



# The Past, Present, and Future of Work

*Our work environment is deeply dysfunctional. But making systemic change requires understanding how we got here.*

Chris Winters

Participants march during a "Fight Starbucks' Union Busting" rally in Seattle on April 23, 2022. As of August 2022, at least 200 U.S. Starbucks stores have unionized their staff, according to Starbucks Workers United.



Our relationship with work can be summed up in two words: It's complicated.

Here in the United States (and elsewhere, too), work dominates our lives. Upon meeting someone new, our standard first question is "What do you do for a living?" Our identities, even our names, often reflect an occupation.

And yet, for too many people, their work is a thankless task for which they are undercompensated. It provides just enough sustenance to get through the day, so they can wake up the next and start over. And the countless hours take a toll on physical and mental health, relationships, and families.

"I'll sleep when I'm dead" is a common refrain. Earlier generations said, "Idle hands are the devil's tools," a phrase that may have come from a 4th-century letter written by St. Jerome, in which he captured the essence of the ancient workaholic: *fac et aliquid operis, ut semper te diabolus inveniat occupatum.*

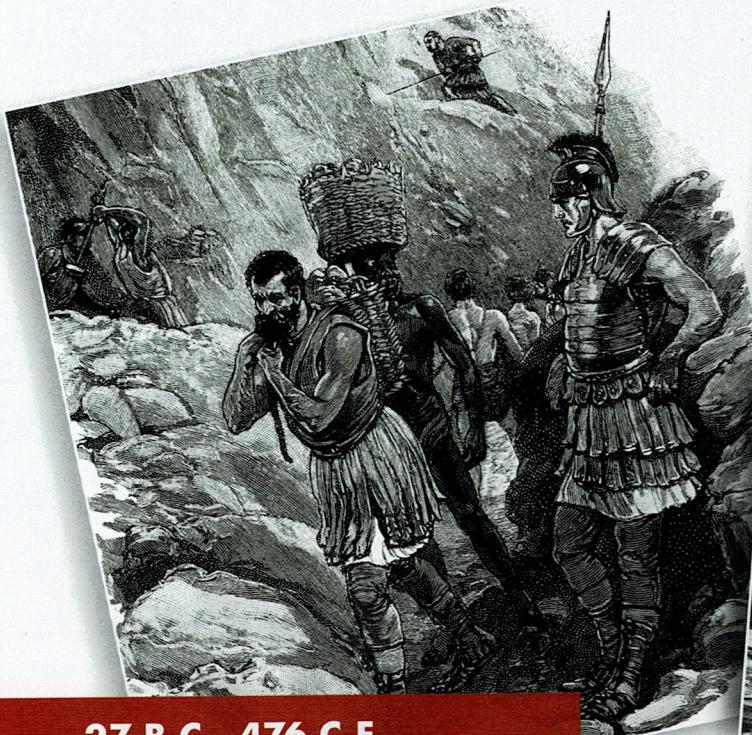
Or, "Engage in some occupation, so that the devil may always find you busy."

There's nothing like the threat of eternal damnation to motivate you to drag yourself out the door for another day in the trenches.

Some people may like, or even love, the work they do. But for many others, "work" is a compendium of indignities—low pay, inadequate benefits, toxic and abusive environments, to say nothing of the disrespect, discrimination, and exclusion that greets many people of color and other historically excluded groups.

But what if it wasn't? What if "work" were a thing we chose to do with our time because we wanted to do it and not because we needed to keep destitution at bay? What if our worth as people in society was measured by something other than where we punch a clock? What if work was something that lifted up and supported our whole lives, instead of something that we endure just so that we may live?

PHOTO BY JASON REDMOND/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES



## 27 B.C.-476 C.E.

Estimates suggest that as much as 10% of the Roman Empire's population was enslaved.



## 1490s-1888

Enslaved Africans, like those pictured here in Brazil in 1885, were used as a source of free labor throughout the Americas from the 1490s until 1888, when Brazil abolished slavery.

### A PAST ROOTED IN SLAVERY

A straight line can be drawn through the history of work in Western societies, from the slavery of the Roman Empire (scholars estimate as much as 10% of the population of the empire was enslaved), to the feudalism of medieval Europe, to the Industrial Revolution in the 18th and 19th centuries. That line is ownership—the wealthy could buy and sell people, land, or labor to accrue more wealth, all at the expense of the poor.

