

Anatomy of a Self-Made Man: Performing the American Work Ethic in the Age of Inequality

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A dissertation

submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

University of Washington

2026

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Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

Communication

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Abstract

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Abstract: This dissertation examines how the American work ethic functions as a rhetorical device across economic classes to undermine organized labor and justify the wealth inequality that exploded as a result. I define this ethic as the conviction that no one is entitled to anything they have not earned through their own hard work and ingenuity, and detail how rhetors across the classes of capital, management, and labor perform this ethic through what I theorize as the bootstrapping ethos. This ethos operates through three interrelated components: public demonstrations of exceptionally hard work, the denial or minimization of unearned advantages, and invidious comparisons with lazy, entitled others. The dissertation proceeds in four chapters. Chapter One traces the intellectual history of the American work ethic from its Puritan origins through the industrious and entrepreneurial variants, showing how the bootstrapping ethos has

remained remarkably stable even as economic conditions have shifted. Chapter Two analyzes how capitalist rhetors—exemplified by Starbucks founder Howard Schultz—deploy the bootstrapping ethos to defend their wealth against challenges from organizing workers, positioning entrepreneurial labor as the only kind that truly deserves material reward. Chapter Three introduces the concept of the Progressive Workplace Brand, demonstrating through a comparative analysis of Amazon, Starbucks, and REI how management rhetoric frames modest treatment as extraordinary acts of corporate benevolence, communicating to workers that they are already getting more than they deserve. Chapter Four examines how workers themselves internalize and deploy the bootstrapping ethos against one another, using interviews with anti-union Trader Joe's employees to show that resistance to unionization is often rooted in a deeply felt attachment to the industrial work ethic and resentment toward younger coworkers perceived as unwilling to earn their place. These chapters reveal that the American work ethic sets an impossible standard of deservingness for working people, one that can always be redefined by capital to labor's disadvantage. I conclude by arguing that the labor movement must move beyond appeals to hard work as the basis for economic justice and instead embrace a rhetoric of universal rights. By appealing to an alternative work ethic more consciously grounded in the common good, organizers may effectively challenge the ideological grip of the bootstrapping ethos and build the solidarity necessary to grow the movement's power.

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION.....	2
CHAPTER ONE: A History of the American Work Ethic and a Theory of the Bootstrapping Ethos.....	47
CHAPTER TWO: Bootstrapping Billionaires.....	93
CHAPTER THREE: The Progressive Workplace Brand: How Management Maintains the American Work Ethic.....	131
CHAPTER FOUR: It's Not Daycare: How Labor Performs the American.....	210
CONCLUSION.....	267

Introduction

During his testimony in front of the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions late in 2023, Teamsters president Sean O'Brien so enraged Oklahoma Senator Markwayne Mullin that the business owner/politician stood up to fight him. Red-faced and fists clenched, Mullin returned to his seat quickly if a bit hesitantly when scolded by the Chairperson, Senator Bernie Sanders.¹ This moment is less important for Mullin's hotheadedness, however, than what provoked it: O'Brien's suggestion in a series of social media posts that Mullin had not truly *earned* his wealth, calling him a "greedy CEO" who "pretends to be self-made."²

The near fight was not the first time the two had clashed over who was a harder worker and who was more entitled; in fact, it was the culmination of a feud that began months earlier. O'Brien had testified in a previous hearing about union busting, and Mullin, a former CEO whose family owns five non-union construction companies, apparently took offense at the hearing's premise and O'Brien's anti-CEO rhetoric.³ Before asking his allotted question of O'Brien, Mullin recounted his own experience being targeted by union "thugs" who tried to organize his workers, picketed his house, and tried to intimidate him. He then asked, "For *what*?"

¹ Mary Claire Jalonick, "GOP Senator Challenges Teamsters Head to a Fight in a Fiery Exchange at a Hearing," Politics, *AP News*, November 14, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/senate-mullin-obrien-teamsters-fight-hearing-153e28d131973d1e10b539491c9e94a6>; Jules Roscoe, "CEO Senator Tries to Physically Fight Teamsters President Over Tweet In Wild Hearing," *VICE*, November 14, 2023, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/ceo-senator-tries-to-physically-fight-teamsters-president-over-tweet-in-wild-hearing/>.

² Sean M. O'Brien [@TeamsterSOB], "Greedy CEO who pretends like he's self made. In reality, just a clown & fraud. Always has been, always will be. Quit the tough guy act in these senate hearings. You know where to find me. Anyplace, Anytime cowboy. #LittleManSyndrome <https://t.co/JNvT7IsA6m>," Tweet, Twitter, June 21, 2023, <https://x.com/TeamsterSOB/status/1671556346246725638>.

³ Kenny Stancil, "'Class War' Erupts at Hearing as Union Leader and GOP Senator Exchange Verbal Blows | Common Dreams," *Common Dreams*, March 8, 2023, <https://www.commondreams.org/news/sean-o-brien-markwayne-mullin-class-war-senate-hearing>.

Because we were paying higher wages? Because we had better benefits and we wasn't requiring them [his employees] to pay your guys' exorbitant salaries? You talk about CEOs that are making all this money, and what do you make, Mr. O'Brien?" He asserted that O'Brien makes \$193,000, while the average feeder driver for UPS makes only \$35,000, and asked "What do *you* bring for that salary?...What job have you committed, or have you started? What job have you created, one job, other than sucking the paycheck out of somebody else...forcing them to pay dues?"⁴ The two men argued over one another until Sanders intervened and allowed O'Brien to answer the question about his earnings. He responded "My salary – if you follow me around – I walk, I actually look at this building –I bet you I work more hours than you do. Twice as many hours." Mullin fired back "That's *impossible*. Sir, you don't know what hard work *is*."⁵ This suggestion from Mullin that O'Brien was in fact the lazy and entitled one, profiting from others' hard work without contributing anything himself angered the Teamsters' boss enough to cause him to post the taunting messages about Mullin that questioned his self-made status and inspired a near physical altercation on the Senate floor a few months later.

Besides the fact that it made watching a Senate hearing feel a bit like watching an episode of *Jersey Shore*, what is remarkable about this exchange is the clarity with which it reveals a shared premise at the heart of progressive and conservative labor politics: the conviction that no one is entitled to anything they haven't earned. Puzzlingly, in the neoliberal era, it seems the labor movement and the business community alike have built an ethos around their own earnest hard work and their opponent's refusal to engage in it; both claim that the other thinks they

⁴ *Defending the Right of Workers to Organize Unions Free from Illegal Corporate Union-Busting | The U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor & Pensions: Hearing before the U.S Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, & Pensions*, United States Senate 118th Congress (2023), <https://www.help.senate.gov/hearings/defending-the-right-of-workers-to-organize-unions-free-from-illegal-corporate-union-busting>.

⁵ *Defending the Right of Workers to Organize Unions Free from Illegal Corporate Union-Busting | The U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor & Pensions*.

deserve something without working for it. Just as this line of logic is a familiar one in rhetoric that seeks to discredit any policy that carries so much as a whiff of redistribution, it has also always been the foundation of anti-capitalist critique.⁶ Socialist thinkers and organizers long before and after Marx have won converts by simply pointing to the inherent injustice of an economic system in which a small sector of the population reaps the rewards of everyone else's hard work, simply because they happen to own all of the productive resources.⁷ Indeed, the labor movement's central premise is that working people deserve more from their employers precisely because they are the ones doing all the work.

So reasonable is this argument that the capitalist class has found what may be its greatest rhetorical success in co-opting and deploying it for itself.⁸ Along with the managerial class who advocate their interests, business owners like Mullin have for decades eroded labor's claims to a morally superior ethos through a curious rhetoric that appropriates for capital the virtues of the working class and redirects anti-capitalist critique of the undeserving rich against "big labor."⁹ In a cultural environment where all ends of the political spectrum seem to agree that no one is entitled to anything they have not earned, these blows against labor unions, however paradoxical, appear to land. A willingness to work hard and to earn one's own way in the world is the

⁶ See, for example, Russell Conwell's "Acres of Diamonds" and William Graham Sumner's "The Forgotten Man" for examples of anti-worker rhetoric, justified on the grounds that wealth is only legitimate if it is earned through one's own efforts.

⁷ Elizabeth Anderson, *Hijacked: How Neoliberalism Turned the Work Ethic against Workers and How Workers Can Take It Back*, New edition (Cambridge, United Kingdom New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press, 2023); John F. Bray, *Labour's Wrongs and Labour's Remedy*, 1st ed. (Routledge, 2016)<https://www.routledge.com/Labours-Wrongs-and-Labours-Remedy/Bray/p/book/9781138974142>; G. D. H. Cole, *Socialist Thought: The Forerunners, 1789 - 1850*, vol. 1, A History of Socialist Thought (London: Macmillan & Co, 1953); Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, New edition (New York: International Publishers Co, 2014); Bhaskar Sunkara, *The Socialist Manifesto: The Case for Radical Politics in an Era of Extreme Inequality*, First Edition (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2019).

⁸ Anderson, *Hijacked*.

⁹ John V. Kane and Benjamin J. Newman, "Organized Labor as the New Undeserving Rich?: Mass Media, Class-Based Anti-Union Rhetoric and Public Support for Unions in the United States," *British Journal of Political Science* 49, no. 3 (July 2019): 997–1026, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S000712341700014X>.

foundational and guiding value of American society.¹⁰ The American Dream that anyone can get ahead with enough effort and dedication, however discredited by research in stratification and social mobility, forms the basis of our social contract and has been deeply imprinted on our moral sensibilities as a result. In other words, while most people understand that the American Dream is not achievable for most, they still cling to it as a normative ideal; it is the way things *ought* to be.¹¹ It is understandable, then, that the American labor movement has reasoned within this moral system, staking the worth of the working class on their working status and taking for granted that working people are virtuous and deserving precisely because they earn their own way.

The problem with this line of thinking, I argue, is its logical extension that no one is entitled to anything they have not earned. When this normative commitment becomes consensus, it encourages rhetors to appeal to a neoliberal American work ethic and in so doing, adopt what I call the bootstrapper ethos. This ethos carries forward the spirit of the fabled American Dream and the enduring American work ethic – that of patient hard work, persistence, grit, and independence. It dictates that a willingness to (try to) work one’s way up the ladder is the highest virtue, even if the next rung is far beyond one’s reach. Perhaps more importantly, it appeals to an inherent shame in needing – or worse, wanting – to be given something one has not earned, for being *entitled*. The question of “rights,” then, is entangled with work, and if earning is virtuous, then entitlement is shameful.

I argue that the current moment calls for a rhetorical examination of the American work ethic and the bootstrapper ethos that performs it. More precisely, I initiate an inquiry into how a

¹⁰ Luke Winslow, *Economic Injustice and the Rhetoric of the American Dream* (Lexington Books, 2017); Adam Chandler, *99% Perspiration: A New Working History of the American Way of Life* (New York: Pantheon, 2025).

¹¹ Alissa Quart, *Bootstrapped: Exposing the Myth of the Self-Made and the Rugged Individualist, From “Little House” to Horatio Alger* (New York (N.Y.): HarperCollins Publishers, 2023).

shared commitment to the virtues of this ethic across classes has contributed to organized labor's near total collapse in the United States and has provided moral justification for the explosion of wealth inequality that resulted in part from labor's disempowerment.¹² What it means to have adequately earned something, after all, is the result of a rhetorical process – a conclusion that is negotiated between labor, management, and capital. Despite its anti-capitalist possibilities in valorizing waged workers over those who have inherited wealth, the American work ethic now serves most often to benefit the latter at labor's expense. In the past, it was easier to use the virtues of work and self-reliance to shame the idle rich – particularly young heirs of wealthy families – into pulling their own weight, to contribute something useful to society rather than coasting off the productive labor of everyone else. Critics from John Locke to Adam Smith to Karl Marx did exactly that, excoriating the social parasitism of, for example, youth fortunate enough to inherit large estates and live off rents.¹³

Scorn for this sort of entitlement appears to have deeper roots in the Western psyche, however, as the ancient Greeks had a word that conveys a similar sentiment in *hybris*. Sometimes translated as broadly as dishonor, scholars have found that in Greek literature, it refers more specifically to a particular kind of hubris usually associated with wealth, youth, and immoral self-indulgence.¹⁴ N. R. E. Fisher has further specified that the particular dishonor of *hybris* is related to its voluntarism. Those with *hybris* have both “energy and power,” yet choose not to use them productively but selfishly.¹⁵ While Fisher finds that Aristotle and others were mostly concerned about how *hybristai* (those with the quality) tended to victimize others by

¹² Steven Greenhouse, *Beaten Down, Worked Up: The Past, Present, and Future of American Labor* (Anchor, 2020).

¹³ Anderson, *Hijacked*.

¹⁴ N. R. E. Fisher, “Hybris and Dishonour: I,” *Greece & Rome* 23, no. 2 (October 1976): 177–93, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017383500019203>.

¹⁵ Fisher, “Hybris and Dishonour.”

belittling them and boasting about their own inherent superiority, the word is also used to describe the general moral hazards of arrogance that comes with excess wealth. As Fisher explains, paraphrasing Aristotle, “those who possess external goods without arête (virtue)...are said to become arrogant and hybristai.”¹⁶ Further, “hybris appears to be even more embedded in the behavior of the rich than it was in that of the young” because they regard everything as something that they could purchase.¹⁷ Rather than general hubris, it seems then that the Greek *hybris* gestures toward the particular hubris of privileged entitlement, in other words, having “external goods” without virtue.

What it means to be virtuous in the context of American capitalism is for a person to earn their material goods rather than carry an entitlement to wealth regardless of what they do with their time and efforts. Just as the ancient Athenian elite felt it was in bad taste to be overly entitled and braggadocious about their superior status, today’s one percent has internalized the idea that to be deserving of their good fortune (and assuage the guilt of privilege), they must earn it themselves.¹⁸ Indeed, many in the upper-middle and upper class do work extremely long hours in jobs that are stressful and demanding and often have had to work exhaustively all their lives.¹⁹ Increasingly, they come from structured childhoods jam-packed with extracurriculars and are quickly funneled into rigorous Ivy League educations, often followed by graduate or professional school. They then graduate into careers that often require far more than 40 hours a week of work. Because of this development, today’s elites feel justified in their good fortune. They earned their place.²⁰

¹⁶ Fisher, “Hybris and Dishonour,” 180.

¹⁷ Fisher, “Hybris and Dishonour,” 182.

¹⁸ Rachel Sherman, *Uneasy Street: The Anxieties of Affluence*, First paperback edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019).

¹⁹ Anderson, *Hijacked*.

²⁰ Shamus Khan, *Privilege: The Making of an Adolescent Elite at St. Paul’s School*, Princeton Studies in Cultural Sociology (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2011); Sherman, *Uneasy Street*.

There are, of course, some glaring problems with this meritocratic narrative. While it is true that the rich work more today than they did in the past, the executive class in particular tend to exaggerate their hours and their labor tends not to be productive – that is, they work performatively.²¹ What is worse, however, is that while the top earners can assure themselves and the rest of us that they earned their places fair and square through working hard all their lives, the simple reality is that those less fortunate than themselves work just as hard and exhaustively all their lives, and by most logical measures much harder, only they are not rewarded for it. Indeed, the working class and the poor have been calling bullshit on the idea that the economy's winners simply work harder than they do for some time, as they string together multiple low-wage and demanding jobs to make ends meet, often while simultaneously juggling other hardships, such as the demands of unpaid domestic labor or perhaps the difficulties of a having a marginalized identity that is undoubtedly wound up with their economic precarity.²²

This is especially troubling because the performative labor of the rich is not unconnected to the declining wealth at the other end of the economic spectrum. Inflated salaries and good benefits for those elite careers have come at the cost of lower pay and worse or no benefits for everyone else.²³ Over 40% of jobs in the United States are now low-wage and under-valued service sector positions.²⁴ While in one sense the rich work hard for their positions, what enables them to capitalize on the opportunities they are given often boils down to the advantages of wealth and identity, as it has always been.²⁵ This is what Michael Sandel has in mind when he

²¹ Michael J. Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?*, First Edition (New York (N.Y.): Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020).

²² Jamie K. McCallum, *Worked over: How Round-the-Clock Work Is Killing the American Dream*, First edition. (New York, NY: Basic Books, Hachette Book Group, 2020); Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit*.

²³ McCallum, *Worked Over*.

²⁴ Chandler, *99% Perspiration*.

²⁵ What the American work ethic ignores is that an opportunity cannot be earned, they are given.

describes *The Tyranny of Merit*.²⁶ While the United States grows more unequal and social mobility becomes more of an illusion, the guise of meritocracy along with the rhetoric of performative labor makes it seem that the winners are justified and the losers have only themselves to blame.²⁷

Though many Americans grow angry and resentful as they become more acutely aware that the playing field is far from even, their ire is directed toward diffuse targets and often remains stubbornly within the moral and ideological framework of the meritocratic American work ethic. That is, though critiques of the extremely wealthy are becoming more commonplace, these critiques tend to be limited to exposing those whose inherited privileges enabled them to become wealthy rather than questioning the morality of a system that enables such absurd disparities in wealth under any circumstances. There is, for instance, an emerging, semi class-conscious genre of film and television wherein a hard-working, less advantaged hero who has had to earn their place at work and in life takes some kind of revenge on wealthy, White villains who have not (though the heroes are often White themselves). The popular film *Send Help*, for instance features Rachel McAdams as Linda Liddle, a frumpy and underappreciated but hard-working employee at a large corporation.²⁸ It is clear that she is fairly high up or at least at the middle of the corporate ladder, has worked hard to get there, and that she is very good at what she does. Her merit is so high that the firm's CEO and founder promised her a promotion to the executive level. Alas, the audience learns quickly that the founder has recently died, and bequeathed the company to his young, preppy looking, misogynistic son who gives the job to a

²⁶ Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit*.

²⁷ See also: Ofer Sharone, *Flawed System/Flawed Self: Job Searching and Unemployment Experiences* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2013), <https://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/F/bo16668097.html>.

²⁸ *Send Help*, Horror/Comedy, directed by Sam Raimi (20th Century Studios, 2026). The film has a 92/100 critic and 86/100 audience score on the film review website Rotten Tomatoes: https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/send_help

golf buddy instead – a manager we see stealing Liddle’s work and presenting it as his own in the first scene, emphasizing her superior intelligence and efforts. After a company plane crash (a trip which she was grudgingly allowed to join), Liddle gets stranded on a Thai island with the new CEO, and due to an obsession with the show *Survivor*, Liddle is far more competent than her boss at surviving and suddenly holds all the power. She spends the rest of the film exacting her revenge, sometimes violently.

That cultural artifacts like this one keep surfacing to popular acclaim suggest a deeply felt frustration with the reality that they depict. American society’s failure to affirm the meritocratic ideals it has always rhetorically affirmed sparks a subsequent desire for stories wherein justice is served, even violently, against those whose wealth and positions of power are unearned.²⁹ It should come as no surprise when the villain is a young and morally despicable CEO who views his lot in life as a birthright. Yet films like these do not question a world in which executives are paid exorbitant salaries and jet around the world at will on private planes at great expense to the planet only to conduct business that is almost certainly exploitative, extractive, or just screwing people over somewhere, somehow. It only objects to the fact that the wrong person – someone who has not rightfully earned the job – is the one reaping the rewards.

Consider also the internet outrage over “nepo babies” in Hollywood or the way that it has become fashionable to point to the injustice of *generational* wealth.³⁰ The qualifier has a way of

²⁹ A few other recent examples might be the Prime TV show *The Girlfriend*, the film *Knives Out* (2019), the film *The Menu* (2022), the film *Ready or Not* (2019) and its sequel (2026), and the film *You’re Next* (2011) though, in the latter two, the heroines are spouses of the ultra-wealthy family members. It is nevertheless clear that they are from a working or middle-class background, and end up having to gruesomely murder their wealthy family members for their own survival.

³⁰ Nate Jones, “An All But Definitive Guide to the Hollywood Nepo-Verse,” *Vulture*, December 19, 2022, <https://www.vulture.com/article/hollywood-nepotism-babies-list-taxonomy.html>; The Washington Post, “Michelle Obama Calls Inherited Wealth ‘Affirmative Action,’” *Washington Post*, August 21, 2024, https://www.washingtonpost.com/video/politics/michelle-obama-calls-inherited-wealth-affirmative-action/2024/08/21/c61320ca-4efa-48ac-80f4-3bf0de999f9f_video.html.

inserting itself into critical discussions of class privilege so that speakers can be assured those who virtuously earned their wealth need not take offense. Further, consider again the heated exchange between Mullin and O'Brien on the Senate floor. While the Teamster's boss called the former business owner a "greedy CEO," given the trajectory of the rest of their argument it seems the real kicker was his charge that Mullin "pretends to be self-made." The near-fist fight gathered lots of headlines, but what got less attention was when the two men met over coffee (which O'Brien suggested they do in lieu of a physical altercation) and bonded over a shared commitment to hard work and self-reliance.³¹ It seems the substance of O'Brien's distaste for Mullin was not so much his oppositional class status as a CEO, but the fact that he may not have ascended to the position through his own merits. Likewise, Mullin could not abide this attack on his work ethic.

My point here is not to call out or antagonize O'Brien for extending an olive branch to a foe, as he likely was doing what he thought was in the best interest of his members – what he is paid (apparently well) to do. Rather, it is to illustrate the shared conviction that no one is entitled to anything they have not earned, as part of my argument that is not in labor's best interest to unreflectively embrace this conviction. Using this line of logic to discredit capital's claims that they are the rightful owners of all of the resources and most of the profit can indeed be persuasive to those of us who have to work for a living, and instinctively bristle at this kind of brazen entitlement. Yet the argument that their hard work itself is what makes working people deserving of a comfortable life can be, and has been used paradoxically but persuasively to discredit organized efforts to empower working people. When everyone agrees that nothing is

³¹ Aris Folley, "Markwayne Mullin Says Teamsters Chief Apologized after Confrontation at Senate Hearing," Text, *The Hill*, July 19, 2024, <https://thehill.com/homenews/house/4780848-mullin-says-teamsters-chief-apologized-after-confrontation-at-senate-hearing/>.

deserved which has not been worked for, it becomes difficult to argue that labor deserves a greater share of the economic pie – or simply better treatment by particular employers – without doing more work than they are already doing; and the idea that they should do less work for equal or better pay becomes a nonstarter. Advocating for working people in precisely this manner is the explicit aim of labor unions. They exist to empower their members as a collective relative to their employers, so that they may fight against their own exploitation – that is, advocating for a greater share of the profits, favorable workplace conditions, more reasonable hours, etc. Particularly in an environment where “greedy CEOs” like Mullin can point sanctimoniously to their own long hours and hard work as proof that they deserve their accumulated wealth fair and square, it is too easy for capital to turn the tables on labor and accuse labor unions – in all their demands for more money and better healthcare and *paid time off* of all things – of being the entitled ones.

Business owners and their representatives have come to favor this line of attack against workers who are attempting some kind of organized effort to improve their conditions because it seems to have a meaningful persuasive effect among a public broadly acculturated to side with rhetors who more skillfully demonstrate the American work ethic. While union members (or organizing employees attempting to become members) are personally denigrated for their hybristic entitlement, the rhetoric of un-deservingness that was once used persuasively against the idle rich is applied to unions on an organizational level.³² Again, the central charge here is social parasitism – profiting off the work of others without contributing productively oneself. This critique so obviously applies to the ownership class it is the go-to arrow in labor’s quiver. Yet as Mullin demonstrated, the American work ethic provides a remarkable shield. It enables

³² Kane and Newman, “Organized Labor as the New Undeserving Rich?”

business owners to deflect anger over the undeserving rich and deploy it against labor unions, positioning them as the real parasites taking dues from the working class without contributing anything themselves. Although this co-optation of progressive rhetoric is a popular conservative strategy for attacking unions, it appeared to take O'Brien off guard that day in the Senate. Rather than substantively respond to the accusation of parasitism by asserting the importance of what the Teamsters do for their members – make their jobs better, safer, less subject to their employer's exploitation – O'Brien was distracted by the attack on his own work ethic and instigated a debate over who works harder and is thus most deserving of their high salaries.³³

It is my contention that these are not the grounds the labor movement ought to be fighting on as the American work ethic sets an impossible standard of deservingness for working people. The conviction that to be deserving of a comfortable life, workers must earn it through their own independent labor sets them up for failure because they are necessarily dependent on the circumstances and goodwill of employers, a force outside of their control. The conviction that employees *ought* to be compensated in proportion to their hard work – or more precisely, that no one is entitled to anything they have not earned for themselves – has allowed increasing numbers of American employers to claim they are justified in keeping wages low and benefits substandard or nonexistent. Their employees' failure to excel or even succeed in these purposefully impossible conditions is often held up as proof positive that those conditions are deserved.³⁴ What I propose here is a thorough examination of the American work ethic and its foundational conviction that no one is entitled to anything they have not earned.

³³ *Defending the Right of Workers to Organize Unions Free from Illegal Corporate Union-Busting | The U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor & Pensions.*

³⁴ Benjamin H. Snyder, "The Disruption of Work Time," in *The Disrupted Workplace: Time and the Moral Order of Flexible Capitalism*, ed. Benjamin H. Snyder (Oxford University Press, 2016), 0, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190203498.003.0001>; Guy Standing, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*, 1st edition (Bloomsbury Academic, 2011).

The American Work Ethic

The self-made man narrative is core to the ethos that builds its arête from the neoliberal American work ethic. This narrative dictates that its referent came from nothing and became rich and important through their own effort – generally by starting a business. American culture holds this sort of person in special, idealized regard specifically because it is presumed they succeeded on their own, by virtue of their own hard work and ingenuity as well the courage it takes to bet on themselves.³⁵ Those who use the self-made narrative in order to position themselves as more virtuous and thus more deserving of material wealth and respect than those who either had or are currently seeking economic help appeal to the American work ethic. Crucially then, this rhetorical strategy is relative. It bolsters the speaker's virtue in relation to an undeserving other, whether implied or explicitly invoked. Relativity further suggests a hierarchical element to the neoliberal American work ethic. Indeed, its logic dictates that the lower one's starting place and the higher one climbs, the better. As referenced above, the ideal type within the self-made universe is one who came “from nothing” and worked their way to “the top.”

This ideal type may be best demonstrated by American stockbroker Chris Gardner, whose memoir, *The Pursuit of Happyness* was developed into a popular film of the same name.³⁶ Though Gardner was an impoverished, single, Black father in 1980's San Francisco, his persistence and brilliant mind enabled him to land a highly competitive, six-month unpaid internship with a stock brokerage and securities firm, where one of twenty interns will be hired for a paid position. Shortly into the course of the internship, Gardner and his five-year-old son are evicted from their apartment and are homeless for months. Despite the many trials and

³⁵ Michèle Lamont, *The Dignity of Working Men: Morality and the Boundaries of Race, Class, and Immigration* (New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation, 2000); Quart, *Bootstrapped*.

³⁶ *The Pursuit of Happyness*, directed by Gabriele Muccino, 2006.

tribulations that result, Gardner's determination pays off in the end. He beats out twenty rich kids and lands the job, eventually opening his own brokerage firm. Gardner's self-made status is as real as it gets. Drawing on his experience, he has found further success as a motivational speaker.³⁷

American audiences understandably find inspiration in Gardner's story because he seems to be an embodiment of our social contract, proof positive that if you work hard enough, you can get ahead no matter how much adversity you face. On a deeper level, the story's promise is that any present suffering – all the obstacles that must be overcome – will only make one's future success that much more deserved. Work hard, never give up, and you too can transcend the grind of financial precarity, and even get rich. The problem with this ideal self-made type – from nothing to everything, or, homeless to successful stockbroker – is that real life examples are exceedingly rare. Stories like Gardner's promise that if he can do it, anyone can. But the reality is that almost no one can. Most of us do not have Gardner's mathematic and problem-solving genius, nor are we charismatic and persuasive enough to convince a stockbroker to take a chance on us. Most of us will never stumble into a chance meeting with a successful stockbroker who happens to be hiring twenty interns at that particular moment.³⁸ Americans know this on some level, that this kind of success requires extraordinary talent and luck in addition to dogged hard work, and that there simply are not that many Chris Gardeners in the world. Yet, as we are steeped in a culture that romanticizes these rare but authentic self-made stories, many of us cannot help but internalize the meritocratic ideal they promote – that only those of us who fought through serious adversity to eventually succeed deserve that success. Rather than fight against a

³⁷ Chris Gardner, "Speaking," *Chris Gardner*, n.d., accessed February 23, 2025, <https://www.chrisgardnermedia.com/speaking>.

³⁸ *The Pursuit of Happiness*.

system that allows hugely successful brokerage and securities firms to benefit from unpaid labor (and more specifically, a system that reproduces inequality by clearly advantaging wealthy children who can afford to work for free for extended periods of time) we cheer for the most marginalized person who is yet willing to compete on those unfair terms, to endure homelessness and racial discrimination, and win despite it all. Romanticizing the suffering of the rare self-made among us, and accepting the contention that this suffering *earns* wealth, keeps us locked in a system wherein such suffering is made inevitable.

The idea that society ought to be set up to enable and reward the self-made is often used to justify the laissez-faire capitalist system that results in vast inequality in American society.³⁹ Yet, this same idea presents a problem for the winners of the American economic system in that most rich people have tenuous claims to self-made status. America's billionaires are no Chris Gardner, and because we are trained to see only those who struggled, sacrificed, and thus earned their way to the top as legitimate, we make a habit of exposing the outright frauds from the real deals. *Forbes*, for instance, invented a self-made scale from one to ten, from which it assigns a score to each person on its annually updated list of the 400 richest people in America. An introduction to the 2023 report explains that the magazine added this score to the "Forbes 400" list in 2014, suggesting an editorial awareness of the public's growing resentment of the undeserving rich.⁴⁰ However, the introduction seems to make a direct attempt to assuage that well-founded resentment when it explains that today, America's billionaires are far more self-

³⁹ Dennis K. Mumby, "Work: What Is It Good for? (Absolutely Nothing)—a Critical Theorist's Perspective," *Industrial and Organizational Psychology* 12, no. 4 (December 2019): 429–43, <https://doi.org/10.1017/iop.2019.69>.

⁴⁰ Gigi Zamora, "The 2023 Forbes 400 Self-Made Score: From Silver Spooners to Bootstrappers," *Forbes*, October 3, 2023, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/gigizamora/2023/10/03/the-2023-forbes-400-self-made-score-from-silver-spooners-to-bootstrappers/>.

made than they used to be. The writer explains, “In 1984, less than half the people on The Forbes 400 were self-made; in 2023, 70% have created their own riches.”⁴¹

Readers may well be skeptical of that claim, however, when they learn how the magazine arrived at that percentage. A score of one to five constitutes the label of “silver spooner,” meaning that the individual in question “inherited most of his or her wealth.” One means the ratee both inherited the entirety of their wealth and is doing nothing to increase it. The higher end of the silver spooners, five, is given to those who “inherited a successful company” but worked actively to increase its profits. The fact that inheriting a successful company earns one a middling score rather than a zero on the self-made scale suggests some questionable accounting already. A score from six to ten means the subject is indeed self-made, and earns them the title of “bootstrapper.” Though the rationale for this end of the spectrum is explained in less detail, it is worth quoting in its entirety:

6: Hired hand who didn't create the business:

[Meg Whitman](#) & [Steve Ballmer](#)

7: Self-made who got a head start from wealthy parents and moneyed background:

[William Ackman](#) & [Reed Hastings](#)

8: Self-made who came from a middle-class or upper-middle-class background:

[Mark Zuckerberg](#) & [Jeff Bezos](#)

9: Self-made who came from a largely working-class background; rose from little to nothing:

[Sergey Brin](#) & [Judy Love](#)

10: Self-made who not only grew up poor but also overcame significant obstacles:

[George Soros](#) & [Harold Hamm](#)

⁴¹ Zamora, “The 2023 Forbes 400 Self-Made Score: From Silver Spooners to Bootstrappers.”

The writer further discloses that the most common score is an eight, which comprises nearly 40% of the list, and supposedly means its referent came from a “middle-class or upper-middle class” background.⁴² In addition to Mark Zuckerberg and Jeff Bezos, Elon Musk is rated an eight.⁴³ That these three men count as 80% self-made reveals the degree to which the rules of this game are rigged. The suggestion that someone like Musk – the son of a South African ruling party official who owned a lucrative engineering business, the outputs of three emerald mines in Zambia, and a tourist resort in South Africa – grew up “middle-class or upper-middle-class” is wildly out of step with material class realities and what the word “middle” implies.⁴⁴ Musk’s father once told a reporter that during Elon’s youth “We were very, very wealthy. We had so much money we couldn’t even close our safe.”⁴⁵ In fact, Zuckerberg, Bezos, and Musk, and likely many other 8’s on Forbes list were raised in families that were far above the middle class.⁴⁶ In order to suggest that these men and the many other “bootstrappers” on the list are in large-part self-made and thus deserve their vast fortunes, Forbes simply redefined the qualifying criteria when assessing their parent’s wealth such that the top one or two percent of earners somehow got lumped in as “middle-class or upper-middle-class.”

The Forbes self-made rating system seems to emerge from a cultural need to perpetuate the myth of the American Dream. Accordingly, it may be as much reflective of the public’s desire to expose and condemn the undeserving rich as it is the new elites’ desire to conform to

⁴² Zamora, “The 2023 Forbes 400 Self-Made Score: From Silver Spooners to Bootstrappers.”

⁴³ Forbes, “Elon Musk,” Forbes, 2025, <https://www.forbes.com/profile/elon-musk/>.

⁴⁴ Maye Musk, *A Woman Makes a Plan: Advice for a Lifetime of Adventure, Beauty, and Success* (Penguin, 2019).

⁴⁵ Phillip de Wet, “‘We Had so Much Money We Couldn’t Even Close Our Safe’: Elon Musk’s Dad Tells BI about the Family’s Insanely Casual Attitude to Wealth,” *Business Insider South Africa*, February 23, 2018, <https://www.businessinsider.com/elon-musks-dad-tells-bi-about-the-familys-casual-attitude-to-wealth-2018-2>.

⁴⁶ Zuckerberg’s parents reportedly paid for his Harvard tuition and lent him \$100,000 to start Facebook. While Bezos’s biological parents were teenagers when they had him, it seems his stepfather was comfortably wealthy. His parents loaned him \$245,000 to start Amazon. Members of the American middle class do not have hundreds of thousands of dollars in disposable income laying around.

meritocratic expectations and the values that underpin them. It seems they want to be self-made, they want to see themselves as having earned their own wealth, and to join the rest of us in shaking our heads at those silver spooners who do not deserve the wealth they have. Indeed, recent ethnographies of the rich have found that today's elites share a revulsion for those born into their fortunes and take great pains to distinguish themselves as having earned their places.⁴⁷ One means of doing so, as the *Forbes* rating system suggests, is to construct and cling to the self-made brand, obscuring their predetermined advantages and emphasizing the role that their own hard work, persistence, and ingenuity played in amassing their fortunes. As *Forbes* also demonstrates, this branding is more effective when it compares its subject to one who is not sufficiently self-made and can be discredited as spoiled and entitled. When a member of the capitalist class constructs for themselves a virtuous image based on the premise that their wealth is self-made and thus deserved, they appeal to the bootstrapper ethos. Further, as this rhetoric constructs a deserving subject, it implies an undeserving other. Though the "undeserving rich" or "silver spooners" provide an obvious target, the "undeserving poor" have of course long been demonized by a broader rhetoric that promotes individual hard work as the highest moral virtue.⁴⁸

As *Forbes'* wealth tracking reporting is quick to emphasize, today's elite are not content to simply inherit trust funds or businesses. For their fortunes, they work, whether their labor is productive or not. They further take great pains to make sure their efforts are publicized, writing autobiographies about how they climbed to the top or boasting about their hard work on social media platforms (sometimes their own social media platforms). They then use all those nights

⁴⁷ Justin Farrell, *Billionaire Wilderness: The Ultra-Wealthy and the Remaking of the American West* (Princeton University Press, 2020), <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/72615>; Khan, *Privilege*; Sherman, *Uneasy Street*.

⁴⁸ Anderson, *Hijacked*.

spent at the office, all those (supposed) 80-hour work weeks, to paper over any predetermined advantages as they claim that their wealth is self-made. Elite rhetors use this performative work ethic to defang critiques from the left that point out that their capital is not deserved and instead belongs to workers. In adopting the American work ethic, however fraudulently or paradoxically, capital exploits this contradiction to the fullest. For this reason, I argue that the labor movement ought to retire a rhetoric that promotes the dignity of workers for their specialized status as laborers and instead embrace a rhetoric of rights. That is, rather than try to out-work capital when capital can simply move the goalposts, I argue that the labor movement ought to assert that working people are entitled to a certain standard of care by their employers no matter what. Rather than stake the worth of working people on their productive contribution to their employers, the labor movement should argue that what it is fighting for is simply inherently deserved, and in fact cannot be earned. By decoupling work from worth, they can also invalidate capital's claims to have earned so much more than everyone else.

Unions and the American Work Ethic

It is my contention that the American work ethic is a primary means of invalidating the solidaristic logic on which the labor movement depends, and accordingly, the two are intertwined. In general, labor unions are institutions devoted to empowering employees relative to their employers.⁴⁹ The contemporary political landscape provides an ideal opportunity to examine efforts to undermine labor unions as the US is experiencing a small but momentous burst of unionization campaigns – the first after decades of decline.⁵⁰ The uptick in unionization is not only notable in and of itself, but for the industries in which it has taken place: retail sales

⁴⁹ Kane and Newman, “Organized Labor as the New Undeserving Rich?”; Stephanie L. Mudge, *Leftism Reinvented: Western Parties from Socialism to Neoliberalism* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University press, 2018).

⁵⁰ Jamie K. McCallum, *Essential: How the Pandemic Transformed the Long Fight for Worker Justice*, First edition. (New York: Basic Books, 2022).

and fast food. Both industries have proved resistant to organization in the past, and the recent wave of unionization within Starbucks, REI, Amazon, and Trader Joes took commentators by surprise.⁵¹

Research and popular media reports point in large part to the complications of working through the COVID-19 pandemic as one catalyst for these grassroots campaigns.⁵² Chris Smalls, for instance, became briefly famous when he founded the Amazon Labor Union and organized the first successful unionization campaign within the retail behemoth in his Staten Island warehouse in April of 2022.⁵³ Smalls founded the union a year earlier, though, after it became clear that the company was not going to take the staff's demands for improved safety measures during the pandemic seriously. Around the virus' peak, Smalls had been working in Amazon warehouses for five years. Though he had finally been promoted to assistant manager two years prior, Smalls described feeling disillusioned with the company's total disregard for its blue-collar employees during the outbreak. He explained that the company made sick pay difficult or impossible to access, and that sick workers were often required to come in until they could show they had a positive COVID test, which, in 2020, were scarcely available. The company also did not initially institute any common precautions to reduce the risk of spread, such as providing or requiring masks, installing barriers between close workstations, or performing temperature checks at the door. There was a social distancing policy in place, Smalls conceded, but no attempt to enforce it.

⁵¹ McCallum, *Essential*.

⁵² McCallum, *Essential*; Alicia Wallace, "America's Workers Gained Power during Covid. A Volatile Economy Will Put That to the Test | CNN Business," *CNN*, June 14, 2022, <https://www.cnn.com/2022/06/14/economy/labor-union-momentum-economy/index.html>.

⁵³ Shirin Ghaffary, "Amazon Fired Chris Smalls. Now the New Union Leader Is One of Its Biggest Problems.," *Vox*, June 7, 2022, <https://www.vox.com/recode/23145265/amazon-fired-chris-smalls-union-leader-alu-jeff-bezos-bernie-sanders-aoc-labor-movement-biden>.

When Smalls contacted HR to complain about a particular coworker who appeared seriously ill with COVID symptoms on the floor and his concerns were ignored, it was the last straw. He has since maintained that this instance, and the pandemic more broadly, was simply the straw that broke the camel's back.⁵⁴ Amazon has many, widely publicized issues with the way it treats its workers – warehouse and delivery drivers especially. It has high rates of injury, uses algorithmic scheduling programs to call in or dismiss workers on a moment's notice, and tracks its workers location and rates of movement so it can punish them if they fail to keep an exhausting pace of work – notoriously resulting in workers skipping bathroom breaks and relieving themselves in bottles and bags instead.⁵⁵ In addition to these draconian conditions, many workers have alleged that management discriminates against workers of color, elderly seasonal workers, and women.⁵⁶

It seems workers at each of the retail and food service companies that saw a wave of unionization shared similar complaints, and saw poor treatment during the pandemic as the catalyst for renewed unionization efforts. As the labor scholar Jamie K. McCallum documented in hundreds of interviews, workers in these industries often could not help but recognize the irony of being treated like sacrificial lambs while being celebrated rhetorically as heroes.⁵⁷ For some, the label of “essential worker” served as an organizing tool – leading workers to question

⁵⁴ McCallum, *Essential*.

⁵⁵ Ken Klippenstein, “Documents Show Amazon Is Aware Drivers Pee in Bottles and Even Defecate En Route, Despite Company Denial,” *The Intercept*, March 25, 2021, <https://theintercept.com/2021/03/25/amazon-drivers-pee-bottles-union/>; Steven P. Vallas, Hannah Johnston, and Yana Mommadova, “Prime Suspect: Mechanisms of Labor Control at Amazon's Warehouses,” *Work and Occupations* 49, no. 4 (November 2022): 421–56, <https://doi.org/10.1177/07308884221106922>.

⁵⁶ Jessica Bruder, *Nomadland: Surviving America in the Twenty-First Century*, Illustrated edition (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2017); Pamela N. Danziger, “Amazon Faces Union Push On Two Fronts: Its Flagship Business And Now Whole Foods,” *Forbes*, January 28, 2025, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/pamdanziger/2025/01/28/amazon-is-battling-unions-on-two-fronts-in-its-flagship-business-and-now-whole-foods/>; Ella Fanger, *Telling the Amazon Labor Union's Story*, October 17, 2024, <https://www.thenation.com/article/culture/amazon-union-documentary/>.

⁵⁷ McCallum, *Essential*.

why, if they are the essential ones, their work has been systematically devalued through regular understaffing, poor compensation and benefits, and managerial disrespect. Organizing workers from Amazon, Trader Joe's, REI, and Starbucks cite all of these concerns as reasons for wanting to join a union, and given that their efforts led to successful union votes within each chain, it appears these concerns are, to some degree, shared.⁵⁸

The recent union drives within each of the four companies, Amazon, Starbucks, REI, and Trader Joe's, present an ideal opportunity for a rhetorical analysis of the American work ethic and the ways that its core conviction – that no one is entitled to anything they have not earned – is used effectively to limit labor's gains. After all, while each of these organizing successes presented reason to hope for a labor resurgence in that they represented the first real inroads organized labor has made in fast food and retail for decades, it is important to note that their successes were, to put it generously, modest, and documented accounts of the organizers' experiences suggest it required a herculean effort on their part to win.⁵⁹ Starbucks had by far the most success, with 500 stores voting to unionize to date.⁶⁰ This number is a bit more sobering when compared with the fact that there are close to 16,000 Starbucks locations in the US alone.⁶¹ Comparatively, 11 REI locations out of 181, four of 608 Trader Joe's, and only the one Amazon warehouse out of approximately 175 have voted to unionize.⁶² That these very modest gains

⁵⁸ Greg Jaffe, "Howard Schultz's Fight to Stop a Starbucks Barista Uprising," *Economy*, *Washington Post*, October 8, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2022/10/08/starbucks-union-ceo-howard-schultz/>; *Why REI's Progressive Image Is a Sham*, directed by More Perfect Union, 2022, 5:53, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x5-NRMWCeTI>; Clint Rainey, "Inside 'Teflon Joe's': Why Your Favorite Grocery Store Is Not What You Think," *Fast Company*, January 7, 2025, <https://www.fastcompany.com/91240524/trader-joes-is-not-what-you-think>.

⁵⁹ Eric Blanc, *We Are the Union: How Worker to Worker Organizing Is Revitalizing Labor and Winning Big* (University of California Press, 2025); McCallum, *Essential*.

⁶⁰ Kevin Reuning, "Starbucks Union Elections," Union Elections, accessed February 17, 2025, <https://unionelections.org/data/starbucks/>.

⁶¹ Cafely, "Number of Starbucks in the US & Other Statistics [2024]," *Cafely*, 2024, <https://cafely.com/blogs/research/starbucks-statistics>.

⁶² "About Us | REI Co-Op," REI, accessed February 17, 2025, <https://www.rei.com/about-rei>; Maximillian Alvarez, "The Long Road to Union Recognition: Trader Joe's Workers Press On," *In These Times*, October 15, 2024, <https://inthesetimes.com/article/trader-joes-union-organizing-fight>; Saasant, "Amazon Warehouse Locations - An

were met with so much excitement from labor advocates is reflective of just how far the labor movement has fallen.

It seems likely that each of the four companies' swift and punitive reactions to the organizing efforts within their ranks had something to do with retail and food worker's reluctance to unionize even in the dire circumstances that working through the height of the pandemic presented. From classic union busting efforts like captive audience meetings and firing organizers under questionable circumstances, each company went above and beyond expectations to resist labor organizing. They closed down unionized stores altogether, argued that organizing workers were preventing the companies from realizing social justice aims, and with the exception of REI, each company joined Elon Musk in an effort to revoke worker's constitutional right to join a union altogether.⁶³ All of these moves, I argue, were premised on a shared assumption that no one is entitled to anything they have not earned. A detailed examination of the anti-union reaction to organization efforts in each case shows that this conviction was echoed in different appeals to the American work ethic from capital to management and down to labor.

Thus, my dissertation examines how a neoliberal American work ethic is differently invoked to the detriment of the labor movement across each of the three classes, using the wave of COVID-era unionization campaigns within food and retail as a case study. Indeed, studying

Ultimate Guide," *Saasant.Com*, 2024, <https://www.saasant.com/blog/amazon-warehouse-locations/>; Scrapehero, "Number of Trader Joe's Locations in the USA in 2025," Location Reports, *ScrapeHero*, 2025, <https://www.scrapehero.com/location-reports/Trader-Joes-USA/>; Nate Wolf, "REI Workers Look to Shake up Co-Op's Board Amid Push for a First Contract," Non Profit News | Nonprofit Quarterly, January 29, 2025, <https://nonprofitquarterly.org/rei-workers-look-to-shake-up-co-ops-board-amid-push-for-a-first-contract/>.

⁶³ Josh Eidelson, "At REI, a Progressive Company Warns That Unionization Is Bad for Vibes," *Bloomberg.Com*, November 15, 2023, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-11-15/rei-s-progressive-branding-tested-by-employee-union>; Jaffe, "Howard Schultz's Fight to Stop a Starbucks Barista Uprising"; *Trader Joe's Shuttters Unionizing NYC Wine Store In The Middle Of The Night*, directed by More Perfect Union, 2022, 4:21, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1_CJKIxVI-o; Steven Greenhouse, "Major US Corporations Threaten to Return Labor to 'Law of the Jungle,'" US News, *The Guardian*, March 10, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2024/mar/10/starbucks-trader-joes-spacex-challenge-labor-board>.

ideas about labor unions presents a useful point of entry into unpacking what I have identified as the neoliberal American work ethic's core conviction because that core conviction is inherently hostile to unions. As I have pointed out before, unions exist in the most general terms to redistribute some profits and power from management to workers.⁶⁴ If one does not believe workers deserve this basic level of protection from employers who otherwise hold all the bargaining power, one is likely to oppose unionization efforts and offer rationales for retaining the status quo.

Approach to Theory and Criticism

This dissertation responds to a need for scholarship that builds rhetorical theories and concepts that grapple with the ideological underpinnings of contemporary economic inequality. Social scientists of all stripes have by now extensively documented how much disparities in wealth have exploded, producing often referenced statistics like the one that shows the top one percent of households in the United States currently owns 31.7% of the nation's wealth, that the one percent's share of wealth has remained at record highs above 30% since 2014, or that the bottom 50% collectively owns only two and a half percent in 2026.⁶⁵ They have further shown that it is in part the collapse of organized labor (along with an eventual neoliberal consensus in government that paved the way for that collapse and ushered in other policies that helped corporations and business owners consolidate their power at the expense of workers and consumers) that led to such an explosion, the hollowing out of the middle class, and shuffling far greater numbers into the ranks of the working poor. Comparatively less attention has been paid to the mechanisms that provide these transformations with rhetorical justification, enabling them

⁶⁴ Greenhouse, *Beaten Down, Worked Up*.

⁶⁵ Katharina Buchholz, "Wealth Of The 1% Reaches Decade High In The U.S.," Big Data, *Forbes*, January 30, 2026, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/katharinabuchholz/2026/01/30/wealth-of-the-1-reaches-decade-high-in-the-us/>.

to proceed with less organized resistance than they might otherwise receive. My project addresses this gap by examining how a single, deeply ingrained conviction—that no one is entitled to anything they have not earned—functions across class positions to undermine worker solidarity and legitimize the concentration of wealth and power among a few owners of capital.

At a moment when public skepticism of billionaires, corporations, and the political system is at historic highs, yet union density remains near historic lows, this study illuminates a central paradox: Americans resent inequality but remain ideologically attached to the meritocratic rhetorical framework that justifies it. By exposing how the bootstrapping ethos operates across capital, management, and labor, this dissertation provides rhetorical scholars, labor organizers, and their allies with a sharper understanding of the discursive obstacles to economic justice, and a clearer sense of what arguments might actually challenge them. This approach to building rhetorical theory and the method of criticism that supports it – focused on making sense of the subtle public arguments that compel people to believe and act (or not) in certain ways, and giving those arguments a name and coherent form – is both one that the problem of inequality calls for and one that has deep roots in the rhetorical tradition. Indeed, in developing a theory of the bootstrapping ethos, my aim is to help rhetoricians and the students that they teach counteract the arguments this ethos reinforces, and in that sense, my approach to rhetorical scholarship is generally Isocreatean.⁶⁶ I will neither dispassionately arrive at an objective truth, nor will I provide a morally flawless critique so granular and endless it finds something wrong with any course of action readers might take in response to the injustice it reveals. Instead, in pinpointing the ways that the bootstrapping ethos works as a rhetorical device

⁶⁶ Michael Leff, “Isocrates, Tradition, and the Rhetorical Version of Civic Education,” in *Isocrates and Civic Education* (University of Texas Press, 2004), 235–54.

to empower capital and management at labor's expense, I hope to build rhetorical theory that ultimately enhances students' civic education.

Michael Leff has advocated an Isocratean approach to rhetorical scholarship, wherein critics contribute to civic education by unpacking how public figures guide consensus and decision making through tapping into *doxa*, or social knowledge/public opinion.⁶⁷ According to Leff, understanding the means by which rhetors persuade through appealing to shared values, history, and culturally specific common-sense is essential for civic education in that it equips a person with the knowledge to both understand and participate in the arguments they encounter in the public sphere. Leff's emphasis on *doxa* and civic education echoes Barry Brummett's argument about the value of rhetorical theory. To Brummett, scholarship that builds rhetorical theory is designed to "systematically assert propositions about how rhetoric actually works in the world" and "identify some rhetorical tactic, strategy, device, etc. and attempt to account for its effectiveness *in general*."⁶⁸ He argues that the usefulness of this approach to theory is "moral and heuristic" and primarily "pedagogical." Citing Samuel Becker's theory that (especially in the age of mass media) people generally encounter rhetoric as discombobulated "message bits"⁶⁹ or a "communication mosaic,"⁷⁰ Brummett explains that people need heuristics to help them more consciously, and more fully understand how the communicative fragments they encounter work together as a persuasive whole.⁷¹ Rhetorical scholars, as people who identify and account for these heuristics themselves and who are charged with reading one another's work, can then equip

⁶⁷ Leff, "Isocrates, Tradition, and the Rhetorical Version of Civic Education."

⁶⁸ Barry Brummett, "Rhetorical Theory as Heuristic and Moral: A Pedagogical Justification," *Communication Education* 33, no. 2 (April 1984): 99, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03634528409384726>.

⁶⁹ Samuel Becker, "Rhetorical Studies for the Contemporary World," *Communication Studies* 50 (1999): 37.

⁷⁰ Becker, "Rhetorical Studies for the Contemporary World," 37.

⁷¹ Brummett, "Rhetorical Theory as Heuristic and Moral."

their students with this knowledge and enable them to better evaluate arguments that occur in the public sphere. It is my hope that the bootstrapping ethos can function as just such a heuristic.

As Leah Ceccarelli articulates in a paper about debates between scientists and those with a financial incentive to cast doubt on scientific consensus, some kind of basic rhetorical competency is imperative for even the most learned experts when it comes to matters that can or must be collectively decided.⁷² Ceccarelli's examples center on what she calls manufactured scientific controversies – instances wherein a rogue scientist, typically paid by an interested industry, successfully creates the appearance of a scientific controversy over a matter about which most scientists agree.⁷³ When the fossil fuel industry embarked on a campaign of climate denial with paid experts, for instance, it was not enough for scientists to simply dismiss their rhetorical challengers and reiterate the fact that the facts were not on their side. The challengers got what they wanted – enough public uncertainty and doubt to justify a total lack of political response to the problem for years to come. Scientists should not just have technical expertise, Ceccarelli argues, but the skills to engage in effective public debate. Thus, would-be scientists ought to learn these skills as a part of a comprehensive civic education.⁷⁴

When it comes to the American work ethic and the suite of harmful policies and unequal circumstances it justifies, the same logic extends to every working person. This includes nearly every young person as current or would-be workers – a large audience of whom are concentrated in colleges and universities. Every student will almost certainly end up in *someone's* employ and are increasingly likely to end up working in the service industry that is the subject of this dissertation – whether it be throughout their educations or as a long-term career. When these

⁷² Leah Ceccarelli, "Manufactured Scientific Controversy: Science, Rhetoric, and Public Debate," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 14, no. 2 (2011): 195–228, <https://doi.org/10.1353/rap.2010.0222>.

⁷³ Ceccarelli, "Manufactured Scientific Controversy."

⁷⁴ Ceccarelli, "Manufactured Scientific Controversy."

young people encounter arguments from capital, management, or their coworkers about how the jobs that they hold as service workers or even something that is supposedly more “skilled” entitles them to so much less than what their bosses earn, my hope is that they do not accept these arguments outright or even dismiss them as obviously self-serving, unfounded, and unfair. In theorizing the bootstrapping ethos, I hope to equip rhetorical scholars, as well as the students and workers they teach with a heuristic that enables them to pinpoint the needlessly cruel logic of the American work ethic, resist it, and convince their coworkers to do the same.

Chapter Overview

In pursuit of this goal, this dissertation will first trace the development of the American work ethic from its roots in Protestantism to a secular version in the present day. Chapter One will make clear how the virtues of a neoliberal vein of the American work ethic came to be ingrained as common sense, as well as how its tenets were used to radically reshape the labor market in favor of capital. I then explain the parameters of the bootstrapping ethos, what I theorize as a primary way the American work ethic is rhetorically performed. This background will be followed by three original studies in Chapters Two through Four that examine the influence of the neoliberal American work ethic across the ethos built in three economic classes: capital, management, and labor.

The first of the three studies, making up Chapter Two, examines the American work ethic within its most straightforward context – that is, when the rhetor adopting it identifies explicitly as an actual entrepreneur, purportedly working hard to earn exorbitant wealth. As entrepreneurs, these rhetors are representative of capital in that they own a productive resource and do not work for wages. However, they understand themselves to be distinct from, superior to, and more deserving than fellow capitalists who inherited rather than founded their businesses (even when

they inherited all or part of the wealth necessary to do such a thing, or received generous loans from family), because they can claim to have earned it: they call themselves self-made men, and our culture generally follows suit.

The chapter argues that when successful entrepreneurs face a challenge from organizing workers, one rhetorical strategy in defense is to publicly perform that bootstrapping ethos – positioning oneself as a morally superior self-made man in comparison with a lazy and entitled workforce who refuse to roll up their sleeves and do the work necessary to achieve a more stable life. Capitalists who adopt the bootstrapping ethos defensively amid labor disputes then, in part imply that since they were able to work their way up the ladder the *right* way – by virtue of their own hard work and industriousness – others must do the same. Regardless of what their workers are asking for – better pay, stable schedules, or more safety measures – when capitalists adopt the bootstrapping ethos, they are communicating to workers that better conditions are not deserved because they have not been worked for, they have not been earned. Above all, this rhetoric works to reproduce the cultural consensus that no one is entitled to anything they have not earned. By gesturing to their own success as evidence that earning real material gains for oneself and *by* oneself is possible, this rhetoric obscures the many barriers to this kind of social mobility that capital has put into place. In other words, shaming workers for their insufficient entrepreneurialism – their inability to climb the ladder – conceals the fact that capital pulled the ladder up behind them long ago.

To demonstrate the bootstrapping ethos at work, I will perform a close reading of Starbucks founder and former CEO Howard Schultz’s testimony in front of Congress in 2023.⁷⁵ Schultz’s testimony provides an ideal text to demonstrate the neoliberal American work ethic.

⁷⁵ *Former Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz Testifies before Senate Panel | Full Video*, directed by CBS News, 2023, 3:20:39, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OZwuwYk0jIY>.

First, Schultz is widely known as one of the few self-made men who is close to the ideal type described above, and his rags to riches story seems to be of immense importance to how he understands himself.⁷⁶ He has, for instance, authored a part-autobiography, part-business, part-self-help book on how to bootstrap oneself out of a working class background titled *From the Ground Up*.⁷⁷ He brings up his humble beginning with pride in media appearances, often in connection with what he considers to be a tremendously generous managerial philosophy at Starbucks. As he tells it, witnessing his father's poor treatment as a factory worker in 1950's Brooklyn made a lasting mark on the young Schultz's consciousness. His family was poverty stricken, living in a housing project, and when his father was injured on the job, he was fired with no recourse or compensation. Schutz says that he vowed to himself then that if he were ever in a position to run a business, he would treat his workers with dignity and respect.⁷⁸

Schultz sees no contradiction between this philosophy and his treatment of organizing workers in 2023.⁷⁹ That Starbucks broke numerous labor laws over the course of their widespread and much publicized union busting efforts is in fact the reason for his Congressional testimony.⁸⁰ Senator Bernie Sanders, then the head of the committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions and a long-time advocate for worker's rights was so disturbed by the extent of Starbucks' apparent disregard for labor law during the course of its union busting campaign that he held a hearing on workers' right to unionize and called in Schultz to testify. The course of

⁷⁶ Noam Scheiber and Julie Creswell, "Why Is Howard Schultz Taking This So Personally?," *Business*, *The New York Times*, December 11, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/11/business/howard-schultz-starbucks-union.html>.

⁷⁷ Howard Schultz, *From the Ground Up: A Journey to Reimagine the Promise of America*, First Edition (Erscheinungsort nicht ermittelbar: Random House, 2019).

⁷⁸ Schultz, *From the Ground Up*.

⁷⁹ Amy McCarthy, "Howard Schultz Doesn't Think Starbucks Has Done Anything Wrong," *Eater*, March 30, 2023, <https://www.eater.com/23663114/howard-schultz-bernie-sanders-starbucks-testimony-senate-help-committee>.

⁸⁰ *Former Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz Testifies before Senate Panel | Full Video*; John Logan, "Corporate Union Busting in Plain Sight: How Amazon, Starbucks, and Trader Joe's Crushed Dynamic Grassroots Worker Organizing Campaigns," *Economic Policy Institute*, January 28, 2025, <https://www.epi.org/publication/corporate-union-busting/>.

the hearing makes clear that both Schultz and many of the senators in attendance are appalled by its premise, that Schultz, in protecting his business from organizing workers, was doing anything wrong. Since many in Congress were once business owners themselves, they do not question Schultz but defend him as an entrepreneur. They argue that Schultz, as a job creator and successful businessman, has earned the right to decide how to run his company for himself, without the oversight of a parasitic union (or apparently the National Labor Relations Board). Like Mullin's line of attack on O'Brien, they turn an anti-capitalist critique on its head by arguing that the Starbucks Labor Union – not Schultz and the Starbucks board – is the greedy and undeserving one, profiting off of Schultz's hard work.⁸¹ Schultz himself appeals multiple times to his own bootstrapping ethos and generosity as an employer. The generous employer bit serves to shame his workers for asking for better treatment than they deserve. By positioning a series of limited benefits programs eligible only to workers who meet a series of thresholds (often managers), Schultz reinforces the idea that good benefits are not something entitled to all workers, but rather something they must earn. Further, by repeatedly emphasizing his own generosity in instituting such programs, he implies that workers are already getting something more than they deserve.⁸² The self-made part insinuates that Schultz earned the billions of dollars he has amassed for himself, by virtue of his own hard work turning Starbucks into a hugely profitable company. And because he earned it fair and square, he has no obligation to share any more of it than he sees fit with young and inexperienced workers.

During the hearing, a clear encapsulation of this logic comes when Schultz expresses his frustration with being called a billionaire. In Schultz' mind, because he earned it, he is not a "billionaire," despite meeting the word's literal criteria. It seems he bristles at the term because

⁸¹ *Former Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz Testifies before Senate Panel | Full Video.*

⁸² *Former Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz Testifies before Senate Panel | Full Video.*

he knows it connotes an inherent injustice – colloquially, it means one who has simply far more than they deserve. To defend against the implied critique of undeservingness – that he has in fact accumulated billions of dollars *not* solely by his own hard work but because he operates within a system that bends the rules in favor of capital (through, for instance, policies that allow CEOs to be paid two or three hundreds of times what rank-and-file workers are), Schultz redefines the word. If billionaire means someone with more than they deserve, it couldn't possibly apply to him because he earned it. He thus deflects the rhetorical charge – adopting the less offensive ethos of an entrepreneur. By insisting that these profits are rightfully his, Schultz undermines his employee's contributions in generating those billions of dollars and reifies the idea that his workers are not entitled to any of Starbucks profits, only what he as the rightful owner chooses to share on his terms.

Chapter Three of my dissertation examines how the core conviction of the bootstrapping ethos – the idea that no one is entitled to anything they have not earned – functions in the organizational rhetoric of management. Taking up Schultz's line of logic from the previous chapter regarding his own generous treatment of workers, I propose that this subjectification of a firm's employees as the fortunate benefactors of corporate generosity relative to workers at other companies constitutes a wider strategy of managerial rhetoric which I call the progressive workplace brand. As I define it, the progressive workplace brand involves highlighting one or several benefits a company offers and framing those benefits as rare gifts which one's workforce is very lucky to be receiving. In positioning benefits as rare and generous gifts, this rhetoric seeks to persuade workers not to see fair wages, healthcare, or paid leave as something they deserve by virtue of their employment. Further, in constituting workers as specially privileged to be receiving what they do, these rhetors seek to instill a sense of indebtedness or guilt in their

employees such that they may be more hesitant to advocate for more. They are, after all, already getting more than what they deserve. When employees of a company that has branded itself as a progressive employer do attempt to unionize – or otherwise advocate for greater control over their working lives – managerial strategists protest that these workers are ungrateful and entitled. Thus, through the progressive workplace brand, managers appeal to the bootstrapping ethos’ rhetorical opposite: the shame of privilege.

I conceptualize the progressive workplace brand, or PWB, as a form of incorporational rhetoric – contributing to Timothy Johnson’s use of that theory – that shapes the labor process in that it encourages workers to consent to working conditions they might otherwise protest or refuse.⁸³ Seen from this perspective, PWB is persuasive because of the wider social context within which it operates, and because it invokes that context in ways that resonate with particular audiences. In the modern day neoliberal economic landscape where precarity is the norm and one takes for granted that their labor will be maximally exploited, one way to ensure that your own workers continue working productively and without complaint is to position them as fortunate relative to others. If a business successfully brands itself as an oasis – a *good* company that truly cares about its workers, treats them with dignity, and provides them the financial benefits to live a comfortable life in a sea of *bad* companies that, well, do not – workers will be less likely to object to the terms of their employment. Indeed, when a worker accepts the premise that they are lucky and would be treated worse elsewhere, or unemployed altogether, they are less likely to withdraw their consent and push for better conditions.

⁸³ Timothy Johnson, *Rhetoric, Inc: Ford’s Filmmaking and the Rise of Corporatism*, The RSA Series in Transdisciplinary Rhetoric (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2020); Vallas, Johnston, and Mommadova, “Prime Suspect.”

Both rarity and generosity are rhetorical constructions which serve to obfuscate conditions that unnecessarily exploit the worker to the benefit of the executive. Framing benefits as gifts rather than something *owed* to the worker means they can be taken away at management's discretion, that workers must be grateful for whatever they are offered, and signals to workers the ceiling of benefits available to them. Despite their branding, companies that adopt the PWB are not exceptional at all in the neoliberal economy. They generally still undercut labor expenses to allocate an exponentially greater share of their profits to executives than to workers. Further, they react with hostility to actions that would secure for workers more of the profits their labor produces, such as union drives or strikes. Yet even the most stubborn union busting campaign from an employer with the progressive brand is laced with the continual insistence to employees that they ought to be grateful to be employed by such a progressive organization.

To trace the contours and consequences of the progressive workplace brand, I focus on three companies which are generally considered to be progressive employers relative to others in their industries: Amazon, Starbucks, and REI. Each company advertises itself as a progressive employer due to some kind of rare benefit or benefits it offers. Further, workers at all companies often testify in a variety of settings that the progressive reputation of the company was a major part of their decision to seek employment there. In order to piece together how exactly the impression is cultivated that these are good places to work relative to others in their respective fields, I turned to the companies' social media pages where available (both Amazon and Starbucks have active social media pages for current workers and separate ones for prospective employees) and hiring websites as important locations where brand images are manufactured and maintained.

