WORKED OVER

ALSO BY JAMIE K. McCALLUM:

Global Unions, Local Power:
The New Spirit of Transnational Labor Organizing

WORKED OVER

How Round-the-Clock Work Is Killing the American Dream

JAMIE K. McCALLUM

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FOR ASA

The less you eat, drink and buy books; the less you go to the theatre, the dance hall, the public house; the less you think, love, theorize, sing, paint, fence, etc., the more you save—the greater becomes your treasure which neither moths nor rust will devour—your capital. The less you are, the less you express your own life, the more you have, i.e., the greater is your alienated life, the greater is the store of your estranged being.

—KARL MARX,
Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844

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INTRODUCTION

ONE NATION UNDER WORK

Three days after Christmas in 1973 a group of workers downed their tools and refused to work. They drew up a list of grievances and demands that they sent to management, and promptly went on strike. They'd been working sixteen-hour days, weeks without a day off, and they had finally reached their limit. The lead troublemaker was William Pogue, who was frustrated by the scheduling demands put upon him and his fellow workers. "We're just being driven to the wall!" he said. "No time for mental preparation . . . there's no way we can do a professional job!" He felt like "a one-armed paper hanger trying to get started in insufficient time!"[1]

Pogue's missive could easily describe a strike in some Rust Belt steel mill. After all, tens of thousands of those workers—frustrated by similar complaints about speedup, technological innovation, and unfair production demands—also struck during the seventies. But Pogue was orbiting the Earth. He and his two fellow astronauts were six weeks into what is to this day the longest and last manned mission aboard the Skylab, the first American space station. They made painstaking observations of the sun and Comet Kohoutek, performed extensive medical tests, took technical photographs of the Earth, and were on track to complete four dangerous space walks.

"We had been overscheduled," Colonel Pogue later wrote. "We were just hustling the whole day. The work could be tiresome and tedious, though the view was spectacular."[2]

None of the astronauts had been in space before, and with inadequate time to acclimate, Pogue became nauseous. The crew understood it to be just a passing sickness and decided not to report it to Mission Control. Unbeknownst to them, however, Houston was listening, spying on the astronauts' conversations, and would later castigate them for keeping secrets. Resentment built over the micromanagement, and their communication with Earth became increasingly hostile.

First Commander Jerry Carr, one of the three astronauts on board the space station, emphasized the unreasonable imposition of the Earth-bound bosses. "On the ground, I don't think we would be expected to work a sixteen-hour day for eighty-five days, and so I really don't see why we should even try to do it up here." The crew members gained a reputation for being notoriously irascible, even though their complaints echo those of many workers today. "We need more time to rest," Carr said. "We need a schedule that is not so packed. We don't want to exercise after a meal. We need to get things under control."[3]

Then he switched off radio communication. The crew rebelled with an unscheduled day off, stopping all craft maintenance, self-monitoring, and experiments. It was the first strike in space. Houston had a problem. With the flip of a switch, managers were cut off from the mission, and the workers were in charge, if only for one placid day. Given the nature of their relationship to the crew on Earth, which had no choice but to meet their demands, the astronauts enjoyed significant leverage, what sociologists call "structural power." Soon after their strike they negotiated a reduced workload, fairer schedules, and greater control over the planning of the mission. Houston gave them required tasks to perform, but the crew was able to plan how the work would be completed. Pogue, described by coworkers as "a down-to-earth

kind of guy," later said that the final weeks of the mission were more enjoyable, allowing the crew time for "studying the Sun, the Earth below, and ourselves."[4]

Initial reports attributed the astronauts' insubordination to lethargy or depression. But Pogue corrected that interpretation. The flight had made him "much more inclined toward humanistic feeling toward other people, other crewmen," he told *Science News* in 1985. "I try to put myself into the human situation, instead of trying to operate like a machine." Upon their return to Earth six weeks later, the crew was met with a hero's welcome. But although no laws prohibit strikes in outer space, unlike on the ground in the United States, the three astronauts faced the ultimate discipline: NASA ensured they never left the stratosphere again.[5]

There's no evidence the Skylab strike had any lasting impact on interstellar labor relations, and it remains the only organized extraterrestrial work stoppage as far as we know. Can this vignette from over forty years ago tell us anything about our contemporary predicament? NASA astronauts, professional space travelers, are hardly representative of working America. They had, however, voiced a concern about long hours, surveillance, and bad schedules that still resonates decades later among all kinds of workers. Overwork is the new normal, and millions of Americans feel the time squeeze. Schoolteachers are increasingly moonlighting to make ends meet—and not just in the summer. The manufacturing renaissance over the last two decades, especially in the South, has put more people to work at longer hours in automobile factories, the industry most identified with heroically shortening the workweek through strikes and collective bargaining. Even those who work the fewest hours today have increased their time at work the most. Mandatory overtime is on the rise, especially among those workers who are exempt from overtime pay regulations. And then there are the corporate professionals and CEOs who often put in sixty- and seventy-hour weeks, topping the list of overworked Americans.

