

SHIT JOBS

Tales from the Bottom Rung



EDITED BY DABTARA & ISA MARJAN

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Introduction

Work sucks. That much should be obvious. The vast majority of the population spends at the very least half the day getting ready for, getting to, being at, and leaving their place of work. Work takes up an immeasurable amount of our time and mental energy, leaving us fatigued and beaten down after our shift. Free time is decompression, not freedom. Time that should be spent on play and creative experimentation is just down time before the next shift where one can catch their breath and try to steady themselves for another week of drudgery.

This project aims to capture this experience from a first person point of view. Every working class person knows what it's like to suffer the daily injustices and humiliations of the workplace, be it in the form of sexual harassment, unpaid overtime, the boss that reneges on their promises, impatient customers, and so on *ad infinitum*. This project is a place for people to share their stories and give an insight into the real and present conditions of the working class. Sometimes venting can be cathartic.

There are a number of excellent submissions in this work, ranging from

interviews to short stories and more. Manufacturing jobs, service and culinary work, and the gig economy are all represented here, united by the common thread of the misery of each of these jobs being a shit job. It is not an attempt to carefully catalogue experiences from every sector of work, which would be both impossible, but rather aims to be an organic cross-section of a good swath of the contemporary working class.

The people in this volume are not unique. Most are just normal people in commonplace jobs, but radical sentiments run deep. I do not want to speak for them and put a political stamp on their contributions, forcing them into an anti-work stance that they may not be comfortable adopting. But, more than anything, this should be taken as a reminder of the basic insight of revolutionary politics: class consciousness is alive and well, and people are still dreaming of a world without work and bosses.

Maybe one day we'll be able to get there.

-Dabtara

* * *

How can we live decent lives
When you won't pay us more
But you'll raise our rent?
And your bosses got his friends in
parliament
Who protect the freedom to work for
him.
No! Stop wasting our time, wasting
our time.

-Talking Reds
"Stop Wasting our Time"

Interview with AB

Background: *AB works as an assistant manager and line cook at a fast food restaurant. He's been working in food service at various restaurants and grocery stores for the last six years.*

* * *

Dabtara: So, how've you been? How's work?

AB: Dude, it sucks. Like, I don't know if I'm going to be able to last until my one year before I quit and start looking for work.

D: Why? What's going on?

AB: It's all management dude. They're completely...they just have no idea what's going on. The actual shifts are fine like I don't actually mind this one [compared to a previous job at a bakery] 'cause the pay is pretty good and stuff but upper management is driving me crazy.

[The current GM in training] basically just got her job cause she knows someone who knows the owner or something, but she really has no idea what she's doing. I do all the closing, take orders, cook half the food,

train people, whatever. She shows up for the first ten or fifteen minutes of my shift and yells at me for either not closing right or breaking some kind of protocol or something, 'cause I'm not supposed to be able to take orders. Like technically I need to go through the training for it but we're so short staffed [and] I'm the only one with experience doing it, so it's either they're going to yell at me about 30-40 minute ticket times or they're going to yell at me for taking orders. And I'd rather deal with it the next day from some manager than the customers, you know?

D: What's the actual "training" for taking orders?

AB: *[Laughing]* That's actually the best part. 'Cause I used to be certified for it, like you need to take a course on the online training program or whatever, but there was some kind of glitch in the system and it basically wiped my progress. So now it looks like I didn't do anything and the managers are just refusing to reinstate me.

It takes them literally like two seconds to override it, they keep telling me "oh, just go through the training again, you know what to do so it should be easy." But that's totally missing the point cause it's like a 10 hour

course, I'm already working close to 50 hours a week for them and now they expect me to spend both my days off this week on something that takes them at max five minutes. Fuck off.

* * *

AB: Dude, let me tell you about this thing that just happened with me and the CEO.

So, this dude was some trust fund kid back in the day who decided to start a restaurant franchise, basically never worked a day in his life on a shift or anything, so there's all sorts of weird systems and shit he's insisting on us having. So annoying dude.

But like yeah he shows up to stores unannounced to like "evaluate" us and I can't believe that some people in mine can't even tell that he's the owner and stuff. But yeah he comes by the other day and I knew he'd be coming cause he always orders the same shit every time and when he gets his order he looks at me and says, "you know the bathroom wouldn't smell like piss if you actually cleaned it."

Which is such fucking bullshit dude like you give us lysol and paper towels. Like yeah the bathroom should be cleaner but you're not

giving us shit to clean it with and you can't expect the GM to spend their own money on maintenance.

D: You ever tell him this?

AB: Nah dude like that's how you get fired here haha. Show up late, steal product, whatever they don't care cause we're always short staffed and they need us in anyway, but if you talk bad to the CEO he will just like hunt you down on the roster and make sure you get the worst shifts until you quit.

D: They don't usually fire you, just give you the worst shifts until you quit?

AB: Right. Way easier on them for you to quit instead of them firing you.

* * *

D: It's been a couple weeks since we talked about work, still the same old same old?

AB: Yeah more or less. That...new GM got moved to a different store though which is cool.

D: Yeah you really didn't seem to like her.

AB: Dude yeah I guess she just didn't know

what she was doing. I just don't know what to do though for work.

D: What do you mean? Like in terms of what you're looking for as your next job?

AB: Yeah exactly. I'm technically an assistant manager here but I look around at other places and they have way more responsibilities that I have no experience with so I don't even know if I can take these positions. And they actually pay us well [at his current job] so like most other places are gonna be a pay cut compared to now unless I somehow get a regional manager job or GM or something.

I think I'm at like a dead end right now. I can't keep working here forever, it's just the same endless routine and it's driving me crazy, but I don't have the money to go to culinary school to get chef certified and my family won't pay for it either, but I can't really save up money right now with rent this high. I just don't know what to do man, I don't want to spend the rest of my life doing this...

