

Working in the Unconscious Masses: Inside a Mega-Retail Store in the United States

Wyatt Nelson, Cornell University

Abstract and Statement of Purpose

Workers in the United States tend to seek individual solutions to social problems. Through personal narrative and references to academic literature, this essay explores consciousness and control in modern retail work. The essay identifies a lack of class consciousness at one workplace in particular and also seeks to explain the individualism of workers in general. I present three causes of individualism: the dominant idea that collective action is impossible, the current precarious economic situation of workers, and the effects of management techniques. Solutions based in building our real-life social networks and committing ourselves to material solidarity are suggested. In general, we can reorient ourselves to think of collective solutions. To orthodox followers of Marx, it seems self-evident that the concentration of wage-workers in towns, cities, factories, retail stores, warehouses, etc. would lend itself to the realization of the collective interests of wage-workers in proletarian struggle. To some extent, this historical observation has proved true. Yet there are significant elements of the wage-earners, especially in the United States, that pursue (usually ineffective) individual solutions to their economic woes. In short, we are isolated from each other. This short commentary seeks to frame the issue, explore the reasons behind it, and offer solutions to this contemporary problem.

Keywords

Working Class, Proletariat, Individualism, Class Consciousness, Collectivism, Retail, Workplace, Surveillance, Atomization, Isolation, Management Techniques

The union organizer's voice rose as he accelerated his barrage of demanding questions. The visibly intimidated retail worker screwed up her face and tried to back away, but the strange man persisted. Suddenly, the video froze and words appeared on the screen: 'If approached by a union representative, you don't have to talk to them.' The words reminded us to report any such activity to our supervisor.

The video stopped, and the HR person flicked on the lights. Without a word about the video, she slipped a multi-page document in front of each of us New Team Members. The document declared that if we invented anything while at work, it belonged to the company. Very politely, she informed us we would be required to sign it if we wished to work here. So I signed. I hardly thought about what I was doing because my mind was still processing

the video. Apparently, there were nasty entities called labor unions that wanted to usurp my relationship with my boss. They would take part of my wage, require me to work certain hours, disallow me from cooperating with my co-workers, and make communication with my superiors impossible. But confused and intimidated as I was, the video had given me a strange sense that somehow, my new employer was *afraid*.

I had not yet learned about the astonishing depth and scope of worker resistance to employers and capitalism. I would spend two years in the workforce before learning that the United States has one of the bloodiest labor histories in the world (Taft and Ross, 1969). I could not begin to comprehend the terrifying scale of labor exploitation on earth for another year after that. To this day I struggle to wrap my head around the absurdity of endless wealth accumulation and society's blind acceptance of a deeply rooted but deeply fallible pattern.

But back then I had no clue. Just like everyone else, I started work. Every day I donned my red shirt and khakis and reported to the time-clock on schedule. My department was grocery. I spent most of my time picking up boxes and bottles, moving them to a specific location on a vast array of shelves, and setting them in their correct place. Sometimes I stood behind a conveyor belt and scanned each of a customer's items before bagging them up. I put money in the cash register. I forced a smile. Every night, I spent three or four hours neatly straightening all the items on the shelves. During that long final hour as the clock ticked closer to midnight, we were locked inside the store to prevent any early departure.

Only later would I learn that locking workers in a workplace might effectively prevent early departure from work, but also contributed to the deaths of workers at the notorious Triangle Shirtwaist Factory¹ (Stein, 1962). In a few years I would learn that the packages of food I moved around were commodities, and understand that commodification—charging money for every single individualized and standardized object—has negative effects on human beings and profitable effects for companies (Marx, 1867). Someday soon I would learn about scientific management of the workplace and its association with surveillance and control (Urso, 2006; Sprague, 2007).

But, like most workers do, I took pride in my work. When the milk cooler was full and fresh, I felt good. When I helped a customer find something they wanted, I felt satisfied. When my co-workers thanked me for doing a good job, I felt proud. For a while, I forgot about the anti-union video. I liked my boss. I even encouraged my friends to shop at 'my' store. I belonged.²

¹ It is fair to note that my workplace had unlocked fire exits. The lock-ins at my workplace were offensive because managers would often wait until 10 or 15 minutes after our shift ended to release us from the building.

² A contributing factor to the feeling of belonging at my workplace was management's psychological manipulation of the workers. In an effort to make sure the workers gave high quality service to customers, the company endeavoured to alter the social relations of production. For an explanation of this process see Paul du Gay (1993)'Numbers and Souls: Retailing and the De-Differentiation of Economy and Culture',

But then the house of cards collapsed. My idealized perception of wage work began to fade when I learned just how long some of my co-workers had been doing this monotonous job. Three years. Seven. Fifteen, and still making less than \$15 per hour. I found out how much more the managers made. I watched a colleague get fired without cause on the whim of a frustrated boss, who probably didn't like her own job either. Supervisors covered up unsanitary conditions. Back-to-back shifts meant substituting Red Bull for sleep. Most of us had back pain, ate poorly, and drank too much. Lots of us couldn't get health insurance. Daily sales goals meant substituting corporate desires for our own and working harder to sell more. The final blow came with my first raise. In exchange for a top score on my performance review, I earned five whole cents. My wage was increased to \$7.80 per hour. Another worker got a one cent raise. One cent!

