

Labor Day and the right to be lazy - at all ages

September 1, 2014

This Labor Day, let's celebrate "the right to be lazy." Let's play, dream, and imagine what a world without alienated labor would be. In a short book by the same name, written from a French prison in 1883, Paul Lafargue argues passionately that workers have been bamboozled by the church, the bourgeoisie, and politicians to believe that their back-breaking labor is virtuous and unavoidable. It's a belief that is, literally, killing them and civilization.

Lafargue denounces capitalism's values as a "pitiful parody on Christian ethics." Capitalists strive to suppress the worker's "joys and his passions and to condemn him to play the part of a machine turning out work without respite and without thanks." The proletariat's acceptance of capitalism's values permits the cycle of overproduction and makes manufacturers "travel the world over in search of markets for the goods which are heaping up. They force their government to annex Congo, to seize on Tonquin, to batter down the Chinese Wall with cannon shots to make an outlet for their cotton goods... Thousands of young and vigorous men reddened the seas with their blood during the colonial wars of the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries."

Education's role in suppressing the desire for pleasure in life is clear to Lafargue, who opens his book with a critique of an 1849 French commission on primary education. He understood that capitalism's ethos must be taught. Mass public education has always been expected to prepare the next generation of workers, but in capitalist democracies it was also assumed to educate citizens to their political responsibilities. The two functions have often conflicted, but now we see that tension erased by measures that aim to reduce schooling to preparation for work without voice, unemployment, and prison. Teachers all over the world see this alteration and are battling governments, powerful elites, even their own unions to protect a different vision of education. One of the most heated battles is over the Common Core, a national curriculum that imposes a "rigorous" course of study that will make even 4 year olds "college and career ready." Enforced by standardized tests, the Common Core is poised to squeeze play and pleasure even out of early childhood education. Early childhood teachers, almost exclusively women and a group not known for their workplace militancy heretofore, have been roused by the Common Core and the testing regime to mobilize. Perhaps without realizing it, their agitation draws on Lafargue's idea about the "right to be lazy" - at least until third grade. And as in so much, the Chicago Teachers Union leads the way among US teachers unions with its statement opposing the Common Core.

Lafargue's furious rhetoric may sound extreme to some readers. But I read his essay after reeling from news about Ferguson Missouri, Gaza, Iraq, Syria. So much violence from state-sponsored terrorism! Such brutal acts by individuals consumed by rage at injustice! In contrast to the ferocious anger evidenced in uploaded photos and videos of beheadings, Lafargue is polemical but reasoned. The violence sickens. Who doesn't want peace? But we cannot have peace without justice, and we cannot have justice if we accept a status quo of inequality, oppression, and poverty, byproducts of, or embedded in our (capitalist) social system.

What of the proletariat, which has not yet rejected the work ethic that Lafargue argues is the basis of social ills? I think Lafargue would concur with Kim Moody's early reading of neoliberalism that in its drive to make workers in every society inter-changeable, capitalism has created the conditions for a new international working class to emerge. The challenge we face is one of political ideas and leadership, and in teachers unions at least, a new generation is emerging that "gets" the

importance of international solidarity, fighting for the dignity of the profession, and for social justice, against politicians who say we have no alternative. (If we just add “play” to that list, I think Lafargue would approve.)

Early childhood educators often defend time for play in the school day by saying that play is children’s work, and much empirical research supports that play lays a cognitive and social groundwork that later schooling taps. Like Lafargue I’d rather defend play for play’s sake, for all of us. This Labor Day let’s celebrate our human right, children and adults alike, to be joyous, to play, and to remember that unions and the working class have to fight like never before to get it.

An adapted version of this Labor Day essay appears in The Jacobin. (I contribute to The Jacobin and New Politics and hope on this day celebrating workers' struggles you will too.)

Is there a subject you want me to tackle? Let me know. And you can follow me on twitter Facebook, as well as my blog here at New Politics.