnically divided groups lived tightly knit lives: the plantation was village, school, community. For these people, like the men and women in Salgado's photographs, the work day was long and the work was back-breaking. Where there were women--few of the Filipino workers had brought wives--families were work units whose combined incomes could promise hope for a better future. By 1920, nearly 20% of all married women in Hawai'i were in

the paid labor force, more than twice the national average.

The descendants of these plantation workers, perhaps some 50% of our present total population, cannot but have strong feelings about them and their sacrifices. As members of militant unions, these workers were also a huge force in the construction of Hawai'i as a modern open society. Originally, plantation workers organized themselves ethnically, and haole planters--The Big Five--could mix a policy of paternalism with a policy of divide and conquer. The early strikes, in 1907, 1920, 1924, and 1927 all failed to achieve gains. But beginning with the strike of 1946, the workers, led by mainland organizers, overcame ethnic division, achieved a consciousness of themselves as workers and became a new force in society. Not only did Hawai'i's workers achieve gains--in job security, housing, medical benefits and increased wages, but these workers also became the core of the reconstituted Democratic Party, the governing party in this state since 1954.

In the course of their struggle to achieve dignity in work, there was one other significant consequence: In this process, these workers also created the idea of someone who was "local," someone who loved the land and the spirit of the land, the spirit of Aloha. Although we are not the melting pot we would sometimes like to think that we are, this shared identification with the history and spirit of this place remains an immense resource for us. Let's hope that we are not losing it.

Yet just as this more democratic society was being constructed, the forces of capital began to deconstruct it. It was increasingly clear to the Big Five that they had to look elsewhere. Tourist development was the elsewhere to which they looked.

People who have come to Hawai'i since the 1970s may have a hard time imagining this place at the time of Statehood (1959). The Aloha Tower was still the tallest building in Honolulu, tourism accounted for 3.1% of the gross state product--it is now nearer to 50%--and one person could still support a family of four with *one* decent full-time job! Work changed again. Today, there are 490,000 "service" jobs and only 65,000 jobs in agriculture, construction and other traditional labor occupations. That is a remarkable shift. "Service" jobs include jobs in transportation, communications, commerce: wholesale and retail, finance, hotels, hospitals, and government and social services. They do not, in general, involve the sort of backbreaking work so well represented by plantation work. They are, in that sense, "better jobs."

But we should not jump to the conclusion that we are now in a "new age" where most work has become more pleasant, more creative. Even if these jobs are physically less demanding, they can be monotonous, painful and involve high levels of stress. They may offer fewer sources of community, and may be more alienating and destructive of well-being. Worse, increasing numbers of these jobs are low-paying, part-time and are increasingly the only jobs open to women in Hawai'i. If we want to get to the bottom of this, we need to begin with a fundamental fact: *There simply are not enough jobs for all those who want to work.* The problem is global, and because we live in a global capitalist system, the consequences are felt everywhere.

Begin with the fact that there are very poor countries along with very rich ones and that 47 million new job-seekers annually enter the already overcrowded global labor force; some 38 million of these are in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Not only are these workers competing with one another for jobs, but everyone with a job is challenged by the fact that there will be someone to take that job at less money. Because there were so few "good jobs" in the Philippines and Latin America, Hawai'i lost sugar and pineapple. Because a graduate of the Institute of Technology in Chihuahua, Mexico will annually earn but \$4500 working at Ford Motors in its Chihuahua factory, Ford builds cars there instead of in Dearborn, Michigan. Because Irish workers can work for less than Americans, Metropolitan Life employs Irish workers to process medical claims.

As the Hawai'i Visitors Bureau will tell you, Hawai'i's tourism is affected not only by downturns in the global economy but also by fierce competition from many other places seeking tourist dollars. The global tourist industry is now the world's largest employer with one of every fifteen workers engaged in feeding, housing, busing, entertaining and cleaning up after tourists. Most of these workers do not earn enough to eat even one meal at one of the tables they serve and clear. We here in Hawai'i prided ourselves on low unemployment--usually ignoring the fact that across most job categories average wages in Hawai'i were lower than they were in seven comparable western metropolitan areas. The era of low unemployment may be over. As of this June, the statewide unemployment rate jumped to 6.8%, putting the state above the national rate and in 10th place nationally. In June alone, the state lost 1600 nonagricultural jobs and 2500 state government jobs. Retail trade, where average salaries are well below the "official" poverty line, gained 700 jobs.

