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Monographic Section

Work Is not Working Anymore? The Rise of Anti-work Demands across Online Spaces in the Coronavirus Pandemic

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Abstract. Following the pandemic outbreak, discussions about the meaning of work have grown larger in the Western public debate. Within this setting, online spaces have emerged as a privileged environment for such discussions: particularly, the lively Reddit's online community r/antiwork, where millions of users gather daily to discuss work-related matters. Based on ethnographic content analysis of a set of posts from r/antiwork, the article critically discusses the 'anti-work' trend. We show how this online forum has been able to aggregate a set of conversations aiming at 'resisting work', and argue that, following the pandemic outbreak, the neoliberal ideal of self realisation through work is undergoing a crisis. Digital discussion groups, such as Reddit, may open a new space for workers' organisation and theorisation of new meanings of work.

Keywords: anti-work, digital methods, quiet quitting, pandemic, Reddit, great resignation.

Following the pandemic outbreak, discussions about the meaning of work have grown larger in the Western public debate. As waves of contagion, and related variants, came and went, many workers experienced significant changes to their usual work routines and practices, leading some to question their choices, reassess their work/life balance, and sometimes rethink their work lives altogether. For workers in the knowledge economy in particular, the unplanned and unprecedented, large-scale experimentation of remote work practices has led to a normalisation of hybrid work routines, with some days working from home and some from the habitual workplace. Initial research indicates that a growing number of workers actually started to question their existing work/lives in the aftermath of the health crisis, reconsidering the balance between the need to work and one's personal and life goals (Gandini, Garavaglia 2023).

Contextually, an emergent anti-work sentiment has gained traction. Anti-work, in broad terms, may be seen as a general critique to work and productivity in their exploitative aspects for human life (Russell 1935). This can be witnessed in a number of related phenomena, particularly the so-called “great resignation”, by which a growing number of workers in Western economies, particularly (albeit not exclusively) in the US, voluntarily leave their jobs with the explicit goal of improving their lives (Thompson 2021; Coin 2023). Within this context, online spaces have emerged as a privileged environment for discussions around work. Take for instance the “quiet quitting” trend, which promoted active disengagement at work on *TikTok*, inviting workers to strictly stick to what is expected of their role, without going above and beyond their duties (Scheyett 2023). Landmark setting for such anti-work discussions, however, has been the lively *r/antiwork* forum on the social media platform *Reddit*, which at the time of writing hosts more than 2.8 million users, largely US-based, who gather daily to discuss work-related matters. This claims to be an online space of discussion

for those who want to end work, are curious about ending work, want to get the most out of a work-free life, want more information on anti-work ideas and seek personal help with their own jobs/work-related struggles.¹

This article critically questions this emergent anti-work trend, locating its affirmation in the context of the long-term evolution of work cultures propelled by digital transformations. We suggest that the pandemic has newly put under question the idea of enjoying and deriving meaning from one’s work, which has been for long at the heart of the neoliberal conception of work (Ross 2009; Weeks 2011; McRobbie 2018). Despite the promise of happiness, social recognition and status acquisition through self-realisation at work that was particularly core to the so-called “new economy” of the 1990s and early 2000s, for many – especially young – workers work now amounts to an insufficient source of income for basic needs. Precariousness often represents a stable career condition, alongside diffuse job insecurity and stalling minimum wages (Blossfeld et al. 2008). Based on ethnographic content analysis of a set of posts extracted from the *r/antiwork* subreddit, we show how this online forum has been able to aggregate a set of conversations aiming at «resisting work». These conversations suggest that, following the pandemic outbreak, the neoliberal ideal of self-realisation through work is undergoing a crisis; digital discussion groups, such as *Reddit*, may open a new space for workers’ organisation and negotiation of new visions and meanings of work.

The article is structured as follows. In the next section we critically discuss work cultures in modern Western societies, with the aim of setting the context of our argumentation. Then, following a methodological note, we present our research and discuss the main insights that can be derived from our analysis. In the conclusion we discuss our findings in light of Kathi Weeks’s (2011) theory of the work ethic, questioning the present and future prospects of the ‘anti-work’ trend in light of the broader post-pandemic scenario.

WORK CULTURES IN MODERN WESTERN SOCIETIES

The definition of the word *work* is ambiguous, as the concept has a complex history (cfr. Marx 1867; Arendt 1958; Donkin 2010). Commonly, work is defined as an activity that is carried in order to receive a wage, as Gorz notes (1999); it is usually considered a natural part of our lives, defining not only the way we earn a living, but also our relationships, our time, our social structures (Weeks 2011). Yet, as Pfannebecker and Smith (2020) have argued, today it has become increasingly difficult to distinguish what is work from what is not work. As digital technology invests every aspect of our social lives, we live a condition of «lifework», as they put it, «where everything you do is work, and everything you do can be put to work» (ivi: xi). Wage labour has been profoundly modified by technology, altering its temporalities, execution and forms of control. Distinctions between work and leisure time, or between unemployment and employment, have become blurred, while nonstandard forms of work

¹ See: <https://www.reddit.com/r/antiwork/> (Last accessed 29 April 2024).

that deviate from the 20th century model of full-time dependent employment, such as freelancing, temporary, platformed jobs, have been argued to be the «new standard» of work in the 21st century (Gandini 2020).

At a general level, it may be argued that work fulfils, at least, three main functions: the attainment of economic independence, the possibility of planning the future, and the construction of a social and personal identity. But as Weeks (2011: 8) underlines, in our society

The normative expectations of waged work as an individual responsibility have more to do with the socially mediating role of work than with its strictly productive function. Work is the main means by which individuals are integrated not only in the economic system, but also into social, political and familial modes of cooperation.

Weeks delves into the socially mediated role of work using the concept of «work ethic». This grasps how people are encouraged to relate to work beyond one's material necessity: work is seen as something dense with meaning in relation to identity, and strongly related to the economic regime in which it takes place (Weeks 2011). The term «work ethic» was first introduced by German sociologist Max Weber, who drew a correlation between the emergence of such an ethic in 16th-century Protestant thought and the origins of European capitalism in his most famous oeuvre, *The Protestant Work Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1906).

