

Paul Apostolidis

Day Laborers and the Refusal of Work

From an autonomist Marxist perspective, Kathi Weeks (2011: 97) writes, “work” serves as “the primary basis of capitalist relations, the glue that holds the system together. Hence, any meaningful transformation of capitalism requires substantial change in the organization and social value of work.” For Weeks, the core autonomist concept of the “refusal of work” entails at once “a refusal of the ideology of work as highest calling and moral duty, a refusal of work as the necessary center of social life and means of access to the rights and claims of citizenship, and a refusal of the necessity of capitalist control of production” (99). Weeks also points out, however, that the refusal of work activates both positive and negative impulses: “The refusal of work comprises at once a movement of exit and a process of invention. The refusal can make time and open spaces—both physical and conceptual—within which to construct alternatives. Rather than a simple act of disengagement that one completes, the refusal is, in this sense, a process, a theoretical and practical movement that aims to effect a separation through which we can pursue alternative practices and relationships” (100). The refusal of work thus involves mobilizing counterdiscourses that dethrone work from its regal place in people’s social, ethical, and political imaginaries. Such a politics also requires incubating forms of sociality that supplant collective activity paced by capital’s rhythms with alternatively temporalized relations of interaction. Refusing work, furthermore, means democratizing the systems through which people produce the material means of life as well as the sustaining activities in households and communities that cultivate human relationships. The refusal of work thus at once stages militant rejections of the given order and nurtures potentialities for freedom from within existing conditions.

Who are the possible subjects of such a politics among today's shifting constellations of social forces? One crucial autonomist move has been to endorse an expanded and politically inflected notion of who belongs to the "working class," such that the "composition" of this class "is no longer limited to wage workers but can also include those necessary to its existence and organization, like the unemployed, domestic workers, and students" (Weeks 2011: 95). In this essay, I reflect on the position vis-à-vis the refusal of work taken by migrant day laborers in the United States: a segment of workers who, in certain ways, occupy all the categories suggested by an enlarged conception of the working class.

Day laborers are wage workers who earn their pay through extremely short-term jobs that they get through lotteries at urban worker centers or by flagging down employers who cruise by informal, street-corner pickup spots. Yet day laborers also number among the unemployed because they lack stable jobs governed by contracts that specify wages, hours, tasks, and other conditions of labor. Most day laborers in the United States are migrants from Latin America whose undocumented status entrenches this condition of chronically unsteady employment.¹ Day laborers are also "domestic workers" in two ways. First, women who do house cleaning increasingly participate in the worker centers started by male day laborers. Second, the latter, when they do gardening, moving, or home improvement, arguably perform "domestic work," which produces no commodities but on which the generation of surplus value depends. Day laborers are "students," finally, insofar as they participate in the fluid yet durable learning spaces provided by worker centers' popular educational programs, although those programs position worker-students differently vis-à-vis capital than they do university matriculants.

As wage workers, students, domestic workers, and the unemployed, day laborers thus belong to multiple constituencies that help comprise a suitably expanded understanding of working-class struggle. As (mainly) migrants from the global South to the North, moreover, day laborers call to mind the need for any anticapitalist politics, including the refusal of work, which has been developed principally in Italy and the United States, to work through problems of eurocentrism and coloniality. In what ways, then, might day laborers help advance the refusal of work? What indications do these workers give that such a politics resonates with their everyday concerns and their organizing priorities? And what can the critical effort to theorize the refusal of work gain by pondering how day laborers view their circumstances and act within these conditions?

At first glance, it would seem unlikely that many partisans for the refusal of work could be found among day laborers. Mired in poverty, denied even the paltry supports that the battered US welfare state supplies to citizens, and hounded by immigration enforcement agents, these migrants will tell you without hesitation that what they want and need more than anything else is a job. Furthermore, in the face of the neofascist demonization of immigrants as criminals and leeches on the body of social wealth amassed through the dutiful labor of good, white Americans, most migrant justice advocates predictably invoke the familiar figure of the “hard-working immigrant” who just wants to support his or her family. Even at its most militant, when the National Day Labor Organizing Network demands an immediate end to deportations through the #Not1More deportation campaign, day labor leaders lean on productivist motifs to justify appeals for migrant rights.