Part of explanation for the absence of good jobs is technological. Automated machines and sophisticated software can today perform many of the jobs currently held by some 75% of the labor force in industrialized economies. This is not in itself a disaster. As utopians like to argue, it might mean that we do not need to work so hard and so long. Sadly, this is not the case. Because the driving force of a capitalist system is to make profit, companies have a fatal imperative to reduce costs by making workers more productive and eliminating the surplus. But there is no mechanism to ensure that those who lose jobs will find other jobs and if they do, that they will find jobs that pay as much.

The consequences have been disastrous. The average weekly income of the 80% of American workers whose jobs are not higher managerial and high technical fell by 18% between 1973 and 1995, a stunning loss of income. Contrary to myth, some 40% of all minimum wage workers are the *sole* breadwinners in their families and the purchasing power of the minimum wage has fallen 31% since 1979. This puts a full-time minimum wage worker some \$7,000 *below* the poverty line. Indeed, some 43% of America's "official" poor work. Income inequality in the US has increased phenomenally. In Hawai'i, income inequality is just about what it was in 1929, a near 20% increase over what it was in 1959.

This goes a considerable way in explaining the "feminization" of the paid labor force, a shift of monumental significance. In 1981, for the first time, more than 50% of all women in the US were in the paid work force. In 1947 about 30% of all mothers with children were outside the paid labor force. Today, that number is just about reversed: by the year 2000, 80% will be in the paid work force. At the same time, 84% of all new jobs in the last decade have been "service" jobs and, remarkably, 84% of all these jobs were taken by women. Add to this, unequal pay for the same work and the fact that many of the jobs held by women are part-time.

There all sorts of reasons why women work, and the opportunities and benefits of work vary enormously with class and with ethnic status. On the one hand, a recent survey showed that even if they could afford it, 58% of American working women would rather work than stay at home. This suggests a sea-change in attitudes which promoters of "family values" seem not to appreciate. On the other hand, it is plain enough that many women entered the paid work force--at least originally--because they felt they had to. For single women who are heads of households, the only choice is work--leaving unanswered the question of who will take care of the children in her absence--or welfare, which despite mythology, barely suffices. Today, one of two marriages end in divorce. In 1990, there were 17.8 million "displaced homemakers," women who had been homemakers and who failed to find a full-time job after they had been divorced or widowed. This is especially disastrous for unskilled women and especially for unskilled minority women: African-American women and Hispanics and in Hawai'i, Hawaiians and Filipinas. For many married women, either trying to avoid poverty or maintaining a middle-class life style demanded that they get into the paid work force. With the "paradise tax" in Hawai'i getting larger every year--it is now around 40%-- Hawai'i has been a national leader in the multi-worker household, with often several families squeezed into the same dwelling.

Defenders of "family values," blame everything on the disintegration of "the family," crime, drugs, welfare, you name it. But not only is the ideal "nuclear" family a bit of myth, but few bother to ask what has caused this "breakdown." It is a fact that poor two-parent families are twice as likely to break up as two parent families not in poverty. It takes little imagination to judge that besides stress and despair, the absence of work which provides self-respect is a large factor in this.

But as regards this largely mythical "nuclear family" with a male wage earner and a wife dutifully committed to domesticity, there is no going back. Incredibly, as a society *we have not even begun to think through the implications of this.*

Work--and the life that attends it--is still in process. It has undergone monumental changes everywhere, but perhaps nowhere faster than here in Hawai'i. And yet because we too often both forget our past or get stuck with a distorted picture of it, we are not ready to confront the present, still less the future. The direction of the future of work is not wholly in our hands, but we are nevertheless players and what we do now, as workers, will have consequences. People need *good* work, work that they can get their teeth into, work that pays them a living wage, work which offers them dignity.