* * *

“Jenny”

By Carlos Danger

I work in a factory on an assembly line making actuators for HVAC applications. My job is actually really simple; the different actuators are similar in size and functionality and all require the same 10 or so steps to completion. Despite this, I make about \$4 per hour more than the minimum wage in my state. It's a simple job that pays fairly well.

Every four months, some blank face in a suit comes to the weekly production team meetings to remind everyone that our jobs are safe from automation or outsourcing or a bad economy. They'll then say in the next sentence that our wages won't go up and everyone seems to nod and sigh at this expected revelation.

I actually believe them when they say my job is safe. The company is developing new assembly lines to accommodate more workers and generally seems to be receptive to employee criticism about the work stations. Various tools have been built to reduce the complexity of the assembly process and dedicated time for stretching has been added before breaks to encourage physical safety. The company, generally, seems to care about the workers, at least while we're on the clock.

One morning, we were all shuttled to the

cafeteria for a meeting. All production departments, all warehouse employees, even the production line leaders. On the screen was a slideshow that said “Our New Employee” and at the podium was another blank face in a suit. He began to talk about the great work we all do, earning light chuckles from some in the audience, and then transitioned into an introduction of the new employee. He clicked to the next slide where there was a picture of the new employee, “Jenny”.

Jenny is a robot, an autonomous forklift. This behemoth operates in the warehouse moving pallets of completed goods from production areas to the shipping department and pallets of basic parts like screws or gears from the delivery trucks to storage in the warehouse. It joins a team of about ten other human material handlers who all work together to keep the production lines filled with materials.

* * *

Since all of us could possibly interact with Jenny during the workday, we needed to be taught how to avoid a conflict with Jenny. The next thirty slides were different ways someone could get hurt by Jenny. Each slide seemed to detail a weirder scenario than the last, and each of them placed an enormous responsibility for the safety of all parties on the individual workers. This is because Jenny only has two sensors, one

along the front of the robot near the forks and another on the rear. The sensors sit approximately six inches above the ground and alert Jenny to any obstacles in its way.

Anything that protrudes into its path of motion that is above the sensor creates a danger that Jenny just can't see. It has pushed a folding table that was accidentally left in its path about forty feet before anyone realized it. Anything that is moving too slow in front of Jenny is met with a loud honk, and when Johnny comes across any obstruction that is detected, it will park itself and beep until a human moves the object in the way.

Jenny is enormous. It's about eleven feet in length and weighs over twelve hundred pounds. Despite its heft, Jenny is only able to move two half pallets or one full pallet. Jenny moves very slowly and carefully, making sure not to stray from the orange and black dashed line on the floor. A human material handler can move twice as many pallets, isn't locked to a set path, and even the slowest of the elderly employees can run circles around Jenny.

Considering all of Jenny's drawbacks, its price tag of about \$900,000 seems crazy. How could any corporation drop that much money, when Jenny's price tag is roughly equal to human material handler's salary for at least 20 years? Is it not a better use of resources and time just to hire another material handler over this robot?

* * *

It's easy to laugh at Jenny. While I don't work in the warehouse section of the building, the beeps are sometimes audible on the production floor and it's common to hear the material handlers complain in the cafeteria about it. This slow, lumbering bot in the way of their work. It is hard for me to rationalize the purchase of such a robot, when human labor is cheaper and better for productivity. It's easy to dismiss Jenny as a ridiculous new addition to our company, when instead Jenny should be a warning shot by the capitalists and a direct threat to all of our jobs.

New technology is always bulky and limited in functionality when compared to existing technology. Landlines were in every household and had been perfected for decades well before the first cell phones were developed in the 1970's. The first cell phones were limited in battery life to thirty minutes and weighed over two pounds, while current smartphones rival computing power of modern laptops and are required in the pocket of people of all ages. Early cars were slower than horse drawn carriages and considered a luxury for years until massive improvements were made making this technology widely available.

Automation is no different. While the autonomous robots at my company may be

unwieldy, slow, and even counterproductive, they won't always be. Autonomous technology improves at a pace unseen before and it won't be long until Jenny becomes a more reliable worker than even the fastest human material handler.

Automation could be humanity's greatest achievement. Replacing menial tasks with robots would relieve so much stress for the workers at my company. The material handlers at work walk about ten miles a day all while dragging hundreds of pounds in boxes. I stand in one place and screw parts together for eight hours and it's not often for myself or other workers to constantly complain about back or joint pain. This kind of work wears down on people, yet I'm one of the lucky ones. Most of the workers in my department are well over 50 years old, with one woman who came out of retirement to come back and work at the age of 79 in order to get health insurance.

As the cost of automation goes down and reliability of automated workers goes up, it will be harder and harder for corporations to justify using human employees. Capitalism is a race to the bottom, a never ending quest to cut costs with no regard for the consequences. Manufacturing corporations regularly outsource labor to countries with limited or no protections for workers in search of cheaper labor. When autonomous labor becomes cheaper than human labor, it inevitably will replace the working class in any and every application it

can.

Automation should liberate the working class, relieving those stuck with the hardest and simplest jobs. Under capitalism, it will be a death knell, the final blow in a centuries long conflict between the haves and the have nots. There will be a time when we have our weekly production meeting and a blank face in a suit will come visit, but this time, they can't and won't promise our jobs. There won't be any employment for us; all the once well-paying jobs we enjoyed for years are gone to make room for robots. This could happen in five years, twenty years, one hundred years. When it does happen, I hope for the sake of us that the economic system we live in prioritizes the value of human life over profits.

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Closing Time

By S. Hamade

Joseph Heller's novel, *Catch-22*, was published to such critical acclaim that its title has become shorthand for facing an impossible situation. My current situation feels a little like that: impossible. Living my life in the hazy fugue state that is post-grad, I'm stuck in a kind of catch-22, desperate for any kind of work to pay my way through grad school aspirations but just as desperate to do literally anything else but work the only kind of soul-crushing jobs that are available to me.