Nevertheless, counterintuitive possibilities exist for finding allies in the refusal of work among day laborers and for critically deepening a theoretical sense of what such a politics means in dialogue with these migrants. These prospects come into view when we foreground the notion that refusing work means rejecting, refunctioning, and supplanting the processes by which capital structures time for working people. On the one hand, in no prior era has capital so successfully saturated every moment of daily life with incitements and compulsions to work, or to prepare for work, in a timescape of perpetual effort that never alters (Berardi 2009; Marazzi 2010; Weeks 2011). On the other hand, the working subject typically experiences work as a disconnected jumble of fragmented gigs that arise unpredictably, last for randomly varying time periods, yield ever-shifting equations between time and money, and offer no glimpse of a stable future.

Work’s temporal structure thus has disintegrated into fleeting and arbitrary bits even as, paradoxically, the subject never ceases to work. Yet precisely this temporal double bind offers immanent potential for critically transforming the norms, habits, and institutions that govern the work society. What is needed are efforts to approach temporal incoherencies within scenes of precarity as advantageous opportunities to disengage from productivist rhythms and unfold newly temporalized processes of sociality and politics.

Listening to the reflections of day laborers in the United States suggests that even as these violently precaritized workers rehearse the elevation of work as the primary social value, they also are developing temporalized forms of collectivity that nascently express the refusal of work. Day laborers’ experimental aspirations toward such autonomous collectivity can be perceived in their accounts of cooperative activities at worker centers like Casa

Latina in Seattle and the VOZ MLK Workers Center in Portland, Oregon, where I have conducted field inquiries.²

Given the formative influence of popular education within day labor organizing (Apostolidis and Valenzuela 2014; Theodore 2015), as in Latin American working-class movements throughout the Americas over the past half century, it makes sense to approach workers' comments in the spirit of this intellectual current. Freire (2000) argues that oppressed persons can and should act as fully fledged subjects in analyzing and transforming their conditions of subordination, in solidarity with others who may not share their specific circumstances of oppression but who still are affected by broadly encompassing dynamics of domination. Social research can contribute to popular education by searching for what Freire (1973, 1985, 2000) calls "generative themes" in the commentaries subjugated people make about their everyday lives. Such themes, as Freire characterizes them, are generative in that they have the potential to both catalyze dialogical exploration of the power relations that lie behind the problems workers describe and pave political pathways toward contesting those power dynamics. The generativity of the theme stems partly from its ability to convey an everyday aspect of the speaker's life in ways that are concrete, emotionally intense, sensually evocative, and poetic. This generative quality also arises from the theme's critical resonance with theoretical accounts of the social problems emphasized by marginalized groups. Within the valences between theme and theory lie the prospects both for differentiating the speakers' experiences and social positions from those of other groups and for discerning shared circumstances that can ground broadscale mobilizations.

When day laborers speak about their job searches on the corner and at worker centers, the themes that surface suggest a vision of the refusal of work that arises amid the warring temporalities of precaritized existence, rather than enacting any clear withdrawal from such time flows and temporal ruptures. Before examining the themes of community life conducive to the refusal of work, therefore, it is important to recognize the themes that bespeak dispositions of thought, desire, and activity that uphold the capitalist government of work and the work society. I must note, however, that although I take account of such deep ambivalences among day laborers' themes, this discussion confines itself to men's perspectives, as very few women attended Casa Latina when I conducted interviews there. (The MLK Center still does not facilitate women's job searches.) Especially given Weeks's (2011) compelling elaboration of an autonomist feminism that aims the refusal of work at the entire working day and all forms of work (paid and unpaid, "productive" or

“reproductive” [or both], whether mainly done by women or men), a more adequate reflection on day laborers and the refusal of work would require extensive inquiries among migrant (women) domestic workers.