In this chapter, I perform a comparative rhetorical analysis of these discursive fragments. I identify three thematic components of the progressive workplace brand that appeared heavily in the rhetoric of each firm. The first, and most important is the framing of the actual benefits offered by the company as generous, rare, and as such, the limit of what can be asked for. All three companies featured videos or statements where a worker testified the pay or time off was more than they ever could have hoped for, for instance. Second is a mischaracterization of the nature of the employer/employee relationship, such that the power differential between executives and employees is flattened. All three companies featured an immense amount of content that encouraged workers to think of the company not as a hierarchical organization with power concentrated at the top, but as a collective of equal partners, friends and family members. The fact that the workers get to work as equal members of a team alongside friends and family, however, is also constructed as a rare benefit. The third and final component of PWB is presenting the work being performed as uniquely important and meaningful, and as such, a rare benefit in and of itself. All three companies feature content that paints their business of selling coffee, recreational equipment, or delivering packages as something deeper, and as such an honor to perform relative to other options. Together, these three themes comprise the progressive workplace brand, and this chapter will be organized to examine each in turn. In combination with the rhetoric of bootstrapping, the idea of benefits as gifts bestowed by friends and work as meaningful irrespective of pay or benefits helps to stifle demands that workers have inherent rights that must be respected by managers.

The third and final case study, in Chapter Four, will turn from capital and its managers to examine how the conviction that no one is entitled to anything they have not earned lands among working people. Unionization campaigns provide an ideal opportunity to examine the rhetorical

efficacy of this conviction, as they are fundamentally an effort by workers to renegotiate what is required of them to “earn” whatever they may be asking for. A unionization campaign is an attempt, in other words, to lower the standards in workers’ favor. To be successful, organizers must persuade their coworkers that they in fact deserve something more from their employers in exchange for less. It is of course unsurprising that capital and its managers are hostile to this argument, but the tremendous rhetorical efficacy of the strategy they use to undermine it – appealing to the neoliberal American work ethic – is best observed in cases wherein workers themselves oppose unionization on the grounds that they are already getting more than they deserve.

Organizers at Amazon, Starbucks, and Trader Joe’s have raised this issue in interviews. Starbucks organizer Len Harris, for instance, told a labor journalist that they felt the biggest challenge was the incredibly low esteem in which the work of typical employees is held and the incredible tolerance higher status workers have for pain.⁸⁴ They pointed out that this low esteem is regularly made apparent in customer’s abuse of employees, but also in the attitudes of their coworkers. Harris explains

...even the best meaning people I’ve worked with have had really similar mindsets of well, like...I’m lucky to just to have a job, and you should feel guilty if you call in sick, and you know, I work 70 hours a week, so this person shouldn’t be complaining if they work 65...this very, like...I’m going to wear my exploitation like a badge of honor.

Similarly, a Trader Joe’s organizer told the same journalist years later that, to his surprise, the most passionate resistance to unionizing his store came not from management, but from a group of his co-workers.⁸⁵ When I reached out to ask this organizer for clarification, he explained that many of the senior staff in particular felt a great deal of honor in their willingness to be

⁸⁴ *Starbucks Leads Corporate CRIME WAVE To Crush Union Workers* | *Breaking Points*, directed by Breaking Points, 2022, 56:21, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FyJohj7nt50>.

⁸⁵ Alvarez, “The Long Road to Union Recognition.”

overworked and pride in the fact that they had worked tremendously hard all their lives to get where they were within the company. Indeed, senior staff with enough years under their belt do earn a generous wage compared to other grocery chains – the organizer knew that these particular workers were making about 27 dollars an hour. This pride in their own accomplishment, it seems, facilitated a deep resentment for more junior workers who, in their support of the union, were apparently not willing to work as hard nor as patiently as they were. Ultimately, he explained, the tempers ran so high that the anti-union contingent were still not on speaking terms with union supporters over a year later.⁸⁶

To hear the anti-union perspective for myself, the organizer referred me to a podcast on which two of his most fervently opposed co-workers had been guests. The podcast, Labor Relations Radio, is hosted by the late management-side labor lawyer Peter List.⁸⁷ When the organizer referred me to the program, the show was recording regular episodes that were available online and on several podcast streaming platforms. During the course of this dissertation, however, List passed away and the episodes were taken offline. Before that happened, I had saved transcripts of each episode where a Trader Joe's employee was interviewed. At the time of this writing, a complete list of episodes are not even available on Internet Archive's Wayback Machine (though, the site does show some listed episodes and the show's former homepage). As the episodes are no longer publicly available, I would like to note that I can provide transcripts to anyone who is interested in reading the full podcasts.

When it was airing, the show hosted a variety of conservative intellectuals, legal workers, and on rare occasion union members themselves who testified that unions are oppressive and

⁸⁶ "Interview with Trader Joe's Organizer," October 10, 2024. The organizer wished to stay anonymous.

⁸⁷ Peter List, "Labor Relations Radio," LaborUnionNews.Com, June 25, 2024, <https://web.archive.org/web/20240625022713/https://www.buzzsprout.com/1932839>.

corrupt forces that exist only to grow their own membership and enrich union leadership at the expense of the American economy. Interestingly, of the show's 168 episodes, five featured current union members or employees embroiled in a unionization campaign, and of those five, three were with Trader Joe's workers.⁸⁸ Further, two of the three were with the same two Trader Joe's workers. There are likely reasons for the show's apparent fixation on the company. It has the reputation of a progressive employer and the workers' opposition helps the show emphasize its often-repeated viewpoint that only workers at "bad" companies deserve a union. It could also be that Trader Joe's employees were simply a convenient sample for the podcaster, or more willing to come on the show for whatever reason. Regardless, these interviews with four Trader Joe's employees across three interviews provide an ideal text to examine how workers too can oppose unionization on the grounds that it is a threat to their own bootstrapping ethos.

Through an analysis of their interviews, I show how the conviction that no one is entitled to anything they have not earned can make working people resistant to, and even resentful of efforts to secure a greater share of corporate profits. Indeed, each employee stakes their opposition to the union on their bootstrapping ethos – they insist they work hard to earn what they characterize as good pay and generous benefits, and insist unionizing workers are lazy and entitled for their refusal to do the same. At the core of their testimonies is the same idea voiced

⁸⁸ *Labor Relations Radio, E83—Trader Joe's Employees Speak Out About Unionization - LaborUnionNews.Com's Labor Relations Radio*, directed by Peter List, 2023, <https://www.buzzsprout.com/1932839/episodes/13134065-labor-relations-radio-e83-trader-joe-s-employees-speak-out-about-unionization>; *Labor Relations Radio, E88—A Trader Joe's Employee Reveals Union Tactics That Led to a Union's Loss - LaborUnionNews.Com's Labor Relations Radio*, directed by Peter List, 2023, <https://www.buzzsprout.com/1932839/episodes/13366076-labor-relations-radio-e88-a-trader-joe-s-employee-reveals-union-tactics-that-led-to-a-union-s-loss>; *Labor Relations Radio, E102—Unionized Trader Joe's Employees Explain the Efforts to Decertify Trader Joe's United - LaborUnionNews.Com's Labor Relations Radio*, directed by Peter List, 2023, <https://www.buzzsprout.com/1932839/episodes/14066058-labor-relations-radio-e102-unionized-trader-joe-s-employees-explain-the-efforts-to-decertify-trader-joe-s-united>; *Labor Relations Radio E140—Here's How Chicago Employees Turned Around An Ambush Election By Trader Joe's United - LaborUnionNews.Com's Labor Relations Radio*, directed by Peter List, 2024, <https://www.buzzsprout.com/1932839/episodes/15517431-labor-relations-radio-e140-here-s-how-chicago-employees-turned-around-an-ambush-election-by-trader-joe-s-united>.

by the likes of Howard Shultz and former business owners in Congress – Trader Joe's employees *already* get more than they deserve – to ask for anything more would be shamefully selfish.

I contextualize these testimonies with recent reporting on the conditions of working at the company that led many other workers to unionize: rampant sexual harassment that went routinely unpunished, regular understaffing and unpredictable scheduling, a variety of safety concerns, and what is for most workers inadequate pay.⁸⁹ The four workers interviewed dismiss these charges as trivial or ignore these concerns altogether. Importantly, they all characterize the complaints as those of young workers, “fresh out of school,” “who’ve never had a job before,” or who are “still on their parents insurance.”⁹⁰ By comparison, they emphasize their own age and experience in the workforce, suggesting sometimes overtly that they faced similar challenges yet fought through them on their own – the virtuous and unselfish way to *earn* one’s lot in life. The four employees suggest that organizing workers are breaking the rules – to earn what they are asking for from the company, they must put in the work rather than expect it outright. One of these workers, who does not discuss his racial or ethnic identity but has a Spanish language name, concedes that the company “is not perfect” and by way of example, mentions that he has struggled with multiple racist managers throughout his tenure. He does not elaborate, but asserts that rather than make a big deal out of it, he simply learned to endure this prejudicial treatment or handle it himself.⁹¹ It seems this worker is not alone, as racist microaggressions at the managerial level have been raised as a concern by union supporters as well. In this worker’s mind though, a

⁸⁹ Clint Rainey, “Sexual Harassment, Union Busting, and a Spotty Safety Record: The Dark Side of Working at Trader Joe’s,” Fast Company, January 9, 2025, <https://www.fastcompany.com/91240535/what-its-really-like-to-work-at-trader-joes>; Rainey, “Inside ‘Teflon Joe’s.’”

⁹⁰ *Labor Relations Radio*, E83; *Labor Relations Radio* E140.

⁹¹ *Labor Relations Radio* E140.

willingness to tolerate prejudicial treatment is apparently part of what it means to earn one's living – workers are not even entitled to a universal standard of basic human dignity.

Conclusion

It is my contention that the conviction that no one is entitled to anything they haven't earned has become so strong, so commonplace, that even the most unsympathetic rhetors imaginable – billionaires, large corporations, and politicians – use it to persuade working people not to pursue the most reliable means of material empowerment they have available to them – joining a labor union. Despite the fact that many Americans harbor an automatic revulsion to, or at least skepticism of, all three, capital and its managers persuade working people to comply with their objectives regardless by appealing to the bootstrapping ethos.⁹² Americans resent the extremely wealthy, but they revere a self-made man. The problem is that these categories often overlap, or at least can be made to overlap when “self-made” is applied as generously as *Forbes* does. When facing a real threat from organizing workers demanding a greater share of company profits, the self-made CEO defangs the implied critique of the word “billionaire” – that they have far more than they deserve – by invoking their neoliberal American work ethic. In other words, capital uses the bootstrapping ethos to shield from legitimate criticism of their massive wealth and the rules that enabled them to “earn” it. Further, the bootstrapping ethos enables capital to turn workers' arguments about deservingness around on unions, as they claim organizing workers are the ones who are after wealth or benefits they have not earned and are thus lazy and

⁹² Amina Dunn and Andy Cerda, “Anti-Corporate Sentiment in U.S. Is Now Widespread in Both Parties,” *Pew Research Center*, November 17, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/11/17/anti-corporate-sentiment-in-u-s-is-now-widespread-in-both-parties/>; Andrew Daniller, “Americans' Views about Billionaires Have Grown Somewhat More Negative since 2020,” *Pew Research Center*, July 28, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/07/28/americans-views-about-billionaires-have-grown-somewhat-more-negative-since-2020/>; Reem Nadeem, “Americans' Dismal Views of the Nation's Politics,” *Pew Research Center*, September 19, 2023, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2023/09/19/americans-dismal-views-of-the-nations-politics/>.

overly entitled. As Senator Mullin further demonstrates, this line of argument is also used to denigrate unions on an institutional level as the real wage thieves, rather than capitalists.

For its part, management works to maintain this paradigm through organizational rhetoric that constitutes employees as entrepreneurialized subjects who are only entitled to what their labor earns them on management's terms. This line of thinking reifies the capitalist logic that the rightful owner of a firm's profits are in fact the owners/founders, to share with workers as they see fit. If that is the case, owners who share more with workers relative to others can be portrayed as generous, and their employees fortunate recipients of that benevolence. Firms that brand themselves as progressive employers for offering a rare benefit encourage workers to conceive of all benefits as generous gifts, rather than something they inherently deserve or are entitled to. The progressive workplace brand, then, is yet another mechanism to shape the labor process in capital's favor. The idea that even substandard benefits that often amount simply to reasonable treatment – things like “work-life balance” or a living wage – are not something that employees are entitled to outright from their employers is directly counter to the aims of the labor movement and any attempt at unionization.

If workers are persuaded that reasonable benefits are not deserved but something that instead must be gradually earned on the owners' terms, they are unlikely to feel any sense of solidarity with organizing co-workers or be sympathetic to the goals of a union. As the interviews with Trader Joe's employees suggest, they will view workers who support unionization as privileged, overly-entitled people who simply refuse to *earn* their living the right way – through their own hard work. In the case of Trader Joe's – an employer who does in fact offer benefits that are superior to many other employers in the industry – workers who have internalized the conviction that no one is entitled to anything they have not earned may be even

more sensitive to unionization campaigns as they understand themselves and their coworkers to already be getting more than they deserve.⁹³ Thus, as Trader Joe's employees demonstrate in the case I examine, workers too will appeal to the American work ethic to oppose unionization.

With these three chapters, I hope to demonstrate the imperative of discrediting the appeal of the bootstrapping ethos, and its core conviction that no one is entitled to anything they have not earned. I argue for a new way of thinking about what is deserved, by whom, and why. Rather than regard a comfortable life as something that only the most hardworking among us ought to deserve, I argue instead for an egalitarian framework in which we remember that some things cannot be earned. That is, I argue for an ethic that recognizes that by virtue of their humanity, all people are entitled to a certain standard of care: a living wage, the ability to receive healthcare, the right to exist without being subject to harassment or discrimination, and some degree of control over their time, to name a few. At the same time, no one is entitled to billions while their employees struggle to get by. In other words, the labor movement has always been correct to argue that the capitalist class does not have a monopoly over basic human rights. However, what I wish to emphasize here is the importance of not falling into the trap of staking working people's claims to these rights on their status as the most hard-working people.

The working class are too often denied these rights under the guise that these are things that must be earned, with capital and management having both the material and rhetorical power to decide what it means to "earn" them. The labor movement's argument that working people deserve more from their employers because they work hard buys into that logic, and in that regard, it undermines their larger project of expanding the rights and power of the working class. This is not, of course, to blame the labor movement for their own demise. Unions have simply

⁹³ *Labor Relations Radio*, E83; *Labor Relations Radio*, E88; *Labor Relations Radio*, E102; *Labor Relations Radio* E140.

been outgunned and outmanned in the war on working people that is neoliberalism. This dissertation points out one rhetorical means with which unions have been so discredited and so disempowered in the modern day – would-be union members can be persuaded that what makes them virtuous and deserving is their willingness to earn material reward through their own hard work rather than being presumptuous enough to think they are entitled to it. In this cultural context, where the conviction that no one is entitled to anything they have not earned is widely shared – workers can be persuaded to embrace what is ultimately their own exploitation as a badge of honor, as Harris put it. Thus, I argue that to move forward, especially at this potentially kairotic juncture where many Americans are disillusioned with the neoliberal doctrine, the labor movement and its advocates must work to undermine the bootstrapping ethos altogether. In so doing, they may relieve the contradiction between American values and their egalitarian political project. Through a rhetoric of universal rights, I hope that they may persuade working people that they do, in fact, deserve a much greater share of the power that capital has so successfully, so immensely, squirreled away for itself.⁹⁴

In contradiction with the American work ethic, I argue that there are some things that cannot be earned, and are instead deserved as a basic condition of human existence. All people deserve – and thus ought to be entitled to – a job that pays a living wage, housing, healthcare, education, some control over their time, and a sense of purpose and dignity. While each of these should be taken for granted as something all human beings are owed, at the same time, I argue there are things that no individual can possibly deserve or be entitled to. While this latter category is no doubt more difficult to subject to specific boundaries, I have in mind a grossly outsized share of money, resources, and power. This sentiment is neatly captured with the

⁹⁴ Thomas Piketty, *Nature, Culture, and Inequality: A Comparative and Historical Perspective*, trans. Willard Wood (New York: Other Press, 2024).

popular slogan “billionaires should not exist,” the idea being simply that there is no world in which one person can truly be said to somehow deserve, or have fairly earned, such an unfathomably greater share of the world’s wealth than everyone else.

Rather, if one person has managed to accumulate so much more than so many others, they exploited many others in the process. This sentiment holds regardless of whether or not the billionaire in question can be said to be “self-made” in the sense that their parents did not have money (though, they almost always did have capital, cultural capital, and other privileges like race, gender, and ability). In other words, Howard Schultz is no more deserving of his billions of dollars than is Wal-Mart heiress Alice Walton simply because he can be said to be self-made. To get it, he necessarily exploited the labor of others. It simply is not possible to accumulate billions of dollars otherwise. No executive (let alone board member) “earns” their salary in the way that their employees are expected to earn their paychecks and everything else. As the AFL-CIO reports, “The median Starbucks worker would have had to start working for Starbucks in 4643 BC (during the Stone Age!) just to earn what Starbucks’ CEO earned in 2024 alone.”⁹⁵ It seems safe to say that the average CEO does not work 382 times harder than the average worker, nor is their job 382 times more important.⁹⁶ That is what they are paid nonetheless, because it is executives, board members, and owners of capital writ large who have the political and rhetorical power to define what earning and deserving mean in the first place.

To make the second half of this argument more persuasively and to greater effect, the labor movement ought to more clearly embrace the first: a rhetoric of universal economic rights, in which all people, including the workers who they fight for specifically, are entitled to a basic standard of care. Indeed, the labor movement has made great strides in popularizing knowledge

⁹⁵ AFL-CIO, *Executive Paywatch - 2025* (2025), <https://aflcio.org/paywatch>.

⁹⁶ AFL-CIO, *Executive Paywatch - 2025*.

about just how serious wealth inequality in the United States is, how much more management typically makes than workers, and often debunks billionaires' fraudulent self-made personas. In this respect, the labor movement has generated a lot of forward momentum in persuading the broader public that there are some things that *no one* deserves. Yet, the argument that there are also things that *everyone* deserves is less common. More often than not, organized efforts to empower working people are firmly rooted in the American work ethic. Whether it is graduate students attempting to bargain for higher wages, baristas for consistent staffing and scheduling, or train conductors for paid time off – the argument usually hinges on the fact that these workers work hard and that their labor is important, therefore they deserve it. This is true, of course, and it is perfectly understandable to argue on these terms in a cultural context wherein the belief that everything must be earned to be deserved is commonplace. Yet it is my contention that the American work ethic is at odds with the labor movement's aim to redistribute wealth and power from capital to the working class.

I have in mind two reasons. First, labor will never persuade capital that it deserves a sufficient share of the profits that capital considers to be its own, regardless of how much or hard low-level employees work. Any employer, and certainly employers as a class, necessarily have the upper hand in a rhetorical negotiation over what it means for their employees to earn whatever it is they might be asking for. As my analysis in Chapter Two shows, post-Fordist capitalists' use of the bootstrapping ethos typically positions being a successful, self-made, entrepreneurial businessman as the definition of earning. Simply being a member of the working class is itself a disqualification, and it is in this way that the modern American work ethic holds workers to a standard of deservingness they cannot live up to. The only way to demonstrate deservingness of more is to earn one promotion after the next, until you are the boss. Or, you can

start your own company and be the boss. For, as I will show in Chapter Two, capital and its managers equate executive and entrepreneurial labor alone as being deserving of the lion's share of company profits. Workers are only entitled to what executives decide to share on their own terms.

Second, those within the rank-and-file who argue that their hard work entitles them to more are most likely attempting to persuade co-workers to join the fight, and from this perspective, the argument is more likely to be effective. However, as I show in Chapter Four, because it is still grounded in the idea that they must earn improved conditions, it can backfire as an organizing strategy. Workers who have internalized the American work ethic are resistant to the suggestion that co-workers they see as less hard working or less productive, who may have less seniority, ought to get a raise or better treatment. These workers, they argue, do not deserve the higher wages and workplace protections that unions provide. Like Senator Markwayne Mullin, they may accuse these workers of being entitled or privileged for expecting such things as a given rather than earning them. They may even argue that being free from sexual harassment, racial discrimination or other prejudicial treatment is a privilege that must be earned – even when they themselves have been the victim of such treatment. Ultimately, when working people are encouraged to adopt a bootstrapping ethos, they are discouraged from feeling and evincing the solidarity required of any organized effort to win more from their employers. Thus, as I will argue in this dissertation's concluding chapters, an alternative work ethic should be adopted that more consciously recalls why work was ever considered to be a moral good in the first place: its capacity to unite us in the pursuit of a greater, in fact *common* good.

Chapter One

A History of the American Work Ethic and Theory of the Bootstrapping Ethos

A History of the American Work Ethic

Pinpointing the precise origins of the American work ethic and the rhetorical performance thereof is a less than straightforward task. Scholars begin this history at different times perhaps because, as intellectual historian Eric Baker argues, the American work ethic has evolved in tandem with structural shifts of the economy, prompting labor to work in ways commensurate with new economic realities.⁹⁷ In Baker's telling, different iterations of the American work ethic that have evolved over time constitute distinct versions that we would do well to recognize. I take his point that the work ethic has morphed enough throughout American history to warrant conceptual severance for some purposes, and that for those purposes, it perhaps doesn't make sense to discuss *the* work ethic but *a* work ethic, as one of several. Nonetheless, Baker's history also makes clear that while the older work ethics may lose some influence in the advent of economic developments that dictate the need for a different approach to waged work, they do not disappear altogether. Rather, vestigial components of them remain, so that in a sense, they exist at once, influencing normative ideas about how one ought to work and why, often in contradictory ways.

While I occasionally distinguish between different versions of the American work ethic as they surface in various characters' rhetoric, my primary task in this dissertation is to identify and analyze the contemporary influence of a conviction that is consistent across all iterations of

⁹⁷ Erik Baker, *Make Your Own Job: How the Entrepreneurial Work Ethic Exhausted America*, 1st ed (Harvard University Press, 2025).

the work ethic that have cropped up throughout American history, that is, the conviction that no one is entitled to anything they have not earned through their own labor. This consistency, as well as the specific shape this belief takes on in American culture, is what enables me to speak broadly about a greater *American* work ethic and expose the bootstrapping ethos that performs it. To make sense of the bootstrapping ethos' persuasive power to constrain the labor movement in the present day, this chapter first provides a brief intellectual history of the American work ethic, and the consequential shifts in managerial philosophies that have influenced it. I trace its development through a linear account of different work ethics that scholars have identified: Protestant, industrious, and entrepreneurial.⁹⁸ A history of each, tied to the transformations of American capitalism that have necessitated or at least enabled them, brings into clear relief the remarkable stability of the bootstrapping ethos as an effective means of justifying inequality and undermining organized efforts to achieve a more equitable distribution of resources. I then outline a theory of the bootstrapping ethos that is used to perform the American work ethic in the current era.

The Protestant Work Ethic

The earliest form of the American work ethic arrived in New England along with the nation's Puritan settlers. The Puritans sought new refuge in part because their religious convictions made them insufferable to the point of persecution. It seems the group's assurance that their combination of stringent asceticism and diligent work in a calling made them better than everyone else, and their tendency to flaunt what they felt was their innate moral superiority

⁹⁸ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Stephen Kalberg (Oxford University Press, 2011); Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries* (Duke University Press, 2011); Elizabeth Anderson, *Hijacked: How Neoliberalism Turned the Work Ethic against Workers and How Workers Can Take It Back*, New edition (Cambridge University Press, 2023); Baker, *Make Your Own Job*.

and exclusive claim to spiritual salvation did not win the Puritans many popularity contests in England.⁹⁹ What came to be called the Protestant work ethic, then, is at least *a* if *the* literal founding value of US society, baked deep into the nation's cultural cake. As I will show, though seemingly difficult to reconcile with its religious origins, the idea that no one deserves anything they haven't earned fits neatly within its logic, at least as it evolved. Indeed, a history of the American work ethic must start here, as the Protestant work ethic and its Puritan peddlers planted the ideological seeds that have guided the shape of American capitalism to the present day. As a moral system which positions an individual's willingness to work doggedly, reliably, and without complaint as an inherent moral good, the enduring roots of the Protestant work ethic are in part what makes appeals to the bootstrapper ethos persuasive.

In one of the discipline's most influential texts, Sociologist Max Weber popularized the Protestant work ethic's name, and argued this ethic is "the spirit capitalism", particularly in the United States – a case he saw as a pure enough example of a society so thoroughly shaped by the ethic he described that it seems a trip there largely inspired the whole idea for the book.¹⁰⁰ Weber identified the Protestant work ethic as having facilitated a broader shift from what he termed economic traditionalism to economic rationalism. The former describes a pre-capitalist culture of work, where adherents understand it to be a mere obligation, something one engages in at the expense of doing more important things and thus for no longer than is necessary. Economic rationalism, on the other hand, is essentially industrial capitalism as it developed in 16th and 17th century Europe. The term means organizing work around rational scientific principles

⁹⁹ Weeks, *The Problem with Work*.

¹⁰⁰ George Blaustein, "Searching for Consolation in Max Weber's Work Ethic," *The New Republic*, July 2, 2020, <https://newrepublic.com/article/158349/searching-consolation-max-webers-work-ethic>; Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Stephen Kalberg (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

geared toward maximizing productivity and profits.¹⁰¹ Though the gradual turn from economic traditionalism to rationalism is largely taken for granted as an inevitable and natural progression of enlightened western society, part of Weber's contribution was to reframe that development as strange, something in need of interrogation and explanation.¹⁰² His own explanation was that paradoxically, the rationalist way of thinking about work was introduced in the religious extremes of Puritan thought. After all, foundational to the faith is a strict asceticism. With the assumption that any indulgence in worldly pleasure is a loathsome sin comes a profound fear of free time. One can only spend so many hours studying scripture or in prayer, after all. To protect their flocks from the temptations of fun that might otherwise fill a free moment, preachers advised that they work. More specifically, Puritan ministers taught their congregants that work was in fact a sacred moral virtue, as God instilled each of his children with a natural talent that was to be their calling. A willingness to work diligently in that calling was thus a righteous endeavor.

The pastor and Protestant reformer John Calvin famously extended this logic by teaching that work was not only virtuous, but that a strong commitment to work was evidence one was predestined to enter heaven. In Weber's analysis, the doctrine of predestination only compounded the anxieties for which the work ethic was prescribed. Even though Calvinists believed they could not earn their way into heaven through good works, they felt compelled to work regardless so that they could both stave off the existential dread of idle time (too much time to question one's status within God's elect) as well as earn the material success that Calvin assured was a sign of spiritual supremacy and acceptance into heaven. Again a bit paradoxically, while Puritans held that wealth was worldly and thus sinful, they came to embrace the process of

¹⁰¹ Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.

¹⁰² Weeks, *The Problem with Work*.

earning that wealth as an inherent moral good. Wealth accumulation was not exactly a new invention, of course, but prior to Calvinism, money was sought only as a means to an end – you plundered or saved it specifically because you had things in mind you wanted to buy. Wealth accumulation as an end in itself, or, the idea that one would acquire money only for the sake of having a lot of money was in part a strange result of the Puritan beliefs that having it was a sign that one had diligently worked hard and that it was wrong to spend it on worldly things. At first, the contradiction between wealth being bad, and spending being bad, but constant work being good was resolved through the obligation to give to charity and pay taxes to support the poor. Gradually though, as the work ethic evolved and became secular, this requirement fell away.¹⁰³

According to political philosopher Elizabeth Anderson, the Protestant work ethic became largely decoupled from financial charity because it was hijacked by a Calvinist inflected conservatism – a strain of Protestantism that migrated with English settlers and eventually won out over the other in the United States.¹⁰⁴ Unlike scholars who categorize the evolution of the work ethic through different historical periods marked by different economic realities, Anderson cleaves the work ethic into two opposing ideological variants. Specifically, she argues that there are two versions of the Protestant work ethic we can trace to the present day, one progressive and the other conservative. Anderson interprets the “progressive” work ethic as rooted in Locke’s philosophy, necessitating an egalitarian morality in which all work has value and all working people deserve a living wage and access to a basic social safety net made possible through redistributive economic policies. In this thinking, drastic disparities in wealth are not justified by different professions, as these are merely a reflection of the necessary division of labor. Locke hailed “productive” work as inherently moral and all productive workers, rich and poor alike, as

¹⁰³ Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.

¹⁰⁴ Anderson, *Hijacked*.

morally worthy. Accordingly, those who do not work hard and contribute something of value to society, the idle rich and the idle poor, were immoral and undeserving of wealth.

In an incredibly detailed examination of *Two Treatises of Government* and lesser-known works, Anderson shows that the philosopher's famed theories of property were firmly rooted in the Protestant work ethic, rather than the libertarian ideology which is often ascribed to him. At the time of Locke's writings, two political factions fought over the direction of English society and its moral underpinnings: the Whigs and the Tories. The Tories were the party of existing aristocracy, who hoped to preserve the elite class's luxurious and leisurely way of life, oriented around activities like sport hunting and attending fancy dinners. The landed gentry that made up the Tories despised work, regarding it as an icky pastime for icky, low class people – an obligation that was obviously beneath them. Herein lay the Protestant Whigs' disagreement. As Locke articulated, they believed God had given the earth to all of humanity in common. This was so everyone could use their own particular skills and talents (their calling) to harness the earth's abundant resources and ensure that all of humanity in common could be well-cared for and flourish. In this view, what makes land valuable is the labor that people expend to cultivate and maintain it. In doing so, they are contributing something that others need, whether that be growing food or producing raw materials, or sustaining a commercial property that develops them. And, in so far as one's labor plays a part in producing something that helps ensure others have what they need to live a comfortable and dignified life, it has intrinsic value. Accordingly, all who work productively for this common good deserve to live a comfortable and dignified life in return.

This is why Locke, echoing Protestant ministers, rejected a system of governance of that allows some to escape their duty to their fellow humans by getting others to do their work for

them. It was not just the idle aristocracy that Locke railed against, but those in the ownership class who exploited and thus undervalued the labor of others. As Anderson puts it, his “policy arguments consistently attack corrupt financial, mercantile, and aristocratic practices that reward idle and exploitative modes of income extraction: usury, monopoly, gambling, artificial state support of high land prices, excessive copyright protections, feudal property rights, primogeniture, slavery.”¹⁰⁵ Those carrying out such practices may well be doing a kind of work, but it is work done not in the service of bettering society but at other people’s expense and for private gain. This is what Locke means he rages against the “unproductive” labor of the idle and exploitative rich.

As Anderson further details, however, Locke follows this same line of logic to indict the non-working poor as well as the rich. His proposed policy reform to 17th century English “poor laws” reflected the prevailing view that poverty was most likely a personal, moral failing rather than the result of structural conditions. Even when confronted with the reality that many poor people were employed but simply were not paid a subsistence wage, Locke, and many other policymakers who had internalized the Protestant work ethic acted on the assumption that the poor could be divided into two distinct camps: the deserving poor, who were unable to earn a living, and the undeserving poor, who were able-bodied but unwilling to work hard enough to get by.¹⁰⁶ The former could qualify for aid from the State, but the latter were subject to incarceration where they could be taught to work. Locke’s proposed poor law reforms

¹⁰⁵ Elizabeth Anderson, *Hijacked: How Neoliberalism Turned the Work Ethic against Workers and How Workers Can Take It Back*, New edition (Cambridge, United Kingdom New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 45.

¹⁰⁶ Policy makers and intellectuals, including Locke, did not conceive of the idea that there could be people who were employed but still poor (or willing to work but struggling to find it) until the government performed an extensive survey and this group was discovered. Coming to terms with the existence of this group was very difficult, and Locke theorized it to be the result of some not leaving enough land for others to farm. As described here, however, policies still tended to punish those who found themselves un or underemployed, taking for granted that it was likely due to an insufficient work ethic. See: Anderson, *Hijacked*, 58.

demonstrated a deep skepticism of those who attempted to claim financial aid, as he sought to require would-be beneficiaries to prove that they couldn't find work and enact a punitive, low-paid work requirement. He advised that anyone caught pretending to have a legitimate reason to need to financial aid (perhaps he has in mind faking a disability or illness) should have their ears sliced off, and if caught again, should be sent into permanent slavery. He also believed that begging was a serious criminal offense punishable by incarceration and forced labor, not only for the one doing the begging but for their children. Indeed, he advised that the children of those caught looking for handouts should be taken from their families starting at age three, where they would then be essentially imprisoned in a "work school," or factory where they would learn to work properly in exchange for bread and gruel.¹⁰⁷

Locke's draconian policy is a reflection of the dual nature of the Protestant work ethic that Anderson describes. Guided by this ethic, Locke's undergirding principle as Anderson describes it is that "'honest industry' deserves its just reward."¹⁰⁸ From this conviction, it is possible to deduce that all honest and industrious individuals are virtuous and deserving of a dignified and comfortable life. Everyone who pitches in to the maintenance of human flourishing should themselves be able to flourish. The other side of this coin, however, is that anyone who does not adequately contribute, who is apparently not industrious and thus dishonest (the two appear to be connected in this thinking) deserves neither flourishing nor dignity (including raising one's children). Though Locke at least thought the willfully un or underemployed at least deserved enough to stay alive, it is a short leap from here to the idea that no one is entitled to anything they have not earned through own labor.

¹⁰⁷ If children themselves are caught begging, Locke advised they be whipped and forced to complete hard labor before being returned home, as Anderson describes on page 59-60.

¹⁰⁸ Anderson, *Hijacked*, 60.

Thus, while the Protestant work ethic has the potential to justify some progressive, pro-worker policies like a more egalitarian distribution of income and other resources, its conservative, rather neoliberal tendencies emerge out of an assumption that able-bodied people always have the option to work and earn enough to avoid poverty. Once a person or family does find themselves in poverty, as Locke evinced, they are only entitled to assistance – even in the short term – insofar as they can demonstrably prove their predicament arises from a total and complete inability to earn more in the labor market, which is no straightforward task. The assumption of individual responsibility and dismissal of structural constraints legitimates a stubborn suspicion of the poor. As it were, structural constraints only grew stricter when the Industrial Revolution changed the balance of power tremendously. When Locke was penning his theories that proved so inspirational for American intellectuals and policymakers, workers could earn a greater share of the profits from their labor as they had access to capital income. Farmers owned their land or leased it under terms that favored their interests. Craftspeople owned their shops. Builders and other manual laborers owned their tools. With the Industrial Revolution, workers could no longer make a living this way and were compelled into the factory, giving owners of capital far greater bargaining power. The new mode of production subjected workers to deskilling, longer hours, lower wages, and general exploitation. Yet even as the ranks of the working poor grew because of these circumstances – a force far beyond their control – the assumption that they deserved it remained persuasive.

The Protestant work ethic's taken-for-granted assumption that it is possible to earn a dignified and comfortable life through work is what Anderson has in mind when she argues the work ethic was hijacked by conservatives, eventually neoliberals, and turned against workers. She traces how with the Industrial Revolution, the conservative version of the work ethic

eventually won out, paving the way for a Calvinist version of the Protestant work ethic that, although originated with British intellectuals, held sway among the Puritan settlers of the American colonies and continues to inform neoliberal ideology in the present day. This conservative version of the work ethic held onto Locke's conviction that wealth must be earned through work, but it was less concerned with the part about why work mattered in the first place: to contribute to a society where all can flourish. Whether that wealth was earned by simply collecting rents from capital was in this view, unimportant. Following Calvin's preaching, the idea was that earned wealth signifies the person it belonged to indeed worked hard in a calling which God approved of. Wealth serves as proof of God's favor which one could only have come by if one had worked hard enough to be deserving of it. Poverty, on the other hand, signifies a moral failing: a self-evident unwillingness to work hard enough to support oneself. From this view, any attempt to reduce poverty, say, through wage hikes or welfare, is unjust.

Herein lies the circular and self-serving logic of what Anderson calls the conservative work ethic. Because the underlying assumption is one of individual responsibility – it takes for granted that earning the comfortable and dignified life Locke imagined was possible through work – structural constraints that in fact make it impossible to succeed are overlooked, or their fault in the matter is maddeningly, and paradoxically downplayed. That is, when the existence of poverty itself is offered as proof that it is deserved (circular logic), owners of wealth and resources (capital) who are presumed to be that way because they deserve it, have all the license in the world to make it harder and harder to actually earn enough in a job to climb out of poverty, even while they preach that this is what the poor must do to escape it and become deserving of a better life. From the perspective of a business owner with employees who are struggling to make ends meet, this logic dictates that the poor are poor because they are not doing enough to not be.

Simply paying them enough to not be poor would be giving them something they have not earned and do not deserve. This perspective conveniently sidesteps the alternative explanation that low wages made them poor and keep them that way— that structural constraints prevent them from doing what they must do as individuals to be deserving. As we will see in the following chapters, through the work ethic eventually becomes secular and market forces largely take the place of God in the equation, this conservative version of the work ethic remains persuasive to owners of capital and their managers in the modern economy. Indeed, the central conundrum of the conviction that no one is entitled to anything they have not earned through their own hard work and ingenuity is this inherent subjectivity: how much and what kind of work entitles whom to what is entirely a rhetorical construction negotiated between capital, management, and labor. While all parties may simply adopt rhetoric that preaches the importance of hard work in the abstract, in practice, a closer look at such rhetoric in action suggests it is often the *kind* of work one does that really matters.

Though Anderson's central argument is that we must take back the work ethic from neoliberals, and re-establish its progressive version, what she also demonstrates so thoroughly is the danger of embracing a value system wherein worth is entirely tied to work. The unifying framework of both the progressive and conservative versions of the work ethic is that hard work is virtuous and idleness is sinful. It is no wonder why conservative thinkers so easily "hijacked" the progressive version in the first place, deploying what is functionally the same moral framework to demonize the poor in general – working *and* unemployed – by asserting that poverty itself was the result of an insufficient work ethic. Both the progressive and conservative interpretations of the work ethic promote a harmful ideal wherein only that which has been virtuously earned through hard work is deserved. This singular ethic, a secular and simplified

version of the Protestant one, is too easily weaponized by capital and its managers against working people as well as those who do not work for wages at all. It seems that in the US, albeit for different reasons, both labor and capital have internalized the Protestant work ethic and a value system which posits that only earned wealth is deserved, and that by extension, no one is entitled to anything they have not earned. The problem is that capital has vastly disproportionate power over the means of earning anything. After all, it is capital that controls not only the means of production, but the cultural resources necessary to define earning/deserving in their favor and at labor's expense.

Creating the Industrious Work Ethic: Corporate Rhetoric and Managerial Thought in the Fordist Era

Scholars push back on a reading of Weber that posits the Protestant work ethic *caused* capitalism to develop, though, it is more broadly accepted that this ethic was a valuable cultural resource as the economy industrialized. There was an emergent need to persuade factory workers that this new kind of work, albeit horrendous, was worth doing well.¹⁰⁹ In response to industrialization, employers and intellectuals helped to popularize a secular version of the work ethic that celebrated obediently performed drudgery as its own moral reward. As Eric Baker writes, this “industrious” work ethic is generally the one any references to *the* work ethic bring to mind in the American context, probably because so many people who work in the US share the confounding experience of working inexplicably hard doing some kind of menial labor despite being undervalued and underpaid by their employer.¹¹⁰ As Baker argues, the industrious work ethic was necessitated by industrial capitalism – a period in time when factory jobs were widely

¹⁰⁹ Stuart Ewen, “Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of the Consumer Culture,” McGraw-Hill, 1976.

¹¹⁰ Baker, *Make Your Own Job*.

available and of growing importance to the economy. These jobs required a “willingness to plod along, perseverance at work no matter what the task that has been assigned to you” and “without expecting much reward.”¹¹¹

Cultivating this willingness in early factory workers was no easy task, as the tasks that they were assigned and the conditions they were made to carry them out in were generally immiserating. PR historian Stuart Ewen traces in early managerial thought the resulting efforts to instill a stable work ethic in factory workers.¹¹² As he explains, wage labor in general was at first experienced as an unnatural change, particularly for immigrant factory workers who were not Puritans and had not been acculturated to the Protestant work ethic. Pre-industrialization, even for the most disciplined Protestant worker, work was different. It was perhaps agrarian, changing with the seasons and the sun, or was at least task-based, likely challenging and dynamic. Adapting to the highly mechanized and monotonous shift on a production line, let alone the logic of the hourly wage system in general, was a particularly immiserating experience. As a result, factory workers tended to put up a great deal of resistance, organized and otherwise.¹¹³ Thus, as Baker puts it, “The primary ideological task that a work ethic needed to discharge under such circumstances was to explain to workers how to make their peace with the unpleasant quality of most industrial wage labor.”¹¹⁴

This task was eventually accomplished by promising workers rewards in this life, rather than the next. As Weeks describes, the industrial-era work ethic simply extends the logic of the Protestant work ethic so that working people are offered at least the opportunity to accumulate

¹¹¹ Baker, *Make Your Own Job*, 4.

¹¹² Ewen, “Captains of Consciousness.”

¹¹³ Ewen, “Captains of Consciousness”; Roland Marchand, *Creating the Corporate Soul: The Rise of Public Relations and Corporate Imagery in American Big Business* (University of California Press, 1998).

¹¹⁴ Baker, *Make Your Own Job*, 4.

wealth as a reward for their labor. In so doing, it tended further to the ideological seeds of the broader American Work Ethic and its attendant bootstrapping myth. As Weeks summarizes nicely,

Where religion in the seventeenth and the early eighteenth centuries may have demanded a life devoted to work, the promise of social mobility – that one could by one’s own disciplined effort and persistence pick oneself and one’s family up by the bootstraps — had emerged in the US by the early nineteenth century as the most recognizable rationale of this official ethos of work. This industrial work ethic, as a secular version of the old ethos, focused not on the question of mobility in the afterlife but rather on its achievement in this life.¹¹⁵

In the United States, rewards of the sort that Weeks describes were best achieved long after the Industrial Revolution. Due to a historically specific moment of post-WWII affluence in which the US had a near monopoly over global resources, and invested those resources in a suite of policies designed to build a middle class, there was a time in which the promise of social mobility was at least a bit more closely aligned with reality, at least, if you were white and preferably part of a nuclear family. Because Black Americans were excluded from government programs and job opportunities during this period of abundant wealth, for this group in particular, the American Dream has always been a falsehood.¹¹⁶ Indeed, as economist Marc Paul shows, even during the New Deal era, known for actually achieving a good deal of wealth redistribution, many of the poorest Americans were left behind. And due to structural discrimination, the poorest Americans were disproportionately people of color, particularly descendants of enslaved people.¹¹⁷ There was, however, a period in the mid-twentieth century wherein business leaders and intellectuals believed that inducing a sufficiently industrious work ethic in employees involved the assumption that they should be compensated well in return.

¹¹⁵ Weeks, *The Problem with Work*, 42

¹¹⁶ Veena Dubal, “The New Racial Wage Code,” *Harvard Law & Policy Review* 15, no. 2 (2021): 511–49.

¹¹⁷ Mark Paul, *The Ends of Freedom: Reclaiming America’s Lost Promise of Economic Rights* (University of Chicago Press, 2024).

It took a while to arrive at this conclusion. Business owners and intellectuals interested in how best to support their interests had for years been experimenting with and writing extensively about managerial philosophies that might cultivate the industrious spirit they were after in their workforce – specifically, since the field of Scientific Management emerged in the late 19th century.¹¹⁸ Its founder, Frederick Winslow Taylor, had the stick in mind more than the carrot. Organizing a factory on Taylorist principles meant streamlining the labor process through de-skilling and measuring the optimal speed with which each component of production should be performed, then planning the most efficient ways that each human movement involved could achieve those speeds. The results were then imposed on workers, who would of course face punishment if they could not, or did not keep up. As scholars have observed, Taylorism primarily conceived of human beings as extensions of the machinery they worked with and treated them accordingly. They were not to speak, as doing so would distract from hitting production target speeds, and to maintain this singular focus on production they were subject to intense and constant supervision.¹¹⁹ These sorts coercive strategies of control remained popular in factories, but alongside Taylorism, the business community embraced the idea that they ought to offer rewards in addition to punishment.¹²⁰

It was Henry Ford who perfected Taylorist management strategies by introducing the assembly line to the production process and applying scientific management to each step.¹²¹ Ford did something unorthodox, though, when he allocated a comparatively greater share of the profits that this efficient system of mass-production generated for the factory workers

¹¹⁸ Steven P. Vallas, *Work: A Critique* (Polity, 2012).

¹¹⁹ Jamie K. McCallum, *Worked Over: How Round-the-Clock Work Is Killing the American Dream*, First edition. (New York, NY: Basic Books, Hachette Book Group, 2020).

¹²⁰ Vallas, *Work*.

¹²¹ Baker, *Make Your Own Job*.

themselves. Factory owners had long been experimenting with workplace perks to increase morale and thus production. These ranged from the practical to the creative, from providing transportation or even housing to hosting lunchtime entertainment and employee cotillions on boss' large estates.¹²² Ford took this logic a bit further when he argued that mass production required a stable, healthy workforce, and to get it, factory workers ought to be folded into the burgeoning consumer economy. He became famous for his contention that those employed on his factory lines ought to be able to afford the product they assembled. Lest Ford be given too much credit, it is worth noting that these were pragmatic decisions that made the man tremendously wealthy.¹²³ He might have, and certainly could have afforded to pay workers even more, or lightened their punishing workloads. While making such pragmatic decisions, he publicly railed against his workers' calculating motivations, annoyed that they worked only for money and not for the love of the game. Worse, he chalked up this apparent moral deficiency overtaking the American working class to the growing influence of Jewish-controlled finance capital.¹²⁴ These antisemitic and otherwise racist rants about having to pay for labor in a newspaper he owned, in fact, were an inspiration to aspiring German chancellor Adolf Hitler.¹²⁵ In sum, it seems he was deeply resentful of having to pay workers anything more than he saw fit.

Nevertheless, the managerial style now called "Fordism" was defined by the rationale that it was more cost-effective to pay all workers enough to lead a comfortable life, so that they could make ends meet and afford a small luxury here and there. This, the logic went, was what was necessary to instill in workers an industrious spirit and maintain production and ideally

¹²² Marchand, *Creating the Corporate Soul*.

¹²³ Timothy Johnson, *Rhetoric, Inc: Ford's Filmmaking and the Rise of Corporatism* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2020), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/washington/detail.action?docID=6507234>.

¹²⁴ Baker, *Make Your Own Job*.

¹²⁵ Johnson, *Rhetoric, Inc*; Baker, *Make Your Own Job*.

circumvent regulation from lawmakers and/or unionizing workers. For the better part of the twentieth century, Fordism was the consensus because in a sense, it worked. Employees did work hard, they kept pace with Taylorist requirements and they generated sizable profits. And in its success, Fordism was of tremendous consequence for a broader American work ethic.¹²⁶

Beyond creating a secular version of the work ethic that scholars have called “industrious,” this iteration of the work ethic helped to deepen the consensus that no one is entitled to anything they have not earned in two important respects. First, as Ford’s rhetoric and earlier instances of “corporate welfare” demonstrate, the comparatively high wages factory workers were paid under Fordist managerial philosophy were always conceived of and discussed by management as acts of corporate generosity rather than something to which factory workers were actually entitled.¹²⁷ This rhetoric highlights the important deficit between the way that the American work ethic is practiced and preached by capital and management. After all, as I’ve argued, what it means to legitimately earn or deserve something, and what it means to work hard are all only rhetorical constructions. Discursively framing above average pay as a generous gift betrays an assumption about what *kind* of work it takes to be deserving in the eyes of the economy’s architects. Capital may extoll the virtues of “hard work” like everyone else, to persuade workers that their hard work will be rewarded. In practice, however, rhetoric that positions so-called low-skilled workers (factory workers, in this case) as the beneficiaries of company largess suggests these workers are not, in fact, entitled to their wages because their line of work is insufficiently valuable to earn them the right to a comfortable life. Assumptions about the worthlessness of labor conceived of as low-skilled remain persistent, and is a topic I take up in the following chapters. For now, what I wish to emphasize is this key consistency between

¹²⁶ Weeks, *The Problem with Work*; Baker, *Make Your Own Job*.

¹²⁷ Baker, *Make Your Own Job*; Marchand, *Creating the Corporate Soul*.

Fordism and the industrious work ethic it sought to cultivate. Under Fordism, a largely blue-collar workforce learned to work diligently for long, hard hours on a factory line, and in exchange they may be gifted with a standard living wage, likely enough to save for the occasional consumer good. An especially hard-working few may even be able to do enough to be promoted, and actually earn themselves a place in the middle-class. The problem that I elaborate on in the following chapters is that capital never really felt these workers were doing quite enough to earn this treatment, hence the characterization that they were pampered by overly generous executives like Henry Ford. And, as we will see, since this treatment was not something to which workers were entitled in the first place, they simply changed the terms of the contract.

Second though, it is this legacy of Fordism that led many working people to believe in and adopt the values of the work ethic as gospel. It was a period in which hard work really did seem to present a path out of destitution that was for so long a standard for the average wage worker likely employed in a factory. So much so that marginalized wage workers too, well aware of the systematic barriers to their success, began to internalize the idea that success was only a matter of working harder, with more determination, than everyone else. As Baker's intellectual history shows, many Black philosophers in the Fordist era wrote books and gave regular speeches on the subject to large crowds. Likewise, there were women self-help writers who advised large audiences of young women that professional success depended only on not giving up and working harder.¹²⁸ Though such workers were never exactly living a life of leisure, it's important to remember that prior to about the mid 1930s, both pay and conditions in factories were abysmal. The Fordist years, by contrast, marked a time in which people really did feel they

¹²⁸ Baker, *Make Your Own Job*.

could pull themselves up by their bootstraps and into a decent life. There was at this point some limited truth to the idea. By 1938, the Fair Labor Standards Act had established a minimum wage, and they now worked an hour day with 40 hours per week counting legally as full time.¹²⁹ As companies grew in size, there were more pathways to promotions and higher wages.¹³⁰ And for the burgeoning middle class (a subject I will return to later on), a modest home, car, and supporting a small family were realistic dreams. This is largely how these years have been collectively remembered: a golden era of American capitalism and of the American dream, proof positive that the former delivers on the latter.¹³¹

More to the point, this period of abundance is often recalled in connection with a golden era of American culture and morality. Contemporary refrains about how “nobody wants to work anymore” and similar laments about the lagging work ethic of younger generations often still gesture to these years, when people knew how to work hard, without complaint and without entitlement.¹³² Back then, the story goes, people understood that this industrious ethic was how you *eventually* make it. You put in your due, and bit by bit, you *earn* a comfortable life. You get a job, work hard to be promoted, save for a house, etc. Those industrious Americans are literally referred to as the “greatest generation,” in part for bearing these highest of virtues. Donald Trump’s infamous slogan that we must “Make American Great Again” (MAGA) purportedly refers to the 1950s, the peak of Fordist capitalism and the decade most associated with an abundance of stable, middle-class careers for White American men (the oppression of Black

¹²⁹ Steven Greenhouse, *Beaten Down, Worked Up: The Past, Present, and Future of American Labor* (Anchor, 2020).

¹³⁰ Marchand, *Creating the Corporate Soul*.

¹³¹ Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism*, 1st edition (University of Chicago Press, 1998).

¹³² See, for instance: Bruce Crumley, “What a New Poll Says About Gen-Z’s Workplace Issues. There Are Many,” Inc, January 29, 2025, <https://www.inc.com/bruce-crumley/what-a-new-poll-says-about-gen-zs-workplace-issues-there-are-many/91140559>; Bruce Crumley, “Gen-Z Hits Some Bumps as It Enters the Workforce,” Inc, September 27, 2024, <https://www.inc.com/bruce-crumley/gen-z-hits-some-bumps-as-it-enters-workforce.html>.

Americans and their subjection to apartheid conditions during these same years tends to be glossed over in these nostalgic recollections, though, for some racial hierarchy seems to be part of the appeal).¹³³ In this sense though, the ultra-conservative MAGA is but one of many narratives of the Fordist years that position them in retrospect as some kind of natural state of American capitalism, a default from which we have tragically been pulled away by corrupting forces. It is this taken-granted-assumption, this imagining of these abundant years as the *real* capitalism – where everyone agrees to work hard, to do their part, and in turn generate so much profit that capitalists will have no problem sharing with their laborers – that has been so consequential for the American work ethic. While the younger generations especially are well aware this world is a faraway place, its enduring memory is a specter that haunts political discourse at every turn. That is, even those who know the American Dream is a fantasy tend to hold it close as a normative ideal, a time to which we must try to return. Thus, in upholding a willingness to engage in challenging menial work for the promise of gradually earned rewards like eventual promotions, the industrious work ethic and the period of Fordist capitalism that shaped it only served to deepen the conviction that no one is entitled to anything they have not earned.

There is of course a problem with a reading of history that positions Fordist capitalism as the real capitalism, and what came next as the aberration: it leaves out a tremendous amount of historical context that suggests the opposite. Scholars see this comparatively brief period of affluence, where good jobs were plentiful and employers mostly felt it prudent to promote from

¹³³ Although Donald Trump has frequently discussed revitalizing the manufacturing sector in America (something that itself would not be good for American workers absent strong unions), his actions in office and history of not paying workers and union-busting as an employer, suggest he disagrees with the Fordist managerial philosophy. Further, any plans to increase the social mobility of the working class seem limited to performatively cruel deportations of select migrant workers – he claims to have made an exception for those employed in agriculture and hospitality after consulting with business owners in these industries. Further, the One Big Beautiful Bill Act is a remarkable upward transfer of wealth.

within, to pay living wages and offer strong benefits, as the exception to the rule.¹³⁴ When placed in historical context, these ideas indeed seem to have been short lived, fading from prominence in Business school curricula, managerial publications, and subsequently from practice in the 1970s.¹³⁵ Political discourse and policies followed suit.¹³⁶ Likewise, the degree to which the working conditions and material circumstances of the working class improved in those years had little to do with their strong work ethic nor the generous mood of capital. It was just as much the result of New Deal policies like the Fair Labor Standards Act that forced employers' hands, instituting the minimum wage, weekends, overtime pay, and that similarly gave workers the right to unionize and made it easier for them to do so. Not only did workers then have new protections, unions with newfound large memberships had political leverage. Democratic politicians took notice, and made it part of their party's agenda to represent this constituency in earnest. The availability of many stable, comparatively well-paying working class jobs again owe in large part to social programs funded by taxes on the wealthy and corporations that would today be unthinkable.¹³⁷ While these policies certainly played a critical role in establishing a healthy middle class, the general abundance of the post-war years owes largely to the geopolitical aftermath of the horrific war. Indeed, it would be difficult to account for the much romanticized affluence of the post-war period that America enjoyed apart from the circumstances of its WWII victory. Having entered much later than its allies, having mostly seen no fighting on

¹³⁴ Benjamin H. Snyder, "The Disruption of Work Time," in *The Disrupted Workplace: Time and the Moral Order of Flexible Capitalism*, ed. Benjamin H. Snyder (Oxford University Press, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190203498.003.0001>; Dennis K. Mumby, "Work: What Is It Good for? (Absolutely Nothing)—a Critical Theorist's Perspective," *Industrial and Organizational Psychology* 12, no. 4 (2019): 429–43, <https://doi.org/10.1017/iop.2019.69>.

¹³⁵ Benjamin H. Snyder, *The Disrupted Workplace: Time and the Moral Order of Flexible Capitalism*, 1st edition (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

¹³⁶ Erik Baker, *Make Your Own Job: How the Entrepreneurial Work Ethic Exhausted America*, 1st ed (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2025).

¹³⁷ Paul, *The Ends of Freedom*.

its shores, the country was comparatively intact and in a far better position than any other to become the leader of a new world economy.¹³⁸

Seen as a part of these circumstances, it is not surprising that the post-war economy nor the comparatively generous Fordist management style these years are remembered for did not last. As Marx famously observed, if left untouched, the arc of capitalist history bends toward a sharp inequality. It takes a great deal of planning, policy interventions, and/or acts of god to generate other results.¹³⁹ But rather than admit this outright, when economic conditions changed and the business community was feeling less generous, the work ethic was offered up as both the cause and the solution. In some ways, that work ethic was the familiar, industrious one. Yet by the end of the period of post-war abundance, the work ethic had mostly been redefined.

The Entrepreneurial Work Ethic

As Baker shows, the entrepreneurial work ethic evolved on top of the industrious one, and to understand this evolution and its consequences, we must jump back in time once more. Just as the average waged laborer in the US was coming to terms with a life of drudgery on a factory floor, a series of crises hit the industrial economy culminating in the Great Depression. As Baker puts it in his history of the entrepreneurial work ethic, “In the years of the twentieth century...workers increasingly confronted an economic landscape in which full-time jobs were not merely toilsome but persistently, structurally scarce.”¹⁴⁰ Baker’s history holds that the entrepreneurial ethic began to take shape, surprisingly, in the industrial period when the first economic contractions led to job losses. With these early economic crises, Baker shows, come a flurry of industrial psychology and self-help texts advising each individual to “make your own

¹³⁸ Marc Levinson, *An Extraordinary Time: The End of the Postwar Boom and the Return of the Ordinary Economy* (Basic Books, 2016).

¹³⁹ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy. Volume I* (Princeton University Press, 2024).

¹⁴⁰ Baker, *Make Your Own Job*, 4

job.” Throughout the years of industrial capitalism though, even when prolonged, these spells of unemployment appeared temporary. As a result, the industrious ethic remained prominent during this period, exercising most influence when it seemed industry was stabilizing. Yet, “In a cyclical pattern repeated over the course of the twentieth century, each new normal eventually proved ephemeral in its own right, revitalizing the demand for a new entrepreneurial vanguard.”¹⁴¹ The Great Depression, when jobs were scarcer than ever before, seemed to solidify the need for a way of thinking about what kind of work was virtuous. Though the entrepreneurial work ethic did not eclipse the industrial one until about the 1960s, Baker shows that it too has deeper historical roots than previously thought. Further, as I will show, the entrepreneurial ethic only deepens the conviction that no one is entitled to anything they have not earned.

In a thorough overview of both pop psychology and managerial science (the former pulling simplified talking points from the latter), Baker shows that the idea that entrepreneurs are happier than employees on average became common sense.¹⁴² From this assumption comes the idea that an ideal society is one of entrepreneurs. Since practically, many successful entrepreneurs need employees, those condemned to employment ought to also adopt an entrepreneur's outlook and approach to work. Therein lies the key to a happier, more productive workforce. The entrepreneurial ethic then functions as a grand moral imperative as well as the latest answer to the problem of intrinsic motivation that has preoccupied executives and business owners, managers, and the researchers advising them since the invention of wage labor. From management's perspective, surely persuading a workforce to think more like the company's founder is the ultimate motivational strategy. In the contemporary economy, after all, material rewards have all but disappeared for many workers, as full-time, well-paid work that offers basic

¹⁴¹ Baker, *Make Your Own Job*, 5

¹⁴² Baker, *Make Your Own Job*.

benefits becomes harder and harder to come by. Accordingly, the kind of hard work that employees are expected to perform to be deserving becomes an increasingly impossible standard to reach.

As Baker explains, entrepreneurial employees “do what they love, they invest in their work with passion, vision, the very substance of their selfhood.”¹⁴³ Further, they do not passively wait for work to appear. They do not “merely execute, however dutifully, the work assigned to them.”¹⁴⁴ Instead, they draw from their own ingenuity to create work for themselves. As Baker shows, it is this entrepreneurial ethic that is considered virtuous in the contemporary moment of late stage capitalism, marked by dynamism, unpredictability, and a “perpetually revolutionary nature.”¹⁴⁵ When it is assumed that the entrepreneurial approach to work is the virtuous or moral one, it is the entrepreneurial worker who is worthy of material reward. However, he explains

the entrepreneurial work ethic also insists that people who create their own work reap a set of intangible rewards that remain out of reach for the less proactive...They acquire a set of virtues, including independence, initiative, creativity, integrity, and self-realization, that are much harder to develop for people who simply do the work that others give them, even if they work very hard. They find a distinctive kind of joy in their work, because it's not *just* work – it's a product of love, objectifying their very personhood.¹⁴⁶

It is because the entrepreneurial work ethic demands so much more of the worker that Baker argues it is in some ways more oppressive, or rather, more “exhausting,” than its industrious predecessor, encouraging a deeper, more intense commitment to work that leaves us feeling lost, anxious, and guilty when we're supposed to be at leisure.

Indeed, Baker's book names something many Americans appear to be struggling with, as, in recent years, even scholars who had not yet been previously interested in work turned their

¹⁴³ Baker, *Make Your Own Job*, 2

¹⁴⁴ Baker, *Make Your Own Job*, 3.

¹⁴⁵ Baker, *Make Your Own Job*, 3.

¹⁴⁶ Baker, *Make Your Own Job*, 3-4

attention to the problem of how it took on such an outsized role in American life. Religious studies scholar Carolyn Chen, for instance, argued persuasively that Silicon Valley managers effectively turned work into its own religion for their young employees.¹⁴⁷ Tricia Hersey argued persuasively against “hustle and grind culture,” urging readers to think of resting as an act of resistance against capitalist exploitation.¹⁴⁸ Journalists too began trying to understand why so many Americans were so dedicated to their work despite often having so little to show for it, documenting the phenomenon in themselves and others. Anne Helen Petersen wrote a famed introspective essay about her own experience with “burnout,” which inspired a book documenting the experience of her millennial peers.¹⁴⁹ Adam Chandler wrote about the myth that success is “99% Perspiration,” showing how so many Americans have labored underneath it.¹⁵⁰ Sarah Jaffe documented a variety of workers burned by their own devotion in a thorough piece of journalism and anti-work manifesto titled “Work Won’t Love You Back.”¹⁵¹ In the same period, the reformed or recovering Girl Boss/workaholic has emerged as a popular subgenre of memoir, wherein the narrator is destroyed both physically and emotionally by her devotion to work, eventually coming to terms with the fact that a cool, fun, and important job did not serve as the source of self-actualization that she expected. Notably, though these stories purport to question or critique the entrepreneurial work ethic (though not using those precise terms), they always seem to devote a great many words to establishing just how passionately and hard their storytellers worked for years or generally decades. Indeed, they are always about their

¹⁴⁷ Carolyn Chen, *Work Pray Code: When Work Becomes Religion in Silicon Valley* (Princeton University Press, 2023).

¹⁴⁸ Tricia Hersey, *Rest Is Resistance: A Manifesto*, First edition., with Brown Spark Little (Little, Brown Spark, 2022).

¹⁴⁹ Anne Helen Petersen, *Can’t Even: How Millennials Became the Burnout Generation* (Mariner Books, 2020).

¹⁵⁰ Adam Chandler, *99% Perspiration: A New Working History of the American Way of Life* (Pantheon, 2025).

¹⁵¹ Sarah Jaffe, *Work Won’t Love You Back: How Devotion to Our Jobs Keeps Us Exploited, Exhausted, and Alone* (Bold Type Books, 2021).

protagonists literally working themselves into physical and mental breakdown before eventually realizing they needed to adjust their priorities. In dedicating so much of their narrative to just how far they were willing to go in their jobs, just how hard they really worked and how broken it made them, it is as if these writers believe nearly working themselves to death was what it took for their rest to be deserved. Or, perhaps they felt this is what their readers would believe.

Like Baker, Historian Benjamin Waterhouse published an intellectual history of entrepreneurialism in America, though his book tells the story of how actual self-employment came to be viewed as the ideal, and its negative ramifications for how business is (and isn't) regulated as well as the distress this ideal creates when self-employment proves impossible.¹⁵² This too provides important historical context for the American work ethic, though in articulating entrepreneurialism as a work ethic – that is, a set of ideas and assumptions about what kind of work is valuable and virtuous – Baker touches on the critical fact that employees, too, are somewhat paradoxically expected to be entrepreneurial. This is, as I have argued, often a standard of virtue to which it is impossible for them to measure up. Only those who are sufficiently entrepreneurial – that is, creative, passionate, ingenuitive, and who take on big risks and bet on themselves, are deserving of and will be blessed with material rewards. But workers are *not* owners, and whether or not their dedication pays off is entirely outside of their control and is instead up to their employers. Because the entrepreneurial work ethic is largely an impossible and contradictory standard for employees, and because it condemns those who do not demonstrate sufficient passion and dedication to their jobs, it too reinforces the idea that no one is entitled to anything they have not earned through their own independent labor.

¹⁵² Benjamin C. Waterhouse, *One Day I'll Work for Myself: The Dream and Delusion That Conquered America*, 1st ed (W. W. Norton & Company, Incorporated, 2024).

Note that all versions of the work ethic concur that the point is for a person to do the work themselves, rather than relying on others. Unlike its industrious predecessor, however, the entrepreneurial work ethic puts this emphasis on independence into hyperdrive, bringing to bear an understanding in which the kind of work that truly entitles a person to material reward is entrepreneurial. It is not enough to work hard in any job diligently on someone else's behalf. Rather, what counts as "hard work" under this ethic is working with ingenuity and risk, with all-consuming passion, and most importantly, for oneself. Reading into Anderson's analysis of the Calvinist roots of neoliberal ideology, I've argued that capital and management have long evinced a tendency to ascribe the kind of work that they do as the kind that truly counts through a circular sort of logic that takes the fact of their success as proof positive that is deserved. For a time under Fordist managerial philosophy and the industrious work ethic that the Fordist economy necessitated, it seems they agreed (albeit reluctantly, as Ford himself indicates) to compensate rank-and-file employees with the means to a relatively comfortable and dignified life. Perhaps because the owners of capital have always felt this is more than the labor of the working class entitles them to, this state of affairs proved short lived.

