

Workers Against Work

Reviewed by Alex Trotter

Alex Trotter

From *Anarchy: A Journal of Desire Armed* #51, Spring/Summer 2001,

Workers Against Work: Labor in Paris and Barcelona During the Popular Fronts by Michael Seidman (University of California Press, 1990) 384 pages, \$50.00 (£30) hardcover.

This is a comparative study of workers resistance to the labor discipline imposed by their own representation in its various flavors (i.e., Socialists, Communists, anarchosyndicalists, and sundry other leftists and liberals) in two different but contemporaneous situations in the 1930s. Unlike most academic labor histories, which seem to emphasize (favorably) political and economic activities of unions and parties, Seidman's is a social history of everyday life under the Popular Fronts in Spain and France, and gives much-needed attention to the revolt against work. Seidman does an admirable job of showing how the "progressive forces" contended with not only their declared enemies on the Right, but also the indifference and unruliness of the masses whose cause they claimed to champion, even if he does seem at times too defensive in his sympathies for the resistant workers. Alas, the \$50 price will be daunting to most potential readers, especially the very workers and work-resisters who would presumably most benefit from it. For those with Internet access, it is possible, though a pain in the ass, to read the entire book on line at the University of California Press Web site (which is what I did). The address is as follows: <http://www-ucpress.berkeley.edu:3030/dynaweb/public/books/history/seidman> – whew! Got that?!

Seidman examines the social and historical differences between France and Spain and the ways these differences produced divergent styles of leadership by the coalitions of the Left, and yet shows how similar were the methods used in the two countries by workers to evade or mitigate the demands of productivism, as were some of the methods used by leftists (revolutionary in Spain, reformist in France) to promote discipline in the workplace, either through blandishments or through coercion. Two definitions of class consciousness came into sharp conflict; for the activists, it meant working productively to build socialism, but for the workers it meant avoiding the demands of wage labor as much as possible. Seidman discusses the particular struggles of women, immigrants, and the unemployed as well as those of the main body of male, citizen, waged workers.

Spain was much less industrially developed than France. There had never been a real bourgeois liberal revolution, and the Enlightenment had made only a tentative impact. The main power remained in the hands of the oligarchic landowning class, the Catholic Church, and the military. Catalonia had the most advanced industry in Spain, but even there, the bourgeoisie was relatively

weak. The bosses' style of rule remained paternalistic to an extraordinary degree, with frequent resort to direct police repression and military intervention in politics (the *pronunciamiento*). The working class during the first part of the 20th century was extremely combative, violent confrontations with employers, the Church, and the police being the order of the day. The Popular Front came to power in a situation of actual takeover by workers; churches were burned and factories were abandoned by their owners, who fled for their lives. The principal workers' organizations, the anarchosyndicalist CNT and the Marxist UGT, expressed a revolutionary ideology up to and throughout the 1930s. Marxists and anarchists alike upheld an ideology of modernization and development, which in their view were tasks the proletariat would undertake because the bourgeoisie could not or would not.

France, by contrast, had established a democratic stability, with separation of church and state; a strong bourgeois class, committed to innovation and the ideology of progress, into which Jews and Protestants were integrated; highly developed industries, and a unified national market. Anticlericalism had faded as a cause after the Dreyfus Affair. There was free public education under the Third Republic, so little need was felt for modern schools like those run by the anarchosyndicalists in Spain. By the time of the Popular Front the main workers organizations the Socialist Party (SFIO), the Communist Party (PCF), and the CGT unions had largely abandoned revolutionary ideology. By endorsing French patriotism in World War I (the *union sacrée*), the Socialists and CGT had integrated themselves into the nation and shown the ruling class that they were not a revolutionary threat. Anarchosyndicalism in France faded after the war and was replaced by Communism as the principal revolutionary ideology. Despite political and tactical squabbles between them, the Socialists and Communists cooperated in the building of the Popular Front. There was violence during the Popular Front, but the capitalist class remained in control of the means of production. Nor did extreme right-wing threats against the state, in the manner of Franco, ever manifest. The officer class in France maintained loyalty, albeit grudging perhaps, to the republic, even under the first "red" government since the Commune.

Seidman compares Spain's level of development in the 1930s to that of prerevolutionary Russia's; the strength of revolutionary ideology there was similar to that of the Soviet Union. Like the Russian Marxists, the anarchist revolutionaries of Spain saw themselves as enlighteners. The Spanish Popular Front (which included the CNT, POUM, Socialist Party, Communist Party, and Catalan nationalists) appropriated Soviet methods, including Stakhanovism, socialist realist propaganda art, and even labor camps for recalcitrant workers, staffed by guards recruited from within the CNT. Despite their disagreements, the followers of Marx and of Bakunin united in their efforts to extract more labor from the workers. In Spain, the disciplinary actions meted out to workers by unions and the leftist state owed not merely to the exigencies of the war with Franco, but were consistent with the ideological foundations of Marxism and anarchosyndicalism, especially the project of rationalizing production, and the glorification of science and technology, including an enthusiasm for Taylorism. Other progressivist projects the Spanish revolutionaries championed were large public works such as roads, dams, and other infrastructure, and they demonstrated a fondness for the modernist urbanism of Le Corbusier, which envisioned massive automobile circulation.