Continual reports of protracted stressful hours across the occupational spectrum suggest a provisional symmetry among the overworked, a unified mass yoked to a new reality of employment. Then again, not all overwork is created equal. Most professionals and managers, those who work the longest hours yet enjoy a greater degree of control over their time, live entirely different lives from those average workers forced into an endless grind. They typically guard their long hours, profitable as they are, and rely on others to do the dirty work around the clock.

Thus, focusing on overwork alone gives us only one part of the picture. In addition to long hours, workers suffer from irregular and unpredictable schedules that change at their employers' whims. And there's also the mass of the so-called involuntarily unemployed, constantly seeking, but not finding, enough work hours to survive. Consider the growing ranks of retail clerks, fast food workers, home health aides, and others who comprise the 80 percent of hourly workers whose jobs have atypical or variable schedules. Their hours are so frequently cut or extended that they cannot plan to live off one job but find it almost impossible to hold down two.[6]

Add to this list the gig economy serfs whose time is far more on-demand than the be-your-own-boss adage suggests. Nor should we forget that many Americans are working "encore careers" longer and longer into their twilight years, thanks to the indebtedness and lack of savings of many boomers. Combine those with long workweeks, those with erratic schedules, and those delivering your midnight app order, and you have almost two-thirds of the American workforce out of sync with what we think of as a "typical" workday.[7]

These three features—overwork, unstable schedules, and a lack of adequate hours—define the paradoxical time signature of the working life today, especially for low-wage workers. By considering these different dimensions together, we see a fundamentally divided labor force. Some are always on, others are scrambling to

the next job, and still others are spending hours and hours just looking for more work, a job in and of itself. There was no simple across-the-board extension of work hours. Instead, the unequal redistribution of our labor time reflects deepening economic insecurity and social inequality.

This inequity was brought into sharp relief when the coronavirus pandemic hit the United States in the winter of 2020, just about the time this book went to press. Though my research was already completed by that time, the first few weeks of the crisis suggested that it was deepening preexisting inequalities in ways that mirrored the patterns I had observed. White-collar professionals, many of whom were able to transition to remote work, struggled to keep up with demanding jobs plus, in many cases, at least forty extra hours a week of childcare. Others endured similar conflicts while on the front lines of the public health disaster. Nurses were prohibited from taking vacations, doctors were beckoned from retirement, and EMTs were dragooned into 24/7 shifts. Grocery store clerks, warehouse and delivery workers, and low-wage security guards, none of whose jobs had provided them any cushion with which to weather hard times, kept working at great risk to their health. And yet, they were the lucky ones. Millions of their working-class peers watched their livelihoods evaporate overnight, with massive layoffs and record-setting unemployment claims that suggested the precarious nature of even full-time workers. They were dependent upon labor for their very survival.

As the country lurched toward a crisis set to rival the Great Depression, it became clear that the depth of the economic disaster was peculiarly American. Governments across the world acted to protect employment, paying salaries and wages to workers whose industries were shut down. But America's unemployment system required onerous compliance with a bureaucratic jungle, plus a long wait, to receive coverage. To make matters worse, most Americans who lost their jobs also lost their healthcare.

It was only through dozens of scattered strikes that those who still had jobs were able to exercise secure conditions that allowed them to work more safely and securely.

It didn't have to be this way.

•

At the heart of this book is a deceptively simple question: Why do Americans lack so much control over the hours of their labor, and how can we reverse the trend?

I've chosen to focus on the temporal dimension of our work lives because it's a point of fundamental conflict in capitalist society. Whoever controls labor in any society also controls time. When we sleep, eat, raise children, spend time with our friends, bask in the sunshine, or take vacations is dictated by those who control our work. Overwork has ripple effects on family life and personal health in untold ways, fraying the intimate relationships and bonds that bind societies together.

These conflicts aren't easily resolved with typical solutions like higher wages, better safety conditions, or stronger labor law. They raise persistent questions that challenge the viability of capitalist society. If our time is so important to us, why is so much of it in the hands of an employer? Or, increasingly, a computer scheduling algorithm? Why is our work time so unevenly distributed? If we're unhappy with our working hours, why do we continue to perpetuate the cycle? Perhaps most crucially, do our varied experiences of work-time conflicts offer the potential for a universal struggle, a broad coalition against a common enemy? The most prophetic and seductive visions of a revolutionary movement have always included a unity of workers, a class cobbled together from the dispossessed and their would-be allies. If a shared experience of the nine-to-five was once the norm, our lives are increasingly governed by a new rhythm dictated wholly by employers. Can the unjust hours of toil unite us in a new mass movement to regain control over labor time?