Post-Fordist Managerial Consensus

Baker pinpoints the evolution of Ford's own philosophy of work as the one of the early signs of a gradual transition from the old, industrious work ethic to the entrepreneurial one, and accordingly, much of his history is dedicated to early indications of this new value system taking place, from Ford through the Great Depression. Baker and other scholars agree though, that it was not until the late 1960s when the entrepreneurial ethic truly eclipsed the industrious one in the broader culture. Other histories have shown that at this point in time, the work ethic of the actual working class became less of a concern, and the newly numerous ranks of white-collar

office workers became a point of cultural preoccupation.¹⁵³ In these years, the American public suffered a profound moral panic over the perceived problem of “conformity” in middle-class corporate professions that was apparently stifling the ingenuitive American spirit – the very one that was credited with fueling those same corporations’ entrepreneurial founders.¹⁵⁴

This conformity, it was supposed, was the fault of an overly paternalistic corporate culture that made white collar workers into intellectually neutered yes men. Worse, this logic went, was that conformist culture had leaked beyond corporate walls and was permeating the very fabric of the American soul. Ironically, to save the spirit of capitalism that so ordered American life, the individual had to be liberated from the grasps of the soulless corporation. Ultimately, this moral panic over the roles of the corporation and the entrepreneurial self in American society ushered in the end of Fordism, and the post-Fordist order of the contemporary economy. Further, as jobs deteriorated in quality as a result of this change, the miserable experience of employment in blue and white collar work alike served only to strengthen entrepreneurial aspirations, rather than inspire collective organizations to improve them.¹⁵⁵ Ultimately, the individualistic rhetoric of the 1960s paved the way for the entrepreneurial work ethic and led both individual employees and even corporations to construct an entrepreneurial ethos. The logic of human capital that results has served to cement and justify contemporary neoliberal ideology and the resulting economic program, a subject I will discuss later on.¹⁵⁶ First, I continue with a history of the entrepreneurial work ethic, showing how the post-Fordist managerial philosophy that seeks to cultivate this ethic in workers ultimately convinced the

¹⁵³ Vallas, *Work*.

¹⁵⁴ Frank, *The Conquest of Cool*; Waterhouse, *One Day I’ll Work for Myself*; Baker, *Make Your Own Job*.

¹⁵⁵ Waterhouse, *One Day I’ll Work for Myself*.

¹⁵⁶ Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution*, First edition., Near Futures (Zone Books, 2015).

business community that employment rights and protections were a drain on the American spirit and thus stifled American capitalism. Ultimately, the consensus that developed out of post-Fordism then, was that when living wages, promotions, and benefits are taken for granted, workers get too comfortable and lose their ability to be creative, to innovate, to think outside the box, and to take big risks. They lose their entrepreneurial edge. In this line of logic, only those who truly earn material rewards through a sufficient ability to work outside the corporate structure – to make their own jobs if they have to – deserve and shall receive them.

A number of factors converged to produce the moral panic over conformist culture and its consequences. In the *Conquest of Cool*, Thomas Frank argues that a key factor was the increasing disillusionment with the very people engineering that conformist culture: advertisers. Rather than resisting and eventually co-opting the anti-conformist counterculture of the era as prevailing wisdom has held, advertisers, or commercial persuaders of the 60s and 70s actively embraced and popularized it.¹⁵⁷ Frank shows that the rigid dullness of work life in the era of mass production extended beyond the assembly line to white collar corporate employees. After all, production was only half the equation in the mass consumption-based economy of the 50s.

If factory work required scientifically engineered precision to ensure profitability, so too did the process by which consumers actually bought the stuff: advertising. The advent of mass advertising was built on a foundation of Freudian theory, stipulating that certain messages could manipulate the masses into buying products by appealing to their unconscious fears and desires.¹⁵⁸ Appealing to the optimal combination of these unconscious anxieties to effectively persuade was thought to require precision. Thus, the prevailing wisdom of the day was that

¹⁵⁷ Frank, *The Conquest of Cool*.

¹⁵⁸ Ewen, “Captains of Consciousness.”

advertising was a science, not an art.¹⁵⁹ Like factory workers on the assembly line whose every movement was scientifically measured for optimum efficiency, ad creators were expected to stick to a rigid set of generic rules. Further, just as factories limited individual workers to performing a singular step in the production process, ad men too regularly complained about being cut off from other departments: creative directors could not work directly with artists, who could not work with copywriters, and so on. This rigid work environment produced a predictable dross of advertising content that – in the interest of sustaining consumer culture – completely saturated the media landscape of the 50s.

In fact, the rigid and scientific approach to advertising bored and alienated consumers as well as many of the industry's workers. The experience of white collar jobs within large advertising firms was so soul-crushing that more than several workers in industry went on to write hugely popular books detailing the ills of corporate culture that are by now commonplace. Sloan Wilson's classic the *Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* was famously inspired by his own experience working in PR.¹⁶⁰ Novels like his and works of nonfiction such as William H. Whyte's *The Organization Man* argued that a corporate culture of conformity was seeping out of the firms and into the culture at large.¹⁶¹ The conformity fostered in large corporations, they warned, was undermining the American spirit of rugged individualism, creative problem solving and entrepreneurial independence by incentivizing employees to become hapless, risk-averse yes men. Whyte in part blamed this on the somewhat new concept of the career. He argued that offering corporate employees job security in the form of regular promotions made them soft, incentivizing them to keep their heads down and conform to expectations rather than work hard,

¹⁵⁹ Frank, *The Conquest of Cool*.

¹⁶⁰ Sloan Wilson, *The Main in the Gray Flannel Suit* (Cardinal Edition (Pocket), 1956).

¹⁶¹ William Whyte, *The Organization Man*, First Edition, 11th Printing (Simon & Schuster, 1956).

stand out, and take big risks. The saliency of the critique leveled by Whyte and so many others is indicative of widespread popular disillusionment with a growing culture of conformity in the 50s, most evident in formulaic advertising.¹⁶²

As Frank describes, a rebellion against conformity had been brewing within the advertising world since the mid 50s. By the early 60s, some of these disillusioned corporate workers left their established firms and formed their own heretical upstarts. They rejected the tenets of advertising based in the science of persuasion, and sought to reestablish persuasion as an art. Taking a cue from the counterculture movements of the time, these new ad firms began to satirize conformist culture and the advertising industry itself. In one example, by satirizing the ubiquitous and cookie-cutter ads of the Detroit auto-makers characteristic of the 50s, Volkswagen advertisers were able to transcend their association with the Nazis and came to be seen as the appropriate car for members of the counterculture. Frank's point in the *Conquest of Cool* is that the anti-conformist counterculture so characteristic of the 1960s did not undermine American consumerism writ large, it undermined the 50's model of *mass* production and consumption and the modes of white-collar corporate work that accompanied it.

The lesson of the 60s for American consumers and the business community alike was that conformity is bad. With the help of hip marketers, fully exasperated with conformist corporate culture themselves, the era's glorification of individuality and free expression was translated into the idea that consumption was a meaningful act of expressing oneself.¹⁶³ As a result, the demand for mass produced goods dwindled as consumer preferences shifted to the personal, unique, and authentic.¹⁶⁴ From the perspective of corporate producers, then, mass production no longer made

¹⁶² Frank, *The Conquest of Cool*.

¹⁶³ Frank, *The Conquest of Cool*.

¹⁶⁴ Naomi Klein, *No Logo: 10th Anniversary Edition with a New Introduction by the Author*, 10th Anniversary edition (Picador, 2009); Snyder, "The Disruption of Work Time."

sense. To remain relevant, corporations would need to adapt. In *No Logo*, Naomi Klein argues that the answer presented itself to the business community in the mid 1980s, in a particular strain of management theory positing that, rather than selling *products*, companies ought to forge and sell their *brands*. While Klein acknowledges that brand consciousness arose much earlier, up until that point corporations took pride in the things they made. Brands existed simply to facilitate the buying and selling of these products. She argues that this changed when once ubiquitous large-scale manufacturers began to falter, and the few firms which seemed to be selling a lifestyle or idea rather than a thing soared to staggering profit levels despite a recession. At this point, management theorists began to proselytize that the resources it takes to sustain manufacturing – factories and all the human labor that it takes to run them – only weigh firms down. Instead, firms should outsource as much of the production process entirely to contractors and subcontractors, dispensing with cumbersome factories and all the labor necessary to sustain production.

Freed from the factory, companies would be made far more nimble, capable of responding to ever-shifting consumer preferences by simply altering their brand images.¹⁶⁵ One sociologist, using the term “flexible capitalism” to describe the current economy, explains that, contrary to older forms of managed or Fordist capitalism,

...flexible capitalism favors arrangements that can respond to rapid and unpredictable change. The emphasis on nimbleness is a response by economic elites to what they perceive as rising domestic and global competition and a shift in consumer preferences towards customization and personalization...A concrete outcome of this emphasis has been a preference to dispense with ‘bloated’ workforces in exchange for a ‘leaner’ workforce composed of a small core of permanent employees and a larger periphery of part time, temporary, and contract workers.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁵ Klein, *No Logo*; Snyder, “The Disruption of Work Time.”

¹⁶⁶ Snyder, “The Disruption of Work Time”, 5

Ultimately then, a moral panic over conformist culture facilitated a shift from Fordist to post-Fordist capitalism on two levels. First, the rhetoric of anti-conformity blamed comfortable careers within large corporations as stifling the spirit of rugged American individualism that was presumed to be the country's engine of prosperity. Indeed immiserated by their dull white collar jobs, these employees agreed that something had to be done. The critiques of former ad men that detailed the horrors of alienation from their labor might have led in a Marxist direction, and to be sure, much of it was intended to indict the ruling class.¹⁶⁷ Instead, the logic was used to justify the end of the bounded career and Fordist management strategies. At the same time, the rhetoric of anti-conformity helped foster a change in the way that Americans related to consumer products, such that they preferred the individualistic, customizable and authentic over the mass-produced. The change in production necessitated by this cultural shift meant that corporations ought to sell brands rather than things, and this change itself helped to facilitate a much more precarious organization of work. As the post-Fordist or Flexible style of organizing the labor process requires workers to take on much of the risk that was once taken on by employers, the entrepreneurial work ethic provides an ideal moral justification for an otherwise obviously exploitative arrangement.

A Theory of the Bootstrapping Ethos

My aim in this dissertation is to explore how the American work ethic functions as a rhetorical device across classes, particularly in the context of labor disputes, to labor's ultimate disadvantage. To this end, I theorize the bootstrapping ethos as the rhetorical performance of this

¹⁶⁷ Karl Marx, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844," in *Social Theory Re-Wired*, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2016); C. Wright Mills and Russell Jacoby, *White Collar: The American Middle Classes*, 50th anniversary edition (Oxford University Press, 2002).

ethic, which I have defined as the conviction that no one is entitled to anything they have not earned through their own hard work and ingenuity. Before delving into the specifics of how this ethic can be persuasively performed, it might be useful to define the parameters of an ethic in general. Though Weber was preoccupied with Protestant ethics in particular, he lectured and wrote about ethics in general, discussing them simply as sets of moral principles, or assumptions about what is right and wrong, that direct human behavior in daily life.¹⁶⁸ He differentiated between an ethic of responsibility, and an ethic of ultimate ends, more commonly translated as an ethic of conviction.¹⁶⁹ In Weber's view, the former describes an ethics oriented around the consequences – that is, a person guided by this sort of ethic believes they must take responsibility for their actions and will make decisions about how to behave according to the consequences of their behavior. The latter is a contrasting view Weber pulled from Protestant thought (likely Luther's), describing it as a commonplace in Protestantism wherein action should be oriented around good intentions: a person must simply do what is right, and the rest is up to God.¹⁷⁰

The American work ethic might best be understood as deriving from this latter type, as it is a set of principles that dictate the right and wrong ways to make a living. Further, in its Protestant roots, it is less concerned with the consequences of doing so virtuously, taking for granted that, whatever they are, they are just (granted, in this case, there is a shift from God to market forces that give consequences their legitimacy). I call the American work ethic an ethic because it is a guiding principle, but as an ethic of conviction, it draws from a commonplace that

¹⁶⁸ Max Weber, "Politics as a Vocation," in *The Vocation Lectures*, ed. David Owen and Tracy B. Strong, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2004), 32–94.

¹⁶⁹ Richard Swedberg and Ola Agevall, *The Max Weber Dictionary* | Stanford University Press, Second (Stanford University Press, 2016), <https://www.sup.org/books/sociology/max-weber-dictionary>.

¹⁷⁰ Swedberg and Agevall, *The Max Weber Dictionary*, Max Weber, "Politics as a Vocation"

good deeds reap just rewards. That is, if a person does what is right as an economic actor, and acquires wealth and resources not idly but truly through their own hard work and ingenuity, it is generally accepted among American audiences that the results are just. That is, when former Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz tells Congress that he earned his billions of dollars himself, by virtue of his own hard work and ingenuity alone (a subject I take up in the following chapter), he not only performs the American work ethic and appeals to the bootstrapping ethos, but in doing so, he means to emphasize to the degree to which his billions were justly earned – fairly dealt by the free market due to his virtuous bootstrapping.¹⁷¹

When a speaker attempts to persuade an audience of something by demonstrating that they are of good moral character, or uses an ethic as a rhetorical device, this is called an appeal to ethos. The concept generally refers to a persuasive appeal that establishes that you, the speaker, are of good character and thus, a credible source. There are countless ways to do this, and rhetorical scholars have theorized many different ways that rhetors construct a desired ethos, or sense of character by appealing to a particular set of values, or ethical code. The way that I bring to the surface in this case is the performance of bootstrapping. By this I mean a speaker's attempt to exemplify or embody the American work ethic, an attempt to persuade an audience that they both subscribe to the ethic and have lived accordingly. I consider any performance of this ethic to function as a rhetorical appeal to ethos, what I call the bootstrapping ethos, to be precise.

As a storied cliché in American culture that describes a supposedly inherent good of self-reliance, bootstrapping seems an appropriate name for the ethos that performs the American

¹⁷¹ Alina Selyukh, "In Clash with Bernie Sanders, Starbucks' Howard Schultz Insists He's No Union Buster," Business, *NPR*, March 29, 2023, <https://www.npr.org/2023/03/29/1166277326/starbucks-bernie-sanders-howard-schultz-union-hearing>.

work ethic. It is more appropriate still in that it unironically describes an impossible feat while insisting that it be attempted regardless. As journalist Alyssa Quart explains in a thorough interrogation of the bootstrapping myth in American society, the term was first used sarcastically in the 19th century by the magazine *Working Man's Advocate*.¹⁷² A writer joked that an inventor who claimed to have discovered perpetual motion with a newly invented device could use to lift himself over the Cumberland River or a barnyard yard fence “by the straps of his boots.”¹⁷³ The punchline is premised on the fact that a person *cannot* lift themselves up by their bootstraps, and for a time, this sarcastic use of the phrase to describe a stupid attempt to do the impossible caught on. At the same time, Quart shows, unironic uses started cropping up, and over the course of the nineteenth century, it was used to describe something Americans should aspire to regardless of the physical impossibility.¹⁷⁴ Because the American work ethic sets up an impossible standard of deservingness for working people, I call it the bootstrapping ethos. And because this ethic is impossible to live up to in reality, rhetorical performance is key.

To illustrate how the ethos is performed, it might be useful to return to *Forbes*’ “Silver Spooners to Bootstrappers” scale – a point system the wealth tracking magazine uses to determine which of the world’s richest individuals is more self-made and which is more of an idle inheritor that I discussed in the introduction chapter.¹⁷⁵ The magazines’ account of how the world’s richest individuals did or did not earn their vast sums shows that very few of these individuals are at any point content to live on what they already have, generally more than they could ever hope to spend in their own, their children’s, or their grandchildren’s lifetimes. Instead,

¹⁷² Alyssa Quart, *Bootstrapped: Exposing the Myth of the Self-Made and the Rugged Individualist, From “Little House” to Horatio Alger* (New York (N.Y.): HarperCollins Publishers, 2023).

¹⁷³ Quart, *Bootstrapped*, 5.

¹⁷⁴ Quart, *Bootstrapped*.

¹⁷⁵ Gigi Zamora, “The 2023 Forbes 400 Self-Made Score: From Silver Spooners To Bootstrappers,” *Forbes*, accessed February 14, 2025, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/gigizamora/2023/10/03/the-2023-forbes-400-self-made-score-from-silver-spooners-to-bootstrappers/>.

they work, and depending on how much their net worth could plausibly be said to have resulted from their own labor, *Forbes* assigns them a numerical grade from 1-10. A grade of 1-5 earns a listee the title of silver spooner, with 1 being a silver spooner of the highest degree. This score means that its referent has had no hand in establishing their fortune. It lists the Walton family heiress Alice Walton as an example.¹⁷⁶ As *Forbes*'s criteria make clear, *any* amount of work involved in simply managing their money earns a listee 2, rather than a 1, on the bootstrapping scale. The very fact that a popular magazine assigns the wealthiest Americans a numerical grade based on how much of their net worth can plausibly be related to their own labor is indicative of a broadly accepted value system wherein deserving is anchored to work. In this way, the scoring system indicates that it is not just a tireless appetite for money and power that compels these .01 percenters to work far beyond any hint of a material need to do so (though this is doubtlessly a factor). Indeed, that many of the wealthiest individuals in the US take care to create the impression that they have some kind of rags-to-riches story suggests it is often not just important that they work hard, but rather more important that they do so publicly – that other people believe they are hard workers and see or hear about their work ethic in action.

For instance, the only thing Elon Musk loves to do more than sleep in his office (he's got these anecdotes for his co-founded 90's start-up Zip2, Tesla, Twitter, and the White House) is tell stories about a time when he was so busy and so hard at work he slept in his office.¹⁷⁷ The anecdotes are always the same. One of his businesses was going through a rough patch and,

¹⁷⁶ Zamora, "2023 Forbes 400 Self-Made Score."

¹⁷⁷ Fred Lambert, "Elon Musk Goes from Sleeping on Tesla's Factory Floor to Sleeping in Sales Office," *Electrek*, July 1, 2025, <https://electrek.co/2025/07/01/elon-musk-sleeping-tesla-factory-floor-to-sleeping-sales-office/>; "Elon Musk on His Early Silicon Valley Days, Future of the Internet," *CBS Sunday Morning*, directed by CBS News, 1998, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zfwK5BvZrY4>; Elizabeth Rosner and Rachel Rasposas, "Elon Musk Has Been Sleeping on the Floor of His Government Office Across from the White House (Exclusive Sources)," *People.Com*, February 13, 2025, <https://people.com/elon-musk-sleeping-office-floor-near-white-house-exclusive-11678717>; Elon Musk [@elonmusk], "Back to working 7 days a week and sleeping in the office if my little kids are away," Tweet, Twitter, July 20, 2025, <https://x.com/elonmusk/status/1946839030177632475>.

because apparently, he alone could fix it, he spent weeks or maybe months sleeping in an office somewhere so as not to miss out on a single moment of work more than biologically necessary. He is usually careful to emphasize the fact that his workplace sleeping arrangements are not comfortable or fun – he describes sleeping under a cramped desk somewhere or on an army cot, for instance.¹⁷⁸ When Musk recounts these stories, he appeals to the bootstrapping ethos. His performances intend to persuade the audience both of the grand depth of his work ethic, and that his labor is important. He's not just some passive executive collecting a fat paycheck. Because he works harder than everyone else, he earns it. And because he is actively involved in whatever business he happens to be running, he can plausibly be said to have earned his reaped rewards primarily through his own labor in executing his own creative visions. Never mind the fact that he comes from tremendous wealth. Never mind the fact that he didn't actually found half the businesses he claims to, invent any of the technologies used in their design, and that most of his businesses' success owes to monopolizing government contracts.¹⁷⁹ All of these facts are a threat to Musk's credibility as a supposedly self-made man, a person so hard-working he's been sleeping in offices since his teenage years even to the detriment of his dating life.¹⁸⁰ This is why he has taken such great pains to keep the facts of his real contributions secret – for instance,

¹⁷⁸ *Elon Musk's 40 Greatest Motivational Speeches | Best Motivation Ever (MUST WATCH)*, directed by Outcast Motivation, 2024, 30:43, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8YHBJdPK6eY>.

¹⁷⁹ Phillip de Wet, "'We Had so Much Money We Couldn't Even Close Our Safe': Elon Musk's Dad Tells BI about the Family's Insanely Casual Attitude to Wealth," *Business Insider South Africa*, February 23, 2018, <https://www.businessinsider.com/elon-musks-dad-tells-bi-about-the-familys-casual-attitude-to-wealth-2018-2>; Libby Winkler, "Quit Calling Elon Musk a Genius: He Buys Existing Innovations and Puts His Name on Them," *Medium*, December 17, 2024, <https://libbysuethewriter.medium.com/quit-calling-elon-musk-a-genius-he-buys-existing-innovations-and-puts-his-name-on-them-580a36152121>; Jeff Ramage, "Inside Elon Musk's Government Contracts," *Built In*, July 18, 2025, <https://builtin.com/articles/elon-musk-government-contracts>; Ian Bogost, "Elon Musk, Baloney King," *Technology, The Atlantic*, April 14, 2022, <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2022/04/elon-musk-buy-twitter-billionaire-play-money/629573/>.

¹⁸⁰ *Elon Musk's 40 Greatest Motivational Speeches | Best Motivation Ever (MUST WATCH)*.

working into a legal contract with both PayPal and Tesla that the companies have to list him as a founder when he is not.¹⁸¹

The increased scrutiny Musk faced due to the profound unpopularity of his efforts at the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) has surfaced many such facts that have generally eroded his bootstrapping ethos and a great deal of his public goodwill (his eventual feud with President Trump later burned his MAGA bridge, too).¹⁸² Musk's example is nonetheless an instructive one for parsing out how exactly the bootstrapping ethos might be performed. From this example and others, I have identified three interrelated rhetorical themes that each perform the American work ethic and work to bolster a speaker's bootstrapping ethos. The first and most obviously demonstrated above is *a public performance of exceptionally hard work*. With his gigantic public platform and desperate desire for approval Musk may do this the loudest, but he is far from the only one publicly performing hard work. Indeed, it makes sense for the wealthiest class of workers, who tend to face the tricky combination of having a job that requires very little real work and an exorbitantly high salary and benefits package in need of justification. From this perspective, when an executive or entrepreneur is asked by a sycophantic reporter what words of wisdom they might share with the public, it makes sense that their answer is almost always about their unwavering work ethic. Many write entire memoirs on the subject, such as Cheryl Sandberg's famed *Lean In*, in which she famously describes her steadfast refusal to let her children compromise her devotion to her career at Facebook.¹⁸³

¹⁸¹ "Was Elon Musk Really a Tesla Co-Founder? How He Became Synonymous with the Brand," *The Economic Times*, March 22, 2025, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/magazines/panache/was-elon-musk-really-a-tesla-co-founder-how-he-became-synonymous-with-the-brand/articleshow/119340540.cms?from=mdr>.

¹⁸² Jaclyn S. Wong, "Elon Musk Approval Low, Reflecting Opposition to Trump Cuts: POLL," *ABC News*, April 28, 2025, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/elon-musk-approval-low-reflecting-opposition-trump-cuts/story?id=121199149>; Jesus Mesa, "Elon Musk's Unpopularity Hits All-Time High after Leaving Trump Admin," *Politics, Newsweek*, June 25, 2025, <https://www.newsweek.com/elon-musks-unpopularity-hits-all-time-high-after-leaving-trump-admin-2090695>.

¹⁸³ Sheryl Sandberg, *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead* (Knopf, 2013).

Indeed, the corporate feminist manifesto might be credited in part with birthing the millennial “girl boss” archetype (along with *#Girl Boss*, of course), inspiring many professional young women of this generation to adopt the ruthless devotion to work that Sandberg promised as the path to a corner office.¹⁸⁴ Importantly, though the term simply connotes a female executive or successful entrepreneur, it was often used to describe young women who performed the girl boss role aspirationally, emphasizing on social media how busy they were at work, describing long hours or even sleeping overnight at the office like Elon Musk. Though this kind of performative work may sometimes be inspired by the top class of earners, it seems workers and even students across the class spectrum feel the need to emphasize their work ethic performatively in this way. Sociologist Rachel Sherman described the phenomenon in her ethnography of luxury hotel workers, describing how one of her co-workers in particular, a low-level manager, would go out of her way to make a big show of being busier and made frequent references to working harder than everyone else.¹⁸⁵ The analyses in this dissertation observe Trader Joe’s workers engaging in this same kind of public performance of their exceptional work ethic, writing op-eds and giving podcast interviews where they repeatedly assert they work harder than anyone else.¹⁸⁶ It is important to note that whether or not these workers are *actually* working hard is beside the point. More relevant is that regardless of their actual work hours, each of these workers in these vastly different circumstances feel the need for their work ethic to be publicly observed and acknowledged. It seems they feel they must demonstrate an exceptional work ethic to be considered worthy of whatever material reward they are after. The performance attempts to prove that they have, without a doubt, earned it.

¹⁸⁴ Sophia Amoruso, *#GIRLBOSS* (Portfolio, 2015).

¹⁸⁵ Rachel Sherman, *Class Acts: Service and Inequality in Luxury Hotels* (University of California Press, 2007).

¹⁸⁶ *Labor Relations Radio E140*.

The public performance of exceptionally hard work is generally linked with what I identify to be the second component of the bootstrapping ethos: *positioning one's own work performance as the active agent in one's professional success by concealing or diminishing any advantages one may have benefited from along the way*. This rhetoric is often defensive, engaged in the face of an accusation of entitlement or another threat to one's bootstrapping ethos. The exchange between Senator Mullin and Teamster's President Sean O'Brien discussed in the introduction provides one clear example.¹⁸⁷ When O'Brien points out that Mullin inherited his business rather than founding it himself, it enrages the Senator because the generally accepted logic O'Brien draws from is clearly that Mullin did not earn his position himself and thus does not deserve it. Facing this threat to his credibility as a bootstrapping individual, he launches into a tirade about how hard he worked from the beginning to grow the business from the ground up. Thus, Mullin diminishes the idea that his wealth may owe as much to the significant head start he received by inheriting his father-in-law's business by invoking his years of hard work turning that business into a success. Indeed, the logic of the American work ethic condemns financial assistance as a form of social parasitism above all else. If earning is the ultimate virtue, being given something – or worse, expecting to be given something for nothing – is the ultimate sin. Hence, wealthy public figures from entertainers to businessmen and politicians tend to claim a middle or working class background, and deny outright or diminish the financial assistance they've received from parents.

There is some recent support for this phenomenon in the literature. In an ethnography of a prestigious boarding high school, Sociologist Shamus Khan observed that the one student who

¹⁸⁷ WATCH: *Oklahoma Senator Challenges Teamsters President to a Fight during Senate Hearing*, directed by PBS NewsHour, 2023, 6:27, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zl-2KTpXShY>.

was proud and vocal about his status as a legacy admission was abhorred.¹⁸⁸ Other children complained to Khan that legacy admissions were wrong, and instead they – who were there by virtue of their own efforts – were the ones that actually deserved their places. In an ethnography of wealthy New York City residents, Rachel Sherman finds that some participants with trust funds lie about having inheritances, or simply never admit it.¹⁸⁹ Further, since not all respondents had inheritances and tended to work even if they did, when asked point blank if they felt like they deserved their wealth, most said of course. They had worked hard to earn it. By identifying this tendency as a component of building a bootstrapping ethos, I build on Sherman's findings, further unpacking how this rhetoric works to persuade the public that inequality is justified. Further, while this particular component of the bootstrapping ethos tends to be employed by the wealthy, who necessarily have more advantages to deny, I show how the same logic of positioning all forms of assistance as social parasitism is used to discredit the labor movement and any effort to expand the social safety net. When workers who are themselves steeped in the American work ethic internalize this logic, they too can be quick to deny any accusations of privilege or entitlement by refusing anything that has not been earned and shaming peers who expect something without working for it.

The tendency to shame those who fail to evince a sufficient work ethic in an effort to bolster one's own bootstrapping ethos points to its third and final component: the element of comparison. I have maintained that the core conviction of the American work ethic is the idea that no one deserves anything they haven't earned, but of course, what it means to earn something is up for debate. Because earning is necessarily defined through rhetorical negotiation,

¹⁸⁸ Shamus Khan, *Privilege: The Making of an Adolescent Elite at St. Paul's School*, Princeton Studies in Cultural Sociology (Princeton University Press, 2011).

¹⁸⁹ Rachel Sherman, *Uneasy Street: The Anxieties of Affluence*, First paperback edition (Princeton University Press, 2019).

one means of performing the work ethic and establishing oneself as a virtuous and deserving bootstrapper is to draw a comparison with others. There is always a group of non-workers or insufficiently hard workers who can be constructed as a lazy and entitled other in relation to virtuous earners. As Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon argued, the state of dependency – that is, being a non-worker – has historically been both racialized and gendered.¹⁹⁰ White, industrious men were the paragons of virtuous independence, while White housewives and people of color were thought to be unable to support themselves through waged labor and thus judged as child-like and inferior. The poor, too, regardless of race, were of course also thought to have a moral shortcoming that prevented them from supporting themselves, a judgement that applied also to the disabled.

The stigmatization of dependency – cast as social parasitism – has been at the heart of many of history’s most profound, discriminatory horrors. Indigenous genocide, slavery, and colonization were all justified in these terms, with the understanding that non-white peoples and non-European cultures lacked the spiritual industriousness of their European, and then American counterparts and were therefore morally deficient and needed to be compelled to work for their own sake.¹⁹¹ Consequential echoes of this same logic continue to be persuasive in ways that work to punish marginalized people. We see it in the Reagan-era moral panic over the myth of welfare queens; in the idea that huge numbers of poor, nonwhite Americans committing petty crime ought to be locked up and compelled to work for a pittance for years, decades, or even the rest of their lives; in the ongoing efforts to cut off access to Medicaid in rural communities, or to

¹⁹⁰ Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon, “A Genealogy of Dependency: Tracing a Keyword of the U.S. Welfare State,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 19, no. 2 (1994): 309–36, <https://doi.org/10.1086/494886>.

¹⁹¹ Sally Engle Merry, *The Criminalization of Everyday Life* (Northwestern University Press, 2001); Chandler, *99% Perspiration*; Erin Elizabeth Hatton, *Coerced: Work under Threat of Punishment* (University of California Press, 2020); Anderson, *Hijacked*.

make it harder to qualify for SNAP, or access any kind of loan forgiveness program, or to raise the minimum wage or make it easier to join a union. The logic behind every one of these actual policies and policy agendas is that the people these programs serve are not sufficiently willing to pull themselves up by their bootstraps, and thus do not deserve them.

Supporting or implementing marginalizing and exclusionary policies like these all stem from the American work ethic, and might all be considered enactments of the bootstrapping ethos. That is, performing the relational or comparative element of the bootstrapping ethos constitutes the subject of comparison as an undeserving other. In this sense, the ethos encourages a politics of exclusion, and this exclusionary logic is precisely what makes the bootstrapping ethos so deserving of critical attention and dismantlement. It betrays an ideology that is incompatible with organized efforts to secure a more equitable distribution of power and resources. As I have argued thus far, progressive efforts to empower the working class and democratize the economy have long been grounded in the straightforward idea that workers deserve a greater share of the wealth because they are the ones doing all of the work. This argument is indeed persuasive in a culture that clings to meritocracy as a normative ideal, yet it also contains a consequential contradiction that has been exploited to the fullest by capital and is used to justify the severely unequal distribution of resources that presently threatens American democracy.

That is, if the worth of working people is premised on their exceptionally hard work and ingenuity, it is too easy to condemn organized efforts to entitle workers to *more* without doing more to earn it, let alone for doing less. Indeed, it is my contention that the American work ethic functions as an impossible standard of deservingness for working people. It has ultimately served to disempower labor and the unions that once advocated their interests, to justify the extreme

overvaluation of the kind of work performed by executives and entrepreneurs, and to warrant a distribution of wealth and resources that so heavily favors capital it is difficult to fathom. With a history of the American work ethic establishing why and how workers were so thoroughly disempowered – influenced at each turn along the way by the idea that no one deserves anything they have not earned – and with a theory of the bootstrapping ethos that performs this ideal in place, I turn to a deeper analysis of how Capital performs the bootstrapping ethos and defines earning and deserving in their own self-interest.

Chapter Two

Bootstrapping Billionaires

Why the Rich Pretend They Used to Be Poor

Celebrities have a funny habit of exaggerating the humbleness of their beginnings. Musicians from Bob Dylan to Ice Cube and Drake both sang and spoke about growing up in poverty, though each were later outed as children of well-off suburbs. Rapper Vanilla Ice claimed to have been raised in poverty in Florida and to have grown up on the streets, but was later found to have grown up in a comfortable suburb of Dallas. Taylor Swift sang about growing up on a farm, “not a mansion,” with bills piling up. In fact, she did grow up on a farm, but this is because her banking executive father ran it as a side hobby and it most definitely was a mansion.¹⁹² Despite proclaiming to be “straight outta the trailer” and dressing like it, “rapper” Kid Rock grew up in a 1.3-million-dollar estate in suburban Michigan.¹⁹³ The singer Lana Del Rey simply invented a new identity altogether, taking great pains to conceal the fact that she is in reality the daughter of a wealthy website mogul who sponsored her career.¹⁹⁴ Actor Blake Lively’s spouse claimed that she grew up “very working class,” despite being the daughter of wealthy Hollywood executives.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹² Hannah Marder, “‘I Was Raised On A Farm’: 16 Celebs Who Acted Like They Were From Humble Beginnings And Immediately Got Called Out,” *Celebrity, BuzzFeed*, June 19, 2024, <https://www.buzzfeed.com/hannahmarder/celebs-who-acted-like-they-had-humble-beginnings>.

¹⁹³ Tarpley Hitt, “Kid Rock, Who Slut-Shamed Taylor Swift and Says He’s ‘Straight Out the Trailer,’ Grew Up on 1.3 Million Estate,” *The Daily Beast*, August 10, 2019, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/kid-rock-who-slut-shamed-taylor-swift-is-a-rich-kid-poser-who-grew-up-on-a-13-million-estate/>.

¹⁹⁴ Paul Harris, “Lana Del Rey: The Strange Story of the Star Who Rewrote Her Past,” *Music, The Guardian*, January 21, 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2012/jan/21/lana-del-rey-pop>; Elana Klein and Priyanka Rajput, “10 Celebrities You Didn’t Know Grew up Super Rich,” *Business Insider*, accessed April 21, 2026, <https://www.businessinsider.com/celebrities-grew-up-super-rich>.

¹⁹⁵ Emily Leibert, “Ryan Reynolds Says Blake Lively Grew Up ‘Working Class,’” *The Cut*, December 16, 2024, <https://www.thecut.com/article/ryan-reynolds-says-blake-lively-grew-up-working-class.html>.

When they cannot claim with a straight face to have grown up poor, the rich and famous may instead claim to have been cut off by stingy parents after high school, thus thrust into a hard-knock life until their hard work and talent eventually earned them their now-successful careers.¹⁹⁶ Long before Donald Trump was a politician, he claimed this about his father, saying the senior Trump “never sheltered him” and that after 18 he was left to make his own way in the world, as he “didn’t inherit” what he built.¹⁹⁷ Similarly, actor/“wellness” entrepreneur Gweneth Paltrow, raised in luxury by Hollywood royalty, has dismissed claims that her achievements have anything to do with her parents. She maintains that after turning 18, they wouldn’t give her a cent and she could barely afford to feed herself until she made it big. Actor/activewear entrepreneur Kate Hudson claims that while she of course had the option to take advantage of her famous parents’ Hollywood connections, she refused – opting to succeed in the industry “herself” even though it meant years of struggling financially.

Taking claims like these at face value still presents a problem for celebrities who make them in order to suggest their success is due to their own merits. Even if they received no direct support from their wealthy and famous parents after reaching adulthood, it is difficult to imagine a scenario in which their rise to fame had nothing to do with inherited connections to their respective industries, as critics have been quick to point out. Yet this criticism is generously premised on the assumption such claims are truthful, when sometimes there is significant evidence to the contrary. Trump, for instance, is widely known to have launched his career in New York City real estate on the back of what he called a “small loan of one million dollars.”

¹⁹⁶ Hannah Marder, “21 Celebrities Who Let Us Believe They Had Rags-To-Riches Stories That Weren’t 100% Truth,” BuzzFeed, April 12, 2025, <https://www.buzzfeed.com/hannahmarder/celebs-who-acted-like-they-had-rags-to-riches-stories>.

¹⁹⁷ Dominique Mosbergen, “8 Times Trump Claimed He Was A Self-Made Man,” Politics, *HuffPost*, October 3, 2018, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/trump-self-made-man-myth_n_5bb46528e4b028e1fe38ebaf.

Inherited access to a million dollar line of credit is hardly distinct from inherited capital already, yet a *New York Times* investigation of Trump's finances found even this number downplayed the degree to which the President's career depended on that of his father, finding he received at least the equivalent of 413 million in today's dollars from Fred Trump's real estate business, "starting when he was a toddler and continuing to the present day."¹⁹⁸

While most Americans were likely already aware on some level that celebrities do not all have a legitimate rags-to-riches tale and instead have benefitted from a smorgasbord of advantages they were born into, a 2022 explosion of outrage over the prevalence of "nepo babies" in Hollywood, sports, and the music industry suggests the disconnect between meritocratic norms and reality can be jarring all the same.¹⁹⁹ The discovery of just how many stars had famous and well-connected parents caused an uproar of righteous outrage from normal, unconnected folks who have to work for a living, and this outrage was channeled into a general campaign to expose them all. Social media posts excoriating the so-called nepo babies for their unearned privilege temporarily abounded, as did listicles mapping celebrities' familial advantages and the occasional think piece about the phenomenon. While not always explicit, the charge leveled in each case was that the stars in question deserved neither their celebrity nor the wealth it garnered, because they had not earned it by virtue of their own hard work and talents but through inherited advantage. In defense, and to pre-empt such charges in the first place, celebrities appeal to the bootstrapping ethos. To imply that they that are self-made, they claim to have grown up poor, or been poor as young adults. And they repeatedly emphasize how hard

¹⁹⁸ David Barstow, Susanne Craig, and Russ Buettner, "Trump Engaged in Suspect Tax Schemes as He Reaped Riches From His Father," U.S., *The New York Times*, October 2, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/10/02/us/politics/donald-trump-tax-schemes-fred-trump.html>

¹⁹⁹ Nate Jones, "How a Nepo Baby Is Born," *Vulture*, December 19, 2022, <https://www.vulture.com/article/what-is-a-nepotism-baby.html>.

they have had to work to get to where they are. Even Paris Hilton, whose fame and fortune is inseparable from her status as a wealthy heiress, considers herself to be self-made. She uses the descriptor in interviews and her memoir, telling one reporter that “I’m self-made. Like, I’ve done this all on my own. No one’s ever given me anything in my entire life.”²⁰⁰

It is telling that Hilton frequently compares her work ethic and entrepreneurial spirit to that of her grandfather Barron, the Hilton Hotel chain’s founder.²⁰¹ In one interview, and the early chapters of her memoir, Hilton asserts that Barron himself was proud her work ethic, quoting him as saying admiringly, “Paris, you work harder than any CEO I know.”²⁰² Perhaps Hilton felt the claim would not be questioned because CEOs, other executives, and enterprising capitalists are rarely subject to as much public scrutiny as entertainment celebrities when it comes to their meritocratic bona fides. It is much more likely to be taken for granted that a wealthy business owner, especially when that business owner is a business founder, earned their success through their own hard work and ingenuity, and thus deserve the wealth garnered. Like so many celebrity memoirs, Hilton’s seems entirely dedicated to bolstering the heiress’ bootstrapping ethos. It charts the many challenges Hilton has had to overcome (she primarily discusses the challenge of having ADHD, but Hilton also suffered abuse as a young woman) to build her influencing empire and reminds readers at every turn that Hilton is not your average rich girl; she is a visionary who pioneered the influencing business model, and an entrepreneur who hasn’t stopped working since she was a teenager, much like Barron himself.²⁰³ Hilton, the book’s narrative implies, earned and thus deserves her fortune, just like her grandfather. On one

²⁰⁰ William Turvill, “Paris Hilton: ‘I’m Not Scared of Anything — except Spiders, Bees and Dying,’” *UK Sunday Times*, November 15, 2025, <https://www.thetimes.com/life-style/celebrity/article/paris-hilton-abuse-family-house-interview-fkfl52xd>.

²⁰¹ Paris Hilton, *Paris: The Memoir* (New York, NY: Dey Street Books, 2024).

²⁰² Turvill, “Paris Hilton.”

²⁰³ Hilton, *Paris*.

level, it boggles the mind to learn that the children of the rich and famous who grow up to continue being rich and famous can claim in earnest to be self-made. On another, the fact that they so often do is indicative of how deeply the economy's winners have internalized the American work ethic. When everyone agrees that only that which has been worked hard for is legitimately deserved, it is less surprising that the most advantaged take extra care to justify their places (to themselves and to the rest of us) by becoming (or pretending to be) self-made, the only ethical way to be so thoroughly rich under such a value system.

This echoes what sociologists Rachel Sherman and Shamus Khan discovered in their respective ethnographies of the rich.²⁰⁴ When confronted with their privileged status, their participants, even those who were born into or married into wealthy families (the great majority), would typically object to the idea that their success owed anything to their class privilege, or any other kind of privilege, for that matter. They countered that they were not merely idle inheritors but instead worked hard to land high-paying jobs. For instance, Sherman asked one man on a 500,000 dollar salary if he felt his lifestyle was “deserved.” He answered, “Damn right. Where I am today, I’ve earned every dime on my own.” He concedes that his in-laws have “helped” but then says how hard he’s worked in his career, saying “I’ve done it. No one’s helped me.”²⁰⁵ Journalist Alyssa Quart documents the same phenomenon in a like-minded book that traces the history of bootstrapping in American culture, exposing it as a myth and arguing that it is a harmful ideology.²⁰⁶ In one chapter, she shows how rich White Southerners, whose family wealth was built on the backs of enslaved Black farmers, still miraculously see their good fortune

²⁰⁴ Shamus Khan, *Privilege: The Making of an Adolescent Elite at St. Paul’s School*, Princeton Studies in Cultural Sociology (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2011); Rachel Sherman, *Uneasy Street: The Anxieties of Affluence*, First paperback edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019).

²⁰⁵ Sherman, *Uneasy Street*, 58.

²⁰⁶ Alyssa Quart, *Bootstrapped: Liberating Ourselves from the American Dream—Exposing the Myth of the Self-Made and the Rugged Individualist, From “Little House” to Horatio Alger* (Ecco, 2023).

as being the result of their own hard work and ingenuity simply because they landed high paying jobs. (Of course, this critique applies to much of the wealth in the United States in general, as so much of the nation's industry and infrastructure owes itself directly to enslaved workers.) To make sense of this phenomenon, Quart cites a series of influential experiments by the social-psychologist Paul Piff in which participants are made to play Monopoly, only randomly selected players get to cheat.²⁰⁷ They are given twice the money, more than one die, or get access to other extra resources, like getting paid extra for passing "go." Piff was interested in whether and how the unearned advantages would change the players' behavior. He discovered that not only were these players generally rude to their opponents, but when they inevitably won the game, they tended to attribute the victory to their superior skills and strategizing. Fully aware that the game is rigged in their favor, the winners still believe their win was earned.

In the *Tyranny of Merit*, political philosopher Michael Sandel explains that the guise of meritocracy is both the reason that the wealthy either pretend to or legitimately believe that they have earned their places, despite having knowledge of their privileged positions.²⁰⁸ It is also the logical undercurrent that allows them to justify the claim that they earned what they have. National mythology holds that the United States is indeed a meritocratic system that rewards hard work and talent, and that this arrangement is not only just but is in fact the most just arrangement. The reality that opportunities are far from equally distributed, that they instead are given mostly to those with inherited advantages creates some cognitive dissonance for both the "winners" and the "losers."²⁰⁹ Losers face the shame of apparent inadequacy, but so do winners

²⁰⁷ Paul Piff, "Does Money Make You Mean?," October 2013, https://www.ted.com/talks/paul_piff_does_money_make_you_mean.

²⁰⁸ Michael J. Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?*, First Edition (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020).

²⁰⁹ Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit*.

who succeed not by virtue of their own merits (i.e., hard work and talent), but at least in part because of their privileged positions. Thus, as Sandel writes, instead of giving a donation to an ivy league school to ensure their progeny's access to an education that will lead to a high-paying job in the future, wealthy parents might opt instead to bribe their children's way into a scholarship for a sport they've never played, as they did during the college admissions scandal. That way, at least it *appears* as though they earned their place through athletic effort. Even for elites who are not consciously pretending, those who indeed work hard, who actually play the sport that landed them admission to Yale or whatever, the guise of meritocracy provides a self-serving kind of circular logic: the fact of success (often predicated on many years of private tutoring) provides proof of merit, proof of earning, proof of deserving. Sandel's point is not only that the United States is not, in fact, a meritocracy, but that meritocracy ought not to be taken for granted as a just system, it ought not be the ideal we strive to enact. Much like outrage over the prevalence of nepo babies in Hollywood, the backlash over the college admissions scandal took for granted that there is a world in which only the best tennis players are given the best scholarships to the best schools, that being the best is somehow a category that can and does exist independently from inherited advantages.

That is, Sandel's point is not only to expose the fact that the US is not a meritocracy in reality. It is that the pure meritocratic system American culture holds up as the ideal is impossible to implement, and striving to do so only serves to justify existing inequality, breeding resentment and despair. For even in the unlikely scenario wherein all elites have ascended to their posts solely on the basis of their own hard work and God-given talents, why, Sandel asks, is it any more fair to lavish rewards on those who happen to be born with the talents and capacity to work hard in a way that society happens to recognize as valuable at the time? Those who were

incensed over the college admissions scandal, for instance, argued that the wealthy students whose parents bribed coaches for their spot on an ivy league team stole those places from talented kids who had worked hard to be the best at the sports in question. Fair enough, but they might have instead questioned why it is that the best tennis player deserves entrance to an ivy league school and the future professional opportunities this education affords. Similarly, rage about Hollywood nepo babies was premised on the assumption that there are more talented actors out there who've had to work hard at their craft, who've been unjustly usurped from the would-be fame and fortune they are due by those born into connections to the industry. This line of logic has no qualms with idea that the best Hollywood actors should be fabulously and disproportionately rich. And more to the point, being scandalized that Donald Trump owes much of his career success to his father is different from being scandalized at the idea that real estate developers could be deserving of such great wealth in the first place. Being upset that the NYC one-percenters interviewed in Sherman's book were mostly born into class privilege is different from being scandalized that there is such a gulf between the one percent and the rest. Herein lies the "tyranny of merit" that Sandel describes. First, it is an impossible ideal, as inherited privilege cannot be easily disentangled from natural ability and effort and the abilities and efforts that count are largely arbitrary, necessarily subjective measures of worth. Second, whether achieved in reality or held up as an ideal, meritocracy is a system wherein vast income inequality continues to be justified.

While the urge to simply expose instances of nepotism for what they are is understandable, I take Sandel's point that these expositions ultimately serve to reinforce, rather than refute what I call the American work ethic. Lamenting the lack of meritocracy in a particular case, and more specifically the existence of those who apparently do not work hard or

intelligently enough to earn their material rewards concedes that it is both possible to do so by some objective measure, and allocating resources on those terms alone is just. My intent is to supplant this logic with a more egalitarian one in which all human beings are deserving of a certain standard of care, regardless of whether or not they are endowed with the particular skills and abilities their society happens to value at the time and whether or not it is possible for them to work hard enough to become to the best at a valuable thing. Thus, this chapter does not merely catalogue the many instances of exorbitantly wealthy and privileged individuals who claim to be self-made but teases out how the wealthiest among us exploit the term's inherent subjectivity in their favor.

Specifically, it traces how the capitalist class appeal to the bootstrapping ethos to defend against the idea that they have accumulated more wealth (and more power) than their productive efforts entitle them to, and thus more than they deserve. I first demonstrate how capital's disproportionate rhetorical power has enabled these rhetors to claim a self-made identity through shielding the public eye from their privileged backgrounds and through redefining what it means to be a bootstrapper, and thus to be self-made. I then unravel the implications of this redefinition, arguing that it allows the modern capitalist class to position themselves as the virtuous earners in relation to the actual working class. I demonstrate this process through an analysis of public statements and executive decisions made by entrepreneurial billionaires, primarily Howard Schultz's treatment of organizing workers and his testimony in front of Congress in 2023. This analysis shows how the Starbucks founder and former CEO adopts the bootstrapping ethos to defend against challenges to his wealth and power. In sum, this chapter shows that the capitalist class considers only a certain kind of hard-working, "self-made" entrepreneur deserving of material wealth, and that this standard necessarily excludes most hard-working people. In

defining the “self-made” in the way they do, bootstrapping billionaires seek to legitimate the extreme inequality that characterizes the American economy today.

The Stakes of the Self-Made Charade

When *Forbes* ran a story about “America’s Richest Self-Made Women” in 2018 with Kylie Jenner pictured with the headline on the cover, it ignited a small fire on the internet.²¹⁰ The then 21-year-old was being hailed as the youngest self-made, soon-to-be billionaire after the make-up line she started, Kylie Cosmetics, was valued at 900 million dollars.²¹¹ As the magazine put it in an article responding to the controversy, readers had “questions,” primarily “How could Kylie Jenner be self-made?” The reporter conceded that yes, the label might seem confusing as she “comes from a wealthy, famous family. Her half-sister Kim Kardashian West helped make her famous. Her mother helped build her business.”²¹² These facts would indeed disqualify Jenner in most people’s eyes, who understand self-made to mean a successful businessperson who at the very least wasn’t born already very rich and into a famous family. Jenner’s total discordance with the descriptor was likely what introduced most baffled readers to *Forbes*’ questionable equation for distinguishing the capitalist class’s “bootstrappers” from its “silver spooners.” Recall my discussion in previous chapters of the wealth-tracking magazine’s 2014 addition of a ten-point rating system to its annually published list of the world’s richest 400 individuals. As editor Kerry Dolan explains specifically in response to the Jenner controversy,

²¹⁰ Sofie Svelander, “Forbes Releases 2018 List of America’s Richest Self-Made Women, A Ranking of the Most Successful Women Entrepreneurs in the US,” News, *IWEC Foundation*, July 11, 2018, <https://dev.iwecawards.com/news/forbes-2018-richest-women-entrepreneurs-us/>; Thatiana Diaz, “Kim Kardashian West Argues That Her Family Is ‘Self Made’ — Here’s Why,” *Refinery 29*, n.d., accessed December 11, 2025, <https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2018/07/204349/kim-kardashian-west-forbes-kkw-beauty>.

²¹¹ Natalie Robehmed, “At 21, Kylie Jenner Becomes The Youngest Self-Made Billionaire Ever,” *Forbes*, accessed September 25, 2025, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/natalierobehmed/2019/03/05/at-21-kylie-jenner-becomes-the-youngest-self-made-billionaire-ever/>.

²¹² Kerry A. Dolan, “Here’s What Forbes Means By Self-Made: From Bootstrappers To Silver Spooners,” Billionaires, *Forbes*, July 13, 2018, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kerryadolan/2018/07/13/heres-what-forbes-means-by-self-made-from-bootstrappers-to-silver-spooners/>.

the magazine developed a scoring system to reflect who inherited their wealth, and who had earned it on their own.²¹³ Defending the magazine's use of the term for Jenner, Dolan explained to readers that inherited advantages like wealth and fame are in fact irrelevant in their definition, and instead anyone who personally *works* to turn their fortune into an even bigger fortune is what counts as a bootstrapper. The lowest score on the rating system is a one, referring to someone who inherited all of their fortune or an already profitable business. Someone who at least "has a hand" in simply *managing* their inherited fortune earns a two. But it is those who grow their fortune specifically by starting their own business who are classified as self-made. Kylie Jenner, as someone who "got a head start from wealthy parents and a moneyed background" but whose billion-dollar net worth stems from a business she "built herself," rates a self-made seven.²¹⁴

I've argued in previous chapters that Forbes' bootstrapping rating scale is largely out of step with reality and likely born out of a desperate attempt to perpetuate the fiction that today's ruling class is more self-made than in the past. As I've explained, this idea holds water only if you don't read the fine print. To support it, Forbes simply redefines the class spectrum (recall its questionable use of the term "middle-class" to refer to people like Elon Musk's upbringing in the previous chapter) so that the meaning of self-made is suddenly much more elastic than it would logically imply. To borrow a metaphor from Sandel, if the class strata in the United States was a 100-story building (a metaphor that more aptly represents the scale of inequality might be a billion-story building), Forbes argues that anyone who climbs from 99 to 100 without taking the elevator has bootstrapped their way there and earned the self-made designation.²¹⁵ Those who do opt for the elevator but put in the effort of pushing the elevator button themselves, rather than

²¹³ Dolan, "Here's What Forbes Means By Self-Made."

²¹⁴ Dolan, "Here's What Forbes Means By Self-Made."

²¹⁵ Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit*.

say, asking the attendant to do it, would, by *Forbes*' account, rate a two. This is likely not what most people have in mind when they think of what it means to pull oneself up by one's bootstraps, or to succeed entirely by one's own efforts. Accordingly, seeing not one but two members of the Kardashian-Jenner dynasty on a list of self-made women was for some a bridge too far. The point, however, is not so much to point out that neither woman is *legitimately* self-made – the substance of the controversy. Instead, it is to point out that one consequence of the term's apparent polysemy is that the owners of apparently bottomless capital who appear on such lists can use the outsized rhetorical power that comes with economic power to decide for themselves what it means. That is, with the help of PR teams and publications like *Forbes* and *Fortune* that exist in large part to stroke the egos of the ultra-wealthy, the capitalist class can simply conjure an alternative and self-serving definition that may not persuade the public but may well convince one another.

Consider Kim Kardashian's response. In an interview with *Refinery29* in the wake of controversy, she came to not only her sister's but her family's defense.²¹⁶ Indeed, each of the Kardashian-Jenner siblings, and mom Kris Jenner leveraged their reality stardom into various business ventures, primarily influencing and starting clothing/make-up lines. Like Kylie Jenner, Kardashian is the founder of a cosmetics company. Of the uproar over whether or not she and her sister deserve the self-made label, she says "I really didn't get it, because she *is* 'self-made' — we (her family) are *all* 'self-made'..." She continues:

Me, Kylie, not one [of the siblings] has ever depended on our parents for anything besides advice. That's how I lived my life with my dad [Robert Kardashian]. He never gave me anything. We might have the opportunity, but I've seen it go the complete opposite way. Nobody works harder than my sisters and my mom.²¹⁷

²¹⁶ Diaz, "Kim Kardashian West Argues That Her Family Is 'Self Made' — Here's Why."

²¹⁷ Diaz, "Kim Kardashian West Argues That Her Family Is 'Self Made' — Here's Why."

To defend against the critique that she and her siblings did not virtuously create their massive fortune with their own hard work and ingenuity but in fact merely benefitted from wealthy parents, Kardashian adopts the bootstrapping ethos. She insists that she and her siblings success was entirely unaided, she emphasizes how hard they have had to work, and she does so through comparison. Beyond saying that “nobody works harder,” she compares her siblings (and her mom) to others who are born (or marry) into wealth but fail to achieve the same level of monetary success. This, she had clarified earlier, is what she means by having “seen it go the complete opposite way.” She and her siblings are not like the other rich kids. Sure, they were born into money, fame, and power. But technically their billions were not inherited. They worked hard for those dollars, so they’ve earned it.

When social media users and cultural commentators in the press mock the idea that someone like Kylie, Kim, or any member of the Kardashian-Jenner clan could be self-made, those comments sting because the implication is that they have not worked hard enough to have earned their wealth themselves, and thus do not really deserve it. The fact that Kardashian, and so many other wealthy, entrepreneurial celebrities insist that they are self-made suggests they agree with this logical schema. They too, look down on the idle rich – their peers with sizable inheritances who do not work to increase those fortunes. By emphasizing their own hard work in relation to such peers, they can claim to be self-made. Since their social networks are likely almost entirely made up of members of other wealthy families, young capitalists like Jenner, Kardashian, and Hilton are unlikely to have encountered anyone who is self-made in the more intuitive sense of the term. Further, there are magazines out there who not only agree that they are self-made but argue the point on their behalf. While most may understand the term to connote a bigger climb up the ladder – someone like Chris Gardner who had no help, whose

success is due *only* to their own hard work and ingenuity – entrepreneurial celebrities adopt the bootstrapping ethos and redefine the term in their favor. Anyone who personally works hard to generate a lot of money (or a lot more than they had before), rather than idly spending down an inheritance, is self-made and thus deserving.

This redefinition is significant for two reasons. First, it suggests that capital has deeply internalized the American work ethic and judge one another accordingly. Exemplified by the fact that *Forbes* felt the need to institute a literal rating system so its intended audience of “the world’s wealthiest people” and otherwise “high net-worth individuals” could gain a more nuanced understanding of who among them has virtuously earned their gargantuan fortunes.²¹⁸ Second, in its clear illustration of whose rhetoric gets materially enforced, capital’s reimagining of what it means to be legitimately self-made is representative of why it is such a poisonous standard of deservingness for working people. All the protestations about Jenner and Kardashian having too many unfair advantages – about their excessive wealth being unfair because, as privileged children of celebrities, they had help and presumably did not have to work that hard to accumulate it – are ultimately irrelevant within a system that is set up at nearly every turn to celebrate, reward, and defer to owners of capital. After all, what it means for an exchange to be fair, what kind of work entitles whom to what, and what it means to be legitimately self-made are all only rhetorical constructions, negotiated between capital, management and labor. When labor is utterly unorganized, and unions are a shell of their former, politically mighty selves, perhaps it should come as no surprise that ordinary members of the public do not hold much sway in the debate at all, that those with outsized economic power, who increasingly own and

²¹⁸ “Forbes Audience and Communities - Global Reach and Influence,” *Forbes Connect*, n.d., accessed April 22, 2026, <https://www.forbes.com/connect/audience-communities/>.

control all the resources will carry on as if they won the argument whether or not the rest of us are convinced.

Thus, it doesn't matter much when Dictionary.com – presumably an authority on the meaning of words – weighs into the debate with an official definition (the dictionary does not think Jenner meets the criteria).²¹⁹ Insofar as the real complaint is that she does not deserve her wealth because she did not accumulate all of her money virtuously, through her own hard work and ingenuity – definitional corrections by social media users, commentators in the press, and even the dictionary are powerless against a system that enables her to amass such wealth regardless. Simply put, American culture takes for granted that only the self-made are virtuous and deserving of substantial reward. It is a commonplace, an ideology that serves as the warrant for an argument. Where the capitalist class (and its managers) diverge from everyone else is what exactly it means to be a real bootstrapper. Those who work for wages may have their own understanding, but the American economy and its architects have a different one. And in the absence of a challenge from organized labor, it is the united opinion of the capitalist class about who is legitimately deserving that matters in a material sense. Capital decides how much workers are paid, which of them are deserving of healthcare, the ability to retire, take a vacation, and so much more.

The definition established by Kardashian, Hilton, and laid out so explicitly by the *Forbes* bootstrapping scale, is that what it means to be a self-made individual is to be a successful entrepreneur. Indeed, the logic seems to be that starting a hugely profitable company is hard work, hard enough work to make any inherited advantages irrelevant when it comes to

²¹⁹ Dictionary.com [@Dictionarycom], “Self-made means having succeeded in life unaided. Used in a sentence: Forbes says that Kylie Jenner is a self-made woman. <http://dictionary.com/browse/self-made> <https://t.co/ehEL7Cf6KV>,” Tweet, Twitter, July 11, 2018, <https://x.com/Dictionarycom/status/1017035779623841793>.

determining who can claim to be self-made. Just as the Calvinists argued that wealth was a sign of a healthy work ethic, today's capitalist class connects capital accumulation to virtue.²²⁰ The more a company is worth, the harder its founder must have worked to generate such massive sums. This view is significant in that its holders have the economic power to enforce it. It is further consequential, however, because it posits that being self-made depends on working for one's self, anchoring self-made status to entrepreneurial or at least chief executive (where you are still the boss) labor. When self-made is the standard, and the term connotes a climb from the bottom to the top, being employed by someone else is only valuable if it is a necessary stop along one's ascent to the top position. If it is only those who truly work for themselves who are deemed to be deserving, then within the confines of a work organization, it is the entrepreneurial founder and their executives whose labor entitles them to material wealth. In other words, in their disproportionate power to decide who deserves what, business owners have determined that what it means to be hard-working and ingenuitive enough to be deserving of material wealth is to start a successful business. This standard presents a problem for working people, who are necessarily unable to meet it so long as they are in someone's employ.

Entrepreneurial celebrities use of the bootstrapping ethos to claim they have virtuously earned their immense wealth is illustrative of how owners of capital define what it means to earn something fairly in their own favor. Specifically, in an environment where everyone agrees that no one is entitled anything they haven't earned through their own hard work and ingenuity, they follow this logic to claim that only entrepreneurs, as a class of people who work for themselves, earn and thus deserve the profits of their entrepreneurial efforts. The stakes of this line of logic for working people are clearer in the case of rhetors whose self-made status is uncontroversial,

²²⁰ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Stephen Kalberg (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

and even more so in cases when these rhetors face a challenge from organizing workers. Indeed, the system all-but entirely endorses capital's monopolized power over deciding what work entitles whom to what, but workers' technical right to organize is the near-sole exception.²²¹ Only with the protection of a union do workers get to join the debate about what they deserve. It is thus no surprise that even the most benevolent companies fight tooth and nail to avoid relinquishing this power. When entrepreneurial rhetors face a challenge from organizing workers, the bootstrapping ethos serves as a remarkable shield. Adopting it allows business owners to position themselves as morally superior and self-made in comparison with a lazy and entitled workforce who refuse to roll up their sleeves and do the truly valuable work of entrepreneurs to earn a better life for themselves.

Bootstrapping Billionaires: How Capital Performs, and Defines the American Work Ethic

Starbucks founder and former CEO Howard Schultz is exemplary of how capitalists perform the American work ethic to justify their own wealth and counteract a challenge from organized labor. Before turning to an analysis of Schultz's statements, I would like to offer a brief account of his actions. When in 2021, Starbucks baristas around the country began organizing in response to the company's handling of Covid-19, long-stagnant wages, persistent understaffing, and algorithmic management that made schedules too unpredictable for workers to either meet benefit thresholds or secure a second job, Schultz did not take it well.²²² In fact, he came out of

²²¹ Though many of the companies discussed in this dissertation, including Starbucks, Amazon, and Trader Joe's but spearheaded by Elon Musk's SpaceX, have sought to remove this right in a lawsuit which argues the National Labor Relations Board is unconstitutional. Musk won this case in fifth circuit court in August of 2025.

²²² Megan K. Stack, "Opinion | Inside Starbucks' Dirty War Against Organized Labor," Opinion, *The New York Times*, July 21, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/21/opinion/starbucks-union-strikes-labor-movement.html>; *Starbucks Leads Corporate CRIME WAVE To Crush Union Workers | Breaking Points*, directed by Breaking Points, 2022, 56:21, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FyJohj7nt50>; Eric Blanc, *We Are the Union: How Worker to Worker Organizing Is Revitalizing Labor and Winning Big* (University of California Press, 2025); Noam Scheiber and Julie Creswell, "Why Is Howard Schultz Taking This So Personally?," Business, *The New York Times*, December 11, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/11/business/howard-schultz-starbucks-union.html>.

retirement and resumed his helm at the post of CEO to defeat what he saw as an existential threat to the company. He told shareholders that they only had a year of leadership in him, giving him 12 months to squash Starbucks Workers United. In these months, the company embarked on a remarkably savage union-busting campaign.²²³

It seems Schultz regarded the union as cancer to be cut away. In public statements, he called the union a “third” or “foreign party,” and chalked up any union victory to supposed infiltrators – people he alleged were paid by unions to get hired at Starbucks and organize stores from within.²²⁴ Whether or not there were such people, Schultz willfully ignored that many prominent and early organizers, including Melissa Slabaugh at the Starbucks Roastery Reserve in Seattle and Michelle Eisen at the first store to unionize in Buffalo, were long-time baristas who had experienced a sharp decline in the quality of their working lives. Eisen, for instance, began working at the company in 2010, when she needed income to supplement her career as a stage manager. Starbucks, which advertised itself as a place where schedules were flexible and workers got benefits at 20 hours per-week, was at that time “pretty much what it was cracked up to be.” She says at first, “Things were pretty good. I felt pretty valued overall. You know, our stores were well-staffed. It was a nice environment.”²²⁵

Inevitably, Eisen explains, company leadership began to experiment with ways to increase profits. Following what is conventional wisdom in the post-Fordist era, they began to slash labor costs as much as possible.²²⁶ Echoing the complaints of workers who were ultimately

²²³ Scheiber and Creswell, “Why Is Howard Schultz Taking This So Personally?”; Stack, “Opinion | Inside Starbucks’ Dirty War Against Organized Labor.”

²²⁴ Scheiber and Creswell, “Why Is Howard Schultz Taking This So Personally?”

