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OCCUPYING OCCUPATIONS

Abstract

The occupation of one's place of work has long been a central figure of labor and livelihood movements: though instances of workplace occupation are relatively rare and their durations brief, they have had a disproportionate imaginative impact. This essay considers the imaginative lineaments of workplace occupations—from the factory occupations of 1917–19 to the worker occupations of the Great Recession after 2008—focusing on the ways they have figured worlds turned upside down, redrawn divisions of labor, inverted spaces of work and daily life, and mapped economies of “solidarity.” [workplace occupation, livelihood movements, strike, workers' control]

Three years before Occupy Wall Street gave a new meaning to lower Manhattan's Zuccotti Park, a group of workers, mostly Latino and Latina immigrants, took over a vinyl window and door factory, Republic Windows and Doors, on Chicago's Goose Island and occupied it for six days.¹ Occurring three months after the fall 2008 financial crash, the factory occupation attracted substantial press coverage as well as then President-elect Obama's endorsement: “I think they're absolutely right and understand that what's happening to them is reflective of what's happening across this economy.”² The tactic succeeded in the short term—the workers won a settlement with severance pay—but it did not have the immediate contagion effect of Occupy Wall Street nor did it receive the same degree of attention. Why not? What was the meaning of what one might call the “other side” of Occupy Wall Street, the still-unmeasured wave of workplace takeovers during the Great Recession?

For the takeover of Republic Windows and Doors was not unique. I do not have a complete archive of such occupations: let me just mention a few. In 2008, women workers occupied the Mansoura-Espana garment factory in the Nile Delta, one of many occupations that helped trigger the Arab spring. In the summer of 2009, there was a 77-day occupation of Ssangyong car

factory in Korea by hundreds of workers, broken by riot police, as well as a 37-day occupation at a Belfast Visteon auto parts factory. In February 2013, workers occupied a bankrupt building materials factory in Thessaloniki, Greece, and began to run it under their control.

What is the meaning of this form of livelihood struggle in a world of precarious and wageless life? How do they differ from earlier factory occupations? How do they differ from other occupations? Do they have a larger significance? How do they fit in a longer history of ways of imagining “wageless life,” in the sense of life beyond wage labor?

Occupying one's occupation is not unprecedented. It was an important aspect of the great waves of 20th-century labor unrest which peaked in the wake of World War One when metal workers occupied factories in Russia and Italy, and in the aftermath of World War Two as railways and plantations were seized in Java, as well as during the upheavals of the late sixties, when textile mills in Chile and shipyards in Glasgow and Gdansk were occupied (a moment that gave rise to host of classic films depicting factory occupations including Ken Loach's *Big Flame*, Jean-Luc Godard's *Tout Va Bien*, and Andrej Wadjja's *Man of Iron*).

One can identify four types of workplace occupations. In some cases, the sit-down was a tactic within a strike: this was the case the 1980 shipyard occupation by Poland's *Solidarnosc* that brought Lech Walesa to fame (and was depicted in *Man of Iron*), as well as the famous U.S. sit-down strikes of the late thirties. In other cases, the factory occupations were sympathetic vibrations from below as new radical governments came to power, as in Russia in 1917 or in Chile after the election of Allende. Still others emerged out of the collapse of established authorities in the wake of war, as in Java, where railway workers and sugar plantation workers took control of foreign-controlled enterprises, or in Algeria where colonial estates were seized when settlers left.

However, the recent occupations—the ones characteristic of our neoliberal epoch—have been responses to imminent factory closings, a situation

that renders the strike ineffective. The most wide-ranging and dramatic instance took place in Argentina after the financial crisis of 2001. Two national movements—one with the slogan “to occupy, to resist, to produce,” the other with the slogan “to work, to produce, to compete”—led to the “recovery” of between 100 and 250 workplaces by between 8,000 and 15,000 workers, a story told well in Naomi Klein’s 2003 film *The Take*.³ Though many of the best-known factory occupations were in goods manufacturing—metal-working, textiles, and auto parts—they spread beyond the “factory” to the service sector, as Argentine workers recovered and ran supermarkets, hospitals, hotels, and schools.⁴

Nonetheless, Occupy Wall Street is far better known than Republic Windows and Doors, Tahrir Square than Mansoura-Espana. How do they differ? Occupations of public and apparently public space—the privately owned spaces to which the public is invited like Zuccotti Park—are more visible than workplace occupations, which occur in the hidden abodes of labor. Public encampments create new and unexpected communities, and new routines of daily life as people try to live and act together. Occupying one’s ordinary occupation, in contrast, is less about building a new community than remaking existing work groups, changing the boundaries of work and daily life, as well as the hierarchies of the job. Accounts from Chicago to Buenos Aires emphasize the democratization of tasks and decision making.⁵