Worked Over is my attempt to untangle these enigmas that have gnawed at me over the years.

The return of overwork is an unexpected development in American history. Though a more leisurely society was on the horizon for more than a century, we reversed course in the 1970s and slowly committed ourselves to long hours, even as they became increasingly unstable. From 1975 to 2016, the hours of all wage and salary workers increased by 13 percent, equivalent to about five extra weeks of work per year. This figure hides quite a bit of variation, as I examine in detail throughout this book, but it's a starting point for understanding an important historical change. This happened even as worker productivity increased dramatically during the same period, and as all our peer countries decreased their average work hours. Combine these trends with decades of flat or declining wages, and it becomes clear that workers are giving far more to the economy than they're getting in return.

I offer three general explanations for this historic shift. An economic explanation suggests that massive inequality, higher than that of any other country in the capitalist world, prohibited our wealth from translating into free time. A cultural explanation suggests that a new kind of work ethic that emphasizes "meaningfulness" has increased the subjective value we attach to work. (And if work is meaningful, isn't more of it better?) The third explanation points to American politics. In the past four decades both major parties have pursued agendas that have contributed to extending and worsening the hours of labor. The policies that created such poor labor conditions for American workers have been a shockingly clear example of bipartisanship at a time when political polarization grabs most of the headlines. Together these trends, all of which emerged against a backdrop of increasing inequality and insecurity, contribute not only to how we work, but also when, and why we do so damn much of it.

But any notion of overwork can't be measured in hours alone; it's a relative and subjective designation. This book examines

how our work time has not only increased, but how it has been restructured and controlled. We experience changes in the nature of work not as macroeconomic forces, but as personal infringements on our dignity, liberty, and pursuit of happiness. Nearly everyone I interviewed *felt* overworked even if they wanted more hours. Many articulated the sense that their work lives were becoming more "intense." They meant that, first, the time they spend working—be it at long, irregular, or insufficient hours—makes them feel overly dependent on employers in their day-to-day lives or for their well-being. Second, timing matters too. A major source of stress was that work was too fast-paced, tied to tighter schedules, and reliant on technologies that ensure work creeps into nonwork time. Among high and low earners alike, there is a sense that we are more than ever under the influence of work, even when we're technically off the clock.

Professionals whose jobs demanded excessive hours, or who were lured to late nights by bonuses and gifts, expressed a deep frustration. "I feel tied to this company's success," said Olivia, who works in California's technology sector. "It's really exciting, but, yeah, a lot of us are driven by insecurity too. Like, if we're not at work, we'll miss out on an opportunity." Popular and anecdotal discussions of overwork tend to focus on white-collar, high-earning professionals like Olivia, even though similar schedules are present across many industries.

Overall, however, this book centers on those at the lower end of the pay scale, who report near-constant insecurity as well. As a class of servants—providing food, childcare, healthcare, and transportation—their work schedules are often determined by the long hours of professionals, the habits of consumers, or the demands of unregulated employers. Even if they work sporadically, or only at odd hours, they express their frustration in terms of overwork. They've gradually increased their hours over the decades and they're finally feeling it. "I work more than my dad did at the same job," said Amanda, a personal care attendant by day and travel

agent by night in rural Vermont. "He built a life though, some stability—what do I have to show for all those hours?"

The American Dream offers what seems like a compelling promise—work hard, get ahead. By now a mountain of evidence refutes that simple formula. Amanda's plight is all too common, as many Americans work excessively and still fall behind. Or, despite their best efforts, they can't even find the work they need at regular hours and reasonable pay. What seems like a fair bargain is actually a raw deal. Thus, it is often said the American Dream is broken and must be repaired. But the death of the American Dream provides an opportunity not to breathe life into an old ideal, but to dream bigger. This book, therefore, offers a more radical proposal. We should redesign our economy so that trading most of our waking hours for money isn't the only pathway to a dignified life. Economic security, human satisfaction, and personal well-being should be rights, not the product of labor like other commodities. Winning such a radical new economic and political system will require the kinds of struggles that have occurred only intermittently throughout American history. And it won't be easy.[8]

Employers have long weaponized time through long hours, forced overtime, insufficient hours, or weekend work. Even daylight saving time was originally conceived to extract more labor as the seasons change. Of course, workers have always fought back. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, work time was a hotly debated public issue. Workers fought for and won work time reductions, which slowly became generalized throughout society. But then they lost the fight for the thirty-hour week, undermining the momentum of a downward trend in work time. Today, many Americans work close to forty-seven hours per week yet earn far less than they did decades ago. Among full-time workers, nearly 40 percent report working fifty hours per week or more, and about 18 percent say they work sixty hours or more. This was not a change that we voted on, a public decision

made for the good of the country—it happened bit by bit, behind our backs.[9]

