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August 2022
APSA 2022 Conference Paper

Big-box Retail Workers, the Great Resignation, and the Anti-work Movement

Retail Workers and the Great Resignation

Somewhere in Oklahoma, not far from Walmart's Ozark heartland, a retired man from the east coast makes a point of visiting the local Walmart whenever he is in the area. However, in recent years his impression of Walmart has degraded: the store has been increasingly messy and disorganized, there are fewer and fewer employees around to help. On his most recent trip, he found a store manager and personally asked him what was behind the degrading quality. The manager ended up offering him a lengthy and heartfelt explanation: 'we can't find any new workers, and the workers we do find quit. There's not that much we can do it about, because frankly, people hate us.' This news came as quite a shock to the old man.

If however one were to check in on the transcript of the online community of r/walmart during this same year, one would find that some of the most popular threads include 'fuck Doug Mcmillan [current CEO of Walmart]', numerous reflections on quitting and 'quiet quitting', and a story about a Walmart worker who was recently left dead in a bathroom for hours. In April 2022, a post titled "wondering if this was written by a customer, an employee, or an employee promoted to customer?" documented a bathroom graffiti next to an official sign deterring shoplifting. It received over five hundred up-votes, with most commentators agreeing that it had been written by a fellow dissenting employee. The graffiti read: "The Waltons, owners of Walmart, make \$4 million every hour. They also make more \$ in one minutes than most of their employees make in an entire year. Just a fact for you to brew on this fine day... Who really is stealing from who?" Beyond appreciation for the sentiment, the

most popular comment read “I might have put in a good two or three days of actual work... I did my fair share of stealing from them.” Some commentators not only approved of these values, but went further in calling for a ‘French revolution style’ revolution to address inequality in the US today. It was soon cross-posted to r/antiwork, an anarchistic community which actively encourages quitting and subverting bad jobs, where it quickly garnered more than nine hundred up votes.

Within the worker narratives that I collected for my dissertation research, there were workers who avoided work tasks, stole merchandise, and deserted shifts. There were workers who formed fiery critiques of the Walmart corporation and of ‘capitalism’ in general. There were many big-box deserters who had since cut big-box stores out of their lives entirely, including a few ex-workers who had turned into local anti-corporate activists. The big-box retail workers whose stories I have collected help to link the transcript of dissent visible on r/walmart to the declining Oklahoma Walmart, helping us to better see the individuals who gradually came to ‘hate’ and avoid the largest corporation in their area.

For this research, I immersed myself in Walmart and Target stores in a post-industrial region of upstate New York. I grew up in this area and worked at both Walmart and Target; I have family and friends that are still working in retail throughout the region. In addition to this ethnographic profile, I gathered twenty-seven in-depth interviews with workers and ex-workers from these stores throughout the region. Within this set, every single worker described working in big-box retail as their ‘last’ choice or their ‘only’ choice. Almost all (~89%) of the workers described economic necessity as driving their ‘decision’, and around a third (~33%) described a specific desire to not work in retail before getting a job in the field. Almost all of the workers expressed criticisms about their jobs. Specifically, almost everyone (>85%) was bothered by the sadness and resistance that they encountered among their coworkers, and a large majority (~67%) developed some critiques about the nature of big-box corporate retail itself. All of the workers I heard from were aware of daily resistant practices throughout the retail workforce, primarily foot-dragging (~82%) and theft (~67%). Significantly for this paper’s topic, a

large majority (>80%) of the workers I spoke with had voluntarily quit their retail positions and felt that their lives had since improved in various ways. As a whole, this body of interviews paints a portrait of an average retail worker that is critical of the corporation that they work for, understands everyday resistance practices, and deserts retail work when they are able to.