It's because of this that I think it's very ironic I ended up working at a "casual caribbean fair" seafood joint whose name is an awful pun on the title to Heller's iconic novel. The work I did there was much closer to the sentiment expressed by Heller's sequel, *Closing Time*, which was published to such middling reviews that I didn't even know it existed before sitting down to write this. Its menu is so exquisitely milquetoast that it's perfect for the palate of the surrounding area's stepford wives and retirees. Its upper management is so martial that you're permitted to ask for a single holiday off, but your petition has no bearing on whether you'll actually have off (you

won't). The owner is so cheap that my younger sister makes as much as the manager for half as much work. Just before Thanksgiving, six people quit, two of whom were replaced, with one of the replacements having to be replaced within two shifts.

* * *

I really thought I would be writing this piece on the time I got sexually harassed while working the host stand. You'd think that having a very drunk older man tell me that I should be so lucky as to catch his eye because he's always appreciated "only the most exotic women" would be the worst story I'd have to tell (it isn't).

My absolute worst experience working at this restaurant was on Thanksgiving. The day before, I spent the entirety of my shift coughing all over our booths, touching plates and silverware with the same hands I had used to blow my nose, and greeting patrons in the smallest voice you've ever heard. Considering illness and food service aren't the most compatible, I tried to call out sick. Instead, my manager promised to release me early. "Releasing me early" meant I went home fifteen minutes before close, miserable.

Thanksgiving proper was a nightmare. The work for the day was middling at best; I managed the incoming reservations and we had very few walk-ins. I was shocked we even had the business that we did, considering my understanding of a traditional Thanksgiving involves eating a home cooked meal as a family. Why so many decided that our bland turkey and abysmally dim lighting made enough for a proper Thanksgiving feast, I'll never know. Regardless, I arrived at 11:00 am and tried my best to keep it together. I had no idea when I would be released. I had hoped that the arrival of the two other hosts scheduled for 3:00 pm meant that I would be able to go home, but when I asked my manager about it two days prior, all they said was "Prepare to be here 'til close." Considering the other host scheduled to arrive with me was explicitly told they were not going home 'til close, I was not hopeful.

By the time 3:00 pm rolled around, my sister had arrived for her own shift. She was summarily dismissed. Apparently, my sister had arrived breathing so thinly that you could hear her wheezing from across the room. Even in the brief moment I saw her, the visible shaking of her hands said enough. She had been struggling with a bout of adult onset asthma for the past year, and

it seemed as though something had exacerbated it to an untenable degree. My manager announced that “No one has ever died on her watch and that wouldn’t start today.” Very thoughtful of her.

The other two hosts arrived to very little fanfare. About a half hour later, I was still there. My manager came around and spoke exclusively to them saying that she was going to dismiss one of them, so they settled it amongst themselves and one stayed while the other went home. My mother texted me asking me when I’d be coming home, and I told her what I knew: I had no idea. My manager said nothing about dismissing *me* until about 6:00 pm, two hours before close. I would be allowed to leave after the final reservation arrived (7:15 pm). It was around the same time that I received a text from my mother, telling me that she was going to take my sister to the ER. My sister was responding to albuterol treatments, but they would only help her breathe for so long. She could no longer speak without consecutive treatments. I offered to take my sister to the ER instead, knowing my mother would have to deal with my other four year old sister for an indiscernible amount of time at the ER. My sister told me she could manage til I arrived.

So, of course, in that moment, I received a small notification from the app of our front-of-house management system:

A new reservation.

7:45 pm.

Of course.

I was ill. I was tired. I had to remind my manager that I needed to take a break to eat. Of course I was livid. We're made aware of our schedules a week in advance, are shamed for requesting time off, get paid a meagre wage to smile in response to having our service disrespected, and are taught to treat the awful people that walk through our doors like they're above reproach. We're treated as though there's no way we have lives outside of work or bodies that need to rest in order to operate at peak efficiency. At that point, I didn't even want to get home to enjoy my holiday. Any chance of that had followed the other host out the door by 3:00 pm. I just wanted to make sure my sister wouldn't suffocate before I could drive my hour drive home to her. It was all very upsetting.

Soon after, the phone rang. The caller ID matched name on our most recent reservation. In spite of myself, I answered, and recited our restaurant's custom greeting in the most agreeable customer service voice I could muster.

“When do you close tonight?”

“8:00 pm.”

There was a palpable silence for an entire minute.

“Oh okay. Thank you.”

* * *

It felt like she was mocking me. It was the most awkward conversation I had ever had in the smallest amount of time. I don't know if she could recognize how disgruntled I was, but the length of her pause made it seem as though she definitely knew she fucked up.

The phone rang again. Same name. Samer greeting.

“So since we made our reservation so close to closing, I wanted to make it easier on you guys and change the time.”

She moved her reservation up to 7:15 pm. It was all I wanted to hear. It felt like her change of heart had less to do with her genuine concern for the staff and more with my relatively curt reply of “8:00 pm” and the palpable awkwardness of our mutual

silence earlier, but I didn't care very much by that point. I just held out until I made my way home.

Eventually, I did get to enjoy some semblance of a Thanksgiving dinner – I got to nibble on some turkey and macaroni salad while my sister got ready to go. The ER waiting room was completely empty, and she was treated rather quickly, but that didn't mean we didn't wait an additional three hours before she was discharged. All the while with a needle in her arm. Did she have an IV? Yes. Was it removed an hour after being administered? Yes. Did the nurse have to quibble with me as to whether or not it was a needle still sticking out of her arm three hours after the IV itself was removed? No.

As of writing this, my sister is on borrowed time. Her doctor couldn't give us an exact diagnosis besides a noncommittal "bronchitis exacerbated by asthma." She was prescribed a limited dosage of steroids to regulate her breathing for the next few days, but she has been unable to see a proper doctor. She's been working her scheduled shifts instead. I think her bills are due around the same time those steroids are supposed to run out.