The return of long hours in the United States is a daunting paradox for social scientists. Typically, the richer a country is, the less time its citizens spend working. But the United States is different. Though at midcentury Americans worked less than Europeans, the situation has dramatically changed. In 2018, we worked an average of 1,786 hours, far more than any peer nation. That's about six hours per week more than the French and eight hours per week, one full day, more than the Germans. We log slightly fewer hours than Turkish citizens, but more than the perceived workaholics in Japan, who even have a word, *karoshi*, that means "death by overwork." Among all peer nations, the United States has fewer paid holidays, and it is the only nation without a legal right to paid sick leave or vacation time, paid or not. It is also the only industrial nation without guaranteed maternity leave. More than one hundred countries have a legally mandated maximum length of the workweek—not the United States. Nevertheless, the next time you have a paid holiday or a rare respite from work, you should thank the nearest socialist. It was radicals within the union movement who brought you the weekend.[10]

An industrious spirit is typically considered to be a natural component of our cultural DNA, an inherited trait from ancestral Protestants. Perhaps, as the handmaiden of capitalism, the work ethic has built a sturdy foundation for our national character. But then why do we need constant reminders to work and produce? People are given different messages about why and how they should work all the time. Some are told to follow their passions, others to keep their heads down and follow orders. But the takeaway is always the same—work hard.

Yet everywhere you look there is anxiety that we aren't working hard enough, that our faith in work is not as strong as it should be. One national poll found that 72 percent of respondents said the

United States "isn't as great as it once was." The principal culprit was Americans' declining belief in the value of hard work. More people thought "our own lagging work ethic" was a larger threat to American greatness than "moral decay," the Islamic State, economic inequality, and competition with China. Widespread anxiety about a diminished work ethic is confounding when considered against the actual data on American labor time.[11]

The work world casts a long shadow over America, stretching far beyond the actual hours we spend on the job. To trace the drift toward a longer workday is to follow work's presence into cultural and political spheres, as the norms and values of the workplace have seeped into nonwork life. Our schools are job training programs. Digital technology allows work to invade our leisure. The gig economy proclaims its 24/7 work-anytime arrangements are liberating, while Silicon Valley tries to convince us that labor and play are interchangeable. The social safety net has nearly been replaced by the obligation to work for low wages. The promise that automation will replace the worst jobs, freeing up a bountiful leisure, never quite comes true. Doctors increasingly prescribe work for certain mental illnesses. Taxpayers in Nebraska fund a medium security prison called a Work Ethic Camp dedicated to promoting a pro-work ideology among those incarcerated there. Even in the fashion world, where blue-collar workwear has been getting lots of runway time recently, we flaunt our fealty to the working life. Moreover, at the same time the hours of labor grew longer, our beliefs about work transformed from something we do primarily as a sacrifice to something that fulfills the very essence of our identity. If status was once conferred upon those with a leisurely life, today nothing is more woke than work.

We need free time to exercise our freedoms in a democratic society as well as to ponder how we might change it. It was true for the Skylab astronauts, and it's true for all of us. The major difference, of course, is that none of us can flip a switch and demand immediate concessions. Time is the scarcest of resources, so it

makes sense that its distribution and control are inherently political questions without easy answers. Over the past four decades, we have lost our power to demand much of anything at work. Collective action takes time, and when workers have less of it, they are less prepared to fight back. So while overwork has caused social conflict in some spheres, it has muted conflict in others.

Usually, the diagnosis to overwork is an individualized solution, involving smarter time management, different professional choices, or better balancing of family and work matters. But overwork is not a personal failing that can be resolved by lifestyle changes. Reducing and improving the hours we work will require a mass movement to turn back the power employers hold over our lives and regain control over our time. Two flashpoints of labor history, captured in photographs, reveal starkly different stories of our country's struggle over labor time.

The first is from 1936 on May Day, the workers' holiday that is hardly celebrated in the United States, the country of its origin.

A group of young women, dressed in nearly identical outfits, proudly march behind a banner demanding a thirty-hour workweek. "Six-hour day! Eight hours pay! Keep depression away!" read one leaflet from the time. In that era, winning a six-hour workday and two-day weekend was the "paramount objective" of the American labor movement. William Green, then president of the American Federation of Labor, surmised the fight for the reduced workweek would inspire the rank and file to "make effective new and widespread demand for goods and services." He was correct.[12]

From 1933 to 1936 labor union membership tripled, going from one million to just over three million members. The movement won wage increases and vastly expanded welfare state provisions. Demands for shorter hours were also a bridge to win concessions from the state. In 1937 Alabama senator Hugo Black, a former Klansman and future Supreme Court justice, sponsored a bill to reduce the federal workweek to a maximum of thirty

