

Labour/Le Travailleur



Work Poetry / Poésie Du Travail

Volume 11, 1983

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/llt11wp01>

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Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

(1983). Work Poetry / Poésie Du Travail. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 11, 171–182.

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WORK POETRY/POÉSIE DU TRAVAIL

Paper, Scissors, Stone

An executive's salary for working with paper
beats the wage in a metal shop operating shears
which beats what a gardener earns arranging stone

But, the pay for a surgeon's use of scissors
is larger than that of a heavy equipment driver removing stone
which in turn beats a secretary's cheque for handling paper.

And, a geologist's hours with stone
nets more than a teacher's with paper
and definitely beats someone's time in a garment factory with scissors.

In addition: to manufacture paper,
you need stone to extract metal to fabricate scissors
to cut the product to size.
To make scissors you must have paper to write out the specs
and a whetstone to sharpen the new edges.
Creating gravel, you require the scissor-blades of the crusher
and lots of order forms and invoices at the office.

Thus I believe there is a connection
between things
and not at all like the hierarchy of winners
of a child's game.

When a man starts insisting
 he should be paid more than me
 because he's more important to the task at hand,
 I keep seeing how the whole process collapses
 if almost any one of us is missing.
 When a woman claims she deserves more money
 because she went to school longer,
 I remember the taxes I paid to support her education.

Should she benefit twice?
 Then there's the guy who demands extra
 because he has so much seniority
 and understands his work so well
 he has ceased to care, does as little as possible,
 or refuses to master the latest techniques
 the new-hires are required to know.
 Even if he's helpful and somehow still curious
 after his many years,
 again: nobody does the job alone.

Without a machine to precisely measure
 how much sweat we each provide
 or a contraption hooked up to electrodes in the brain
 to record the amount we think,
 my getting less than him
 and more than her
 makes no sense to me.
 Surely whatever we do at the job
 for our eight hours — as long as it contributes —
 has to be worth the same.

And if anyone mentions
 this is a nice idea but isn't possible,
 consider what we have now:
 everybody dissatisfied, continually grumbling and disputing.
 No, I'm afraid it's the wage system that doesn't function,
 except it goes on
 and will
 until we set to work to stop it

 with paper, with scissors, and with stone.

Waiting For Them To Come Back From Coffee (inspired by a recent anthology)

Monday, A.M.

They're late from coffee
again.
If I complain
I'm on their backs.
They'll call the shop steward.
On the sales counter
I let them do crossword puzzles
and snap gum
in the customers' faces.
The alternative is a slowdown strike.

The head of payroll has a B.A.
in business administration.
She is illiterate.
She majored in math.
Three and three equals seven.
When I question her calculations
she lectures me on Thoreau.
She marches to a different drummer.

The quality control foreman is an activist in
The Workers' Struggle for
Individuality and Human Dignity,
Branch Thirty-nine,
Local Sixteen,
Affiliated with the Brotherhood of C.F.L.I.O.U.
of America.
He inspects riveting.
I ask why some sheets pass by him
with only eight rivets in twelve holes.
It's simple.

He can't write poetry and
watch holes at the same time.
He is a free spirit.
Nineteen Eighty-Four is not here
yet.
I leave with instructions
to read Orwell.

Tuesday, A.M.

They're late from coffee
again.
They arrive in tears.
The Union Hall decorations
for the "Oppressed Workers Of The World
Springtime Dance and Solidarity Banquet"
have arrived eight days late,
torn and smashed.
When they went to the post office
to ask the reason,
the unionized clerk
told them to fuck off.

The pay checks are
not available.
Thoreau helped put the
figures in the computer.

The shop steward
has not arrived.
He straightened out an "S" curve
on his way to work
in his new Ford
when the union-made steering mechanism failed,
splattered his face through
the unbreakable windshield.

Tuesday, P.M.

I turn my Toyota
smoothly into my driveway.
God is not dead.
And the rest of the week
looks a lot brighter
for the bourgeois.

