

The Working Class Waves Bye-Bye:

A Proletarian Response to Andre Gorz

How should we respond to Andre Gorz' Farewell to the Working Class? Is Gorz the theorist of a future revolutionary perspective, as he claims? Or does a hidden agenda lie behind his seeming acceptance of the "abolition of work"? Examining his recent work we find that Gorz is not the innovative revolutionary theorist he seems on the surface. Instead Gorz has created a sophisticated attack on working class power based upon attacking the wage by increasing the area of unwaged labor while calling for a cut in the waged work-day. Further, Gorz' analysis represents a closing of ranks ideologically between the social democratic, stalinist and alternativist or "low energy" sectors of the western left. As Daniel Cohn-Bendit pointed out in an issue of Semio-text, Gorz' work has found particular favor among alternativist circles where the total transformation of society and especially the capacity of the working class to play a revolutionary role are rejected in favor of creating small areas which minimize bureaucratic control. For these reasons, we at Midnight Notes believe a critique of Farewell to the Working Class is in order; Also, Gorz' misrepresentation of an anti-work position provides a good opportunity to clarify some of our own views.

To begin with, Gorz defines work and working class in narrow classically capitalist terms: "Work nowadays refers almost exclusively to activities carried out for a wage." He continues, "Work is essentially carried out for a wage... and entitles the recipient to a quantity of social labour equivalent to that which he or she has sold. (emphasis is ours) Working for a wage amounts to working in order to purchase as much time from society as a whole as it has previously received." Before we have finished the second of nine theses which comprise the first chapter, Gorz has made clear his view that, at least in the more industrialized countries, workers are not exploited. Work to Gorz is dull, routine, something he would rather not do himself but it is not exploitation. Far from an accidental slip, this view defines Gorz' position for the rest of the book. If work is exploitation, then struggles against it must be supported. But Gorz

opposes, in clear terms, every form of working class struggle for material improvement and every perspective which leads to "social wage" struggles.

The right to a "social income" for life in part abolishes "forced wage labour" only in favor of a wage system without work (!-M.N.) It replaces, complements...exploitation with welfare, thus the division between Left and Right will, in the future tend to occur less over the issue of the social wage than over the right to autonomous production.

First of all, we say the wage in whatever form is a relation of power. For workers, waged or unwaged, the wage is both the means by which capital hides exploitation, and the relative power of the working class to resist exploitation. Capital exists by imposing unpaid labour time - in other words by getting more labour than the wage pays for, which takes the form of surplus value extracted from both waged workers and unwaged workers such as housewives, students, artists, etc. However Gorz both defines work only as waged work and ignores the unpaid part of waged work itself. He then calls for less waged work-time in order to free more hours, not so we can "rest" more, but so "we may all work" more in our "free time!"

We should hardly need, after more than a century, to go back to Marx's debates with those who ignored the importance of the wage struggle in improving the lives and building the power of workers (see Wage Labour and Capital). As for the idea of a wage system "without work", there are at least some of us willing to go on record here and now as endorsing, at least as a minimum program, that the ruling class just mail us our paychecks and let us stay home. But Andre Gorz' opposition to this idea is stated in no uncertain terms: "The demand to 'work less' does not mean or imply the right to 'rest more', but the right to 'live more!"; and two paragraphs later:

Our watchword may be defined as : Let us work less so that we may all work and do more things by ourselves in our free time. Socially useful labour distributed over all those willing and

able to work will thus cease to be anyone's exclusive or leading activity. Instead, people's major occupation may be one or a number of self-defined activities, carried out not for money but for the pleasure or benefit involved.

This last point reminds us of the custom in the U.S.S.R. of requiring several days a year of unwaged "socialist voluntary labour"--with workers normally employed on the specified day receiving no pay for a full day's work. Gorz is in fact afraid that people will take his anti-work rhetoric too seriously and use the opportunity to work less - to work less. The self-proclaimed leading advocate of the abolition of work is rather enamored of the work ethic.