Workers at a May Day Parade in 1936 demand a thirty-hour workweek. SOURCE: *New York Daily News* Archive.

hours. And Green began threatening to enforce it with waves of militant strikes. The legislation stalled after its passage in the Senate, undermined by a competing bill, the National Industrial Recovery Act, which guaranteed collective bargaining rights for unions but only a tepid reduction in hours. The strikes never materialized either, but the movement for shorter hours resonated with larger ideas of the time.[13]

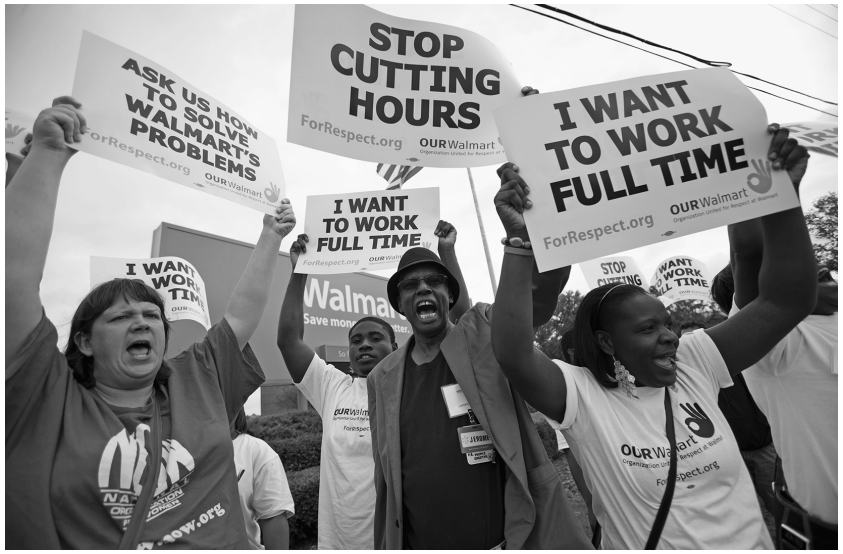
In a now-famous speech amid the Great Depression, "Economic Possibilities for Our Grandchildren," John Maynard Keynes forecast that within the coming century, humanity would grow the economy and create technological innovations in the workplace that would make possible the fifteen-hour workweek. For this he was not entirely sanguine, however, as it presented a new conundrum: "How to occupy the leisure, which science and compound interest will have won." Keynes's worries about

the coming leisure society reverberated throughout the century as shorter hours ebbed toward a real possibility in American life.

In 1973 the US Department of the Interior released a white paper that argued, "Leisure, thought by many to be the epitome of paradise, might well become the most perplexing problem of the future." After President Jimmy Carter briefly proposed a truncated four-day workweek in 1977, the *Washington Post* declared that we were "within striking distance" of the leisure that had seemed inevitable since midcentury. But history is cunning: half a century later we've survived the looming threat of free time. What defines most Americans today is not our bountiful leisure, but a drudging commitment to work. Our contemporary predicament, which happened amid predictions of the opposite, is captured in the other snapshot.

In 2011 Walmart workers staging a one-day strike on Black Friday demanded more hours and an end to short shifts. "I Want to Work Full Time!" read one placard. "Stop Cutting Hours!" said another. This moment is incongruous with the one above for obvious reasons—the workers in the first photo demand a shorter workweek in solidarity with the unemployed; in the second the demonstrators demand more work time for themselves. Both are the product of the same historical process, in which time is wielded as a weapon that pits workers against one another. Today, the Fair Labor Standards Act, the primary law dictating the minimum wage and overtime pay, offers only modest enforcement of scheduling and work time regulations.

Today we work not only more hours, but worse and unstable hours. More than a quarter of us do some work between 10:00 p.m. and 6:00 a.m., with schedules that are unpredictable and constantly changing. The protest below is not about *wanting* more work, as is often the case with the overworked professionals; it is about *needing* more hours and a more reliable schedule. This high level of underemployment is an important part of the story of



Walmart workers protest unstable scheduling and lobby for more hours on Black Friday. SOURCE: Associated Press.

labor time today. Although shorter hours were once a hallmark of social progress, today they signal a crisis for low-income workers and their families. Walmart workers don't just want more work; they want the work they need to survive in modern America, and low wages aren't the only challenge they face. Millions of Americans, including most of those who work at Walmart, wake up each morning not knowing when or if they will need to be at work, forced to cope with schedules that can change in an instant, even during shifts, making meeting the demands of school and childcare extraordinarily difficult. Less than a quarter of hourly workers have a regular standard shift, while 60 percent have a variable schedule. Staffing priorities at Walmart, as at most large retail firms, are designed by algorithms that determine the most cost-effective schedule. Which—I hate to break this news—is not the worker-friendly one. The combination of overwork, erratic schedules, and involuntary unemployment creates a

profound crisis of time. For this reason, labor movements for better hours aren't just fighting for leisure, free time, or relief from overwork. Fundamentally, they are struggles for collective control over work time.[14]