According to Weeks, in different phases of capitalism the work ethic promises different rewards to workers. For Weber (ibidem), the protestant work ethic offered a transcendent reward: salvation after death. By applying diligently to work and approaching it as an end in itself, after death one could be among those predetermined to go to heaven (Weeks 2011: 57). In the Fordist era, the promise was focused on material rewards, with consumption and social mobility taking a central role. During the so-called “glorious thirties, both blue- and white-collar workers had the expectation to stay with their firms for a long time, advance in their career and retire with large pensions. Indeed, many of the popular staples of the so-called “American dream” arose during this period in the US, including having a decent, secure job, owning a home and a car, and aspiring for social mobility (Marchand 1985; Chancer et al. 2018;). After WWII, Western societies experienced a period of significant economic growth, with the industrial sector reaching a peak of about 20 million workers in 1978 in the United States (Ocejo 2017), which influenced the relationship between work and life. Put differently, workers were promised that those working hard and applying to work diligently would be able to consume and experience some degree of social mobility in life. While in the protestant work ethic consumption was seen as a sign of moral failing, in Fordist capitalism working hard meant having the possibility to earn a wage that allowed consumption, living comfortably, and achieving social status.

Then, following the energy crisis of the 1970s – which Marxist historian Giovanni Arrighi (1994) describes as the mid-cycle crisis of the «long 20th century» characterised by the US hegemony – rampant globalisation and technological breakthroughs led to a decrease in manufacturing employment, while financialisation continued to grow and consumer goods prices remained accessible. The post-Fordist era and the affirmation of a knowledge economy driven by information rather than material production led to the appearance of new jobs in the service sector. But while stability may have described jobs and working conditions in the industrial era, when people were more likely to stay at one company for their entire careers (or at least had the option to do so), the term “precarious” comes to be increasingly utilised to describe employment status in this “new economy” of the late 1990s and early 2000s (Chancer et al. 2018; Gandini 2020).

Individualisation and the ideal of living authentically, of being true to oneself, became central to the post-industrial work ethic, which translated in the attempt at reconciling one's work with one's passion, in order to be happy and express one's true self completely (Lindholm 2013). Eponymous with this new culture of work is the mythological narration of the rise of a «creative class» of workers (Florida 2002) which, at the dawn of the new century, carried the promise of reconciling one's need to work with individual ambition and talent, and the fulfilment of one's passion. Yet, as demonstrated by a large body of research published in the two decades following Florida's creative class manifesto, the rise of the creative industries as the centrepiece of the new economy based on information and knowledge turned out to be much less successful than expected, with experiences of unpaid work,

precarity and uncertainty becoming common and widespread (Hesmondhalgh, Baker 2008; Gill, Pratt 2008; Ross 2009; Arvidsson et al. 2010; McRobbie 2018).

In parallel with this evolution, according to Weeks, in the post-Fordist era, workers have been encouraged to think of work as a device for self-realisation, as a realm of autonomy, creative expression and happiness. They have been invited to see work as something that is not separate from the rest of their lives, but rather to align their selves with the capacity to create value at work and to consider at once necessary and desirable to invest themselves fully in work (Weeks 2011; Farrugia 2019). The rhetoric of passion had become ubiquitous: workers should pursue their true passion, or ‘calling’, and find a way to make it profitable. Success is seen as arising from passion, while failure is caused by not correctly identifying one’s true passion and ‘calling’, or not trying hard enough (*ibidem*). In this view, work gets to be strongly tied to individual responsibility and entrepreneurial skills, overshadowing the larger economic and political context: if one’s career does not work out, the self itself may be considered as faulty.

This represents the main byproduct of the affirmation of neoliberalism as an economic, political and social doctrine based on entrepreneurship and individual affirmation (Harvey 2007; Gandini 2016; 2020). In the neoliberal era, what is seen as valuable in workers is not merely the skills they possess, but their identities as a whole (Weeks 2011). On top of requiring workers to possess specific abilities or credentials, the lines between work and leisure get blurred in order to include subjectivity in the process of capitalist valorisation. Through this process, the practice of work gets to be infused with workers’ individual identities, interpersonal preferences, and affective experiences. As they participate in work, workers are expected to mobilise fresh and intimate aspects of their subjectivities, adding value to their ability to express themselves and interact with others (Farrugia 2019; Bandinelli 2020). While the neoliberal work culture has pushed many workers to emotionally invest more and more in work, which is more linked to burnout (Hochschild 1983); to accept jobs that may be meaningless or even useless (Graeber 2018); to cope with job insecurity and the lack of basic protections such as living wage, guaranteed hours, sick leave and secure contracts (Gandini 2020), many workers, as Frayne (2017: 18) underlines, are left

In a perpetual state of anxiety about making plans and meeting needs. [...] For many people, this material insecurity manifests as a kind of ambient dread, constantly playing on the nerves. Anxiety becomes an ordinary part of daily life and thinking about the future becomes difficult.

The pandemic suddenly and abruptly appears at the peak time of this work culture. Unsurprisingly, discussions on the meaning of work took on immediate centrality in the public debate at the onset of the pandemic, as a distinction was quickly drawn between “essential workers”, whose jobs were deemed to be necessary for the basic needs of society and would therefore continue almost as normal despite possibly fatal risks – and others, for whom the general mandate was a recourse to remote work. It has been argued that the pandemic has caused an «exogenous shock» to the routines and habits of many workers, leading many to what may be seen as a moment of reckoning (Bertolini et al. 2022). On the one hand, after the experience of lockdowns and the sudden transition to remote work, workers became aware that rules and habits were in fact changeable, opening up a new horizon of possibilities and demands (Gandini, Garavaglia 2023). On the other hand, the traumatic circumstances of the pandemic had a strong impact on the mental health and personal wellbeing of workers, leading to increasing burnout and voluntary resignations, but also a growing interest in psychological well-being and therapy (Jaffe 2021).