During the final stages of this study in late 2021, a new mass phenomena presented itself: the Great Resignation. This term refers to the fact that more workers have voluntarily quit their jobs in this past year or so than at any other point in US history. Though the exact significance of this trend and its long-term effects are not yet entirely clear, it has generated a welcome public conversation on the power and the significance of worker desertion. Early on in the trend, Karin Kimbrough, the chief economist of the job website LinkedIn, defined for many what was happening:

“We can see what sectors people are quitting. Retail sectors and hospitality sectors. It may not just be worth it for some folks. And so in some cases people are quitting and they're not yet returning. They're taking a break. Americans are burnt out. I like to think of it as-- it's a, 'Take this job and shove it,' measure. It's just a sign of people saying, 'You know, I don't need this.'...It's as if that social contract of work is being rewritten, and right now the worker's holding the pen.”¹

On a fundamental level, the trend has caused many workers – and media pundits – to consider shifting attitudes on work itself: “We are inching closer and closer to new ways of thinking about labor, from reframing how we talk about ‘laziness’ to advocating for the four-day workweek, which suggests this may only be the beginning of a much-needed societal shift.”² Many ‘resigners’ have either not re-entered the workforce or have dramatically shifted their life paths away from prioritizing work. As one commentator suggested, referencing the American Transcendentalist tradition, “being a great resigner entails reclaiming life, or rather making a conscious choice about what to respect and where to tap meaning...The Great Resignation is a resignation from the industrial model, the brick-and-mortar

1 Whitaker, Bill. “The Great Resignation: Why More Americans are Quitting Their Jobs Than Ever Before” [60 Minutes](#), January 9, 2022.

2 Blackmon, Michael. “Americans are Overworked and Over Work” [Buzz Feed](#), October 18, 2021.

model, the office-factory model.”³ Even publications which are firmly directed towards managerial elite have been forced to consider the trend, with one major pamphlet recently noting “The ‘great resignation’ is more of a great reckoning: a shift in what workers value and what they’re looking for from their employer.”⁴

In terms of defining what specifically comprises this trend, MIT Sloan’s Management Review recently concluded that “high quit rates are most pronounced among front-line customer facing industries, such as apparel retail, fast food, and specialty retail.”⁵ CNBC’s accounting of the numbers suggested that during August 2021 “a total of 892,000 workers in the food service and accommodation industries left their jobs, while 721,000 retail workers departed.”⁶ Though we often hear narratives that focus on highly paid office and tech workers leaving their jobs as a part of this trend, as a whole the trend is overwhelmingly comprised of service workers in fast food and retail. Though the extent of this exodus in recent years is certainly noteworthy, this trend of mass desertions in retail is nothing new. In terms of the ubiquity of ‘resignation’, retail has long had the highest turnover rate of any job category in the US, both in terms of overall turnover and especially in terms of voluntary separation.⁷ The turnover rate for hourly retail jobs has consistently been over 60% for decades, and in 2018 that rate surged to an average over 80%.⁸ This rate suggests that at least two-thirds of retail workers choose to quit these jobs within a year. Big-box retail stores, in particular, average employee turnover rates that are over 75% per year.⁹ Though neither Walmart nor Target publicly disclose their own specific

3 Kagg, John and Jonathan van Belle. “What Thoreau can teach us about the Great Resignation” Fast Company, November 11, 2021.

4 Mercer Management Consulting. The Truth About What Employees Want. Marsh McLennan Publishers, 2021.

5 Sull, Donald, Charles Sull, and Ben Zweig. “Toxic Culture is Driving the Great Resignation” MIT Sloan Management Review January 11, 2022.

6 Cox, Jeff. “A record 4.3 million workers quit their jobs in August, led by food and retail industries” CNBC October 12, 2021.

7 Mercer. 2019 US Mercer Turnover Survey. New York: Marsh McLennan, 2019. Web.

8 Howland, Daphne. “Retailers are seeing high employee turnover” Retail Dive November 16, 2018. Web.; Wells, Megan. “Retail Turnover Rates in 2018” Daily Pay December 17, 2018. Web. This compares to sectors like corporate office employment who see turnover rates max out at around 15%.