Two of our coworkers, a mother and her son, were promised they would be “accommodated” on Thanksgiving. Each of the two worked extra shifts the week before and switched their shifts to opening shifts at 11:00 am, hoping to leave by 3:00 pm. Both worked ‘til close. My sister only came in on Thanksgiving to give our manager no choice *but* to send her home. The way we’re treated at that restaurant is a joke. The money is decent, the hours aren’t very long, and the work isn’t very hard, but our manager is neurotic to an exaggerated degree and the owner fucked a younger host after hours in the restaurant once. He’s divorced now. I’m currently looking for other employment but I only got this job in the first place because of my sister and haven’t had any luck since applying to jobs since before I even started this one. It’s honestly an impossible situation and I have work in thirty minutes.

* * *

Interview with Hamza

Isa: First could you describe your employment history – I guess it started formally in Canada, though you did do some sort of freelance internet stuff in Pakistan and even Dubai, right?

Hamza: Oh yeah, so in Dubai, not really so much. I was just like mostly involved in the school student leadership organization in school in Dubai, so nothing serious at all. And I didn't go to any meetings or anything, I just knew someone who was in a high position and he just appointed me to a role and so that wasn't any real experience. I just got like a free badge for nothing.

In Pakistan, just a bit of graphics design here and there, not even like a regular job, just a sporadic thing. And yeah, it started over here formally and I think the first job I had was in a convention. So I was part of the anime club as you know in university. We got a posting from a vendor in our club group saying that if anyone is looking for a job at the weekend, there was going to be a convention, and you were going to work for all four days and get a good minimum wage and yeah, just customer service. So I had no experience but just this three day booth job. And that was like my first ever job

experience, we made like a couple hundred bucks and to me that was like a lot at the time and I was like, “Yeah, cool. I made a bunch” [laughs].

I think the first thing I did after that was fundraising, but that was only for like a few weeks and not even like properly. That was literally just, you know, very, very, very casual. I went to this like office downtown, they give you this little short bullshit interview and as long as you prove that you can like speak, they hire you. It was a fundraising place for organizations like Plan Canada, SickKids, Amnesty International, all that shit.

I: So was this another agency they outsourced this fundraising to?

H: Yeah, it was this third party that literally just did fundraising, so non-profits go to them and outsource fundraising. So we're on the streets everyday pitching for a different cause, we're not actually hired by Plan Canada or anyone, we're just paid to raise money.

I: So that's really interesting and I kinda have, I guess, two questions about this: there's this sort of idea that non-profit work is really exhausting, especially people who

work these sort of organizations full-time, they're overworked, the pay is shit, there's a lot of very strict hierarchy, so one. I was wondering if you've experienced that yourself and if you could speak about it, and number two is, if you're being sent to these NGOs through some third party, I feel like you'd feel very detached from this work, so the element of really believing in something, that isn't even there. Could you talk about that a bit, was that alienating, did you speak with your coworkers about this?

H: Yeah no, absolutely. So I'll start with the second question, so you've said that I'm not actually working for this organization, I'm literally just paid to raise money. It was all about the numbers, it wasn't about the work at all. We didn't have any discussions about the morality of it or what was actually happening, we weren't passionate about fixing the problem whatsoever, our thing was very numbers driven, it was like being a salesman, more than a humanitarian worker you know? So we were completely detached, it helped that at the time I was working I had a political science degree, and so I was just more articulate when it came to talking about these kinds of things. And I just had a better understanding of it, so I could explain it better, because you know, you're out there in the street, ushering

people over and asking them if they know about a situation, a certain problem, whatever that needs money. And you have to explain the situation in that place, and whatever. And it helps to like, you know, be woke, when it comes to explaining stuff. So I had that going for me, but it was literally just using my knowledge, but I don't even know if they were actually doing what they said they were doing with that money. There was no idea, there was no presentation of like "This is what we're doing," all that stuff. Because the story seemed very scripted and very idealistic, and there was no proof whatsoever of it really happening. So it just felt like we were raising money, and given like this story to go shill out. And that's what we're doing.

There was this kind of delusion among higher ups that they actually were doing something very moral and just and good, but the fact that it was so numbers driven was like an internal hypocrisy.

I: Wow.

H: Yeah, they're just kinda deluding themselves into thinking they're doing that, but they kinda just let themselves be ignorant, and like, "As long as we generate money, we get paid and that's all there is to

it.”

I: Yeah...

H: In terms of conditions though, like long hours, underpaid, understaffed – that whole thing. I actually never saw any of that, but I think NGOs and non-profits in these organizations, especially these third party fundraising organizations and stuff, and third party event organizations, all these little companies that sprouted around the whole NGO industry or humanitarian industry, it’s exactly like start-up culture. It’s the exact same. So some companies have a very good environment, it just works very well because they have all the money. Some companies will be very harsh because it’s every single person pulling up the place by its bootstraps, just doing all the work and keeping it all together. The one I worked for first was a larger one, the work was pretty much drop in/drop out. Once you get hired, you never really get fired. It’s just, you get called in for a shift or you don’t get called in. And if you don’t get called in for a couple days, you just assume, “Okay, fine whatever, I’m not gonna get called in again.” But if you call a manager and say, “Hey, I wanna work today,” they’ll be like, “Yeah, sure whatever.” Like even now to this day, if I call this manager and say, “Hey, I want to

work today,” they’ll say “Yeah, show up.” The manager doesn't care about who they're hiring and who they're not. You just show up, put on a vest, and they direct deposit the money in your account, and that's all there is to it.

So it's almost something like in-between gig economy and an actual job. So if you do call in every, you have a shift everyday. Because they don't care if they have thirty people out in the street, or 50 people, they'll pay them all. But that leads me to being underpaid. Because everyone in the company, they're all decently paid. They're all paid at least 40-50k, which is not bad. And the higher-ups were making, you know, 70, 80. But it wasn't bad at all. I've seen other startups, and other NGOs, ones that get a lot of funding from the government over here. If you're a grad student or you have a Master's or a PhD student, I've seen postings for jobs that start at 67k and everyone in the company makes 67k, so from the most junior to the most senior, they all make 67k. So there are some companies that have structures like that too.