In light of these instances, not only the question of *how* we work, but also that of *why* we work became part of a collective discussion, which found online spaces as the ideal ground to proliferate. More than thirty years of neoliberal work narratives sustaining the idea of work as a form of identity expression, passionate investment, and a path to happiness, began to be put under question in an unprecedented way, as a rising plethora of books on the topic testimonies (cfr. Jaffe 2021; Coin 2022; Colamedici, Gancitano 2022; Carozzi 2022). Elaborating on Weeks, we may argue that the promises of the post-Fordist work ethic started to be challenged as the pandemic dragged many workers out of their usual routines, giving them the opportunity to assess their work and lives outside of their rapid-paced, usual routines. Within this setting, many have come to the realisation that their aspiration of self-fulfilment through work was unsustainable in the long-term. Put differently, it was not only one’s routine or

existing work/life to end up challenged, but the meaning of work itself. Acting as a rupture in the relationship between individuals and work, the pandemic allowed many to see work from a different perspective, bringing them to challenge why should they keep their passionate dedication to work if this often does not even afford them basic economic stability or the possibility to plan one's future, even for higher-skilled workers. Coin (2023) claims that this sentiment mounted as a diffuse «sense of betrayal» and a feeling of repulsion against work cultures based on passion and self-realisation, which have come to be synonymous with exploitative workplaces.

In turn, from the onset of the pandemic, more and more workers have seemingly started to reclaim more fundamental rewards than self-realisation through work, such as more sustainable wages, stability, protections on the workplace, work/life balance and time for personal and affective lives. Contextually, many workers also turned to social media and other online environments to discuss their grievances around work. Clearly, this is not necessarily new: take for instance the forms of collective mobilisation that characterised the gig economy, which have been fostered by online discussions. *Amazon Mechanical Turk's* workers, for instance, developed an activist platform, the *Turkopticon*, to publicise and evaluate their relationships with employers (Silberman, Irani 2016). Similarly, online forums have been instrumental in the collective organising of couriers and other workers in the gig economy (cfr. Della Porta et al. 2022). Yet, this developed into an anti-work conversation, centred around a general critique to work and productivity in their exploitative aspects. Two major instances are representative of this phenomenon: one is the “quiet quitting” trend, which became popular on the social media platform *TikTok* in the form of short videos promoting the idea that workers should stick to the minimum requirements of their job, avoiding to extend their working hours and duties beyond what is strictly required (Scheyett 2022). A second one is the *r/antiwork* subreddit, which affirmed as a popular forum for workers in the US to voice their concerns, thereby finding others who shared their same circumstances, feelings and thoughts. In the next sections we explore anti-work discussions within *r/antiwork*, illustrating the main topics of the conversation and questioning the extent to which a digital space such as Reddit might represent a milieu for the collective redefinition of the meaning of work and for the discussion of issues related to the everyday experiences in the workplace.

METHODOLOGICAL NOTE

Our research was driven by the aim of reconstructing the main topics and discourses emerging across *r/antiwork* discussions at the peak of its activity, that is, immediately after the most severe lockdown restrictions. To do so, we started from the following research questions: 1) What are the recurring themes discussed within *r/antiwork*? 2) What are the main narratives around work that users in *r/antiwork* share and coalesce around? 3) Do these narratives challenge the meaning of work and the work ethic, and in so doing, do they offer an alternative proposition?

The social media platform *Reddit* is an entertainment and discussion forum website where registered users (known as *redditors*) can post content in the form of written posts or hyperlinks. The site is arranged into interest groups, or *subreddits*; being topically self-identified entities, subreddits constitute online communities with their own norms and insider vocabularies and jokes (Medvedev et al. 2020). Users can visit a “top page”, or feed, in each subreddit as well as *Reddit* itself, to view post titles and links for voting and commenting. At the same time, they can assign a rating to the published contents, referred to as “upvote” and “downvote”. These ratings impact the visibility of the contents on the site's pages. Content visibility is thus determined by time and voting score, commonly referred to as *karma*. High-scoring posts typically appear at the top of each page, while older material progressively loses prominence. Due to fairly permissive content policies, it is possible for users to maintain substantial anonymity, as well as to create more than one account (ibidem). At the time of data collection, *r/antiwork* hosted more than 1.8 million users; by the time this article was finished, it had reached 2.8 million.

In order to reconstruct the most relevant conversations within *r/antiwork*, we employed a qualitative digital methods approach (Caliandro, Gandini 2017), which consisted in manually constructing a dataset consisting of the

top 100 *r/antiwork* posts that obtained the most upvotes between March 2021 and March 2022. The most popular post in our sample obtained 290.000 upvotes, while the least popular one obtained 78.000 upvotes. Upon this body of data, we performed ethnographic content analysis (Altheide 1996). As Altheide (1996: 68-69) defines it

Ethnographic content analysis is used to document and understand the communication of meaning as well as to verify theoretical relationships. Its distinctive characteristic is the reflexive and highly interactive nature of the investigator, concepts, data collection and analysis. [...] Like all ethnographic research the meaning of a message is assumed to be reflected in various modes of information exchange, format, reason and style.

Informed by digital methods, ethnographic content analysis allows for the use of digital data and metadata as methodological sources that inform the analysis of a body of cultural content, and thus isolate and critically assess the main narratives that emerge from it (Caliandro, Gandini 2017). The collected content was thus categorised according to the main themes discussed. In a first step, an unstructured, qualitative exploration of the posts led to the identification of a set of keywords, which grasp the different aspects of the *r/antiwork* discussion. In an iterative process, these were then consolidated and grouped in 4 categories, as follows:

- 1) *Everyday work-related issues*. Keywords: low wages, abuse, threat, short staffing.
- 2) *Reactions to abusive work situations*. Keywords: remote work, collective action, unionising, voluntary resignation, chain resignation, creative protest, vendetta, employer/employee clash.
- 3) *Reflections on the cultural role of work*. Keywords: neoliberal rationality detournement, supply and demand, unreliable promises of work, generational clash, end of American dream/world.
- 4) *New visions of the role of work in life*. Keywords: life over work, free time, work smarter, automation, «old rules don't work».

Considering that posts contained keywords belonging to more than one category, in a second step each post was qualitatively assigned to one specific category, in accordance with its content. This allowed us to generate a typology, which is detailed and discussed in the next section.