9 Gustafson, Krystina. “Retail’s turnover a plus for economy but challenge for stores” CNBC, September 23, 2014.

turnover rates, on the Reddit community for Walmart employees (r/Walmart) many workers have posted individual store turnover rates over 90% in recent years.¹⁰ A recent thread in mid-2022 discussed several stores with turnover rates that were over 100%, with the highest reported rate at 197%.¹¹

Workers' Critiques of Corporations

Understanding *why* retail workers desert their jobs in such large numbers is important and frequently misunderstood. The presumption of economics – and most traditional union organizers – is that workers are primarily concerned about the field's desperately low pay rates. This presumption proves false however, both in existing research around the great resignation and in my own project. The aforementioned MIT study makes it clear that “a toxic corporate culture is by far the strongest predictor of industry-adjusted attrition and is 10 times more important than compensation in predicting turnover.”¹² Their definition of ‘toxic corporate culture’ includes lack of inclusion, disrespect from management, and perceptions of unethical behavior on the part of the corporation. Much more so than gripes with the specific pay rate, it was these kinds of moral critiques of the corporation that highlighted what my interviewees had to say as well.

In almost all of the workers' narratives that I heard, critical perspectives were developed and voiced. The single most common and significant complaint was the lack of loyalty that workers observed among their fellow workers, a major narrative element in a full twenty three (85%) of these narratives. As some workers noted themselves, misery is contagious. The misery that any worker feels upon encountering other retail workers – especially long-term retail workers – is usually experienced as the single worst part of retail work in general. Workers immediately noticed that their coworkers were

10 Hines, Nickolaus. “Workers Reveal What it’s Really Like to Work at Walmart” Mashed, October 21, 2020.

11 [bulldogjwhit295]. “Turnover rate” Reddit April 3, 2022;
https://www.reddit.com/r/walmart/comments/tvrvfm/turnover_rate/

12 Sull, Donald, Charles Sull, and Ben Zweig. “Toxic Culture is Driving the Great Resignation” MIT Sloan Management Review January 11, 2022.

visibly unhappy, that they drug their feet, that they purposefully stole and sabotaged processes, and that they often skipped shifts or deserted their jobs altogether.

The second most common critique (~67% of all workers) was even more telling: criticisms about the structure of the corporation itself. Not all of these critiques focused on exactly the same thing or worded their concerns in the same way, but they all pointed towards endemic structural issues about the corporation itself. Some workers suggested that the large corporate structure made it impossible to get to know other people at the job. Some claimed that the large corporate structure made them feel like a ‘machine’, like a ‘number’ or even like a ‘slave’ in the way it paid no attention to them as individuals. Other workers focused on the ‘greed’ of the corporation, which they saw through the ruthless paces it subjected workers too, the soaring profits earned by its owners, or the harsh punishments meted out against their own workers’ thefts. Many workers also focused on issues about the corporation that extended beyond their job itself: seeing corporations as the killers of local jobs and ‘mom and pop’ businesses, seeing them as agents of globalized supply chains that degrade local economies, or seeing them as aggressively marketing poor quality materials.

‘Nathan’¹³ put it well: “The person behind the corporation – truth be told, especially in a capitalist based government such as our own, which is also a republic – people just care about money. They don’t give a fuck about the little guy. For real, for real.” ‘Zahra’ summarized her view of corporate employment quite succinctly: “I was just a number in their mines. And I realized that that was all I was. And I want to be something more, more than just a number.” ‘Tanya’ explained “They don’t have mercy on their workers... Slavery, I don’t know, I only know what I see from black and white pictures, but they don’t have any respect for you, and you don’t get anything. They want to squeeze you and get the blood out of you.” ‘Zach’ described the prevailing feeling around his community: “They hated it. Mainly because Walmart is a very – they think that Walmart is this big

13 All floating first names from this point forward refer to specific interviewees, with their names anonymized.

frickin chain company, built to put all of these small mom and pop shops out of business. So a lot of my friends don't like it, including me." Teresa developed a particularly thorough critique of the corporation:

"The store as a whole I have no respect for. They talk a good line about concern for their employees, but they have very little....They were not fair, they did not listen. They were concerned for their own appearance, and they were concerned with the numbers your department came up with, they wanted to look like their department was doing well. But they rarely used anything but threats of 'you better get this done, or else!'... It was rare to find a human being there."