²²⁵ Maximillian Alvarez, “*We’re Done*”: Starbucks Workers Launch Indefinite National Strike, Working People Podcast, n.d., accessed December 11, 2025, <https://workingpeople.libsyn.com/were-done-starbucks-workers-launch-indefinite-national-strike>.

²²⁶ Benjamin H. Snyder, *The Disrupted Workplace: Time and the Moral Order of Flexible Capitalism*, 1st edition (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

persuaded to organize as well as those who decided against it, Eisen points out that staffing levels plummeted while each barista's responsibilities were increased. Mobile ordering and services like Uber Eats made orders explode and managing them difficult, without more baristas on shift to help. Menus grew exponentially. A barista notes with horror on the Starbucks baristas reddit that their store offers 36 different cold foam options alone.²²⁷ More responsibility did not mean more pay. Eisen says that her pay in 2021, when her store voted to unionize, was 16 cents higher than it was in 2010. She says rather than invest in veteran baristas, it seems leadership decided to "churn and burn" their workforce, or, intentionally let workers burn out and quit in a short amount of time to avoid paying out benefits and raises.²²⁸ Other baristas have focused on both the unpredictability and inconsistency of their hours.²²⁹ In the years since Eisen made Starbucks her day job, the company has adopted algorithmic scheduling practices that, despite keeping most baristas at part-time hours, are erratic enough to make getting a second job (and paying bills) nearly impossible. The inconsistency also has the effect of making it so many workers are denied enough hours on average to qualify for benefits.²³⁰ These algorithmic management strategies to slash labor cuts are by now standard practice in retail and service.²³¹

²²⁷ kalethegoose, "we offer 36 different cold foam options," Reddit Post, R/Starbucksbaristas, November 9, 2025, https://www.reddit.com/r/starbucksbaristas/comments/1osp6qa/we_offer_36_different_cold_foam_options/.

²²⁸ Alvarez, *Working People*.

²²⁹ tmoiraflem, "what do i do about these scheduling issues???", Reddit Post, R/Starbucksbaristas, April 25, 2025, https://www.reddit.com/r/starbucksbaristas/comments/1k7sj6t/what_do_i_do_about_these_scheduling_issues/.

²³⁰ Scared-Ad-7678, "I got scheduled to work 5 days a week for only 29 hours. I'm pissed," Reddit Post, R/Starbucksbaristas, March 28, 2023, https://www.reddit.com/r/starbucksbaristas/comments/124xsen/i_got_scheduled_to_work_5_days_a_week_for_only_29_/; passthewax, "No hours making me spiral...", Reddit Post, R/Starbucksbaristas, September 5, 2023, https://www.reddit.com/r/starbucksbaristas/comments/16aj6xr/no_hours_making_me_spiral/; graylikesoap, "overworked and not understaffed, but under-scheduled," Reddit Post, R/Starbucksbaristas, March 14, 2022, https://www.reddit.com/r/starbucksbaristas/comments/te2i3g/overworked_and_not_understaffed_but_underschedule_d/; "40 Minutes for Starbucks Coffee? Customers and Workers Fume Over Fewer Staff," *Bloomberg.Com*, May 29, 2024, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2024-05-29/starbucks-wait-times-jump-after-changing-work-algorithm-staffers-say>; Alvarez, *Working People*.

²³¹ Alex J. Wood, *Despotism on Demand: How Power Operates in the Flexible Workplace* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020), <https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/255/monograph/book/74190>.

Add to this equation a deadly pandemic, throughout which Starbucks baristas were compelled to work after management argued baristas were essential. The social service work baristas were suddenly required to take on in their already severely understaffed stores was, it seems, a bridge too far for some. Unhoused people understandably took shelter in exclusively open Starbucks bathrooms at the same time when desperate customers flocked to exclusively open Starbucks cafes, at the same time when stores were more understaffed than ever before. Starbucks customers, who already have a reputation for being particularly prone to nastiness, became nastier than ever before. People of color especially reported having to endure racialized and dehumanizing insults, although it seems no one was immune to vitriol. Baristas regularly broke down in tears, sometimes more than once daily.²³² For working in these conditions, executives felt baristas deserved about 15 or 16 dollars an hour.²³³

Howard Schultz personally learned all of this from baristas themselves on a nation-wide tour, where he met with employees in “collaboration sessions.”²³⁴ To avert the threat of unionization, he wanted to hear from them what was wrong, to persuade them that he was listening, that *he*, not a union, would fix it. To that end, Schultz met with groups of baristas and store managers themselves in round-table discussions, listening as they described these challenging conditions, and encouraging them to write their suggestions on sticky notes.

According to a Starbucks press release and organizing baristas, they asked for higher wages, and

²³² Greg Jaffe, “Howard Schultz’s Fight to Stop a Starbucks Barista Uprising,” *Economy*, *Washington Post*, October 8, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2022/10/08/starbucks-union-ceo-howard-schultz/>.

²³³ Barista pay rate is highly variable by location, though outside of California this amount seems fairly standard even in the present day. It should be noted that baristas were paid less before the unionization wave began, though I was unable to find an average wage before the raises came into effect. Today the average wage is \$17.30, but California’s 20 dollar minimum wage for food service workers appears to skew this number. OkCatClown, “How much money do you make?,” Reddit Post, R/Starbucksbaristas, December 10, 2024, https://www.reddit.com/r/starbucksbaristas/comments/1hb9vhd/how_much_money_do_you_make/.

²³⁴ Jaffe, “Howard Schultz’s Fight to Stop a Starbucks Barista Uprising”; “Starbucks CEO: Restoring the Trust and Belief of Our Partners,” December 3, 2024, <https://web.archive.org/web/20241203200556/https://about.starbucks.com/stories/2022/starbucks-ceo-restoring-the-trust-and-belief-of-our-partners/>.

for tips. They asked for more workers on shift, for predictable schedules and more hours, for paired down menus and to do something about the disaster that was mobile ordering. They asked for the company to live up to the values it advertised.²³⁵ After explaining these grievances to shareholders in Seattle, Schultz did in fact make some changes. Under his guidance, the company rolled out a series of new and improved “partner investments”: sooner-to-accrue vacation pay, modest pay raises (for workers who met tenure and hourly thresholds, of course), access to “financial skill-building,” a new and improved HR app, a North American version of the company’s international barista championship, and perhaps most importantly, a supposed-change to scheduling practices dubbed “partner-centric scheduling.”²³⁶ The change involved adding to the HR app a space for baristas to input their hourly availability. However, managers reserved the right to override workers’ preferences.²³⁷ Further, in the time since these changes were announced, baristas say stores are as understaffed as ever.²³⁸

To be fair, perhaps each of these reforms were suggested by workers invited to “collaborate” with Schultz. Not all sticky notes were published, so, perhaps Schultz really did take worker voices into account. Regardless, the implemented changes respond to the surface, at best, of baristas’ concerns. What organizing workers at Starbucks were asking for was some leveling of the playing field – they saw unionization as the only existing means workers have to enforce managerial promises and exercise any real control of their workplace conditions. Indeed, no matter how much executives and managers may protest that they are responsive to the concerns of their employees, it is a simple fact that without the protection of a union, workers

²³⁵ Jaffe, “Howard Schultz’s Fight to Stop a Starbucks Barista Uprising”; Alvarez, *Working People*.

²³⁶ Starbucks, “Starbucks Announces Investments for U.S. Retail Hourly Partners (Employees),” Starbucks Stories, November 2023, <https://stories.starbucks.com/stories/2023/starbucks-announces-new-investments-for-u-s-retail-hourly-partners-employees/>.

²³⁷ “Our Continued Commitment to Partner-Centric Scheduling & Staffing,” *About Starbucks*, May 28, 2024, <https://about.starbucks.com/press/2024/our-continued-commitment-to-partner-centric-scheduling-staffing/>.

²³⁸ Alvarez, *Working People*.

have no means of holding them to account, and employers are free to decide for themselves whether or not to listen. As organizations which allow employees to collectively bargain with their employers about the terms of their employment, and critically, are invested with the legal authority to actually enforce the contracts the two parties agree to, unions exist to solve this very problem.²³⁹ In this case, Schultz was in fact willing to listen, but a substantive response was another matter, as giving his workers a modicum of control over their working lives and his company was one request Schultz could not countenance. To Schultz, baristas did not deserve this basic level of protection.

Stores that had so much as filed for a union vote were not invited to collaboration sessions.²⁴⁰ At least one pro-union employee did manage to slip through the cracks, and went viral when she posted a video of Schultz telling her “If you hate this company so much, you can go find another place to work,” which she (and the National Labor Relations Board, or NLRB) took to be a threat.²⁴¹ This was an understandable interpretation of an otherwise benignly childish pout, given that Schultz had already started firing organizers. As workers have a federal right to organize under the National Labor Relations Act, it is illegal to retaliate against organizers. It also happens all the time. Companies get away with it as bosses simply give alternative reasons like being two minutes late, being out of dress-code, or saying the F-word (all claims that Starbucks made), making it hard to bring the companies to court.²⁴² It is remarkable

²³⁹ Steven Greenhouse, *Beaten Down, Worked Up: The Past, Present, and Future of American Labor* (Anchor, 2020).

²⁴⁰ Jaffe, “Howard Schultz’s Fight to Stop a Starbucks Barista Uprising.”

²⁴¹ *Former Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz Testifies before Senate Panel | Full Video*, directed by CBS News, 2023, 3:20:39, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OZwuwYk0jIY>.

²⁴² *Starbucks Leads Corporate CRIME WAVE To Crush Union Workers | Breaking Points*.

then, that Starbucks' firing campaign under Schultz was blatant and sweeping enough to warrant an investigation by the NLRB and win some reinstatements.²⁴³

Not only did they fire organizers, the NLRB found, but they unlawfully fired suspected and known union supporters, a determination Starbucks made through unlawfully surveilling workers on the floor.²⁴⁴ When union votes prevailed regardless, sometimes the company simply shut down the whole store and laid off everyone.²⁴⁵ Schultz said it was because the stores were in high-crime areas, citing the concerns baristas expressed to him about their safety in understaffed stores amidst a pandemic. It is unlikely that losing their jobs would have been their preferred solution. Perhaps the most egregious violation of labor law, though, was Schultz's decision to offer differential benefits based on union status. It turned out that union stores were not just excluded from the collaboration sessions themselves but were denied the modest suite of reforms to come out of them.²⁴⁶ Under the NLRA, it is illegal to coerce workers out of organizing in any manner, and offering non-union workers more money or better benefits falls into this category.

The company announced this decision to exempt union stores in the same press release that rolled out the reforms, giving the NLRB a pretty solid case.²⁴⁷ Threatening statements that Schultz made personally in video calls to US employees, corporate notices, and, by some accounts, in-store drop-ins, were, on top of everything else, enough to lead the board to conclude that Schultz must apologize to workers and truthfully inform them of their right to organize

²⁴³ Samantha Cole, "NLRB Demands Starbucks' Anti-Union CEO Record Video, Send Apologies to Workers," *VICE*, August 26, 2022, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/nlr-demands-starbucks-anti-union-ceo-record-video-send-apologies-to-workers/>.

²⁴⁴ "NEWS: HELP MAJORITY STAFF REPORT ON STARBUCKS" The U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor & Pensions," March 26, 2023, <https://www.help.senate.gov/dem/newsroom/press/news-help-majority-staff-report-on-starbucks>.

²⁴⁵ Allison Nicole Smith, "Howard Schultz Says More Starbucks Stores to Close for Security Reasons," *The Seattle Times*, July 19, 2022, <https://www.seattletimes.com/business/starbucks/starbucks-ceo-howard-schultz-says-more-stores-to-close-for-security-reasons/>; Cole, "NLRB Demands Starbucks' Anti-Union CEO Record Video, Send Apologies to Workers."

²⁴⁶ "NEWS."

²⁴⁷ Starbucks, "Starbucks Announces Investments for U.S. Retail Hourly Partners (Employees)."

without retaliation in an official statement.²⁴⁸ The board released this decision in August of 2022. By March 2023, Schultz hadn't yet complied (he never did) and the intimidation campaign continued. His anti-union campaign also turned out to be something of trendsetter, as Trader Joe's, Amazon, and REI waged their own war on organizing workers around the same time (a subject to which I'll return later on). In response, the well-known pro-union Chairperson of the Senate Committee on Health, Education, and Labor and Pensions Senator Bernie Sanders convened a panel on the importance of protecting workers' right to form and join unions. If the NLRB couldn't provide much accountability, perhaps Congress could. Sanders called Schultz to testify. Not without resistance, and only after officially stepping down as CEO, he eventually complied.

Essentially a state-sanctioned debate over whether Schultz's anti-union crusade represented any wrongdoing on his part, his appearance before the Senate committee revealed much about what Schultz himself, and many Senators who are specifically tasked with regulating labor, believe about what employees and employers deserve.²⁴⁹ Indeed, the course of the hearing makes clear that Schultz himself and many of the Senators who question him are appalled, offended even, at the hearing's premise. Both Schultz and his congressional defenders – usually fellow business owners who also identify as entrepreneurs – staunchly maintain that Schultz had every right as a business owner and founder to decide for himself how to run his company, without the oversight of a parasitic union, or, apparently, the state. As unions exist to give workers a say over the terms of their employment, inherent in this logic is the idea that business owners alone are the rightful arbiters of what, exactly, their workers are entitled to, or what they deserve. Further, both Schultz and those who side with him stake this argument on Schultz's

²⁴⁸ Cole, "NLRB Demands Starbucks' Anti-Union CEO Record Video, Send Apologies to Workers."

²⁴⁹ *Former Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz Testifies before Senate Panel | Full Video.*

status as a bonafide self-made man. Senators repeatedly praise Schultz for his great American, bootstrapping success story, and Schultz from the get-go, appeals to the bootstrapping ethos. In doing so, he argues that as the CEO and largest individual shareholder, he is the rightful owner of Starbucks profits, and that workers are only entitled to whatever he sees fit to share with them.

At the broadest level, this logic is apparent in Schultz's repeated assertions that neither he, nor the executives and managers carrying out his orders, did anything wrong. After Schultz makes an opening statement of sorts, Senator Sanders, as the Chairperson, gets to ask the first set of questions, most of which confront Schultz with the recent NLRB findings. Each time, Schultz's answer is that Starbucks did not break the law. Sanders asks "Are you aware that NLRB judges have ruled that Starbucks violated federal labor law over 100 times during the past 18 months – far more than any other corporation in America?"²⁵⁰ Schultz responds simply "Starbucks Coffee Company – let me set the tone for this very early on – has not broken the law."²⁵¹ And set the tone he does. When Sanders asks whether he would testify in a future trial connected to the NLRB investigation's findings, he responds "Mr. Chairmen, let me say under oath: these are allegations, and Starbucks has not broken the law."²⁵² When Sanders asks if he is aware that the NLRB has ordered him to record a statement to Starbucks employees informing of them their rights. He answers, "No, I am not, because Starbucks did not break the law."²⁵³ Inherent in Schultz's defense is a dismissal the NLRB's authority. Their thorough investigation into his conduct that concluded he did, in fact, violate labor law amount only to "allegations," because to Schultz, any law that says what he did to stop the spread of unionization in his company was wrong is, well, wrong. In a literal sense, they are not only allegations – the NLRB

²⁵⁰ *Former Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz Testifies before Senate Panel | Full Video*, 27:21.

²⁵¹ *Former Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz Testifies before Senate Panel | Full Video*, 27:31

²⁵² *Former Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz Testifies before Senate Panel | Full Video*, 30:44.

²⁵³ *Former Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz Testifies before Senate Panel | Full Video*, 31:50.

is an independent federal agency made up of a panel of judges who consider allegations that have been made and then, after investigating the truth of the matter, rule on them. In disputing their ruling that he broke the law, Schultz seems to be refusing to acknowledge their legitimacy as a governmental adjudicating body.

Even as Schultz concedes under questioning that workers have a right to organize, concessions such as this are always followed by a “but” – the thrust of which is that his own “preference” in the matter, or, rights as a business owner, ought to override the rights of workers. For instance, Senator John Hickenlooper points out to Schultz that some of his baristas feel the union-busting campaign contradicts the company’s self-branding as a uniquely respectful employer. He asks Schultz how he would respond to those workers who hoped to organize with “less confrontation.” Schultz responds:

Well thank you for the question, and the opportunity to answer that, you know, without some of the propaganda that has been floating around. You know, I built my life trying to create a company that values every single person with dignity and respect that puts on the green apron. That has not changed as a result of one percent – 3,400 people out of 250,000 -- who want to join the union. We've said it publicly: we respect the law we respect their right and we want to treat everyone with respect and dignity. However *I* have the right and *the company* has the right to have a *preference*. And our preference is to maintain the direct relationship...²⁵⁴

Starbucks respects the law and their employees right to organize. But his and his company’s preference that workers *not* be organized (which Schultz calls maintaining a direct relationship) means that companies like Starbucks have a superseding right to close down any store that votes to unionize, fire organizers and suspected organizers, surveil and intimidate workers to prevent them from discussing the possibility, and prevent unionized workers from receiving the same pay and benefits as everyone else. It is difficult to reconcile all of those actions with the idea that Starbucks respects employees’ right to organize. Perhaps to Schultz, anything short of putting a

²⁵⁴ *Former Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz Testifies before Senate Panel | Full Video*, 41:22.

“no unions” clause into their contracts is justified. Further, in dismissing descriptions of his illegal activity as “propaganda,” and in emphasizing how few employees have ultimately voted to unionize, he appears to be further minimizing the weight of their concerns and the legitimacy of their right to organize.

It seems that to Schultz, between his workers rights and his own preferences as the company’s founder, one bears more legal legitimacy than the other. Indeed, Schultz appeals to his preference three more times throughout the hearing when confronted with whether or not workers have the right to organize. When Senator Tina Smith suggests that unionization is outside of Schultz’s hands, he responds “Senator, I agree with you that I do not have the right to decide who can vote for a union or not. But I am the chairman, I am the CEO of the company...and I have the preference and the right to communicate to our people about what it is we believe is right for Starbucks.”²⁵⁵ Again, given the manner in which Schultz decided to “communicate” this preference, it seems his own right, as the chairman and CEO, outweighs the rights of those who wish to form the union.

In an impassioned defense of American entrepreneurs like Schultz, Senator Rand Paul makes clear that he agrees. He opens:

Howard Roark points out the ingratitude that man has for the entrepreneur, the creator. Thousands of years ago, the first man discovered how to make fire. He was probably burnt at the stake. He taught the others to light, but he left them a gift that had not been conceived, and he lifted darkness from the face of the earth. Now, Starbucks didn't exactly discover fire, but Starbucks did, somehow, somewhere, discover in the depths of man's soul that he would pay as much for a double mocha latte as he once did for a week's worth of coffee.²⁵⁶

²⁵⁵ *Former Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz Testifies before Senate Panel | Full Video*, 1:32:25.

²⁵⁶ *Former Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz Testifies before Senate Panel | Full Video*, 34:24.

He goes on to say that while his family prefers Maxwell House, the point is that Congress has no business telling an American businessman how to run his business, offering up the hearing as proof that entrepreneurs are chronically underappreciated. Ironically, his opening salvo rests on a bit of capitalist propaganda so taken-granted that he ironically demonstrates just how revered these figures are. References to “the first man” who discovered fire are littered across cultural artifacts (the one Paul is referencing here is from Ayn Rand’s *The Fountainhead*, as evidenced by his mention of its protagonist, Howard Roark) and common in everyday conversation. It is common enough to prompt anthropologists to debunk it, explaining that the idea that fire building was somehow discovered by a single man (presumably some maverick caveman out there, disrupting the raw meat and general darkness industries with a bold innovation) and not by various groups of hunter-gathers around the same time and in various locations around the globe is preposterous.²⁵⁷

It is about as preposterous as the idea that this man would somehow be analogous to the modern entrepreneur. Despite so often being discussed interchangeably, entrepreneurialism is not the same thing as innovation. Starting a business does not require inventing anything. It requires only owning something. Indeed, Howard Schultz was not the first to discover that people like sugary drinks, Italian espresso, or that they will pay much more for it than they will for Maxwell House. Schultz did not invent the product, nor did he invent Starbucks. As is the case for many of our celebrated entrepreneurs, he bought it as a then small roastery in Seattle. And when he did, he set to work “communicating” to his new employees (the details of how, exactly, are unclear) his preference that they dissolve their existing union. Eventually, he got his way. Nevertheless, Paul continues:

²⁵⁷ Jordan Thomas, *When It All Burns: Fighting Fire in a Transformed World* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2025).

Convincing the public to buy very expensive coffee is not the discovery of fire, but still it deserves respect. Instead, Congress convenes today not to praise Starbucks but to bury them. The hearing today is convened to attack a private company for its success when its success has benefited both customers and its employees alike.²⁵⁸

He goes onto assert that Starbucks is proof of the success of American capitalism, and expresses the opinion that the (apparent) alternative would be a “government coffee company” before saying: “If you don't want their coffee, be like my family. Buy Maxwell House. But for goodness sakes, don't deride one of the great American success stories. This is not who we are. We are better than this.”²⁵⁹

By establishing that he finds the idea of Starbucks a bit ridiculous, preferring a much cheaper option, Paul positions himself as a frugal everyman even while underscoring his support for the company and for Schultz as its founder. Indeed, while a few Senators on the committee tell Schultz that they agree that his rights as a business owner and entrepreneur ought to be prioritized over the rights of his workers, Paul, a libertarian, is the most adamant. In his view, Schultz is a great American entrepreneur, and Paul is outraged that Congress, in attempting to enforce Schultz’s compliance with labor law, deigns to disrespect the entrepreneur. Compounded by his insistence that Schultz deserves only praise, Paul, who does not dispute any of the NLRB’s findings, implies that business owners like Schultz are the ultimate authorities in all matters concerning their businesses. By dismissing the idea that the government broadly and the NLRB in particular have any call to tell Howard Schultz that his workers have a right to organize, Paul implies that workers do not, in fact, have a right to organize. The rights granted to them are up to their employers.

²⁵⁸ *Former Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz Testifies before Senate Panel | Full Video*, 35:28.

²⁵⁹ *Former Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz Testifies before Senate Panel | Full Video*, 38:15.

Senator Markwayne Mullin, too, embraces this logic, accusing Sanders of calling the hearing out of an unfair bias against CEOs and business owners. According to Mullin, while he is “not against unions,” bosses like Schultz have every right to their preference over unionization because unions make the employer-employee relationships adversarial when workers should realize that they and their bosses are in the same boat and act accordingly.²⁶⁰ Of course, to some extent, employees do have a shared interest in a business’s success as their jobs depend on it. But this often-repeated platitude plasters over the sizable caveat that, in a capitalist economy, employers have an incentive to squeeze as much out of their workers as they can for as little as possible. Unions do not manifest this truth by speaking it aloud or describing it as it occurs. Mullin goes onto say that the whole purpose of the hearing is counter to the American way of life, which, as he sees it, means rewarding entrepreneurs. He exclaims:

The government's role is to create an environment for entrepreneurs, for go-getters, for job creators, for world-changers to be successful in life. The U.S. government is designed for people that want to succeed, that can go out and achieve anything that we choose to. But when you lean towards socialism, what you think is government is the answer and unions are the choice, and if you're against us then you're dead wrong and you must be corrupt. It's not the world we're living in; that's not the America that we believe in.²⁶¹

To this entrepreneur and CEO turned Senator, society and the laws which guide it ought to be configured to ensure the success of entrepreneurs. To Mullin, the success of entrepreneurs is antithetical to trade unionism (which he seems to equate with socialism). The senator is likely unaware that states with strong welfare systems and strong unions across industries can have decent rates of entrepreneurialism and a thriving business sector, like Finland.²⁶² Further, to Mullin, it is apparently only entrepreneurs who are “go-getters,” “people that want to succeed”

²⁶⁰ *Former Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz Testifies before Senate Panel | Full Video*, 1:11:52.

²⁶¹ *Former Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz Testifies before Senate Panel | Full Video*, 1:11:10.

²⁶² “Entrepreneurship in Finland,” GEM Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, accessed December 11, 2025, <https://www.gemconsortium.org/economy-profiles/finland>.

and “can go out and achieve anything that we choose to.” The idea that workers who are content to remain as such would be rewarded despite their inability or unwillingness to “succeed” – or, pull themselves up by their bootstraps into the ownership class – is counter to the American way of life. As he lays out his philosophical opposition to unions, he says it is because unionized workers “can never become an executive” and can “never be a CEO.”²⁶³ Employment’s only moral value is as a stop along the climb up the ladder. To capitalists like Mullin, owning or at the very least managing a business is the only kind of labor through which one can truly earn wealth. Unions sin because they reward workers who do not rise in the ranks and take money from those who did to do so. While maintaining that his defense of Schultz is reluctant since they are on “opposite sides” of the political spectrum, on the issue of what it means to earn and thus deserve wealth, they agree. For capitalists, class solidarity trumps any political concern.²⁶⁴

Statements from Schultz and fellow entrepreneurial executives in Congress like those above illustrate how the capitalist class’s understanding of what it means to truly earn and thus deserve wealth is to become to an entrepreneur, to start and manage a business at an executive level. They further demonstrate that belief through the presumption that entrepreneurs are unique in their claim to self-made status. Indeed, Schultz’s testimony is indicative of just how crucial the presumption that one has bootstrapped their way into business ownership really is. Just like celebrities who insist they grew up poor or working-class, or reality TV stars who leverage their fame into lucrative lifestyle brands (or the presidency, for that matter), someone who says “I built what I built *myself*” (as Donald Trump did, many times)²⁶⁵ appeals to the conviction that those whose success is built on a foundation of their own self-governed hard work and talent are

²⁶³ *Former Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz Testifies before Senate Panel | Full Video*, 1:09:52.

²⁶⁴ *Former Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz Testifies before Senate Panel | Full Video*, 1:08:48.

²⁶⁵ Mosbergen, “8 Times Trump Claimed He Was A Self-Made Man.”

the only ones who are truly deserving of whatever they have achieved. As Sherman, Khan, and Sandel have noted, class privilege can be a shameful state of being within such a meritocratic value system, where one is only entitled to what they have personally earned.²⁶⁶ This is the critique that Elon Musk is picking up on when he complains it is “morally wrong” and “dumb” to call him what he is: a billionaire.²⁶⁷ The only identity he embraces is that of the entrepreneur. For the most privileged – those who consistently find themselves on lists of the world’s richest individuals – performing the American work ethic persuasively and being beheld as a legitimate self-made man is of the utmost importance.

When Howard Schultz appeared before the Senate, some on the committee felt the subject of his wealth was relevant to the question at hand: whether Starbucks retail employees had the right to form a union free from the company’s drastic interference. Each time his sizeable net worth was broached, Schultz appealed to the bootstrapping ethos. He did so first to argue that his self-made status nullifies any implication that he could possibly have more wealth than he deserves, and second to dispute the idea that rank-and-file workers could be entitled to anything more than he determines they deserve. The clearest encapsulation of this logic comes in an exchange with Minnesota Senator Tina Smith. Smith takes a more adversarial tone with Schultz, suggesting that workers’ attempts to unionize are understandable given the serious imbalance of power between themselves and executives like him. She says “I mean, you’re a billionaire – the imbalance of power is extreme...”²⁶⁸ Schultz initially responds with his spiel about how he is allowed to have a preference in the matter. But then he makes it clear that he has heard the word “billionaire” one too many times throughout the hearing. He rejoins:

²⁶⁶ Sherman, *Uneasy Street*; Khan, *Privilege*; Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit*.

²⁶⁷ Elon Musk [@elonmusk], “Use of the word ‘billionaire’ as a pejorative is morally wrong & dumb 🤔,” Tweet, Twitter, May 26, 2022, <https://x.com/elonmusk/status/1529961091656212514>.

²⁶⁸ *Former Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz Testifies before Senate Panel | Full Video*, 1:32:17.

The last thing you said, and it's been said many times by the chairman—I just want to make a point of that—this moniker of "billionaire." Let's just get at that, okay? I grew up in federally subsidized housing. My parents never owned a home. I came from nothing. I thought my entire life was based on the achievement of the American dream. Yes, I have billions of dollars. I earned it. No one gave it to me. And I've shared it constantly with the people of Starbucks! And so anyone who keeps labeling this "billionaire" thing...²⁶⁹

At this point, Sanders cuts him off, purportedly out of a time constraint. But when he does, Schultz cries out “It’s your moniker, constantly. It’s unfair!”²⁷⁰

Despite meeting the word’s literal criteria, using it to describe him is apparently unfair. Because no one gave him his billions, because he earned them, he believes he is not, in fact, a billionaire. It seems he bristles at the term because he has absorbed from its usual context that it connotes an inherent injustice. When Sanders says it, or when his workers do, what that they mean is someone who has more than they deserve. To defend against the implied critique of outsized class privilege—that he has in fact accumulated billions of dollars *not* solely by his own hard work but because he operates within a system that bends the rules in favor of capital (through, for instance, policies that allow CEOs to be paid hundreds or even thousands of times what rank-and-file workers are) —Schultz redefines the word.²⁷¹ If billionaire means someone with more than they deserve, it couldn’t possibly apply to him. That he feels the need to bring up his humble beginnings in this moment, the fact that he “came from nothing” and grew up renting,

²⁶⁹ *Former Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz Testifies before Senate Panel | Full Video*, 1:32:53.

²⁷⁰ *Former Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz Testifies before Senate Panel | Full Video*, 1:33:33.

²⁷¹ It should be noted that while the average CEO gets paid 233x what their workers do in the US at the time of this writing, many of the companies discussed in this dissertation have a far higher wage disparity. This situation has only worsened since Starbucks CEO Brian Niccol took over in 2024. In a report about how 20 of the largest employers in the US are driving the unaffordability crisis, Starbucks was found to have the worst CEO to worker pay ratio – at 6,666 to 1. Niccol makes \$95,801,676 to the average worker’s \$14,674, and has full command of the company jet for personal and work related travel. Accordingly to public records, the company pays the person who is in effect Niccol’s private jet pilot a salary somewhere between \$207,000 and \$360,300. See: Sarah Anderson, “America’s 20 Largest Low-Wage Employers and the Affordability Crisis,” *Institute for Policy Studies*, March 4, 2026, <https://ips-dc.org/report-americas-20-largest-low-wage-employers-and-the-affordability-crisis/>; Aditi Bharade, “Why Starbucks Is Letting Brian Niccol Use the Company Plane for More Personal Travel,” *Business Insider*, January 27, 2026, <https://www.businessinsider.com/starbucks-brian-niccol-company-plane-personal-travel-safety-concerns-2026-1>.

suggests Schultz takes for granted that his rise from the bottom justifies whatever he has managed to accumulate and cancels out any accusation of undue privilege. He is a self-made man, and he deserves his billions.

More subtle in this statement is the logical extension that he is the rightful owner of Starbucks profits. Here, his choice of words is revealing: workers get what he decides to “share” with them, not what they have earned through their own hard work for the company. It is difficult to rectify such formulations with Schultz’s repeated proclamations that he values and respects all who “wear the green apron.” Indeed, Schultz founds his entrepreneurial identity on this respect, explaining in his opening statement, in exchanges with Senators, in multiple memoirs and in interviews that the catalyst for his entrepreneurial philosophy was witnessing his father’s treatment as a laborer. Schultz begins his opening statement:

My vision for Starbucks Coffee Company has always been steeped in humanity, respect, and shared success. It's a vision that was inspired by the struggles of my father, a World War II veteran who slipped on a sheet of ice in 1960 and was promptly fired from his job as a delivery driver. It fractured our family and it deeply scarred me. I decided at an early age that if I was ever in a position to run a business, it would be based on respect and shared success.²⁷²

Schultz frequently offers his father’s story in defense of accusations that his harsh anti-union campaign represents any mistreatment of his workers. It is always vague, as it is here – though the implication is that young Schultz so strongly felt firing an injured worker without recourse was unjust, that he vowed never to be such a heartless boss. Accordingly, perhaps more than anything else throughout the hearing, Schultz emphasizes all the reasons he is an amazingly generous employer. In a different context, however, Schultz gives a more detailed, and different explanation of what he learned from his father’s story.

²⁷² *Former Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz Testifies before Senate Panel | Full Video*, 21:28.

When a journalist asked him what his dad taught him about work ethic, Schultz says this is a complicated question. He says that while his dad “wasn’t lazy, he wasn’t a hard worker.”²⁷³ He chalks up many of the difficulties that he had in life, including on the labor market, to his experiences in WWII, which left him physically and mentally damaged. As a result, his father “bounced around from one bad blue-collar job to another...and established himself as always the victim and never took responsibility.”²⁷⁴ Schultz explains that this included a bitterness and violent anger of which he was sometimes the target. Though he had a lot of compassion for his father and what he went through, he says, he was also very disappointed in him, and this disappointment seems connected not only to his violence, but to his failure to achieve despite difficulty. In the next breath, he says “But I didn’t learn work ethic from my father. The work ethic that I have come from survival, and realizing nobody is going to give me anything.”²⁷⁵ With these statements, Schultz buttresses the fortress that is his own bootstrapping ethos. A true self-made man, he even had to learn his extraordinary work ethic by and for himself. This time (and perhaps always deep down, for those who like a little Freud in their analyses), the undeserving other to which Schultz compares himself is his father, who lacked a sufficient work ethic to bootstrap himself out of PTSD and physical ailments, and had the gall to expect something in return from society after being sent to fight in a brutal war as a teenager. Perhaps by saying he had to come to terms with the fact that nobody will give you anything, Schultz does not mean this is the way things ought to be. But by attributing his father’s failure to transcend the projects to his insufficient work ethic, Schultz insinuates that on some level, he got what he deserves.

²⁷³ Howard Schultz | *In Depth* w/ Graham Bensinger, directed by Graham Bensinger, 2023, 31:43, 1:05:08, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b_Jl2YNtwA.

²⁷⁴ Howard Schultz | *In Depth* w/ Graham Bensinger, 32:11.

²⁷⁵ Howard Schultz | *In Depth* w/ Graham Bensinger, 32:55.

Thus, while Schultz so often claims that his father's firing inspired him to be a benevolent boss, his father's perceived inability to "take responsibility" for his circumstances taught Schultz that no one is entitled to anything that they have not earned through their own entrepreneurial efforts. Within this logic, it becomes possible to reconcile what many perceived as a hypocritical response to organizing workers. By forming a union, as an organization that would collectively bargain on their behalf for better treatment, baristas were asking for more than their labor entitles them to. This is a rate of exchange that, according to business owners, can only be determined by a business's owners. As Schultz made abundantly clear in his testimony, Starbucks baristas enjoy such lavish treatment they are nothing but fortunate to be in the company's employ. He repeatedly lists off the extravagant benefits the company offers throughout the hearing, citing outside reporting that they are the best in the industry, and calling them at many points "unprecedented." Stock options since the 90's, he says like a refrain.²⁷⁶ Healthcare at part time hours, have you ever heard of such a thing?²⁷⁷ Don't even get him started on the tuition repayment program.²⁷⁸ And these, he assures the Senators, are just the hits. There are more. Nearly every Senator, with a few notable exceptions, cede the point that Starbucks is a remarkably generous employer. From what long-term employees like Eisen have described, baristas in the 90's and the mid 2000's would have likely agreed they were treated well.²⁷⁹ When Schultz brags about the generosity of his company's benefits, however, he glosses over what is easy to uncover with a little digging: that many baristas are denied enough consistent hours to

²⁷⁶ Schultz mentions stock options six times throughout the hearing, in his opening statement and in a particularly heated exchange with Senator Ed Markey that begins at 1:56:53.

²⁷⁷ Schultz mentions healthcare benefits ten times throughout the hearing, calling the fact that he made it available to part-time workers "unprecedented" in his opening statement at 22:55

²⁷⁸ Starbucks has a deal with Arizona State University, in which eligible employees receive a scholarship to earn a bachelors degree fully online from a long list of approved, online degree programs. It appears the scholarship covers half the cost of tuition, and Starbucks will pay the rest "after any federal aid-based grants have been applied." "Starbucks College Achievement Plan | ASU Starbucks," accessed December 11, 2025, <https://starbucks.asu.edu/>.

²⁷⁹ Alvarez, *Working People*.

achieve benefit thresholds, even those that are available at 20 hours per-week. He glosses over the fact that the average wage of over 17 dollars an hour he boasts about was forced upon the company by the fact that California has a 20 dollar an hour minimum wage for food service workers, a wage hike fought hard for by unions, and that many Starbucks workers in other states get paid significantly less.²⁸⁰ He further ignores the fact that in the present day, 17 dollars is a living wage in very few locations, and baristas rarely get full-time hours that would make it a living wage even in those locations. There are many more limitations to the benefits that Starbucks advertises, but the point is that each of them is anchored to doing a certain amount of work. The decision to describe them as unprecedented benefits generously gifted to employees is indicative of the conviction that no one is entitled to anything they have not earned through their own self-governed hard work.

I take up the subject of managerial rhetoric that paints companies as especially generous employers in the following chapter, arguing that these progressive workplace brands attempt to instill in workers the idea that they are already getting more from their employers than they deserve. For now, however, I argue that capitalists who adopt the bootstrapping ethos amid labor disputes in part imply that since they were able to succeed the *right* way – by virtue of their own entrepreneurial hard work and industriousness – others must do the same. By emphasizing the many benefits Starbucks workers (theoretically) are offered, so long as they work enough, Schultz maintains that he has given them every opportunity to work their way up the ladder and achieve the American Dream just as he did. But when entrepreneurs like Schultz gesture to their own success as evidence that earning real material gains for oneself and *by* oneself is possible, this rhetoric obscures the many barriers to this kind of social mobility that capital has put into

²⁸⁰ “Victories: \$20 Hour for California Fast Food Workers,” *California Fast Food Workers Union*, n.d., accessed December 11, 2025, <https://californiafastfoodworkersunion.org/victories/20hour/>.

place. In other words, shaming workers for being insufficient bootstrappers who cannot or will not climb the ladder conceals the fact that capital pulled the ladder up behind them long ago.

Chapter Three

The Progressive Workplace Brand: How Management Maintains the American Work Ethic

Introduction

When REI retail employees started organizing in 2022, the company's response in some ways followed the standard union-busting playbook: captive audience meetings, anti-union pamphlets and posters, and disproportionately disciplining organizers in ways that almost certainly violate labor law but can be difficult to prove. Yet workers and commentators both observed that there was something unusual about the precise tenor of management's argument against the union. Namely, the company held that by forming a union, employees were getting in the way of its social justice initiatives. For instance, a *Bloomberg* reporter obtained an audio recording of a mandatory, all-staff meeting in a Manhattan store wherein the manager "ticked off a list of what he called 'serious red flags' about the union" that employees were organizing with: the Retail, Wholesale, and Department Store Union or RWDSU. The one that stood out to employees as especially baffling was the claim that the union was suspect because it allocated "barely any of its revenue to social impact." He urged employees to "Compare that to our 6.3 million to nonprofit partners in 2021 alone." By aligning themselves with the union, REI management implies, employees would be taking away resources from an organization that fights for progressive causes.

The company took this line of logic further when it argued that it does not just financially support social justice organizations, but that it is one. The clearest encapsulation of this argument appears in a specially-recorded company podcast episode released in response to organizing

efforts. It features a brief conversation between President and CEO Eric Artz and executive Wilma Wallace, who introduces herself as the company’s Chief Diversity and Social Impact Officer, despite the title of “General Counsel, Corporate Secretary, and Vice President” on her LinkedIn page.²⁸¹ After a quick land acknowledgement, Artz goes on to say that he is not opposed to unions in general; in fact, unions offer important protections for marginalized workers. But that is precisely why he and the board are against unionization in this case. In a transcript of the podcast provided by Labor Lab, he explains:

A big part of what unions exist to do is to speak for employees where and when they don’t have a voice. The very essence of a co-op is actually contrary to that because in a co-op we turn towards one another...I believe every one of you, every employee at REI, has a direct voice in speaking to and influencing every aspect of the employee experience from health and safety, to pay and benefits, to where and when REI puts our values into action.²⁸²

In Artz’s reasoning, unions are to give a voice to the voiceless, to protect workers from *bad* companies. REI isn’t just a *good* company – it is a co-op, and as such, it is hardly a business at all and might as well be advocacy organization.²⁸³ Artz’s argument appears to be premised on the fact that listeners are unaware of the meaningful difference between consumer-owned and worker-owned co-ops. In the former, customers own the company in exchange for dividends, discounts, and a say in decision-making. In the latter, workers share in the company’s profits and are the ones who collectively make decisions. Artz does not explain how REI’s consumer-owned co-op model translates to the idyllic workplace he describes.

Readers may notice that REI’s response to some employees attempted unionization – doggedly insisting that the company is progressive and thus already treats employees generously

²⁸¹ Labor Lab, “Here’s the Transcript of REI’s Union-Busting Podcast,” *LaborLab*, n.d., accessed December 12, 2022, https://www.laborlab.us/transcript_of_rei_union_busting_podcast.

²⁸² Labor Lab, “Transcript.”

²⁸³ Despite its status as a cooperative, REI is in fact quite a large company, operating 180 retail stores at the time of this writing and employing 14,000 employees as of 2024. However, this number was larger in 2022 when Artz recorded the podcast, as REI has since restructured and laid off over 1,000 workers.

– bears a striking resemblance to Howard Schultz’s Congressional testimony. Indeed, while the core of his argument is that he, as the company’s founder and CEO, is a self-made man and thus the rightful owner of all the company’s profits, Schultz insists again and again that he has been far more generous with sharing those revenues than he needed to be. He brings up how much more generously he pays than competitors, how he offers healthcare at part-time hours, the fact that there are stock options, the tuition reimbursement program, and more at every chance he gets. The message is clear. Starbucks is a tremendously generous employer, and workers’ demands for anything more are patently absurd. On further inspection, it seems both Artz’s and Schultz’s statements draw from a much larger tradition of corporate rhetoric, wherein image-makers at both companies have been burnishing their ethos for just such an occasion. I term this rhetorical strategy the progressive workplace brand (PWB).

With this strategy, companies attempt to brand themselves as inclusive, socially-conscious and generally progressive employers. Whereas branding rhetorics are typically understood to be those which aim to construct a particular impression for a class of consumers, I argue that the progressive workplace brand instead attempts to persuade a public of current and prospective employees (though appealing to sympathetic consumers is likely an added bonus). Organizations who engage in this rhetoric offer benefits that are, or are constructed to be rare and precious gifts to their employees. These gifts may be material, such as above-average pay given the geographic area or skill level, or benefits for part-time employees, or they may be immaterial, such as tolerance of diversity in the workforce. This branding has two functions. In the short term, the employer’s apparent benevolence is used to justify or minimize unnecessarily objectionable, even undignified working conditions that benefit executives at the workers’ expense. More broadly though, framing benefits as extraordinary acts of benevolence for which

workers ought to be grateful serves to reproduce the idea that workers are *entitled* to very little from their employers. That is, when Starbucks endlessly pats itself on the back for offering health insurance to part-time employees, they imply that this benefit is not something part-time employees deserve on the basis of their labor, as they haven't worked hard enough to earn it. Everyone knows it takes at least a consistent average of 40 hours weekly to be deserving of healthcare in the United States. Thus, by constituting their employees as the beneficiaries of undue corporate benevolence, employers who adopt PWB reinforce the American work ethic, and its core conviction that no one is entitled to anything beyond the wages they have earned.

When companies successfully persuade workers that they are comparatively lucky, and in fact getting better treatment than they deserve, the result is a peculiar, in fact strategic kind of shame. In a cultural environment where the idea that everything must be earned solely on the basis of one's hard work and ingenuity is a commonly accepted moral sanctity, it stands to reason from one perspective that employees would specifically reject working for a company that insists it spoils them. The state of privilege on its own can be a morally uncomfortable one, especially when others' suffering is obvious, numerous, and grievous. This is why White people sometimes fight to erase the ugly history of white supremacy and all its associated evils, it is why the wealthy build social and physical barriers that shield them from the plight of the less fortunate, and it is at least in part why so many celebrities, as described in the previous chapter, exaggerate the humbleness of their beginnings. Having privilege may indeed induce a certain amount of guilt in a person, yet few decide the moral costs outweigh the material benefits. Most prefer to keep their advantages, and by some accounts the more one accumulates the harder it becomes to do without. Of course, low wage service workers are an unlikely bunch to lump in with the likes of a word like privilege. Low wage workers in the service industry are

disproportionately disadvantaged beyond the lower class status that results from their employment: they are more likely to be women, people of color, non-native born citizens, disabled, and more likely to have grown up poor. Yet perhaps in this case, when they are constituted as lucky relative their service industry peers employed at less generous companies, they may find this message comforting, especially if they have experienced worse and thus are aware of the low regard in which their labor is held. In this case, if they feel any guilt for getting more than they are told they deserve, rather than renounce their good fortune, they relieve that guilt by performing their gratitude so as not to come off as overly entitled or spoiled.

Thus, whatever workers are made to put up with in reality, the progressive workplace brand communicates to workers that they are fortunate, and that they would be ungrateful to complain. It may go as far as to imply that the company is doing charity work on its employees, or providing a social service by employing a certain population (such as former convicts or workers with disabilities). While PWB is most obvious in moments when workers defy its logical appeals and push for greater control of their working lives, it is intended to function as both a proactive and reactive means of control, to both pre-empt and quash rebellion in all its forms. Fundamentally, like the broader American work ethic, the progressive workplace brand aims to manufacture and maintain worker consent.

This chapter explores PWB through a comparative study of three employers who have for the most part successfully branded themselves as progressive workplaces, and who have used that brand image as a means of undermining a labor movement: Amazon, Starbucks, and REI. Workers at each company report that they were drawn to employment there because of their progressive reputations. Organizers say it was precisely the difference between their companies' progressive rhetoric and the reality of their jobs that inspired them to push for unionization, yet

each company invoked their progressive reputations to persuade other workers that organizing was unnecessary and undesirable. Indeed, interviews with workers at each firm indicate that many were hesitant to push for greater control of their working lives because they considered their employers generous and themselves fortunate.²⁸⁴ These statements necessitate a close examination of the progressive workplace brand, as a potentially persuasive form of employer rhetoric that shapes the labor process and maintains employees' consent. To develop PWB as a concept, this chapter incorporates insights from a tradition of critical rhetoric focusing on the communicative means by which corporations obfuscate their societal harms, and from labor process theory, a critical lens of analysis in sociology examining the relationship between labor and management.²⁸⁵

This chapter will proceed in the following sections. I will first review the literature on corporate branding, with a particular focus on the rhetorical strategies organizations adopt to brand themselves as benign or beneficial actors in society and simultaneously evade responsibility for the social harms that result from their business.²⁸⁶ As the literature on branding

²⁸⁴ “Amazon Workers United4Change (w Nannette Plascencia & Ivan Baez),” *Working People*, directed by Maximillian Alvarez, Real News Network, March 3, 2023, <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/amazon-workers-united4change-w-nannette-plascencia/id1414587517?i=1000602721230>; *Why REI's Progressive Image Is a Sham*, directed by More Perfect Union, 2022, 5:53, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x5-NRMWCeTI>; Vyom Raval, “Seattle Starbucks Workers Fight Union Busting amid Unionizing Wave,” *The Daily of the University of Washington*, May 23, 2022, https://www.dailyuw.com/news/community/seattle-starbucks-workers-fight-union-busting-amid-unionizing-wave/article_d9422e60-dac8-11ec-bab4-e714f0897fed.html; Megan K. Stack, “Opinion | Inside Starbucks' Dirty War Against Organized Labor,” Opinion, *The New York Times*, July 21, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/21/opinion/starbucks-union-strikes-labor-movement.html>; Steven P. Vallas, Hannah Johnston, and Yana Mommadova, “Prime Suspect: Mechanisms of Labor Control at Amazon's Warehouses,” *Work and Occupations* 49, no. 4 (November 2022): 421–56, <https://doi.org/10.1177/07308884221106922>.

²⁸⁵ Timothy Johnson, *Rhetoric, Inc: Ford's Filmmaking and the Rise of Corporatism* (University Park, PA, UNITED STATES: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2020), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/washington/detail.action?docID=6507234>; Nicholas S. Paliewicz, “Industrial Pioneerism in the Beehive State: Rio Tinto and the Corporate Persona,” *Western Journal of Communication* 86, no. 1 (January 2022): 60–82, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10570314.2021.2016939>; Vallas, Johnston, and Mommadova, “Prime Suspect”; Ashley Mears, “Working for Free in the VIP: Relational Work and the Production of Consent,” *American Sociological Review* 80, no. 6 (December 2015): 1099–122, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122415609730>.

²⁸⁶ Roland Marchand, *Creating the Corporate Soul: The Rise of Public Relations and Corporate Imagery in American Big Business* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Nicholas S. Paliewicz, *Extraction Politics:*

is primarily concerned with how corporate and organizational rhetoric more broadly constitutes a public of willing or indifferent consumers, I then turn to labor process theory in order to contextualize PWB within scholarship that elucidates the relationship between workers and management. While labor process scholarship has contributed much to the question of why workers comply with management's directives, as a line of sociological inquiry it is less concerned with the precise rhetorical mechanisms that make managerial rhetoric persuasive. Thus, I first provide an outline of both bodies of literature before advancing the progressive workplace brand as one form of employer rhetoric that shapes the labor process and structures workers' willingness to consent. Next, I map the contours of PWB through application of the concept to a comparative rhetorical analysis of the websites and social media pages of Amazon, Starbucks, and REI. I sort this analysis into three themes which together form the components of the rhetorical strategy I am calling PWB: framing employment benefits as generous gifts; mischaracterizing the nature of the employer-employee relationship, such that workers are constituted not as such but as friends, family, or partners in the organization; and portraying the work as more meaningful than it really is, so that employees feel compensated by the work itself. I conclude with a discussion of the implications for future research, rhetoricians, and working people.

Branding, Corporate Personas, and Incorporated Rhetoric

Corporate image-making strategies are in part the result of the American public's long-held skepticism of large corporations. Corporate historian Roland Marchand explains that until the American economy began to shift from competitive to monopoly capitalism around the dawn of the 20th century, the executive class was unconcerned with managing public opinion, and

Rio Tinto and the Corporate Persona, The RSA Series in Transdisciplinary Rhetoric (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2024).

dismissed PR generally as a waste of time and resources. By the early 1900s, though, the then small business dominated economy had progressed to the point where many firms had failed or were absorbed by more successful ones.²⁸⁷ Thus, a series of unprecedented mergers and acquisitions created a handful of newly massive and monopolistic corporations. Their sheer size and power invited scrutiny and skepticism from the public, and potentially from government regulators. Thus, Marchand traces how various firms and the ad agencies they employed sought to “create the corporate soul” in order to deflect this suspicion and combat the already familiar charge of being a “soulless corporation.” Ultimately, Marchard shows that corporations embraced image-making as an essential means of legitimizing their operations in the eyes of the public, and shows that some corporations indeed found remarkable success in humanizing their organizations.²⁸⁸

That corporations have so deeply embedded themselves in the fabric of American society despite a skeptical, at times hostile public is a puzzling set of facts that rhetoricians and cultural scholars more broadly have sought to make sense of. There is a growing body of research theorizing the rhetorical means through which corporations present themselves as beneficial actors in the world, despite the often enormous social costs of their operations. As large firms are necessarily large polluters, much of this scholarship examines the ways in which corporations obfuscate their environmental harms through PR campaigns which portray them as environmentally friendly. This line of inquiry has added the term “greenwashing” to the popular lexicon.²⁸⁹ Scholars of environmental rhetoric have shown that energy industry giants often

²⁸⁷ Richard Edwards, *Contested Terrain: The Transformation of the Workplace in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Basic Books, 1979).

²⁸⁸ Marchand, *Creating the Corporate Soul*.

²⁸⁹ Jed Greer and Kenny Bruno, *Greenwash: The Reality Behind Corporate Environmentalism*, 1st edition (Penang: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1997); Brian Tokar, *Earth for Sale: Reclaiming Ecology in the Age of Corporate Greenwash* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1997).

imitate the discourse of the grassroots environmental campaigns which oppose them in order to create an ethos of sustainability.²⁹⁰

Others have argued the business community's embrace of corporate social responsibility (CSR) in ad and PR campaigns should be conceived of as a broader appropriation of progressive social movements beyond (though certainly including) the environment.²⁹¹ Indeed, rhetorics of corporate social responsibility express commitments to racial justice, gender equity, fair trade – all socially progressive movements. Jessica Vredenburg et al. has identified “woke-washing” as when corporate behavior contradicts such activist messaging.²⁹² Critical scholars, too have adopted the term, though from a perspective that posits commercial interests will always run counter to true social justice ideals and thus all activist messaging is empty spin. Francesca Sobande, for instance, explores how “woke” bravery is branded, and finds that woke advertising can both highlight and conceal feminist and Black activism by misusing and promoting commercialized notions of equality for Black women.²⁹³ She concludes that the co-optation of activist messaging promotes a neoliberal version of social progress that centers “individual ambition and consumption” over systemic change and resistance.²⁹⁴

The literature on greenwashing and wokewashing shows that one means by which corporations have sought to construct socially conscious brands has been to appropriate social

²⁹⁰ Peter Bsumek et al., “Corporate Ventriloquism: Corporate Advocacy, the Coal Industry, and the Appropriation of Voice,” in *Voice and Environmental Communication* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 21–43, https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137433749_2; Jennifer Peeples, “Aggressive Mimicry: The Rhetoric of Wise Use and the Environmental Movement,” in *The Environmental Communication Yearbook* (Routledge, 2014).

²⁹¹ Oyvind Ihlen, “Good Environmental Citizens? The Green Rhetoric of Corporate Social Responsibility,” in *Rhetorical and Critical Approaches to Public Relations II*, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2009); Carl Rhodes, *Woke Capitalism: How Corporate Morality Is Sabotaging Democracy*, First Edition (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2021).

²⁹² Jessica Vredenburg et al., “Brands Taking a Stand: Authentic Brand Activism or Woke Washing?,” *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing* 39, no. 4 (October 2020): 444–60, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0743915620947359>.

²⁹³ Francesca Sobande, “Woke-Washing: ‘Intersectional’ Femvertising and Branding ‘Woke’ Bravery,” *European Journal of Marketing* ahead-of-print (December 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1108/EJM-02-2019-0134>.

²⁹⁴ Sobande, “Woke-Washing,” 26.

justice discourses in a way that minimizes responsibility for the very same injustices activists seek to remedy in those very corporations. The progressive workplace brand is a related strategy as I define it, in that it certainly involves hiding poor labor practices behind a progressive appearance. Yet the concept I advance here attempts to diagnose something deeper than the rhetoric vs. reality framework terms like greenwashing and woke-washing reflect, as valuable as they are. Appropriation alone does not explain how corporations have been allowed to grow virtually unchecked to the point where they rival states in power and influence, and yet do not face a more serious, organized challenge from the public or lawmakers.

Paliewicz has pointed out that the networked status of corporations complicates criticism that uses a greenwashing framework.²⁹⁵ Theoretically, it is difficult to allocate blame, or claim definitively that appropriation is deliberate when “corporate identities, by their very nature, are networked, dispersed, and accidental.”²⁹⁶ Paliewicz argues that rhetoricians need ways to better account for organizational, networked rhetoric if we are to understand the outsized influence of corporations in American society. He theorizes the corporate persona “as one way to study corporations’ multiple, highly complex, subjective networks in ways that can escape the singularities of corporate social responsibility.”²⁹⁷ Writing about the Rio Tinto Kennecott (RTK) mining conglomerate, Paliewicz uses a new materialist framework to detail how corporate power is tied to its networked form. In order to maintain legitimacy for its operations in the massive Bingham Canyon Copper mine in Utah, RTK manifests a culturally resonant pioneer persona by instantiating its presence across places, spaces, and objects of historical significance for the community. Thus, the corporate persona grants the corporate rhetor a sense of omni-presence in

²⁹⁵ Paliewicz, *Extraction Politics*.

²⁹⁶ Paliewicz, “Industrial Pioneerism in the Beehive State,” 64.

²⁹⁷ Paliewicz, “Industrial Pioneerism in the Beehive State,” 64.

a community's cultural memory, making its presence seem to be a natural or inherent historical development, and thus "inseparable from the state and the people therein."²⁹⁸ At the same time, Paliewicz shows, the same diffuse persona "allows RTK to equivocate about responsibilities associated with its whitewashed, colonial past and its ecological footprints," such as decimating mountains, creating tons of toxic waste, and giving the area "some of the worst air pollution in the country."²⁹⁹

Paliewicz makes some important distinctions in how corporate, as opposed to an individual's rhetoric ought to be conceived. In emphasizing the corporation's networked form, his study makes the critical point that corporate rhetors must do more than invoke different identifications among the audience, as do the second and third personas. Rather, as dispersed entities, corporate rhetors must also construct their own identities. As he explains, the corporate persona advances rhetorical theory by "understanding the rhetor--and not just the audience--as an invisible multiplicity that constructs a 'passable' identity in public places and space for rhetorical motivations."³⁰⁰

Though he does not use the concept of a corporate persona, Johnson has similarly sought to explain how another corporate rhetor constructed its own powerful identity as integral to a natural arc of human evolutive progress, and thus made itself essential to American life: Ford.³⁰¹ Like Paliewicz, Johnson argues that corporate rhetoric is unique, though he roots its uniqueness in Gramsci's theory of hegemony. He explains "Gramsci's approach argues that the rhetorical work of corporations is unique in that it goes beyond persuasion. Rather, corporate rhetoric relies on a network of skillful combinations that draws together humans, material objects, and ideas to

²⁹⁸ Paliewicz, "Industrial Pioneerism in the Beehive State," 62.

²⁹⁹ Paliewicz, "Industrial Pioneerism in the Beehive State," 62.

³⁰⁰ Paliewicz, "Industrial Pioneerism in the Beehive State," 65.

³⁰¹ Johnson, *Rhetoric, Inc.*

create systems of meaning that appear to be closed, circular, definitive.”³⁰² Thus, the networked form of corporate rhetoric enables the impression that it is not rhetoric at all, not subject to debate but instead a matter of neutral fact or common sense.

Noting that Gramsci developed the concept of hegemony in reference to the Ford company’s total dominance over American culture, Johnson adapts the concept of hegemony to theorize what he calls incorporational rhetoric. Applying the concept to the Ford Company’s vast archive of widely screened, popular films, Johnson argues that through incorporational rhetoric, the Ford company was able remake its own image and the way that the public understood themselves and the world. Through the incorporated rhetoric of Ford’s films, he shows, the company was able to habituate the American public to the idea that being a society organized entirely around mass production and consumption was a natural development. He writes

The combination of this wide circulation and framing the films as yet another Fordist innovation would help the company spread a vast aesthetic framework that would further normalize machinery and production while also positioning them as powerful extended analogies for understanding knowledge, economies, and the idea of a well-lived modern life. More than this, the very presence of these films argued that one could ‘see’ the Fordist economy - allowing for the company to convince its many viewers to accept the wholesale shifts in economic relations taking place at that time.³⁰³

As the films did not explicitly advertise Ford products, they were largely consumed uncritically and appeared simply as realistic movies of and about American life. As Johnson shows, however, they were not intended to sell cars, but to sell the “Ford idea” – that consumer capitalism was an inevitable development of human progress.

Through their conceptions of the corporate persona and incorporational rhetoric, both Paliewicz and Johnson have contributed much to our understanding of how corporate image-making strategies have enabled corporate actors to maintain hegemony and avoid being held

³⁰² Johnson, *Rhetoric, Inc.*, 18.

³⁰³ Johnson, *Rhetoric, Inc.*, 24.

accountable for harms associated with their business practices. Indeed, to properly account for the particular sort of corporate rhetoric that I identify in the progressive workplace brand, I build on Paliewicz's notion of the corporate persona to account for how the companies' rhetoric constructs themselves and their audiences in particular ways, and does so through projecting themselves resonantly across a network of people, places, and objects. Further, I adopt Johnson's conception of incorporational rhetoric by problematizing the ideology presented in each employer's rhetoric as neutral matters of fact, and, at least partially "attending to [the] systemic networks surrounding persuasion."³⁰⁴ However, as rhetorical scholars often are, both Paliewicz and Johnson are concerned with how corporations maintain such an outsized influence in our democratic society, and accordingly, with their impacts on a broader public of democratic citizens. It is an obvious truth that the discourses of consumer capitalism require the maintenance of both a public of reliable consumers and workers – people to reliably produce consumer goods and services. Indeed, Marchand's exhaustive account of the rise of PR shows that workers featured heavily in even the earliest of PR campaigns as both subjects and objects.³⁰⁵ Though workers are undoubtedly instantiated in corporate rhetoric, working people have attracted far less attention in rhetorical theory. I seek to close this gap in rhetorical scholarship by identifying the progressive workplace brand as a form of incorporational rhetoric that aims not (only) to constitute a supportive citizenry, but a public of current and prospective employees. This rhetoric, as I will argue, attempts to persuade workers that they are fortunate despite poor conditions. In constituting workers as lucky to get whatever their respective bosses offer, employers who adopt PWB affirm the idea that whatever the supposedly generous treatment on

³⁰⁴ Johnson, *Rhetoric, Inc.*, 20.

³⁰⁵ Marchand, *Creating the Corporate Soul*; Stuart Ewen, "Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of the Consumer Culture," New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976.

offer is, it is something workers do not deserve. If workers are convinced that they are indeed the fortunate recipients of their employers' undue benevolence, already getting more than their labor entitles them to, they are unlikely to push for better treatment. Thus, the progressive workplace brand works to secure employee's consent. Before turning to analysis, then, I wish to briefly contextualize PWB within a body of theory concerned particularly with how employers maintain the consent of their workers through the labor process.

Labor Process Theory

Within the sociology of work, labor process theory has emerged as a critical analytical lens aimed at explaining the peculiar relationship between management and labor in a capitalist economic system.³⁰⁶ As Steven P. Vallas et al. explain, labor process theorists problematized the tendency within the field to understand worker resistance as irrational. This view instead emphasizes the peculiar status of labor as a commodity. "Although capitalists gain formal ownership over the labor power that they buy, they are confronted with the fact that workers still retain possession of this commodity and typically resist efforts at its exploitation. This infuses an element of uncertainty into the wage labor bargain and prompts capital to develop systems of class-based control and surveillance..."³⁰⁷ Thus, the labor process refers to the process by which managers elicit the consent of their employees to the terms of employment. Inspired by Michael Burawoy's famed ethnography of Chicago factory workers in the 1970s, who worked far harder and faster than necessary, the central question of labor process theory is not why workers resist, but why do workers work as hard as they do.³⁰⁸ Vallas and colleagues describe a history of labor

³⁰⁶ Vallas, Johnston, and Mommadova, "Prime Suspect."

³⁰⁷ Vallas, Johnston, and Mommadova, "Prime Suspect," 424.

³⁰⁸ Michael Burawoy, *Manufacturing Consent: Changes in the Labor Process Under Monopoly Capitalism* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1982), <https://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/M/bo23899991.html>.

process scholarship that has generally sorted the history of labor control in capitalist societies into different periods. Early scholarship emphasized coercive or despotic control mechanisms, while later works posited that despotic controls and coercion were fading in favor of more hegemonic ones, in which firms attempt to obtain voluntary compliance through the creation of rituals and corporate cultures that employees identify with and internalize.³⁰⁹

Vallas and colleagues' review shows that more recent scholarship posits a shift backward toward despotic control, spurred both by technological changes that allow a variety of ways to track workers productivity and what might be characterized as widespread neoliberalism. Vallas et al.'s contribution to labor process scholarship – and the first of two primary reasons their study is of such importance here – is to problematize the generalizing urge of the social sciences. They caution that the tendency to ascribe a singular, coherent regime of managerial control to a particular moment in time is misguided, and that identifying the sources of worker disempowerment depends on a recognition that mechanisms of control are not uniform but complex and multifaceted. A rhetorical approach lends itself well to this idea, as the goal is never the creation of an all-encompassing general theory but the identification of the mechanisms of persuasion grounded in a particular context. Indeed, this approach by nature takes into account the complexity of control Vallas and coauthors foreground. Accordingly, by developing the concept of PWB, this paper intends to identify one rhetorical means through which management elicits compliance from employees.

Vallas et al. ground their cautions about oversimplification in their findings, which are the second reason their study is of such interest here. In their interviews, the authors find that Amazon uses both despotic and an array of hegemonic methods to compel warehouse workers to

³⁰⁹ Gideon Kunda, *Engineering Culture: Control and Commitment in a High-Tech Corporation*, Revised edition (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2006).

follow company directives. The despotic methods they describe refer mostly to technological means of tracking progress. These methods have received a fair amount of attention in the popular press due to the harsh (and by many accounts humanly impossible) pace of work they set. For instance, the scanners some workers must use to scan in new merchandise track worker progress and require them to hit certain quotas, or face punitive measures including termination. Efforts to reach such quotas are what prevent warehouse workers from using the bathroom by some famed accounts.³¹⁰ Yet the hegemonic controls described by Vallas are less publicized. From worker descriptions, they pinpoint three: normative, governmental, and relational control. In the first, certain hard or loyal workers are given special status and responsibilities. The second refers to a “system of rules and resources” which “imbue workers' positions with a semblance of individual choice.”³¹¹ Relational control, as the authors describe it “fosters a sense of obligation among workers who are aware of the low esteem in which their labor is held and are thankful to the firm for hiring them, as if the job resembled a gift.”³¹² The authors elaborate that this method of control arises from the dismal state of the labor market for workers without a college degree. Faced with an alarming lack of job prospects, these workers are grateful to the company for the gift of employment no matter the circumstances. Further, workers in this position demonstrated their loyalty to the company by expressing the view that unhappy coworkers were lazy or ungrateful.