I: That's interesting,

H: Yeah, so actually it's not a bad industry to be in. You can actually make a very

comfortable living off it. Not luxurious, but still comfortable. So if you're, you know, married and you and your partner and both you and your partner are making 50k, that's a 100k household, and with education being free, healthcare being free, it's quite a comfortable life.

I: Yeah, it's totally different from the kind of accounts I've read at least in the United States. It might be a US/Canada thing.

H: Yeah, maybe it might be a government subsidy thing. But yeah, there's more than enough business but they're decently well paid and they get bonuses quite frequently and it's one of those jobs when you go home, you don't think about it. The 7 hours you show up, are the 7 hours you work. But you never think about it again.

At my current job because I'm working at the [EB Games] store, we have this group chat, and the turmoil that my store is in. I'm basically always kind of on call not to work, but to reply in the group chat, to like help solve any problems or answer any questions. Or just like, if they wanna update everyone, they send out, like whoever is working, they send out a picture of whatever the office has been emailed to tell us. So we're always like constantly connected.

Which I don't like, compared to other jobs I had, where I go home and I don't have to think about it.

I: So actually, let's talk about that, jump around a bit. I want to ask about this idea of invasion of work into everyday life, your private life. Like constantly kind of hovering you, it sounds absolutely horrifying. It's something I'd assume is a problem with management, instead of just your regular worker at Gamestop.

H: Like specific to my situation?

I: I meant in general, I feel like this would be a problem management would have to deal with, or someone in logistics. But the idea that someone like you who just joined this company, and you don't have some kind of management position, that's, I think, terrible that you have to deal with this.

H: Yeah, dude, we don't have a manager, we don't have an assistant manager, and our key holder just left. So she [the assistant manager] during the summer went on a mental health leave. She actually just disappeared out of nowhere, but after a couple days, she sent a doctor's note, and when you send a note, they legally can't do anything. So she was gone in the summer

for mental health leave, and she just did it again, she just up and left, didn't tell anyone. So I find out in the morning, when I come in early to open the store, she just disappeared. So we thought initially she would be gone for two weeks, but it's three weeks now and we know we won't be back until December. So that's basically two whole months...

This is a very poorly managed company. It's the worst managed company I've ever seen. It's worse managed than Sky Zone. Sky Zone was better than this.

I: Okay, let's talk about how shitty the management is here. Is it because of company policy, is it something inherent to the system, or is it just the work culture that has developed among those in managerial positions?

H: To be honest, it's hard for me to say because I joined so recently, but the fact that I don't know kind of does say something. So the level of transparency is not there now, there's no transparency whatsoever. So you can't see what above the person above you is doing whatsoever, and there's just lots and lots of barriers between like a normal associate to key holder to an assistant manager to manager, and manager

getting into, like, the head office level jobs is like unheard of. It's happened like once or twice, and like -

I: So like once you're manager, you stay like that forever?

H: Mhm, So once you're retail manager, you reached the top of what your potential is. And it's weird but they're very adamant about outside hiring. So they don't promote people at the internal store level, even if they're every skilled, so in positions of marketing or merchandising or logistics or anything like that. You have to be an outside applicant, rather than be working at one level, like there's it's not easy to move around, there's no mobility whatsoever.

I: That's really bizarre, do you know what the reasoning behind this kind of policy is?

H: I don't know, dude, I think it's an ass-backwards company, it's a dying industry, and they're just fucking stupid and they're putting more and more nails into their coffin. A lot of their policies are really fucking stupid and they're struggling to stay in business, and I don't know, the way they manage their employees, I don't know if it's out of fear, but it's just really bad. Compensation is really bad as well. It's also

illegal to have work group chats.

* * *

I: This is another thing I was discussing with someone else, so you've worked as a waiter before, so if like you're waiting a table and it's maybe instead of like some boomer entitled 50 -year old, it's maybe a guy in his 20s, and he's like "It's alright man, I've done food industry before," particularly mentioning that he's worked in these fields before, would you feel some kind of solidarity, would it result in better customer service, or a connection on a kind of deep level?

H: I would say yes. I've seen it happen on both ends, so as a person who worked, I would say it's actually the other way around. I would definitely feel it to some extent, but people who have worked those positions, when they come to the store, I've found I'm much more polite, very understanding, and patient, I don't give them a hard time. Because I understand the system myself. I have a lot more empathy. So as a customer I'm more empathetic and when I'm working I find that the customers are more empathetic and nice to me, the ones who are, you know, more like that. When I go as a customer to another store, when I tell

them I'm in retail as well or something, while they're checking me out and stuff, they feel really happy to have heard so. "Okay, so you get it." So they feel relieved and I do feel they have that sense of solidarity, and I've seen people more enthusiastic and more relieved because they're not putting on that front anymore.

I: Right, like, "This guy gets it."

H: Yeah, yeah, they know it's like, "He's here right now," but tomorrow it could be them, you know, as a customer and me serving them, so like it's that kind of just mutual respect I guess. And because I've worked similar jobs so many times, so like when I go to a restaurant and stuff, like when I go to York [University], I go there often enough and I talk to the waitresses often enough that once they're done with their shift, they just sit down at the table and we just talk and stuff. So like once you tell them and once they know that, you're like closer to being a friend than a customer at that point.

I: Okay, so the idea of sabotage. Anything from being dramatic like fucking with a rude customer or taking something, some merchandise, to just something as seemingly innocent as just work slowdowns,

calling out or something, or just leaving the job... But not doing that just because you're tired but something rooted in anger and just not being happy when working. Do you think the possibilities for this are there, which fields does it happen more in, or talk about your experiences in such actions.