As said, ethnographic content analysis is particularly useful in the observation of digital content as it allows to chiefly focus on narratives, topics and any other aspect which may be useful to the reconstruction of a cultural imaginary around a specific issue, taking full advantage of the multi-modal nature of digital content (Caliandro, Gandini 2017). Compared to quantitative content analysis, which focuses on the numerical coding of content, it allows greater in-depth exploration and the illustration of nuances in the analysis which would otherwise remain unexplored. Nonetheless, our research maintains some important limitations. First, while the choice of focusing on the top 100 posts follows the native structure of interaction on *Reddit*, it still privileges the outputs of its «vanity metrics» (Rogers 2018), thus adopting the numerical performance of posts as an epistemological principle. This may lead to the exclusion of other significant content, which did not make part of this selection. Second, despite the rich set of data at our disposal, we have limited information about the context wherein these conversations originate: what do those who abandon their job do, after quitting? Are there any other factors that enable the abandonment to take place (i.e., existing savings, social capital, networks of support) besides those shared in these posts? Relatedly, and perhaps most importantly, qualitative research with digital data allows us to gather very limited socio-demographic data such as gender, ethnicity, age, or sexual orientation, about individual participants in *r/antiwork* discussions. The information at our disposal suggests that the majority of users who are active in *r/antiwork* are US-based: this is in line with the main setting where instances of a “great resignation” movement were recorded. As Gittleman (2022) notes, voluntary job abandonment rates have been stable for decades in the US context until March 2021, when they began rising again, peaking in the period April – December 2021, which covers the vast majority of the time frame considered in this research. The same article evidences how the tightening of the labour market alone (a byproduct of the pandemic restrictions) does not explain in full the recorded rise in quit rates, and suggests that changing cultural attitudes about work are at the basis of this phenomenon – hence

the timeliness of our research. Indeed, other research stresses that US work cultures have been impacted by the pandemic in a significant way: a *Microsoft* (2022) report indicates that 53% of US-based workers are more likely to prioritise their health and wellbeing over work than before the pandemic. This confirms the relevance of the data at our disposal; yet, we remain fully aware that limiting this inquiry to a set of online data ultimately limits the scope of the conclusions we can reach with our study. A potential expansion in the direction of a set of qualitative interviews to some of the users in our dataset would certainly contribute to consolidating the significance of the empirical evidence presented here. Nonetheless, we maintain that the possibility to access such an ample set of qualitative data about opinions, attitudes and feelings about work by a large number of workers in such a delicate social, economic and sanitary setting constitutes a highly valuable resource that we hope will constitute a useful baseline for researchers interested in pursuing further the study of anti-work cultures in other geographic and socio-demographic settings.

FINDINGS

At a general level, the top 100 posts appearing on *r/antiwork* at the time of data collection can be divided into two main categories: *narrative* and *informative* ones. Narrative posts are majoritarian in number, and cover personal experiences and issues: through a textual post, a screenshot of a personal conversation (direct messages or emails) or an image, users tell their personal stories about difficult situations in the workplace. Many ask for support or advice to other redditors, who engage in comments and discussions. A smaller portion of these posts were coded as informative: that is, they do not present first-hand experiences of work grievances but focus on spreading information on work-related matters, typically in the form of screenshots from Twitter or other social media platforms, online articles, memes or videos. In terms of job sectors involved in the discussions, the majority of posts are about service work such as retail, hospitality and care work, and knowledge work, particularly in the IT sector. Many posts refer in adversarial terms to Baby boomers, suggesting that the majority of users likely belongs to the younger generational cohorts of Millennials and Gen-Z. Overall, the jargon used, the inside jokes and the thematisation of work-related issues broadly recall socialist and anarchist ideas, as demonstrated by dedicated sections such as «Recommended Reads» where books by Karl Marx, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, David Graeber, and American anarchist collective Crimethinc are enlisted.

Focusing on content and themes, our analysis identifies 4 main types of posts, as shown in Table 1 below. We divided the posts across two axes: on the one hand we have current issues vis-a-vis future prospects; on the other hand, personal experiences vis-a-vis abstract reflections. In the section that follows, we delve deeper in each of these categories.

Everyday work-related issues and experiences

The first category is composed of posts that focus on the practicalities of everyday work life. A main subset of posts in this category focuses on the paradoxical situations of workers that face scant worker protections. These highlight the negative aspects that workers have to face, particularly in relation to low wages, abusive and patronising behaviour from employers and managers, and the lack of personal rights in the workplace. Many report abuse

Table 1. Typology of the main themes in *r/antiwork*.

| | Personal experiences | Abstract reflections |
|---|--|--|
| Present: Discussing current problems of the labour market | Everyday work-related issues and experiences | Reflections on the cultural role of work |
| Future: Creating a new idea of work | Reactions to abusive work situations | New visions of the role of work in life |

from employers. In some cases, posts discuss circumstances where the employer engages – or asks employees to engage – in illegal behaviour, such as serving expired food, threatening to sue the employee if they resign or fire the ones who join a union. The most interesting type of posts in this subset is represented by stories of users who are forced to come back to work when they are not on duty, due to short staffing. In many of these cases, the lack of workers is caused by multiple resignations. Some report workers being blackmailed with the threat of taking away their healthcare benefits or terminating their job if they do not abide by this order. See for instance the post below (Fig. 1), where an employer requires an employee to work at Thanksgiving when he or she is on a planned vacation.

A second subset of posts in this category concerns *patronising behaviours* from employers, who may not necessarily be abusive but that perform a feeling of superiority. In one of these, a redditor uploads a photo of a pair of socks donated by their employer, stating:

I'm a skilled tradesman who is supposed to get a \$3000 bonus at the end of the year for making the company \$150,000 in profit, per my contract. I doubled it, which is supposed to increase my bonus. This is what I received. 100% done with this industry.²

Other posts discuss the common practice of receiving food as a perk instead of bonuses or pay rises, even though these should be provided by contract. These behaviours from the employers are collectively discussed and reframed as conducts that justify the choice to leave one's position. A third subset of posts in this category concerns *the cost of living*, often presenting the claim that compensations and wages do not allow workers to make ends meet. A third of the posts overall in this category mention low wages, usually in relation to the health and safety hazards workers have to face in the workplace, the lack of rights, and abusive behaviour from superiors. Many affirm to work jobs that do not allow for economic independence, causing them to constantly worry about their financial situation. This is discussed in relation to the profits that companies make by exploiting workers, which is framed as greed. Here, the capitalist ideal of accumulation is contested as unethical: see for instance Fig. 2, which is a *Twitter* screenshot that received a lot of upvotes, where the profile "Fuck You I Quit" highlights the choice to raise prices and terminate the contracts of the unionized employees of a famous coffee shop chain. A smaller number of posts in this category also discusses the so-called "pay talk", illustrating discussions between management and workers about the amount of an equitable salary, as, according to *r/antiwork* redditors, many companies prohibited the discussion of personal wages in the workplace among employees and with customers, even if this is unlawful.