Through their conceptualization of relational control, Vallas and coauthors demonstrate that Amazon workers without higher education can internalize the idea that they should be

³¹⁰ Jessica Bruder, *Nomadland: Surviving America in the Twenty-First Century*, Illustrated edition (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2017); Ken Klippenstein, “Documents Show Amazon Is Aware Drivers Pee in Bottles and Even Defecate En Route, Despite Company Denial,” *The Intercept*, March 25, 2021, <https://theintercept.com/2021/03/25/amazon-drivers-pee-bottles-union/>.

³¹¹ Vallas, Johnston, and Mommadova, “Prime Suspect,” 424.

³¹² Vallas, Johnston, and Mommadova, “Prime Suspect,” 423.

grateful to the company – the mere fact of their employment positions the employer as a benevolent actor offering a precious gift. The annoyance these workers express with complaining coworkers suggests that if workers adopt this framing, it may successfully complicate efforts to empower workers. Vallas et al. trace this sentiment in workers’ statements, but they do not consider the ways these attitudes are produced and reproduced rhetorically. Further, this small segment of their study limits the sentiment to workers with low levels of education. I argue that what they describe as relational control covers a much more wide-ranging rhetorical strategy.

The Progressive Workplace Brand

As I define it, the progressive workplace brand is a form of incorporational rhetoric that shapes the labor process in that it encourages workers to consent to working conditions they might otherwise protest or refuse. PWB is persuasive because of the wider social context within which it operates, and because it invokes that context in ways that resonate with particular audiences. The current moment is one in which corporations have a tremendous amount of power. As this dissertation has argued, one consequence (and cause) of corporate hegemony has been a diffusion of a generally neoliberal ideology throughout American society that begat the American work ethic and posits no one is entitled to anything they have not earned. Under neoliberal logic and the post-Fordist management that realizes it, labor is an obnoxious expense. Firms ought to employ as few people as minimum functioning allows, and pay them as little as possible, so a greater share of profit can be allocated for those at the top.³¹³ Inherent in this logic is the idea that those performing the actual work of a business operation are a dime a dozen, and that there is very little they deserve in exchange for their labor.

³¹³ Benjamin H. Snyder, “The Disruption of Work Time,” in *The Disrupted Workplace: Time and the Moral Order of Flexible Capitalism*, ed. Benjamin H. Snyder (Oxford University Press, 2016), 0, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190203498.003.0001>.

It is my contention that workers understand these changes and, to varying degrees, understand or have even internalized their logical implication - that as workers, they are entitled to nothing from their employers. They are accustomed to the fact that jobs pay less and provide fewer substantive benefits than they did decades ago. And certainly, the idea that one can be hired on at a company, rise through the ranks, support a family and one day retire comfortably is laughably antiquated. What I wish to emphasize here is that precarity is by now the norm in most industries. It is the default expectation that one's labor will be held in low esteem, and accordingly, that one's employer owes one very little by virtue of one's employment. It is this state of affairs that has enabled the progressive workplace brand to emerge as one mechanism of control over the labor process. Indeed, low expectations on the part of workers is an obvious boon for employers, in that it creates a rhetorical opportunity to brand one's organization as the exception to the rule.

Thus, in the modern day neoliberal economic landscape where precarity is the norm and workers take for granted that their labor will be maximally exploited, one way to ensure that your own employees continue working productively and without complaint is to position them as fortunate relative to others. If a business successfully brands itself as an oasis – a *good* company that truly cares about its workers, treats them with dignity, and provides them the financial benefits to live a comfortable life in a sea of *bad* companies that, well, do not – workers will be less likely to object to the terms of their employment. Indeed, when workers accept the premise that they are lucky and would be treated worse elsewhere, or be unemployed altogether, they are less likely to withdraw their consent and push for better conditions. This is the essence of PWB: it is rhetoric that positions the company as a benevolent giver, generously offering rare gifts which the employees are fortunate to receive.

As we will see, however, both rarity and generosity are rhetorical constructions which serve to obfuscate conditions that unnecessarily exploit the workers to the benefit of owners and executives. For, framing benefits as gifts rather than something *owed* to the workers means they can be taken away at their employers discretion, that workers must be grateful for whatever they're offered, and signals to workers the ceiling of benefits available to them. Despite their rhetoric, companies that adopt the PWB are not exceptional at all in the neoliberal economy. They generally still undercut labor expenses to allocate an exponentially greater share of their profits to executives than to workers. Further, they react with hostility to changes that would actually entitle workers to more of the profits their labor produces, such as union drives or strikes. As the introductory anecdote illustrates, even the most stubborn union busting campaign from an employer with the progressive brand is laced with the continual insistence to employees that they actually are quite fortunate to be employed by such a progressive organization.

In order to trace the contours and consequences of the progressive workplace brand, I have selected three companies which are generally considered to be progressive employers relative to others in their industries: Amazon, Starbucks, and REI. Each company advertises itself as a progressive employer due to some kind of rare benefit or benefits it offers. Further, workers at all companies often testify in a variety of settings that the progressive reputation was a major part of their decision to seek employment there. In order to piece together how exactly the impression arose that these are good places to work relative to others in their respective fields, I turned to the companies' social media pages where appropriate (both Amazon and Starbucks have active social media pages for current workers and separate ones for prospective employees) and hiring websites as important locations where brand images are manufactured and maintained.

In writing this chapter, I performed a comparative rhetorical analysis of these discursive fragments. In so doing, I identified three thematic components of the progressive workplace brand that appeared heavily in the rhetoric of each firm. The first, and most important is the framing of the actual benefits offered by the company as generous, rare, and as such, the limit of what can be asked for. All three companies featured videos or statements where a worker testified the pay or time off was more than they ever could have hoped for, for instance. Second is a mischaracterization of the nature of the employer/employee relationship, such that the power differential between executives and employees is flattened. All three companies featured an immense amount of content that encouraged workers to think of the company not as a hierarchical organization with power concentrated at the top, but as a collective of equal partners, friends and (sometimes literal) family members. The fact that the workers get to work as equal members of a team alongside friends and family is also constructed as a rare benefit. The third and final component of PWB is presenting the work being performed as uniquely important and meaningful, and as such, a rare benefit in and of itself. All three companies feature content that paints their business of selling coffee, recreational equipment, or delivering packages as something deeper, and as such an honor to perform relative to other options. Together, these three themes comprise the progressive workplace brand, and I've organized my findings accordingly.

Benefits as Benevolence

Companies that adopt the progressive workplace brand position the benefits offered by their organization as benevolent gifts, above and beyond what the company is required to offer and thus more than what workers deserve. While material benefits feature quite heavily in this progressive branding, I was surprised to find that immaterial benefits too are constructed as rare

and generous, often in tandem with the tangible. Consider, for instance, the numerous employee testimonial videos posted to Amazon's company news vlog on YouTube.³¹⁴ Corporate communication channels are a sort of ground zero for official efforts at image management, and as such, serve as reliable indications of how a given company attempts to occupy a certain persona. Amazon's active presence on YouTube suggests that video is a preferred medium for this task. Though the News page is broad in scope, videos about the experience of working at the company comprise a notable proportion of the feed, with some even grouped together on the Vlog's homepage under the title "Working at Amazon." Indeed, videos about life at Amazon for different workers are numerous enough to form their own genre of worker testimonials. These testimonials construct Amazon as a shockingly generous employer, offering vulnerable populations of workers a chance to succeed in life.

Along this vein, quite a few videos emphasize the fact that the company offers opportunities for advancement, positioning the idea of the career, as opposed to a mere job, as a rare and generous gift. This theme is most explicit in one video featuring a diverse group of employees gathered around a table, discussing their career growth within the company. A single mom of three, for instance, talks about how after a few months of hard work in the warehouse, the company saw something special in her. They trained her in software development, which tripled her income. Another describes how he struggled to find work after a years-long gap in his employment history. Amazon hired him, and he testifies that he's been promoted four times in four years. The workers all agree that "this is not a dead end job," and the video closes with a quote from a young woman who simply says "Amazon has given me a career. I did not have one

³¹⁴ "Amazon News - YouTube," accessed March 12, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/@AmazonNews>.

before, but Amazon has given me one.”³¹⁵ That this worker literally frames her career with Amazon as a gift given to her by her employer, rather than something that she earned or deserves by virtue of her work is quite striking. In a broader economic landscape wherein there is no guarantee that years of loyal service will earn workers steady promotions, companies who successfully brand themselves as the exception to this rule can constitute themselves as benevolent and their employees as lucky recipients of their generosity. Perhaps even the vast majority of employees, who of course will never become salaried executives – who instead spend long hours storing merchandise or driving delivery trucks, and are made to do so at an inhuman pace – will be persuaded that they are nevertheless fortunate enough to work for a company that promotes from within.

A few of these videos were released in 2018, after Amazon raised its starting wage to \$15 per hour. One features a young man who immigrated from Venezuela. He testifies that thanks to this generous wage, he is now able to send money home to his family, and explicitly mentions that he was not able to do this at his previous job, where he made only \$9 hourly. He also mentions that he now has dental and vision insurance for the first time in his life. The video ends with the statement “It [the job] was life changing for me. If I hadn’t taken this job, I don’t know where I would be right now.”³¹⁶ Similarly, a video featuring a mother, Chatonn, begins with her explicitly comparing her old employer to Amazon. She says that before, she worked in retail, and was “struggling to make it, day to day.” \$15 per hour, however, relieved Chatonn’s stress and enabled her to become a better parent. She explains that now she can afford art supplies for her daughter, and karate lessons for son. She concludes “Amazon allows me to be the parent that I

³¹⁵ *Amazon Employees Discuss Their Career Growth* | *Amazon News*, directed by Amazon News, 2022, 1:57, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J-hK38QOyJ0>.

³¹⁶ *How At Least \$15 Per Hour at Amazon Helps Leonardo and His Family* | *Amazon News*, directed by Amazon News, 2021, 1:00, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3szyEmjeK4o>.

want to be. That is everything to me.”³¹⁷ Comparisons like these contribute to a general understanding that Amazon is far more generous than other companies. They construct the wage as rare, something that similarly positioned workers would not get elsewhere, and as such, it is something that the company does not have to offer but chooses to do so out of benevolence.

Framing the wage as wildly generous, however, also serves to establish it as the upper limits of what employees ought to imagine or expect. Another video released promoting the \$15 per hour wage hike provides a good example. It opens on an excited individual standing on a sorting line at a conveyor belt. Displaying a large grin, the worker asks “The 15 dollar raise?” and continues “Oh my god, I was so happy, like, I can’t ask for anything better.”³¹⁸ It goes on to show testimonials from this same individual and others who describe how challenging life was prior to receiving the “opportunity” to work for Amazon. The first individual mentions the lack of benefits at their previous company, and another describes being on the brink of sleeping on the streets with his family. Not only did Amazon give him the gift of employment, they exceeded his wildest expectations with the pay bump to fifteen dollars per hour. The video ends by cutting back to the first worker giddily repeating “I don’t know, like, I couldn’t ask for anything better! Come to Amazon!”³¹⁹ The video both begins and ends by impressing upon the audience that fifteen dollars an hour, as well as other vaguely alluded to benefits, are the best they could or *should* ever hope for. In this framing, the benefits offered are above and beyond what is compulsory, and thus are constructed as gifts rather than something workers deserve. When workers internalize the idea that a modest wage is mind-blowingly generous (as those in the

³¹⁷ *Amazon’s At Least \$15 Starting Wage Changed Chatonn’s Life* | *Amazon News*, directed by Amazon News, 2021, 1:00, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sHckphdtsIk>.

³¹⁸ *Amazon Gives Opportunities with \$15 an Hour* | *Amazon News*, directed by Amazon News, 2018, 0:47, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fJkn_BX42mE.

³¹⁹ *Amazon Gives Opportunities with \$15 an Hour* | *Amazon News*.

video apparently have), they are unlikely to consider the possibility that they are entitled to a greater share of the profits of their labor. Thus, testimonials like these act as evidence of, and serve to reproduce the low expectations that contribute to service worker's chronic underpayment.

Though a generous hourly wage is occasionally mentioned on Starbucks' Instagram pages, other material benefits seem to be the focal point of the coffee giant's reputation as a progressive employer. The Starbucks College Achievement Plan, or SCAP is heavily promoted on both the Partners and Jobs Instagram pages. Many posts are succinct and informational.³²⁰ While I had previously heard through word of mouth that Starbucks pays their baristas' college tuition, I learned from the fine print of these posts that SCAP will specifically pay the tuition for qualified baristas (those who consistently work 20 hours per week) if they enroll in a list of pre-approved online undergraduate programs offered through Arizona State University. Other SCAP posts are inspirational worker testimonials, where program graduates thank the company for its generosity.³²¹ In a video collaboration with Arizona State University posted by the Partners

³²⁰ Starbucks, "Starbucks Jobs on Instagram: 'Pop Quiz! How Many of These Facts Did You Know about the Starbucks College Achievement Plan? We're Invested in Your Success. Become a Starbucks Partner (Employee) and Receive 100% Upfront Tuition Coverage for a First-Time Bachelor's Degree through Arizona State University's Online Program. Learn More through the Link in Our Bio. #ToBeInCollege #Goals #College,'" Instagram, February 12, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/p/C3QSBVhp0ys/>.

³²¹ Starbucks, "Starbucks Partners (Employees) on Instagram: 'Partner Luis Shares What He's Been Able to Accomplish with Starbucks 🌱🎓👉 What's Your Favorite Thing about Being a Partner? 📌 #GreenAprons #ToBeAPartner,'" Instagram, November 4, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/Ckim3o6NGp5/>; Starbucks, "Starbucks Partners (Employees) on Instagram: 'Thank You to Nayely for Sharing Your Starbucks Story! We're Proud to Be Your Partner. Partners, We'd Love to Hear How You Have Been Supported by the Partners in Your Store! 📌 #ToBeAPartner #GreenAprons,'" Instagram, December 7, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/Cl3uuhqrocr/>; Starbucks, "Starbucks Partners (Employees) on Instagram: 'Last Monday, 850+ Starbucks Partners Graduated from Arizona State University through the Starbucks College Achievement Plan (SCAP) Program. Siena, a Shift Supervisor from Washington, Is Taking You behind the Scenes of Her Experience at Graduation. 🌱🎓 #ToBeAPartner #ToBeAGraduate,'" Instagram, December 15, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/CmMkj4YpK15/>; Starbucks, "Starbucks Jobs on Instagram: 'We're Committed to the Success of All Our Partners, Which Is Why Every Eligible U.S. Partner Working Part- or Full-Time Receives 100% Upfront Tuition Coverage for a First-Time Bachelor's Degree through Arizona State University's Online Program. Reach Your Educational Goals with Us! Learn More about the Starbucks College Achievement Plan through the Link in Our Bio. #ToBeAPartner #ToBeAGraduate #ToBeInCollege #BackToSchool #Hiring,'" Instagram, August 25, 2023, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/CwX29z8IKpJ/>; Starbucks, "Starbucks Jobs on

account, dramatic symphonic music builds as the screen fades from black along with a voice over and text that announces 10,000 SCAP graduates as of 2023.³²² The camera then shows four clips of different young people seated in front of the camera in a studio. Each testifies that college did not seem possible before the program.

One young woman says that without the SCAP program, she would not have gone back to school. She says that the program has enabled her to pursue her dreams, and that “this company is also preparing me for a future. And that’s incredible.” Another young man says he feels like the program represents “a bigger movement in how we approach college,” and another testifies that “Starbucks is making a difference, and I’m part of that difference.”³²³ While we hear these employees’ words, we alternatively see footage of them smiling behind the coffee counter at work, and studying at work. Triumphant music plays while the camera zooms in on graduation sashes emblazoned with the Starbucks logo. In this video’s framing, Starbucks is indeed committing an unbelievable act of benevolence. That wages are absent from the videos and SCAP is so prominent perhaps suggests that Starbucks prefers that it be seen as doing more than providing pay. As the employees testify to here, they are revolutionizing higher education, making dreams come true, and providing their baristas not just with a job, but with a future. This

Instagram: ‘This Winter We Are Celebrating Nearly 1,000 Partners (Employees) Who Are Graduating from the Starbucks College Achievement Plan! Eligible U.S. Partners Can Earn Their First-Time Bachelor’s Degree Online from Arizona State University, with 100% Upfront Tuition Coverage. We’re Invested in Your Success. Learn More through the Link in Our Bio 🎓 #ToBeAGraduate #ToBeInCollege #ToBeAPartner #Hiring,’” Instagram, November 17, 2023, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CzwKNkgrJcf/>.

³²² Arizona State University and Starbucks, “Arizona State University on Instagram: ‘This Year Marks More than 10,000 Graduates Who Earned Their Degree from Arizona State University through the Starbucks College Achievement Plan (SCAP). How Is Starbucks College Tuition Benefit Different from the Rest? • Earn Your First-Time Bachelor’s Degree with 100% Upfront Tuition Coverage. • You Can Start the Application Process on Your First Day as a Partner. • Choose from over 140+ Diverse Majors, Studying at Arizona State University Online. • No Commitment after Graduation. • If You Are a Veteran Partner – You Can Extend an Additional SCAP Benefit on to a Family Member. We Are so Proud of Our Scholars and Are Honored to Support Their Growth and Dreams — Whether It Is at Starbucks or beyond. Congratulations, Graduates! #ToBeAPartner #ToBeAGraduate #ToBeInCollege 🎓💚🎉,’” Instagram, May 10, 2023, https://www.instagram.com/reel/CsEclFng_qi/.

³²³ Arizona State University and Starbucks, “Arizona State University on Instagram.”

theme of making dreams come true appears prominently in other worker testimonials about benefits.

After 2023, when new benefits were added, there are several posts containing testimony about a stock sharing program called Bean Stock, and the Family Expansion Benefit, which reimburses certain parts of the costs of adoption and in vitro fertilization. In posts about the former, workers testify that the benefit enabled them to buy a home.³²⁴ In posts about the latter, they explain how the benefit enabled them to fulfill their long held dreams of parenthood despite infertility and other barriers.³²⁵ The corporate news blog features both new adoptive parents and those who used fertility treatments with success, and all are sure to explicitly thank the company for its support.³²⁶ In a picture story with written text, a worker named Emily who conceived a child with her wife using IVF and the Family Expansion benefit is quoted as saying “Starbucks never gave up on me and my wife trying to make our dreams a reality.”³²⁷ The next image is this worker’s tiny newborn son sitting in a large Starbucks branded coffee mug, with two Starbucks aprons in the background. Text below reads “With the help of the Starbucks Family Expansion benefit and ongoing support from partners, we’re honored to have played a small role in welcoming James to the world!”³²⁸ As someone had the good sense to add the qualifier “small”

³²⁴ Starbucks, “Starbucks Partners (Employees) on Instagram: ‘It’s Time to Accept Your Bean Stock Grants! Partner Evelyn Is Here to Explain How It Works and Then You Can Head over to the Link in Our Bio to Get Started. #ToBeAPartner,’” Instagram, December 9, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/C19Bw3npRM3/>; Starbucks, “Starbucks Announces Investments for U.S. Retail Hourly Partners (Employees),” Starbucks Stories, November 2023, <https://stories.starbucks.com/stories/2023/starbucks-announces-new-investments-for-u-s-retail-hourly-partners-employees/>.

³²⁵ Starbucks, “Starbucks Partners (Employees) on Instagram: ‘We Were Instantly Inspired by Jenna When She Shared Her Story with Us. Huge Congratulations as She Takes the next Steps towards Her Dream of Becoming a Mom. ❤️ #ToBeAPartner #GreenAprons #StarbucksBenefits,’” Instagram, March 24, 2023, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/CqLauWvtznf/>.

³²⁶ Starbucks, “Starbucks Announces Investments for U.S. Retail Hourly Partners (Employees);” Starbucks, “Starbucks Announces Investments for U.S. Retail Hourly Partners (Employees).”

³²⁷ Starbucks, “Starbucks Partners (Employees) on Instagram: ‘We’re Honored to Have a Partner like Emily. Welcome to the Starbucks Family James! 🍷❤️ #ToBeAPartner #Starbucks,’” Instagram, July 18, 2023, <https://www.instagram.com/p/Cu2L3Q5pAFB/>.

³²⁸ Starbucks, “Starbucks Partners (Employees) on Instagram,” July 18, 2023.

to this text, the company stops short of taking full credit for the creation of human life. Nonetheless, in posts about college tuition, stock options, and family expansion benefits Starbucks assumes the role of a benevolent sponsor of new life, whether that be in the metaphorical sense of making dreams come true, the literal sense of making babies, or both. This rhetoric constructs Starbucks as a progressive employer of near god-like proportions, and simultaneously constructs employees as the fortunate recipients of its benevolence.

To be sure, college tuition reimbursement and family expansion coverage are indeed hard to come by, and not something the average food service or retail worker has access to through their jobs. In that sense, it is perfectly understandable that the workers interviewed are grateful for these opportunities. At the same time, framing these benefits as acts of extraordinary generosity reproduces a line of logic that ensures they stay rare, rather than something everyone deserves. As a matter of fact, that the majority of baristas are not scheduled enough hours to actually maintain Starbucks' many advertised benefits has been a chief complaint of organizing workers, and has been shown to be true by the company's internal research.³²⁹ Consequently, baristas' attempts to ensure consistent scheduling, and thus, expand benefits eligibility to more of the workforce were met with the hostile union busting campaign described in Chapter Two. However there is no mention of this anywhere on Starbucks' Instagram. In fact, the employees featured in many testimonials are managers and shift supervisors, who ostensibly are given more consistent hours. Further, pro-union comments are selectively hidden on quite a few posts, as the company is allowed to flag them as misinformation. Ultimately then, Starbucks' Instagram

³²⁹ Stack, "Opinion | Inside Starbucks' Dirty War Against Organized Labor"; Amy McCarthy, "Howard Schultz Doesn't Think Starbucks Has Done Anything Wrong," *Eater*, March 30, 2023, <https://www.eater.com/23663114/howard-schultz-bernie-sanders-starbucks-testimony-senate-help-committee>; Starbucks, "Starbucks CEO: Restoring the Trust and Belief of Our Partners," Starbucks Stories, April 10, 2022, <https://stories.starbucks.com/stories/2022/starbucks-ceo-restoring-the-trust-and-belief-of-our-partners/>.

constructs the image of a progressive employer offering rare and generous benefits. In so doing, it reproduces the idea that baristas are lucky to get what they do, and attempts to push for more are unwarranted and ungrateful. Indeed, just as Vallas' Amazon interviewees reported feeling indebted to the company, interviews with Starbucks organizers indicate that their coworkers were hesitant to unionize for this very reason. Beyond discouraging their own workers from unionizing, in promoting the idea that these benefits are an act of extraordinary benevolence on the part of Starbucks, the company reproduces worker's low expectations in general and naturalizes the idea that workers are not already entitled to good benefits from their employers.

Beyond the benefits themselves, Amazon's YouTube videos and Starbucks Instagram posts are also careful to emphasize who the beneficiaries are. Both companies construct their willingness to both hire and respect a diverse workforce as a rare and generous benefit in itself. Indeed, a general theme of accepting workers for their diverse identities is featured much more prominently in the rhetoric of all three companies than I expected. REI's hiring web page repeatedly proclaims that the organization is committed to practicing anti-racism and fostering a multicultural workplace. Affinity organizations are proudly emphasized, and text-based testimonials as well as video hiring ads feature high-ranking women of color who describe how meaningful it was for them to work in a corporate setting with mentors who "look like me."³³⁰ Their hiring website also makes employment demographics over time available on their website.³³¹ Starbucks Instagram posts regularly feature workers of color, differing abilities, veterans and military spouses, and LGBTQ+ individuals who express gratitude to the company for supporting them and accepting them as they are. Most numerous, however, are more

³³⁰ REI, "Commitments | REI," Commitments | REI, accessed March 4, 2024, <https://www.rei.jobs/commitments?>; REI, "Careers Home | REI," Careers Home | REI, accessed January 30, 2024, <https://www.rei.jobs/careers-home?>; *Discover Better at REI*, directed by REI, 2023, 1:23, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HxSe_m7W470.

³³¹ REI, "Commitments | REI."

ambiguous posts wherein the workers express how wonderful it is to work for a company that allows them to be themselves. This theme appears in video hiring advertisements, and still images posted to the Starbucks Jobs Instagram. These numerous posts all feature a portrait of a smiling barista in their uniform, with a text quote. In one such portrait, a man is quoted as saying “To be able to come here, put on the green apron, and not only get to be myself but be appreciated and loved for who I am - It feels really good.”³³²

For Amazon’s part, a handful of moving employee testimonials also construct acceptance as a rare benefit. Several discuss how Amazon generously provides employment to workers without college degrees, and allows them to advance through the ranks regardless.³³³ Another features a disabled veteran of the Iraq war, who lost an arm and suffered a traumatic brain injury in combat. The video opens with his statement that “being offered a position at Amazon exceeded any expectation I was going to have for my life.”³³⁴ He goes on to explain that, going into his interview, he was nervous. However, “One of the gentlemen that was doing my interview was also a combat veteran. I asked him, ‘Do you think that I can do this job?’ And he said, ‘Why couldn’t you?’ And I knew from that moment that I wanted to work for Amazon...because it had a place for me.”³³⁵ He goes on to describe how he found community through the company’s affinity group for veterans. Similarly, acceptance of LGBTQ+ individuals is a reoccurring theme. In one video, a transgender woman describes how painful her previous existence was before transitioning. She explains that she applied to Amazon particularly

³³² Starbucks, “Starbucks Jobs on Instagram: ‘We Strive to Create a Culture of Warmth and Belonging, Where Partners (Employees) Can Bring Their Whole Selves to Work, Feeling Supported and Empowered. Learn More about Becoming a Partner Today through the Link in Our Bio 📍 #ToBeAPartner #Hiring #Opportunity,’” Instagram, August 15, 2023, <https://www.instagram.com/p/Cv-Er-8LwZM/>.

³³³ *This Amazon Employee Found Success Without a College Degree* | Amazon News, directed by Amazon News, 2022, 1:41, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=icVECQOlkl0>.

³³⁴ *How This Iraq Veteran Found Purpose with Amazon* | Amazon News, directed by Amazon News, 2022, 2:30, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j9tDOUk84Qs>.

³³⁵ *How This Iraq Veteran Found Purpose with Amazon* | Amazon News.

because their healthcare plan covered gender affirming care, something that she was struggling to get covered at her last job. She continues, saying “I really want people to know about Amazon, how welcoming and how accepting they are of the LGBT community. How advanced they are for health care. They're willing to spend this amount of money to help their employees. I could not have done my surgery without them.” Tearing up, she says “I get emotional because having a company so open and to have them care....I feel welcomed, I feel included, I feel seen, and to be able to be... *me*.”³³⁶

Although this testimonial clearly advertises the fact that Amazon’s healthcare plan generously covers gender affirming care, the real benefit emphasized here is that the company is an ally. What is constructed as a generous gift here is that the company is *not* discriminatory. That the worker is practically moved to tears by Amazon’s acceptance of her identity, that it treats her with dignity and respect regardless of her gender identity, is indicative of an experience wherein acceptance is indeed the exception to the rule. Similarly, that the veteran was so impressed by his interviewer’s assumption that he was capable of the job despite his disability positions Amazon as a rare, anti-ableist diamond in the rough. My point here is certainly not to undermine the hardships and discrimination these individuals have endured in their working lives, or to attack companies that adopt policies that work against discrimination. It is instead to problematize a line of logic that positions acceptance of diversity, or – simply treating employees with the dignity and respect they deserve as human beings – as generosity. No employer ought to receive this level of gratitude for simply not discriminating against workers with marginalized identities. Positioning acceptance as a generous gift, rather than something all employees deserve keeps expectations low. It indicates to workers that they are not inherently entitled to be accepted

³³⁶ *This Employee Found Acceptance at Amazon* | *Amazon News*, directed by Amazon News, 2022, 2:29, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1TXEVU2w1n4>.

for who they are, and not be discriminated against for it. When the simple lack of racism, ableism, sexism, etc. is understood to be an act of generosity, marginalized workers may be persuaded that they are indebted to their employers and be compelled to tolerate otherwise poor working conditions.

Finally, though REI exemplifies all the themes discussed above, what is most notable about the particular brand image of progressive employer its rhetoric constructs is its emphasis on what we might call work-life balance. Indeed, the co-op demonstrates that even a benefit as mundane as time off – something to which the great majority of employees are entitled to everywhere – can be constructed as rare and generous. Consider the hiring advertisement that is embedded on the careers webpage and posted to YouTube, titled “Discover Better at REI.”³³⁷ The video features workers from all divisions – retail, corporate, warehouse, and the media studio, which takes photos of merchandise for online advertising. Workers from each division are shown seamlessly moving from the outdoors, recreating amidst a beautiful landscape, to being at work. The first worker is a fit-looking man, who cheerfully walks into an REI store with his green vest, where he is leading a team meeting for a huddle of applauding workers. Suddenly, he is outside, barefoot in a sunny park with a mountain range behind him. He appears to be practicing a martial art with a young man who he introduces in a voice over as his son, who apparently also works at REI. In a flash, his son is at work, sorting merchandise on the store floor. This theme repeats. We see another worker taking a landscape photo on a rainy trail, who flashes to the media studio where he is photographing merchandise, and flashes again back outside, getting into a hammock. The corporate employee goes from typing on her laptop and meeting with a coworker on Zoom, to suddenly shutting the laptop, closing her eyes, and taking

³³⁷ *Discover Better at REI.*

a breath. When she opens her eyes and exhales, she is on a wooded trail in outdoorsy clothes with her children, who are laughing and playing with bubbles.

This content begs for someone to point out that REI is far from the only company that allows employees to leave the store outside of their work hours. Yet, the editing of this video seems to suggest that REI invented the concept of time outside of work. In fairness, the intention may have been to emphasize the fact that some employees qualify for volunteer days, where they can get paid to do things like trail clean up. Hence, the warehouse worker in the video asks “Where else can you get paid to go outside?” and proceeds with a group of other workers to clean up a hiking trail. Of course, there are many organizations that do pay employees to actually be outside as part of their job, and even paid volunteer days are not entirely uncommon. Nonetheless, the video seemed to indicate that REI’s employees are especially fortunate recipients of increased access to outside time. Further, paying employees to be outside – though not as rare as this framing indicates – is an integral part of REI’s reputation as a progressive employer dating back to the #OptOutside campaign.

#Optoutside denotes the company’s celebrated policy of closing its doors on Black Friday and giving employees a paid day off, launched in 2015. Notably, it is specifically listed as a benefit of employment on the co-op’s careers website.³³⁸ The idea was indeed widely received as a revolutionary act of benevolence to employees on the part of the company. According to REI’s VP of Communication and Marketing, the idea was brought forth by someone working in retail who pitched it to executives as a way to be more authentic in their brand.³³⁹ The marketing team launched the campaign by having then CEO Jerry Stritzke write a letter to employees explaining

³³⁸ REI, “People & Culture | REI,” People & Culture | REI, accessed January 30, 2024, <https://www.rei.jobs/people-and-culture?>

³³⁹ *Behind-the-Scenes of REI’s #OptOutside*, directed by Edelman, 2016, 0:47, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bdixsSGDuzE>.

the decision, and, the VP explains “it was only after we’d communicated in a very human way to those folks that we decided it was right to bring earned media, social media, all of that.”³⁴⁰ The company then released the CEO’s letter to the press and embarked on a massive, month-long ad campaign. They took out full-page magazine and billboard ads, and draped stores in large black banners that announce “REI will be closed on Black Friday. #OptOutside.” They circulated inspirational videos that describe #OptOutside as “doing something unprecedented,” and as fomenting a larger anti-consumerist social movement.³⁴¹ Central to the framing of #OptOutside in media coverage, however, was that the decision to close and give workers a paid vacation day on the busiest shopping day of the year amounted to an act of such unbelievable generosity that executives might have gone mad. When Stritzke appeared as a guest on CBS Mornings to discuss the store closure, for instance the three hosts grill him as to how he could have OK’d such an insane policy. In asking Stritzke to explain himself, one of the hosts says that a lot of people must be wondering “What’s Jerry smoking?”³⁴² Stritzke agrees that Opt Outside may seem crazy, but that the co-op eventually embraced it as a policy that “one, our associates would love, but two, as a co-op we have five million members that love the outdoors” and thus it would resonate with them also.³⁴³ Stritzke frames Opt Outside as being first and foremost an act of benevolence for his employees.

Other news coverage also adopts this framing. One Kansas City local TV station covered the story by going to an REI store and interviewing retail workers for their reaction. One reports simply being in disbelief. Another says he was “ecstatic. I mean, we’re all being paid to be

³⁴⁰ *Behind-the-Scenes of REI’s #OptOutside*.

³⁴¹ *REI - #OptOutside Case Study*, directed by Bigumigu, 2016, 2:21, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IMsxrJeJ8IU>.

³⁴² *REI CEO on Why Company Is Closing Stores on Black Friday*, directed by CBS Mornings, 2015, 4:02, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QIVZdnuNiJY>.

³⁴³ *REI CEO on Why Company Is Closing Stores on Black Friday*.

outside. 12,000 employees are getting paid to be outside!”³⁴⁴ Another worker says that while traditionally it is one of the company’s biggest sales days, “it’s not just about making money.”³⁴⁵ These workers’ statements contribute to the framing of Opt Outside as an act of extraordinary generosity from a company that puts its people over its profits. Other news stories confirm this construction of REI. On Black Friday itself, one California town’s local TV news stations covered the story by interviewing people who indeed decided to opt outside. In contextualizing the story, the news anchor explains that REI executives felt Black Friday consumer madness “had gotten out of hand,” so “workers were encouraged to escape the madness and go outside and play.”³⁴⁶ A resident who decided to go out hiking is later quoted as saying “I love that REI cares enough about its employees that it would do that for them.”³⁴⁷

Thus, with Opt Outside and hiring advertisements that suggest co-op workers have time outside of work, REI constructs paid vacation days, and apparently the fact that the company does not literally expect employees to work inside 24/7, as the rare and generous gift of a benevolent organization. This construction encourages REI workers to see themselves as the fortunate recipients of the company’s largess, and accordingly, it constitutes those who would ask for better treatment as unreasonable and ungrateful. In fact, though REI has stopped offering many other paid holidays to much of their workforce, including Thanksgiving, they continue to emphasize the generosity of Opt Outside. Yet in constructing REI as a company that offers such a revolutionary amount of time off, workers are encouraged to consider vacation days and a

³⁴⁴ *REI Employees Talk about #OptOutside*, directed by KSHB 41, 2015, 1:35, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7n3YKb8K6II>.

³⁴⁵ *REI Employees Talk about #OptOutside*.

³⁴⁶ *REI Closed On Black Friday*, directed by News Channel 3-12, 2015, 1:16, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zAJ69sv_gbI.

³⁴⁷ *REI Closed On Black Friday*.

work-life balance of some kind as something they're lucky to have at all, rather than something that they deserve.

Workers as Partners, Friends, and Family

The second thematic component of the progressive workplace brand is rhetoric that flattens the power differential inherent in hierarchical business organizations. This rhetoric can be obvious when it overtly constitutes workers as voiced, equal partners in the company, rather than employees who have little power in actual decision making and must comply with management's directives. What I conceptualize here as the equal partners component of the PWB also can be subtle when it constructs an image of the company wherein coworkers are foregrounded and corporate structure is invisibilized. For example, the equal partners component of PWB celebrates the affections between "work besties," "work family," and coworkers who are literally family members. In doing so, it encourages workers to see the company not as a separate entity with whom their interests are opposed, but as individuals they know and care about.

Constructing waged workers as equal partners and implicating them as the company itself could be conceptualized as a separate rhetorical strategy aimed at producing and reproducing workers' consent by turning solidarity with one another into loyalty for the company. However in the cases I examine here, the rhetoric of equal partners functions as a component of the progressive workplace brand because it is constructed as a rare and progressive benefit of the particular organization. It communicates to workers that they are fortunate to be employed by an organization of equally valued and respected friends and family members, and positions those who would seek greater control from such a nice company as overly indulgent and ungrateful.

One component of this rhetorical strategy is when corporate communications background or invisibilize corporate structure by focusing heavily on the relationships between coworkers. In REI's hiring advertisements, workers are regularly shown volunteering and simply having fun together at affinity group meet-ups.³⁴⁸ In one self-recorded worker testimonial posted on the hiring website, an employee says he's never before had a job where he actually elected to spend time with coworkers outside of work hours.³⁴⁹ Fun company events are explicitly listed as employment benefits. Perhaps most notably is an annual Twinkie roast, where a group of smiling young people pose holding up fire-charred Twinkies on a stick.³⁵⁰ Starbucks, for its part, posts a ton of content on the Partners Instagram page which celebrates "work besties." Employees are regularly pictured embracing each other and grinning, and captions encourage baristas to "tag your work bestie!"³⁵¹ Many of the posts on the Partners page show co-workers goofing off and having fun together. Dancing is a common theme.³⁵² Posts like these clearly indicate that Starbucks is a fun place to work. However, consistently emphasizing co-workers and the real friendships that exist between them encourages baristas to see the company first and foremost as a network of their friends, obscuring executives and corporate structure.

A few of Amazon's produced videos also feature warehouse workers having fun together, and many worker testimonials discuss how much these workplace friendships mean to them and

³⁴⁸ REI, "People & Culture | REI."

³⁴⁹ REI, "People & Culture | REI."

³⁵⁰ REI, "People & Culture | REI."

³⁵¹ Starbucks, "Double Shot of Friendship. Tag Your Barista Bestie in the Comments below! 🍵💚 #ToBeAPartner #NationalBestFriendsDay #Starbucks | Instagram," June 8, 2023, https://www.instagram.com/p/CtPECxrpQOT/?img_index=1.

³⁵² Starbucks, "Starbucks Partners (Employees) on Instagram: 'Our Partners Are Creepin' It Real in Stores Today. Happy Halloween! 🎃🍂 #ToBeAPartner #Starbucks #SpookySeason'," Instagram, October 31, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/CkYnt0qtT8T/>; Starbucks, "Starbucks Partners (Employees) on Instagram: 'The Coffeehouse Pop Playlist Hits Different! 🎵 What Playlist Are You Playing during Your Shift? Comment below! 🎵🎶 #ToBeAPartner #StarbucksMusic,'" Instagram, July 11, 2023, https://www.instagram.com/reel/Cuj_34upz9E/; Starbucks, "Starbucks Partners (Employees) on Instagram: 'This Trend, but Make It Partners! 💚💚 #ToBeAPartner,'" Instagram, November 17, 2023, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/CzwUF5ToKR5/>.

the degree to which they transcend the company. Amazon takes a step further, however, in constructing coworkers as family. In one such video, a warehouse manager tells the story of how her coworkers supported her through her daughter's battle with leukemia.³⁵³ The video begins by introducing the subject at work in a morning meeting, preparing warehouse workers for the day. In a separate voice over, she says "We are a strong band of friends and...and definitely family. After everything that we've been through."³⁵⁴ She explains that her daughter was diagnosed at age ten. Both she and coworkers in other interviews describe how they would visit her in the hospital and deliver meals to the family's house. The video splices in the employee's own cell phone recordings of her daughter during this time, one of which shows her delighted daughter receiving a care basket of toys and candy as the employee announces "So mommy's coworkers got a present for you...." The worker goes on to explain that her coworkers carried her family through the difficult time, and were there for her after her daughter passed away. The employee is shown laughing and talking with other employees in the warehouse as they work, and in a voiceover, she says "It definitely speaks to the fabric of who we are. We are a family. We are."³⁵⁵

Though this example uses family metaphorically, another celebrates the preponderance of actual family members working side by side in Amazon warehouses.³⁵⁶ The video opens on a warehouse worker named Jenna who says that overall there is a sense of family at Amazon, but that many of her coworkers in the warehouse are actually related. The video then introduces viewers to several pairs of family members working happily together. First is a man and woman

³⁵³ *The Heart of an Amazon Fulfillment Center* | *Amazon News*, directed by Amazon News, 2018, 1:54, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bqrN_N4Gt-0.

³⁵⁴ *The Heart of an Amazon Fulfillment Center* | *Amazon News*.

³⁵⁵ *The Heart of an Amazon Fulfillment Center* | *Amazon News*.

³⁵⁶ *Amazon Employees Work as a Family* | *Amazon News*, directed by Amazon News, 2020, 1:34, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7S0sSWXR7VI>.

who are engaged, joking about who's driving home today as they work at a sorting station. The man jokes that it's a good thing he works with his fiancé, as she is the one who is able to get him out of bed on time for their shifts. He continues, "It's just fun to work with your best friend. We have a connection at home and we have a connection at work."³⁵⁷ Another worker interviewed says that she loves it at Amazon because of her coworkers. She then excitedly introduces the camera to a young woman working behind her as her daughter. She says "Being able to work together, and building that kind of relationship...it's pretty awesome."³⁵⁸ Footage shows her talking with her daughter as they work, and exchanging I love yous. The camera cuts to a series of shots of warehouse workers dancing together, laughing, smiling, and exchanging enthusiastic pleasantries. Then, the screen cuts away back to the mother in the previous interview, who says "We rely on everybody else. It's like a big huge family. I'm very thankful to have that."³⁵⁹ As she speaks, the camera is tighter on her face, revealing that her eyes are welling with tears.

Though more explicitly in the latter example, as the worker describes a level of thankfulness that moves her to tears, both videos position the family atmosphere in Amazon warehouses as a rare benefit of working for the company. I argue that when used as part of the progressive workplace brand, positioning workers as family does more than serve the obvious intended function of coercing a familial level of loyalty to one's workplace. Indeed, employers of all sorts describe their workplaces as being like a family, so much so that the phrase constitutes a familiar trope synonymous with a toxic culture of overwork and underpayment.³⁶⁰ I certainly do not dispute that the same intentions undergird the familial theme in Amazon's corporate rhetoric,

³⁵⁷ *Amazon Employees Work as a Family* | *Amazon News*.

³⁵⁸ *Amazon Employees Work as a Family* | *Amazon News*.

³⁵⁹ *Amazon Employees Work as a Family* | *Amazon News*.

³⁶⁰ Joshua A. Luna, "The Toxic Effects of Branding Your Workplace a 'Family,'" *The Harvard Business Review*, October 27, 2021, <https://hbr.org/2021/10/the-toxic-effects-of-branding-your-workplace-a-family>.

however, I wish to highlight here that emphasizing the real solidarity, affection, and love that develops among coworkers serves the deeper purpose of invisibilizing or minimizing corporate presence as it constitutes ‘the company’ not as a hierarchical organization with whom their interests can be opposed, but as a mere collective of friends and family. This rhetorical flattening of internal power dynamics also constructs the care provided by coworkers as a rare benefit of working for the organization in question. For instance, the warehouse manager makes no mention of higher-ups doing anything nice for her on behalf of the company during her daughter’s illness; the video is entirely about her co-workers. The familial theme, then, encourages Amazon warehouse workers to think of Amazon not first and foremost as a massive corporation, but as the warehouse full of people who support and care about each other. If the company is nothing more than the sum of these caring parts – mothers and daughters, “besties,” fiancés, and generally people who know and support each other – then the workplace is progressive by definition in that it cares about employees. Working for such an organization is a rare benefit indeed, as it is the exception to the rule that companies do not care about their workers, nor are they sympathetic to their needs. Constructing care as a rare benefit of employment at only uniquely progressive workplaces like Amazon, Starbucks, or REI, however, reproduces the unfeeling employer as the natural state of affairs. Thus, those who work for organizations that are good or nice enough to care about them are encouraged to feel overly grateful, even indebted to the organization, rather than view this simple courtesy as something they deserve.

Positioning coworkers as friends and family suggests that the most progressive workplace isn’t a workplace at all, but a home. It is understood that the relationship between managers and employees is one predicated on subordination. To gloss over this understanding, PWB

companies use many ways to mischaracterize the nature of the employer-employee relationship such that the employees are constituted as having more power within the organization than they actually do. Starbucks provides the most obvious example in its insistence on calling employees “partners.” The use of the word to describe hourly employees nearly requires no explanation, though executives’ frequent invocation of partner discourse in official corporate communications and hiring ads on their social media channels is worth discussing in more detail. Starbucks has used the term partner from the beginning, and Schultz in particular has been consistently vocal about the fact that in his mind, restaurant workers are indeed partners on whom the success of the company depends.³⁶¹ Successive leadership has followed suit, and the idea that all workers are partners in the company has remained a central part of the coffee giant’s brand image.

Accordingly, both the Partner and Jobs Instagram pages utterly are saturated in posts that maintain the partner narrative. Every post on the Jobs page invites prospective employees to “become a partner,” or even become “*our*” partner, language that implies an ownership stake rather than an owner-subordinate relationship. Every post on the partners page describes “what it means #tobeapartner” - and though each is hashtagged accordingly – some are more explicit than others. For instance, a photo compilation of happy, hard-at-work baristas posted to celebrate the new year is captioned “Here’s to another year with you, partners! You are the heart and soul of our company, keeping us grounded in a time of change, both inside and outside our walls.”³⁶² Here, as baristas are cast as the core of Starbucks, the people who keep the company grounded, it is implied that they are the ones with the largest influence on the character of the organization.

³⁶¹ Noam Scheiber and Julie Creswell, “Why Is Howard Schultz Taking This So Personally?,” *Business, The New York Times*, December 11, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/11/business/howard-schultz-starbucks-union.html>.

³⁶² Starbucks, “Starbucks Partners (Employees) on Instagram: ‘Here’s to Another Year with You, Partners! You Are the Heart and Soul of Our Company, Keeping Us Grounded in a Time of Change, Both inside and Outside Our Walls. We Can’t Wait to See What 2023 Has in Store. ❤️,’” Instagram, January 2, 2023, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/Cm66ceFoSpR/>.

Workers testify to their special collaborative power, too. In a hiring ad, a barista is interviewed about “the culture of belonging” at Starbucks. He explains “You are called a partner, and to me that means that you are part of, like, a collaboration.”³⁶³ The language of partnership in examples like these construct the employer-employee relationship as different at Starbucks. That the company offers a partnership, or a collaboration wherein front-line workers are celebrated as partners and together move the organization as a whole, is positioned as a uniquely progressive feature that food service workers should feel fortunate to benefit from.

Like all components of PWB, the rhetoric of partnership attempts proactively to maintain workers’ consent to what is inherently a subordinate position in the company. When the logic of the progressive workplace brand fails to be persuasive and employees vie for more power within the workplace, companies may invoke their progressive reputations reactively. Much like REI’s instance that employees are not subordinate but in fact have a valued voice and the power to affect change within the organization, Starbucks leaned hard on the partner narrative when stores started to unionize. When Schultz resumed the post of CEO to avert the unionizing crisis, he went on a tour of the country to meet with baristas and managers, in what Starbucks called “co-creation” and “collaboration sessions.”³⁶⁴ Starbucks featured these sessions quite heavily in official communications. They invited reporters, wrote about them on the corporate blog, and of

³⁶³ Starbucks, “Starbucks Jobs on Instagram: ‘From the Beginning, Starbucks Set out to Be a Different Kind of Company. One That Not Only Celebrated Coffee but Also Connection. Learn More about Becoming a Partner and Explore Opportunities through the Link in Our Bio. #ToBeAPartner #MoreThanCoffee,’” Instagram, November 16, 2023, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/Czt68bBPJCA/>.

³⁶⁴ Starbucks, “Starbucks CEO”; Starbucks, “Starbucks Jobs on Instagram: “‘What Is the Future of Work at Starbucks That We Will All Be Exceptionally Proud of?’” — Howard Schultz Partner Care Is Our Priority. That’s Why We Are Listening to Our Partners (Employees) to Ensure We Meet Them Where They Are. This Month, We Welcomed Back Our Founder Howard Schultz to the Role of CEO. In His First Week, Howard Met with Partners around the U.S., Holding Collaboration Sessions Designed to Empower Partners, Co-Create Solutions and Reimagine the Company’s Future. #ToBeAPartner,’” Instagram, April 13, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CcTBUElloD1/>; Starbucks, “Starbucks Partners (Employees) on Instagram: ‘Partners, through Recent Collaboration Sessions, Partner Surveys, the Partner Hub and More, We’ve Been Listening. Today Is Just One Step towards Co-Creating the next Chapter of Starbucks. Learn More about Today’s Investments via the Partner Hub. ❤️ #ToBeAPartner,’” Instagram, May 3, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CdHD9cbJ8vM/>.

course, featured them on their social media pages.³⁶⁵ The narrative of all of these communications about such collaboration sessions was that retail workers constitute valued partners in the organization, whose voices will be taken into account. Schultz was pictured at these events surrounded by employees. He is seen shaking their hands, participating actively in brainstorming sessions alongside them, and simply listening earnestly in the crowd.

The caption of one Instagram post about the sessions reads:

Partner care is our priority. That's why we are listening to our partners (employees) to ensure we meet them where they are. This month, we welcomed back our founder Howard Schultz to the role of ceo. In his first week, Howard met with partners around the U.S., holding collaboration sessions designed to empower partners, co-create solutions and reimagine the company's future. [#ToBeAPartner](#)³⁶⁶

It is worth noting that posts like this one which are meant to be more public facing often include a parenthetical clarification like the one above, explaining that they are not in fact describing actual corporate partners but employees. This clarification might well break the illusion that PWB seeks to achieve, yet it may also be necessary for maintaining it. This post is on the jobs page, not the one for existing partners, and its likely that viewers who don't (yet) work for the company are unaware of its equalizing lingo. If that's the case, without the clarification they might misunderstand who it is that Schultz is "co-creating" the company's future with. Making decisions with board members or shareholders – roles which the term partner typically connotes – hardly suggests a progressive corporate structure. Rather, in posts like these, it is necessary to inform viewers that at Starbucks, employees are considered partners. Further, it seems significant that this post's author declined to capitalize Schultz's abbreviated title. Perhaps the intention was

³⁶⁵ Greg Jaffe, "Howard Schultz's Fight to Stop a Starbucks Barista Uprising," *Economy*, *Washington Post*, October 8, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2022/10/08/starbucks-union-ceo-howard-schultz/>; Starbucks, "Starbucks CEO"; Starbucks, "Starbucks Jobs on Instagram," April 13, 2022.

³⁶⁶ Starbucks, "Starbucks Jobs on Instagram," April 13, 2022.

simply to adhere to the platform's casual style, but in doing so, the effect is to downplay the concentrated power conveyed by the formal title of the company's chief executive officer.

Grammatical choices like these serve to deepen the message's content of challenging typical corporate hierarchies. Just as REI CEO Eric Artz claims that the co-op is a democratic organization wherein the voices of retail workers are valued and accounted for, Starbucks positions itself as a uniquely progressive, even egalitarian company. The theme of partnership serves to set Starbucks apart as a company that truly cares for, and *listens to* its employees. It is taken as a given that, on a corporate level, other companies do not consider their employees partners, nor are they receptive to their ideas or responsive to their desires. Thus, by apparently collaborating with and listening to workers, Starbucks and REI are apparently offering a rare gift indeed to retail workers: control over their working lives. The immediate implication of this line of logic (and the stated intention of Artz and Schultz) is that unionizing in this particular instance is unnecessary.³⁶⁷ By constituting workers as *already* voiced and efficacious within the organization, and by framing this relative empowerment as a rare benefit that is unique to the organization's culture, PWB companies frame unionizing workers as spoiled and ungrateful. In a broader ideological sense, however, positioning attention to workers' "voice" as a rare gift offered by only the most progressive of companies reproduces the idea that having some control over their work lives is not something that workers inherently deserve. It implies that the natural order of things is one in which workers are powerless to affect change within the organizations that employ them, and other arrangements – be they unionized or officially democratic workplaces – are the ones that deviate from that norm. Ultimately then, this way of thinking about work as an institution encourages workers and management alike to proceed from the

³⁶⁷ Jaffe, "Howard Schultz's Fight to Stop a Starbucks Barista Uprising"; Labor Lab, "Here's the Transcript of REI's Union-Busting Podcast."

assumption that employees are powerless, placing an immense burden of proof on those who feel this need not be the case.

Meaningful Work

The final component of PWB that I have discovered is the idea that workers are lucky to be a part of an organization that allows them to serve a greater good. All three companies advertise to workers that their respective businesses are uniquely pro-social, and accordingly offer a rare opportunity to be engaged in meaningful work. Specifically, I find that the companies in question each constitute what might otherwise register as ordinary service work as something more magical, more selfless, or more of a public service. In this chapter's final section, I explore how Amazon, Starbucks, and REI each bend the reality of what its employees labor accomplishes so that the work is perceived as its own reward. In that order, I explore how Amazon likens warehouse and delivery workers to Santa's elves, Starbucks paints its baristas as first responders of sorts, and REI constructs its sales staff as wilderness rangers.

It should first be noted, however, that for some workers, meaningful work may be the most important benefit of all. A host of scholarship and popular writing has traced a change in Americans' attitude toward work in recent years, wherein they increasingly look to their jobs as a source of spiritual fulfillment, rather than a mere obligation for survival.³⁶⁸ Some have argued the development is generational. Baby boomer parents born into a cultural revolution that celebrated individuality and creative expression and grew to detest the mind-numbing monotony of manufacturing or office work impressed on their millennial children the importance of finding

³⁶⁸ Carolyn Chen, *Work Pray Code: When Work Becomes Religion in Silicon Valley* (Princeton University Press, 2023); Erik Baker, *Make Your Own Job: How the Entrepreneurial Work Ethic Exhausted America*, 1st ed (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2025); Anne Helen Petersen, *Can't Even: How Millennials Became the Burnout Generation* (Boston New York: Mariner Books, 2020).

work they were passionate about above all else.³⁶⁹ The problem with the “do what you love” aphorism, as many critics have pointed out, is that it is a highly effective managerial strategy for securing a whole-hearted devotion in employees wherein work – if it is truly one’s passion – comes before all else.³⁷⁰ It is easy to exploit this kind of devotion. Historian Eric Baker found that managers and executives in mid-twentieth century factories and offices were well aware of this, working on the advice of industrial psychologists to inculcate this kind of intrinsic motivation in their workforces rather than simply coerce compliance as they had before.³⁷¹ Indeed, workers who love their jobs find themselves working long and irregular hours that may not always be paid. They may accept low salaries or forgo benefits on the idea that some of their compensation is spiritual. As Sociologist Caroline Chen has pointed out, this religious devotion to the company mission may now be most prevalent in the tech world, where employees from Google to Juul to Juicero have all believed that their labor was saving the world.³⁷²

I certainly agree with critics who argue that work ought not be viewed as the appropriate avenue for self-fulfillment in that this perspective is obviously exploitative and so clearly sets up a great many people for existential despair and burnout when they discover, as Sarah Jaffe put it, that work won’t love us back.³⁷³ At the same time, it’s easy to see why so many workers today prioritize having a job they find meaning in. Rather than understand demand for meaningful work as a departure from the norm, complacency with the meaninglessness of most waged labor may be better seen as the historical aberration. After all, for the great majority of human history “work” – even the most demanding – was at least meaningful in the sense that there was a

³⁶⁹ Petersen, *Can’t Even*.

³⁷⁰ Miya Tokumitsu, *Do What You Love: And Other Lies about Success and Happiness*, First Regan Arts hardcover edition (New York: Regan Arts, 2015).

³⁷¹ Baker, *Make Your Own Job*.

³⁷² Chen, *Work Pray Code*.

³⁷³ Sarah Jaffe, *Work Won’t Love You Back: How Devotion to Our Jobs Keeps Us Exploited, Exhausted, and Alone* (New York: Bold Type Books, 2021).

tangible reason for it that mattered personally to its performer.³⁷⁴ Modern waged labor, by contrast, can be oppressively arbitrary. This is what many socialist activists argued in the industrial era, and Marx articulated as alienation.³⁷⁵ More recently, the late anthropologist David Graeber diagnosed an epidemic of “bullshit jobs,” which he described as jobs that are “so completely pointless, unnecessary, or pernicious that even the employee cannot justify its existence.”³⁷⁶ After publishing an essay theorizing the phenomenon, Graeber received hundreds of emails from readers who felt they had bullshit jobs. They were receptionists whose jobs were automated long ago but were still expected to sit at a desk forty hours per week and “look busy,” despite their bosses knowing they had no work to do. They were managers whose only task was to create unnecessary work for others. They were coders whose job consisted only of fixing the poorly written code of superiors, rather than simply writing quality code in the first place. In each case, even when getting paid decent salaries for accomplishing, according to them, basically nothing, these workers described the experience of their bullshit jobs as utterly miserable. Meaningless work is a special kind of torture, and, and in an economy dotted with so many pointless or outright pernicious jobs, employers who can reasonably portray themselves as accomplishing something of use or even value can emphasize this fact as a rare and coveted benefit. In the remainder of this section, I will show how each company frames its work at uniquely meaningful, for bringing joy to children, for building community in a broken world, and for guiding people through the wilderness.

Amazon workers as Santa’s elves

³⁷⁴ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Stephen Kalberg (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

³⁷⁵ Karl Marx, “Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844,” in *Social Theory Re-Wired*, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2016).

³⁷⁶ David Graeber, *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018).

While some white collar Amazon workers may have “bullshit jobs” in Graeber’s sense, warehouse workers and delivery drivers do not. There are umpteen pernicious aspects of the *business*, in that it generates a tremendous amount of unnecessary waste and pollution, relies on slave labor in the Global South, hurts small businesses, etc. But the actual labor of packing and delivering packages does provide a useful service, and corporate image-makers miss no opportunity to emphasize the importance of this mission to employees and the greater public. As demonstrated in two different videos posted to the company news YouTube channel days before Christmas, the holiday season presents just such an opportunity.³⁷⁷ Each video features young children of warehouse workers from around the world equating their parent’s work to that of Santa’s elves or the big man himself. One that appears to be focused in Canada opens on two little girls facing the camera, but seated at a craft table in a brightly colored kids’ room flush with books and toys.³⁷⁸ A box with an Amazon logo sits nicely in the background in the space between them, just visible.

Though they are both busy crafting, the clip begins with the younger of the two saying “I think Amazon helps Santa by delivering toys.”³⁷⁹ The two sisters look up to face the camera before it cuts away to footage of several workers walking through an expansive warehouse with their children in tow. On screen text explains that for the holidays, the company invited “some of the children of Amazon employees to see where their parents worked” and that the following video will show the viewer what they thought. The children are mostly younger, though a guess that they mostly fall between the ages of five to twelve seems reasonable. After some brief clips

³⁷⁷ *Amazon Employees around the World Give Their Kids a Behind-the-Scenes Look before the Holidays*, directed by Amazon News, 2024, 1:55, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dDGpNNhtQnQ>; *Amazon Employees Bring Their Kids to Work / Les Employés d’Amazon Amènent Leurs Enfants Au Travail*, directed by Amazon News, 2024, 2:10, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q6AZxLDBD_I.

³⁷⁸ *Amazon Employees Bring Their Kids to Work*.

³⁷⁹ *Amazon Employees Bring Their Kids to Work*.

of parents carrying and leading children through the space, pointing and showing them how machines work, we see another sit-down interview in the same space with two brothers this time. The older one seems to elaborate on the previous child's train of thought, saying "I think Amazon does help Santa, because...like, you could get everything off of Amazon."³⁸⁰ Another young girl poses that Santa himself gets some of the toys delivered from Amazon, and one of the older boys supposes that Santa and the company "made a little coalition that's like Santa's workshop."³⁸¹ His brother smiles and adds that yes, the two must have made a deal wherein Santa can get whatever he wants delivered from the company.

Between clips of the children musing about Amazon and Santa are more clips of parents showing their children how the production line works. The children then move from talking about Amazon helping Santa in the abstract to their parents in particular. As we see footage of a mom showing her young son what to do with a finished package, we hear his voice over say "My mom would help Santa by packing and putting stuff in the box."³⁸² Another mom showed her small, pig-tailed daughter how to scan a package, and the child's voiceover says "My mom packages stuff...like toys!"³⁸³ With videos like this one, Amazon imbues its business of delivering packages with the most sacred of childhood joys, equating itself to Santa and its employees to Santa's elves. By putting these words in the mouths of children, they amplify the message that warehouse workers play an important role in an overall important mission. Employees are not simply preparing *things* to be delivered. They are helping facilitate the spread of holiday cheer and childhood wonder around the world. This framing positions warehouse work with newfound profundity. The older pair of brothers do not compare their mom to one of

³⁸⁰ *Amazon Employees Bring Their Kids to Work.*

³⁸¹ *Amazon Employees Bring Their Kids to Work*

³⁸² *Amazon Employees Bring Their Kids to Work.*

³⁸³ *Amazon Employees Bring Their Kids to Work.*

Santa's elves, perhaps because of their age, or perhaps because she does HR for the warehouse so the analogy wouldn't quite track. They do explain, however, that her work is important because she takes care of all the other workers and makes sure they are all happy, "like a mom" is supposed to do.³⁸⁴ Surely if any job is more meaningful than helping Santa, it is being a mom.

It seems Amazon PR considers the holiday season in particular "Prime" time to hype the grandiosity of its mission. Another video features a program developed by military veterans that ensures speedy delivery of Christmas presents for active duty troops overseas.³⁸⁵ Another from the same year features a sled dog musher who delivers Amazon packages to rural Alaska.³⁸⁶ But even outside of the extra layer of significance that the holidays adds, Amazon consistently preaches that the work of delivering whatever product the customer could possibly dream of as quickly as possible, to practically anywhere, is meaningful work. The remoteness of the places Amazon delivers is a regular feature. Like the sled dog video, another boasts "How Amazon Delivers to Customers in Yellowstone National Park During the Winter."³⁸⁷ In it, both a year-round park resident/employee and a driver who makes the delivery route in the winter are featured. They both explain that the weather is severe enough in the park during winter that year-round residents employed by the park to keep a couple of locations open are more or less unable to leave. The driver cheerfully describes the perils of the job, like having to navigate slowly around Bison herds on snowy roads. The park worker describes how grateful she is to have dog food and toiletries delivered rather than having to make the long and arduous journey in and out of the park herself. The video ends with a quote from the driver, who says "Being a connection

³⁸⁴ *Amazon Employees Bring Their Kids to Work*.

³⁸⁵ *Amazon Ensures Holiday Packages Arrive on Time for Military Families*, directed by Amazon News, 2024, 3:02, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ka8-FfiuNf4>.

³⁸⁶ *Watch How Amazon Delivers to Customers in Rural Alaska*, directed by Amazon News, 2025, 2:50, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NGsg0We7LWM>.

³⁸⁷ *How Amazon Delivers to Customers in Yellowstone National Park During the Winter*, directed by Amazon News, 2024, 2:59, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dbga8Fb688Y>.

from outside the park to employees in the park, it's a good feeling. You know, it's not just driving a truck. It's definitely a little more."³⁸⁸

The sentiment conveyed with this statement is a neat end for what this video, and others like it seek to convey: the job is not *just* delivering packages. It is *more*, giving workers the intrinsic gratification of providing a vital service to people who depend on them. The choice to feature delivery to rural or hard-to-reach locations makes sense if the goal is to imbue Amazon's work with a deeper meaning. The US, at least, is vast and riddled with far-flung, unconnected corners that are difficult to reach to this day. Getting resources to the people who inhabit these places is indeed an important and laudable task. In fact, when the company was yet a mere bookseller, some of Amazon's early corporate-side employees describe kind notes that rural customers would write to them, expressing gratitude that they no longer had to drive hours to reach the closest bookstore. Understandably, notes like these left early employees feeling good about the company and their work within it. They didn't feel like they were just writing code or coming up with marketing strategies or what have you. They were doing something with a deeper meaning.³⁸⁹

At the same time, Amazon runs into a problem if its case for being a good company and thus a good employer that provides meaningful work relies on its delivery to remote locations, since the ones doing the delivering aren't likely employed by Amazon. When it comes to remote places, anyone dropping off an important package either works for the USPS or are a local resident who the company contracts on a per-package basis. Actually paying, insuring, and reimbursing an employee to deliver toilet paper to, say, the bottom of the Grand Canyon by pack

³⁸⁸ *How Amazon Delivers to Customers in Yellowstone National Park During the Winter.*

³⁸⁹ Dana Mattioli, *The Everything War: Amazon's Ruthless Quest to Own the World and Remake Corporate Power* (Little, Brown and Company, 2022), <https://www.hachettebookgroup.com/titles/dana-mattioli/the-everything-war/9780316269773/>.

mule (as one video depicts) is simply not profitable. This problem is largely why the postal service exists in the first place, because US founders saw mail delivery as a democratic public good, and the ability to receive mail a right.³⁹⁰ Indeed, contrary to private delivery services, the USPS is obligated to deliver to every address in the country, no matter how remote. Thus, rather than pay employees to make these long, sometimes dangerous trips, Amazon simply contracts the services of the USPS, a workforce who has no choice but to deliver in places where Amazon will not.³⁹¹ Thus, it is postal workers who deliver what people in rural areas purchase from the site. Although the details of the contract are not public, it is of no doubt cheaper for the retail giant to operate that way. Postal workers who are paid modestly, worked hard, often through severe staffing shortages, appear to be unhappy with the situation *particularly* in rural areas.³⁹² The influx of Amazon packages they are told to prioritize overwhelms the infrastructure the postal service is set up to handle. In a reddit post, one USPS driver complained that Amazon is “killing” the organization, and causing him to work seven day weeks that often stretch long into the evening.³⁹³ Thus, when the Yellowstone Park worker expresses her gratitude for the service, it is questionable how much of her thanks Amazon is due. Warehouse employees did indeed gather and pack her order, but this service is far from unique to the company. Since it is likely that the trucker featured drove for USPS, Amazon’s main contribution was to provide a convenient platform where it is possible to buy toiletries and dog food in the same place.

