Destructive Creation

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Joseph Schumpeter famously explained the ability of the capitalist system to survive and recover from its structural crises by a process of "creative destruction." Schumpeter agreed with Marx that the productive dynamics of capitalism generate crises, but he did not regard these crises as proof of the irrationality of capitalism and the necessity of its ultimate collapse under the weight of its own contradictions. On the contrary, he saw crises as essential to the open-ended survival of capitalism. In crises new means of production, new technologies, new labour practices, and new commodities displace those that were dominant in a previous moment of capitalist evolution. While for those who were dependent on the old structures (capitalists and workers, but mostly workers), periods of crisis can be catastrophic. Judged from the abstract perspective of the system and the future, crises are the conditions for intense social and technological creativity unmatched, and unmatchable, by any competing system. Schumpeter argues that capitalist history is therefore a history of "industrial mutations…that incessantly revolutionizes the economic structure *from within*, incessantly destroying the old one, incessantly creating a new one. This process of Creative Destruction is the essential fact about capitalism. It is what capitalism consists in and what every capitalist concern has got to live with."(Schumpeter, 1942, 83). It is also what every worker has to live with, and from the perspective of those whose lives are constantly overturned, the process is more destructive than creative. We aim to allow some of those voices to speak, that everyone might better understand the on-the-ground reality of capitalist "creativity." Before turning to the voices of the victims, let us first try to understand more clearly the general outlines of the process.

Marx too argued that capitalism constantly revolutionized the means of production, and Schumpeter acknowledges as much (Schumpeter, 1942, 82). Whereas Marx believed that these crises would become cumulatively more severe and provoke increasingly global working class action, ultimately ending in the overthrow of the ruling class, Schumpeter argued that because there is no specifiable limit to what

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capitalists may invent in the future to counteract tendencies towards falling rates of profit, capitalism is potentially endlessly dynamic and not vulnerable to undermining itself from within. Since the eighteenth century, capitalism has revolutionized itself through the application of heavy machinery to production, through faster modes of transportation, through the shift towards the mass production of consumer goods as a major source of profitable investment, the application of real time communication technologies to production, and the globalization of financial products and services those same communication technologies have permitted. Thus far, it has proven Schumpeter and not Marx correct. There has as of yet been no successful global revolution (although there have been waves of global struggle, most recently the Arab Spring-Occupy wave beginning in 2010) and no definitive proof that capitalism cannot invent yet another structural revolution to absorb the surplus capital awaiting opportunities for profitable investment ($680 billion in Canada alone) (Press Progress, 2015). There are worries, even from critical mainstream economists like Thomas Piketty, that capitalism may have reached the limits of profitable growth in the production of real commodities (Picketty, 2014, 93-5). Should that prognosis be true, and only financial speculation remains to absorb surplus capital – a result that would mean no growth in employment and wages outside the upper reaches of the financial industry – then a political crisis, exacerbated by rejection of the politics of surveillance and control dangerous for the future of capitalism in North America, Europe and the BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India, China) countries far more dangerous for capitalism may erupt. Chris Hedges (2015), notably, believes that such a global uprising is inevitable.

Predications about the inevitability of revolution, especially successful revolution, are always questionable. What seems unquestionable is the fact that capitalism faces material limits to its growth that Schumpeter could not see in 1942. The global crisis in life-support systems that a century of fossil fuel burning, resource extraction, habitat depletion, and pollution have collectively caused is incompatible with the long-term future existence of any highly organized industrial-technological economy. A threat to the general environment is a threat to human life itself. At the same time, as movements towards "green capitalism" attest, capitalists as well as environmentalists can recognize long-term ecological dangers, and adjust their practices accordingly. While capitalist production up to this point in history has been materially irrational in its environmental destruction, no one can say for certain that a sustainable capitalism is impossible. Environmental crisis could prove