There is an inevitable imbalance of power in the world of work in any capitalist society, but today that imbalance is immense and is powerfully reinforced by the policies of government. It is just here where we must rethink our labor history and the role of unions. It is not the task of a union to save a job which pays \$7.00 an hour so that a corporation can increase profits. Indeed, its task goes well beyond a collective bargaining agreement. Rather, we have to see that at the level of politics, *workers and their interests are not represented and that the union remains the best organization to do this*. Consider only this sample of current national policies:

- Trade policy, for example, NAFTA, which devotes pages to intellectual property rights and almost nothing to workers's rights.
- Corporate welfare in the form of subsidies and tax policy: For example, transnationals received more than \$104 billion in subsidies in 1993; Sunkist received \$17.8 million "to promote orange juice overseas." As with decreases in the capital gains tax, there is no reason to believe that any of this ends up in jobs for Americans. What was "voodoo economics" for George Bush was tested by his President. It remains voodoo economics. Indeed, the \$29.2 billion in subsidies which went to agribusiness was twice what is spent on welfare. This is money which could have been used to create real jobs for Americans, jobs which, for example, would be aimed at restoring our cities, our schools, our communities.
- The dismemberment of the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) which now fails to protect the rights of unions to organize and, remarkably, makes it legal for employers to break strikes with "permanent replacement workers."
- A minimum wage which is the lowest among advanced industrial societies. In the US it is 33% of the average wage, in Europe with some 40% of the workforce in unions, it is over 80%.
- The new "contract" on America. Instead of "ending welfare as we know it" by investing the \$10 billion promised by Clinton to create jobs, it cuts \$60 billion by abolishing, strictly, Aid for Families with Dependent Children, the core of "welfare" in this country. While this legislation will not create work for people, it will surely punish not only the already jobless, but perhaps two million of their children as well.

As former Teamster leader, John P. Morris well put the matter: "Corporations can do what they want...and there's nothing the people can do about it." Both parties are firmly controlled by the Rich who would like to convince working Americans that their problems are, wondrously, the fault of the poor.

As a nation of immigrants divided by race and ethnicity, American workers failed to achieve a Labor Party. But if working people are to have a voice, then they must join together in organizations that can represent their joint concerns as working people. History and commonsense

tells us that there is no obvious alternative to a strong and united union movement.

And what of Hawai'i? Our special problem has been identified many times: We cannot afford to be a one-dimensional tourist economy. The occupations with the most demand in our state are, in order: waiters and waitresses, janitors/cleaners, cashiers, sales supervisors, kitchen workers, fast-food helpers, and maids/housekeepers. The rest of the list is as grim. But the party of the workers of this state built a \$200 million dollar convention center and will spend millions more to market and operate it. State House Tourism Chair Romy Cachola tells us that convention centers are not built to make money. Convention centers are built "to attract hundreds of thousands of new visitors to hotels, restaurants and other businesses" (*Honolulu Advertiser*, October 30, 1995). For what? For more lousy jobs and the cultural and environmental degradation that is Waikiki?

Sieji Naya, before he became the Director of The Department of Business, Economic Development and Tourism (DBEDT) under our current Governor, cautioned us that our future would not be pretty if we failed to take advantage of our strategic position between Asia and the U.S. Mainland and become a link between mainland producers and Asian consumers (*Ka Leo O Hawai'i*, April 14, 1992). Given our unique geography and population, we could, he said, offer professional services: legal, financial, consulting, management and construction.

It easy enough to add to this. Why do we import so much of our food when diversified agriculture is a real potential for an alternative economy for Hawai'i? And what of the eco-tourism, health-tourism, the garment industry, small manufacturing, and other small businesses which get next to nothing in the way of State support?

Hawai'i remains a special place. The unions which made Hawai'i an open and more democratic society remain vital: Union membership in Hawai'i remains well over twice the current national average, a sad 15% They need to grow, to be inclusive and speak for *all* working people. It may be that the workers of this state can make the government of this state responsive to them. Perhaps as they have done before, they can lead the nation in showing the way. If, today, only a few of us wear the garments of the manual laborer, "Palaka power" could still be a force.

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