Moreover, whereas the occupation of public space remains within the tradition of liberal protest—the right to public assembly—workplace occupations challenge capital’s claim to own and to manage, particularly when they shift from sit-ins to work-ins, resuming the making of goods or providing of services. At this moment, the contradictions of worker-owned businesses emerge: relations to previous owners, suppliers, clients, and creditors; relations among workers with pre-existing salary scales and divisions of labor; relations to social movements and political parties; relations to the state’s police forces and its bankruptcy courts. In many places, as workers become owners, they lose labor rights; there are vital debates over whether recovered workplaces should become worker-owned cooperatives or government-owned public enterprises.⁶

How significant are these workplace occupations? Though they are rare and brief, they have disproportionate imaginative impact; their stories circulate long after the event, becoming fundamental

narratives for labor and livelihood movements. Like strikes, occupations stand as festive revolutionary interruptions of the endless time and constrained space of work. But they also promise that “another work is possible,” as they redraw divisions of labor, invert spaces of work and daily life, and map economies of “solidarity.”

As such, they are forms of what one might call concrete utopias, figures of wageless life, life beyond wage labor. Most studies of “utopian” thought and practice focus on particular thinkers and particular experimental communities rather than on the ideas of labor movements and the practices of reorganizing work. However, new forms of social life rarely jump out of the heads of individual thinkers; thus it may be more interesting and useful to ask how ordinary working people have imagined and enacted alternative ways of working and living. What are the utopian or prefigurative visions and practices that have been embodied in labor movements? This is a large question and no one to my knowledge has fully explored it. However, the strike and the occupation embody the two main threads of utopianism in the labor movement itself: the refusal of work and workers’ control. The refusal of work is an antiwork line that runs from Paul Lafargue’s classic pamphlet of 1883, *The Right to Be Lazy*, to the autonomist and anarchist groups of the 1970s like Zerowork who wanted to turn mass unemployment into mass freedom. The complementary trope of workers’ control runs from the IWW’s syndicalist vision of “one big union” to the *Sin Patrón*—without bosses—of Argentina.

These may seem “utopian” in the negative sense—unrealistic dreaming—but they capture the two elements that distinguish wage labor, and thus lie behind more “realistic” visions of getting beyond wage labor. For the first—the refusal of work—is a response to wage labor as the complete dependence on the market. Market dependence is usually defined as the situation where you do not have access to the means of subsistence without market transactions, so you are forced to acquire money, to get a job. If you have no access to means of subsistence, you must get a job even if there are no jobs. In this situation, to lose your job is a calamity, and much work discipline depends on the threat of being “laid off,” what the British called “the sanction of the sack,” what Americans call being “fired.”

The second—workers’ control—is a response to wage labor as subjection to the dictatorship of the workplace, to the despotism of the workplace

division of labor, to the reality that wage laborers lack any voice or enforceable rights in the workplace, and have little or no control over the labor process or decisions of the firm.

Livelihood movements have tended to focus on one side or the other. Some have struggled to secure a livelihood without market work, by trying to guarantee a basic income, to break the dependence on market, making sure that everyone has the basic means of subsistence: food, housing, health care, childhood education, old age support, and protection against unemployment. This “refusal of work” tradition can also be seen in the battle to win free time, by shortening the working day (the campaign for the eight-hour day), the working week (with the struggle for the weekend), and the working lifetime (with childhood education and old age pensions).

Other livelihood movements fought to change power relations in the workplace: union grievance procedures are one form of countervailing power, but the long history of factory occupations, elected factory councils, and worker-owned enterprises are a constant reminder that the democratization of the workplace—what was often called “industrial democracy”—is plausible.

This is the real promise of the unfinished story of Republic Windows and Doors. Part of the agreement that emerged out of the factory occupation was the sale of Republic to a California “green” building company, Serious Materials, who announced that they would re-employ Republic’s union workers and refit the factory to manufacture energy-efficient windows and doors. Unfortunately, Serious was not serious, hiring back only a handful of workers before deciding in February 2012 to sell off the machines and close. However, two dozen workers, including the original leaders of the occupation, inspired in part by a screening of *The Take*, decided to form a co-operative, New Era Windows, and, after a second occupation of the plant, managed to purchase the equipment. With the help of a nonprofit that had financed co-operatives in Argentina, they began production in the spring of 2013, building windows and doors to a new era.

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NOTES

1. This article was presented originally as a talk that was part of a collective presentation, “Spaces and Times of Occupation,” by the Yale Working Group on Globalization and Culture.

2. Quoted in Monica Davey, “In Factory Sit-In, an Anger Spread Wide,” *New York Times* 7 December 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/08/us/08chicago.html> See also Lydersen.

3. Ranis.

4. Lavaca Collective, Sitrin.

5. See the documentary films by UE, Friend, and Klein and Lewis.

6. Gall, Ranis, and Ness, and Azzellini.

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