My colleagues and I kept working. We smiled and said thank you to these insults. But out of view of the bosses, we expressed ourselves. Our resistance took place in aisle shadows, in whispered tones, and in furtive acts. Alone in the aisles we would mock our leaders, imitating their supposedly motivating catch phrases. We would snag a granola bar or expensive cosmetic. We gave our friends big discounts at the register. Whenever we could, we stopped work to chat. Breaks ran long. Some of us showed up late for work, and left early. Others quit. Meanwhile we talked about things we'd rather be doing, the latest gossip, and last night's sports or TV show.

One thing we never talked about doing was organizing together as a union of workers. The only thing most of us knew about unions was what we saw in the orientation video. After work, most of us were so tired we just wanted to go home—or just get away from this place. There was often a supervisor in the break room. Just down the hall, you could hear the HR manager clicking away on her keyboard. Some people had aspirations for management positions. Others banked on that next raise. Overall, we just didn't see the point. This was just the way it was. Get a different job if you want a better life, right? We were dupes.

The money I made at that job helped my family pay for my university degree in labor studies. What now sets me apart from most of my former co-workers is four years of academia—books, professors, clubs, conferences, ideas, and lots of young people to talk to and engage with. My work experience at one of the biggest retailers in the US informed my studies, and my studies changed the way I think about my old job. But back then, none of us had a clue. If my co-workers and I knew even a little of what I know now, things might have been different.

We might have thought of ourselves as workers. Our bosses called us 'Team Members,' but we would have seen right through that rhetoric and understood that we were not at all part of a team, but minions expected to take orders. We might have realized that it was our work, the efforts of our hands and of our minds, that was responsible for making the company's profits. We might have pointed out that our brothers and sisters—underpaid

The British Journal of Sociology vol. 44, no. 4, pp. 563-587; and Hyman, Richard (1987) 'Strategy or structure? capital, labour and control', *Work, Employment and Society*, vol. 1, no. 1 p.41.

workers in other places—had sweat and died to produce the commodities we so neatly stacked on the shelves. We would have remembered the mines and landfills that capitalize and punctuate the sentence of production. We might not have been so eager to please our bosses and we certainly would not have quietly accepted pennies for a ‘raise.’ We might have even realized our common interest as a working class.

Collective Failure: Individual Solutions to Social Problems

Why didn’t the workers in my workplace, including me, think of ourselves as a cohesive unit, an entity that could mobilize, an organized class? Clearly we recognized our bond and mutual struggle and this is why we shared in our practices of subtle resistance. Yet when trying to improve our material situation, we resorted to individualism. Why do we seek individual solutions to social problems? I will suggest three reasons relating to our material situation as workers, which do not offer a comprehensive explanation but hopefully do point in a meaningful direction. The first is that mainstream discourse presents collective action as futile. A second cause is management’s intentional isolation of workers and manipulation of workplace culture. A third is the precarious and insecure nature of our jobs.

In the first place, there is very little collective activity in the Great Plains state in which I live. A few labor union locals, community organizations, and a handful of radical groups are organized and active. However, information that travels through the mainstream—television, radio, newspapers—fails to mention any of this activity. From the perspective of the workers at the mega-retail store, there is no such thing as collective activity in our society. As a result, such combination seems futile or even insane.

Secondly, intentional isolation of workers limits collective action. Managers were sure to keep only one worker per aisle, so we wouldn’t waste time chatting. We were required to take lunch breaks in sequence, one after another, rather than all sitting down together at noon time. Shifts would start at 30 minute intervals, so large groups of workers wouldn’t enter and leave the facility at the same time. These techniques are part of a much broader socialization effort described by one scholar:

Workplace organisation and culture in retail help to socialise the workers from an early stage into the values of personal initiative, enterprise, hard work, individual responsibility, and self-discipline. At the same time, the compulsions of workplace culture stimulate individualism and a self-centred pursuit of one’s own interests, discourage cooperation and collective action, including workplace dissent (Goopta 2009, p. 54).

While Goopta’s work focuses on retail workers in India, his observation is true for Midwestern American workers as well. Multiple systems at my store built up and reinforced the workplace organization and culture referred to above. For example, free meals were awarded to individual workers who received compliments from customers. ‘Great Team Cards’ were used to aggrandize the accomplishments of workers who took it

upon themselves to clean up a spill or help a customer find something. We were instructed to refer to customers as ‘guests,’ as if they came to visit us. Grievances were handled individually in the HR office, often relying on reassignments, transfers, or termination to ‘solve’ problems. Intentionally and unintentionally, our store helped teach us to act as lone wolves.

A third explanation for individualization is insecure work. Goopta also summarizes the scholarly discussion on this topic. He points out that the ‘heightened insecurity of labour, coupled with multiple, shifting employments, have fragmented and atomised the labour force and undermined collective action.’ And ‘the burden of risk from unstable employment has been privatised and come to be borne by individuals themselves, thus exacerbating labour market inequality and exploitation.’ These developments ‘have encouraged individualised responses and personal strategies for coping with the problems of work and employment’ (Goopta 2009, p. 46).