While Gorz would like to emphasize the "newness" of his current views, there is a distinct continuity in his perspective over the last decade or so. Gorz, a Communist Party ideologue in the 1950's, is best known for his work of the 1960's Strategy for Labor. Already in the 1960's Gorz had developed three tendencies which he carries over into his latest work:

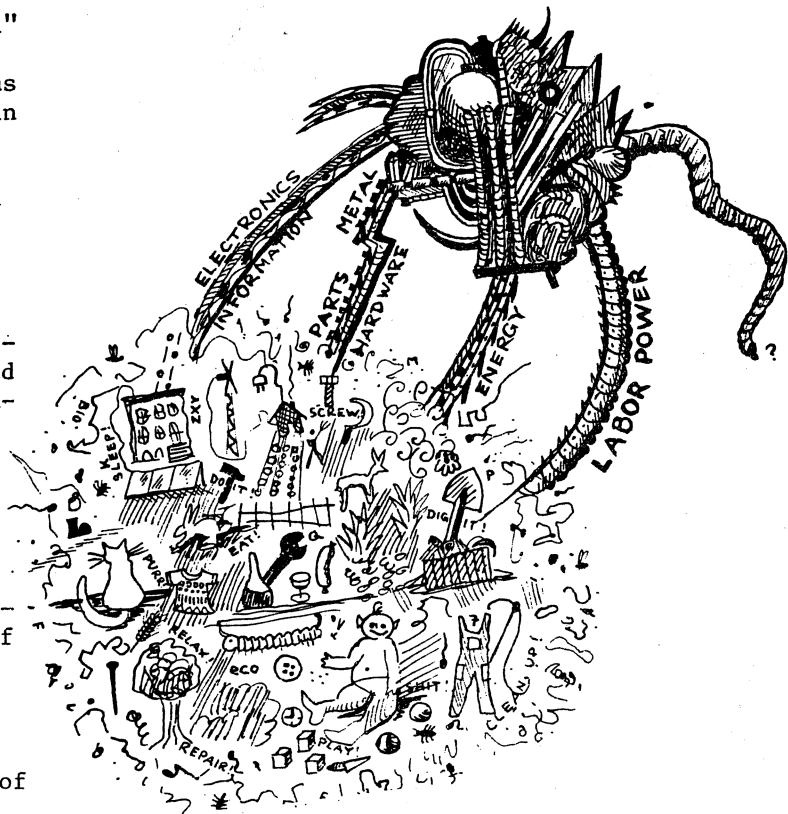
1) A disavowal of the wage struggle. Gorz was then arguing that "economic" demands were "consumerist" and limited to the constraints of the system, as distinct from "political" or "structural" reforms which supposedly hastened the transition to socialism - reforms such as workers' control of production which, in the latest phase of the struggles has been encouraged by capital as a way of adding a voluntary luster to lower-waged work - the self-management of poverty. As we shall see, Gorz systematically attacks the working class wage struggle today as well.

2) A productivist outlook on revolution. That is, in the sixties Gorz argued that because traditional production workers did not identify with their work, they would be replaced by the "new working class" of technicians, etc., who would be led to make the revolution because capitalism limited their ability to realize themselves in their work--a revolution to liberate work from inefficiencies! Now Gorz seeks the reduction of "wage labour" in favor of the development of more productive areas of the unpaid day as we shall see.

3) Seeing the revolutionary program as determined by the latest development of capital, instead of viewing capital as the result of the social struggle. Thus, where Gorz had previously claimed that capital had eliminated the revolutionary

potential of production workers, he now argues that capital has eliminated the revolutionary potential of the whole class. In an interview in Semiotext (Vol.4 No.2 1982) Gorz states "One of the things I have tried to show is that the working class has become structurally incapable of taking control of production and society." Gorz' argument is that the way capital has structured the workplace and hierarchically organized labour-power "besides being means of producing, are always means of dominating, of disciplining, and of militarizing the worker." This should not come as news to anyone. Gorz, however, uses this fact as a reason to abandon the possibility of revolution. Gorz assumes a priori that working class autonomy is out of the question. Or put a different way, Gorz' claim is that working class organization can only mirror the hierarchical structure of capital. From the Paris Commune to the whole history of the workers' councils to the structure of Polish Solidarity (which did not stratify members by industry and function but included all employees as members) the evidence goes against Gorz' claim.