Reactions to abusive work situations

A second type of post presents *reactions* to the aforementioned unfair or abusive work conditions. These may take the form of individual choices, for example linked to one's decision to leave a certain workplace or voicing one's needs to the employer; alternatively, they may take a more collective form, through strikes and protests. A main subset of these concerns *voluntary resignations*: many of the posts with the highest ranking recount personal stories of users that decided to leave work voluntarily to avoid the situations earlier described, such as to stop enduring abuse, accepting wages under the cost of living, or patronising behaviours. Usually workers have already found a new job or search for another one immediately after leaving. The comment section becomes a space of support, discussion, and sharing of similar experiences. A common trend in this subset is the resignation without notice, offered via direct message, as depicted in a post titled «Who's the boss now» portraying a text message screenshot which had 180.000 upvotes in March 2023 (Fig. 3). The user quit their job following degrading behaviour from the employer, who asked them to come back to work during a work permit due to family mourning, and facing a refusal, insulted the redditor, who decides then to resign via text message.

² Available at: https://www.reddit.com/r/antiwork/comments/rtqxe3/im_a_skilled_tradesman_who_is_supposed_to_get_a/ (Last accessed 31 March 2023).

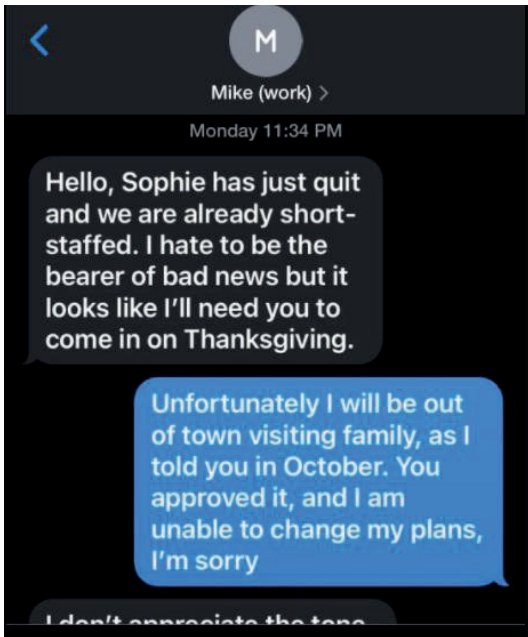


Fig. 1. «Finally decided I'd had enough of my P.O.S. boss on Monday, & damn did it feel good». Available at: www.reddit.com/r/antiwork/comments/r4f9an/finally_decided_id_had_enough_of_my_pos_boss_on/ (Last accessed 31 March 2023).

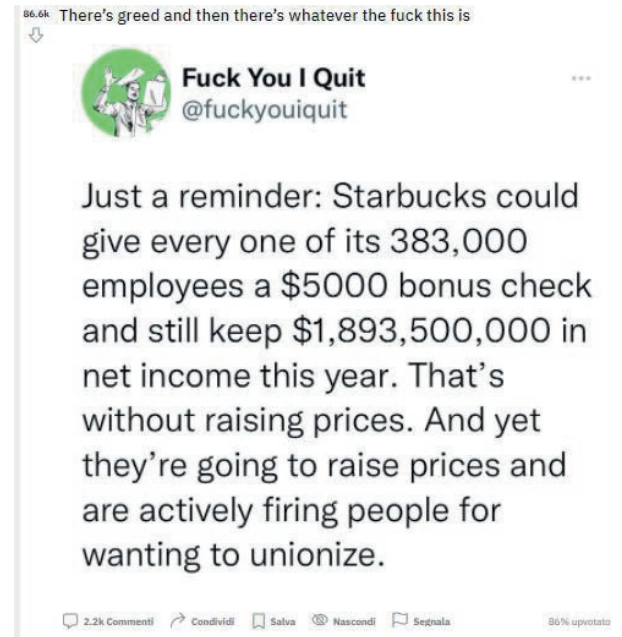


Fig. 2. «There's greed and there's whatever the fuck this is». Available at: https://www.reddit.com/r/antiwork/comments/std1oz/theres_greed_and_then_theres_whatever_the_fuck/ (Last accessed 31 March 2023).

A second subset of posts in this category concerns *creative protests* against unfair conditions: by using digital tools, such as hijacking remote working meeting chats, by boycotting individually or by participating in collectively organised individual actions. In Fig. 4, it is possible to see an example of this creative protest: a Twitter screenshot reports that, in response to Kellogg's alleged punishment of striking workers and search for new workers via online advertising, younger workers applied in big numbers with no real intention of accepting the position, causing disruption to the company.

Other posts in this category report personal vendettas, or discuss strikes (12%), almost exclusively in positive terms. In some cases redditors congratulate workers of a specific company for the success of a strike in the US or internationally, or ask to participate in a boycott campaign or a strike.

Reflections on the cultural role of work

A third category of posts discusses abstract aspects linked to working life, referring to everyday issues as those discussed in the first type, but contextualising them in society and culture at large. Many of these maintain that work is no longer reliable as a source of income, status and social mobility, even for those that dedicated many years to professional education (see Fig. 6 below). Low wages are sometimes put in relation to the crisis of the American Dream (see Fig. 5 below), or with the climate crisis. These often discuss how the promises of the work ethic do not hold anymore in the society they are living. An article screenshot shared on *r/antiwork* which says: «Workers no longer believe that working hard will lead to better wages»³ was upvoted 141.000 times. The neo-

³ Available at: https://www.reddit.com/r/antiwork/comments/scbw37/no_shit/ (Last accessed 31 March 2023).



Fig. 3. «Who's the boss now». Available at: https://www.reddit.com/r/antiwork/comments/q9dwp6/whos_the_boss_now/ (Last accessed 31 March 2023).



Fig. 4. «YES, HAHAAHA- YES!». Available at: https://www.reddit.com/r/antiwork/comments/rcswoa/yes_hahaha_yes/ (Last accessed 31 March 2023).

liberal work ethic, based on the complete identification of the self with hard work as a means for self-realisation, is then discussed and deconstructed as unreliable.