to play the same revolutionising role as economic crisis – a spur towards creative destruction of old production methods. David Harvey avoids the doomsday talk that dominates much discussion on the left and says, correctly, that "if there are serious problems in the capital-nature relation, then this is an internal contradiction within and not external to capital. We cannot maintain that capital has the power to destroy its own ecosystem while arbitrarily denying that it has a like power to cleanse itself and resolve or at least properly balance its internal contradictions" (Harvey, 2014, 259). That which has the power to destroy (being a power over the object destroyed) also has the power to preserve. Capitalism could cause global ecological collapse, but since it is essentially a dynamic and self-revolutionising system, that outcome is neither a logical entailment of its principles of organization nor a material necessity of its actual operations, precisely because capitalism lives by changing its actual operations.

The future remains open – and that is a good thing for socialists, who can help change that future by effectively organizing to transform capitalism into a democratic socialist life-economy in which natural wealth and human labour are marshalled to produce life capital. Life capital is according to McMurty (2015):

> "the *life wealth that produces more life wealth without loss and with cumulative gain*. We defend it by life goods to ensure our life capacities are not reduced but grow through time. Most are unpriced – the sun and air, the learning, the home environment, the delight in nature, the play, the love, the raising of children, the fellow arts, and so on. On the social level, the same holds and any well-governed society provides for them in many ways. All may recognise the principle of life capital in their own lives as self-evident, and that all which lasts through time that is worthwhile is life capital."

While political struggle must be future-oriented, it must be anchored in the present, in where we stand now, and not on the non-foundation of abstract principles and dogmatic beliefs. Where people stand in the present is determined by where people find themselves in the system of production. As Michael Lebowitz argues in his must read *Beyond Capital: The Political Economy of the Working Class*, because needs can only be satisfied through the purchase of proceed commodities in capitalism, the natural object of struggle for working people is not socialism straightaway, but higher wages and better working conditions. "Rather than pointing beyond capital, the inability to satisfy their needs in itself leads workers

not beyond capital, but to class struggle within capitalism"(Lebowtiz, 1992, 131). This fact has two implications: first, the struggle to satisfy needs can only ever be completed in a socialist society, but second, workers can make their lives better through successful struggles within capitalism for higher wages, for better working conditions, for shorter working hours, and for pensions that ultimately free workers from the need to keep working for wages. It is in light of this second implication that precarity is best understood.

What is called precarious labour, short term, non-unionized, insecure work with few, if any, benefits, is a consequence of class struggle – the class struggle of capitalists against the gains that working class people had made over two centuries of struggle. Precarious workers are the victims of capitalist success in undermining historical gains. When we look at precarity from this perspective, Schumpeter's creative destruction looks more like destructive creation. The past gains of working class struggle and the improved lives these gains have enabled are being destroyed by the creation of new forms of precarious labour. While politicians and system-servants will try to draw our thoughts away from the victims through their usual formula of "necessary sacrifices," human fellow-feeling and critical attention to the real implications for displaced workers' lives and livelihoods must hold attention fixed on the destructive moment: for those expelled from any sort of secure employment, in a context where a democratic socialist life-economy alternative is not immanent, precarious employment makes life a de-humanizing struggle just to survive.

It is in this light that we want to consider precarity by sharing a few of the voices of its victims. Although the alienating and oppressive conditions in which they work is de-humanizing, their capacity to endure and to resist lets their dignity as human beings – the foundation of the struggles of all oppressed people – shine through. Precarity, from our perspective is first of all a matter of the conscious destruction of the achieved level of life-security won by the organized working class. Only in a secondary sense is it a matter of precise sociological analysis (has not work under capitalist conditions always been precarious, which raises the question to what extent the term 'precariat' is sociologically meaningful?). These questions are important, but their value lies in *the extent to which they help orient struggles to improve life and life's conditions*. As Henri Lefebvre argued in the first volume of his masterpiece, *The Critique of Everyday Life*: "Once the philosopher is committed to life, he will watch over its meaning and its development from within…At the very heart of the everyday, he will discover what is hindering…the march forward."