In the initial stages of the Spanish Revolution, piecework was abolished and wage differentials leveled. But as the CNT and UGT encountered ongoing resistance by workers to exhortations to produce more and sacrifice for the war effort, piecework and wage differentials were reinstated. Workers engaged in all manner of goldbricking, theft of tools and supplies, faked injuries and

illnesses, and reluctance to attend union meetings or pay dues. The Popular Front responded with fines, dismissals, campaigns to curtail work stoppages on fiesta (saint) days, and Grinch-like efforts to eliminate Christmas celebrations and New Year's bonuses. Unions and collectives insisted on using their own doctors to examine claims of illness or injury. The label of "sabotage" was applied with a very broad brush to workers who complained, were impolite in serving customers, took nonurgent telephone calls on the job, and didn't ask for more work after completing a job. Slacking off was even equated with fascism: "The lazy man is a fascist," as one slogan had it. All adults between 18 and 45 had to have a "work certificate," which could be demanded for inspection at any time. There were campaigns against vices such as drinking, gambling, and pornography. Workers were reminded by the UGT that "the revolution is not a party time," while the CNT asserted that "the masses must be reeducated morally."

Seidman throws doubt on the notion that organizations outside the mainstream of the CNT offered a significant alternative to its compromises, corruption, and bureaucracy from the standpoint of resistance to labor discipline. For example, the Friends of Durruti, whom he calls "extreme leftists," called for more work, sacrifice, and even forced labor. Durruti himself spoke of the need for the revolution to be totalitarian. Mujeres Libres, the women's group affiliated with the CNT, admired the supposed Soviet success in abolishing prostitution.

In France, the strategies of coercion by the Popular Front were softer than in Spain, reflecting the higher degree of accommodation of the French working class to the industrial system, and the greater overall stability of the society. Seidman is at pains to show that the role of unions and leftists was not purely coercive, that they also, depending on the situation, assisted workers' demands for less work. Although they came to power on a massive wave of strikes in 1936, French leftists were concerned not with building a dictatorship of the proletariat in conditions of spartan economic development but in fighting to integrate the proletariat into the emerging consumer society. As a Communist slogan of the time put it: "The Riviera for all" (*i.e.*, not only for the rich). The main political purpose of the Popular Front may have been as a short-term alliance to check the rise of fascism, but it was also an acknowledgment that a Soviet- or syndicalist-style revolution in France was not a real possibility, although it lingered on as a rhetorical pitch.

In contrast with Spain, the main controls on the working class in France were instituted by the capitalist class itself. French capitalists did not need to be trumped by left-wing industrial militants in implementing Taylorist scientific management or piecework. Discipline on the factory floor was tight, and foremen in France were, as Seidman puts it, loyal "sergeants" in the army of production, whereas their counterparts in Spain often actually sided with workers in fights against bosses and senior management. Although not as radical as the Spanish, French workers were insubordinate enough to make the captains of industry wish that the conditions in their factories and workshops resembled those of "the countries of order" (United States, Britain, and Germany).

Before the Popular Front, a 48-hour workweek was common in France. The two main achievements of the Left government headed by Socialist leader Léon Blum were the 40-hour week and paid vacations. Employers gritted their teeth and submitted to the reduced hours of labor. But workers showed their gratitude for these leftist- and union-brokered gains by constantly demanding more in a thousand unsanctioned ways. The strikes of 1936 that brought the Popular Front to power, and later ones as well, were largely spontaneous and initially caught militants off guard before they slowly brought them under control. As in Spain, workers exhibited lateness, drunkenness, theft, slowdowns, resistance to piecework, fake injuries, and disrespect for authority. The

unemployed would often avoid accepting offers from government placement bureaus. During the strikes there was considerable destruction of machinery and other property costing many thousands of francs worth of damage. Disobedience continued after the strikes abated. The rhetoric of the Popular Front called on workers to fight fascism, but workers had their own ideas about this; for them, the real fascism was iron discipline in the workplace. "Democratic" bosses, foremen, engineers, and other taskmasters were often referred to by workers as fascists (there were, in fact, enough future admirers of Marshal Pétain in their ranks), as were strikebreakers. Seidman cites one example of a model worker in the Stakhanovite mold being followed home by hundreds of his fellow workers who spat on him from head to foot.