³⁹⁰ Winifred Gallagher, “A Brief History of the United States Postal Service,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, October 2020, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/brief-history-united-states-postal-service-180975627/>.

³⁹¹ Caroline O’Donovan and Jacob Bogage, “A Rural Post Office Was Told to Prioritize Amazon Packages. Chaos Ensued,” *The Washington Post*, November 28, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2023/11/28/amazon-missed-mail-rural-towns/>.

³⁹² O’Donovan and Bogage, “A Rural Post Office Was Told to Prioritize Amazon Packages. Chaos Ensued.”

³⁹³ “Amazon is killing the USPS,” Reddit Post, R/USPS, July 24, 2024, https://www.reddit.com/r/USPS/comments/1eaqsbj/amazon_is_killing_the_usps/.

Nonetheless, actual employees of Amazon can point to stories like hers to support the idea that their work has meaning and purpose.

Amazon does not boast about their dependence on entities like the USPS (they contract with private delivery companies sometimes, too), perhaps because it pokes a hole in the idea that the company is doing the important work of delivering vital goods to hard to reach places and perhaps because depending on what are technically competitors is not something worth bragging about from a business standpoint. Thus, the company has come up with an alternative model that it hopes will eventually eliminate the need to contract the services of postal workers in the HUB delivery program.³⁹⁴ In it, the company pays individually contracted drivers to deliver to a local business, and that business is responsible for delivering packages in the area at \$2.50 a pop.

While Amazon proudly touts this program as a way that it empowers local entrepreneurs with a lucrative side hustle, a comic book store employee who declined to be part of the program told the *Washington Post* they felt the offer was ironic given Amazon's monopolistic tendencies.³⁹⁵ Put all the small shops out of business, then claim to empower those that are left by paying a pittance to do something they are unwilling to employ someone to do. While some struggling shop owners expressed gratitude for the opportunity, others felt the company was merely shifting the risk onto the local businesses they claimed to be empowering.³⁹⁶ In this way, Amazon merely joins the ranks of so many other tech companies portraying precarious and poorly paid gig work as an opportunity for empowering entrepreneurs. Meanwhile, Amazon employees can feel good

³⁹⁴ Beryl Tomay Amazon Vice President, Transportation at, "Amazon Launches Amazon Hub Delivery to Empower Local Businesses across the U.S.—Here's How It Works," About Amazon, June 26, 2023, <https://www.aboutamazon.com/news/transportation/how-does-amazon-hub-delivery-work>.

³⁹⁵ Caroline O'Donovan, "Amazon Is Paying Small-Town Florists and Funeral Homes to Deliver Packages," *The Washington Post*, May 3, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2023/05/03/amazon-delivery-small-business-rural/>.

³⁹⁶ O'Donovan, "Amazon Is Paying Small-Town Florists and Funeral Homes to Deliver Packages."

about the meaningful work they are being told they are responsible for completing as packages go out to people who need them.

Starbucks baristas as public servants

For all of Amazon's attempts to imbue its mission and what its workers do with greater meaning, Starbucks takes this game to another level entirely. Its management has long confused what it actually accomplishes in the world (being a coffee-centered fast-food restaurant chain) with saving it, and the deficit between this grandstanding rhetoric and reality creates a cost primarily borne by Starbucks baristas. Journalist and social critic Naomi Klein, for instance, focused on Starbucks as one of several companies in the early '90s at the forefront of cementing the gradual transition from selling things to selling brands.³⁹⁷ Notably, the others, such as Apple and Nike, manufacture a durable product, and it is the product which acts as a vessel for the brand. Starbucks is distinct in that its product is fleeting, and the responsibility to fulfill the expectations its brand lays out lay largely at the feet of the people staffing Starbucks cafes. Unfortunately for Starbucks baristas, corporate image-makers set those expectations sky high.

Starbucks' brand has never really been just about the coffee. When Schultz bought the roaster and eventually reimagined it as a cafe in 1987, his vision was a coffeehouse suffused with the "warmth and artistry" of Italy's "coffee culture."³⁹⁸ It would be a cafe where people from all walks of life gather unhurried, engaging in lively conversation over little cups of steamed milk foam and espresso in various combinations. The "little" part must have fallen away pretty quickly. Schultz likely already knew or learned quickly that Americans are not suited to dainty European sizes and ushered in the gargantuan lattes we know and love today. It is unclear

³⁹⁷ Naomi Klein, *No Logo: 10th Anniversary Edition with a New Introduction by the Author*, 10th Anniversary edition (New York: Picador, 2009).

³⁹⁸ "About Us: Starbucks Coffee Company," accessed January 27, 2026, <https://www.starbucks.com/about-us>.

when the endless array of syrups and drizzles and shavings made their entrance, but this further step away from Italian artistry happened early enough in the company's existence to predate collective memory. Schultz has fought each step in the fast food direction, from serving what are essentially glorified milkshakes to an array of frozen, toast-to-serve breakfast sandwiches, but the growth afforded by junk food prevailed. The company he founded may be worlds apart from the particular Italian "artistry" Schultz initially sought, but what he and his predecessors have prioritized is the vibe of a coffeehouse: the "warmth" half of the original vision.

The company has long advertised its cafes as a uniquely welcoming, even healing space in a divided world, one in which friends and strangers alike can come together over a simple cup of coffee. Its mission statement, for instance, reads "With every cup, with every conversation, with every community - we nurture the limitless possibilities of human connection."³⁹⁹ Nurturing the limitless possibilities of human connection is a far grander, yet more ambiguous mission than making and serving quality beverages. For any current or potential Starbucks retail workers unsure about what this means exactly, the company's corporate communication channels are completely awash in messaging that clarifies it is they who are expected to nurture and connect with each and every customer to the utmost of their abilities, cultivating a uniquely compassionate atmosphere. Accordingly, Starbucks baristas and other cafe workers can rest assured their work has a deeper meaning. They are not *just* making drinks and snacks, they are making their communities a better place.

One common style of post on the Starbucks Jobs Instagram channel, for instance, is a single, portrait image of a smiling employee or employees at work, generally bathed in soft, warm-toned light. These posts are accompanied by text, either in the caption from the post's

³⁹⁹ "About Us."

author or a quote from the featured worker overlaying the image, that proclaims working at Starbucks is all about taking care of others. In one such portrait/quote post, a barista named Ailyn (clad in a warm smile of course) is quoted as saying “It’s all about giving back and making sure that everyone is taken care of.” The caption from corporate elaborates, affirming that “Connection and community are at the core of our Mission & Values. We work together to uplift the everyday for customers and partners (employees) – making the world a bit brighter one cup at a time.”⁴⁰⁰ The concluding message on this, as well as every single post on the Jobs Instagram page implores job seekers to “Join us. Inspire with every cup.”⁴⁰¹ Given that these posts are more numerous on the Jobs page than the one for existing partners, it seems their purpose is in part to attract a certain kind of applicant. It addresses those who are motivated by a desire to help others, and generally perform service-oriented work. Baristas that have this inclination and who believe that their work at the company is a legitimate means of “making the world brighter” and “giving back” are an important part of making Starbucks’ brand as a unique haven of compassion and care a reality for customers. Cultivating a workforce of dedicated public servants, however, has benefits for the company beyond customer satisfaction. Rather, it has the added value of, if successful, persuading Starbucks baristas that their work is uniquely good and uniquely meaningful in the food service industry, which those motivated to do good in the world likely view as a rare and desirable benefit. Indeed, its competitors no doubt advertise about having exceptional customer service, as all in the industry do. Starbucks takes this predictable branding to another level, conflating what might otherwise register as ordinary *customer* service with

⁴⁰⁰ “Starbucks Jobs on Instagram: ‘Connection and Community Are at the Core of Our Mission & Values. We Work Together to Uplift the Everyday for Customers and Partners (Employees) – Making the World a Bit Brighter One Cup at a Time. Join Us. Inspire with Every Cup. Learn More through the Link in Our Bio. #ToBeAPartner #Hiring #Opportunity,’” Instagram, July 13, 2023, <https://www.instagram.com/starbucksjobs/p/CupEJHRRa8F/>.

⁴⁰¹ Instagram, “Starbucks Jobs on Instagram,” July 13, 2023.

meaningful and extraordinary *community* service – the kind of work that, in the US economy, rarely pays and few are fortunate enough to be able to make a living at, but that pays intangible benefits of pride in contributing to the greater good.

The warm portrait and inspirational caption combination is one way in which the company tries to persuade potential employees that at Starbucks, they can make a difference. A holiday season post featuring two happy baristas holding up infamous red cups reads: “Making spirits bright in our communities all year long. ✨ We believe we’re merrier together. Join us. Inspire with every cup.”⁴⁰² Another features two embracing baristas at the register basking in the familiar soft glow of warm-toned, soothing light. The caption reads: “As our partner (employee), you have the opportunity to build relationships with your team and your community – making the world a bit brighter, one cup at a time.”⁴⁰³ Through the use of phrases such as “one cup at a time,” the posts invoke an encouraging narrative of gradual change that is common in advocacy work, where organizers are motivated by the idea that even the small tasks are meaningful; they are growing a movement little by little even if they can’t yet see big changes. Starbucks baristas, tasked with making people’s lives better in the few moments they get to interact, may indeed take comfort in the idea that they can effect a gradual, yet tangible change as one individual. Further echoing advocacy and community organizing rhetoric, these posts underscore that baristas are not alone in this mission, but serve on a dedicated, supportive team.

⁴⁰² “Starbucks Jobs on Instagram: ‘Making Spirits Bright in Our Communities All Year Long. ✨ We Believe We’re Merrier Together. Join Us. Inspire with Every Cup.’” Instagram, November 13, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/starbucksjobs/p/DCUNVwxSM2r/>.

⁴⁰³ “Starbucks Jobs on Instagram: ‘As Our Partner (Employee), You Have the Opportunity to Build Relationships with Your Team and Your Community – Making the World a Bit Brighter, One Cup at a Time. Join Us. Inspire with Every Cup. Learn More through the Link in Our Bio. #ToBeAPartner #Hiring #Opportunity,’” Instagram, September 7, 2023, <https://www.instagram.com/starbucksjobs/p/Cw5nfj7JuHg/>.

Notice that each post caption quoted above emphasizes how the job enables baristas to uplift both customers and partners. This dual theme is a near constant in posts on the Jobs page, and a handful of posts even primarily emphasize a special bond among partners. For instance, one portrait features a young barista with a glowing smile, whose visible nametag reads Morgan with a small drawn-on heart. Morgan's words are featured in the image, and she's quoted as saying "We're all just very open and kind to each other, and I feel like that's what it's all about, being kind to each other."⁴⁰⁴ In a longer video featuring Morgan, posted around the same time, she explains how supportive her co-workers and her managers are, and how positive an experience it is to come to work with such a team.⁴⁰⁵ The desired effect of emphasizing the sense of internal community among partners oriented around carrying out Starbucks' laudable mission is likely to deepen the appeal for applicants seeking a sense of purpose. Any group of people pursuing a grand mission as a team share a unique bond over their shared experience and struggle. Soldiers, police officers, nurses, first responders, and firefighters, to name a few, are lines of work widely associated with exceptionally close bonds and internal loyalty (sometimes to a fault) as well as the pursuit of a greater good. To be sure, belonging to such a tight-knit community is meaningful in and of itself, and it is often cited as a primary reason people in such professions pursue them in the first place. That the community is derived from work toward an important goal like public safety, helping the sick and injured, or national security makes the job all the more meaningful. By emphasizing the unique bond among partners, joined together in

⁴⁰⁴ Instagram, "Starbucks Jobs on Instagram," July 13, 2023.

⁴⁰⁵ "Starbucks Jobs on Instagram: 'Connection Is at the Core of Working at Starbucks. We Work Together to Uplift the Everyday for Customers and Partners (Employees) – Making the World a Bit Brighter One Cup at a Time. Join Us. Inspire with Every Cup. Explore Opportunities through the Link in Our Bio. #Hiring #ToBeAPartner #Kindness,'" Instagram, July 28, 2023, <https://www.instagram.com/starbucksjobs/reel/CvQHZb0sT-P/>.

pursuit of a kinder world, Starbucks seeks to imbue the jobs its retail workers do with this same sense of meaning, which is typically associated with careers in community or public service.

Corporate communications are in fact so carried away with the company's abstract mission that there is little mention of the fact that what the company actually does is serve people food and drinks in what is basically a fast food environment. Indeed, the fact that the coffee giant typically avoids being lumped in with the likes of McDonalds or its fast food coffee counterpart, Dunkin Donuts, is a testament to its branding. It has a drive-through, serves what is to my mind indistinguishable from an Egg McMuffin and a variety of what might as well be vaguely coffee-flavored Frosties, and employees in its cafes are expected to fulfill orders just as quickly as any fast food employee. Yet nowhere is the work characterized as fast food service on the Jobs or Partners Instagram. There are certainly many posts on the Partners page that show baristas making drinks (typically the more refined or complex ones, like lattes featuring latte art or a cold brew with shaken cold foam) yet rarely do the words that accompany these pictures even acknowledge that what retail workers are engaged in is food service. Instead, the work is always characterized as building community, helping people, or simply making the world a better place. In this way, corporate communications suggest cafe workers are not cafe workers at all, but more akin to the kind of public servants and care workers typically associated with performing meaningful work. Sometimes this claim is overt. In one video posted to the Partners Instagram page, a man clad in a green apron and standing in a Starbucks seating area speaks to the camera, addressing his fellow partners. He introduces himself as Tyler, a 12-year partner and current

store manager, and says that he wants to share how a “very vulnerable conversation with [his district manager] changed the way [he] walked into the store each and every day.”⁴⁰⁶

While viewers see footage of Tyler making drinks, working the drive through, and engaged in some sort of brainstorming session with another partner (they are seated at a table in a cafe, speaking warmly, gesturing enthusiastically and jotting things down in a notebook), he says that he has always been motivated to pursue a career in community service, a long tradition in his family. He was especially drawn to a career in law enforcement, which to him meant helping people in their most desperate moments. He explained all this one day to his district manager (DM) when she asked about his interest in the criminal justice field, saying “I just want to help people that might not know where else to turn, whose last lifeline might be dialing 911.”⁴⁰⁷ As Tyler tells it, the DM then looked him in the eyes and said “You know, you do that every single day you tie the green apron.”⁴⁰⁸ This statement allowed him to see his job in a new light, he says, and after five years as a store manager, “that same passion to help others fills my cup each day. I walk in ready to support my team, my peers, and even support my community.”⁴⁰⁹ The message in Tyler’s video is clear. Given Starbucks’ special mission, working in one of its cafes is as meaningful a community service as serving on a police force or as a first responder. The two are, apparently, indistinguishable, as the DM describes working the counter at Starbucks as accomplishing the same thing.

Lumping itself in with emergency services is a bit of a theme on Starbucks’ Partners page. There are, for instance, many posts about charity work the company finances, though

⁴⁰⁶ “Starbucks Partners on Instagram: ‘Thanks for Sharing Your Story with Us, Tyler! What Fills Your Cup at Starbucks? 🍀 #ToBeAPartner #GreenAprons,’” Instagram, accessed February 8, 2026, <https://www.instagram.com/starbuckspartners/reel/Cr063pSOWYG/>.

⁴⁰⁷ Instagram, “Starbucks Partners on Instagram.”

⁴⁰⁸ Instagram, “Starbucks Partners on Instagram.”

⁴⁰⁹ Instagram, “Starbucks Partners on Instagram.”

charity events are typically organized by workers. They post about donating to food banks, churches, schools, hospitals, and in one instance, organizing a food and supply drive on the Yakama Indian Reservation.⁴¹⁰ In each instance, the company positions itself as providing critical resources to those in need. There are also many posts about a charity program by the Starbucks Foundation, the company's philanthropic arm, called the Neighborhood Grant Program, in which partners can nominate a local nonprofit to receive funds from the Starbucks Foundation.⁴¹¹ Some of the winners have been organizations that help transgender youth, fight opioid addiction, and provide a variety of services to homeless veterans.⁴¹² On the one hand,

⁴¹⁰ "Starbucks Partners on Instagram: 🌟 ALL.IN.23' Has Landed at the Starbucks Headquarters! Seattle Is One of 23 Cities That ALL.IN. Is Hosting Events in This Summer to Impact Community Needs of Food Scarcity, Health and Education. 'While Our Focus May Be on Giving Away Backpacks and Preparing Families for Back-to-School, It's Also a Vessel for Delivering Hope, Care, and a Sincere Wish for People to Experience a Better Day,' Says Troy. 'I'm Hoping That Partners and Customers and the Community Can Experience That at Our Events. This Is Human Connection, This Is Grassroots, This Is Us Working Together Intentionally. This Is Us at Our Best.' 🌟 #ToBeAPartner #ALLIN23 #23n23"," Instagram, July 30, 2023, https://www.instagram.com/starbuckspartners/reel/CvVXZdyRDG_/; "Starbucks Partners on Instagram: 'September Is Hunger Action Month™, Feeding America's® Annual Nationwide Campaign That Inspires People to Take Action and Raises Awareness of Hunger in the U.S. We Know That Every Action – Big or Small – Is a Step toward Ending Hunger in Our Communities. Here Are Some Ways You Can Take Action This Month: 🌟 Use the Waste & Recycling App on the Store iPad to Look up Your Store's FoodShare Donation Partner and Best Practices for Donation Pick-Ups. 🌟 Use the Community Champion Portal to Take Action to Support a Local Food Bank or Hunger Relief Organization. The First 5,000 Partners to Sign-up to Volunteer, Attend a Learning Opportunity or Create a Volunteer Event on the Community Champion Portal Can Earn a \$100 Donation towards a Local Hunger Relief Nonprofit. 🌟 Wear Your FoodShare Pin to Raise Awareness about Reducing Food Waste and Taking Action to Help End Hunger. To Continue Making an Impact beyond Hunger Action Month™, Visit the Community Champion Portal for Volunteering and Donating, All Year Round. #ToBeAPartner,'" Instagram, September 5, 2023, <https://www.instagram.com/starbuckspartners/reel/Cw0NzcgxkI0/>; "Starbucks on Instagram: 'When Kindness Meets Community. 🌟 #Starbucks #ToBeAPartner #Kindness,'" Instagram, November 7, 2023, <https://www.instagram.com/starbucks/reel/CzWdFueAXdn/>.

⁴¹¹ "Starbucks Partners on Instagram: 'Starbucks Partners, Let's Make an Impact! Nominate a Local Nonprofit for a Neighborhood Grant and Help The Starbucks Foundation Support the Causes That Matter Most in Your Community. Last Round, 33,000+ Partners Nominated Local Causes — Let's Keep the Momentum Going! 🌟 Nominations Open through Feb. 23 for North America Partners 👥 Nominate an Organization You're Involved with on Your Own or as a Team ? Have Questions? Ask Your Manager for Details! Together, We Can Brew Change. 🌟 #ToBeAPartner #NeighborhoodGrants,'" Instagram, February 13, 2025, <https://www.instagram.com/starbuckspartners/reel/DGBV113JilP/>.

⁴¹² "Starbucks Partners on Instagram: 'Shift Supervisor Fay Shares Her #GreenAprons Story. 🌟,'" Instagram, June 10, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/starbuckspartners/reel/CeoD2cYFZHh/>; "Starbucks Partners on Instagram: 'Adrian, 20 and a Starbucks Barista in Mobile, Alabama, Nominated Prism United for a Neighborhood Grant. Adrian Runs the Teen Program at Prism, a Nonprofit That Supports LGBTQ+ Youth in the Region, the Same Program That Helped Him Survive His Teen Years. Adrian's Story Encapsulates the Heart of the Neighborhood Grants Program and the Power of Community. 🌟 Starbucks Is Proud to Celebrate Prism United, Which Will Use

working for a company that gives to charity might reassure employees that their employer is good in some sense, but it is not the same thing as having a meaningful job. On the other, the type of charities featured does deepen the association with community, even emergency services that the company appears to favor. For, beyond giving to service-oriented charities, some posts insinuate (albeit more subtly than in videos like Tylers) that Starbucks itself plays a role in disaster response.

It seems that a primary role of the company is to be of service throughout tragedy and assist in the healing process. After the Uvalde school shooting was followed by a mass shooting only a few weeks later at an Independence Day parade in Highland Park, Illinois, Starbucks posted somber portraits of store managers from both towns, each wearing a custom green apron embroidered with “Uvalde Strong” and “Highland Park Strong,” respectively. The caption reads:

Following the recent mass shootings in communities across the nation, store managers Nancy from Uvalde, Texas and Colby from Highland Park, Illinois, gathered with fellow partners in Seattle at the Starbucks Support Center to discuss the importance of wellbeing, community and the evolving Third Place. Nancy and Colby, we are forever proud to be your partner and thankful for the ways you've served your community through such tragedies. Learn more about this moving event at the link in bio.⁴¹³

Though it is unclear what was discussed at the meeting referenced (the link in bio referenced is no longer posted), the implication seems to be that it is Starbucks partners responsibility to serve the communities they work in by providing comfort and kindness in their darkest moments. This

the Award from The Starbucks Foundation to Help Fund the Region’s First LGBTQ+ Youth Community Center. Click on the Link in the Bio to Learn More about the Neighborhood Grants Program. #ToBeAPartner,” Instagram, June 24, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/starbuckspartners/reel/C8mr8j6JZ1Z/>; “Starbucks Partners on Instagram: ‘It’s More than Coffee, It’s Connection’ 🍷. Through The Starbucks Foundation’s Neighborhood Grants Program, Partners like Joey Are Turning Everyday Moments of Connection into Real Community Impact by Nominating Local Nonprofit Organizations They Care Deeply about. #ToBeAPartner #NeighborhoodGrants,” Instagram, August 18, 2025, <https://www.instagram.com/starbuckspartners/reel/DNgRiFGpdST/>.

⁴¹³ “Starbucks Partners on Instagram: ‘Following the Recent Mass Shootings in Communities across the Nation, Store Managers Nancy from Uvalde, Texas and Colby from Highland Park, Illinois, Gathered with Fellow Partners in Seattle at the Starbucks Support Center to Discuss the Importance of Wellbeing, Community and the Evolving Third Place. Nancy and Colby, We Are Forever Proud to Be Your Partner and Thankful for the Ways You’ve Served Your Community through Such Tragedies. Learn More about This Moving Event at the Link in Bio.’,” Instagram, August 10, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/starbuckspartners/p/CghyYpJJVpK/>.

seems to be the role of the “evolving Third Place” mentioned, as the term is a sociological one connoting a social gathering place critical to community building. Invoking the term in this context suggest that Third Places like Starbucks cafes play a role in providing comfort and healing in a broken and divided world, and that this mission depends on partners like Nancy and Colby. Thus, Starbucks does not merely support organizations on the frontlines of disaster response, it is a peer among them. Retail workers in its cafes are engaged in their own important kind of emergency service.

This theme popped up once again during the destructive California wildfires of 2025, when company posts again depicted Starbucks partners mobilizing to help at a moment of crisis. In one video, viewers first see baristas huddled around a team leader in a store, saying “We have pastries, we have cups, we have beans...our goal is to get it to the people who need it the most.”⁴¹⁴ Viewers then see assembly-like lines of partners gathering supplies: water in bottles, large spigot jugs, and things in Starbucks bags which transitions into footage of a make-shift coffee and beverage service in a parking lot at sunrise. The video shows people clad in safety gear, some of them firefighters (the video shows a close up of a LA county firefighters patch on a man’s jacket, another with a forest service patch), others likely first responders of other kinds gathered around tables where the spigot jugs and other goods are being distributed. In one shot, you can hear a partner behind a table loaded with Starbucks cups says “You guys are saving lives, here’s some coffee.” A birds eye view reveals that the gathering is enormous, and located in front of the Rose Bowl. An amplified voice says “Thanks again for all your hard work out

⁴¹⁴ “Starbucks News & Stories on Instagram: ‘We’re Deeply Proud of Our Partners (Employees) for Quickly Mobilizing to Support Their Neighbors, First Responders and Local Communities in Southern California with Crucial Supplies. Their Teamwork, Tenacity and Resilience in the Face of These Wildfires Has Been Nothing Short of Incredible. Together with Our Customers, The Starbucks Foundation Is Donating More than \$1 Million to Aid in Relief and Rebuilding Efforts in the Region. #SoCalStrong,’” Instagram, January 16, 2025, <https://www.instagram.com/starbucksnews/reel/DE535w-JOg7/>.

there. We do what we need to do to get all the folks that have been affected by this disaster, to give them a little bit of normalcy.”⁴¹⁵ As the voice says this last part, the video cuts to a chalkboard outside a Starbucks that reads in cheerful letters “We are open and happy to serve our community!”⁴¹⁶ The insinuation is that by remaining open throughout disaster and providing affected community members and firefighters the comfort of coffee and pastries, Starbucks partners are performing a kind of emergency service of their own.

The video continues with a cut to a young man in a green apron at an LA store near the wildfires, armed with a cup and a sharpie. He explains that he and his coworkers are writing encouraging messages on each cup, and viewers see a partner writing “we’re here for you,” before holding it up and smiling broadly at the camera. It then cuts to what appears to be the lone customer in the store, a woman telling the camera that “it’s good to have that little place again where people are gathering together. Like, we know this place. And I was really glad to see that the baristas that work here are back, and that they’re safe.”⁴¹⁷ It seems this customer has perfectly articulated the role that Starbucks sees itself playing in moments like this one: a familiar, comforting place where the doors will be open, you will be treated with compassion, and communities can turn to in their darkest hours. Working for such a place is less about food service than it is about selfless community service. When the company emphasizes the unique and valuable role that Starbucks baristas play in their communities, they promise baristas that they are cashing in on a rare opportunity to be involved in truly meaningful work, the sort of work that might not be available to them otherwise. Police generally attend college and then a training program. Most forms of social work require at least one expensive degree, often two.

⁴¹⁵ Instagram, “Starbucks News & Stories on Instagram.”

⁴¹⁶ Instagram, “Starbucks News & Stories on Instagram.”

⁴¹⁷ Instagram, “Starbucks News & Stories on Instagram.”

Non-profits, too, prefer college degrees and experience in the form of low or unpaid internships. Getting trained as a first responder is expensive too, and becoming a fully-fledged firefighter is no cakewalk; jobs are competitive and applicants must be in excellent physical shape. By repeatedly emphasizing baristas as supporting the work of service providers, and creating a special, community-building space, Starbucks argues to current and prospective employees that their work has just as much meaning, only with a much lower barrier to entry.⁴¹⁸

There is an obvious dark side of selfless work, and imagining Starbucks retail workers nominally responsible for doing the work of first responders, social workers, and the like. Namely, this kind of service work is a much larger responsibility than baristas and even their supervisors are compensated (or trained) for. Yet they are expected to take on some of the risk and sacrifice inherent in this line of work regardless. Take, for instance, an LA-based Starbucks barista's personal Instagram post during the same California wildfires, which was quickly re-posted by Starbucks Workers United (SBU) and went viral.⁴¹⁹ It shows the view from just outside the store, where a visibly massive fire burns in the hills not so far away. Text that SBU overlaid on the post explains that the company was forcing employees to keep the store open despite the circumstances. More text says that "Profits should NEVER be prioritized over safety - period." True enough, though it seems doubtful the decision to keep the store open was rooted in concern over losing a few days' revenue from that particular store - a drop in the bucket for

⁴¹⁸ That is not to say anyone can get hired at Starbucks; the company does have a reputation for being selective in who it hires as the job is demanding and baristas must embody the brand.

⁴¹⁹ "Starbucks Workers United on Instagram: 'EDIT: UPDATE VIDEO ON OUR PROFILE! Some Starbucks Workers in LA Are Being Forced to Work in Areas Impacted by the Recent Wildfires - Even in Places Where the Air Quality Is Unsafe. Some Partners Were Told by Management That Their Stores Must Open Because "the Community Depends on Us," Ignoring That Some of These Workers Had to Evacuate Their Homes Themselves. Profits Should NEVER Be Prioritized over Safety, and We Call on Starbucks to Not Only Give Impacted Workers the Time off They Need, but Bargain in Good Faith with Our Union so That We Can Enact Firmer Safety Protections for Our Workers. (Video Taken from the Parking Lot of a Starbucks That Stayed Open) #tobeapartner #unionstrong #1u #losangeles #lawildfires #wildfires,'" Instagram, accessed February 4, 2026, <https://www.instagram.com/sbworkersunited/reel/DEqA6GSyUZb/>.

Starbucks. Rather, what executives were likely concerned about was the company's aspirational brand: a critical Third Place, one that never closes its doors on its community even, perhaps especially, in the wake of disaster. Recall the sign outside the store in the feel-good video about the fires put together by corporate and described above: "We are open, and happy to serve our community!"⁴²⁰ This kind of selfless service is indeed a grand, and laudable mission, one that baristas may indeed be excited to pursue and even attract them to the company in the first place. When a job involves such a grandiose mission, however, it is rife with possibilities for employees to be exploited. In this case, baristas may be convinced that remaining at their posts as the hills around them burn, or, as a loose gunman rampages nearby, is part of their job, as the smiling, big-hearted employees featured in the company posts appear to have been. If they are not convinced by branding, as the union and disgruntled baristas clearly were not in the latter instance, they may be forced to stay anyways. Apart from such dire circumstances though, imbuing barista's work with such an urgent mission may compel them to tolerate what might otherwise be intolerable circumstances in their day-to-day work, circumstances imposed unnecessarily by management to redistribute company profits from labor to themselves. Severe understaffing, stagnant wages, unpredictable schedules, and being subjected to all manners of abuse by customers, all of the conditions described in the previous chapters might seem just a little more worthwhile if the job has more meaning than making coffee. Indeed, workers might even feel fortunate to be employed by a service industry company that is actually doing good in the world, something that is indeed hard to come by in any industry.

REI "Green Vests" as wilderness rangers

⁴²⁰ Instagram, "Starbucks News & Stories on Instagram."

While Starbucks' mission of healing a divided world is a bit divorced from the fact that its business is making and selling drinks and snacks, the meaningful work that REI promises its retail workers that their labor supports has at least a closer connection to reality. At every turn, the company's hiring website and social media channels suggest that working in one of the co-op's stores is not just about selling pricey apparel and top-notch gear, it's about making the outdoors accessible to everyone. The logic here is layered. First is the implication that owning pricey apparel and gear are a prerequisite to spending enjoyable time outdoors. While true that certain outdoor activities do require specific gear, hiking is not impossible or even unpleasant without a Patagonia fleece. But Instagram posts featuring knowledgeable REI sales staff, termed "Green Vests" after their uniforms, making enthusiastic recommendations about all the products they personally use in their own outdoor adventures confirm the messaging on the company's hiring webpages: people need their advice about what to buy before they go outside. Second, if workers start to second guess whether selling upscale outdoor goods is really compatible with lowering barriers to entry, the hiring webpages and promotional videos remind them that REI is not a corporation, it's a co-op. As a co-op, this logic goes, the company's objective is not about profit, it is about impact: in this case, preserving outdoor spaces and getting more people enjoying them. Just as REI leans heavily on its status as a co-operative to persuade workers that they have a voice in the company, it uses this same line of logic to suggest that their work is in the service of an important mission rather than their employer's bottom line.

The idea that Green Vests are primarily enabling people's outdoor adventures rather than simply selling them things because REI is not a money hungry corporation but an innocent little co-op is dominant on the hiring section of the company's website. On the career site's landing page is a banner image of a man (decked out in stylish apparel, accessories, and a backpacking

pack) seated on the rim of a grand canyon, if not *the* Grand Canyon, gazing over its natural splendor.⁴²¹ Already, the message is that careers at REI mean making scenes like this one happen. Lower down on the page, there are three quotes paired with three images of an employee named Sam, a fit-looking man portrayed on different trails and in a variety of gear and outfits. The first two quotes tell prospective employees that the team at REI is tight-knit and supportive, and that the only way to help customers find products is to use those products yourself. In the last quote, however, Sam tells viewers that “It’s not just about selling gear. It’s about encouraging adventure outside.”⁴²² Here Sam neatly sums up REI’s argument to Green Vests about why their work has a deeper meaning, saying plainly the message promoted across the site with abundant phrases such as “Your work helps inspire and enable a life outside for everyone,” and “REI co-op is a place where we move forward together, grow with purpose, are empowered to thrive and trailblaze for impact.”⁴²³ By repeatedly emphasizing aspirational abstractions like growth, purpose, trailblazing, and impact, REI seeks to persuade employees that they are working toward a greater goal, and to detract from the fact that at a base level, the organization’s goal is the same uninspiring and unsexy goal of any other retailer: profit.

In fact, the website informs viewers that moving forward together, growing with purpose, being empowered to thrive, and trailblazing for impact are REI’s four core principles. For each principle, there is a short video testimonial from a different employee. Each one explains either how working for the company enabled them personally to get out in the wild more (something that would fall under the benevolent benefits section of this chapter), or how the job enabled them to help others access the outside. An employee named Marionette’s testimony is offered as

⁴²¹ REI, “Careers Home | REI.”

⁴²² REI, “Careers Home | REI.”

⁴²³ REI, “Careers Home | REI.”

an example of what it means to “trailblaze for impact.”⁴²⁴ Now a sales specialist for the company, she explains that she used to be a stay-at-home mom, where she enjoyed time with her family and organizing outdoor activities in her community. Viewers hear her voice over footage of her at first in her green vest at work in the shoe department, then a still image of her family out on the trail, footage of her walking a trail solo, and photos of her hiking with groups of what appear to be mostly fellow women of color around the same age, smiling happily in a variety of weather conditions. More footage of her walking a trail with a friend dissolves into footage of an REI store, and the camera is suddenly following Marionette in her green vest through the aisles. Her voiceover continues “It was never my intention to re-join the workforce, but someone told me about REI and honestly, I wish I would have discovered it earlier and made a career out of it.”⁴²⁵ The camera is by now showing Marionette tying shoelaces and showing customers different outsoles. This dissolves into a beaming Marionette walking toward the camera away from the shoes, when suddenly she is outside on a trail, clad in a rain jacket and hiking pack and the same friendly smile. Her voiceover tells the audience “I’m able to keep doing what I love: connecting underrepresented groups to the outdoors.” Still images of Marionette in a big, smiling, diverse crowd posed in some beautiful woods fill the screen before flashing back to footage of her hiking solo, this time taking in the healing sight of a waterfall. Her voice says “I keep pushing forward because what I do impacts lives.”⁴²⁶

Connecting underrepresented groups to the outdoors does indeed impact lives, and is certainly meaningful work. However, it is unclear how exactly selling shoes at REI enables Marionette to do this beyond perhaps subsidizing the work she was already doing on her own

⁴²⁴ Viewers must click the career page’s “more” button to reveal the four video testimonials for each core principle. REI, “Careers Home | REI.”

⁴²⁵ REI, “Careers Home | REI.”

⁴²⁶ REI, “Careers Home | REI.”

time. Indeed, it seems the company is fond of taking credit for the important work that actual trailblazing employees like Marionette do *outside* of work, suggesting that joining the sales staff means actively working toward those same goals. The hiring website takes special care to emphasize how the company is committed to diversifying outdoor spaces in terms of race, gender, and ability (perhaps in part because executives felt the need to defend against complaints of rampant racism among supervisory staff and management that went unpunished).⁴²⁷ Text on the home screen above the testimonials assures the viewer that “As a co-op, we are committed to becoming a fully inclusive, antiracist, multicultural organization. Your work helps inspire and enable a life outside for everyone.”⁴²⁸ While this text also positions a supposed lack of organizational discrimination as a rare benefit, in this context, it suggests that employees get to work toward achieving this same goal for outdoor space. Another testimony focuses on how the featured employee started a hiking group for Black men after coming to work for the company. It is unclear how selling expensive apparel and gear is supposed to increase access for marginalized communities, a likely barrier of entry for many in those communities being cost. Instead, these claims appear to be tied to the volunteer efforts of employees, not organized by the co-op and very little of which the employees are likely to be compensated for. Yet by positioning the community organizing work that its employees do off the clock as part and parcel of the company’s purpose, REI staff may be assured their work has the grander purpose of increasing access to the outdoors for all.

Frequent Instagram posts featuring Green Vests deepen the impression that they are more than salespeople, constituting them as a particular kind of expert whose special knowledge

⁴²⁷ See, for instance: *Why REI’s Progressive Image Is a Sham*, directed by More Perfect Union, 2022, 5:53, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x5-NRMWCeTI>.

⁴²⁸ REI, “Careers Home | REI.”

would-be recreators need to enable their adventures. For instance, around the holiday season, the company began a series of posts with the title “Don’t Guess...Ask a Green Vest!” Each are videos where a few sales staff give personal, themed recommendations based on their own experiences. One such post begins with a smiling, waving Green Vest outside an REI store who introduces themselves as Sam and says the time for the REI holiday sale has come.⁴²⁹ Sam turns and invites the viewers to follow along and come check out the store’s latest deals. Inside, a Green Vest named Dante holds up an REI brand down jacket, which text lets viewers know is 30% off. Dante says the jacket is his favorite layer at the moment, and he just purchased the olive green color he’s showing off for himself. The next Green Vest featured holds up a waterproof trail shoe, saying he loves it for longer trips. Then the camera cuts back to Sam, who, standing among clothes and packs, says dramatically with a clap between each word, “The REI Powderbound bootpack.” Holding the pack up, Sam says it will be perfect for storing their boots and all their ski apparel, comes with “handy pockets, and tons of space” before slinging the pack over their shoulder, walking off saying “I’ll see you on the slopes.”⁴³⁰ This sign-off is said with some sassy impatience, as if Sam cannot wait any longer to get out skiing, and can simply leave the store to do so at will.

From one perspective, posts featuring charismatic Green Vests like Sam offering product information are an unremarkable sales tactic in a world of digital shopping. From another, they do not simply inform customers but communicate something important about and to REI sales staff. Each Green Vest featured spoke of a personal connection to the products they

⁴²⁹ “REI on Instagram: ‘When There Are so Many Deals and so Little Time, It’s Easy to Get Lost in the Holiday Shopping Sauce. Luckily, Our Green Vests Always Have the Best Recs out There. Here’s Their Quick Field Guide to the REI Holiday Sale: 🧥 REI Co-Op 650 Down Jacket 🥾 Oboz Katabatic Shoes 🧦 REI Co-Op Powderbound Boot Pack Shop the Sale Now Thru Nov 24! Link in Bio.’” Instagram, November 17, 2025, <https://www.instagram.com/rei/reel/DRKkW2zCRHF/>.

⁴³⁰ Instagram, “REI on Instagram,” November 17, 2025.

recommended. They all either had used or were purportedly planning to use them on their own adventures. Whether or not these admissions are genuine, when Green Vests are featured this way, they are constructed as expert outdoorsmen whose advice matters to customers seeking adventures of their own. The fact that Green Vests are so frequently featured in company posts of their own accord (doubtfully for any extra money or reward), giving advice about how they recreate affirms the idea that their work is more than just sales for sales' sake. It is to help people who may not know how to get outside. The captions on these posts further affirm Green Vests as wilderness experts. Sam's video caption reads: "When there are so many deals and so little time, it's easy to get lost in the holiday shopping sauce. Luckily, our Green Vests always have the best recs out there."⁴³¹ Green Vests know best, and being an expert outdoorsperson willing to share that knowledge with other non-expert members of the broader community is indeed more meaningful than contributing to board members' salaries.

Posts that feature Green Vests outside their respective REI stores do even more to affirm the idea that their work is more akin to wilderness guiding than it is to sales. One such video post begins with the camera approaching a woman gathering things from her open car trunk at a trailhead.⁴³² Text overlaying the screen reads "Trailhead prep with REI Green Vest Kelsi," as the person filming asks how she's doing and what she's hiking today. Kelsi, already decked out in a trendy hiking outfit complete with a beanie and headlamp (curious, since it appears to be mid-day), flannel and down vest, REI branded leggings with Darn Tough socks worn on the outside, says that she is going to hike up Moat Mountain. She then proceeds to list off all the things she brings with her when she does this hike: a sit pad for the summit (here the camera pans over the

⁴³¹ Instagram, "REI on Instagram," November 17, 2025.

⁴³² "REI on Instagram: 'Ever Wonder What REI Green Vests Bring on the Trail? Kelsi—Avid Hiker and REI Store Employee—Shares Her Favorite Gear, Snacks and Go-to Patagonia Layer. Shop Her Picks and More Hiking Must-Haves at the Link in Bio,'" Instagram, September 9, 2025, https://www.instagram.com/rei/reel/DOZPSdHkpE_.

sit pad in the trunk of her car), snacks (the camera pans over a snack bar and a protein-infused stroopwaffle, both sold at REI) and, as she puts it, “definitely my layers.”⁴³³ The camera pans over a tangle of clothes with a Patagonia fleece zip and puffer jacket prominently featured.

The cameraperson asks “What’s your favorite layer?” Pulling out the puffer jacket from the pile and holding it up to her torso, she says “My Nano Puff. It’s just so comfy and cozy, and nice to have up at the summit.” The caption reads “Ever wonder what REI Green Vests bring on the trail? Kelsi—avid hiker and REI store employee—shares her favorite gear, snacks and go-to Patagonia layer.”⁴³⁴ The video and caption position Kelsi – both an “avid hiker” and someone with the extensive product expertise that comes with being a Green Vest – as having special knowledge to share about how to hike, and how to hike the particular trail at which she is shown. Rather than selling Patagonia jackets, Kelsi is educating an audience about an area of wilderness she knows well. The summit is cold, the ground is hard though there’s a view that warrants lingering, and the trail is long enough that you’ll want a snack. Forest rangers give visitors to public lands this kind of routine, yet helpful insider information every day. In posting videos like these, REI likens Green Vests to guides or rangers, their job to equip the public with all the information they might need to enjoy particular outdoor areas. Further, a tremendous amount of posts make it plain that it is not only humans who need special advice about what gear they need to recreate properly, but dogs. Just as people need particular snacks, water bottles, and fleeces to get outside, their dogs need name-brand harnesses, snow booties, intricately patterned leashes and collars, and top-of-the-line collapsing water bowls to accompany their humans on adventures.⁴³⁵ Green Vests know which ones you’ll need when and where.

⁴³³ Instagram, “REI on Instagram,” September 9, 2025.

⁴³⁴ Instagram, “REI on Instagram,” September 9, 2025.

⁴³⁵ “REI on Instagram: ‘Need a Little Resolution Inspiration? #REIPartner: @adam.Northwest Has Some Great Ideas. And We’ll Help You Stick to ‘Em 🍌 Have Some Already? Tell Us in the Comments!’,” Instagram, January

Beyond digital communications, the actual green vests that sales staff are named for themselves do much work to deepen the association between employees and some sort of wilderness guide or ranger, perhaps crossed with a girl or boy scout uniform.⁴³⁶ They are a close match for the shade of green associated with uniform shirts of forest rangers and have the same, logo-clad breast pocket. Forest ranger uniforms tops come with patches, badges, and pins and REI sales staff are encouraged to adorn their green vests with similar, pinned-on decorations promoting things like favorite brands and personal outdoor-related interests. Further, there is an additional REI logo embroidered on the back in a brighter shade of green that bears a strong resemblance to something one might find embroidered on the sleeve of a wildland firefighter or a civilian conservation corps member. It depicts two crossed pickaxes with the words “Co-Op est. 1938” in the negative space created by the cross. For corporate communications to effectively detract from the fact that sales staff are sales staff, positioning them as scouts, guides, or ambassadors to the great outdoors, they must look the part. It helps that in such communications, they are frequently referred to by the color of their uniforms rather than as retail staff or sales representatives. This careful positioning works to persuade Green Vests that their work has a deeper meaning. They are dedicated scouts earning their wilderness badges as well as knowledgeable experts helping people get out into the outdoors.

8, 2026, https://www.instagram.com/rei/reel/DTQejiOib_O/; “REI on Instagram: ‘Don’t Leave Your Gear Trapped behind the Screen, Bring It Outside. 🧡 Our Cyber Sale Is Here! Shop Now through 12/8 — Link in Bio. Discount Based on Original Prices. While Supplies Last.’” Instagram, November 30, 2025, https://www.instagram.com/rei/reel/DRr6U_WEbvh/; “REI on Instagram: ‘Shopping the Cyber Sale Is Kinda like Navigating a Virtual Trail, No? Good Thing Our Green Vests Are Here to Guide Us with Their pro Picks: @ruffwear Gear: Grip Trex Dog Boots @rei Co-Op Cycles REV Bike for Kids @nomadix Towels & Blankets @altrarunning Lone Peak 9 Explore Our Cyber Sale Now Thru 12/8! Link in Bio.’” Instagram, December 3, 2025, <https://www.instagram.com/rei/reel/DRzx2awCc0L/>.

⁴³⁶ “REI on Instagram: ‘Every Vest Tells a Story. Every Pin Is a Chapter,’” Instagram, December 17, 2025, <https://www.instagram.com/rei/reel/DSX0aomlBq9/>.

If workers start to question the degree to which their jobs are really about this important mission, the hiring website reminds them emphatically that REI is a co-op, which apparently means money is a distant concern compared to the organization's mission to make the outdoors a space for everyone. When prospective employees navigate to the "Inside REI" page of the co-op's hiring website, the banner image that fills the screen is the front entry of a store with neon letters spelling "OPT OUTSIDE," reminding viewers from the get-go that REI cares more about its mission than its bottom line.⁴³⁷ Scrolling down, there is a large text block with the header "Different by nature, not business as usual," further suggesting that REI is hardly a business at all, it's an outdoor association. Beneath the headline the text reads "The co-op was built by people pursuing honest ideas with spirit and ingenuity. They set out in search of a better way, and weren't afraid to break convention to find it."⁴³⁸ Despite the ambiguity of these sentences, the implication is that the co-op's founders were unconcerned with monetary gain from the start. Descriptors like honest, genuine, and authentic, however vague, are typically used to connote intrinsic motivations rather than extrinsic ones – wealth especially. Searching for a "better way" and "breaking convention" further implies breaking the mold of a corporate way of life, working 9 to 5 in an office for the man so one can keep up with the Joneses. From the get-go, the hiring website wants prospective employees to know the organization they'll work for is above all of that materialistic stuff. Working for REI means following the higher calling of a life lived outdoors, and helping others do the same.

An animated video next to this text elaborates on what it means to work at REI co-op. It opens on the sounds of traffic and to a wide angle view of a cityscape, an individual standing on the street with a dog on a leash. The camera pans up toward the sky, and as it rises above the

⁴³⁷ "Inside REI | REI," Inside REI | REI, accessed February 8, 2026, <https://www.rei.jobs/inside-rei?>

⁴³⁸ REI, "Inside REI | REI."

city, traffic sounds give way to birds chirping, and a narrator asks “Did you ever wonder if there was a different way to live life?”⁴³⁹ Her words appear in text on the screen, as does an animated bird, flapping freely in the sky. The choice to literally rise above the city seems intentionally symbolic of a higher calling, communicating that REI is about transcending the rat race. A somber piano chord strikes. She continues “This is the story of 23 people who did. 23 people who found an answer to that question in the mountains.”⁴⁴⁰ The camera pans back down, this time on a mountain range and vista that overlooks it. In the foreground, there is a group of people, their backs to the camera and faces to the mountain view, holding binoculars, maps, and simply beholding. The voice elaborates “23 climbing buddies who made a choice to shape their life around what they loved....” Here, the camera widens to reveal the friends are standing atop a heart-shaped butte, out of which the mountain rises. One person is climbing up the side of the butte. The message here is clear. If you love nature, working at REI is about doing what you love. She continues, “...which led to a simple idea: to build a business around a life outside.”⁴⁴¹ The camera pans over and the mountain range continues, with a hiker, deer, wilderness, and a biker. The narrator continues “And because they loved mountains more than money, they formed a co-op.”⁴⁴² As she says this, the camera switches to a birds eye view of people collaborating to move the letters spelling “co-op” to the center of the screen. There are hikers with walking sticks and a dog, campers warming themselves by the fire, and a walker checking out a map surrounding the letters. The video goes on to explain what a co-op is, the voice explaining that

⁴³⁹ REI, “Inside REI | REI.”

⁴⁴⁰ REI, “Inside REI | REI.”

⁴⁴¹ REI, “Inside REI | REI.”

⁴⁴² REI, “Inside REI | REI.”

co-ops are made up of members. “In our case, millions of members, members who come together for a common cause.”⁴⁴³

Here, there are two false premises worth unpacking. First is the idea that consumer co-ops operate as communes of some kind, everyone pitching in in service of a collective goal. In practice, REI members have little control over what actually happens in the organization, as the co-op is much more akin to a representative, rather than popular democracy. Members can vote on some things, like board members, but there is still a board of people calling the shots, and it is a good bet the field of candidates is typically limited to people who are actually quite interested in money, maybe even more so than mountains. Second, then, is the clearly stated premise that co-ops are unconcerned with profit, preoccupied instead with a grander mission. That may have been true when the co-op was founded, primarily, it seems, as a place where the 23 friends referenced in the video could all pitch in for mountaineering gear and share it. Yet nothing about the structure of a consumer co-op is antithetical to the profit motive (REI reported 3.53 billion in sales in 2024).⁴⁴⁴ Co-op members who pay a joining fee qualify for dividends, yes, but these are always dependent on how much they purchase, and often (including at REI) only to be spent within the organization. This is not the structure of a charity, it is not even a non-profit, like the video seems to suggest (and non-profits, too, can and do try to turn a profit).

Further, as organizing workers and outside watchdogs have observed, REI’s board has been subject to a slow takeover by formerly corporate executives, who have run the co-op as any private equity-owned firm would be run: everything is geared toward maximizing profits in the short term, which always means funneling money from labor to management. REI, today a behemoth in the outdoor retailing industry, grows harder to distinguish from the corporations it

⁴⁴³ REI, “Inside REI | REI.”

⁴⁴⁴ “<https://www.Rei.Com/Impact>,” REI, accessed February 8, 2026, <https://www.rei.com/impact>.

defines itself against. In all its calls to be an organization that stands for reconnecting people to a simpler, more authentic life spent in nature, away from the materialism that confronts us in the city, the deeper meaning that REI has constructed for its sales staff is perhaps especially ironic. The point of communing with the natural world is to transcend the ego, to be unconcerned with things like shopping and aesthetics. Perversely, REI staff are indirectly tasked with selling expensive material goods and a general aesthetic that are meant to connote an opposition to this very kind of materialism. But this is not what REI sales staff are told by the hiring website or corporate social media channels. Instead, they are assured that when you work as an REI Green Vest, you get to do what you love: be outside, be connected to nature, and grow that same love in others, perhaps especially those who have been made to feel unwelcome in outdoor spaces in the past, or marginalized groups who might stand to gain even more from the healing power of nature. This is indeed a laudable goal, so like Starbucks and Amazon employees, the staff of REI stores may feel lucky to have a service industry job with a deeper meaning.

Implications of the appeal to meaningful work

In debunking the lofty missions that these companies claim their respective employees' labor supports, I do not mean to argue that the jobs their workers do have no value, or that workers are wrong to see meaning in their work. I mean instead to highlight the harm that comes from mischaracterizing the work that employees are actually engaged in, tethering any meaning inherent in the job to grandiose abstractions or worse, other industries entirely. The other professions already command a great deal of respect; the status of first responders and wildlife rangers is widely recognized, as is their importance to society. By insisting that service industry jobs are only meaningful or important when they are not really service industry jobs at all reaffirms the idea that such work is not deserving of respect or recognition. Baristas' jobs, for

instance, require tremendous speed, precision, memory, stamina, patience, charisma, and the ability to do several things at once. Doing it well is a formidable skill, and it ought to command respect in its own right. Perhaps more importantly, part of the reason it takes so much skill is that there is a huge demand for food and drinks that baristas serve, especially at Starbucks. Baristas, warehouse packers, delivery drivers, and retail sales workers all do skilled, and valuable labor in their own right. These jobs indeed have meaning, but by positioning them as both something they are not, and as getting a rare opportunity to do something worthwhile as a member of the broader community, employers reinforce the idea that their employees are getting something extra, something special, something that is more than they deserve.

Conclusion

All workers deserve meaningful employment, to have some decision-making power in their workplaces, and to be compensated well and receive benefits. Yet as I have argued in this chapter, the progressive workplace brand undermines these notions at every turn. When Amazon celebrates itself for paying warehouse workers 15 dollars an hour, or REI insists that its employees have special power within the organization because they work for a co-op rather than a corporation, or Starbucks waxes poetic about its mission and positions its baristas as having the special privilege of serving in its ranks of community healers, they are reiterating to employees that these are all things they do not deserve and ought instead be eternally grateful for. This is the core function of PWB, what I have described here as a form of incorporational rhetoric that seeks to constitute the companies who adopt the brand as extraordinarily generous employers and their employees as the fortunate recipients of undue benevolence. These examples further summarize PWB's thematic components: framing standard or modest benefits as extraordinary gifts, mischaracterizing the employer–employee relationship as one of equal partnership, and

portraying otherwise ordinary service work as uniquely meaningful. In any circumstance, receiving a generous gift places a person in the giver's debt, a position that is already wrought with possibilities for exploitation. Add the tremendous amount of power than employers hold over employees, and the cultural condition wherein being given something one has not sufficiently earned is considered a moral blight, and these possibilities only deepen and grow more dire.

Indeed, it is my contention that in all three cases examined here, the progressive workplace brand functioned primarily as a means of securing workers' consent to poor working conditions. The fact that each company faced a union-drive, on the one hand, offers some reason to hope that when conditions grow poor enough, the difference between rhetoric and reality can be exploited by organizers for real change. On the other hand, as I discussed in Chapter One, union gains within each company were modest, as the vast majority of stores within each company remain un-unionized and likely never even held a vote. The organizing wave further appears to have ebbed. This sobering reality suggests that constituting one's workforce as forever in your debt, as undeserving yet generously spoiled all the same, is an effective means of securing their consent to poor treatment. When the idea that no one deserves anything they haven't earned through their own hard work and ingenuity is commonplace, a person who has been persuaded that they are already getting more than their labor entitles them to is unlikely to push for even more, and may even be hostile to the idea. The task for organizers is to upend ideas about what kind of work entitles whom to what, and about what makes a person deserving. This is, of course, a tall order, the difficulties of which I explore in the following chapter.

Chapter Four

It's Not Daycare: How Labor Performs the American Work Ethic

Introduction: Trader Joe's and the Progressive Workplace Brand

In the Spring of 2022, an employee of Trader Joe's in Hadley, Massachusetts told the progressive media outlet *More Perfect Union* that the popular grocer's customers are under the impression that the company is "an amazing place to work and they take such good care of [their employees]." They clarified "...that's because it *used* to be true."⁴⁴⁵ Around the same time at another store in Burlington, Vermont, an employee shared a similar sentiment, saying succinctly "It was a good place to work. Until it wasn't."⁴⁴⁶ As the pandemic dragged on, Trader Joe's employees across the country observed a steady but sharp decline in their working conditions, some of them experiencing first-hand how their famously generous suite of benefits could be rolled back at the drop of a hat. Just like their peers at Starbucks, Amazon, and REI, some Trader Joe's employees sought the protection of a union to hold their employers accountable to their purportedly progressive values.⁴⁴⁷

Like Starbucks, Amazon, and REI, Trader Joe's has very much made being a progressive workplace core to its brand.⁴⁴⁸ In fact, the company's corporate communications fit neatly within the parameters of the progressive workplace brand as I defined them in the previous chapter: framing benefits as acts of corporate benevolence, flattening the power differential between workers and management, and casting what would otherwise be perceived as ordinary service

⁴⁴⁵ *Trader Joe's Workers Launch Historic Union Drive*, directed by More Perfect Union, 2022, 6:41, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mbMaElwDNzI>.

⁴⁴⁶ *The Untold History Of Trader Joe's Union-Busting*, directed by More Perfect Union, 2022, 6:03, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WleTV68axHc>.

⁴⁴⁷ Zac Whidby, "When We Organized At My Trader Joe's," *Progressive.Org*, April 26, 2023, <https://progressive.org/api/content/8d4fc8a4-e441-11ed-86ab-12163087a831/>.

⁴⁴⁸ "Careers," Trader Joe's, accessed March 17, 2026, <https://www.traderjoes.com/home/careers/what-we-offer.html>.

work as profound and meaningful. First, managerial rhetoric frequently emphasizes the boundless generosity of the benefits on offer to rank-and-file employees. For instance, shortly after the Hadley store employees announced they would be the first in the company to hold a union vote, the company podcast, *Inside Trader Joe's*, dropped a special episode all about “What it’s like to work at Trader Joe’s” that is actually just a long list of all the benefits workers receive.⁴⁴⁹ The two executive hosts who introduce themselves as Tara and Matt begin by confirming what they believe is the widely held belief that the company is a “great place to work” before launching into the list of benefits that makes it so. Interestingly, Matt begins the conversation by framing Trader Joe’s as generous for employing human beings at all, saying “we’re committed to being a people centric business. We’re not looking to have self-checkout robots in lieu of humans.”⁴⁵⁰ Given the serious understaffing of front-end employees that is now routine in grocery stores, the choice to employ humans to do this work may indeed be perceived as a rare benefit. By bringing it up in this context, Matt casts the company’s awareness that human labor has value as something workers ought not take for granted, and that they should be grateful to be employed in a company with such a progressive view.

The two hosts then trade testimonials to all of Trader Joe’s generous benefits, enthusiastically describing each. “We don’t do minimum wage at Trader Joe’s,” Tara says, explaining that TJ’s employees make more no matter their location. Matt adds that employees are eligible for raises not once but twice a year, which Tara calls “a pretty cool thing,” adding that employees have an “incredible” health care plan with dental, vision, and medical coverage available.⁴⁵¹ Matt emphasizes that employees only have to work 28 hours per week on average to

⁴⁴⁹ Matt Sloan and Tara Miller, *What’s It like to Work at Trader Joe’s?*, ICMYI, *Inside Trader Joe’s Podcast*, May 19, 2022, <https://www.traderjoes.com/home/podcast?page=19>.

⁴⁵⁰ Sloan and Miller, *What’s It like to Work at Trader Joe’s?*

⁴⁵¹ Sloan and Miller, *What’s It like to Work at Trader Joe’s?*

qualify for coverage. With a but-wait-there's more tone, Matt boasts they also have a retirement plan, and that Trader Joes contributed more than 100 million to those funds the previous year. Tara pipes up that "...even for part-time workers that are not working a whole lot of hours, we offer paid time off benefits, which is pretty great." Next, Tara says she wants to emphasize "another really cool benefit," which is a 20% employee discount that Matt agrees is "phenomenal." Tara then says she considers job growth to be a benefit in itself, saying "...maybe some people don't see this as a 'benefit', but we really do because we value promoting people from within and taking people on the growth journey with us."⁴⁵² With this list, Tara and Matt suggest that Trader Joe's is indeed a benevolent boss, positioning each benefit as one that workers should be grateful to be receiving, and thus, more than their labor actually entitles them to.

Second, like Starbucks, Amazon, and REI, Trader Joe's uses rhetorical tactics to mask the power differential inherent in the employee-employer relationship. Where Starbucks has partners instead of baristas, and REI has Green Vests instead of salesmen, Trader Joe's has crew members instead of retail staff.⁴⁵³ From one perspective, this term is merely consistent with the company's nautical theme, and it should be noted that the ship metaphor does suggest more of a hierarchical structure than partners or Green Vests. Nonetheless, calling retail workers the "crew" does suggest an idealized unanimity of purpose, the swing of rowers in synchronized effort. Further, on its hiring website and many corporate communications, Trader Joe's makes it a point to emphasize the relative lack of hierarchy in its structure, especially among the crew and "mates" (or supervisors).⁴⁵⁴ At Trader Joe's, employees are not separated by department. That is,

⁴⁵² Sloan and Miller, *What's It like to Work at Trader Joe's?*

⁴⁵³ Trader Joe's, "Careers."

⁴⁵⁴ "Our Crew," Trader Joe's, accessed April 14, 2026, <https://www.traderjoes.com/home/careers/our-crew.html>.

workers are not hired to be cashiers, to stock grocery, produce, dairy, and the like. Instead, all crew members do all of these jobs, and are rotated through different departments every day. They often work alongside their mates or the captain (the manager).⁴⁵⁵ Though some of these workers are certainly more voiced and efficacious than others, like Starbucks, Amazon, and REI, Trader Joe's uses the appearance of a lack of corporate structure to suggest that the crew is already empowered with a seat at the table.⁴⁵⁶

Finally, while meaningful work does not appear quite so heavily in the company's corporate communications as in that of the other three companies featured in this dissertation, the hiring website does position the company as a special community outpost in a world where these kinds of third spaces are quickly disappearing. Just as they do at Starbucks, employees feature prominently in this vision of the company mission, as they are the ones responsible for creating the laid-back but authentically friendly environment Trader Joe's seeks to realize. For instance, a video posted at the top of the "Careers" page on the company website is titled "Something's missing in other grocery stores....". According to the video, that thing is employees who are physically and emotionally present to help customers find what they need, offer information about specialized products, and generally brighten their day with an authentic connection.⁴⁵⁷ Another podcast episode detailing company values posted to the hiring website confirms this construction of employees, wherein they are not merely stocking shelves or operating a check stand but providing an important, increasingly hard-to-come-by service to those in their communities.⁴⁵⁸

⁴⁵⁵ *The Untold History Of Trader Joe's Union-Busting.*

⁴⁵⁶ "Trader Joes United (@traderjoesunited) • Instagram Photos and Videos," June 6, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/traderjoesunited/>.

⁴⁵⁷ Trader Joe's, "Careers."

⁴⁵⁸ "Who We Are," Trader Joe's, accessed April 14, 2026, <https://www.traderjoes.com/home/careers/who-we-are.html>.

It appears that Trader Joe's crew members largely felt like the company image was what it was cracked up to be until the COVID-19 pandemic put the company's loyalties to the test. It was around this time, organizers report, that crew members realized how the treatment and benefits they had enjoyed were not guaranteed. Instead, the terms of their employment could be altered at management's discretion. In Hadley, an organizer reported that after they came back from an initial period of leave at the pandemic's start, it was like the company wasn't "even pretending to care anymore."⁴⁵⁹ A crew member at a special Trader Joe's location in New York City dedicated to wine told a reporter that the company "presents itself as this thoughtful caring organization, and that was proven not to be true when our benefits started being rolled back during the pandemic."⁴⁶⁰ In Burlington, another crew member described how the conditions of essential work in the pandemic's early days were difficult, with "conflicting information, understaffing, and rampant burnout." He continued, however, with an acknowledgement that at first they were receiving two dollars in hazard pay and then later an additional two dollars in "thank you pay" that "made it worth it for a while."⁴⁶¹ In May of 2022, employment conditions had not changed, but the pay bump ended abruptly. Their ability to take leave for anything Covid related was suspended. Another long-time Burlington crew member described how when her husband got sick and received a terminal diagnosis, she stepped down from some of her responsibilities to spend more time with him. Her pay was then lowered further, and she abruptly lost her health insurance.⁴⁶² At the New York City wine store, another crew member described being frustrated with the working conditions, but, when she was approached about unionization

⁴⁵⁹ *Trader Joe's Workers Launch Historic Union Drive*.

⁴⁶⁰ *Trader Joe's Shatters Unionizing NYC Wine Store In The Middle Of The Night*, directed by More Perfect Union, 2022, 4:21, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1_CJKIxVI-o.

⁴⁶¹ *The Untold History Of Trader Joe's Union-Busting*.