(Lefebvre, 2014, 120). In order to guide practice, theory must listen to the everyday voices of working people struggling against the destructive creations of new and worse conditions of work.

The city of Windsor, Ontario has lost 14,000 manufacturing jobs in the last decade – unionized work with pensions and benefits that provided real protection against the life-blind cruelties of the capitalist market (Pearson, 2015). These jobs have not all been replaced, but to the extent that they have, it has been with precarious labour, often in the service industry, call centres and temporary agencies. The Windsor Workers' Action Centre sat down with some workers struggling with precarious work conditions. In what follows we share their thoughts on workplace precarity, its social and political implications, and how it has affected their personal and familial lives.[4]

STORIES FROM THE MARGINS: THE PRECARIAT SPEAKS

Our conversations with workers revealed a number of disturbing themes, many which extended precarity beyond the workplace and into the very fabric of their lives. This minimum wage work often included high-stress and fast-paced work environments with ever more demands for multi-tasking, parking lot rendezvous with shadowy contractors, and workplaces that pitted employees against each other in a fear-driven struggle to protect their own jobs. Precarity is accompanied by a general atmosphere of fear: fear of supervisors, fear for personal safety, and, overriding everything, the fear of being fired. What became clear in these stories is that, in a climate of 'no-work', people felt compelled to take any work. This included jobs that they understood to be unsafe both physically and mentally, and which also undermined their dignity as human beings: work shifts, for example, so demanding that there was no time to go to the washroom, having to eat lunch at the same counter where they worked, and working conditions so crowded that workers rubbed against each other while performing their duties.

In an effort to better understand our role as worker advocates in a time and place marked by the displacement of manufacturing jobs

4 These interviews were conducted over a two hour period on August 5, 2015 at the Windsor Workers Education Centre by Paul Chislett and Mireille Coral. Four workers took part in the discussion on their respective workplaces: retail, construction, street organizing, and vegetable packaging plants. Each has agreed to the inclusion of the selections of their stories we have chosen. Their names have been changed to protect their identities.

through deindustrialization, and in keeping with the principles of a liberatory critical pedagogy which encourages dialogue rooted in the lives of people (Freire, 2005; Freire & Horton, 1990; Horton, 1998, 2003, Kane, 2001), the Windsor Workers' Action Centre invited workers who had left precarious workplaces to tell their stories. An ancient and powerful practice, storytelling has been a means for conveying knowledge throughout human history (White, 1980; Wilson, 2008). We saw the telling of stories as an opportunity for workers working in marginalized situations to be heard, but also as an opportunity for us to learn from them. In keeping with the model of critical pedagogical practice wherein power relationships are supplanted and inverted (Freire, 1995; Horton, 1998), as worker advocates we became "students" and the workers became our teachers. By listening to their stories, we gained a more exact understanding of the kinds of problems workers face in Windsor, problems which, we are sure, can be generalized across the capitalist world. The following descriptions of workplaces and work experiences come from the workers themselves.

PACKING PRODUCE: CONTRACTORS AND CLIQUES

Two of the workers who shared their stories, Norma and Cheri, worked in Leamington packing produce in greenhouse packaging plants. Their stories are immediately characterized by intrigue, as they describe meeting men in minivans in parking lots outside fast food restaurants early in the morning. Norma and Cheri never learned the full names of the men who picked them up, drove them to work, and paid them on pay day. As Norma explained, the job of her contractor was to "find people to work at the farm for another guy that's affiliated with that farm. He talks to people to find people who want to work. He goes to McDonalds [in Windsor] standing outside and gets people to work that way." Cheri described being paid on payday out of "buckets of cash," which was handed to the workers out the window of the contractor's minivan: "With my contractor, his wife would hand it out through the car window out of a laundry basket, like the kind you would put in your sink, and there would be little envelopes in line, with your name on it, and they had their little 2 year old son in the back seat." On her pay envelope were written the deductions from her pay – "I had to pay $60 for my ride, $20 for the privilege of having a time card, $5.50 for the privilege of having a coat because they have to clean it, so for 46 hours I cleared $328.50" – but no mention of EI or CPP deductions required by law. "Who are these men with no last names and who do not pay EI or CPP?" Cheri was puzzled: "They're off the map. They're taking $2 per hour off your pay and putting