Day laborers commonly invoke the notion of “fighting for the job” to characterize the rough and edgy milieu of the corner. They thereby call attention to the bare-knuckles competition for work and wages that structures this distinctive urban time space, especially when, as is often the case, workers have not organized themselves to set minimum wages (Theodore, this issue). The fighting breaks out when a car suddenly pulls up to the curb: it is part foot race, part inverse auction, part wrestling match. As one worker explains, “the employer arrives and you run and run, and the one who reaches the door first is the one who gets in.” Sometimes, workers engage in shouting matches to bid down one another’s wage offers. Often, though, the goal is simply to beat others into the back seat of the pickup truck, to be taken away with no negotiation over the terms of labor and compensation. There is no “contract” between independently choosing parties, clarifies one day laborer, chuckling at my naive suggestion that such a term might apply—there is just “the law of the strongest.” The victor is the one who prevails in the melee of “shoving and elbowing” and who avoids getting “knocked down” by other combatants or run over by the employer.’

Waging these battles for jobs, day laborers suggest, implicates them in a paradoxical temporal pattern according to which migrants facilitate their own social abjection and physical debilitation even as they struggle to enact the work society’s norms and achieve subsistence. On the one hand, fighting for the job means enduring slowly creeping passages of time in which very little happens. Meanwhile, the individual’s anxiety steadily mounts and his bodily vigor slowly erodes from standing on the hard pavement with nowhere to sit down, no protection from the elements, and nowhere to go to the bathroom. On the other hand, this grim temporal continuity gets punctured at irregular, unforeseeable intervals by brief episodes of panic and violence. The violence, or the threat of it, comes from fellow competitors, from random passersby who yell obscenities at workers, and from police officers who show up without warning to drive workers away or arrest them, perhaps routing them toward deportation.

Yet, even as they endure the brutally disorienting and contradictory temporality of “fighting for the job,” day laborers grace their efforts with the halo of moral virtue. For these migrants, taking up this “fight” connotes a demonstration of self-reliance, an attentiveness to social duty, and a performance of masculinity that goes beyond mere physical brawn. The temporal

imaginary of this aspect of the “fight” links the prudent management of everyday time to a life trajectory of upward mobility and the gradual stabilization of a life course hitherto disrupted by migrations and precarious work. Thus, says one upbeat day laborer, “On the corner . . . every employer is an opportunity. . . . It’s the one who is most on the ball who goes to work.” Workers further underscore their own moral worthiness by contrasting their industrious behavior with the “degenerate,” “irresponsible” habits of fellow day laborers who, they say, drink in public, pilfer merchandise from nearby shops, and fail to use their time productively. The irony in this good/bad worker dichotomy is that precisely by elevating the quest for work above all else and then either standing inactive or fighting violently on the corner, day laborers who strive to demonstrate their work ethic end up being seen as degenerates and treated accordingly by society.

This painful situation suggests the need for a political response that goes beyond furnishing safer, more reliable, and more plentiful job opportunities for day laborers. Even reducing the pressures that the deportation regime exerts on these migrants would not be enough to break up the “fight” on the corner, although it would de-escalate it somewhat. The core problem, however—the fount of the fight—lies in the structure and valorization of work itself, under conditions of precaritization that have spread throughout neoliberal society even as they manifest in extreme ways among day laborers. The flexibilization and dissolution of the employment contract; the growing governance of work by quasi-legal power regimes in mobile, ever more provisional spaces; the increasingly discretionary and fortified application of state policing functions within such spaces; the temporal oscillations between unpredictable bouts of income-generating work time and tediously continuous time periods of waiting and preparing for work; the cruelly optimistic posture of “aspirational normativity,” to use Lauren Berlant’s (2011) phrasing, in which one strives to approximate “the good life” by means that thwart the achievement of such a life; the visceral registering of these temporal predicaments in syndromes of corporeal time by which the body is imperiled precisely through attempts to preserve it—all these tendencies take on exceptional forms in the lives of day laborers. And it is above all the homeland security state that enforces this exceptionality. Yet these dynamics of precaritization are also coming to shape daily experience for working people throughout the class order, especially if we view the latter in the broadly encompassing terms proposed by autonomism. In relation to this society-wide phenomenon of precaritization, the day laborer appears not only as exception but also as synecdoche.