Bruce Cudney

SORTING MAIL AT XMAS

any job can be
improved with
imagination,
I tell myself

so I pretend I am
in Heaven
sorting prayers
for the Master
& this whiles away
the time

a prayer for him . . .
a prayer for her . . .

suddenly I feel
more productive,
perhaps I should have been
an angel.

when the row boss
isn't watching
I note the number
of chess card games
going through the mails
or read the postcards
from exotic places.

on letters I know
I add cryptic notes:
"You owe the Post Office \$1 million."
or *"The Postmaster General
rescinds your rights to the mail."*
against the vow
I took for God & country
earlier.
meanwhile, sorting mail
at night here in the
boondocks imagining
all the Christmas
parties going on around me.

Nellie McClung

job description

care for Mr. Crystal:
salute his eye
caress him
lift his head
to take the juice
slide the soap
along his thigh
stroke his shoulder-bone
and follow down
to powder folded loins
sting his tongue
with sweetened lemon
sweep his lips
with vasoline
dress him turn him
roll him in your arms
then
with your finger-tips
draw out his teeth
press shut his eyes
wind his ring off
and send it to the safe
tie a tag
around his toe
and another round
the plastic bag
shove him on a stretcher
and wheel him to the fridge
orderly help push
it's cold down here
hurry: hurry
close the door
kill
the lights

Alicia Priest

IT'S ALL OUR FAULT

it's all our fault —
 we killed the redwoods
 and now we're ready to take the blame
 and pay the money that we get paid
 to see them protected in national parks
 that we don't own.

we're the people who fished out the oceans
 so our kids could eat oatmeal
 and day old bread
 and now we're waiting out the moratorium
 on the catching of roe herring,
waiting also for the first unemployment cheque
 and the kids are eating oatmeal
 without sugar but we're not complaining —
 it's all our fault.

we're the people who followed the boom
 and brought the oil out of the ground
 to fuel the cars that others of us made
 so they could eat
 and we're the people who built the roads
 we use to get to places
 where we build more cars, more roads
 and better mousetraps
 and now that we have to wear gasmasks
 and listen to smog alerts, we're sorry —

it's all our fault.

we're the people who are ruining the economy
with our outrageous wage demands:
 father forgive us, for we understand not
 the ways of inflation.

we're the people who destroyed
 the institution of marriage and the sanctity
 of the nuclear family
 by not resisting the sexual advances
 of our bosses —
 it's all our fault; we should have had
 more personal integrity.

we killed the whales, the seals,
 the buffalo and each other,
 we poisoned the air, polluted the water,
 and made this a planet
 fit only for insects.

we did it for wages;
 it's all our fault —
 we did it because we didn't know
 there was anyone else to go to work for.

Al Grierson

What He Knew

If he had been able to silence his heart
 what his strong heart knew

Years on the passenger service, fifteen hundred miles
 across half a continent, a few inches of globe

He can't tell his grandchildren
 what his heart knew

In the pullman sleepers for thirty-five years
 obsolete time

Work in the berths four hours
 in the morning, four at night, sit out the miles
 glad enough in the service

If only he had been able to silence his heart
 after thirty-five years of trains
 Forcing it

until it silenced him, on his
 driveway of wet snow, holding the shovel, a few steps, startled,
 Just two weeks on the pension

What his heart knew then
 His thousands of heart-beats stopped telling

Erin Mouré

We Are a Trade

Sometimes people clutter in aisleways, holding
 unspent money,
 their eyes tired, by days travelled
 in broken airconditioning,
 the sun & prairies cut in their bodies, their stance —
 You can't say you don't see
 Pythagoras,
 the immigrant Canadian sending money home;
 he's out there in his lousy field of rapeseed
 on New Holland equipment, cutting
 one yellow swath from the horizon.
 Some will call this impossible
 politics.
 Pythagoras will turn his tractor toward the train.
 His belief bends the earth & grows.
 Wheat corporations take the money, America —

In the train, passengers eat & return
 to watch & drink whiskey,
 speak old aphorism —
 the duck-lakes of Saskatchewan, money in Alberta,
 Valley farmers dead in their silage
 & us, employees, members
 of the weak union who won't vote anymore
 who serve doggedly
 18 hours every day, who work dogged
 For the time off at home, whole afternoons spent
 in poolrooms, or sleeping
 Affluent in dreams, paying rent in public housing

What do you expect from us
 We earn dividends for no one
 We watch Pythagoras & prime ministers from the same train
 flat & curious

We are a stubborn trade

Erin Mouré

THE STRAIT OF BELLE ISLE

Sure, we can study kings and princes,
 Watch the sweep of Empire catch
 Even this lonely Shore within its grasp:
 For dry men in old chambers
 Have copied it on parchment for our future eye.