The images are juxtaposed in another way too. In 1936 more Americans worked for the big automakers than for any other employer, and most were union members. Through militant strikes, widespread organizing, and political victories, those unions grew in number and power over the next two decades as workers across the country won shorter hours, high wages, benefits, safety standards, and a voice at work. But no surge in union membership followed the 2008 Great Recession as had happened after the Depression. Today Walmart is the largest employer in the country, dominating the labor market in a staggering nineteen states, and exactly zero of those 1.5 million employees are union members. Thanks to poverty wages, they simply can't afford to work less.

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The greatness of any society can be measured by how it treats its workers. Ours steals their money. We take the massive wealth that workers create and redistribute it upward to a tiny ruling elite. American CEOs take home 312 times what their average employees make. This elite plays a large role in a great legal theft, helping elect policymakers who stand up for the big guy. A nine-month investigation by *Politico* in 2018 found that employers pocketed $15 billion that should have gone into workers' paychecks because of poor enforcement of minimum wage laws.[15]

It is also legal to steal their time. In 2014 the Supreme Court unanimously ruled that workers at an Amazon warehouse did not need to be paid for the mandatory security check, which took upwards of a half hour at the end of every workday, adding hours of unpaid time to their workweek. Time can be spent in a way that satisfies us deeply or that makes us feel like we're being

robbed. And we are. Yet "time theft" is a crime that's uniformly alleged of workers, not bosses. One recent study found that employees "steal" 4.5 hours per week by falsely claiming they've worked when they were doing something else, such as talking with coworkers about their personal lives. All of this raises an obvious question: Why do bosses care so much about how workers spend their time? Because time isn't just money—it's power.[16]

While writing this book I spoke with workers, managers, policymakers, union leaders, and technology experts—from Silicon Valley coders to Heartland autoworkers, from the retail sales floor to strip clubs, from scientists building robots to low-wage workers who are treated like them, as a passenger in the back of an Uber and a stowaway on a Google Bus.

Though their stories are their own, they're not just of their own era. I kept noticing the ways they intersected with the most pressing challenges American workers have been reckoning with for decades. In general, the crisis of time workers face today is the outcome of decades of free-market fundamentalism, sometimes called neoliberalism, the onset of which is often roughly dated to 1973, the year the Skylab workers struck. Neoliberalism's *raison d'être* was to squash ascendant worker power and redistribute their money and power toward the upper crust. It was a stunning success. As this book shows, neoliberalism has not only set back the fortunes of American workers, it has extended their hours and intensified their work.

The ability to overcome this crisis will depend upon an organization of workers, one that recalls past traditions of labor militancy but is well suited for our contemporary moment. This prospect is dependent upon the realization of working-class consciousness, a phenomenon hampered by resurgent racism, xenophobia, and conservatism. Every now and then we see glimmers of that possibility rekindling the radical spirit that inspired our forebears to fight for control over calendars and clocks. The movement for a

fair workweek, led mostly by low-wage retail workers, has won significant legislative victories across the country, giving workers new rights to demand better schedules and more consistent hours. Meanwhile, tens of thousands of striking teachers—many struggling with poor pay, overwork, or the need for an extra job—have led inspiring movements to transform public education. Some workers have recently overturned decades of policy that require poor people to work for welfare, opening up the possibility of overhauling a highly punitive system. It's hopeful flickering lights like these that originally inspired me to write this book.

The first chapter outlines the central premise of the economic argument: that longer hours, unstable schedules, and economic inequality all tend to reinforce one another. Economic inequality, however, is the outcome of a power shift away from workers and toward employers, and the next three chapters offer a new account of how that shift was accomplished. Chapter 2 identifies the rise of managerial control over work time that transformed workplace dogma about productivity into a philosophy of life. This control manifests itself not just as longer hours but as speedup, a process recently amplified by digitalization, apps, and surveillance, which is the subject of Chapter 3, and by the widespread use of robots, which is illustrated in Chapter 4. Labor-saving automation has been conceived of typically as a means for managers to control work, not save time. That it occasionally did help reduce the workweek is an outcome of the ability of workers to exert control over machines, a power they sorely lack today.

Chapter 5 shifts the analysis toward culture. Here I make the argument that a new kind of work ethic has gained prominence since the 1970s, one that centers on meaningfulness and purpose as much as, if not more than, money. This new belief system, a cultural corollary to the rise of neoliberalism, acts as an ideological scaffolding for a more work-intensive economy. If people don't believe that work is inherently good for the soul, however, or are

insufficiently motivated by economic necessity, American politicians force them to work anyway while hardly paying them at all. Thus, Chapter 6 examines the rise of workfare programs and other schemes that governments have found to enforce work by revoking access to necessary food or healthcare. Such programs are controversial, but they have nonetheless been the backbone of US welfare policy through many Democratic and Republican administrations. The chapter concludes on a high note, as a campaign has recently overturned such laws in New York City, which also marks another turning point in the book.