In turn, a vision of the refusal of work that is attuned to this specific confluence of sociohistorical circumstances can also be glimpsed in the political impulses generated at day labor centers. Day laborers express provocations that tend toward the refusal of work in their themes regarding the kinds of communities they are forging at worker centers, even though these workers neither self-consciously adopt the language of the refusal of work nor articulate—not yet, at least—its negative aspect. Lacking this dimension of outright repudiation, the political tendencies brewing at day labor centers might better be termed the *displacement* of work, or the *occupying* of work time, although their overtones evoke work's refusal.

Within the workers' discourse, one theme that anticipates the refusal of work is the notion of "conviviality" in the midst of unrelenting "suffering." Weeks (2011) underlines the anti-ascetic insistence of the refusal of work on forms of pleasure seeking and creative invention no longer hemmed in by the mutually reinforcing protocols of the work ethic and the heteronormative family ethos. Day laborers voice a kindred motivation to experiment with autonomously and collectively generated forms of sociality through arts, educational, and political activities at worker centers. Yet, in a way that suggests a critical modification of Weeks's vision, they pointedly situate such efforts within an everyday milieu where continual suffering becomes a source of innovative relationality, without celebrating suffering and thereby recapitulating the work ethic's ascetic attachments.

Listening to day laborers talk about Casa Latina and the MLK Center, it is evident that a culture of small-scale interpersonal practices of conviviality in response to multiple forms of personal distress supplies vital ferment for more extensive dramatizations of collective autonomy. Such practices involve gestures of companionship to combat the relentless isolation and sorrow that afflicts these migrant workers, who otherwise spend most of their days alone, far from those they love. Day laborers have also evolved informal networks of material sharing: they offer scarce food, lodging, or money to those whose luck repeatedly fails in the center's job lottery and who keep losing the fight for work at the corner. Together, such convivial activities disrupt, reorder, and unfold alternatives to the work-deranged temporalities of these migrants' daily lives on a localized, intimate level.

These interpersonal practices prepare the ground for more ambitious efforts to counteract the temporal jolts and contortions of "fighting for the job" through collective projects that take shape within the time gaps left at least potentially open by the work society's dysfunctions. An ethos of cooperation leads workers to refrain from work periodically, notwithstanding the

“desperate” desire for work they perpetually feel and repeatedly voice, and instead to exercise routine care for the center community by keeping the facilities clean, volunteering for communal events, and flyering in local neighborhoods. Conviviality in response to suffering, furthermore, feeds workers’ organized efforts to run the centers on their own behalf through democratic worker assemblies. Thus, one worker insists, speaking for many others, that to lead these communities, you “have to have come from below, to have suffered what we suffer.” In a similar spirit, workers at Casa Latina affirm that in the face of appalling job-related injury rates for day laborers, workers themselves, through peer-led popular education workshops, are best equipped to teach safety techniques and to motivate others to refuse to do dangerous work.

Through the activist endeavors mobilized by worker centers, day laborers also project their own power into society at large. One worker, enunciating yet another generative theme, characterizes the organization as a means to “open a pathway” through which day laborers can assist one another, not only interpersonally but also through worker-led political interventions. The latter are notable for their strategic, cultural, and political-temporal versatility. They range from the shock politics of physically blocking ICE transport routes, to protracted legislative battles in city council chambers, to Day of the Dead commemorations that link intergenerationally accreted traditions with the current agonies of the Arizona desert. The “pathways” forged by the centers also deploy rhetorics of rights that avoid individualist, depoliticizing reductionism, as suggested by one worker who credited Casa Latina with enabling him to get “engaged in political activism and to fight for all rights . . . not for individual but for general rights, like for the community.”