Whether one places the beginning of capitalism in the heart of industrializing England or in the merchant classes of the Renaissance, by the time Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels wrote about the problems of capitalism in 1848, the economic system was rooted firmly in place across Europe and the Americas.

"Marx's point (one of many) was that slavery, feudalism, and capitalism have something very similar in common. In all of those systems, a very small number of people are in the catbird seat," says Richard Wolff, professor emeritus of economics at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and a visiting professor at the New School in New York City.

Capitalism's initial promise, Wolff contends, was that it would replace slavery and feudalism, which is what formed the

intellectual backdrop of the American and French revolutions. Many workers and even elites saw the end of these oppressive systems to be a step toward freedom. But deposing monarchies and freeing serfs often just resulted in the replacement of one overlord with another, as wealth transferred from the landed gentry to a new moneyed elite (who in some cases were the same people), and businesses were incentivized to keep their workers poor and powerless.

"Capitalism is its own obstacle to achieving the very things capitalism promised in overthrowing feudalism and slavery," Wolff says.

Today, the workplace remains dehumanizing, even with more labor protections in place than in eras past.

The 40-hour work week was itself a compromise. Enacted in U.S. law in 1940, it was intended not to prevent laborers from working 16 hours a day, six or seven days a week, but to reduce unemployment by preventing one person from holding what is now the equivalent of two or more full-time jobs. Even today, there are enough loopholes in federal law that many employees simply can't clock out at 5 p.m. if they want to remain employed.



## 1908

Children and adults worked an average of 14 hours per day with few, if any, breaks. Pictured: Indiana Glass Works, 9 p.m., August, 1908.



## 1915

Starting in the 1860s, various industries began to adopt shorter work weeks, and then Congress imposed a 40-hour work week in 1940. Pictured: A government office in 1915, with hours prominently posted.

Pair this with a widespread societal notion that we must love our jobs, or find them “fulfilling,” and we’re set up with a disconnect, given that so many jobs are grinding, exhausting, demeaning, and even dangerous. Or they serve no purpose other than to perpetuate work. But we do them because we need the money.

As the COVID-19 pandemic ravaged our communities and upended the world economy, it became clear there was a demand for something new. Unregulated capitalism was shown to be broken: Supply chains shattered, workplaces became disease vectors, and relationships with families and friends were severed by death, chronic illness, and polarization.

The unemployment rate peaked at nearly 15% in April 2020, the highest recorded level since 1948, according to the Congressional Research Service. Between January and April of that year, more than 22 million non-farm jobs were lost. Other people found themselves labeled “essential workers,” forced to continue working in person in order to keep the meatpacking plants producing and the deliveries of food, toilet paper, and cleaning products dashing to the doors of middle-class people

now working from the relative safety of their homes.

“Frontline workers,” especially in health care, child care, education, and public safety—many of whom are women, people of color, or both—had to make significant adaptations to how they performed their jobs, and many health care workers experienced significantly higher levels of risk of infection, anxiety, depression, and burnout. Lacking government mandates, only some businesses offered hazard pay for those forced to work in close quarters, and even that meager benefit quickly expired.

One notable effect of this radical societal reordering has come to be termed the “Great Resignation.” More than 47 million people in the U.S. voluntarily quit their jobs in 2021, according to the Society for Human Resource Management. And while many of those workers quit because they’re fed up with an unrewarding job, others are rethinking the overall role of work in their lives, or fighting to improve their working conditions by forming labor unions at companies like Amazon and Starbucks, or even staging walkouts at non-unionized workplaces.

Most workers who died from COVID in 2020, before vaccines became available, were in retail, service, or blue-collar jobs that offered no opportunities for remote work.

Supermarket cashiers were considered "essential workers" early in the coronavirus pandemic. Pictured: A Publix supermarket employee bags groceries in Miami Beach, Florida, on May 27, 2020.



At a Triumph Foods pork processing plant in St. Joseph, Missouri, employees worked up to 10 hours a day, side by side. In 2020, at the start of the pandemic, at least 600 of the plant's 2,800 employees got sick, according to an investigation by *USA Today* and the Midwest Center for Investigative Reporting.



#### OVERCOMING THE GRIND CULTURE OF THE PRESENT

The pandemic proved to be the tipping point. Many of the people who died during the early stages of the pandemic were the essential workers in the service, health care, and manufacturing sectors: "Those who kept the world moving while others had the privilege of staying home," says Angelica Geter, the chief strategy officer of the Black Women's Health Imperative in Atlanta.