⁴⁶² *The Untold History Of Trader Joe's Union-Busting*.

she was initially unsure. Then she noticed on a paystub that the company was no longer contributing to her 401K. She said she looked back through months of her past statements, finding that each check said “zero” contributions from Trader Joe’s, which, according to the company’s benefit plan, should have been contributing 10%. It was at this point that she knew her employer needed some accountability to follow through with its own promises.⁴⁶³

In Hadley, a crew member named Sarah Yosef who had been with the company for over 18 years noticed a more gradual drop in working conditions which Covid only sharply accelerated. What especially triggered Yosef’s alarm bells was watching a coworker get cancer in 2019, only to lose his healthcare coverage. “I know they didn’t want to see me dead, you know, from cancer,” that worker told *More Perfect Union*, “But they also didn’t want to pay any more than they had to. And as soon as they were able to remove me from their health insurance, they did.”⁴⁶⁴ Despite Trader Joe’s promise that workers get healthcare coverage at part-time hours, Yosef says this hasn’t exactly been true since the Affordable Care Act (ACA) was passed in 2010. The company, apparently seeing the ACA as an opportunity, upped hourly averages for coverage and began using the now-ubiquitous algorithmic scheduling software to ensure that few actually qualify. Yosef herself, a former Captain, does not qualify because she can no longer work more than 24 hours per week on doctor’s orders, specifically because of injuries sustained on the job. As she and other workers explain, Trader Joe’s prefers a very particular aesthetic to set it apart from other big grocery chains: that of your friendly, neighborhood grocer. Part of achieving this aesthetic means small stores, meaning shelves must be constantly restocked in creative ways, typical trolleys don’t fit in the aisles. Workers are often lugging around heavy boxes in their arms one at a time, or lifting things from the ground instead of a cart. Further, cash

⁴⁶³ *Trader Joe’s Shatters Unionizing NYC Wine Store In The Middle Of The Night.*

⁴⁶⁴ *Trader Joe’s Workers Launch Historic Union Drive.*

registers have no conveyor belts, meaning workers generally have to bend down and lift items directly from customer's carts before scanning and packing them, thousands of times a day.⁴⁶⁵ On the Trader Joe's employee subreddit, even workers who report being happy with the company and their jobs say it takes a substantial toll on their bodies.⁴⁶⁶

Again like Starbucks baristas, some crew members describe their working conditions during Covid, especially, as taxing on their mental health as well. As Trader Joe's was one of few organizations with open doors, people needing shelter or assistance sometimes turned up, and providing that care was a task that fell to crew members. Sarah Beth Ryther, a crew member in Minneapolis, Minnesota, told the magazine *Fast Company* that one day, a young man bleeding from a gunshot wound to the head appeared in her store. Ryther recalled sitting with his head in her lap until first responders arrived, and despite later learning that he survived, Ryther was badly shaken up, feeling that the store should have been closed or she should have at least been allowed to leave for the day. Neither came to pass, and Ryther told the magazine that it was then that she decided to join the union effort.⁴⁶⁷ Further, while reporting on Trader Joe's working conditions, the reporter learned about another safety concern, uncovering an apparently widespread pattern of unpunished sexual harassment. The magazine also spoke to Sarah Yosef in Hadley, who recounted a time when she was still the store's captain, and was told to investigate complaints about a male crew member. She was shocked to hear reports from several female crew members that this man had repeatedly propositioned them for sex, ignoring their requests to

⁴⁶⁵ *Trader Joe's Workers Launch Historic Union Drive.*

⁴⁶⁶ mothsforhire, "Exhausted," Reddit Post, R/Tjcrew, May 10, 2022, <https://www.reddit.com/r/tjcrew/comments/umn4bz/exhausted/>; Heartsforus, "What about this job is so exhausting?," Reddit Post, R/Tjcrew, October 22, 2023, https://www.reddit.com/r/tjcrew/comments/17dj136/what_about_this_job_is_so_exhausting/.

⁴⁶⁷ Clint Rainey, "Sexual Harassment, Union Busting, and a Spotty Safety Record: The Dark Side of Working at Trader Joe's," *Fast Company*, January 9, 2025, <https://www.fastcompany.com/91240535/what-its-really-like-to-work-at-trader-joes>.

stop. She presented higher-ups with the results, but nothing happened for months. The man in question remained at his post in the store, until he was eventually transferred to an even larger location in lieu of punishment. When Yosef asked if his new supervisors were at least made aware of his history, she said her manager simply responded that it was too late. At another Massachusetts store, a young crew member reported being forcibly kissed on the mouth by a male coworker following months of harassment. She finally complained when she discovered her coworkers had experienced similar mistreatment from the same individual, only to see the man go unpunished, eventually being transferred instead, and two of the victims get fired for minor infractions. Workers in Oakland told the magazine that a manager not only regularly sexually harassed female crew members and even customers, but also made a habit of using racial slurs. When they told their captain about this, he defended the offending manager and dismissed them as a “lynch mob.”⁴⁶⁸

These reports suggest that like Amazon, Starbucks, and REI, Trader Joe’s is yet another company with a long-instilled brand of a progressive workplace where working conditions and benefits have been gradually deteriorating, reaching a new low during the pandemic. Just like at the other companies, it seems this new low heightened the contradictions with progressive branding enough to inspire unionization efforts at several stores across the country, from Oakland, Minneapolis, and Chicago, to New York City, the Boston suburbs, and Burlington. Despite the troubling treatment described above, however, by all accounts organizers’ efforts were deeply contentious, and they were not only met with the vitriol of management, but of their coworkers.⁴⁶⁹ In fact, interviews with workers who staunchly opposed unionizing suggest that

⁴⁶⁸ Rainey, “Sexual Harassment, Union Busting, and a Spotty Safety Record.”

⁴⁶⁹ Maximillian Alvarez, “The Long Road to Union Recognition: Trader Joe’s Workers Press On,” *In These Times*, October 15, 2024, <https://inthesetimes.com/article/trader-joes-union-organizing-fight>.

the progressive workplace brand can be a persuasive means of preventing workers from pursuing better treatment, and an effective barrier to real workplace solidarity.⁴⁷⁰ Indeed, over the course of 2022 and 2023, five Trader Joe's crew members appeared on the podcast *Labor Relations Radio*, hosted by the late management-side labor lawyer Peter List to discuss their disdain for organizing efforts in their stores. It is clear from listening to the podcast that List held a low opinion of unions and their members, and he initially invited two anti-union crew members from Hadley to discuss the situation after one of them published an op-ed detailing their opposition.⁴⁷¹ The other three, however, reached out to List of their own accord after hearing the episode, hoping to share their own stories and offer advice to other crew members opposed to unionization.

In each case, these workers first describe Trader Joe's as a remarkably generous employer with benefits they, as service workers, are lucky to enjoy. Second, they constitute themselves as hard workers who earned pay raises by virtue of their own efforts, and organizing coworkers as lazy, entitled, and ungrateful young people unwilling to simply roll up their sleeves and earn a raise the right way. This chapter explores these themes, examining how the progressive workplace brand can persuade workers to accept managerial rhetoric about what it means to earn or deserve something. I find that just as executives adopt the bootstrapping ethos to fend off challenges to their wealth from organizing workers, so too do these Trader Joe's crew members. They largely experience unionization attempts as an attack on their own identities as hard workers, and one that poses risks for their ability to accumulate wealth and security. In

⁴⁷⁰ *Labor Relations Radio* E140; *Labor Relations Radio*, E88; *Labor Relations Radio*, E83.

⁴⁷¹ Michael Alcorn, *Trader Joe's Union Is Not What We Bargained for* - *Washington Examiner*, June 13, 2023, <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/opinion/beltway-confidential/2758855/trader-joes-union-is-not-what-we-bargained-for/>.

defense, they position themselves as diligent bootstrappers in relation to a lazy, dishonest, and young generational other.

Gen Z Goes to Work (When They Feel Like It): Generational Politics and the American Work Ethic

When Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Senator Edward Markey introduced the Green New Deal as a policy resolution in 2019, the press largely covered the proposed legislation as the work of a naive, delusional young person.⁴⁷² The policy outlined a plan for the US to achieve net-zero carbon emissions through a “just transition,” including a jobs retraining program for workers employed in the fossil fuel industry to move to clean energy, a massive investment in green energy infrastructure programs to create such jobs, and carving out a space for Indigenous, low-income, and non-white program leadership. Media commentators were not impressed, seizing on the fact that the policy was introduced by Ocasio-Cortez (then 29) and supported by fellow millennials as proof positive of its absurdity.

A *Wall Street Journal* columnist wrote that it “reads more like a progressive letter to Santa Claus than it does a serious piece of legislation,” and called “the kids” seeking radical action on climate change “ignorant brats,” with Ocasio-Cortez as their leader.⁴⁷³ A *New York Times* columnist called her the “modern-day pied piper,” leading young people astray and driving the global economy toward imminent collapse.⁴⁷⁴ Another lamented that “younger generations need older ones to turn that idealism into more than just pretty words” and yet another chastised Ocasio-Cortez personally and young supporters generally for their

⁴⁷² Hanna E. Morris, “Constructing the Millennial ‘Other’ in United States Press Coverage of the Green New Deal,” *Environmental Communication* 15, no. 1 (January 2021): 133–43, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17524032.2020.1812686>.

⁴⁷³ Paul H. Tice, “Opinion | On Climate, the Kids Are All Wrong,” Opinion, *Wall Street Journal*, March 12, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/on-climate-the-kids-are-all-wrong-11552430379>.

⁴⁷⁴ Steven Rattner, “Opinion | Yes, We Need a Green New Deal. Just Not the One Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez Is Offering,” Opinion, *The New York Times*, March 20, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/20/opinion/green-new-deal-carbon-taxes.html>.

“undisciplined” approach to politics.⁴⁷⁵ In an analysis of how the mainstream press covered the Green New Deal, environmental communication scholar Hanna Morris called this ubiquitous tendency to portray millennials (at that time the generation in the young adult category) advocating for political action on climate change as ignorant, radical, and thus unserious as “constructing the millennial other.”⁴⁷⁶ Morris points out that, despite being co-introduced by Markey—a white man and baby boomer—commentators at both the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* always credited the bill to Ocasio-Cortez, centering on her age and thus presumed lack of wisdom and common sense to delegitimize the legislation. In analysis expanding on quotes like those above, Morris shows how the legacy press positioned young people as not just naive and idealistic, but dangerously so—a grave threat to the world order and the prosperity that it supposedly enables.

Of course, young people are always lambasted for their presumably ill-informed political opinions by elder voices in the media and culture writ large. Baby Boomers were criticized for their opposition to the Vietnam War and the general politics of the cultural revolution in the 60s, and Gen X, with their love of heavy metal, grunge, and hip hop, inspired many a moral panic about anarchistic youth. While older generations always worry about ‘kids these days,’ they presume that with age and the perspective that comes with it, the younger generation will wise up—that is, abandon their political idealism and become more conservative, at least in the economic sense. The old adage that anyone who is not a liberal at 25 has no heart, and not a conservative by 35 has no brain sums up this perspective nicely, indicating a cultural

⁴⁷⁵ Frank Bruni, “Opinion | In Defense of the Gerontocracy,” Opinion, *The New York Times*, February 26, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/26/opinion/older-politicians.html>; Catie Edmondson, Emily Cochrane, and Lisa Friedman, “Liberal Freshmen Are Shaking the Capitol Just Days Into the New Congress,” U.S., *The New York Times*, January 6, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/06/us/politics/tlaib-aoc-new-congress.html>.

⁴⁷⁶ Morris, “Constructing the Millennial ‘Other’.”

environment wherein conservatism is equated with moderation and acquired common sense. It should be noted, though, that aging into more conservative ideological positions, if it happens at all, is less a natural result of accumulated wisdom and more a logical effect of structural incentives. In the US, if baby boomers became more conservative over time, it may be because they benefitted from an abundance of post war wealth and policies that set them up nicely to accumulate and hold onto it.⁴⁷⁷ As a consequence, some now resist progressive structural change that would, say, require them to pay new or higher taxes to support young people without accumulated wealth of their own. For instance, in Florida, there is an ongoing fight to exempt retirees from paying property taxes that support public education, the logic being that they no longer have children in school and therefore they ought not have to pay into the system.⁴⁷⁸ In the Scandinavian states, by contrast, opposition to the more socialist institutions and policies—such as universal healthcare or welfare programs that enable long parental leave and sustain individuals and families through long periods of unemployment—tends to come from younger people, who are unlikely to have their own children or have a serious health crisis. They resent the higher tax rates that help sustain the welfare state in youth, but age into an appreciation for the system when its benefits become more tangible.⁴⁷⁹

That economic conservatism is less a natural progression that comes with maturity and more a result of circumstances can further be evidenced in growing opposition to capitalism that has been noted with dismay by media commentators like the ones quoted above, first among millennials, and perhaps more so among Gen Z. Given all of the changes to the American

⁴⁷⁷ David Goldfield, *The Gifted Generation: When Government Was Good* (New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2017).

⁴⁷⁸ Mitch Perry, “Florida House Passes Proposed Amendment to Immediately Phase out Property Taxes” *Florida Phoenix*, February 19, 2026, <https://floridaphoenix.com/2026/02/19/florida-house-passes-proposed-amendment-to-immediately-phase-out-property-taxes/>.

⁴⁷⁹ Anu Partanen, *The Nordic Theory of Everything: In Search of a Better Life* (New York, NY: Harper, 2016).

economic landscape described in Chapter One that have effectively and increasingly redistributed power and resources from the working and middle classes to capital, it is not entirely surprising that today's youth is lukewarm on an economic system wherein chances of success are ever-shrinking. Historically high housing and food prices paired with a job market in which wages are stubbornly stagnant, stable jobs are few and far between, and half the positions left seem to revolve around training your own robot-replacement is indeed a tough pill to swallow. It should come as no great shock that 18-29 year olds are modestly curious about socialism.⁴⁸⁰ They also display higher support for unions than their older counterparts did even in their own idealistic youth.⁴⁸¹ Perhaps worst of all from the perspective of older generations, they display a startling lack of dedication to their jobs.

If millennials were portrayed as a generational 'other' for their foolish devotion to radical political policies like the Green New Deal, members of Generation Z have similarly been positioned as a generational 'other' for acting as a lazy and entitled group who expects far too much from their employers. They are blamed for expecting to be given material rewards as a condition of their employment, rather than slowly earning them through good work over an extended period of time. This trait, unsurprisingly, is an alarming one for proponents of the American work ethic. Articles decrying members of Generation Z for their insufficient work ethics are numerous, as are publicly-made managerial statements about how to handle them in the workplace.⁴⁸² For instance, an article in *Fortune* discussed the results of a survey finding that

⁴⁸⁰ "Harvard Youth Poll Reveals Mounting Strain on Young Americans — Financial, Institutional, and Social | The Institute of Politics at Harvard University," accessed March 12, 2026, <https://iop.harvard.edu/press-releases/harvard-youth-poll-reveals-mounting-strain-young-americans-financial-institutional>.

⁴⁸¹ "AFL-CIO's Shuler: State of the Unions Is Strong with Record Public Support, Unprecedented Activism and Organizing This Labor Day | AFL-CIO," August 29, 2023, <https://aflcio.org/press/releases/afl-cios-shuler-state-unions-strong-record-public-support-unprecedented-activism-and>.

⁴⁸² Bruce Crumley, "Gen-Z Hits Some Bumps as It Enters the Workforce," Inc, September 27, 2024, <https://www.inc.com/bruce-crumley/gen-z-hits-some-bumps-as-it-enters-workforce.html>; Bruce Crumley, "Here's What Business Owners Need to Know About Their Gen Z Employees," Inc, April 12, 2024,

hiring managers say Gen Z is the hardest generation to work with specifically because they make outlandish demands for things like flexible schedules and “mental health days.”⁴⁸³ Time off for feeling mentally, rather than physically, unwell is an idea still considered absurd enough to regularly mock.

An article in the UK’s *Telegraph* about “Six ways Gen Z is ruining the workplace for everyone else” includes their requests for such days as a sign of ridiculous overindulgence.⁴⁸⁴ Similarly, A *Wall Street Journal* article explains “Why Gen Z is Unprepared for the Workplace,” which seems to boil down to their refusal to show up and learn the old fashioned way.⁴⁸⁵ *Essence* wrote about how Gen Z is totally uninterested in ascending the corporate ladder, while still being interested in money.⁴⁸⁶ According to *Fortune*, older celebrities also like to complain about working with today’s twenty-somethings, as they are notoriously late and unreliable.⁴⁸⁷ Another *Fortune* article breaks down a viral anecdote posted to social media by a CEO, frustrated by a Gen Z applicant who refused to complete an extensive skills test after an interview because it “looked like a lot of work.”⁴⁸⁸ The CEO posted the applicant’s reply, which went on to say that

<https://www.inc.com/bruce-crumley/heres-what-business-owners-need-to-know-about-their-gen-z-employees.html>; Sydney Lake, “Roughly Half of Gen Z Workers Say They Don’t Want to Return to the Office Because It Means They Can’t Binge-Watch Their Favorite TV Shows during Work Anymore,” *Fortune*, April 1, 2025, <https://fortune.com/2025/04/01/gen-z-workers-streaming-while-working-from-home-survey/>; Orianna Rosa Royle, “Gen Z Job Seeker Refused to Do a 90-Minute Task for Free—Now the CEO Who Complained about It Is Being Slammed,” *Fortune*, accessed March 12, 2026, <https://fortune.com/2024/04/29/gen-z-job-seeker-refused-90-minute-task-recruiter-slammed/>; Bruce Crumley, “What a New Poll Says About Gen-Z’s Workplace Issues. There Are Many,” *Inc.*, January 29, 2025, <https://www.inc.com/bruce-crumley/what-a-new-poll-says-about-gen-zs-workplace-issues-there-are-many/91140559>; Marianka Swain, “Six Ways Gen Z Are Ruining the Workplace for Everyone Else,” *The Telegraph*, October 14, 2025, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2025/10/14/six-ways-gen-z-ruining-the-workplace/>.

⁴⁸³ Orianna Rosa Royle, “Gen Z Really Are the Hardest to Work with—Even Managers of Their Own Generation Say They’re Difficult,” *Fortune*, January 22, 2025, <https://fortune.com/article/how-to-work-with-gen-z-vs-millennials-work-ethic-employees-workplace-recent-grads/>.

⁴⁸⁴ Swain, “Six Ways.”

⁴⁸⁵ Tessa West, “A New Lost Generation: Why Gen Z Is Unprepared for the Workplace,” *US, Wall Street Journal*, March 1, 2026, <https://www.wsj.com/lifestyle/careers/gen-z-worker-skills-294463f6>.

⁴⁸⁶ “The Corporate Ladder Is Dead—And Gen Z Wants Nothing To Do With It,” *Essence*, July 28, 2025, <https://www.essence.com/news/money-career/corporate-ladder-is-dead/>.

⁴⁸⁷ Royle, “Gen Z Really Are.”

⁴⁸⁸ Royle, “Gen Z Job Seeker Refused.”

they were uncomfortable dedicating the amount of time required to complete the task “without knowing where [they] stand” in the hiring process.⁴⁸⁹ The post ignited a debate in which many denigrated the applicant for their apparently insufficient American work ethic, being unwilling to put in the hard work necessary to get the job. Some younger posters, however, felt the applicant was justified in refusing to do a significant amount of unpaid labor, which is something that has become an increasingly common part of the application process.

That these anecdotes and articles discussing Gen Z’s long lists of demands for employers abound on the internet suggests that the characterization of today’s young workers is widely accepted, and that there may be a real generational gap in the kinds of expectations workers have for their employers. Notably, for commentators like the late Peter List and the Trader Joe’s workers who appeared on his show, the younger generation’s brazen entitlement and interest in labor unions are part and parcel of the same moral failure. Indeed, somewhat spurred on by List, all five crew members paint union supporters as naive and spoiled young people whose interest in organizing stems exclusively from those two characteristics. In so doing, they position organizing coworkers as a generational ‘other’ in Morris’s sense, seizing on a narrative of generational difference floating around in the zeitgeist to explain coworker’s otherwise incomprehensible behavior.

This generational component of anti-union animosity in the workplace, however, appears to be relatively new. In a 2003 ethnography of a non-union automotive plant, for instance, Heather Zoller found that many manufacturing workers shared a disdain for coworkers who had been supportive of a failed unionization attempt years earlier.⁴⁹⁰ They felt that a desire for the

⁴⁸⁹ Royle, “Gen Z Job Seeker Refused.”

⁴⁹⁰ Heather M. Zoller, “Health on the Line: Identity and Disciplinary Control in Employee Occupational Health and Safety Discourse,” *Journal of Applied Communication Research* (Annandale) 31, no. 2 (2003): 118–39, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0090988032000064588>.

stricter safety guidelines and easier day's work that a union would secure was a sign of both moral and physical weakness, of being unwilling or unable to buckle down and do the hard work necessary to succeed with enough ingenuity and expertise to avoid serious injury by one's own merits. Zoller conceptualized what I would call an appeal to the bootstrapping ethos as a shared identity norm of the "good worker," a creation of the worker's collective construction, negotiated between the group and the individual. Zoller is no doubt correct to see the good worker as a kind of social identity, informed by the culture of the group. Importantly though, referencing Sociologist Gideon Kunda's influential work on the subject, she notes that employees must negotiate this sense of self within their workplace's organizational culture.⁴⁹¹ My analysis differs from Zoller's in that I take into account that additional, organizational layer. Indeed, I see the ways that Trader Joe's employees use the bootstrapping ethos as necessarily entangled with managerial rhetoric. In this case, rhetoric that sustains Trader Joe's progressive workplace brand and constitutes the crew as fortunate recipients of corporate benevolence and thus in the company's debt enables the construction of the 'good worker' as someone who counts themselves as lucky and thus does not expect more than they are already getting.

A second difference between my study and Zoller's is that in her case study, it tended to be workers who were middle-aged and older, those whose bodies had sustained a greater degree of wear and tear over time in such a physically demanding job that were more open to the protections a union would provide. The apparent inversion of the role that age plays in Zoller's case study and the contemporary organizing wave discussed in this dissertation can be explained, however, when considered in relation to who initiates the unionization effort and the conviction

⁴⁹¹ Gideon Kunda, *Engineering Culture: Control and Commitment in a High-Tech Corporation*, Revised edition (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2006); Heather M. Zoller, "Health on the Line: Identity and Disciplinary Control in Employee Occupational Health and Safety Discourse," *Journal of Applied Communication Research* (Annandale) 31, no. 2 (2003): 118–39, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0090988032000064588>.

that no one is entitled to anything they have not earned through their own hard work and ingenuity. Despite the widespread hostility to unions that Zoller observed on the automotive plant floor, perhaps some older workers felt that they had worked long and hard enough to deserve an easier go of things, or at least to freeze in place the ever-quickenning pace that they were expected to perform their jobs. Indeed, from this perspective, the ire of veteran Trader Joe's crew with more junior colleagues for their attempts at organizing is reconcilable, as these workers have not yet worked long or hard enough to deserve the improved conditions and higher wages they seek. Perhaps echoing Aristotle's warnings about the moral corruption of spoiled and hubristic youth, the conviction that no one is entitled to anything they have not earned implies the state of being deserving comes with age.⁴⁹² With these dynamics in mind, I turn to a close reading of crew members' statements and a brief explanation of the context in which they were made.

Trader Joe's Crew on Labor Relations Radio

Between 2023 and 2024, the late management-side labor lawyer and consultant Peter List interviewed five Trader Joe's crew members who were opposed to the union efforts in their respective stores. These interviews took place on List's podcast, *Labor Relations Radio*, formerly hosted on his website, LaborUnionNews.com.⁴⁹³ Among labor advocates, List was something of a notorious figure, having successfully consulted in many of the major union and strike-busting efforts to have taken place in the last few decades. Union-busting is hardly a surprising accusation for any labor lawyer employed by management, as this is the point of the job. However, as labor advocates have documented, List went a bit further than just breaking a

⁴⁹² N. R. E. Fisher, "Hybris and Dishonour: I," *Greece & Rome* 23, no. 2 (October 1976): 177–93, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017383500019203>.

⁴⁹³ It seems that [LaborUnionNews.com](https://www.laborunionnews.com) was taken down when List suddenly passed away in 2025. *Labor Relations Radio* still appears on Apple podcasts and some other common podcast platforms.

union or strike here or there when hired. He was the head of a small anti-union professional empire, starting both the Kulture Consulting and Logic Labor Relations firms, which themselves have several subsidiaries all devoted to theory, practice and public promotion of an Ayn Rand-ian philosophy in which the entrepreneur is king and workers are mere subjects.⁴⁹⁴ In an investigation into List and his business entanglements, the progressive publication *In These Times* found that Kulture Consulting was not only helping to suppress labor activity for firms like AT&T and Coca-Cola, but was quite involved in the right-wing media ecosystem as well. Indeed, Kulture Media, the firm's media arm, was actively involved in disseminating misinformation not only about labor unions, but Covid-19, the QAnon conspiracy theory, and the January 6 insurrections at the Capitol in 2020.⁴⁹⁵

All of this is to say that the crew members who appeared on List's podcast were not being interviewed by an unbiased host. List occasionally asks leading questions or pushes certain themes, and my analysis of crew members' responses takes List's role in their dialogue into account. For the most part, however, the discussions are relatively unstructured and wide-ranging. List's background further helps explain why, when Trader Joe's crew member Michael Alcorn wrote an op-ed for the *Washington Examiner* outlining his opposition to the union at his store in Hadley, Massachusetts, List was excited enough to invite him on the show. After all, the op-ed reiterated many of the anti-union talking points that List's audience typically heard from consultants like himself, only Alcorn had the practical wisdom of an employee to back them up. Bolstering his claims, Alcorn appeared on the podcast with a coworker who shared his opinions on the union, Les Stratford.

⁴⁹⁴ John See, "The Union-Busting Consultant Spreading Far-Right Conspiracy Theories," *In These Times*, April 26, 2021, <https://inthesetimes.com/article/kulture-consulting-union-busting-qanon-trump>.

⁴⁹⁵ See, "Union-Busting Consultant."

The interview with these two crew members of the Hadley store took place in late June of 2023, a bit less than one year after the store became the first in the grocery chain to unionize.⁴⁹⁶ In August, *Labor Relations Radio* hosted another Trader Joe's crew member, who uses the pseudonym Kiki. As she and List explain, Kiki heard the prior episode with Alcorn and Stratford, and reached out to List hoping to share her own unhappy story with a unionization attempt in her store in Brooklyn, New York.⁴⁹⁷ Unlike the prior case, however, Kiki's store voted down the union. Finally, about one year later, two more Trader Joe's crew members made an appearance on the podcast from a store in Chicago; they chose to be identified by their first names of Nikki and Jose.⁴⁹⁸ Nikki and Jose both fervently opposed unionization efforts in their store, and led an anti-union campaign of their own that must have rivaled the efforts of management. At the time of their interview, the store had recently voted 71-70 in favor of the union, though the 71st yes vote was being challenged in court by Trader Joe's. Nikki and Jose took their efforts as being largely responsible for the strong anti-union turnout, and, seemingly under the impression that the contested vote would work out in their favor, take the near 50-50 split as a victory.⁴⁹⁹

These three episodes, or more precisely, the discussions between List and the five workers interviewed, form the basis of my analysis. I find that in each case, with and without List's help, each interview consists of two themes that reflect their employer's progressive workplace brand. First is the idea that Trader Joe's is already a great place to work, thus, crew members are in no need of a union. Second is the idea that organizers are lazy and entitled for attempting to win higher wages and benefits without being willing to simply work for them on

⁴⁹⁶ *Labor Relations Radio*, E83.

⁴⁹⁷ *Labor Relations Radio*, E88.

⁴⁹⁸ *Labor Relations Radio* E140.

⁴⁹⁹ In fact, the National Labor Relations board allowed the 71st yes vote to stand.

management's terms. Sometimes encouraged by List, each worker portrays union organizers as naive, idealistic, and largely privileged young people, unable to reconcile their lofty utopianism with the idea that they must earn the things they demand as a condition of their employment.

Trader Joe's is already a great place to work

Each episode opens on the idea that Trader Joe's does not need a union because it is already a great place to work. The idea that good employers ought not be subjected to union organization is a standard company talking-point to be whipped out at the first opportunity when workers announce they seek to form a union. It was the crux of Howard Schultz's defense in front of Congress.⁵⁰⁰ It was in Eric Artz's statement to REI employees on the company podcast.⁵⁰¹ And it has been in countless statements made by CEOs in similar circumstances before them. Trader Joe's was no different, as its CEO Dan Bane sent a letter to every employee when organizing efforts went public explaining how well they were treated during the pandemic and in general.⁵⁰² As List explains at the start of Alcorn and Stratford's interview, Alcorn began his op-ed the same way. When List asks Alcorn to elaborate, he responds:

Yeah, yeah, that's right. I think when I came to Trader Joe's, I instantly was so happy to have the job. I felt like it was a very low stress environment compared to my previous employment.⁵⁰³ There was a lot of support....And it just is a fun place to work. Very interactive. You never get stuck in one place. Everybody is pretty equal and everybody gets to get involved in all sorts of decisions within the store, no matter who you are. So it's been a really fun place to work in.⁵⁰⁴

In describing what makes Trader Joe's a good employer, Alcorn begins by emphasizing the second element of the progressive workplace brand: the idea that the organization is void of

⁵⁰⁰ *Former Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz Testifies before Senate Panel | Full Video*, directed by CBS News, 2023, 3:20:39, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OZwuwYk0jIY>.

⁵⁰¹ Labor Lab, "Here's the Transcript of REI's Union-Busting Podcast," *LaborLab*, n.d., accessed December 12, 2022, https://www.laborlab.us/transcript_of_rei_union_busting_podcast.

⁵⁰² "Trader Joes United (@traderjoesunited) • Instagram Photos and Videos."

⁵⁰³ Which, it should be noted, was Starbucks.

⁵⁰⁴ *Labor Relations Radio*, E83.

hierarchy and employees already have the power to effect change within it and exercise control over their working lives. The phrasing that everyone *gets* to get involved with “all sorts of decisions,” “no matter who you are,” especially emphasizes that rank-and-file employees are lucky to be receiving this benefit. These equal relations, paired with support, make Trader Joe’s not just a good place to work, but a *fun* place to work, which Alcorn feels is important enough to repeat.

The theme of employees already having a voice within the organization comes up again a bit later, when List asks the pair, if Trader Joe’s workers have it so good, what reason did organizers even present for needing a union in the first place? Alcorn responds that their reasoning was that workers needed “a seat at the table,” or management could take advantage of them. List interjects “But did you—and correct me if I’m wrong—it sounded as though you *did* have somewhat of a seat at the table prior to that.” Alcorn answers

Yes. Yes, I felt like we did. I think at Trader Joe’s there was little bureaucracy, and we have connections with everyone in the company. We can call the CEO if we wanted to. We’ve got access to everybody. It’s not an environment where you have to go through a bureaucratic process to express your ideas and maybe your concerns about the workplace.⁵⁰⁵

Alcorn uses an apparent lack of bureaucracy and ease of access to everyone in the company all the way up to the CEO to constitute workers as already voiced and thus efficacious, and lucky to be so, as the statement seems to suggest these conditions are rare. With List’s help, Alcorn suggests that because Trader Joe’s is generous enough to allow workers a seat at the table, they don’t need a union.

Kiki, the employee from the Brooklyn store, also argues that the work environment is one in which the division between workers and managers is negligible. When List asks her a leading

⁵⁰⁵ *Labor Relations Radio*, E83.

question about whether management treats coworkers harshly or expects an unfair amount of labor from them, she explains that if anything, managers are too soft on lazy coworkers (a topic to which I will return later), and continues “...so our managers are not like that at all. They’re not like, oh, go do this, go do that, while I sit down and have coffee. They’re right there with you in the trenches, you know, doing the job that they wouldn’t ask you to do that they wouldn’t do.”⁵⁰⁶ With this statement, Kiki both positions the company as uniquely heterarchical and managers as uniquely considerate, never asking workers to do anything they wouldn’t do themselves. She goes on to say that if workers have concerns, there is a special HR number posted in the breakroom, and workers can even get six free counseling sessions (HR staffers are sometimes trained counselors) by calling. It feels necessary to point out that giving workers access to HR—a department that exists specifically to make sure disputes are resolved in a way that absolves the company of any wrongdoing—is standard practice and hardly an act of benevolence. Further, the many young women whose complaints about sexual harassment went nowhere suggest that perhaps crew members do not have much real decision making power after all, as these workers used the voice available to them only to discover they were shouting into the wind.⁵⁰⁷ Nonetheless, both Kiki and Alcorn position Trader Joe’s as a special kind of workplace, where the power differential between employee and employer is insignificant. This characterization is significant in that it largely matches Trader Joe’s own messaging about what makes it such a progressive employer. Whether this argument emerged from workers or corporate messengers, it seems that the logic that good companies do not need unions, and Trader Joe’s is not just a good but the *best* company, holds purchase among some workers.

⁵⁰⁶ *Labor Relations Radio*, E88.

⁵⁰⁷ Rainey, “Sexual Harassment.”

Despite the fact that every single worker emphasizes the fact they are not “anti-union” (most of them insisting as much more than once) the logic seems to be that unions are appropriate only in the most perilous, physically demanding and dangerous occupations. José, of the Chicago store, makes this point explicitly as he expresses his inability to wrap his head around what would possess organizers to feel a union was necessary in their workplace. He tells List

...the comparison of Trader Joe’s, of like—we have it so good! I’m not really understanding what this union is for. And I know one of the big concerns—and I’ve also heard this from other stores—is safety, right? Safety, safety, safety....And, but for the most part, we work in a very safe environment. We are very safe. We work at a grocery store... We don’t, we’re not dealing with heavy equipment. We’re not in a coal mine. We’re not construction workers. We’re not in this grandiose field where we are, like, lifting, like...The heaviest box, the heaviest amount of weight that they ask you to lift is 25 pounds!⁵⁰⁸

José goes on to say that managers go out of their way to accommodate crew members who can’t even lift that much, or who have any concerns about any aspect of the job. Like Kiki, he insists that if anything, they are *too* accommodating for overly cautious workers. Indeed, his message is clear and two-fold. First, crew members have it good, so good, in fact, that their treatment borders on pampering, as apparently they are “very, very safe.” Second, however, José goes further in that he establishes a commonly agreed upon set of circumstances that are poor enough wherein workers might be entitled to seek the protection of a union: a coal mine, or a construction site. Jobs that are this dangerous, this physically arduous are the point at which concerns about safety in the workplace are legitimate. Crew members like Yosef in Hadley, who make a stink about their repetitive stress injuries have no right to complain.⁵⁰⁹ Thus, in constituting himself and fellow coworkers as fortunate to be treated better than coalminers, José

⁵⁰⁸ *Labor Relations Radio E140.*

⁵⁰⁹ *Trader Joe’s Workers Launch Historic Union Drive.*

joins corporate imagemakers that construct the progressive workplace brand to reduce expectations about what service workers deserve on the floor.

In further keeping with the progressive workplace brand, all five crew members spend quite a bit of time singing the company's praises by going over every benefit they receive, framing them as extraordinary acts of corporate benevolence. Alcorn and Stratford both discuss "industry-leading wages" when List prompts them, emphasizing that, since they've each been employed with the company for a decade or more, they now make a solid wage of about 50K, earned through generously frequent raises over time.⁵¹⁰ Both emphasize how this is more than anything they would have ever made in any other retail job, suggesting that service workers like themselves are fortunate to make a middle-class wage, and in so doing, reinforcing the idea it is not something they deserve. José, for his part, is fond of hyperbole to communicate just how generous a company Trader Joe's is, and how fortunate the crew are to be in its employ. He explains emphatically that, in the past five years of his employment with the company, his wage has gone up 10 dollars, exclaiming "...then the percentage wise of like \$10 more than what I got, like that's *insane*. Like that is to me an incredible increase in wages."⁵¹¹

It should be noted that José appears to be taking into account the four dollar hazard pay given to the crew during part of the pandemic, the same one that was abruptly cancelled and organizers sought to reinstate as a regular wage. Nonetheless, to José, his hourly wage is not just generous but irrationally so, to the point where he questions the company's sanity. Within the same train of thought, José even makes a benefit that was *reduced* sound like an insane act of generosity, explaining how Trader Joe's retirement matching program drew him to work there. When he first started, he says, the company would match up to 15% contributions to a retirement

⁵¹⁰ *Labor Relations Radio*, E83.

⁵¹¹ *Labor Relations Radio* E140.

fund, which was “an outrageous, outrageous percentage.”⁵¹² As he tells it, to expand the number of the stores nationwide, the company needed to cut back on this expenditure. “But guess what?” he asks, “They kept - they went up to 10%. They went down to 10%...To me, if you look and you do your research, that’s still way more than a lot of places in the United States. But our insurance has *always* been great.”⁵¹³ Yes, José admits, the benefit technically went down, but before it was outrageous, which bore repeating, and even the reduced number is still better than most. He then feels the need to quickly jump into a discussion of another benefit that has apparently never suffered any problems. Further, it should be noted that José made this statement in connection with the fact that an organizer in his store had claimed, like the worker in Burlington, that the company had quietly stopped contributing to his retirement fund altogether. Perhaps to José, the fact that they were ever willing to do it at all is a sign of commendable benevolence. In this mindset, retirement contributions are not something crew members deserve, but something they ought to be grateful for.

José next launches into a discussion of their wildly generous healthcare, emphasizing the fact that they can get unlimited free massages covered, of all things. He is not the only one to talk about this benefit in particular. Kiki emphasizes how few hours Trader Joe’s workers must put in for coverage, telling List that “If you work 15 hours a week, you get free eye care and dental. If you work 28—and they dropped it, it was 32 – Now it’s only 28 hours a week—you get full medical coverage and good coverage...”⁵¹⁴ How fortunate the worker is who puts in anything less than 40 hours and still gets healthcare coverage is a theme that comes up again and again in this dissertation, appearing in the rhetoric of CEOs and founders, official corporate

⁵¹² *Labor Relations Radio E140.*

⁵¹³ *Labor Relations Radio E140.*

⁵¹⁴ *Labor Relations Radio E140.*

communications, and now rank-and-file employees. Nikki, too, agrees that the healthcare plan is excellent, adding that even mental healthcare is fully covered, telling List that she can go to see a therapist without having to pay anything herself. She elaborates that the plan is so good, it tends to shock people. She explains

My husband used to work for the AMA, for the American Medical Association. People that say, that work in the health field, the health department, medical field, and they say, I can't believe that you have better insurance than we do. And I'm like, I know. It's crazy...And you work in the place that has the machine, that I need an x-ray or a CAT scan or whatever, and I get better benefits than you.⁵¹⁵

In the United States, health insurance that is both affordable and holistic is indeed a rare benefit, especially in the service industry, where companies seem especially fond of ensuring that most employees don't work enough hours to qualify (which, seems to be the case in recent years with Trader Joe's workers like the one Yosef described, who stopped receiving enough hours to qualify after his cancer diagnosis). In this respect, the comparison with the medical industry is telling. After all, Nikki, José, Peter List, and apparently Nikki's husband and his colleagues all take for granted that employees of a grocery store ought to have worse insurance than those in the medical field. It is doubtful that they consciously mean to make a normative claim to this effect. Nonetheless, by constituting themselves and their coworkers as lucky to subvert this expectation, they buy into the idea that their retail labor entitles them to a lesser standard of care, and that they are therefore already getting more than they deserve from Trader Joe's. Kiki too makes a similar suggestion, when she discusses how people are always "blown away" by the benefits she gets from the company, lamenting the fact that they are not so lucky.

Of all the interviewees, Nikki and José spend the most time discussing their benefits without prompting from List. That these two are extra grateful makes sense given the fact that

⁵¹⁵ *Labor Relations Radio E140.*

both come from professional backgrounds wherein they were offered no benefits at all. José explains that he used to be a bartender, a job at which he made good money but could not afford insurance let alone a retirement fund, both of which likely became a concern as he settled into middle age. He references getting older a few times, specifying at one point that his age is 46.⁵¹⁶ Nikki, who “just turned 50” is about the same age, though her pre-Trader Joe’s precarity stems from a different professional background entirely. She establishes early on in the interview that for her, Trader Joe’s is a side gig; her full time job is teaching Communication courses at a local university. The semester that the interview took place, she had four courses on her plate.

While she does not specify her exact job title, it seems likely that Nikki is an adjunct professor, which—at the risk of telling any reader of this dissertation something about which they are well aware—is a precarious lifestyle indeed. Adjuncts are not employees with benefits and protections, but independent contractors to whom their hiring institutions have no obligations. Not only is job security unpredictable, but they are paid a generally paltry, per-credit rate that necessitates a high teaching load to scrape together a living wage. Apparently, at whatever institution Nikki teaches, four courses is not enough. Perhaps Nikki and her fellow adjunct professors ought to join so many of their counterparts across the country and form a union. Instead, Nikki expresses gratitude that she has a side gig that offers her the flexibility she needs to teach.

Flexibility is constructed as yet another rare benefit on offer from the company, and a valuable one indeed as, for many, modern life seems to grow more complex and unpredictable by the day. Explaining her other professional obligations, Nikki says

...Trader Joe’s has always been so good to me, about like my schedule. And they’re really, they’re really understanding with a lot of people regarding their schedule. They know that this is not the be all, end all for people. They know that people have lives

⁵¹⁶ *Labor Relations Radio E140.*

outside of work. And so they're always extremely, at least find that at our store, they've always been very accommodating.⁵¹⁷

José echoes this appreciation, describing how he has never had a problem taking time off for family obligations because the company knows that family comes first, and that crew members have other aspects to their lives in general. He explains

And the great thing, the great thing about Trader Joe's. I'm sorry, it's just we have a lot of artists of all different kinds of backgrounds, actors, painters, whatever, you know. And I've never been in a company that allows you to, a musician can say, you know, I'm going on tour for a month, can I have it off? And they give it to you and you still are employed. It blows my mind that that's not looked at, you know. We have a lot of actors that are at our store who are trying to make it and they're going through the grind. And anytime if the schedule's made, then they're like, oh my god, I have an audition at this time. Yes, go, don't worry about it.⁵¹⁸

It should first be noted that according to *Fast Company's* investigation, the preponderance of actors and other creative types (perhaps even including college professors) employed at Trader Joe's may be by design, as the friendly, interesting, and engaging personality types are an important part of realizing Trader Joe's unique and bohemian brand. Founder Joe Coulombe and other executives have said as much, and employee handbooks that were leaked to the magazine encourage employees to consider their workplace a "stage" upon which they are star performers.⁵¹⁹ Under the assumption that it is a happy, not at all profit-motivated coincidence, Trader Joe's generosity blows José's mind. It is practically unthinkable that a business would allow its employees to exercise some control over when they come and go, or that managers would take the time to reorganize the schedule to accommodate employees needs and even desires as human beings. By constructing Trader Joe's apparent willingness to do so as a shockingly generous benefit, Nikki and José reinforce the idea that control over their working

⁵¹⁷ *Labor Relations Radio E140.*

⁵¹⁸ *Labor Relations Radio E140.*

⁵¹⁹ Rainey, "Sexual Harassment."

lives is not something they deserve, but something that they have been generously gifted. Nikki goes on to specify explicitly that that kind of generosity is afforded to her only because she “has always been good to them,” so they are good to her, and that “obviously, if you are not a good worker, that’s a different situation.” The logic Nikki is applying here is that such gifts are earned, not expected. The fact that Trader Joe’s rewards their good workers by generously accommodating their schedules is a gush-worthy benefit that is paradoxically both gifted and earned, but never expected as a fundamental right.

Spoiled brats united? Positioning organizers as lazy, entitled kids

If Trader Joe’s is such an outrageously generous employer, it stands to reason that only especially ungrateful workers would have the gall to ask the company for even more. I have argued that this is the intended logic of the progressive brand, and the statements of all five employees suggest they find it persuasive. Indeed, when List asks about organizers’ ages, each employee adopts the bootstrapping ethos primarily by positioning organizers as a generational other against which they can contrast their own superior work ethic. These performances of the American work ethic by employees demonstrate a difference in how the capitalist and working classes understand what it means to sufficiently earn or deserve material rewards, despite a shared commitment to the idea that they must indeed be earned through hard work. As I argued in Chapter Two, founders and their executives perform the American work ethic as a primarily entrepreneurial one. That is, when the capitalist class adopts the bootstrapping ethos, they are often less than straightforward about it means to adequately earn and thus deserve something. As discussed in previous chapters, on the one hand, business owners and executives from Markwayne Mullin, Elon Musk, and Kim Kardashian to Howard Schultz make a point of boasting about the many long and hard hours they put in and all the risk they cleverly navigated

to climb to the top. Hard work and ingenuity, as I've argued, are values commonly shared across the working and capitalist classes alike. On the other hand, as I demonstrate in Chapter Two, upon closer inspection, capitalists' rhetoric betrays a more specific understanding about what one has to do to truly deserve material comforts: become an executive or start a business of one's own. That is, they characterize entrepreneurial labor as uniquely valuable and in fact the exclusive means of entitlement to company profits. This rhetoric ultimately establishes entrepreneurialism as the baseline standard of deservingness, its logical extension being that workers are entitled to no more than their employer sees fit to share with them. Capital and its managers, then, reserve the exclusive right to define what employees deserve. That labor unions exist to redistribute some of this power to the rank-and-file is precisely what makes them so abhorrent to corporate leaders.

Whereas capitalists perform an entrepreneurial work ethic, the Trader Joe's workers interviewed on *Labor Relations Radio* demonstrate what intellectual historian Eric Baker conceptualized in contrast as the now largely outdated industrial work ethic: a willingness to diligently follow instructions and always put forth one's best effort no matter how small or insignificant the task.⁵²⁰ As Baker defines it, it is the industrial work ethic that is largely consistent with the tenets of the American dream, which dictates that those who display its virtues will be rewarded over time, generally by receiving the gradual promotions and incremental rewards necessary to build a comfortable life, or in other words, to work one's way up the ladder.

Of course, as Baker, a host of empirical research in social stratification, and contemporary labor union organizers point out, capital has burned many of the bridges to middle

⁵²⁰ Erik Baker, *Make Your Own Job: How the Entrepreneurial Work Ethic Exhausted America*, 1st ed (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2025).

class stability from working class subsistence that existed a few decades ago.⁵²¹ They did so, as I argue, with the justification that it is capital and capital alone whose labor entitles them to the lion's share of company profit. Interviews with Trader Joe's employees who were deeply opposed to unionizing, however, suggest that that opposition in part stems from an attachment to the industrial work ethic. This ethic imbues their labor with value and provides a framework to interpret a life of hard work and precarity as necessary battles to be won on the path toward earned, thus truly deserved success. Accordingly, these workers differ from capital in their definitions of what it means to earn or deserve a comfortable life. However, by casting organizing coworkers as lazy and entitled others, their rhetoric is largely consistent with the idea that material rewards must be earned on capital and management's terms.

Consider a lengthy exchange between host Peter List and Les Stratford, of the Hadley store. From each episode, it is clear that List himself is concerned with the supposed political progressivism of the Zoomer generation, particularly as it relates to anti-capitalist sentiment and an interest in labor unions. He makes a point to ask every interviewee about whether they observed an age gap between the pro- and anti-union crowds in their respective stores. List gets his opportunity to do so when Stratford organically mentions a concern for young coworkers who are supposedly being brainwashed to distrust the company and their managers by union organizers. "I want them to come and just be able to come to work, do their job, gain respect by doing their job, and not have to come into a place where they're being told, oh, by the way, this

⁵²¹ Baker, *Make Your Own Job*; Benjamin H. Snyder, "The Disruption of Work Time," in *The Disrupted Workplace: Time and the Moral Order of Flexible Capitalism*, ed. Benjamin H. Snyder (Oxford University Press, 2016), 0, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190203498.003.0001>; Guy Standing, *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*, 1st edition (Bloomsbury Academic, 2011); Jamie K. McCallum, *Worked over: How Round-the-Clock Work Is Killing the American Dream*, First edition. (New York, NY: Basic Books, Hachette Book Group, 2020); Steve Viscelli, *The Big Rig: Trucking and the Decline of the American Dream* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016), <http://muse.jhu.edu/pub/263/monograph/book/45740>; Luke Winslow, *Economic Injustice and the Rhetoric of the American Dream* (Lexington Books, 2017).

company, you can't trust them, and they're union busters," Stratford tells List, who agrees that this is a sad state of affairs.⁵²² With this statement, Stratford endorses the idea that the proper way for young workers to "gain respect" is to put their nose to the grindstone and do their jobs, not conspire against the company like organizers seem to be encouraging.

This theme continues when List presses the generational divide, asking Stratford to clarify something for him. He confirms first that Stratford has been in retail since 1987, so he's indeed "been around a while." Then List poses the question: "It seems as though a lot of the current wave of organizing has been towards more youthful and progressive kids, so to speak. And I'm curious as to what is driving that...What is driving that, in your opinion?" Stratford responds promptly: "I mean, it's a strange sense of entitlement that I want this now. I don't want to work for it and earn it. I want it now. They don't necessarily feel that they have to work for it, that they deserve it. They deserve it like right now, not in the future. It's rewarding to be able to get a raise. It is for me. I mean, it's like, yay, another time I did it right."⁵²³ With this statement, Stratford performs the bootstrapping ethos by contrasting his own work ethic with members of a generation sorely lacking in that department. Whereas Stratford finds it rewarding to gradually earn raises through diligent labor that meets managerial requirements over time, these young workers have been convinced of the "strange" idea that they deserve higher wages now, as a condition of the work they are already performing. Such audacity can only be described as "entitlement," a word colloquially used to connote the morally hazardous condition of being spoiled, or bearing unearned privilege.

⁵²² *Labor Relations Radio*, E83.

⁵²³ Labor Lab, "Meet the Persuaders: Logic Labor Relations," *LaborLab*, February 27, 2025, <https://laborlab.us/logiclaborrelations/>.

To underscore this characterization of organizers, List then asks if the company has fallen behind with offering wages consistent with recent inflation. Stratford and Alcorn both agree that the company's wages are generous, noting they both make the top-tier wage for crew members at 27 dollars per hour. As noted earlier, at 40 hours per week, this wage does indeed amount to a decent living wage in Hadley, Massachusetts, where the estimated cost of living for a single adult is \$2,797 per month according to census data.⁵²⁴ What Stratford, Alcorn, and List fail to consider is the fact that entry level wages offered by the Hadley location are far less, at \$16.41 according to hiring ads on Indeed.⁵²⁵ That number appears to be the rate at the time of this writing, however, meaning it may have been less in 2023. At that wage today, an entry-level employee would make about \$2,626, which is more than a hundred less per month than their cost of living as a single adult. Achieving this wage further assumes the entry-level worker in question works 40 hours per week consistently, which by all accounts is very unlikely to be the case. Suppose the best case scenario – that a worker in this position was consistently scheduled for 40 hours, and was offered enough of a pay bump at their first performance review to cover the 100 dollar gap. Even in that case, a mere six months (assuming that the company offers twice annual performance reviews as executives Tara and Matt boasted on the company podcast) is a long time to go without making ends meet, as anyone who has been in such a position is well aware. Further, if the testimonies of Trader Joe's crew sympathetic to union efforts hold any merit, pathways to achieving the 27 dollar maximum wage are becoming increasingly sparse within the organization. Yet, for their unwillingness to buckle down, suck it up, and bootstrap

⁵²⁴ Site built by: Salary.com, "Cost of Living in Hadley, MA 2026," Salary.Com, accessed March 16, 2026, <https://www.salary.com/research/cost-of-living/hadley-ma>.

⁵²⁵ "Crew Member Salaries in Hadley, MA for Trader Joe's | Indeed.Com," accessed March 16, 2026, <https://www.indeed.com/cmp/Trader-Joe/s/salaries/Crew-Member/Hadley-MA>. If *Indeed* data is accurate, the *average* wage in Hadley is only \$16.92, suggesting many employees make the entry level wage or close to it.

their way to an increasingly uncertain future stability, Stratford, Alcorn, and List agree that union supporters are awfully and strangely entitled.

Kiki shares the idea that the unionization attempt in her store was primarily the result of overly privileged youth. When recounting the story of her experience, Kiki is especially aggrieved that organizing efforts largely were coordinated over a group chat of disproportionately young, inexperienced, unambitious, and white coworkers. She tells List that

There, it kind of like the buzz was happening of, oh, have you heard about the chat? And I said, you know, a lot of us, a lot of us didn't hear about the chat. And when I say a lot of us, it was those of us over the age of 35, most of us that are people of color, and people that had spoken about wanting to move up in the company. So all of us were left in the dark. If you fit that category, we were all left in the dark.⁵²⁶

Kiki returns several times throughout the interview to the organizers' youth and ignorant activism, generally in connection with what she assumes is a sense of entitlement.

Before unpacking the generational component of this characterization, it is important to consider the racialized element of Kiki's disagreement with union organizers in her store. She explains that a major source of contention both she and her mostly nonwhite coworkers had with organizing efforts is that it was mostly white organizers who made race a central component of their campaign. That is, she describes how, to her dismay, race was a topic of conversation in the infamous group chat. An example she offers is that apparently someone had pointed out that a middle-aged Latina crew member was always asked to clean the bathrooms, and in the chat participants speculated this was due to unconscious bias on the part of managers. Kiki felt it was inappropriate for white coworkers to be discussing the racial identities and speculating on the experiences of nonwhite coworkers without their knowledge, and that it was indicative of organizers' tendency to exploit the identities of marginalized groups for personal gain (in this

⁵²⁶ *Labor Relations Radio*, E88.

case, forming a union). Her dismay deepened when this same group based the union campaign on the idea that management discriminated against both nonwhite and LGBTQ+ coworkers in her store. Kiki does not disclose whether she identifies with the queer community or her own particular racial identity, though it is clear from her statements that she is nonwhite. In her experience, she tells List, the characterization that management was racist or otherwise prejudiced against marginalized people was simply not true. A majority of her coworkers agreed with her, she says, explaining that "...I'm sure there's other Trader Joe's that need to be unionized, you know? But for our store, we didn't feel like it needed to be. And definitely not running on a platform like that. Nobody wanted to vote on a platform like that."⁵²⁷

In being careful to allow for the possibility that discrimination may be enough of a problem elsewhere in the company to warrant unionizing, Kiki is an interesting case in that she is not opposed to unions on principle. Instead her opposition stems from organizers' tactics and an apparently poor argument on their parts, compounded by their own positions of privilege. What she describes is by now a culturally resonant stereotype. That is, the suburban, newly college-educated white person who – now armed with an understanding of the many discriminatory horrors of history and how their legacy lives on for marginalized people in the present day – is perhaps a little too quick to get offended on marginalized peoples' behalf. They do so even, as Kiki describes here, when that interpretation of a situation does not ring true for the community in question. When this is the case, it is understandable that people like Kiki would be offended at the assumption that they should be offended. To do so is to assume a superior interpretation of reality, an authority that organizers did not have. Further, assuming that a nonwhite person's racial identity would be the most salient part of their identity and primary lens through which

⁵²⁷ *Labor Relations Radio*, E88.

they interpret every interaction and structural condition is to engage in the very same race-based essentialism that social progressivism is supposed to oppose.

At the same time, it is perhaps an unsurprising if unfortunate fact that it is those who do indeed have more privilege, and therefore have been socialized into holding greater expectations about what it is that they deserve, who are more likely to fight against conditions they perceive to be unfair. Sociologist Annette Lareau has found support for this phenomenon in public schools, and commentators have made the same point about the 2020s organizing wave that is the subject of this dissertation.⁵²⁸ Consider the plight of the contemporary middle class college student, told all their life that higher education was their ticket to maintaining middle class stability. When they graduate into a world where middle-class jobs are increasingly scarce and have increasingly high barriers to entry, they realize that the job they got working at, say, Starbucks or Trader Joe's to start paying back student loans might be more long term than they initially intended. It is precisely this kind of person who might be outraged when told to tolerate the low wages, unstable hours, and generally poor conditions I have described at length, and it is precisely this kind of person who is likely to entertain the idea of starting a union.

That person is different from someone who has been socialized to believe their labor is not worth much more than the minimum wage in the first place. This is certainly not to say that history is not full of contrary examples. Many of the staunchest labor advocates have been women and people of color, of course, such as nineteenth century mill worker and textile industry organizer Sarah G. Bagley, or the twentieth century labor and civil rights activist Baynard Rustin of the AFL-CIO. It should further be noted that Jamie Edwards, the president of

⁵²⁸ Annette Lareau, *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life, 2nd Edition with an Update a Decade Later* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011); Megan K. Stack, "Opinion | Inside Starbucks' Dirty War Against Organized Labor," Opinion, *The New York Times*, July 21, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/21/opinion/starbucks-union-strikes-labor-movement.html>.

Trader Joe's United, is Black and transgender, and it seems Trader Joe's workers who both support and oppose the union are racially diverse for the simple fact that Trader Joe's employees, along with the entire working class, is racially diverse.⁵²⁹ What I wish to emphasize, however, is the possibility that labor advocacy, as a form of activism oriented toward improving the conditions of a whole workplace, is a positive outlet for the overly educated and entitled youth that are derided here. After all, it is not as though organizers seek protections or raises exclusively for themselves. Asking for a raise (which you apparently have the opportunity to do every six months at Trader Joe's) is much easier than winning a union vote. Rather than a selfish act, the whole point of forming a union is that it safeguards *all* workers' rights and puts them in a position to bargain for better pay and benefits across the board.

Perhaps organizers in Kiki's store did not articulate this solidaristic argument very effectively, as she appears to be under the impression that organizers were exclusively seeking raises for themselves. Under this puzzling belief, like Alcorn and Stratford, she characterizes union supporters as lazy and entitled young people who have not yet learned a proper work ethic. She elaborates on this sentiment in a lengthy exchange with List, which begins when she attributes organizers' apparent greed, in this case, to New York City's notoriously high cost of living. She posits that

I think what it is too, you know, I have been in New York almost 13 years and it's an expensive city, you know, and most people have more than one job. And I mean, I have a lot of coworkers, you know, I have a coworker, she starts a job from 6 a.m. till 4 and then comes into Trader Joe's from 5 to 11. Does that five days a week, you know, people do what they gotta do for their family. And I think the inexperience of these kids, of work experience they don't have, but also moving from whatever state and realizing, wow, New York is really expensive. So instead of getting a second job, I deserve more money at my current job, you know?⁵³⁰

⁵²⁹ José García, "The Backbone of America: Understanding the Working Class," *Ford Foundation*, October 1, 2025, <https://www.fordfoundation.org/news-and-stories/stories/the-backbone-of-america-understanding-the-working-class/>.

⁵³⁰ *Labor Relations Radio*, E88.

Kiki identifies the idea that a basic condition of full time employment ought to be paying workers enough so that they can reside in the same cities where they work as a naive and youthful fantasy. Rather than expect something so outlandish, the virtuous thing to do is to buckle down and get *two* full time jobs, to “do what you have to do” to provide for your family, apparently under the terms that employers set. To Kiki, it is difficult to reconcile the idea that workers could be deserving of more money simply because they cannot make ends meet. She goes on to assert that after the union vote, even those who voted yes must have been forced to confront the degree to which their desire for better pay and benefits stemmed from a place of entitlement.

And I think a lot of them realize that after the vote went no, for them to understand why so many people voted no, I think that’s why a lot of them that said yes were asking all those questions and saying, oh, I can’t believe I voted for that. Because once they heard people’s stories of, like my coworker that works two jobs in one day, once they started hearing that, it was almost like they felt their own entitlement of, oh, am I voting yes because I deserve more? Or do I feel entitled that I deserve more? While you’re watching your coworkers work two, three jobs to survive. I think a lot of them had eye-opening experiences with that.⁵³¹

It is here that Kiki’s argument betrays a fundamental misunderstanding about the purpose of forming a union. She supposes that union supporters must have felt entitled, and embarrassedly so, for having the audacity to believe that they deserve “more” for their labor. These workers must have been put in their place by the stories of coworkers that accept the low esteem in which their labor is held, and are willing to work two or three jobs just to get by. She seems to suggest that by voting to unionize instead of following in their stead, union supporters were positing that they were in fact more deserving than their coworkers who were apparently willing to compete on management’s terms. On the contrary, union organizing is far from an attempt to position

⁵³¹ *Labor Relations Radio E140.*

oneself as more deserving than one's coworker who have thus far effectively consented to terms of their employment as is. It is an attempt to realize better treatment for *all* of one's coworkers, to ensure that everyone is compensated fairly such that no one must work 16 hour days or hold down two or more jobs just to get by. It is entirely possible that it was cases like that of the coworker Kiki describes that inspired organizers in the first place, rather than a self-centered belief that they personally deserve higher wages. Supporting a union means that you *all* deserve better. Perhaps it is with this sentiment that Kiki disagrees, as she appears to favor a system in which only the hardest workers succeed.

It is more likely, however, that Kiki's grievance is both deeper than a simple misunderstanding about the mutual aid that labor unions provide, and more complex than a conscious desire for others to struggle. It seems instead rooted primarily in a profound and palpable sense that her own hard work – and that of her older coworkers – is being disrespected. In this train of thought, by upending the established system instead of following in her footsteps as a good worker, young people are denying herself and her fellow good workers the virtue and material rewards they are due. The idea that changing a system to remove unnecessary hardship cheapens the sacrifices of those who previously had to navigate through it, hardships and all, is a common one in political discourse because it is commonly and deeply felt. Each time the debate about student loan forgiveness rolls around, there are typically older Americans who graduated years prior and paid off their student loans the old-fashioned way who argue that exempting youngsters from doing the same wouldn't be fair them.⁵³² Individuals who were subject to

⁵³² Leland Vittert, "Vittert: Student Loan Debt Forgiveness Is Unfair to Nearly Everybody," *NewsNation*, August 23, 2022, <https://www.newsnationnow.com/us-news/education/vittert-student-loan-debt-forgiveness-unfair-to-nearly-everybody/>; Antony Davies and Jamies R. Harrigan, "Beware the Incentives of 'Forgiving' Student Loan Debt," *The Daily Economy*, November 16, 2022, <https://thedailyeconomy.org/article/beware-the-incentives-of-forgiving-student-loan-debt/>.

ritualistic bullying or hazing when they joined an institution sometimes dismiss contemporary attempts to quash these practices as political correctness gone mad.⁵³³ Kiki's offense at young organizers in her store seems to follow a similar logic, that changing the rules suddenly (no matter how unfair those rules are) is fundamentally unfair to everyone who has been following them thus far without complaint. Sure, rewriting the rules could materially benefit rule followers and breakers alike. In the process, however, it would drain the former of their virtuous status as bootstrappers, making all of their hard work for naught. Who would do such a thing to their elders but disrespectful youngsters?

José and Nikki of the Chicago store, too, are strongly vexed by organizers' apparent youthful entitlement, elaborating on this theme extensively throughout the interview. At one point, José asserts of the Trader Joe's that "It's not playtime. It's not daycare. It's not recess, it's a job and they don't ask for much."⁵³⁴ The comparison is a clear attempt to paint union supporters as children who expect to be treated as such, rather than buckling down and doing the purportedly minimal labor Trader Joe's asks of them. Accordingly, he frames union demands as a failure of adult responsibility. Earlier on in the interview, José presents his understanding of the union efforts at his store by saying the place is "very cliquey." When List asks him to elaborate, he explains that all of the union organizers and many of its supporters worked on the night crew, and that "the night crew [who were responsible for the organizing campaign] is very young."⁵³⁵ This makes sense to José, as he explains that older crew members prefer the early morning shift, as they have children and other responsibilities, while the night crew is made up

⁵³³ Charlie Lowisma, "The Imminent Change to College Culture," *Medium*, April 17, 2020, <https://medium.com/@clowisma10/the-imminent-change-to-college-culture-2108c9701b26>; Nikki Schwab, "Pete Hegseth Wants to Bring Back Army's 'shark Attack' Training," *Galleries, Mail Online*, August 8, 2025, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/galleries/article-14983791/Pete-Hegseth-wants-bring-Armys-shark-attack-training.html>.

⁵³⁴ *Labor Relations Radio E140*.

⁵³⁵ *Labor Relations Radio E140*.

disproportionately of college students who take classes earlier in the day. He goes on to say that “a lot of people who are for this union are a bunch of friends, you know?” By describing union supporters as a college-aged clique, José positions them as unserious, idealistic youth, delegitimizing their concerns just as Morris observed newspaper commentators do with millennial supporters of the Green New Deal.⁵³⁶

This insinuation is made less subtly over the course of the interview. Later on, José again returns to the theme of youth when he offers an anecdote of changing the mind of an apparently non-committal worker wearing a union pin. After persuading her that union supporters in the store were dishonest backstabbers (to which I will circle back), José asserts that she then confessed she was only wearing the pin in the first place so she would not be kicked out of the clique. Recounting the encounter, he says “So like, let’s say there’s a group of, like we said, a bunch of middle 20s to middle 30s. It’s a group of people that she said, if you don’t have a political stance in something right now, without doing your research, you get kicked out of the group. And that was what she was afraid of, that she was going to lose some friends.”⁵³⁷

Nikki agrees with this characterization of union supporters, in which, ironically, their inherently political grievances are drained of political substance, a rhetorical strategy which Morris calls depoliticization. Instead, Nikki recasts concern for progressive political causes as both the shallow stuff of adolescent popularity contests and the ill-founded idealism of youth. Referencing the Oakland store’s progressive politics and recent unionization, she says

I think what’s happening is that a lot of the younger people, people in their 20s and 30s, they want to do this outside of work. It’s like something that they, that it’s like, it’s part of the group. It’s just part of the clique that they’re in. It’s part of what they, this is what they’re striving for. This is their cause. This is the fist in the air. This is what we want to do.⁵³⁸

⁵³⁶ Morris, “Constructing the Millennial ‘Other’ in United States Press Coverage of the Green New Deal.”

⁵³⁷ *Labor Relations Radio E140*.

⁵³⁸ *Labor Relations Radio E140*.

By likening the union activities of her coworkers to a youthful clique and hobby, Nikki suggests that their efforts are inherently unserious – just another progressive cause to be pursued not on its merits but for the thrill of sticking it to the man. She does not contemplate the possibility that a youngster’s dedication to a “cause”—apparently a vaguely derogatory term here—could be either genuine or just. More to the point, the desire to be involved in this sort of extracurricular activity apparently does not count toward the youth’s work ethic, despite their admitted devotion to doing the hard work that activism entails. Elsewhere in her interview, Nikki explains that her understanding of Gen Z’s work ethic is informed by her other job, as a college professor. Indeed, she explains to List that she has seen a marked drop in students’ ability to put in the bare minimum of showing up to classes. To Nikki’s chagrin, she explains that her Gen Z students take their responsibility to show up less seriously than her own generational counterparts, or even the millennials did. Observing that Covid made the situation worse, she complains that

...they’re like, oh, I, you know, I have to take my mom somewhere. I have a dentist appointment. Like they, they don’t care about like... to me, like, I’ll make my dentist appointment not when I’m teaching. Like I’ll make it a day or make it like after work is done or a day that I have off, whereas they are, they’re more likely to be the, like, I don’t feel good. I can’t make it. I have a stomach ache. I can’t make it. I have a UTI. I can’t make it. I have, like, a driving lesson that day.⁵³⁹

Readers may feel a reflexive twinge of sympathy when it comes to dealing with four classes of students and the extra work of accommodating their many time commitments. Nonetheless, it reveals a profound frustration with a generation imagined to bear a stubborn refusal to roll up their sleeves and do the work necessary to succeed at any cost, UTIs and family commitments be damned. By contrast, Nikki prides herself on her own ability to prioritize work above all else.