Scattered across these pages are stories of resistance to a work-intensive society that are every bit as political as union representation, worker safety, or fights to secure a higher minimum wage. In Chapter 7, this theme is central as readers meet a number of people fighting to control the temporal conditions under which they work. Some are desperately overworked, some gainfully underemployed, but all are leaders of new labor movements to democratize the ways we work. They hail from across the country but come bearing a singular message: greater worker power means better working hours. In the final chapter, I build on the data and stories collected throughout the book and outline a platform for a new shorter hours movement, which I believe is a moral referendum on the value of work. An important step to making work better is winning the ability to live well while doing less of it.

The voices in this book raise complex questions that force us to connect our individual experiences at work with the larger prospect of a better society. Why did the hours of labor decline for almost one hundred years, and then reverse course? Why is hard work the source of both so much misery and so much pride? Why is nonwork time—schooling, leisure, family life—increasingly designed to meet the needs of the workplace? Why, as a culture, do we seem to love work but hate workers? Perhaps most importantly, what can we do as a society to get control of our work

time and democratize our workplaces in the process? In answering these questions, I uncovered seismic shifts over the past half century that have transformed our society and that help explain why we work the way we do. Decades of trickle-up in work hours, and a decline in our power over employers, mean that the only sane way forward is to regain control over our collective pacemakers. After all, time isn't just money *or* power—it's justice.

CHAPTER 1

THE HOURS OF INEQUALITY

If you have ever stopped at a Dunkin' Donuts in northern New Jersey, before or after work, there's a chance that Maria Fernandes poured your coffee. She worked at three different Dunkin' locations, often back-to-back-to-back, and was described as a "model employee" by a company spokesperson. From 2:00 to 9:00 p.m. she worked the counter at a Dunkin' kiosk inside Newark's commuter rail station. She then headed to a second shop, open 24/7 in downtown Linden, where she worked until 6:00 a.m. If business was slow, she took a respite by settling into piles of doughnut containers to rest for a few minutes. On weekends she picked up a third shift beginning at 8:00 a.m. at a shop in Harrison, and always took on additional hours when asked. On average she worked about eighty-seven hours per week. Though she worked hard, New Jersey's minimum wage was not enough, and she often fell behind on the $550 rent for her basement apartment in Newark. Between shifts, Fernandes napped in her car, the engine running to keep her warm.

On Monday, August 25, 2014, Maria's shift ended at 6:00 a.m., and the next did not begin for two hours. Grainy security camera footage of a local Wawa convenience store shows her car pulling in and parking just after 6:47 in the morning.

"U can call if you like," she texted her boyfriend just as he got to work. After they chatted, Fernandes tilted back the driver's seat of her white Kia with the engine running, the windows shut, and the doors locked to catch up on sleep.

She never woke up.

A Wawa employee noticed her sleeping in the car and was shocked to find her there—eyes open, foaming at the mouth—when his shift ended hours later. Fumes poured from the car, reeking of gasoline. Fernandes was pronounced dead on site from a mixture of exhaustion and carbon monoxide inhalation. She was wearing, of course, her brown-and-white Dunkin' Donuts uniform.

Fernandes, a thirty-two-year-old immigrant from Portugal, quickly became the face of an endemic problem—overwork and poverty amid great wealth and prosperity. Her name appeared in the speeches of politicians for a time, and her plight made it into the mainstream media. There was even talk of a law in her name that would regulate work hours and schedule predictability. "The death of Maria Fernandes demands a call to action," a union leader wrote in an op-ed just after her death. But no action materialized. Still, the name of Maria Fernandes is revived episodically, when another person dies too early because he or she was working too late, too hard, or too often.

In May 2018 thirty-four-year-old Pablo Avendano was struck by an SUV and killed on his bicycle in Philadelphia while working for the Silicon Valley–funded food delivery app Caviar. Just days after his death, a banner was hoisted near the scene of the accident: "The Gig Economy Killed Pablo." Caviar, following the norm among Silicon Valley startups, classified Avendano as an independent contractor, making him ineligible for company healthcare and union protections, and rendering his family ineligible for any benefits upon his death. To collect money for his funeral expenses, friends launched a GoFundMe campaign, which claimed that he died "working a gig economy job that incentivizes riding a bike in dangerous and inclement weather." His best

friend, George Ciccariello-Maher, penned a piece in *The Nation* that said Avendano had been riding through bad weather for hours the day he was hit. Where others see dangerous conditions, Caviar sees opportunity. The day before, the company texted its couriers an emoji-laden message that read, "When it rains the orders POUR on Caviar! . . . Go online ASAP to cash in!"