Geter, who also holds a doctorate of public health, says that this was mostly Black and Brown workers, and especially women.

According to one 2022 study published in the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, most workers who died from COVID in 2020, before vaccines became available, were in retail, service, or blue-collar jobs that offered no opportunities for remote work. Nearly 45% of non-White women in low-wage jobs worked in the service industry, and about 60% of men of any race in low-wage jobs worked in blue-collar professions.

Another study documented the death rate of Black workers being higher than any other racial group and found that among essential workers, those higher rates were also because Black people are disproportionately represented among many jobs that expose them to higher risks of infection.

The decision for many of those people was simple: go to work and risk illness, or stay at home with their families and risk impoverishment. The pandemic exposed the inequalities that we already knew about but seldom saw in such stark terms.

"That's exactly what COVID did," Geter says. "It painted the whole picture and brought it forth."

The Black Women's Health Imperative was founded in 1983 to target the most pressing issues facing Black women and girls in the U.S. Its long-running initiatives include programs in diabetes prevention, HIV prevention and care, a network at Historically Black Colleges and Universities, and distributing menstrual products in Black communities.

It was not a coincidence that years of frustration with discrimination, racism, and workplace toxicity, along with the cumulative negative health effects, boiled over when COVID exerted maximum pressure on the workplace and brought many people outside into the streets, first protesting poor working conditions, and then racism and police brutality.

"Enough was enough," Geter says.

"Most people don't make the connection between being overworked and the impact on your health," Geter adds. Recovery from burnout can take years, because it often has been compounded by the experience of discrimination. Even the expectation of discrimination or microaggressions in the workplace takes a mental and emotional toll, which can lead to precursors of heart disease, breast cancer, and other health conditions that disproportionately affect Black women.

"When I go into an office of other people, I represent the entire Black community," Geter says. "The stress of anticipation of that—it just wears on you."

Many companies tried to meet that need for their own

Frustration with discrimination, racism, and workplace toxicity, along with the cumulative negative health effects, boiled over when COVID exerted maximum pressure on the workplace and brought many people outside into the streets in protest.



Despite the risk of exposure to COVID-19, thousands of protestors spilled out onto the streets across the U.S. and abroad. Pictured: A #BlackLivesMatter protest in Cincinnati, Ohio, in May 2020.



workers with enhanced benefits during the pandemic and new diversity, equity, and inclusion programs.

“During 2020 we saw Fortune 500, Fortune 1,000 companies allocate billions of dollars to promote equity in their workplaces,” Geter says. “They needed tools and information and resources to know what to do with them.”

But DEI programs alone aren’t enough to make sustainable changes. There are still too many barriers that keep people of color out of promotions, hiring opportunities, pay increases, and retention. Education is needed, but so is accountability, and the funding to pay for both.

“If we don’t create change that empowers the people who have the least amount of privilege and experience discrimination the most, we will see the same issues over and over again,” Geter says.

The Health Imperative’s answer to that was to develop a multipart initiative, including an employee-centered “wellness toolkit” for businesses that highlights workplace culture, training, hiring, and research that centers the voices of Black women—in an effort to reduce the physical, mental, and emotional harm that so many experience in their workplace environments.

Tiffany Jana, a writer, speaker, and pleasure activist who has consulted with businesses for nearly 20 years to create more human-centered workplaces, also says it’s necessary that businesses recognize what their employees are going through in the present day, not just as employees, but as full human beings.

“What I think is missing from the workplace is the acknowledgement and the honoring of, essentially, the sanctity of humanity,” Jana says. “Everyone who chooses to raise their hand and then come and work for your company, that’s a deeply sacred gift, that’s an incredibly special, beautiful thing that we have failed to honor appropriately.”

Another consideration for businesses in creating a more people-centered workplace lies in their structure as profit-making enterprises. Jana has incorporated two of their three companies as B Corps that adhere to triple-bottom-line accounting: focusing as much on social and environmental concerns as profits.

“Over the last, say, eight, nine years, the pressure has been coming up from the bottom. [People] within organizations and institutions are saying, ‘Wait a minute, you know, we really love the work, we really love the company, but we don’t feel like we’re being valued,’” Jana says. “And they’ve been demanding culture-based work to help create an environment that is more gracious and welcoming and human-centered.”