⁵³⁹ *Labor Relations Radio E140.*

List is more than happy to keep this theme going throughout the interview, prompting José and Nikki to return to it at every opportunity. As the pair explain to List how they fought the pro-union campaign and personally persuaded many of their coworkers to vote against it, List asks who, exactly, they were able to switch, and ventures a guess. “Do you think that the bulk of those people were of, I’m getting to a point here, a certain age group?” He asks, “Like, were you able to switch the Millennials, but not the Gen Zers or?” Both Nikki and José agree that it was primarily the Zoomers who did not want to be cast out of the clique and couldn’t be persuaded. José shares that he took careful note of every employee in his store who was for and against the union. By his calculation, every person involved in organizing the union was under 30 or in their mid 30s, and all had been with the company for less than three years. Despite the fact that mid-30s is not exactly the inexperienced youth the three have been discussing, here José is careful to add tenure to the list of requirements for getting a vote in the matter. Indeed, particularly for José, the organizers’ great offense is not just their youth, but their position that their own opinions about how the workplace ought to be run bore equal weight to veteran crew members like himself. In José and Nikki’s estimation, these workers had not yet earned this privilege.

This is clear from the get go as both Nikki and José recount the story of how the union organizing efforts in their store unfolded. Nikki describes being unwittingly taken out for a drink by a coworker, who eventually sprang upon her the news that she and several coworkers hoped to form a union and were planning a vote. According to Nikki, she was not immediately turned off, but wanted to know whether they had gotten the blessing of “veterans” like José. When it eventually became clear that José and other day shift crew were being purposefully left in the dark on the grounds that they would side with management and hinder organizing efforts, Nikki told José about what was going on. Though José’s opposition to the union surely runs deeper

than the fact that, in his apparent perception, his junior coworkers went over his head, his rage about this unforgivable slight is palpable throughout the interview. He describes union organizers as “liars” and “dishonest” people who “blind-sided” him with the union campaign.⁵⁴⁰ Particularly within the context of all the discussion about the organizers’ age and inexperience, the implication of characterizing organizers’ efforts to form a union as a conniving betrayal for leaving out veteran workers like José betrays the sentiment that these workers had not yet earned the right to make any decisions, or perhaps have an opinion, about their shared workplace. This right is reserved for workers like José, who had worked hard over a fourteen year period to earn it. Numerous statements make this sentiment plain. For instance, in recounting his confrontation with the union leaders in his store, José explains

And I said to them, we will never ever trust any of you. And none of us veterans will ever work with you, because you guys are liars. You think – you think that you could out work me? You have no clue who you’re messing with. Absolutely no clue. Because all I’ve done in my life is work hard, really hard, in everything that I’ve ever done, because that’s the kind of person I am. And I know this man who is their leader barely does anything for five years. And I believe the truth and hard work always pay off.

With this statement, José perfectly adopts the bootstrapping ethos, the performance a bit reminiscent of the confrontation between Senator Mullin and Teamsters boss Sean O’Brien recounted in the introduction. For José, hard work is the appropriate measure of a person’s virtue, and he has it in spades. Further, in saying that working hard is all he’s ever done in his life and just the kind of person that he is, it is clear that his identity as an exceptionally hard worker is for him a, if not the, defining one. In going over his head as a veteran who has put in so much time and effort, organizers have made the mistake of attempting to subvert this value system, overstepping their ranks in an assumed hierarchy

⁵⁴⁰ *Labor Relations Radio E140.*

where José's years of hard work puts his own preferences and opinions far above theirs. That the leader happens to be a poor worker in José's eyes (he earlier described the union leader as "the laziest person I have ever known"), makes their audacity all the more preposterous. Further, if the problem is a bunch of entitled kids not wanting to do any work, José sees hard work as the solution. As he puts it, the idea that organizers could "out work" him to prevail in their efforts is preposterous. By inherently linking the will to hard work with "the truth," a connection he makes explicitly five times during his interview, he emphasizes the bootstrapping ethos's connection to virtue. With statements like these, he seems to be under the impression that his work ethic alone will guide him to victory, persuading his coworkers of "the truth" that is the American work ethic, which he himself embodies.⁵⁴¹

I have argued in contrast, that when labor uses the bootstrapping ethos this way, their logic contains a contradiction. It assumes their gradual ascent up the ladder (in this case, José's journey toward earning crew members' maximum wage) is the result of their own efforts, neatly sweeping under the rug the important caveat that their success depends wholly on management's willingness to dole out opportunities and recognize their merit. That employees are necessarily unable to be the masters of their own destiny in the way that the American work ethic requires is why the standard of worthiness it establishes is a harmful one for all working people. As they are necessarily dependent on employers, it sets them up for failure, providing justification for the idea that it is entrepreneurial labor and entrepreneurial labor alone that entitles one to wealth and respect. What José demonstrates is a competing interpretation, wherein the American work ethic is not subject

⁵⁴¹ *Labor Relations Radio E140.*

to debate but an objective standard—one in which it is not capital, not management, not other people making subjective decisions about who deserves what, but a matter of truth.

Conclusion

As union organizers are likely to encounter their fair share of coworkers like those discussed in this chapter who are deeply attached to the value system of the American ethic, how can they overcome the apparently serious, often generational rifts workers like them express? When older generations see overcoming profound hardships (albeit overlooking the degree to which hardships have become increasingly insurmountable in the present day) as a rite of passage, and experience arguments for systemic change as fundamentally disrespectful of their own years of hard work, what kind of appeals must younger organizers make to persuade them? Or, for that matter, how can union organizers persuade any worker who perceives an organized attempt to empower working people relative to their employer as a threat to a moral system that gives meaning to their struggle and valorizes them as heroic bootstrappers?

Perhaps one place to start looking for answers to this puzzle is the not-so distant past, a time and place where a largely individualistic work ethic – anchored in the conviction that anything deserved must be earned – was the very definition of virtue and honor, and yet the great majority of workers not only belonged to unions but proudly, passionately so. Take the once mighty copper mines of Butte, Montana, for example. Until 1982, when the Anaconda Copper Company shut down its last mine in the city of its headquarters, Butte was equal parts company town and union town. That is, according to historians and a large trove of oral history interviews preserved by a county archive, practically every aspect of life in the respectably sized city was oriented around its biggest employer and the way of life it carved out for its employees.⁵⁴²

⁵⁴² Brian James Leech, *The City That Ate Itself: Butte, Montana and Its Expanding Berkeley Pit*, n.d.; “The Verdigris Project,” The Verdigris Project, accessed February 25, 2023, <https://www.verdigrisproject.org>.

Mining was Butte's identity, one that even those who worked in other fields defined themselves in relation to. As the oral history archive and many other persistent efforts to preserve the industry's memory in Butte suggest, it is an identity that many Butte residents have trouble letting go of in the present day. In an analysis of these oral histories, I've argued that this nostalgia runs deeper than a desire for economic stability, which for all its faults, the Anaconda Company played a major role in providing for at least a few generations. Rather, oral history interviews with minors recorded both just after the mine's closure and again in 2018 suggest that what former miners really miss is the job, and more aptly, my analysis found, the virtuous status bestowed upon them for doing it.⁵⁴³

Underground mining is such dangerous work that it is the go-to example anti-union employers and employees alike use as a point of comparison for why their own industry needs not be unionized. Even José in this very chapter reached for it, telling List that it's not like Trader Joe's employees work in a mine.⁵⁴⁴ It seems the hazards of mining are so notorious that even the most stridently anti-union rhetors can agree that perhaps these workers need the protections of a union. Frequent underground fires, cave-ins, dangerous machinery, sweltering heat and humidity, tight working spaces, and the toxic silica particles thick in the air of mine shafts, notorious for causing lung disease and – at least until ventilation systems eventually improved these odds – about a 50-50 chance of death around age 40, once earned mining the title of the world's most dangerous job.⁵⁴⁵ Yet in their recorded oral histories, it was these very conditions that underground miners expressed an attachment to. Not only did constant mortal danger provide a kind of thrill, but having the willingness and ability to endure and even excel at

⁵⁴³ Rebekah Welch, "Exploitation as Ethos: Pride and Sacrifice in a Mining Town," National Communication Association 110th Annual Convention, November 22, 2024.

⁵⁴⁴ *Labor Relations Radio E140*.

⁵⁴⁵ Leech, *The City That Ate Itself*.

the world's toughest job became a deeply coveted badge of honor. I found that miners sorted themselves and each other into a hierarchy of virtue wherein those who labored in the harshest, most hazardous conditions but worked hard all the same occupied the top position. Everyone interviewed, from local school teachers, bartenders, and Anaconda Company executives to engineers and machinists to the rank-and-file employees doing the mining themselves, expressed an awe-inspired admiration for the men that performed this excessively dangerous and excessively difficult work well. Even those of them who were most involved with their local union shared this value hierarchy.⁵⁴⁶

Though some former miners interviewed expressed irritation with the safety standards and associated bureaucratic rules the union enforced, not a single miner expressed anything remotely resembling the idea that union protection was for weaklings looking for a way out of hard work. This was, perhaps, the work ethic's most extreme circumstances. These miners were a group of men who thought of themselves proudly and literally as the world's hardest workers, using this quality to define virtue's very essence. In their interviews, they showed no hesitation in shaming coworkers who they felt fell short of their high standards – belittling coworkers who took comparatively easier posts, who were simply less productive, or, god forbid, complained.⁵⁴⁷ Yet even these men felt there was a standard of treatment to which *all* of their coworkers were entitled, and many of them proudly fought just as hard to enforce that standard on each other's behalf. In their interviews, several of the miners casually mention participating in militant strikes between boasting about their own herculean work ethics.⁵⁴⁸

⁵⁴⁶ There were many different jobs that men held underground, some of them with different union representation than others, though miners were generally a part of the Western Federation of Miners, in Local Number One.

⁵⁴⁷ Welch, "Exploitation as Ethos."

⁵⁴⁸ See, for instance: Louis Loushin, "Louis Loushin, Veteran & Hoisting Engineer," n.d., accessed October 1, 2024, <https://www.verdigrisproject.org/oral-histories/louis-loushin-veteran-amp-hoisting-engineer>.

Examples like this one suggest that even in workplaces where exceptionally hard work is held up as the highest virtue and workers openly judge one another accordingly, labor unions and the solidaristic attitude that sustain them need not be viewed as incompatible with or even threatening to this value system. What sets today's service workers apart from Butte's miners only a few decades ago is an interpretation of the work ethic that has been stripped of class analysis. That is, Butte's miners, and likely the other roughly 25% of Americans who belonged to a union at the time, believed in a higher standard of treatment to which they were *all* entitled from their employers: a living wage, a pension, etc.⁵⁴⁹ As I have argued throughout this dissertation, what today's capitalist class has accomplished so successfully in the intervening years is inculcating an anti-worker interpretation of the work ethic wherein none of those expectations can be taken for granted, and instead, no one is entitled to a living wage for long hours of labor, or a comfortable retirement for a lifetime of work. It stands to reason then that a critical first step in unraveling this now hegemonic conviction, and perhaps even winning over or at least softening the anti-union sentiment of the Josés of the world, is to reframe the purpose of organizing a union in one's workplace while appealing to a work ethic that celebrates yet quietly redefines hard work: how much, and more importantly what kind it takes to be deserving.

As Elizabeth Anderson argues in her thorough intellectual history of the work ethic, a version of it that posits all labor is valuable and thus all working people ought to be taken care of by employers and society generally (a version more like what Butte's miners evince) is much closer to what some of its early champions in Western Europe appear to have meant.⁵⁵⁰ As I

⁵⁴⁹ Lawrence Mishel and Jessica Schieder, "As Union Membership Has Fallen, the Top 10 Percent Have Been Getting a Larger Share of Income," *Economic Policy Institute*, May 24, 2016, <https://www.epi.org/publication/as-union-membership-has-fallen-the-top-10-percent-have-been-getting-a-larger-share-of-income/>.

⁵⁵⁰ Elizabeth Anderson, *Hijacked: How Neoliberalism Turned the Work Ethic against Workers and How Workers Can Take It Back*, New edition (Cambridge, United Kingdom New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press, 2023).

summarized in the introduction, Anderson identifies two competing versions of the work ethic: one progressive, valuing all laborers and rooted in the philosophy of John Locke, the other conservative, rooted in the philosophy of figures like Jeremy Bentham and Thomas Malthus. As opposed to seeing all work as having value to society and supposing from there that working people ought not to be allowed to live in poverty, the latter sees poverty not as a result of too low wages and otherwise unfair conditions but as the result of individual moral failure. As this logic goes, poverty is a mere consequence of not working as much or as hard as one should, and any effort to improve the condition of the poor would thus be immoral. Anderson's point is that the progressive work ethic has been hijacked by proponents of the conservative one in the United States, and that we ought to take steps to institute the Lockean version once more.

I certainly take Anderson's point that the work ethic's logical system is malleable enough to lead in both pro or anti-worker directions, and that if the goal is to once again empower working people, the most reliable course of action might be to follow an existing path back to Locke rather than abandon the work ethic altogether and all at once – a feat that may be impossible when all ends of the economic spectrum agree on the moral sanctity of hard work. To win over those who are skeptical of unions and not yet accepting of the idea that all working people deserve a comfortable life as a basic condition of their employment, regardless of seniority or anything else, I agree with Anderson that it makes a certain amount of sense to appeal to some inherent value in hard work when making arguments for unions. However, where I depart from Anderson's important insights is to propose a slightly different way that union organizers can mount such an argument on the labor movement's behalf and in line with its goals. That is, I believe that it is important to remind coworkers and the culture writ large of

what it is that is supposed to make working hard a virtuous quality in the first place: its capacity to serve a greater, in fact a *common* good.

That is why Locke and thinkers like him equated hard work with morality and likewise despised idleness: the latter makes no contribution to society, while the former is supposed to be virtuous specifically because in creating value for society it does something for others.⁵⁵¹ Indeed, before waged work fully took over the definition of what counts as work at all, it was a willingness to dedicate one's time and efforts, or perhaps even one's life, for the benefit of society (rather than for one's own selfish gain) that was considered a core virtue and functioned as a work ethic of sorts. In Ancient Athens, for instance, one word for this sort of virtue was *arête*, often translated simply as virtue but used more specifically to convey the particular values associated with the courage, strength, and "goodness" of warriors. As rhetorical scholar Debra Hawhee explains it, *arête* indicates a brave and brilliant athleticism that requires constant maintenance, self-discipline, and thus, self-sacrifice.⁵⁵² To have it, one must constantly do virtuous things that are deserving of honor; chief among this list is dying in battle or winning in the Olympic games. In other words, what makes warriors and athletes so deserving of glory, what imbues them with virtuosity is their willingness to do hard things, to suffer, and even die for the greater good of their civilization. Of course, while these actions are very much considered virtuous in the present day, I argue that the modern American work ethic has harnessed some of these residual energies for self-sacrifice while stripping them of the whole, greater good

⁵⁵¹ John Locke, *Locke: Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge England ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988); John Locke, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education and of the Conduct of the Understanding*, ed. Ruth W. Grant and Nathan Tarcov (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1996).

⁵⁵² Debra Hawhee, "Agonism and Arete," *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 35, no. 3 (2002): 185–207, <https://doi.org/10.1353/par.2003.0004>.

component that was always supposed to be the point, deploying them in service of someone else's profits instead.

Perhaps one way for organizers to appeal to skeptical co-workers and chip away at the apparent perception that unions are for the lazy and weak, then, is to appeal to the inherent *arête* of their advocacy work, positioning it within the “economy of actions” that demonstrates a willingness to work hard and suffer for the group. I don't mean to suggest that unions have failed to make the idea that their work is largely in service of the collective good a part of their messaging. On the contrary, they have made this argument since their inception. The problem illustrated in this chapter is that, perhaps especially in industries without historical ties to trade unionism, in the present day United States, many workers may not have heard such arguments; indeed, this perspective is effectively drowned out by an ocean of corporate rhetoric that insists unions are purely parasitic, pointless organizations. In this set of circumstances, perhaps the best way to persuade them otherwise is for the message to be embodied by coworkers whose *arête* is undeniable.

From winning a union vote in one's store to all the work of effectively running it in the future – bargaining campaigns, handling grievances, etc. – organizing is extremely hard work. Overcoming stigma, countering elaborate union busting campaigns, and responding to almost always drawn-out legal battles requires a similar, if not much greater level of persistence, dedication, and grit as does success in any job, and is indeed something internal organizers must do on top of their jobs and without compensation (all the while enduring vitriol from coworkers and management alike). Not only is it a gargantuan effort, but it is hard work that one puts in doggedly in the present to improve not only their own, but others' future prospects. In this respect, union organizers differ little from bootstrappers, save for different definitions of what

counts as hard work and what makes the struggle worthwhile. For the latter, the point is to win according to the established rules, no matter how difficult or impossible they might be. For the former, it is to fight just as hard to change them, to balance the scales a bit more in workers' favor. Interviews with Trader Joe's workers suggest older generations see changing the rules they've worked so hard to play and win by as disrespectful of their years of hard work and a moral system that gives meaning to their struggle. Perhaps by building an ethos rooted in *arête*, what might be considered the bootstrapping ethos' ethical ancestor, organizers can articulate a version of their solidaristic vision that reassures those who would otherwise be skeptical of their efforts.

I have in mind a line of argument that first frames organizing activity as inspired by the bootstrapping work ethic of previous generations, pointing out what these two, granted very different methods of securing a better, more dignified life for oneself and one's family have in common. Young organizers might make this connection explicitly to their older coworkers who are inclined to take offense at the idea of unionization, explaining that millennials and zoomers who do the work of labor organizing are following in baby boomers' footsteps when they devote long hours to work undertaken without complaint to improve conditions for future generations. To illustrate how this argument might go, it might help to briefly return once more to José's interview. A big theme for José is that the coworkers who ran the campaign were exceedingly lazy, save apparently for one younger woman – the same one that took Nikki out for a drink. José explains that he held her in high regard, as they worked for a while on the same shift in the same section and he felt that she was "one of the hardest workers" he had ever met. He explains that he was "stunned" by her involvement because he considered her to be a "great person" with such a

strong work ethic.⁵⁵³ Baffled, he felt the need to confront her, and explains to List that when he did, she was already drained because she was “taking a lot of heat,” presumably from coworkers like him. José elaborates that the two proceeded to have a two or three hour conversation, the details of which are sparse beyond José asking “How can you do this? How can you do this?” Not long after, José says, she stepped down from her position in the union and eventually left the store.⁵⁵⁴

While it is unclear exactly what was said in this encounter, and without any insights into the worker in question’s point of view, what is clear is that José came away from the conversation feeling he had successfully enlightened her to the error of her ways, so much so that she abandoned the campaign and resigned in disgrace. As José says that it was this young woman who took the brunt of “the heat” from angry coworkers, one might alternatively speculate that she left because she was being harassed, not because she changed her mind about unions and was ashamed at her efforts. Nonetheless, I highlight this anecdote here in that it represents a possibly missed opportunity to frame the union efforts to José and other older coworkers as a form of dedication to their jobs inspired by how hard they have witnessed people like himself work. That is, if she didn’t, perhaps this young woman might try explaining that her generation writ large and her younger coworkers in particular see union organizing not as a short cut to climb to José’s level, but as a similarly long and difficult road they must climb to ensure that they, and all the workers who come after them, have an opportunity to succeed. Organizers often say that they do what they do not because they hate their jobs or the company, but because they care deeply about both and want to do all they can to make them better. For people like José, this line of argument is likely the right one, only it seems critical to bolster it with the idea

⁵⁵³ *Labor Relations Radio E140.*

⁵⁵⁴ *Labor Relations Radio E140.*

that a union is just a different way for dedicated youngers to honor his example when following in his footsteps as a hard worker, especially since walking exactly in his footsteps – sticking with the company long enough to eventually make a living wage – has become less and less possible.

While explaining this outright may be a necessary first step, it is of course unlikely to be convincing on its own. I have in mind two ways of making it more persuasive. First, at least in cases like this one wherein organizers face a steep generational divide, it may be especially important for organizers and union-supporters to be conscious of their leadership and their reputations with older workers. I certainly don't want to be in the position of advising young workers to work harder than they already do; yet in any workplace there are likely to be workers of all ages who simply do their jobs well and are known for it. If organizers are young people exclusively, winning votes from older coworkers may depend on choosing leaders known to credibly embody the older, industrial work ethic, like the young woman described by José. Having a hard-working ethos already might set union organizers up to better embody and thus demonstrate an alternative work ethic that is rooted not in the idea that no one deserves anything they haven't earned on management's terms, but one rooted instead in *arête*. That is, organizers must demonstrate how one can work hard at their jobs not solely for the benefit of company profits and the recognition of their immediate managers, but for the greater good of one another and the generations of employees that will come after them. As difficult as it may be, one way to embody such an ethic is to meet harassment and vitriol with solidarity and care, to fight for even the most contemptuous coworkers by simply not giving up. That is, it may be especially important for union leaders to be in it for the long haul.

Second and perhaps more importantly, however, there is another way for union organizers to breathe life into the idea that joining a union and supporting the labor movement is

not an indication of a poor work ethic, and that is to be strategic about the demands they center in their campaigns. All unions absolutely must fight for better wages and benefits, of course, but foregrounding a slightly different way of winning those core and critical victories might be especially important for winning over coworkers whose understanding of right and wrong remains deeply entangled with the American work ethic: that is, fighting for the right to full-time work. As I have described throughout this dissertation, much of the precarity that service workers face today is owed simply to the now commonplace managerial strategy of minimizing labor costs as much as possible by relying on skeleton crews and denying workers enough hours to earn the benefits to which they are entitled.

A host of scholarship has shown that today's working class faces the apparently paradoxical predicament of being under and overworked at the same time, as they try desperately to eke a living out of multiple part-time jobs.⁵⁵⁵ That effort is especially difficult since it is hard to find multiple part-times jobs compatible with one another's schedules. As many workers testify, they are stuck working ten hours one week and 33 the next, with no rhyme or reason to the change in shifts. In a 2024 survey, 6.7 million workers reported that they worked part-time jobs not by choice, but because they were unable to find full-time work.⁵⁵⁶ In the service industry especially, full-time work is a luxury increasingly available only those workers like José, Alcorn, and Stratford, who are lucky enough to have started with their companies at a time when full-time work was an option and are now grandfathered in.

⁵⁵⁵ Jamie K. McCallum, *Worked over: How Round-the-Clock Work Is Killing the American Dream*, First edition. (New York, NY: Basic Books, Hachette Book Group, 2020); Matt Bruenig and Adelle Waldman, "Americans Should Have a Right to Full-Time Work," *New York Times*, March 18, 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/03/18/opinion/minimum-wage-hours-work-part-time.html>.

⁵⁵⁶ Bruenig and Waldman, "Americans Should Have a Right to Full-Time Work."

Organizing around this issue in particular has the dual benefit of striking a devastating blow to an exploitative managerial strategy that has played a major role in redistributing risk to workers and reward to executives and board members, thus empowering working people, and is likely more appealing to workers skeptical of unionizing on the grounds that it poses a threat to their identity as hardworking bootstrappers. Kiki, for instance, said that organizers demands were not focused on the long-term and showed her they were unserious.⁵⁵⁷ Organizing efforts that seek more hours for employees might begin to show the workers like her that unions are not mere collectives of spoiled brats who feel they are entitled to a good pay and benefits without working for them. Save for the fact that unions accomplish this goal through collective action, the end result is not so different from the entrepreneurial spirit that executives preach; it is merely another means of freeing workers from their state of dependence on their employers. Indeed, organizing around the right to full-time work would be a tremendous boon to the goals of the labor movement and has the potential to appeal to workers still deeply attached to the idea that a dignified life must be diligently earned through a life of hard work. Framing full-time work as a critical right – something to which everyone ought to be entitled – signals a slight but powerful logical shift. It has the added, and in my opinion crucial benefit of slowly, subtly undermining the conviction that no one is entitled to *anything* they have not earned through own waged labor. This is an argument I take up in my concluding chapter.

⁵⁵⁷ *Labor Relations Radio*, E88.

Conclusion

If the state of the job market at the time of this writing is any indication of what is to come in the future, the need to chip away at the American work ethic's foundational conviction – what I have defined as the conceit that no one is entitled to anything they have not earned through their own hard work and ingenuity – deepens by the day. I have argued throughout this dissertation that the problem with this standard of deservingness is that it sets working people up to fail. It instructs them to be masters of their own destiny, to work hard and pull themselves up by their bootstraps and earn their way into the warm embrace of a comfortable, dignified life where ends at long last meet. In doing so, it conveniently ignores the reality of myriad structural constraints on their ability to do what they are told they must – that, as employees, they are necessarily dependent on their employers' willingness or ability to reward their efforts. What it means to earn or deserve something is not the result of some objective equation but the product of a rhetorical negotiation between capital, management, and labor. And without the legal backing, organizational discipline, and political power that trade unions provide, labor does not have much sway in the debate.

A large majority of American workers in the present day do not belong to a union. In 2025, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that the share of unionized workers was 10%, down significantly from the density peak of 33.5% in 1954.⁵⁵⁸ Membership saw a particularly noticeable drop beginning around the late 1970s.⁵⁵⁹ It was around this time that the business

⁵⁵⁸ U. S. Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Union Members - 2025* (2026), <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/union2.pdf>; Paul D. Romero and Julie M. Whittaker, *A Brief Examination of Union Membership Data*, legislation (Congressional Research Service, 2023), <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R47596>.

⁵⁵⁹ Lawrence Mishel and Jessica Schieder, "As Union Membership Has Fallen, the Top 10 Percent Have Been Getting a Larger Share of Income," *Economic Policy Institute*, May 24, 2016, <https://www.epi.org/publication/as-union-membership-has-fallen-the-top-10-percent-have-been-getting-a-larger-share-of-income/>.

community was abandoning the Fordist managerial consensus and moving into what scholars deem post-Fordism – the style that favors an ever-leaner, ever-more flexible corporate structure with as few salaried and benefitted employees as an organization can get away with.⁵⁶⁰ It was also around this time that corporations, with the help of neoliberal ideologues in government zealously de-regulating business, began outsourcing jobs overseas, or contracting out the work that was once performed by a rights-bearing employee to some other firm who would pay a pittance to laborers in the Global South to do it in dangerous, maximally exploitative, and ultimately much cheaper conditions.⁵⁶¹ Union jobs in the private sector largely disappeared and the concurrent push to downsize government prevented the still-unionized public sector from making up these losses.⁵⁶² Tracing the organized political effort on the part of neoliberal ideologues and the business community writ large to achieve these ends, however, is not the point. Rather, the focus of this dissertation has been to identify the underlying ethic that has been used rhetorically to justify labor's near total collapse in the United States.

Indeed, it is my contention that by appealing to the American work ethic, and positioning unions as organizations for those who are too lazy, entitled, or weak to earn anything on their own merits and thus are undeserving, capital and management have found great success in discrediting the labor movement and ensuring that workers stay unorganized. And under these conditions, in which labor is too disorganized to have much power in the debate about what it is that workers deserve, capital and management have decided amongst themselves that workers

⁵⁶⁰ Benjamin H. Snyder, "The Disruption of Work Time," in *The Disrupted Workplace: Time and the Moral Order of Flexible Capitalism*, ed. Benjamin H. Snyder (Oxford University Press, 2016), 0, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190203498.003.0001>.

⁵⁶¹ Kurt Andersen, *Evil Geniuses: The Unmaking of America: A Recent History*, First edition (New York: Random House, 2020).

⁵⁶² Lawrence Mishel, Lynn Rhinehart, and Lane Windham, *Explaining the Erosion of Private-Sector Unions: How Corporate Practices and Legal Changes Have Undercut the Ability of Workers to Organize and Bargain* (Economic Policy Institute, 2020), <https://www.epi.org/unequalpower/publications/private-sector-unions-corporate-legal-erosion/>.

are actually entitled to very little in exchange for their efforts. As I argued in Chapter Two, their rhetoric suggests instead that it is their own labor and their labor alone – that is, executive and entrepreneurial – that entitles those doing it to the lion’s share of company profits. In this way of thinking, workers are only deserving of what capital decides to share with them, and the only way to be deserving of anything more than the scraps is to become a capitalist, that is, to start a successful business, or to rise to the ranks of the executive.

The vast economic inequality that results from capital’s unrivaled power to determine what workers deserve is a dire enough problem on its own. For instance, though Starbucks founder Howard Schultz (as the CEO who presided over the company during the bulk of the baristas’ organizing efforts) is the focus of this dissertation’s case study on the arguments of capital, and the one who testified to Congress that he alone has earned his billions, his position is not an isolated one. In fact, the company seems to have doubled-down on the idea that executives are entitled to everything. Current CEO Brian Niccol literally topped the charts for the highest average CEO to worker pay ratio in a recent report on the “Low-Wage 20” – 20 large US corporations with the lowest wages.⁵⁶³ For context, the average CEO to worker pay ratio in the US in 2024 was 281 to one.⁵⁶⁴ This is a striking enough difference already, one that is often cited by labor advocates as the outrageous proof of how far we have fallen from the more even days of the mid-twentieth century, when ratio bottomed out in 1965 at 20 to one.⁵⁶⁵ Niccol, by contrast,

⁵⁶³ Sarah Anderson, “America’s 20 Largest Low-Wage Employers and the Affordability Crisis,” *Institute for Policy Studies*, March 4, 2026, <https://ips-dc.org/report-americas-20-largest-low-wage-employers-and-the-affordability-crisis/>.

⁵⁶⁴ Elise Gould, Josh Bivens, and Jori Kandra, “CEO Pay Increased in 2024 and Is Now 281 Times That of the Typical Worker: New EPI Landing Page Has All the Details,” *Economic Policy Institute*, n.d., accessed June 5, 2026, <https://www.epi.org/blog/ceo-pay-increased-in-2024-and-is-now-281-times-that-of-the-typical-worker-new-epi-landing-page-has-all-the-details/>.

⁵⁶⁵ Lawrence Mishel and Julia Wolfe, “CEO Compensation Has Grown 940% since 1978: Typical Worker Compensation Has Risen Only 12% during That Time,” *Economic Policy Institute*, August 14, 2019, <https://www.epi.org/publication/ceo-compensation-2018/>.

had in 2026 a pay ratio of 6,666 to the average Starbucks's barista's pay, making \$95,801,676 while the average barista was paid \$14,674.⁵⁶⁶

The reality of executive-worker pay disparity at Starbucks is even worse than this figure makes it sound, as it excludes some of the more creative ways that Niccol is compensated. For instance, Niccol made headlines when he was first hired due to a rather unusual allowance the company made for him. He was based in Southern California, and, apparently unwilling to relocate to the company headquarters in Seattle, he was given free rein over the company jet for commuting purposes.⁵⁶⁷ This was an absurd enough perk already, and one that union organizers seized on to counteract the idea that the company couldn't afford to better compensate them or schedule more baristas. Yet even though Niccol no longer needs to commute back-and-forth, having finally moved to Seattle, what is worse is Starbucks has since given Niccol permission to use the jet to go wherever he wants for whatever reason he wants to, on their dime, having removed the cap on his annual travel expenses so he can do so unhindered.⁵⁶⁸ If this absurd pay imbalance still resulted in a living wage for the average barista, the sting would be somewhat less. But the poverty-level pay for the average barista is evidence that earning a comfortable and dignified life as an employee is increasingly out of reach for most Americans. Jobs that compensate workers fairly are few and far between for those without increasingly specific and difficult-to-access training. And at the time of this writing, as new technologies displace software engineers, copywriters, and other knowledge workers, it appears that what kind of training one

⁵⁶⁶ Anderson, "America's 20 Largest Low-Wage Employers and the Affordability Crisis."

⁵⁶⁷ Ali Watkins, "The Starbucks C.E.O.'s New Commute: 1,000 Miles on a Corporate Jet," *Business*, *The New York Times*, August 22, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/08/22/business/starbucks-ceo-commute-jet-brian-niccol.html>.

⁵⁶⁸ Instead, Starbucks has constructed a new company headquarters in Southern California for his convenience. See: Aditi Bharade, "Why Starbucks Is Letting Brian Niccol Use the Company Plane for More Personal Travel," *Business Insider*, January 27, 2026, <https://www.businessinsider.com/starbucks-brian-niccol-company-plane-personal-travel-safety-concerns-2026-1>.

ought to pursue to set themselves up for professional success – or at least, to get a job or work in an industry where there might be a hope of future financial stability – is anyone’s guess.

Young adults anxiously enter a job market at a time where a great deal of the world’s capital is invested in the singular project of eliminating the need for human labor entirely.⁵⁶⁹ In a sense, the risk that so-called artificial intelligence poses to workers is nothing new, as jobs are constantly being automated while new ones pop up in their place. In another, the scale of AI-automation is something else entirely, frequently being compared to the Industrial Revolution even by those who downplay concerns that AI will simply take all the jobs outright. True, the machines of the Industrial Revolution did not replace human beings altogether; they only caused a total transformation of the nature of waged work and the jobs that existed. But if that is indeed the *less* worrying future that AI has in store for humans without capital who must sell their labor for wages, it should be noted the changes wrought by the Industrial Revolution immiserated workers for at least 150 years, plunging so many into such severe poverty and exploitation that workers banded together into newly formed labor unions before they had a federal right to do so. Maximally exploitative conditions persisted through many workers’ lifetimes despite militant strikes that were often met with violent force, and in the United States, more than a thousand people were killed in these violent confrontations.⁵⁷⁰ If this is the more optimistic scenario, it seems worry is warranted. Further, in the event that AI technology never is quite able to replace the vast majority of human workers as developers and employers apparently hope, the amount of money currently invested in the industry – and in effect wagered on the fact that it will – may

⁵⁶⁹ In the US, at least, it is a majority. AI and machine learning deals comprised 65.4% of all U.S. VC deal value in 2025. See: “Q4 2025 PitchBook-NVCA Venture Monitor,” PitchBook, January 15, 2026, <https://pitchbook.com/news/reports/q4-2025-pitchbook-nvca-venture-monitor>.

⁵⁷⁰ Kim Kelly, *Fight Like Hell* (Simon & Schuster, 2023), <https://www.simonandschuster.com/books/Fight-Like-Hell/Kim-Kelly/9781982171063>; Erik Loomis, *A History of America in Ten Strikes* (The New Press, 2018).

well cause a catastrophic economic collapse that will eliminate a great many jobs regardless.

This state of affairs, coupled with domestic political turmoil and geopolitical chaos wreaking havoc on global markets and supply chains, has made it so those who must work for a living and are dependent on employers to be able to virtuously earn their lot in the life as they are told they must are finding themselves between an AI-generated rock and politically-contrived hard place.

The public sector workers fired en masse by Musk's DOGE report struggling to find work more than a year later.⁵⁷¹ UPS cut 48,000 jobs in 2025, and plans to cut 30,000 more in 2026.⁵⁷² Amazon has cut 30,000 corporate positions since late 2025.⁵⁷³ Disney cut more 1,000 jobs and says there will be more.⁵⁷⁴ Verizon cut well over 13,000.⁵⁷⁵ PayPal cut its workforce by 20% so far in 2026, and Meta released plans to fire at least 8,000.⁵⁷⁶ Headlines like these abound, as do articles about how a great many 2026 college graduates are unable to find entry-level work in positions that expect a college degree. Anecdotes about applying to hundreds of jobs and dedicating countless hours and coming up empty handed are becoming commonplace, and college graduates are reportedly learning to adjust their career expectations.⁵⁷⁷ It seems even the

⁵⁷¹ Fiona Gilsson and Gary Grumbach, "A Year after DOGE, Former Federal Employees Are Still Looking for Work," *NBC News*, April 22, 2026, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/doge/year-doge-former-federal-employees-still-unemployed-looking-jobs-rcna265911>.

⁵⁷² Peter Eavis, "UPS Says It Is Cutting Up to 30,000 Jobs," *Business*, *The New York Times*, January 27, 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/01/27/business/ups-jobs-layoffs-2026.html>.

⁵⁷³ Annie Palmer, "Amazon Engineers in Seattle Slam Employer for Building AI Data Centers While Laying off 30,000 Staffers," *Technology*, *CNBC*, June 4, 2026, <https://www.cnn.com/2026/06/03/amazon-engineers-in-seattle-slam-employer-for-ai-data-amid-layoffs.html>.

⁵⁷⁴ Dade Hayes, "Disney's Recent Layoffs May Not Be One-Offs As Company Touts 'Culture Of Efficiency,'" *Deadline*, May 6, 2026, <https://deadline.com/2026/05/disney-layoffs-workers-ai-culture-of-efficiency-1236882815/>.

⁵⁷⁵ Dominick Reuter, "Verizon Cuts Several Hundred US Workers Months after Slashing 13,000 Jobs," *Business Insider*, accessed May 9, 2026, <https://www.businessinsider.com/verizon-cuts-hundreds-of-jobs-in-latest-round-of-layoffs-2026-5>.

⁵⁷⁶ Colleen Cabili, "PayPal Layoffs: New CEO Cuts 20% of Workforce in Q1 2026," *Yahoo Finance*, May 6, 2026, <https://qz.com/paypal-layoffs-ceo-turnaround-cost-cutting-050626>; Eli Tan, Kalley Huang, and Mike Isaac, "Meta Lays Off 8,000 Employees, as A.I. Casualties Mount," *Technology*, *The New York Times*, May 19, 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/05/19/technology/meta-layoffs-ai.html>.

⁵⁷⁷ Maya Yang, "'I Feel Helpless': College Graduates Can't Find Entry-Level Roles in Shrinking Market amid Rise of AI," *US News*, *The Guardian*, April 12, 2026, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2026/apr/12/college-graduates-job-market-ai>; Sherin Shibu, "'I'm Doing Everything That I Possibly Can': New College Graduates Face One of the Toughest Job Markets in Years," *Entrepreneur*, April 29, 2026, <https://www.entrepreneur.com/business->

competition for unpaid internships is off the charts, yet for the lucky interns who land them, paid work does not seem to be within reach.⁵⁷⁸ Facing this abysmal job market, young college graduates are choosing one of two paths: hide from the labor market a while longer in graduate school, or get a job in the service industry. If things continue apace, the former choice may only delay the inevitability of the latter. Precarious positions in the service industry (itself not immune to the challenges of automation in the form of mobile orders and just-in-time scheduling software), where take-home pay is low, hours are unstable, and benefits are out of reach if on offer at all, may well be all that is left.

It is this rather bleak state of affairs that makes the need to upend the American work ethic all the more necessary. The conviction that no one is entitled to anything they have not earned with their own hard work and ingenuity already establishes an impossible standard of deservingness for working people, who are unable to be the masters of their own destiny that the ethic tells them they must to be deserving of better working conditions. Particularly for service workers, the ethic dictates a punishing circular logic. If you are struggling to make ends meet, you are told to simply work more and work harder to earn your way into a better position. Yet in effect, the fact that you have the job that you do – be it a salesperson at REI, a Starbucks barista, a warehouse worker at Amazon, or a crew member at Trader Joe’s – is offered as proof positive that your presently poor working conditions are deserved. The American work ethic provides a neat rhetorical cover for the many structural barriers to social mobility (from discrimination to low wages to a purposeful tightening of the labor market) for the working class that exist in

news/new-college-graduates-face-toughest-entry-level-job-market-in-years; Sydney Ember, “Graduates Reset Ambitions in Pursuit of First Jobs,” Business, *The New York Times*, April 28, 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/04/28/business/economy/college-graduates-job-market.html>.

⁵⁷⁸ Bryan Mena, “The Job Market Is so Tough, Young People Are Struggling Just to Land Internships | CNN Business,” *CNN*, April 6, 2026, <https://www.cnn.com/2026/04/06/business/job-market-internships-squeeze>.

reality, barriers that capital has worked hard to put into place and appear to multiply with each generation.

This dissertation set out to describe that rhetorical cover and track how it is used in practice, revealing how it can work persuasively to prevent workers from doing the one thing in the present set of circumstances that would empower them with the authority to counteract their employer's low valuation of their labor: joining and actively participating in a union. In Chapter One, I described the history of the work ethic in the United States. From the work of historians, cultural critics, and sociologists, I pieced together an intellectual history of the American work ethic from its Protestant origins through the industrious and entrepreneurial versions, showing how the idea that no one deserves anything they have not earned through their own hard work and ingenuity has persisted across eras. I traced how this ethic developed in tandem with economic shifts, with industrial capitalism, Fordist management and post-Fordist flexible capitalism. Each phase reinforced the idea that it is a person's capacity to work that determines their worth. Ultimately, the chapter provided a critique of both conservative and progressive interpretations of the work ethic, showing how even well-intentioned versions can be weaponized against workers and the poor. After summarizing this history, I introduced a theory of what I call the bootstrapping ethos. If an ethic is a belief about right and wrong, an ethos is how a rhetor appeals to such a belief. The bootstrapping ethos is the rhetorical performance of the American work ethic. I posited that the bootstrapping ethos has three elements: the public performance of exceptionally hard work, positioning one's own hard work as the active agent in one's success (or failure) while downplaying the impact of any structural advantages (or disadvantages), and drawing a comparison between those who evince a strong work ethic and those who do not in order to constitute them as an undeserving other.

With a history of the American work ethic and a theory of the bootstrapping ethos in place, I then traced how the work ethic is differently performed by three economic classes: capital, management, and labor, all to the labor's disadvantage. Each class constitutes its own case study chapter, which focuses on one or more of the four companies discussed in this dissertation that experienced a highly publicized labor dispute in the aftermath of the COVID-19 lockdowns: Amazon, Starbucks, REI, and Trader Joe's. These companies were certainly not the only ones whose employees joined or formed new unions in the early 2020s. As scholars have reported, the oftentimes miserable experience of "essential" work during this period, mired in increased risk and responsibility with little reward, particularly as the companies employing them boasted record-breaking profits, led many workers to push for more control of their working lives and a greater share of their labor's bounty.⁵⁷⁹ However, the unionization attempts that occurred within the four companies I focus on here were particularly notable in general and especially relevant to this dissertation for three reasons. First, retail is a notoriously unorganized industry, and seeing union campaigns pop up simultaneously in a few major companies that employ thousands of people warrants attention. Second, the large size and status of these companies – each is a powerful employer and powerful rhetor when it comes to setting expectations about what kind of work entitles whom to what – warranted a closer look at their rhetoric. Third and most importantly is how each company and its executives responded to their workers' attempts to unionize. Each one embarked on an unusually swift and severe campaign of their own to halt organizing efforts in their tracks, generating a great deal of public attention as well as violating labor law frequently enough to rack up (and lose) several cases in court.⁵⁸⁰

⁵⁷⁹ Jamie K. McCallum, *Essential: How the Pandemic Transformed the Long Fight for Worker Justice*, First edition. (New York: Basic Books, 2022).

⁵⁸⁰ See, for instance: Office of Public Affairs National Labor Relations Board, *NLRB Region-3 Buffalo Wins Administrative Law Judge Decision Requiring Starbucks to Rehire and Compensate Seven Unlawfully Fired*

Starbucks' union busting efforts set the stage for my first case study in Chapter Two. In it, I explored how capital performs the American work ethic in an analysis of Howard Schultz's testimony in Congress, specifically the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions.⁵⁸¹ He was forced to testify in response to the glaring illegality of his efforts to bust the growing ranks of Starbucks Workers United. The NLRA gives workers a right to unionize, and prevents employers from punishing organizers and sympathizers or hindering activity or discussion about unionizing (the law calls this "protected activity"). Nevertheless, employers frequently get away with doing both because even if workers file a complaint, as long as employers are careful to leave enough room for doubt, their punitive actions can plausibly be chalked up as unrelated in court. In fact, advising employers as to how to walk the line between illegal and legal union busting is a thriving branch of corporate law. Under the leadership of Howard Schultz – the man credited with founding the company as we know it and longtime CEO who resumed his post specifically to deal with the threat of the union – Starbucks apparently chose not to tread that line lightly. They fired organizers under flimsy pretenses, closed stores that voted to unionize, surveilled workers to prevent them from discussing organizing, and denied unionized workers benefits and wage hikes, stating openly in a company memo that unionized status was the reason for the denial. For this and more, Schultz was summoned to testify in a Senate hearing on workers right to organize.

In order to defend against the idea that his actions constituted any wrongdoing, Schultz adopted the bootstrapping ethos. Part of this ethos for capital, my analysis found, is a strategic

Workers, Reopen a Facility, Bargain with the Union, Provide Union Access, Conduct Training and Post Remedial Notices at Stores | National Labor Relations Board (2023), <https://www.nlr.gov/news-outreach/news-story/nlr-region-3-buffalo-wins-administrative-law-judge-decision-requiring>.

⁵⁸¹ *Former Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz Testifies before Senate Panel | Full Video*, directed by CBS News, 2023, 3:20:39, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OZwuWYk0jIY>.

redefinition of what it means to be self-made. To demonstrate that they deserve their disproportionate wealth, the ultra-rich often insist that they worked hard to virtuously earn it. I demonstrated this point through dissecting the examples of several celebrities who have exaggerated the humbleness of their beginnings and claimed to be self-made. I dwelled on an online controversy that erupted when *Forbes* magazine put Kylie Jenner on the cover of an issue about self-made women, and the statements her sister Kim Kardashian made in her defense.⁵⁸² Kardashian claimed that she, her sisters, and her mom were all self-made for the simple fact that they had all worked hard to earn their vast sums, instead of simply inheriting it. This understanding of being self-made, I argued, is indicative of capital's redefinition of the term and performance of the bootstrapping ethos, as they claim that anyone who personally works to grow wealth (as opposed to rising from genuine poverty) is self-made and thus deserving. The chapter then turned to an analysis of Schultz, who I posited is a more interesting case given that he meets the more conventional definition. In his testimony, Schultz made clear that he is baffled by the charges against him, using his legitimately humble beginnings as a defense against the idea that the imbalance of power between himself and his workers is unjustified. He emphasized how he "came from nothing" and thus "earned" his billions, bristling at the accurate label of "billionaire," because he understands the term implies he has more than he deserves. Instead, he insisted his wealth is justified because he built Starbucks himself (paying no mind to the contributions of his thousands of employees) through relentless effort. In essence, the chapter found that Schultz used the bootstrapping ethos to defend his wealth and anti-union actions,

⁵⁸² Jessica Marmor Shaw, "Kylie Jenner Makes Forbes List of Wealthiest 'Self-Made' Women and the Internet Is up in Arms," MarketWatch, July 11, 2018, <https://www.marketwatch.com/story/kylie-jenner-makes-forbes-list-of-wealthiest-self-made-women-and-the-internet-is-up-in-arms-2018-07-11>; Thatiana Diaz, "Kim Kardashian West Argues That Her Family Is 'Self Made' — Here's Why," *Refinery 29*, n.d., accessed December 11, 2025, <https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2018/07/204349/kim-kardashian-west-forbes-kkw-beauty>.

arguing that *only entrepreneurial labor* (his own) truly earns rewards, while wage workers are only entitled to what owners choose to “share.” This logic, the chapter concluded, pulls up the ladder of mobility behind capital while punishing workers for failing to climb it.

Chapter Three turned from executives and founders to corporate image-makers, who I conceptualized here as management. The capitalist rhetoric discussed in the previous chapter constituted anyone who starts or runs a successful company as necessarily self-made and thus uniquely deserving; the corporate rhetoric discussed in this one constituted employees as necessarily dependent and thus undeserving. It did so however, in a less-than straightforward way. Through an analysis of the employee-facing social media channels and websites of Starbucks, REI, and Amazon around the time of their labor disputes, I found that each company subtly reinforced the idea that workers are entitled to very little from their employers through communicating to them that they are treated exceptionally generously, and lucky to be receiving the benefits that they do. I called this rhetoric the Progressive Workplace Brand (PWB), and argued that by positioning modest benefits or positive aspects of employment as gifts that employees ought to be grateful for, corporate image-makers are communicating to workers that these benefits are not deserved. The chapter focused on three thematic elements: framing modest benefits as extraordinary acts of benevolence, obfuscating hierarchy in corporate structure to make it seem as though workers are empowered to make decisions within an organization, and constructing the actual work that employees perform as uniquely meaningful irrespective of compensation. I argued that PWB is a rhetorical attempt to control the labor process, both a way for an employer to pre-empt an organized challenge from workers and to react to such a challenge, as workers who internalize the idea that they are indeed already getting more than they deserve may be unlikely to push for more from their employers. Chapter Four examined

how PWB, and the American work ethic more broadly, can be internalized among employees and used to persuade some against organizing. Focusing on anti-union Trader Joe's crew members who appeared on a management-side labor relations consultant's podcast, the chapter showed how workers themselves perform the bootstrapping ethos to position union supporters as lazy and entitled young people. Like the corporate image-makers discussed in the previous chapter, these workers argued that Trader Joe's is already an extraordinarily generous employer—offering industry-leading wages, healthcare at low hour thresholds, retirement matching, and flexible schedules. Accordingly, they constructed organizers as spoiled kids who demand rewards now rather than earning them gradually through hard work and tenure. Unlike the entrepreneurial work ethic of executives, however, these workers demonstrated something more akin to the industrious one common in the Fordist era: the belief that diligence, loyalty, and patience will be rewarded over time with raises and stability. One long-time employee explicitly contrasted Trader Joe's with coal mines or construction sites, implying that only workers in truly dangerous jobs deserve union protection. Another accused young organizers of feeling “entitled” to a living wage in an expensive city rather than working two jobs like one of their coworkers. I unpacked the generational politics these rhetors evinced, arguing that their anti-union sentiment may stem from a deeply felt sense that organizing disrespects the sacrifices of long-time workers who played by the rules. I concluded by drawing on the case of Butte, Montana's unionized miners—who celebrated extreme hard work *and* militant solidarity—to suggest that the work ethic need not be anti-union. Organizers might win over skeptical coworkers by emphasizing *arête* (virtuous struggle for the common good), choosing leaders known for their work ethic, and centering demands like the right to full-time work, which honors the value of hard work while

challenging capital's power to define what it means exactly to earn and thus deserve one's lot in life.

To chip away at capital and management's disproportionate power in the debate about what kind and how much work entitles whom to what, it is paramount for workers to organize. Recent unionization waves, though comparatively minor and modest, provide reason to hope. While true that only 10% of workers belong to a union at the time of this writing, between 2021 and 2022 there was a 58% increase in the number of union elections, and public opinion polls show a gradual increase in their favorability writ large.⁵⁸³ The case studies in this dissertation certainly suggest that organizers have their work cut out for them, and it should be noted that the companies they are up against are so determined that they have shown a remarkably persistent refusal to bargain in good faith. Despite the rise in union elections at the four companies discussed occurring in 2022, writing four years later, not a single store has managed to negotiate a contract due to management's stalling and refusal to entertain a single union demand.⁵⁸⁴ Because of such managerial petulance, growing the ranks of union members and building both political pressure and a credible strike threat is the best means of growing labor's power relative to capital and management.

How then can organizers win votes for unionization and the labor movement win allies when the American work ethic has been so deeply engrained in the American psyche by capital,

⁵⁸³ Michael Sainato, "US Sees Union Boom despite Big Companies' Aggressive Opposition," US News, *The Guardian*, July 27, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/jul/27/us-union-boom-starbucks-amazon>; Gallup Inc, "Labor Union Approval Relatively Steady at 68% in U.S.," Gallup.Com, August 28, 2025, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/694472/labor-union-approval-relatively-steady.aspx>.

⁵⁸⁴ Wade Rathke, "Stuck at the Bargaining Table," *The Chief Organizer Blog*, June 2, 2026, <https://chieforganizer.org/2026/06/02/stuck-at-the-bargaining-table/>; Jeremy Gantz, "Two Years In, These 'Progressive' Companies Still Haven't Negotiated First Union Contracts," *In These Times*, April 12, 2024, <https://inthesetimes.com/article/starbucks-trader-joes-rei-union-labor-nlrbs-first-contract>; Dave Jamieson, "Why Workers Are Frustrated With Amazon, Starbucks and Trader Joe's Right Now," *Business, HuffPost*, December 2, 2023, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/new-unions-won-historic-elections-but-first-contracts-harder_n_656a26f4b028b0f3d0196a.

management, and labor alike to discredit the movement's aims? Not unlike Anderson's calls to "take back" the work ethic from its conservative hijackers, I made a slightly counter-intuitive suggestion.⁵⁸⁵ That is, the labor movement broadly and union organizers particularly must fight for the universal right to full-time work alongside the continued fight for higher wages.. On a broader level, unions could organize around the issue as a matter of federal or state policy, and work to get it legislated. At the more granular level, employees trying to win a union election in a particular store could campaign on the idea that they will fight to institute a version of this policy into their union contracts, so that a particular Starbucks, for instance, would be obligated to offer existing employees full-time hours before hiring more part-time baristas to work sporadic shifts.

I argue that the labor movement ought to embrace both strategies, as fighting for the universal right to full-time work at a livable wage, to be exercised or not according to one's needs, works to undermine the extreme economic inequality that the American work ethic is used as a cover for advancing. If workers are paid more for their hard work, CEOs will be paid less, and all will have what they need to thrive. In reimagining a stable living as something to which everyone is entitled, this alternative, egalitarian version of the work ethic affirms hard work as a virtue, and will likely appeal to members of the working class who have been steeped in the cultural message that their willingness to do hard jobs, put in long hours, etc. is what makes them good, useful, and worthwhile. Yet, in eliminating the need to work one's way up to this level of stability, along a long (and in reality often endless) ladder of precarity, an egalitarian work ethic recognizes all work as valuable and worthy of reward for what it is, instead of

⁵⁸⁵ Elizabeth Anderson, *Hijacked: How Neoliberalism Turned the Work Ethic against Workers and How Workers Can Take It Back*, New edition (Cambridge, United Kingdom New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press, 2023).

valuable only if it proves a temporary stop along an ascent to management or starting a business. Contrary to the American work ethic, then, it would actually serve the material interests of working people, forcing capital and management to recognize and reward the contributions of their employees instead of owners and executives in near exclusivity. And, in so far as it forces workers' contributions to be rewarded and recognized as valuable, it plants the ideological seeds of a more broadly egalitarian valuation of humanity, wherein those doing the critical work that occurs outside of the labor market can also be recognized and rewarded for what they already contribute. Indeed, in the context of neoliberal hegemony and post-Fordist capitalism, establishing the right to full-time work at livable wages could prove a necessary first step in undermining the American work ethic and empowering both the working and non-working poor alike.

The promise of the policy I advocate for here rests on some key differences with other policies that approve the idea of work as a right. Since the New Deal, for instance, there has been discussion of and energy around instituting what is usually referred to as a "jobs guarantee" – a federal right to work. The idea for a jobs guarantee was originally conceived as a means to prevent the mass destitution created by mass unemployment in the event of a massive market crash like that of the Great Depression. Invoking the legacy of successful jobs programs like the Civil Works Administration (CWA), proponents of a jobs guarantee say if a person demonstrably cannot find work in the private sector during a period of world-wide economic crisis, the government should be obligated to provide them with a job. The problem with this policy, at least with how it is generally proposed, is that its goal is less about eliminating poverty through providing good, long-term jobs and more about eliminating welfare programs – those dreaded things where the government *gives* money and assistance to people that they haven't earned

through their labor. Economist Hyman Minsky, who taught a lot of the modern proponents of the jobs guarantee, advocated for the policy on the grounds that it would eliminate the “welfare mess” for all but the most “severely handicapped” recipients, and require everyone else to “earn his or her way through the exchange of income for work.”⁵⁸⁶ In other words, Minsky imagines a jobs guarantee to provide a temporary solution to unemployment without really addressing its cause. The point of this sort of jobs guarantee seems to be punishing those who find themselves unemployed, saddling jobseekers with extra work while they are expected to be doing the arduous task of finding a new, permanent position. Most advocates of the policy appear to share this view, focusing more on the moral imperative to “earn one’s keep” than improving the long-term economic prospects of those who are impoverished.⁵⁸⁷ Even progressive economist James K. Galbraith soothes reactionary worries that a jobs guarantee wherein workers are offered well-paying, stable jobs in the public sector will cause a mass exodus from the private sector by arguing that the jobs won’t actually be that good are not intended to be long-term. Rather, they will only help sustain workers through periods of unemployment.⁵⁸⁸ As labor lawyer and policy analyst Matt Bruenig points out, this is workfare by another name, and anchoring welfare payments to work only impedes a person’s ability to find stable employment.⁵⁸⁹

Bruenig has more recently advocated for a different kind of jobs guarantee: the right to full-time scheduling. There is no reason why this policy could not or should not be pursued in tandem with government programs like the CWA that would grow the numbers of good, union jobs in the public sector. Economist Mark Paul has made a compelling case for this kind of New

⁵⁸⁶ Hyman P. Minsky, “The Strategy of Economic Policy and Income Distribution,” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 409, no. 1 (September 1973): 96, <https://doi.org/10.1177/000271627340900110>.

⁵⁸⁷ Matt Bruenig, “Various Job Guarantee Quotes,” *Medium*, March 10, 2019, <https://mattbruenig.medium.com/various-job-guarantee-quotes-1291d22981ee>.

⁵⁸⁸ “We Work | James K. Galbraith,” *The Baffler*, May 2, 2018, <https://thebaffler.com/latest/we-work-galbraith>.

⁵⁸⁹ Bruenig, “Various Job Guarantee Quotes.”

Deal era Right to Work law, making no mention of any need to eliminate welfare programs in the process. Nonetheless, it is in part because the right to full-time hours targets the private sector that it offers a unique ability to undermine the Sisyphean nature of the American work ethic and its material consequences. Part of the problem I have surfaced throughout this dissertation is that the current organization of the American economy is set up for the near exclusive purpose of rewarding successful entrepreneurs and their executives. A key mechanism in organizing the economy to redistribute wealth and resources from the bottom to the top has been post-Fordist flexible capitalism – under which it is taken for granted that a business should grow ever leaner, operating with as few employees as possible and paying them as little as possible. Just-in-time-scheduling is this doctrine made manifest, the now ubiquitous practice in retail of using predictive algorithms to schedule only as many workers for a precise period of hours as you might need, and keeping a large roster of part-timers on file who you can call for a sporadic shift here and there as need be. Establishing more full-time, good jobs in the public sector is a good step, but it will not prevent large employers from shifting ever more risk onto their workers and allocating more rewards for owners and executives.

Forcing these large employers, rather than just the government, to offer full-time hours at livable wages to employees who want them will do much more to reduce capital and its managers' disproportionate power to determine what it is that labor deserves.⁵⁹⁰ In adopting and promoting the language of rights, it further encourages workers to see themselves as entitled to a means to make a good living. In a book on just-in-time scheduling, for instance, Alex J. Wood

⁵⁹⁰ Bruenig and novelist co-author Adelle Waldman, who worked a low-wage retail job doing research for a book, specifically propose that “part-time employees who work at companies with more than 50 full-time-equivalent employees be given the option to work full time after three months of employment...provided it does not place an undue burden on the employer (a common standard in labor law).” See: Matt Bruenig and Adelle Waldman, “Americans Should Have a Right to Full-Time Work,” *New York Times*, March 18, 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/03/18/opinion/minimum-wage-hours-work-part-time.html>.

found retail workers subject to it were especially likely to see the sporadic hours they did receive as a rare gift, one which they ought to be grateful for.⁵⁹¹ This is the same mindset I discuss in Chapter Three, where workers are so accustomed to maximal exploitation that they are grateful for even minimal benefits – which, in this case, would be any amount of hours at all. Organizers have a real opportunity to undermine this mindset, and with it, the conviction that people who are poor deserve their lot if they can, somewhat counter-intuitively, appeal to co-workers who’ve internalized the belief that no one is entitled to anything they have not earned. As Kiki, the Trader Joe’s crew member whose words were featured in the last chapter, testified to, she felt that organizers demands were both too focused on the short-term and disrespectful of older co-workers who had worked hard to succeed under the established rules.⁵⁹² Perhaps workers like Kiki might be more amenable to the idea of unionization if they felt that young organizers were working to ensure that all of their coworkers would have the opportunity to work hard and secure for themselves a comfortable and dignified life. Indeed, the right to full-time hours affirms hard work as virtue, making it an appealing campaign issue for workers who might otherwise be persuaded that unions are only for those who do not want to work hard. At the same time, in establishing a full-time (decently paying) job to which everyone is entitled, it serves to erode the idea that *everything*, including a stable job itself, must be earned by some impossible measure of hard work and ingenuity.

Organizers and the labor movement more broadly should fight to institute the policy into their contracts, they should campaign on the issue to win union votes, and they should organize around establishing it as federal labor law. They should fight for the policy for all the reasons I

⁵⁹¹ Alex J. Wood, *Despotism on Demand: How Power Operates in the Flexible Workplace* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020), <https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/255/monograph/book/74190>.

⁵⁹² *Labor Relations Radio*, E88.

have outlined, but also because it has potential as a winning issue, and because workers deserve more than a guarantee of full-time hours. They deserve to have a say in the debate about what it is that their labor entitles them to. And for that, they need a union. It is because labor unions, under the current system at least, are the best if not the only means of empowering workers to have real control over their working lives relative to their employers that those employers are so often willing to give them almost anything else. As this dissertation has demonstrated, companies may claim again and again that their workers are already voiced and efficacious within the organization, but they will go to the ends of the earth to stop workers from doing the one thing that would require the company actually take those voices into account.

The point I wish to emphasize at this dissertation's conclusion is that contrary to their rhetoric, capital and management do not deserve to wield this power, regardless of whatever they have done in the past to supposedly earn their current place. Just as there is a basic standard of care to which everyone is entitled, there are some things that simply no one deserves – and such a wildly disproportionate share of wealth and power is, to my mind, chief among them. Kicking the legs out from beneath the ethical framework that conflates valuable work with entrepreneurial labor to justify such vast inequality is a necessary step in flattening it, and this dissertation is my attempt to contribute to that goal. What I ask of interested scholars is to keep kicking. There is plenty more work to be done, and the contemporary moment presents the ideal time to do it.

As inequality soars to ever greater heights, it seems a great many Americans are angry. They are angry about getting laid off, angry there are so few jobs that pay a living wage with consistent hours, or where they are not made to endure discriminatory treatment due to their identities. Particularly if they are a young person graduating into the workforce at the precise

moment that capital is working hard to eliminate the need for human workers altogether, they are angry that there are so few jobs for entry-level employees. Both an abundance of historical and contemporary events have made it clear that it is relatively easy to harness and direct this anger away from its rightful targets and toward one another. For instance, reactionary forces have recently pointed the finger at DEI initiatives, undocumented immigrants (and naturalized citizens, for that matter), China, women and the public schools that apparently are biased towards them, and of course, as I have outlined here, anyone with the temerity to join a union (all while fearmongering about the malign cultural influence of other marginalized groups, like transgender individuals). Sewing division at the bottom this way is a tried-and-true means of guarding against the real threat to the owners of capital that an organized working and middle class would pose. To shrink the numbers of those who fall victim to reactionary, even bigoted scapegoating, scholars of rhetoric can work to document, critique, and interpret cases that deepen an alternative narrative, one in which the very few who are currently benefitting from everyone else's demise are correctly identified as the villains. The modest but renewed interest in labor unions and other important forms of grassroots community activism, such as local efforts to prevent data centers from being built in a given neighborhood, for one example, suggests this alternative story has legs.⁵⁹³

There are many more instances of unscrupulous billionaires adopting the bootstrapping ethos to justify how much they pay themselves, and how little they have allocated for their employees.

There are many more instances of companies adopting the Progressive Workplace Brand in order to persuade their employees that they are already getting more than they deserve. And there are

⁵⁹³ Daniel Geiger, "Data Center Executives Fret over the Industry's Increasingly Toxic Public Image," *Business Insider*, April 16, 2026, <https://www.businessinsider.com/data-center-industry-response-growing-pushback-regulation-2026-4>.

many more workplaces where coworkers disagree with the idea of unionization because they have bought into the narrative that unions are for lazy, entitled youth and for other complicated reasons that could be unpacked. In such a thoroughly unequal society, instances of exploitation justified by some warped appeal to a commonly held value like the need to earn one's keep abound. Scholars should study these instances not only to build rhetorical theory for the sake of knowledge itself, but for the benefit of their students and society itself. Decades prior, Barry Brummett argued that rhetorical theory is "heuristic and moral," a kind of theory that is primarily pedagogical.⁵⁹⁴ That is, to Brummett, the point of writing about a particular rhetorical device or tactic and "attempting to account for its effectiveness in general" is to inform students, so that they can better understand how the constant stream of messages they encounter are trying to persuade them. The project of undermining the American work ethic, a project that this dissertation contributes to, and the broader project of identifying and critiquing related rhetorical strategies used to divide and conquer in the modern day, is one that takes Brummett's words to heart. After all, it is students who often find themselves employed in the service sector, and it seems that increasing numbers of them may remain there longer than they might have planned. The conclusion that should be taken from this dissertation is that each of them and every one of their coworkers – whether it is the job they hold for the rest of their working lives or not – deserve to be compensated with the means to live a comfortable and dignified life.

⁵⁹⁴ Barry Brummett, "Rhetorical Theory as Heuristic and Moral: A Pedagogical Justification," *Communication Education* 33, no. 2 (April 1984): 97, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03634528409384726>.