H: Yeah, I can talk about it because I'm doing it right now! [laughs] I just purposely don't put in 100% anymore. I just stopped caring. It's actually multi-faceted here. But yeah, this is something that actually just happened yesterday too, but another thing before I get into that. Basically I'm tired, there's so much to do, they're putting extra pressure, so if I'm going to be here an extended amount of time, I'm not going to work as hard as if I wasn't. I'm just going to pace myself, work a little slower, but it's also partially in my head I'm thinking, "There's certain things I'm doing that managers are supposed to do." But because there's none here, the way it's distributed among sales associates, but that shouldn't be happening. And if it should, then we should be getting paid more as a result. So I'm not gonna do stuff that managers are supposed to do, because I know I'm not getting paid for it.

I: And no, that's sort of in a sense correct according to company policy, right? You're

not supposed to be doing this work, so you're not gonna do it.

H: Yeah no, it is technically right. But additionally so because we're all distributing the weight and stressing ourselves out, and basically all bending over backwards to make it still function, because of that, the store, number-wise, and in terms of how it looks to upper management, it looks fine. Numbers are coming in, and sales and all that, so, "What's the worry? No problem, just let them be." But we're all dying to let them stay in maintenance, so I kind of want there to be fires that have to be put out, I want there to be something that they can notice and say, "We can't stay idle, we need to do something to fix this situation." Because as far as they care, they're paying two less salaries and getting the same productivity, so why would they care?

I: Yeah, and the higher ups see that and because they've never worked on the floor and they think it's sustainable to be that understaffed.

H: Yeah but it's really, really not. Like if I need days off, then that's it. Like if there's a certain day that I need off, and my one only coworker who has keys, so he can't cover. So he can't open and close, because that would

be like twelve hours, so he can't do both. So both of us have to work every day basically, So he has to open and I have to close, or I have to open and he has to close. Every single day. So yeah, we both have to be doing one thing or the other.

* * *

**“Starbucks accommodated my
disability
until I reported racism and they fired
me.”**

I feel as though I'm being murdered in plain sight.

Slowly.

And in the pantomime fashion of the commodified African.

Wherein my body, or parody of a body, is effaced piecemeal into the white-green-black-and-blue lattice of the American dollar.

Or, in my case, my apron.

I am a barista at Starbucks, in Hillsborough, New Jersey.

I am black and severely disabled.

I am, of course, about to be fired.

I have a rare neurological disorder, Central Sleep-Apnea.

Probabilistically speaking, any one of us has a less than one percent chance of having

said disorder.

Central Sleep-Apnea is, at least in part due to its rarity, very difficult to treat.

Next, I have Post-traumatic Stress Disorder. This too is clinically difficult to treat.

I suffer from Major Depressive Disorder, Attention Deficit Disorder, and Generalized Anxiety Disorder.

These conditions work to the effect that my sleep is characterized by my choking for hours with a heart rate that is equivalent to my running a marathon whilst having incessant night terrors.

For this reason I awake groggy, bogged down, and overtired. Sometimes I cannot wake at all and fall back asleep no matter how hard I attempt to wake.

This amounts to intermittent lateness at work, and rare severe lateness.

(I have been severely late twice due to disability, over a two year period of exemplary performance.)

None such lateness was held against me at Starbucks until after I reported racial bias at

my store to Starbucks's Ethics Department.

Here's how that went:

I received my first write-up for disability related lateness in May, on the day I returned to work after reporting racism in my Starbucks.

I was written up retroactively for an incident that had transpired the previous year.

My general manager made sure to inform me that she now "had to follow the rules" because I had reported her store to the Ethics Department.

Somehow, I was the only person in the store written up for transgressing the 'excessive lateness' policy of arriving more than five minutes late at my store over a two year period.

I am left to wonder whether at all there might be a discrepancy between the time cards of my, tangentially white coworkers and my manager's reports.

If I am to go by common conceptions of the passage of time, my white coworkers are regularly excessively late to this day and have been over the past two years however

none of them have been held to the standard that I have been.

Moving on, and to return to my manager's heretofore referenced 'corrective actions' toward me, she next explained to me, a twenty-four year old disabled black male, that, "nobody here [at Starbucks in Hillsborough] was found guilty of racial bias and consequently that no one there was racist."

She, of course, failed to consider the methodology of Starbucks's quasi-investigation into my reports of racial, those being plainly: asking those whom I reported for racism if they were racist or not.

Those whom they polled of course said "no, we are not racist."

That being said it conveys little that the Ethics Department found "no evidence of bias" at my store.

Moving on, today I met again with my general manager at Starbucks.

She gave me my "final warning" before forcible separation from Starbucks, or termination.

Before doing so, she intimated that she, an able-bodied white woman, “understood” my experience as an obviously disabled black person in the marketplace; immediately thereafter admonishing me to, as you may have guessed, “be an adult as we all do.” [sic]

She, in other words, demanded I somehow stop being disabled, ‘or else.’

I stared blindly. She went on.

“You will be held to the same standards as everyone else...”

“You should have called in sick [when rendered unconscious due to your chronic conditions] and you would have been excused,” she said.

I explained to her that it was and is impossible for me to contact anyone when rendered, for lack of a better word, comatose, and unable to wake no matter how loud or blaring any alarm or attempt at reaching me might be.

I have explained this routinely and vividly to my general and district managers to no avail.

I have submitted copious amounts of clear medical documentation, however, I have yet to establish “formal accommodations” with Starbucks’s almost purposefully inaccessible office for providing accommodations for disability. I have been trying for a year straight, however, doing so is difficult due to several logistical factors related to illness, impoverishment, and nearly unpaid labor.

She went on.

“You’ve gone on medical leaves yet nothing has changed. The bad [we associate with you] outweighs the good.”

Said “bad” is effectively (1) my being disabled, (2) my being black, and (3) my reporting clear and obvious racial and disability related bias at my store.