#### A MORE COLLECTIVE, HUMAN FUTURE

If the current trend in workplace evolution is toward a more human-centered environment, the question then becomes whether that evolution is possible in businesses whose only goal is to maximize profits for their shareholders. Wolff, who has studied and written extensively about the history of capitalism and socialism, says it isn’t. But what can support a human-centered future is more worker-owned

co-ops and democratic governance structures, and not just in small shops or artisan manufacturers.

"I'm not sure that scaling is all that big a deal," he says. "If making big units is going to cost us the ability to have a democratic system, we should at least question the size, and if that's necessary."

The world already has seen how a smaller co-op can evolve into a larger but still democratic organization. Mondragón, a diversified corporation founded in 1956 in Spain's Basque region, is the world's largest worker-owned cooperative, with 80,000 employees, and incorporates democratic decision-making at all levels of the company.

It is arguably one of Spain's most successful companies, with branches in 31 countries. It incorporates 96 self-governing cooperatives in sectors as wide-ranging as industry, retail, finance, and education.

Mondragón is only the largest example. About two-thirds of the 4.5 million people in the Italian region of Emilia Romagna, one of the wealthiest areas in the European Union, are co-op members, and they produce 30% of the region's gross domestic product.

It's a society in which co-ops and top-down businesses coexist peacefully.

"It's a real laboratory for the question 'How could a society be a mixed society?'" Wolff says. "They've normalized it."

In the U.S., examples of thriving co-ops include Sí Se Puede Women's Cooperative, a house- and office-cleaning cooperative run largely by Hispanic immigrant women. Founded in Brooklyn, New York, in 2006, the organization is now one of several immigrant-run cleaning cooperatives in the city.

The history of co-ops in the U.S. extends back to pre-colonization Indigenous communities, and practices created in the Black community after the Civil War, rooted in African traditions.

Indigenous societies were and still are much more communitarian. Strong ties to families and tribes keep many Native Americans in close proximity to their communities. That makes for some difficult choices: If forced to choose between having a job and building a career in a distant city, or returning to a rural reservation to care for family and participate in their culture, many choose the latter.

That also contributes to the level of unemployment in Indigenous societies, which is already the highest in the nation.

In one study, in which several members of Native reservations were interviewed about their work lives, the lead researcher, Ahmed Al-Asfour, then a professor at Oglala Lakota College and now the director of the Center for Workforce Development at Southern Illinois University, found that strong community ties often took priority in decisions about work.

"As one participant said, it is all about 'we' not 'I' and this is a core belief for individuals living in collectivistic societies," Al-Asfour wrote.

That's led to a mismatch between those ties and the expectations of the non-Native economy.

"The discrimination highlighted in the interviews stresses the cultural tensions between Natives and non-Natives as the Natives' culture, values, and traditions continue to be undermined and underscored by non-Natives," Al-Asfour wrote.

## WE CAN GET THERE FROM HERE

A wholesale evolution of capitalism into a more democratic system is possible, but it has to start with a shift in ideology, Wolff says.

"Human beings have come to adapt to capitalism by thinking there is something necessary or logical or socially efficient by having the nature of work defined by and governed by profitability," he says.

In other words, we have bought into the idea that pay is equivalent to worth.

But that ideology doesn't measure all of the consequences of a human being who works: The effort of performing labor changes the body and mind of the worker, it changes people who interact with the worker, and it changes the natural environment.

If work were to be truly fully compensated, "you'd have to do what hasn't ever been done: Figure out all the effects," Wolff says.

That means structural change becomes as important as an ideological shift. If a business that makes a product loses its market, the business usually cuts workforce to preserve its profits. A democratically run co-op that prioritizes worker well-being might take a different action—change products being made, retrain workers, or cut hours of work so production meets the existing demand.

"This kind of structural change—which is anathema in capitalism—this also would have to be in place. That would make this a much easier conversation," Wolff says.

Another key development would be a society that disassociates value from the workplace. Policies like universal health care or basic income would reduce the need for people to remain in dehumanizing jobs and allow them to pursue endeavors more in line with their value system.

That's something Tiffany Jana has tried to pursue in their own life, designing their work to be fulfilling and complementary to their life, and encouraging others to follow that example.

"When I meet people, I don't ask them 'What do you do?' or 'Where do you work?'" Jana says. "I ask them 'How do you spend your time?' And it confuses the crap out of them."

"Each of us has a beautiful opportunity, in this season, to decide how we want to define ourselves, how we want to contribute to this new societal structure, this new way of being, and then work diligently towards creating that change," Jana says. 

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