This point must be emphasized, however: day laborers’ only incipiently negative yet richly creative refusal (or displacement, or occupying) of work remains thoroughly entangled in the reigning temporal paradoxes even as it partially separates from them. As resonant as the theme of conviviality is among day laborers, often the very same workers insist that forging a strong community at the center means making these organizations more professional, more businesslike, more efficient, and more exclusionary toward workers who disobey the rules and shirk hard work. As one worker puts it bluntly, “people need to see that this is not a playground, but a workforce.” Day laborers keep plunging into the “fight for the job” even as they “open pathways” toward a form of radical politicization with distinctly anti-work valences.

Day laborers' themes and practices thus do not yet embody the refusal of work in the sense of an explicit demand, a manifest repudiation, or a coherent strategy that is advanced by a self-consciously committed, organized collectivity. Nonetheless, the workers' communal actions and conceptions do make the refusal of work real in a more than anticipatory way insofar as they creatively repurpose the time of precaritized existence while obstructing the dominant temporalities of work. At day labor centers, the temporalities of conviviality that clear paths to political activation calm and contest precarious time's whipsawed swerves from long, drawn-out stretches of tense, demoralizing, and incapacitating waiting toward sudden tooth and nail fights for the job. That time of self-defeating subjection to work's autocratic rule becomes, for certain durations of daily experience, the time of innovative sociality and collective autonomy. Similarly, time usually reserved for performative enactments of cruelly optimistic *individual* responsibility gets spent—in defiance of ascetic ordinances—on *collective* demonstrations of *social* responsibility.

This is why the #Not1More deportation campaign and the new sanctuary movement, which have crucial bases in US day-labor centers, represent more than just further cooptations of migrant militancy by the norms and nostrums of the work society. Day laborers' generative themes show how currents coursing toward the refusal of work are active among the day-labor network's rank and file. The themes intimate how these gathering energies could extend the network's militancy from its increasingly uncompromising stand on deportation to a new push not just for legal work and safer work for migrants, but for less work for everyone. They illuminate both the conceptual challenges and the practical dimensions of materializing the refusal of work by striving, in the rigorously utopian manner that Weeks (2011: 197) describes, "to think the relationship between present and future both as tendency and as rupture."

Notes

This essay was first presented at the 2017 Radical Critical Theory Circle Seminar in Nisyros, Greece. I am grateful for the comments made at this gathering, especially from Jodi Dean and Andreas Kalyvas.

- 1 In some US cities, there are also significant populations of African, Asian, East European, and African-American day laborers.
- 2 This research involved seventy-eight individual interviews with day laborers and participatory observation at the two worker centers. Interviews with day labor center leaders in several other major US cities supplemented the intensive research in Seattle and Portland.

References

- Apostolidis, Paul, and Abel Valenzuela, Jr. 2014. "Cosmopolitan Politics and the Migrant Day Labor Movement." *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 2, no. 2: 222–44.
- Berardi, Franco "Bifo." 2009. *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy*. Translated by Francesca Cadel and Giuseppina Mecchia. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e).
- Berlant, Lauren. 2011. *Cruel Optimism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Freire, Paulo. 1973. *Education for Critical Consciousness*. New York: Continuum.
- Freire, Paulo. 1985. *The Politics of Education: Culture, Power, and Liberation*. Translated by Donald Macedo. Westport, CT: Bergin and Garvey.
- Freire, Paulo. 2000. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Translated by Myra Bergman Ramos. New York: Continuum.
- Marazzi, Christian. 2010. *The Violence of Financial Capitalism*. Translated by Kristina Lebedeva. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e).
- Theodore, Nik. 2015. "Generative Work: Day Labourers' Freirean Praxis." *Urban Studies* 52, no. 11: 2035–50.
- Weeks, Kathi. 2011. *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Post-work Imaginaries*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.