The essential point is that Gorz' new "viewpoint" is seen through the eyes of capital- its left eye perhaps, but



certainly capital's. When workers struggled against work, creating today's situation, where capital is forced to abandon certain sectors of work because the pace of struggle became too intense, Gorz opposed these struggles. Now however, Gorz sees capital abolishing work through automation (though he is blind to the transfer of much production work to the backs of third-world workers as well) and believes the "left" must accommodate itself to this progress:

The error consists in believing that labor, by which I mean heteronomous salaried activity, can and must remain the essential matter. It's just not so. According to American projections within twenty years labor time will be less than half that of leisure time. I see the task of the left as directing and promoting this process of the abolition of labor (capital's current program--M.N.) in a way which will not result in a mass of unemployed on one side, an aristocracy of labor on the other, and between them a proletariat which carries out the most distasteful jobs for forty-five hours a week. Instead let everyone work much less for his salary and thus be free to act in a much more autonomous manner. This means replacing heteronomous, salaried labor with the independent work of freely associated individuals in extended families and neighborhood cooperatives so that autonomous activity based on voluntary cooperation would prevail and market relationships including the sale of labor time would waste away.

The two most important concepts for Gorz' thesis are that the abolition of work is already occurring caused by capitalism itself, and that the working class no longer exists, at least as a social agent. The development of machine technology has always been a weapon of capital's to respond to working class activity. Already Marx had chronicled the introduction of industrial machines as a counter-revolution against the working class revolt against the length of the work day. What we are witnessing today is not a revolution which merely needs to be managed correctly, but yet another profound industrial counter-revolution which will be used by capital only to increase the work we all do, both temporarily, by the increase in the unwaged part of the work day, and through the vast expansion of spheres of labour-intensive unpaid and low paid work; Gorz encourages both of these increases - first he lectures on the one hand on the need to "endow domestic or family based activities

with a new dignity and to lead to the abolition of the sexual division of labor." Then he calls for the development of areas of "autonomous production", "Autonomous production will develop in all those fields where what one can do for oneself in a given period of time is worth more than what one could buy by working the equivalent period of time for a wage." The message of this do-it-yourself attitude, is that perhaps it has become too "expensive" for us all to rely on waged "specialists" every time the drain clogs or the house needs painting. But expensive in what way? Gorz' position becomes clearer when we examine his views on housework and the social wage more closely. Gorz writes that the main concern of the women's movement "can no longer be that of liberating women from housework, but of extending the non-economic rationality (of housework) beyond the home." Indeed. But Gorz' argument gets worse. "Indeed if housework were remunerated at the marginal price of an hour's work... the cost of domestic payments would be so high as to exceed the capacities of even the opulent society." Well then, we have finally reached demands which are revolutionary and which cannot be met by capital. Their limits are not our limits. Clearly Gorz is trying to save the system, not destroy it, and his attempt to ideologically disarm every single working class struggle is testimony to this fact.

Working class demands have turned into consumerist mass demands. An atomized serialized mass of proletarians demand to be given by society, or more precisely by the state, what they are unable to take, or produce.

This position was bad enough in the "affluent" 1960's but to hold it now when millions of people have suffered from declining wages, factory closings, and the destruction of the social wage which are all part of the austerity programs which Gorz seems so enthusiastic about, amounts to pure and simple class treason. Gorz supports the "abolition of work" while at every turn opposing the refusal of work.