The fact that work no longer provides economic independence is also frequently highlighted. As a redditor ironically says, the motivational phrase «The reward for work well done is the opportunity to do more» is now seen not as an incentive to self-identify in the working activity, but as a memento against overworking, as the only reward will be more work (cfr. Figure 7, below). The ideal of the hard worker man who can get social mobility by focusing on his objectives is deconstructed.

In more than one post out of ten of this subtype, this deconstruction has the shape of a *generational clash*. This commonly takes the form of an adversarial tone against older generations, recalling the «ok boomer» thread (Zeng, Abidin 2021). In Fig. 8, for example, a user reacts to the common stereotype that younger generations do not want to work, commenting on an email screenshot from 2022, which received 90.000 upvotes at the time of writing, in which her boss belittles younger workers for their attention to the reduction of the spread of the coronavirus.

In some cases the tone is nostalgic, presenting a reminiscing view toward the life experiences of the baby boomer generation as they are perceived to have lived an era of full employment, low housing prices and hope toward the future. A *Twitter* screenshot shared on 25/2/22, hitting 99.500 upvotes, says:

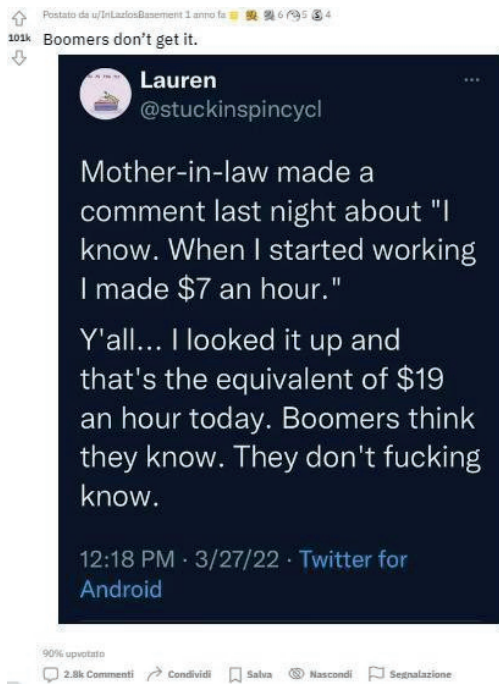


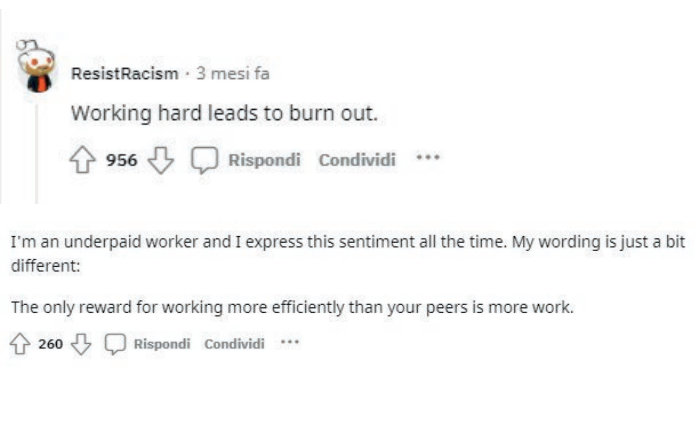
Fig. 5. «Boomers don't get it». Available at: https://www.reddit.com/r/antiwork/comments/trvajm/boomers_dont_get_it/ (Last accessed 31 March 2023).



Fig. 6. «\$15/hr is \$120 per 8 hr day». Available at: https://www.reddit.com/r/antiwork/comments/svm2jo/15hr_is_120_per_8_hr_day/ (Last accessed 31 March 2023).



Fig. 7. «This fucking motivational quote when I walked in this morning». Available at: https://www.reddit.com/r/antiwork/comments/razia4/this_fucking_motivational_quote_when_i_walked_in/ (Last accessed 31 March 2023).



Shoutout to our parents for hitting a timeline sweet spot. Drop in right after WWII, have a bunch of weird sex before HIV, buy a house for like \$20.000, start a family, retire young, and peace out right before the ocean kills us.

This view takes into account all the challenges of workers in present times, the fear and the unpredictability of the future, the hardship of a salary below the cost of life, the desire for free time, as well as the need to take into account the larger economic and political context.

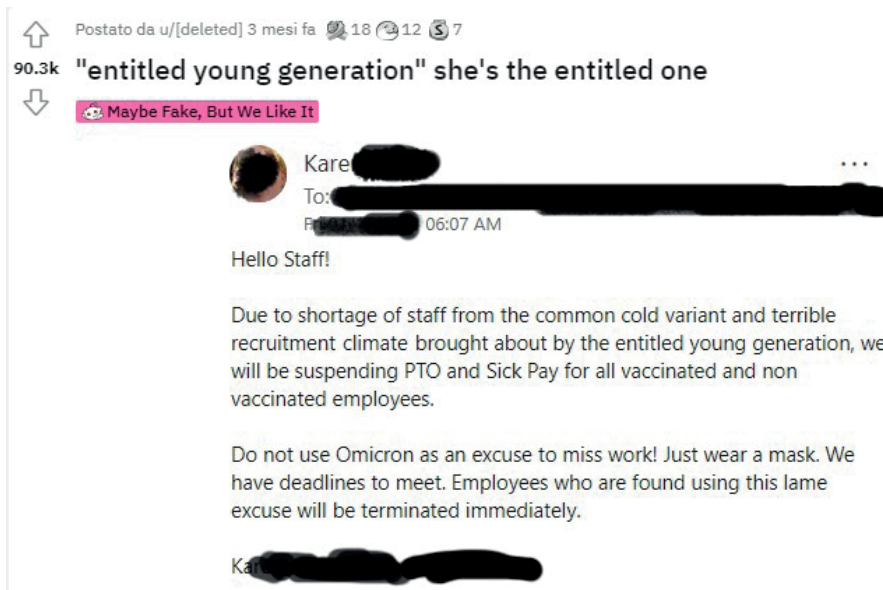


Fig. 8. «Entitled young generation... she's the entitled one». Available at: https://www.reddit.com/r/antiwork/comments/s65nas/entitled_young_generation_shes_the_entitled_one/ (Last accessed 24th March 2024).

A new vision of work?