it in their pocket, and how they get away with it I don't know. If they have 200 workers they're making $400 per hour. The companies say they are paying so and so, and so it's off our hands, but they know what's going on." Furthermore, the cash workers are all paid on the same day and in the same way, adding to the mystery of the identity of the contractors: Cheri observed, "Obviously people felt pretty comfortable with $5000 cash in their vehicle".

Inside, the packing plants are chaotic stressful places: "They had a 25 minute lunch and you have a gown, gloves, and a hat. You can't eat your lunch dressed, so you have to dispose of your stuff and you have to get rid of your smock. Well there's 200 people working there; you have 25 minutes to get undressed, go eat, and come back, and they would blow a siren and you're supposed to be at work within 3 minutes and if you weren't in line in time, they were suspending you for a period of time. So basically you are trying to figure out where your coat is…If you want to put your smock in your locker, it's going to take you 5 minutes to get there, 5 minutes to get to lunch, 5 minutes to put your smock back on, so people were throwing them all over the place and then trying to get them on before the bell went off." Once back at their work places, workers were crowded together: "We're really packed in together. Doing your job, your bum rubs against the person behind you." Workers packing tomatoes and peppers are required to step up on a grate in order to avoid slipping on a floor that, as the shift progresses, becomes increasingly strewn with vegetable matter. When asked about safety training, Norma said, "They talked a little bit about it [in orientation] but not much. They said to make sure that you stood on the grid."

Norma described her experience at the plant as "worked to the bone and that's what we expect of you." She also speaks of groups or cliques that form among workers in the plant, "and if you don't get into a clique then you just eat by yourself. I didn't talk to many people." The formation of cliques also proved to be a source of stress and fear, as Norma discovered on her last day at work. After being warned of a zero tolerance policy regarding drugs in the workplace, Norma approached her supervisor to tell him that she needed to take medication for her bipolar disorder. On her break, she was asked by other workers about "being bipolar because they overheard the conversation with the boss and I was honest with them and thinking it's my time, it's my break, and I didn't think there'd be any consequences, so I finished off the work for that night and the next day the driver wouldn't pick me up and the driver wouldn't answer…I got a hold of him 2 days later and he told me I was fired for saying I was bipolar and I was on medication." Norma suspects that one of

the few people she spoke to at work told the contractor about her condition: “I think he was the one talking about me being bi-polar and on my meds and stuff, and I think that’s how they found out. It was actually through a friend of mine.”

STREET LABOURERS: A UNION OF MUTUAL AID

While precarious labour makes organizing even more dangerous, it is also a spur to creative resistance on the part of precarious workers. In Windsor, panhandlers and buskers have recently come together to form a union. Street Labourers of Windsor (SLOW) is an organization that provides direction and assistance for anyone who finds him or herself on the street. Ryan the organizer who grew the membership from three to twelve, describes his motivation as coming from a place of understanding: “What took me to organizing is because, well, I've seen it all. I've done it all. I know what these people go through. I know their needs; I know that they need to be talked to. I know that people don't know where to go, what to do, and I'm trying to find a connection somewhere where they can reach out.” Making sure that people on the street receive guidance and assistance in finding food and shelter is one of the main priorities of the union. Why a person is on the street is less important to SLOW than how; for Ryan, “the key is to try to work with people.”