I had previously explained as much to my seventeen year-old supervisor who originally filed the penal report leading to my “final warning.”

Said supervisor, while dismissing me minutes into my eight hour shift, suggested that I should “maybe take another medical leave” if I was still disabled, and that she and other supervisors resented me for being disabled and taking previous medical leaves

because it made “things” hard for them.

I was astounded and responded that my dismissal was not a material sociopolitical, medical, or analytic philosophy class and that I could by no means undue years of learned bias, discrimination, and scapegoating. I then went home.

I reported the above incident to my general manager, as she had previously instructed me to report any incidents of presumed ‘retaliation’ from my superordinates.

* * *

She would later have me sign a formal agreement that I would never contact her except through the company ‘Teamworks’ iOS / Android application, on threat of separation or ‘firing’ presumably.

Said standard being a standard I and only I, the disabled black barista, have been held to. The fact of which we, in the developed world, might label ‘plainly discriminatory.’

Now, if I may return to my general manager’s corrective speech, she went on.

Moving forward, my manager then suggested any need for future medical leave

that I might need would be denied (somehow) and that I would be fired in case of medical emergency because, again, I am “held to the same [albeit horrifically ‘different’] standards as everyone else.”

Said standards which my, again only tangentially white coworkers and supervisors were and are beheld to are as follows:

1. Routinely arriving at work inebriated to zero consequence. (Supervisor.)
2. Sharing their own personal WiFi hotspot entitled “white supremacy rules” to a black barista, again with zero consequence. (The same supervisor.)
3. Accusing me and only me, a black barista, of “time theft” for taking my jacket off after clocking in, while other white baristas actively and openly clocked in and sat idle. I reported said incident to Starbucks’s Ethics Committee. They investigated and found “zero evidence of racial bias” and my accusing supervisor was left unscathed.
4. Going on medical leave and returning to a “partner of the quarter award” for their white bravery.

5. Pattern sexual harassment. To illustrate, one coworker asked me “[if I was] a marshmallow dream bar... because [I was] lookin’ like a snack” [sic.] Comments like these went unchecked amongst my coworkers as a rule.

Without respect to the above infractions of any coherent form of ethics my Starbucks is filled with acts of bias and implicit bias. Bias to the extent of racially inequitable or unfair: (a) performance evaluations and promotions, (b) reporting of and consequential penal actions of infractions of company policy, and (c) simple awareness of communicative ethics or etiquette.

To illustrate (c), my coworkers laughed and joked throughout Starbucks’s superficial one-off near single-hour “mandatory bias training,” and routinely make plainly racist and absurd comments. As a rule, none are held accountable for these comments as racism, just like ableism, is often intangible and thereby difficult to prove. The burden of proof in such an environment, composed by a majority of like-minded ableist and racist or ‘normal’ white people lies upon the minorities. In this piece the minorities I center on are the black and the disabled. I am this minority.

To quote my seventeen year-old supervisor whilst dismissing me ahead of schedule “[she couldn’t] stand [me] being there.”

My district manager agreed with her dismissing me at random, and by his plainly vindictive actions toward me, a disabled black barista, cannot stand me being there [at Starbucks] either.

My manager, while explaining her and my district manager’s sympathy with the discriminatory hate my idiot supervisors had for me then very casually tried to manipulate me into “going somewhere new with a fresh start.”

* * *

Update: I’ve since been fired for arriving three minutes late and taking three minutes to take my medication and exit my vehicle and walk onto the work floor.

So, I was fired for being a whole one minute over Starbucks’s excessive lateness policy.

My manager’s words were “I’m not paying you to take your medication.” My white coworkers are allowed to medicate with impunity, however.

* * *

Footnotes:

1. Starbucks, in a childlike attempt to verify my reports of working in a racially biased store simply polled said store to find out if the store was racist. You can imagine how that went.

2. My General Manager, in one of her infantile proto-managerial corrective monologues, somehow made time to randomly call into question and mock my virtually flawless academic career at Rutgers, currently on hold due to lack of funding, equating my financial hardships with my doing nothing with my entire life. Said hold, let's call this (a). Alongside my (b) taking the apposite measures to end said hold and return to my studies, of which I have merely one year left to complete. (a-b) being taken with my (c) exhibiting and living the material effects of chronic disability, my white, able-bodied general manager understood as my inexplicably, mindlessly, and lazily refusing to enroll in Starbucks's sponsored online program at Arizona State University. And so, my manager, in the archetypical obtuse and brutish blood-stained naïveté and narcissism of all white supremacists, in one

swell stroke, obliterated the black intricate latticework that constitutes my being, and , in one brutish swing of a club, rendered me a do-nothing African-American, stagnant, incompetent, and incapable of accomplishing literally anything.

Her exact depiction of the last circa two years of my life was that "... nothing has changed." That I, whilst steeped in said years, had accomplished nothing, despite my at times clocking in over two-hundred hour months, whilst at the brink of death. I do not hyperbolize, I was dying. That I, in the past two years, adrift, surviving wave after wave of blood-soaked oblivion — that I, in an age-old dry yet wet cauldron of patented, dismal, foreign yet familiar, black, haunting, revolting yet enticing Oedipal and instinctive tragicomedy, transmutational horror which would put Virgil, Ovid, Homer, and even Job to the dark, dark, niggardly shame known only by the grisliest most ape-like and forgotten of, former, applicants — no, not applicants — psychotic house-slaves (I meant to say,) freshly removed from the workbed, moist, mindless, deep underground, nearing the railroad eternally whereupon they realize: there is no Harriet Tubman in Hillsborough, and I am two hours late for work.

Interview with Steve

Dabtara: When we talked earlier you said that one of your worst working experiences was bagging groceries and working in supermarkets. Tell me a little about that.