The real genius of Gorz' perspective is that in his attack on social services and wages for housework and his advocacy of "autonomous" production and self-help, Gorz constructs the program for a radical reduction of the cost of reproducing labor power. If we look closely at Gorz' call for reducing the work day, we find the hidden agenda behind it revealed at last:

All in all, at the level of society as

well as the family, the lack of time means impoverishment and extra expenditure. We have barely begun to add up the hidden costs of productivism. More time would make it possible to develop household as well as artistic, cultural, and craft production; it would allow more direct involvement in running neighborhoods or towns, and the creation of cooperative laundries, canteens, kitchen gardens, community workshops. Lastly it would allow much cheaper and more satisfying services to be exchanged within the framework of the neighborhood, housing estate or local cooperative.

(Note the preservation of labor-time as a measure of value - M.N.)

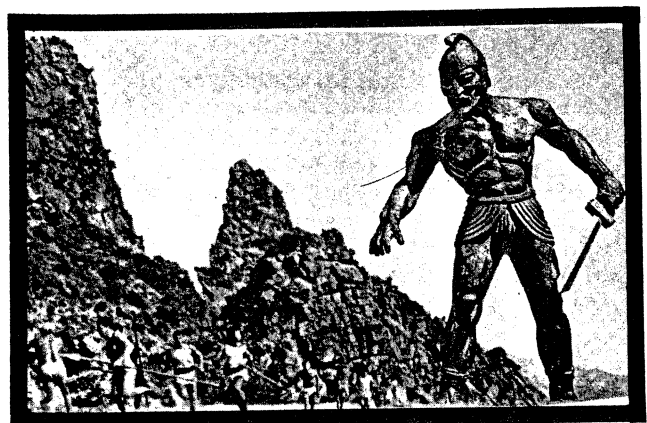
As for Gorz' suggestion that capital itself is abolishing work, we would laugh if the truth weren't so tragic. We have already revealed the creation of more work in the theory of Gorz' program. In the actual world of class conflict, capital's struggle is always to create more work. Gorz mistakes the destruction of certain sectors of the working class (e.g. the relative reduction of assembly-line workers) with the destruction of the class itself. Instead, as M.N. has shown in previous issues, exploitation has been expanded in the reconstituted capitalist economy, spatially with an increase in low-wage sectors of labor - intensive work, and temporally with an increase in the unwaged sector of the work-day (the right wing version of Gorz' program). The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights (recently replaced by Reagan) reports that 152,000 people are slaves in North Carolina alone - yes that's in the year of the space shuttle, the home computer and industrial robots. (Talking Drum Sept. 1983). This is another form of extending the "non-economic rationale" of household labor to other sectors, as was Stalin's network of "autonomous, non-market production." What Gorz really wants is to expand unwaged "housework" while reducing waged commodity production work in a radical reconstruction of capital's accumulation of surplus value: "all work and no pay," capitalism without a money wage system. We say no thanks.

Finally for Gorz to convince anyone of his thesis that the working class has disappeared politically, he must ignore actual working class struggles. We are told that "Instead of demanding the abolition of wage - labour, the proletariat has come to demand the abolition of all unwaged work." Given the marxist view of exploitation, this seems like perfectly reasonable behavior on the part of the

proletariat, since winning the end of unwaged work would mean the end of the system itself. Ironically, Gorz spends much of the book arguing that the working class is no longer a social agent and that the same working class is spending too much time struggling in ways which threaten Gorz' plans. Gorz' solution is to ignore certain struggles entirely. For instance, he writes, "Over the past twenty years the link between the growth of the productive forces and the growth of class antagonism has been broken." This argument of course is contradicted by the French uprising of May 1968, the decade of struggle of the Italian extra-parliamentary left, Solidarity in Poland, the British rebellions of 1981, Liberty City, Miami, the tremendous general strike which toppled the Shah of Iran, and the current struggle of West German workers for a shorter work week, etc.

Gorz dismisses all liberation movements in the third world, (along with the existence of the third world itself) claiming that, "armed violence has never led to a 'people's war' in any country. It has led to counter guerilla campaigns which have usually been able to liquidate both supporters and sympathizers of armed struggle..." We need only mention China, Vietnam, and Nicaragua for a few. Does Gorz expect our brothers and sisters in El Salvador to give up because he's "proven" that armed struggle never succeeds ?