SLOW recognizes the work of panhandling and busking as work, as “just a way of seeking money so that you know you can survive.” As with any work, working conditions are a concern for the union. Panhandlers and buskers are very often working with mental illnesses, addictions, or both. In a number of cases, street labourers are people who were injured at work and now find themselves on the street living with chronic pain. Communicating needs under these conditions is difficult, and, as R explains, “trying to work with everybody in this to make it one is a very great challenge.” Equally challenging is the attitude of the public. Anti-panhandling sentiments expressed in *The Windsor Star* (Vander Doelen, 2014) in the spring, as outdoor patios began to open, fuelled an angry discourse in the city in which panhandlers were characterized as pests. Ryan speaks passionately of remarks from passersby that panhandlers must endure: “I've watched and seen how people have said, ‘You shouldn't be on the street.’ Well, that's not yours to say. You don't even know the reason *why* I'm here, what I'm doing here. Are you in the same predicament that I'm in? Do you even know who I am? I don't know who you are. And one day you could be doing the same thing.”

This concern for the wellbeing of street labourers is not limited to providing material assistance. During the weeks of anti-panhandling

arguments, SLOW represented its membership by undertaking political action. As the anti-panhandling rhetoric increased, the Downtown Business Improvement Association proposed the installation of so-called care meters in the downtown core. Putting money in the meters would ostensibly be a way for concerned people to help the poor – the money would be distributed among agencies – without contributing to panhandling and its related problems of drug addiction, alcoholism and so forth. For Ryan, this was an important political cause. He saw care meters as taking money out of the hands of poor people and giving it to bureaucracies: "We fought against that - I was spearheading that, and then it actually went out the window; the motion did not get passed, and then the care meters were never installed, which was a victory for us."

WORKING AT THE GAS STATION: SECRET SHOPPERS AND CHOCOLATE BARS

Joan worked the night shift at a gas station that is located near the last automotive plant in the city still running three shifts. Joan earned an undergraduate degree at the University of Windsor in the 80s; she argues that she stands as proof that, propaganda about the causal connection between higher education and secure, well-paying work notwithstanding, earning a degree is not a guarantee against precarious work. This was not her first time working as a gas station attendant. "I want to tell you what it's like, what is expected of minimum wage workers today," she begins. When she worked as a gas station attendant in 1986, "there were four pumps, and we got to sit at a desk, inside, with a few bags of chips and maybe five different kinds of chocolate bars on the counter to sell. And you sat at this desk and you could read, you could do crossword puzzles or watch T.V." In 2009, "I had two pages of things to do between customers." The new gas station had 12 gas pumps, "every chocolate bar made in North America; the whole front counter, bottom of the counter is nothing but chocolate bars. I've counted them: there were over 2000 individual chocolate bars, gum packages, Tums, you name it, and we also sold lottery tickets. There was a lottery machine, cell phone minutes, as well as seven refrigerated cases where we sold sandwiches, pop, cold drinks. We also sold newspapers, magazines, and car products, like oil and windshield wiper fluid. We were a gas station, convenience store, and there was a Tim Hortons." Some of the tasks she was required to perform during her shift included watching the pumps, watching the store, selling goods, removing expired food from the refrigeration units, cleaning the inside of the units, cleaning the toilet, and wiping dust and grime off every chocolate bar and package of gum and candy at the front of the store by the cash register.

"Employers find more things for workers to do, ridiculous things to do, to merit any raise in minimum wage."

No chairs were provided; workers improvised by sitting on stacked milk crates and cushions. There were no scheduled breaks and no one to take over if the worker had to use the washroom. Workers were expected to eat lunch at the counter while waiting on customers. The only option for a worker who became sick or had to use the washroom was to ask the Tim Hortons employee to watch the store. "You went to the washroom as fast as you possibly could and then ran back. Nine times out of ten somebody would be standing there waiting to pay for something. You're never really off the job, ever." Gas station attendants were also financially responsible for customers who drove away without paying for gas even though this policy endangered workers' lives. A gas station attendant in Calgary was killed earlier in the summer trying to prevent such theft. Once again, the phenomenon of third party contractors – in this case, private franchise owners – plays a role in this dangerous practice. "The corporation can claim to the media that it does not have a policy of making attendants pay for stolen gas," Joan explains, "but you don't get a paycheque from the corporation. Your paycheque comes from the guy who runs the gas station on behalf of the corporation."