The most thoughtful critique of corporations came from Nathan after he quit jobs at both Target and Walmart. Nathan described his experience of working in retail as having been educational in that he learned "how corporations treat their employees" and how this reality conflicts with ideals about efficient corporations that he had been taught in the past. He explained his views:

"I definitely remember before the influx of corporate versus just mom and pop places, and a lot of those places having to shut down. Just because of branding, you know, advertising. Most people are definitely disappointed, because a lot of these people come from family businesses that were shut down because of Walmarts and Targets and Lowes and Home Depots. Definitely. I remember this hardware store that was open since I was a child, they had to shut down because they built a Home Depot right down the street."

Nathan combined his own experiences working at these stores with his broader understanding of the history of the region. He had seen local industries close completely, and he had seen most of the local small businesses that remained forced into closure by the construction of the new big-box strips. He could see that 'branding' and 'advertising' tricked people into frequenting these new stores, and he could see the 'reality' of how these stores actually operated from day to day at the employee level. Altogether, Nathan's experience of working in big-box retail had helped him to develop a thoughtful critique of these large corporations in general, as well as the "capitalist government" that sustains them. If my own narrative of retail work was included in this data set, it would closely mirror the learning experience that Nathan described here.

Though different workers pointed to different elements of the corporation to focus their critiques on, they all made pointed and thoughtful critiques about the nature of the corporation itself. Many of these critiques were structural, not believing that their issues were just temporary problems or that they were the fault of particular individuals. These workers display distinct moral frameworks that are at odds with market demands and the natures of the corporations that they have been forced to work for. With these political perspectives in mind, it is not difficult to understand why so many of these workers quit their jobs as soon as they were practically able to.

Workers' Perspectives on Quit Rates

Workers' explanations of their own eventual decision to quit usually began with ruminating on how common it was for their coworkers to quit. Around three quarters (~74%) of the workers I spoke with specifically brought up the issue of their store's endemic employee turnover problems. At times this turnover rate created the job position that they ended up landing, at other times this constant churn left their department or their store desperately short-staffed. Some workers chose to share their own thoughtful analyses of the situation causing the endemic turnover. Nathan mused that workers quit: "Just out of dissatisfaction, just not being satisfied. Management, higher management especially, they just all didn't care." David echoed this perspective, seeing endemic job dissatisfaction as the cause of the evident turnover. As he described conversations among coworkers, "Yeah, like F this place. I'm gonna try to get another job, I can't stand this place. I can't wait to get out of this place...the pay was low, the work was hard, and the gratefulness of the management wasn't there." Other workers similarly linked the elements of the low pay, the lack of respect from management, the availability of other jobs, and the ultimate decision to quit. When considering the many coworkers that she saw quit before her – including the more experienced worker that was supposed to be training her - Zahra meditated on the causes of these actions:

“They just seemed so unhappy. And no one wants to feel unhappy all the time, and that’s just what it appeared to me....The way they were treated by upper management. Even if you were to take off a day. Nobody cared. It was like you were just a number, there was nothing else but your ID number, and that was it. And if you can’t do your job, there’s someone else that will. So they were hiring and getting rid of people very often.”

These workers’ perspectives show that many workers were well aware of *why* their coworkers were continually deserting the job around them. They could see that their coworkers were unsatisfied with the corporate structure and its daily lack of respect, and that they wanted to move on to a more human environment when they were able to. Once again, the theme of the alienating nature of large corporations remains at the fore of worker understandings of what is wrong with the big-box workplace.