The fourth category is composed of posts who take a step further in the creation of a new vision of life and work, by deconstructing the relationship between work and the individual. Success is reinterpreted as personal wellbeing in the present, having time for the loved ones and enough money to live happily. Free and leisure time are reclaimed as superior to work success. Many of these posts discuss the naturalisation of work in our everyday lives, deconstructing the idea of retirement or the 8-hour work day, because they take all the energy out of people (cfr. Fig. 9 and 10).

In line with these ideas, other posts take a more practical turn and discuss personal stories about users that decided to stop giving *absolute priority to work* in their lives. In some cases, this takes the form of a voluntary resignation to fulfil the need for personal goals, such as proposing to one's partner and taking a holiday, as in Fig. 11 (below).

Other posts in this category consider whether technological automation may be a means to achieve more free time to pursue personal passions, recalling accelerationist stances (Srnicek, Williams 2015). One IT worker recounts having found a way to use technology to automate their work without telling their employers, allowing them to work a few minutes a day to complete the required task through a software the employer knows nothing about. Some posts take an explicitly Marxist tone, discussing the notion of work as a product that can be sold to the best offer. In the context of *r/antiwork*, this idea is often referred to with the keyword «supply and demand», subverting the common neoliberal conception of this phrase. In Fig. 12, for instance, a user posts a screenshot of a personal chat with their employer, treating their work as a commodity in short demand, and asking for a higher price in order to continue the employment relationship. In another case, as depicted in Fig 13, a *Twitter* screenshot discusses the idea that employers that cannot afford workers should not complain that the labour market is faulty, just like a person that cannot afford an expensive car just does not buy it. These discussions use class conflict as a conceptual frame, albeit without using the classical terminology. This frame also deconstructs the idealisation of a rich lifestyle as the wealthy, the capitalist, the employer, is presented as a negative ideal.

The underlying idea is to overturn the common neoliberal trope that workers are lucky to work, in favour of the idea that employers should create an enjoyable work environment in order to attract workers, as the following two screenshots highlight.



Fig. 9. «It really is». Available at: https://www.reddit.com/r/antiwork/comments/ouwp61/it_really_is/ (Last accessed 31 March 2023).



Fig. 10. «Title». Available at: <https://www.reddit.com/r/antiwork/comments/pt48jj/title/> (Last accessed 31 March 2023).

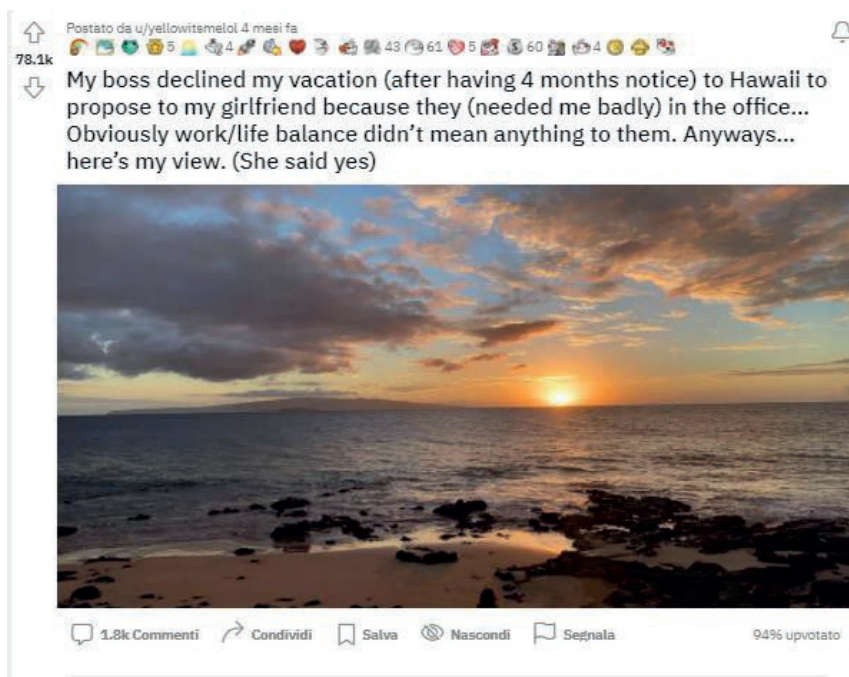


Fig. 11. «My boss declined my vacation...». Available at: https://www.reddit.com/r/antiwork/comments/r827fd/my_boss_declined_my_vacation_after_having_4/ (Last accessed 31st March 2023).

Overall, our analysis shows that the discussions in *r/antiwork* concurred to create an imaginary of work that places significant importance on emotional and physical well-being, which seems to acquire greater importance than one's career. While this is likely related to the types of jobs worked by the majority of *r/antiwork* users, whose occupations seem to be mostly concerned with the service economy, yet the link between work and the rewards it should give – the income it produces, the ability to plan the future, or one's career advancement – appears to be rather tenuous. Although economic stability is seen as central, for *r/antiwork* users one's work priorities are seem-

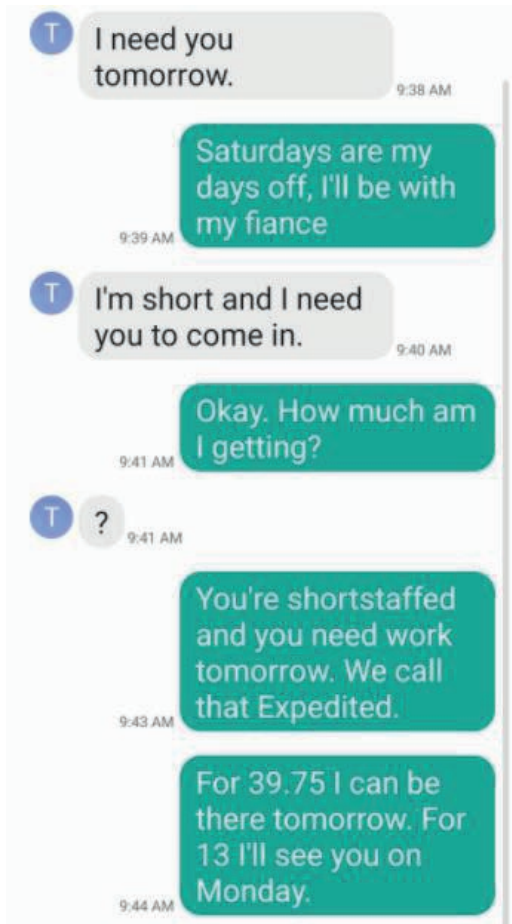


Fig. 12. «Between a friend and his manager at a small packing plant». Available at: https://www.reddit.com/r/antiwork/comments/qan0aa/between_a_friend_and_his_manager_at_a_small/ (Last accessed 31 March 2023).