Indeed, our jobs were precarious. Most people didn’t stay for more than a couple years—sometimes significantly less time than that. This made it hard to make friends with co-workers. Sometimes it seemed like it almost wasn’t worth getting to know a new hire, because who knows how long they would stick around? And of course, everyone is worried about their own job, or thinking to themselves ‘where next?’. Goopta’s explanation of shifting risk also applied to us. A bad sales month meant fewer hours for everyone and maybe even layoffs. In this precarious environment we all silently but collectively decided it was ‘every man for himself.’ I went to college. One of my ex-co-workers is almost done with a nursing degree. A third became a manager at the same company. Many others moved onto different jobs—hopefully better ones. And save for a few tenuous connections some of us have managed to keep, most of us are scattered to the winds. Our destinies are as isolated and uncertain as the commodities we arranged on the shelves and sold.

What can we do?

Workers don’t need a bachelor’s degree to understand the condition of labor under capitalism; everyday life is training enough. But in order to achieve class consciousness and practice solidarity, workers deserve more than routine anti-union propaganda. Here is a task for educated workers and their allies. We can work to humanize and collectivize work in many ways, some of the simplest of which are listed below:

Talk to your co-workers. Be friends, talk about sports and love interests. Also talk about work. Ask people, what’s the worst part of your job? Do you like your boss? Do you get paid enough? Present yourself as the fellow worker you are and be a friend.

As an ally, talk to your workers as much as you can. When you check out at the store or see us cleaning, start a conversation. Ask us questions about ourselves. How long do you have to work today? Do you have kids? What are your dreams? What is your favorite place to eat around here? Is your job safe?

Support strikes. You can do this most concretely by donating money to strike funds and bringing food to strikers. Show up. Share the love. People will really appreciate you. You will be rewarded with smiles and handshakes and heartfelt thank-yous. For example, there are plenty of opportunities to support workers involved in the OurWalmart campaign and the Fight for 15 movement.

Learn about workers in other places. The global labor movement is gigantic and beautiful. Read about ship breakers in Bangladesh (Kernaghan 2014), port workers in Madagascar (ITF 2017), migrant workers in Qatar (ITUC 2014), farm workers in Mexico (Marosi 2014), or cotton pickers in Uzbekistan (UGF 2016). Hold other people's stories in your mind as you go about your daily life. If the global working classes are going to create a global revolution, we need to understand each other.

Fight the bosses. Get some people together. You'll know what to do.

Author Bio

Wyatt Nelson is a graduate of the School of Industrial and Labor Relations at Cornell University. His undergraduate honors thesis was titled *Origins of Labor Environmentalism: Industrial Unions for Economic Security and Environmental Decency in American Industry*. Since graduation, he has worked as a rooftop gutter cleaner, participated in the indigenous rights struggle at Standing Rock, and traveled internationally. He hopes to continue his studies in graduate school.

Bibliography

D'Urso, Scott C. (2006): 'Who's Watching Us at Work? Toward a Structural-Perceptual Model of Electronic Monitoring and Surveillance in Organizations', *Comm Theory*, vol. 16, pp. 281.

Du Gay, Paul (1993): 'Numbers and Souls': Retailing and the De-Differentiation of Economy and Culture', *The British Journal of Sociology*, vol. 44, no. 4, pp. 563-587.

Gooptu, Nandini (2009): 'Neoliberal Subjectivity, Enterprise Culture and New Workplaces: Organised Retail and Shopping Malls in India', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 44, no. 22, pp. 45-54.

Hyman, Richard (1987): 'Strategy or structure? capital, labour and control', *Work, Employment and Society*, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 41.

ITF (2017): 'Poverty And Intimidation At The Gateway To Madagascar: Precarious Work, Injuries And Sackings At The Port Of Toamasina, Madagascar', International Transport Workers' Federation Report.

ITUC (2014): 'The Case Against Qatar: Building Workers Power', International Confederation of Trade Unions Report.

Kernaghan, Charles (2014): 'Garment Workers In Bangladesh Fight Back and Win. The Institute Initiates Turn Around in Major Apparel Producers', Institute for Global Labour and Human Rights.

Marosi, Richard (2014): 'Hardship on Mexico's farms, a bounty for U.S. tables', *Los Angeles Times*, Dec 7.

Marx, Karl (1867): *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Vol. 1*, Progress Press, Moscow.

Sprague, Robert D. (2007): 'From Taylorism to the Omnipicon: Expanding Employee Surveillance Beyond the Workplace' *J. Marshall Journal of Information & Privacy Law*, vol. 25, no. 1, pp.1-36.

Stein, Leon (1962): *The Triangle Fire*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca.

Taft, Philip and Ross, Philip (1969): 'American Labor Violence: Its Causes, Character, and Outcome', *The History of Violence in America: A Report to the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence*, ed. Hugh Davis Graham and Ted Robert Gurr.

UGF (2016): 'Forced Labor In Uzbekistan's Cotton Sector Preliminary Findings from the 2016 Harvest', Uzbek-German Forum.