Two experienced workers offered particularly in-depth and thoughtful considerations of the turnover situation in big-box retail: Quentin and Paul. For Paul, a store manager at Walmart, confronting the ‘problem’ of turnover was certainly among his basic job tasks. A strong believer in the right to a second chance, Paul was committed to offering jobs to even those workers who had negative histories with previous jobs. However, the turnover at his store – and at Walmart more broadly – got so high that he was forced to reconsider this ‘open door’ hiring policy. When considering the question of what caused this seemingly unstoppable trend towards workers deserting his store, Paul mused

“This is not the best neighborhood, so I think just a lot of personal issues come into play. Just the outside stresses of day to day life – we’re not paying them enough to be rich on, we’re just trying to get them by.... So when you have their personal life effect their day to day job, in their mind they think ‘I could probably make this money elsewhere, it’s not that much money’.”

Workers know that the pay is low, they know that other comparable jobs exist, and they are struggling with their economic situations more generally. Precarious workers have difficult lives in America today, and the many difficulties that they confront during daily survival in a harsh capitalist economy often compound the problems and stresses that they face at work.¹⁴ Since Paul had to deal so closely with so

14 To note one example that offers compelling narrative ethnographies of such challenges: Desmond, Matthew. *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City*. New York: Broadway Books, 2017.

many workers – and the ultimate reasons why these workers chose to quit – he had a studied and broad perspective on this situation. While less informed coworkers at times speculated that it was moral failings like ‘laziness’ that caused their coworkers’ behavior, for a manager working closely with the individuals in question it was clear that many of the workers’ issues were coming from the structural economic challenges that low-wage workers confront outside of the workplace.¹⁵

After considering the evident disappearance of coworkers, Quentin, a retail worker with decades of reluctant experience, offered another broader analysis of the field: “I would hazard to guess it happens in all large retailers, big box stores – there’s just no way to get the loyalty they need to get people to always show up.” Quentin had found that Target’s problems stemmed from its large and impersonal corporate structure. This cold ‘task-driven’ style caused significant discontent among his coworkers, and he could see that it caused them to quit. He elaborated on common topics of discussion among coworkers: “Everyone was talking about looking for other places to work. They were all like enough already. I think people stay at Target because it’s great that they pay \$13.75 an hour, but you can go work at McDonalds for \$13.75 an hour.” This sense that one is both replaceable at Target and that one can easily replace their own job with a similar position leads to an attitude of unconcern towards holding any specific job. He continued, “Most people were like, ‘I’m just passing through’ ...There was just no sense of loyalty at all to the job. Op, they just decided to leave.” As noted previously, this ‘lack of loyalty’ and general discontent among coworkers was for many workers the worst part of the job experience, and it was for Quentin as well. Though he didn’t complain of specific short-staffing issues, this attitude of casual dismissal towards the workplace made it difficult to form social connections or to establish effective cooperation. Since Quentin had himself worked at many similar retail positions in the past, he was to a degree a part of the same trend – or he at least understood through experience the economic decisions faced by coworkers. Quentin’s experience with

15 Besteman, Catherine and Hugh Gusterson, eds. The Insecure American: How We Got Here and What We Should Do About It. Berkeley: University of California, 2009.

retail also enabled him to see that this trend was common across the field and that it was caused by the structures of large corporations themselves.

Since workers often enter into retail employment under coercive constraints and then experience further coercion in the workplace, the act of quitting is often experienced as a kind of a liberation from an unfree state. In the narratives I heard, workers did not feel that they ‘freely’ chose to enter into the work relationship, and they often did not feel free to leave it. Most workers framed the decision to quit in terms of ‘dignity’ or ‘respect’. In relation to an experience that is defined by impersonal disrespect, the act of quitting is a fundamental method for a worker to reassert their agency and to demand to be treated with respect by leaving the disrespecting workplace. The awareness workers’ gain about their coworkers frequent desertions along the way normalizes this narrative of escape. As Randy Hodson notes, “Fulfillment at work entails more than having a positive attitude towards a job. Dignity at work also requires a sense of fulfillment, growth and development – a realizations of one’s human potential.”¹⁶ Workers eventually decide that if they are going to ‘grow and develop’, it will have to be somewhere outside of the retail workplace. Though their complex value systems would not have been visible within Albert Hirschman’s reductive ‘Rational Choice’ economics orthodoxy,¹⁷ in the retail environment of today workers overwhelmingly pursue ‘exit’ for personal dignity instead of the ‘voice’ of reform or uncritical ‘loyalty’.¹⁸