Fig. 13. «The free market works both ways». Available at: https://www.reddit.com/r/antiwork/comments/rsuuu4/the_free_market_works_both_ways/ (Last accessed 31 March 2023).

ingly represented by, on the one hand, the activity itself – that is, being able to do something enjoyable, which provides fulfilment – and, on the other hand, by the necessity to preserve one's psychological well-being. Deciding what's best for an individual is presented by *r/antiwork* users in a rather rational way, evaluating costs and benefits, putting work in a broader mix of personal instances to take into account. Obviously, not everyone has the same possibilities to pursue such a goal, due to care responsibilities, class positionings, gender, race. While we do not have precise information concerning the socio-demographic condition of *r/antiwork* users, due to inherent limitations concerning digital research, yet these discussions arguably frame work in a way that seems to take some distance from the post-Fordist work ethic of work as self-realisation, although inevitably originating from this same cultural setting.

What characterises this strong focus on emotional wellbeing, in fact, is that it remains focused in the immediate present; there seems to be a *presentification* of work and its meaning that is in line with what Colombo and Rebughini (2019) describe as

a lifestyle focused on the present, on immanence, accompanied by a difficulty in imagining the future, typically observed among youth in Western countries [...], characterised by the paradoxical oscillation between fatalism and hyper-realism.



Fig. 14. «Amen, that's the spirit». Available at: https://www.reddit.com/r/antiwork/comments/rnpp8g/amen_thats_the_spirit/ (Last accessed 31 March 2023).

This, we contend, may represent the kernel of a new work ethic, which builds on the individualist work ethic of the post-Fordist (and neoliberal) era, based on self-realisation, passion and being true to oneself, and blends it with the perception of the unpredictability of the future, accelerated by the pandemic, and the impossibility – or the inability – to imagine one. We will discuss this last point in the conclusive section.

CONCLUSION

The article has discussed the emerging «anti-work» trend that followed the pandemic outbreak, which has found an important space of discussion in the *r/antiwork* subreddit. Based on the qualitative analysis of a sample of *r/antiwork* posts, we illustrated the main themes and narratives constituting these conversations. It may be argued that this set of conversations points in the direction of a growing collective movement of “resistance to work”, which embodies the crisis of the neoliberal ideal of self-realisation through work that has been affirmed as hegemonic since the end of the 20th century. While the pandemic has newly brought under question the promise of deriving meaning from work, discussions in *r/antiwork* suggest we may be confronted with the seeds of a new work ethic, which builds on the post-Fordist neoliberal conception of work, based on self-realisation, passion and being true to oneself, and blends it with the perception of the unpredictability of the future ignited by the pandemic, and the impossibility – or the inability – to imagine one. In the long term, the pandemic crisis may prove to be a turning point in the problematization of the relationship between identity and work and the role of the latter in society – alongside the rising question of technological automation and the risks concerning the development of artificial intelligence (in the workplace, and beyond). The anti-work trend emerges in the unexpected crack in history that has been the Covid -19 pandemic, opening a breach towards a much broader, and necessary, discussion on work and its meaning.

Not coincidentally, during the last decade in particular, family and work, the two basic structures in our society, have been under the spotlight of “culture wars” that divide among conservative and progressive views and, oftentimes, along generational axes. Younger generations – that we can infer *r/antiwork* users largely belong to –

have been argued to share a common perception to be falling out of history, to be living in a present with no way to anticipate the future. Thus, they tend towards a «politics of the present» as a form of agency, of critical and creative capability, and not only as a form of adaptation. As Colombo and Rebughini define it:

The necessity to govern, invent and reconfigure everyday life becomes a new form of 'politics of the present', as a technique of everyday life that young people learn to apply to cope with unpredictability, more than to predispose the future. [...] The present is no longer a fleeting moment, but the only horizon where relations and strategies can be organised (Rebughini, Colombo 2019: 7).

This perception seems to be corroborated by data: Chetty and colleagues (2017), who combined data from the U.S. Census and Current Population Survey and de-identified tax records to explore the rates of absolute mobility for different cohorts of Americans, note that rates of upward income mobility have fallen sharply over the past half century. On average, 92% of children born in 1940 grew up to earn more than their parents. In contrast, only 50% of children born in 1984 grew up to earn more than their parents. The rate has drifted downward since, but the Millennials cohort are the first to fall below 50% in the US. This might explain, at least in part, why *r/antiwork*'s participants are interested in renegotiating their expectation of economic stability, career growth, future planning through work, in favour of happiness in the present.

It is also no coincidence that, beyond the US, the main other setting where instances of "great resignation" have been recorded is Italy, where a long tradition of thinkers and political groups have taken work as their object of discussion, influenced by the diffusion and relevance of the Italian Communist Party in the past century. At the same time, work has taken many different meanings for different political strands, ranging from «work as a right» to «work as a social condition that allows for dignity» (Trentin 1997; Gramolati, Mari 2010), up to a «curse» or a «persecution». In particular, the return of antiwork trends in current times recalls operaismo's requests for a «liberation from work» (Pizzolato 2017), although it seems to add new nuances and interpretations to those ideas, intertwining them with accelerationism and the critical assessment of a changed socio-political context, also in light of technological development (Srnicek, Williams 2015).

Overall, empirical data about the anti-work trend and, in general, about the meaning of work in the post-pandemic scenario, remain sparse. More research is therefore required in the years to come to properly assess the actual extent and scope of the different movements of resistance to work, and on the redefinition of the work meaning and ethic. Yet, this article has evidenced how digital discussion groups, such as Reddit, may provide new, important spaces for workers' organisation and negotiation of new meanings of work. The study of these groups beyond digital media research will therefore be instrumental for harvesting key insights on the meaning and the importance attributed to work by workers, as many of them across the Western world seem to be no longer content to stick to old habits for the sake of an income, and ready to take to online spaces to voice their discontent.

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