But few riders were really cashing in no matter how long or hard they worked or how quickly they got online. Couriers at Caviar made close to ten dollars per delivery until 2014, when the company switched to an algorithm that matched delivery demands with riders. As with other algorithm-based models, such as those adopted by Uber and Lyft, the software transfers power to those who design and own the technology. A 2018 study by JPMorgan Chase found that a flood of gig workers caused the wages earned by platform-based food deliverers to fall by more than 50 percent since 2013. Mirroring this larger trend, corporate profits at Caviar soared but wages per delivery declined, forcing many couriers to work longer hours, leaving them exhausted and overworked in dangerous conditions. As Avendano was the night he died.[1]

In *Working Ourselves to Death*, Diane M. Fassel argues that an increasing number of people are simply "addicted to incessant activity." Bryan Robinson, a psychotherapist and author of the book *Chained to the Desk*, compares "workaholism" to a disease like alcoholism. Other accounts blame our cultural endowment of American individualism, which manifests itself as a self-destructive need to get ahead. These explanations are common ones, but it is unhelpful to attribute a widespread social problem to a singular category—addict, workaholic—that raises far more questions than it answers. Workaholism can't explain why Fernandes and Avendano died.

Are we really just hardwired to work hard? Obviously not. Historical changes in the amount of time we work can easily dispel a psychological explanation. Fernandes didn't want to be

sleeping in her car any more than Avendano wanted to be weaving through traffic for an app. Nor, it seems, are the vast majority of workers giving their all out of an irrational commitment.

So what, then, are the social forces that have kept our work lives stubbornly long and unpredictable? For a fuller explanation, let's look at the structure of the economy and recent trends in work time. In the decades leading up to the 1970s, most workers enjoyed a condition they would relish today—declining hours and rising pay. But it didn't last. To find out what happened, we need a better understanding of the complex relationships between rising economic inequality, longer hours, and the American class structure.

Work hours declined precipitously starting in the middle of the nineteenth century. This data has led some to argue that there's a built-in structural bias of capitalist economies to translate productivity gains into increased leisure. This is erroneous. We can attribute the vast majority of that decrease in work hours to trade union pressure and political interventions. It was striking carpenters in Philadelphia in 1791 who inaugurated the movement to win the ten-hour day, a two-hour reduction. And about one hundred years later, on May 1, 1886, thousands of strikers in Chicago, eight of whom were later hanged, demanded "eight hours for work, eight hours for rest, eight hours for what we will," the slogan of the struggle for the eight-hour day. These fights for shorter hours culminated in two major pieces of legislation toward the end of the sloping trend. The Wagner Act of 1935 gave unions the right to bargain collectively with their employer, offering them a clearer avenue to negotiate over hours reductions. The Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 attacked "starvation wages and intolerable hours." It also outlawed child labor and set the standard forty-hour workweek, mandating overtime pay to de-incentivize employers to compel longer hours.[2]

Historian Benjamin Kline Hunnicutt shows that hours dropped so low that workers basically stopped fighting for further

reductions even as the context for doing so was perhaps better than ever. Instead, as leisure time grew, American families needed more money to take advantage of these opportunities and began advocating for higher pay more fervently than for fewer hours. Higher wages, in turn, made longer hours more desirable, and workers increasingly sought relatively lucrative overtime benefits to earn more. Still, high rates of unionization and relatively high wages ensured the downward trend in hours continued until about the mid-1970s.[3]

Social scientists disagree on how exactly to calculate the change in work time since then. The average workweek has remained relatively constant for the past few decades. But we've increased our hours dramatically by working more weeks per year. Juliet Schor ignited a debate about longer hours in her 1991 book *The Overworked American*. When she updated her book a decade later she found the trends had only accelerated. Using data collected by the Current Population Survey, she found that from 1973 to 2000 the average worker added 199 hours (about five weeks) to his or her annual schedule. The surge was staggering for some subgroups within that sample. For example, those in the middle of the income distribution saw an increase of 660 hours per year, a rise of more than 20 percent.[4]

Among Schor's main explanations was that as union strength waned and the state retreated from its commitment to shortening the hours of work, firms were able to restructure jobs as fundamentally longer-hour positions. Increasing employer power eroded a "market for shorter hours," a system in which individual workers were able to negotiate hours or trade hours for time off. Schor also found that workers adjusted their expectations as work time increased. On surveys, they reported satisfaction with their hours despite reporting a preference for shorter hours in previous years. She concluded that workers ended up "wanting what they get rather than getting what they want." Her research overturned the myths that working time today is a matter of