Understanding the importance of this central focus on workers ‘reclaiming their dignity’ is essential for understanding political thought and activity among retail workers today. Adam Reich and Peter Bearman’s major study 2018 study of Walmart workers found that, on the largest statistical level, affronts to a sense of ‘dignity’ are what Walmart workers to find to be the worst part of their job

16 Hodson, Randy. *Dignity at Work*. New York: Cambridge University, 2001; p. 238.

17 There are many thorough refutations of Rational Choice Theory. To cite just a few key texts: Shapiro, Ian and Donald Green. *Pathologies of Rational Choice Theory: A Critique of Applications in Political Science*. New Haven: Yale, 1996. Bowles, Samuel and Herbert Gintis. *A Cooperative Species: Human Reciprocity and its Evolution*. Princeton: Princeton University, 2013. Bregman, Rutger. *Humankind: A Hopeful History*. New York: Little, Brown and Co., 2020.

18 Hirschman, Albert O. *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1970.

positions.¹⁹ Jan Ch. Karlsson’s major sociological study of workplaces showed that “the dignity of workers often conflicts with the economic demands of efficiency, productivity and profit.”²⁰ Hodson claims simply that “Without some minimum of control, without dignity, work becomes unbearable.”²¹ Workplace desertion is, for many, the only path available to even attempt to win back some sense of personal dignity. Even if the working conditions of job positions like retail stocker or cashier were to improve, it is questionable whether such service positions could ever supply people with an adequate sense of dignity, which remains the most important criteria in the words of workers themselves.

Quitting as a Moment of Liberation

Many worker narratives I heard placed a dramatic focus on the moment of quitting. Benjamín narrated his decision to quit the first time: “I just quit, I was like whatever, I fucking hate this job. They treated me like shit, and they’re lying to me all the time about hiring new people. Almost everybody quit in January. It took me up to June to quit.” Combining his considerations of the inherent disrespect of corporate structure with his observations about coworkers’ quitting, Benjamín defiantly quit and reclaimed some of his dignity. In fact, the background reason for this first act of quitting was that he had a looming medical procedure and he knew that he would not be granted time off, but this was just ‘one more straw’ of disrespect in a job that he already ‘fucking hated.’ When he decided to quit the same store a second time less than a year later, he committed to making his quitting final. He mused on the way that Walmart seemed to thrive on people who failed to follow through with their own intention to quit: “Walmarts and stores like that, they do great in neighborhoods, like suburban places. Because a lot of people just stay where they are born, that’s what happens: people just stay. They don’t quit. I stick more to my plan, I knew I was quitting, I was leaving. A lot of people don’t have that mindset.”

19 Riech, Adam and Peter Bearman. Working for Respect: Community and Conflict at Walmart. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018: pp. 104; 238.

20 Karlsson, Jan Ch. Organizational Misbehavior in the Workplace. New York: Palgrave, 2012; p. 5.

21 Hodson, Randy. Dignity at Work. New York: Cambridge University, 2001; p. 4.

Benjamín looked back on this determination very positively, because his life had improved significantly both socially and economically since he left Walmart behind. Still though, he had sympathy for others from his hometown who remained ‘stuck not quitting’.

Paul, the manager, was perhaps the most surprising quitting story that I heard, in part because manager positions are thought to be of a much greater value. As discussed above, Paul was critical of many elements of Walmart’s operations. Eventually these issues seemed to prove too much for him, and he suddenly and abruptly quit his position. He explained this surprising decision:

“They just kept on raising the expectations, without raising the compensation. So that wasn’t fair in my opinion. So I just flew out of town, with no plan at all.... I just didn’t want to stick around and wait...knowing that the current thing wasn’t going anywhere, it was them or me, so I just decided to leave.”