Steve: The worst part about the job is that it tends to be a high volume thing. Most people at my place came to shop for a week or two or even more. Buying in bulk, things like drinks and other canned items. They expect you to do most of the loading for them. [The supermarket chain] employs highschool kids to do a lot of the cart pushing and loading in the parking lot, but as a cashier it is not really easy to walk around to the cart for every bag so I would just be lifting from my back. The standing and back lifting eventually adds up and you feel it at the end of the day. Before that I was in the pharmacy and it didn't really involve much physical labor, but the fatigue mats [cushioned matts to stand on] didn't help much...

D: Related to the previous question, but can you speak at all about what the day to day aspect of working at this grocery store was like? And, if you can, go into what kind of mental effect you felt like this work had on you.

S: Day to day, working at the grocery store meant handling surges of customers that would expect full service for sometimes two, three, or even four hundred dollars worth of groceries. The families that came in would get all sorts of different types of vegetables, marinated meats, etc. It was interesting to talk to some of the customers. Some were friendly, and others were serious. I cannot recall encountering an irate customer, but I did at the pharmacy plenty of times.

Doing this kind of work was very boring. I quit after 2 days because it was just not worth it. I might have made a dollar or two an hour more than other cashiers but it was not worth empty work.

D: You've also spent some time working in the gig economy, food delivery driver kind of stuff. So I'm a little surprised that you don't seem to mind that work as much. Is there a reason why?

S: The gig economy is great because I can work in between other jobs. I've spoken to a few rideshare drivers who do it full time and end up making 40k a year, and get to have a lot of it untaxed due to mileage. The Lyft delivery gig pays about 8-10 [USD] an hour after deducting gas costs. It is a good way to

make food or drink money on the weekends. Also you can smoke weed while working. Customers usually don't tip though, because they are built into the app. But now tips are counted towards our pay.

It is honestly very fun to do food delivery during peak hours. The past summer was very busy and after doing some income calculations, I totaled about 450 dollars at about 11 dollars an hour. I can listen to music while delivering. Also you are sitting, so it's very comfortable in my minivan with the cushioned seat. Work environment is very important to me.

D: I'm assuming that you ended up interacting with customers quite a bit. Talk a little bit about your experiences with them and how you feel like it made things better or worse in terms of the day to day.

S: The customers did make it better once when I was a bagger training under a cashier and I was tipped a few dollars. I honestly believe if you have a 400 dollar basket of food you should tip me for scanning it all.

D: How do you treat people working jobs like these differently now after spending some time working in one of them?

S: I treat fast food workers, retail workers, and grocery store workers better not because I know how hard their jobs are, but because I am a more mature person. Usually the people at these places will accommodate you if you ask, if you are a nice person and phrase the request of yours well.

* * *

Untitled
By Axel Steel

I'm a software developer at a fairly well-known bank.

The job itself isn't difficult and the people aren't annoying but over time I've come to resent my job.

The office environment is fairly antisocial and I've found it difficult to bond with my peers due to the age gap so I could just be craving the intimacy of working in a group environment.

The work itself is pretty straightforward and I'm always up to date with my timelines but even then, something about it just feels off.

Maybe I've burnt myself out on coding from working right out of college.

Maybe the idea that my role is so small in the grand scheme of things makes me feel unimportant.

Whatever the reason is, I feel uninspired and emotionless in regards to my daily tasks.

The promise of better benefits down the line

seems great but even then, I'm not sure if I can commit to this lifestyle for too much longer.

* * *

Micha's Story

My name is Micha, and I have done factory work through a German temp agency for a couple years.

This particular incident happened around four years ago. To make things brief, I was working night shifts at this fruit processing factory, and slipped on a wet pallet. The way I fell meant my arm was slashed against this machine, and I ended up with a ten centimeter [four inch] long gash on my forearm. All my team leader did was slap a bandaid on it, and I continued my shift in its entirety, finishing up at exactly 6 AM.

When I left work and reached my house, I could only rest for a few hours before seeing a doctor for my injury. The doctor bandaged my arm, and I told him about how work uniforms were short sleeved tees, and that I could not wear a cotton bandage on my arm because I was working in the food industry and the bandaids we get at work were special ones (they have a certain amount of metal that sets off the metal detectors if they fall into the product you're working with). So I was pretty sure a larger cotton bandage wouldn't be permitted. So he wrote me a sick note. I went to the agency I worked through to ask if it was okay for me to turn

up like that. Like I said I was doing night shifts, which had a substantial pay bonus and I really did not want to lose that. They flatly said I couldn't enter the food hygiene restricted area with it, so I handed in the note.

Later a guy from the agency called me and said they'd put a long sleeve in my locker so I could work the shift. So I rushed back to work at 10 PM, only to find that my locker contained the regular short sleeved tee. I told a colleague to explain to my team leader what happened and went home (clothing handouts are not open during night shifts, so I absolutely had to rely on my agency guy to put that long sleeved uniform shirt in my locker). To sum it up, I did hand in a doctor's note, but the conditions on which I even could enter the workplace were not met, even though I agreed to work with an injury. I am fairly sure that, by the way, is illegal if you have already handed in the note. Anyway, at the end of the month I check and see that, lo and behold, I was eight hours short of a full paycheck. They did not pay me for that night even though it's in the industry tariff contract.

* * *

I think that with institutionalized temporary

work, it has become easier to circumvent legal protections for workers. And it's already hard to insist on your rights even when you are directly employed by a company and not via a temp work agency. This is a mode of employment even more detrimental to workers than regular wage labour – and ironically costs the company that hires temp labour just as much as a regular employee per hour, but of course with the benefit of being able to give out short term contracts on demand. That means little access to workplace organization since most unions don't really care about temporarily employed colleagues, and an employer (the temp work company) that is even more inclined to cheat you for every penny they can avoid paying. That's because of course they know you're desperate for work (otherwise you would have direct employment) and most workers get hired out only for a couple of months anyway. If you make trouble, there's a bunch of others waiting.

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lewaniaan.com
lewaniaan@protonmail.com