But while Gorz' disavowal of the third-world struggles which have shaped three decades may seem absurd, his rationale is part of an important aspect of his argument, namely, that the state is



invincible, can no longer be done away with. If we are to believe Gorz and agree that our struggles should be to develop autonomous areas of production as he suggests, Gorz must convince us to

forsake the struggle over/against the state:

The existence of a state separate from civil society...is thus the essential prerequisite to the autonomy of civil society. (!- M.N.) The state serves to free civil society and its individual members from tasks which they could only undertake at the price of impairing both individual and social relations. Thus the existence of money and and prices makes it possible to avoid the haggling and mutual suspicion that go along with barter.

Thus Gorz simultaneously proposes the "whithering away of the state" through the elimination of the struggle over the social wage and the fruits of that struggle (e.g. "welfare," etc.), and the need to preserve the state to avoid "anarchy". This bears a striking resemblance to the Reagan program. Gorz has his imaginary Prime Minister tell the public, "The government's vocation is to abdicate into the hands of the people" - an echo of Reagan's self-help rhetoric. It all adds up to more unwaged work. In fact, of course, the state is necessary to insure that all the workers do all the waged and unwaged work Gorz wants us to do in his "Dual Society".

We do not intend to give the reader the impression that because we defend wage struggles in all forms against Gorz' position, that Midnight Notes supports the wage system. However, reality must be taken into account when developing our strategy, and the wage is under brutal attack by capital. The working class cannot abandon the wage while the ruling class still maintains control over the means of reproducing wealth. This would leave us virtually defenseless.

However, struggles which reappropriate wealth would enable us to begin moving toward a society which transcends the work/wage relation. The self-reduction struggles in Italy and elsewhere, lowering the price of commodities through struggle, the "commodity riot" seen in the U.S. ghettos, and similar activities are early examples of this type of struggle. To the extent that we do away with price, and overcome the denial of wealth which forces us to work and be exploited, we can transcend the wage system. But wage struggles must be used to build our power to prepare to raise the stakes. We must not abandon the wage or the struggle for the wage while capital still exists.

Gorz' program, presented as a radical new suggestion to the revolutionary
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movement, is in fact an attempt to ideologically unite the stalinist, social-democratic and alternativist forces of the left in a way that can forestall struggles around the refusal of work and install the left as the managers of the working class. Gorz' utopian vision at the end of the book is complete with a (left) president and prime minister who address a passive public to explain the revolution by decree. The two highlights are the creation of bike lanes on the public streets and the banning of television two nights a week - both low energy style demands. Army vans pick up people who are - this being the first day of liberation after all - on their way to work. Is this the best we can do?

We at Midnight Notes have a different vision:

A great ship is about to sail on a beautiful early morning. Assembled on the ship are all of the self proclaimed "marxist" ideologists who, now that the revolution has come, prepare to sail around the world to spread the good word, and build a society which will accept their vision of socialism based upon the joy of endless voluntary work and self-sacrifice. The ship has been named the Pequod in honor of its inevitable destination and in memory of the contributions of Melville and C.L.R. James.*

Suddenly, a huge crowd gathers. It is a mass of Gorz' "atomized, serialized proletarians" come to see the ship leave without any gratitude to the would-be-saviors on board. These workers, standing there on the pier on the first day of victory and liberation, knowing their true class interests, recognize their real "benefactors" for who they are. Laughingly, the crowd promises the ideologists on board the ship, Gorz among them, that everyone will put in as much voluntary work to build socialism as they possibly can. Reassured, the ship sails off and the working class waves bye-bye to the ideologists. A few people light up joints and crack open beers. A few more go back to bed. A few go start a picnic. A few people carry on some needed services like health care, (and even they only work short shifts). Everyone takes it pretty easy and begins spending some of their spare time thinking up how to build safe machines that can do the work people still do, and inventing new drugs, sex positions and crossword puzzles made up of the names of famous marxist ideologists.

* - see Mariners, Renegades and Castaways by C.L.R. James