But, if we seek to disembark,
 If we leave behind the merchant's brig
 (Turn our backs upon her),
 Ask instead
 Of local men, of living and of dying on this Shore,
 Of cooks and servant girls
 And youngsters;
 If we seek to find
 The generations of the Strait;
 If we try to comprehend
 Their interwoven life and land and sea —
 Where is the charting of their days?

The answers are not written in a well-formed hand,
 But found amid the gravestones and the wooden homes,
 Amid the seamed and weather-beaten faces of the old,
 Learned from a life where cliffs and strand
 (The ocean and the land)
 In subtle balance with each other's wealth
 Jointly supply the riches of the poor.

Here's an integrity of earth and man,
 Complex and finely-turned to fit the balance of their days:
 This is their ledger and their life's accounts.

THE DETROIT STATE POEMS: FINAL DAY

Last day of term, but the night before
 a phone call to say
 Plummer is in town. Formerly he worked
 as deckhand on the west coast tugs;
 now he has completed the Ministry of Transport school
and is second mate on a Great Lakes freighter,
 in for twenty-four hours
 at the salt dock below the Bridge.
 In the afternoon he's off watch
 and I leave the bar on Cass
 where Buckholz and I have gone to celebrate
 and drive over to pick him up,
 then back through Customs again to the tavern.

He has to be on watch by 8, so we drink
 and he talks about the life:
 learning the rivers and channels
 upbound and downbound,
 the steady checking and double-checking of position
 while under way. When cargo is being loaded
 he has to constantly figure
 the change in the vessel's center of gravity
 to ensure she doesn't roll over
 and sink right at the pier.

Buckholz wants to know
 about conditions, and Plummer explains
 he quit one ship at the Lakehead
 because the other officers would sometimes
 physically kick the crew
 — mostly young Maritimers and Québécois.
 "We wouldn't put up with that for a moment
 on the tugs," he says. "But the union here is weak."
 He tells how when the Lake boats berth some places
 no one is on shore, so the ships
 swing a man out on a small boom
 to land to receive the vessel's lines.
 And how once or twice a year a man gets caught
 between the hull and the dock
 and crushed.

"Plus there's applying for Unemployment
 when the Lakes freeze," Plummer says.
 "Since it happens each year

you'd think by now they'd have worked out a procedure.
But no, you have to go down like everybody else
and wait.

I finally was interviewed by this guy
who asks me my 'reason for leaving previous employment.'
I leaped up, strode over the window,
yanked back the curtain and pointed outside at the snow.
'See?' I yelled as loud as I could.
'It's freezing. When water freezes
boats can't move. Understand?'
Everybody is staring at us
and I got my money with no more hassle."

We drink, and Buckholz and I talk about the year just ended,
both of us finished with this job.
Then it's time to go.
As we start the long rise of the Bridge
Plummer says: "I thought it would be different
as an officer,
like beginning again, but it isn't.
It's more exciting in some ways: to navigate —
monitoring your speed, the beacons, the buoys.
But I went on the tugs at eighteen
and I'm over thirty now. It's a shock
to realize sailing is about all you know how to do."

We pass the crest of the Bridge, and far underneath us
we see the tiny freighter tied to the edge of the river.
"It's probably too late to learn another trade
so I guess this is what I am. After these many years
working watch on and watch off, round the clock,
I don't even know if I could handle
a nine-to-five job."

We descend to the lineup
at Customs,
then downriver to the side of the ship.
And I leave him there
to return home to pack: setting forth once more this season
on my own uncertain
voyaging.

Tom Wayman

Telephone Operator

After a few months
the fluorescent glare
fits her with glasses
she'd never needed
before this job;

& she begins to see
her supervisors
as grade school
teachers
from whom permission
for basic functions
must be begged:

Even at home
in sleep,
when her bladder
shakes her shoulder
from dreams,
she wakes to her hand
waving anxiously
in the air.

Sandra Shreve

give away

on the way into camp
the faller
next to me

wants to know if this
is my first day
logging.

a lucky guess
I figure
intuition.

but he keeps on
says don't know much
else than work kid

but one thing sure
either that hardhat's
backward
or you are.

Ken Cathers