Blum criticized workers for refusing overtime, including weekend work, and lowering productivity. But he seems to have been genuinely popular. He promised that the Socialist government in France would not open fire on the workers, as the Social Democrats in Germany under Noske had after World War I. He managed to keep that promise, but then, France never really came to a revolutionary situation in the 1930s, so that pledge did not meet its supreme test.

The Left, like the Right, conducted a civilizing offensive on the working class aimed at controlling lifestyle in the interests of productivity. Even the expansion of nonworking time was part of this drive. The licentiousness of popular culture would be fought through the organization of leisure time (not to be confused with idleness or laziness) and the promotion of consumption. Militants scolded workers for smoking, drinking, playing cards, or betting on horses. Meanwhile, the era of bargain stores for the masses and credit buying plans had begun. The CGT instituted a vacation savings plan. Vacations were viewed in a utilitarian light, as a necessary restorative in preparation for more work. The automobile was starting to take over, although at this time most workers could not afford one; most commuting was still done by bicycle. The Communists whined that French auto makers had failed to "democratize" the automobile.

The end of the Popular Front in Spain came, of course, through Franco's military victory over the republic. In France, it came about for various reasons, including the increasing reluctance of the bourgeoisie to suffer competitive disadvantage in international markets because of the reduction in hours of labor. Increased wages were accompanied by increased prices, which angered the middle classes. The increasing international tensions caused by Hitler's moves contributed to the desire of the French ruling class to put its house in order so as to meet the threat. The Daladier government, dominated by the Radical Party, a liberal ally of the "red" parties in the Popular Front, told French workers that they must cut out the nonsense and start working harder and longer. As much as the Socialists, Communists, and unions tried to enforce this task, it was not enough for the champions of order and the "right to work." Another spontaneous general strike ensued in 1938 to prevent the extension of the 40-hour week; it was blamed by the bosses on the Communist Party, and the PCF was eager to claim credit for organizing it. When this strike failed, the momentum of the Popular Front was gone.

It was the resistance or indifference by workers to schemes of workplace utopia that contributed to coercive responses from the state and labor activists, Seidman asserts. "One can speculate," he says, that the bureaucratization and centralization of the CNT and the state may have been slower had workers sacrificed wholeheartedly. Democratic workers' control could have had more chance to succeed, and the centralized war economy might have had fewer advocates. But he doesn't offer any proof of these speculations, which makes me wonder why he offers them at all, especially since they seem to contradict the main theses of the book. Is he hedging his bets? Seidman shows another conflict by acknowledging that workers resistance to increases in work-

time and productivity hurt the war effort against *franquismo* in Spain as well as French military preparedness in a time of Nazi-directed German rearmament. (French aviation workers balked at weekend work in their effort to defend the hard-won 40-hour week, whereas German workers in aviation were turning in 50- to 60-hour weeks.) But elsewhere he points out that the real thing to regret is that German workers didn't follow the example of their French comrades in asserting the right to be lazy. This is an issue he might have explored in greater depth.

Closer to home, American readers might want to compare *Workers Against Work* with John Zerzan's *Elements of Refusal* for an analysis of the relationship between labor unions, the state, the capitalist class, and workers everyday struggles against work in the United States during the same time period.

The achievements of the French Popular Front seem paltry today. A 40-hour week? Paid vacations? The near revolution of 1968 seemed like the beginning of the end for this quantitative death on the installment plan, but it is still very much with us.

The author concludes by invoking Paul Lafargue's *Right to Be Lazy*, and suggests, along with Lafargue, that the abolition of the state and of wage labor (Seidman never says abolition of work) depends on an automated cybernetic utopia in which machines do all the work. This is a problematic concept that goes unexamined at the end of *Workers Against Work*. One may speculate that the way to eliminate resistance is not by workers control of the means of production but rather by the abolition of wage labor itself. He also says that the workers resistances he describes should not be read as false consciousness, backwardness, or sympathy for the Right. Well, who would come to that conclusion? Few among the Left/union organizers and activists of today would think of reading this book, and fewer still could stomach it if they did. Seidman's phrasing here betrays an academic timidity in seeming anticipation of the disapproval of his leftist colleagues in the sociology or history department.

According to Seidman, "resisters did not articulate any clear future vision of the workplace or of society." This statement points to one of the mysteries inherent in the struggle against work. Now, as then, resistance to work is ubiquitous but inchoate. It has no need of militants, indeed scorns them, but agitators of the zerowork persuasion may play some kind of secret, undefined role in its encouragement. Unorganizable, it is like a magma beneath the surface of contemporary society. We don't know whether its next great eruption is very near, or more distant, or in what country it will happen next. And maybe this book can help.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Alex Trotter

Workers Against Work

Reviewed by Alex Trotter

From Anarchy: A Journal of Desire Armed #51, Spring/Summer 2001,

Retrieved on January 1, 2019 from https://web.archive.org/web/20011205102625/http://www.anarchymag.org:80/51/review_workers.html

theanarchistlibrary.org