In her most recent job as a gas station attendant, Joan was assessed in a variety of ways, most notably the "secret shopper" test. She scored 93% on this assessment, but was told that she had failed. "The supervisor approached me like I had done something terrible. I thought, 'I got 93, that's an A,' but the supervisor told me that, in fact, I had failed the secret shopper and the boss is really mad." The "secret shopper" was actually a corporate spy sent to the store to see if the worker did her job according to corporate standards. Anyone coming to the counter might actually be a secret shopper; the worker would find out the next day. Of particular concern to the secret shopper was the matter of up-selling: Joan was supposed to ask anyone who purchased anything at the store if they wanted one other product: if the customer purchased gas, for example, Joan was supposed to ask if the customer wanted washer fluid as well; if the customer bought cigarettes, did he or she want a lighter? Joan found it hard to remember to upsell, especially during peak hours. In the wake of her 93% "failure", she began to use sarcasm as a form of resistance, asking customers who bought only a newspaper if they wanted washer fluid, too. Would they like a lighter with their chocolate bar? When the supervisor suggested that Joan didn't need to upsell to everyone who came to the counter because the secret shopper would be a customer who purchased gas, Joan pointed out that the next person in line could very well be the

secret shopper, listening. To this, the supervisor could make no reply and walked away in frustration. “So I had my little ways of protesting the ridiculousness,” Joan said.

CONCLUSION

The workers’ stories vindicate Lefevbre’s argument that the struggle for socialism must be grounded in concrete understanding of workers’ everyday lives. How can workers be mobilised effectively in ever changing conditions of destructive creation of new and worse conditions of employment unless everyone hears the human experience of what it means to be a precarious worker? Grounding political practice in everyday life means starting from and accepting the contradictions of everyday life for workers, especially precarious workers, under capitalism. One of the main frustrations of the precarious workers we spoke with was the problem of not being able to organize effectively against the corporation they nominally worked for, because of the role of third party contractors or private franchise owners. These contractors did not provide even the most basic health and safety training; furthermore the use of these contractors or private franchise owners allowed major corporations to not be responsible for policies that could endanger workers’ safety. Drawing from a pool of the desperate unemployed, contractors are middle men who stand between multinational corporations and the people who seem to be working for those corporations. Workers must always fight on two fronts: first, against the immediate indignities and deprivations of precarious work, and second, against the deeper structural problems of capitalist society itself.

Norma and Cheri, for example, went to work at a major greenhouse operation but were not clearly paid by the greenhouse operators; Joan worked at a major gas station chain, but was not employed by that corporation, but by a franchise owner who, because he or she must pay up the chain, is difficult to organize against. In an effort to employ the cheapest most flexible workforce possible, multinational corporations help create the conditions for low-wage flexible work. This demand for ever more low paying and insecure work is the foundation upon which precarious work is created. Large employers become less and less responsible for the working conditions of the human beings working in their plants and shops, as administrative costs are minimized, as well as costs associated with health and safety training. This fractured flexible workforce faces an additional challenge of trying to organize to improve their conditions, as workers have done in the past.

Still, as SLOW shows, political resistance is also creative. While it is easy to dismiss twelve street workers in a small Southern Ontario city as

a woefully inadequate response to global economic problems, one must also keep in mind that global circuits of capital must still pass through human beings, human labour, to reproduce themselves and grow. To the destructive creation that capital imposes on workers' lives, the self-organization of workers can still be a force of real creative destruction: supersession of the private control of universally required life-resources and their redistribution according to the principles of a democratic life-economy: production and distribution for life need satisfaction, and life-need satisfaction for the sake of enjoyed and meaningful contribution to the on-going project of human life-development.

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