Paul could see that the work was very demanding and would continue to be very demanding, but there was simultaneously no chance that the company would come to pay him more or treat him with more respect. This led him to the ultimate conclusion that it was ‘either them or me’ - either he would allow the corporation to continue to exploit his labor for its benefit, or he would have to sever ties with the corporation altogether. At the time of our interview, he had made this decision very recently, and he had not yet decided what he was going to try to do for work next. In fact, he had not even firmly decided on which area he might choose to live in next. He had simply chosen to commit to a period of indeterminacy rather than the doomed fate of remaining with the corporation. Far from the economic-minded decisions that Rational Choice economists project on to all humans, Paul is one of a number of workers that chose to quit big-box retail without any economic benefits – and even with significant economic costs. Echoing the sentiments of the aforementioned commentators on ‘the great resignation’, striving for dignity and a sense of purpose was often more important in guiding a worker’s decision to quit.

In fact, at least seven workers that I spoke with quit when they were able to even though they did not immediately proceed into any other employment. Sarah, who self-liberated from foster care and started working as soon as she was legally able to, quit on her 18th birthday when a small inheritance became legally available to her. She did not look for a new job again until she had more or less exhausted these funds. Rebecca explained her decision to quit for schooling: “I was getting ready to graduate and I had to devote more time to studying, so I just kind of cut it. That was it, enough of this, I needed to focus on more important things, rather than money. I just cut it off because of school.” Instead of focusing on ‘money’, Rebecca chose to devote her full attention to her studies for her last year or so of college. As with Paul, David, Ellis, Sarah, and others, she remained outside of the workforce for at least a year after quitting. Nathan, who left his job initially to concentrate more on making music, explained his own decision to quit similarly: “I was just tired of the atmosphere, I knew I was better than working at Target. There was no point in continuing to go nowhere fast. There was no growth, no development, for a long term view, for my goals, versus just working there.” Since there was no possibility of serious long-term improvement at Target, Nathan echoed Paul’s claim that it was ‘them or me’. Nathan’s sense of reclaiming dignity is audible when he noted that, in retrospect, he thought of himself as “better than working at Target.”

For a couple of workers, the experience of quitting their retail jobs was truly profound. Logan indicated clearly that quitting his job at Walmart was “one of the best decisions I ever made in my life.” He further explained his reasons for quitting:

“I knew that there wasn’t any opportunity. There wasn’t really anything to look forward to, you’re not really moving towards anything.... The realization finally just came to me, if I don’t try to change something, nothing is going to change for me. What do I have to look forward to, maybe a couple dollar raise and then get let go? That was my thought process in leaving, even though it was one of my only options. I still figured it would be better for me to leave, and try and do something else.”

Like many of the other narratives just mentioned, Logan eventually also realized that it was ‘them or me.’ He made the difficult and brave decision to leave without any particular prospect for his next job

in mind, but since the job itself was ‘dead-end’ and ‘depressing’ he had come to see this exit as one of the best decisions he had ever made. Echoing this sentiment, Zahra also declared: “It was miserable, I really was miserable. I stuck it out, and then I was done, and it was the greatest day of my life.” Zahra did have a concrete idea about where else she would work – she already had at least one other job at the time. But the fact that the moment of quitting was experienced as ‘the greatest day of my life’ is quite notable nonetheless. Zahra found Target to treat to her like a number, her job there made her more miserable than anything else she had encountered in life. The ability to finally be free of this burden and its constraints was nothing less than wonderful. Though not every worker spoke about the quitting decision with quite this level of poetic gravity, the sentiment of a profound and positive shift attached to the act of quitting was quite common.

Beyond the narratives of quitting that I encountered in my own interviews, I also found a number of narratives that focused on the act of quitting a big-box retail store online. For example, in 2018 a 17 year old associate named Jackson Racicot at a Walmart near Edmonton in Canada made international headlines when he dramatically quit over the store’s loudspeaker system. Once he paged into the store’s booming announcement system, he began his speech: “Attention all shoppers, associates, and management, I would like to say to all of you today that nobody should work here — ever.”²² In the widely shared social media post that he made of the incident, one can hear people in store clapping and cheering at the end of his speech. As he explained in an interview with a local newspaper afterwards, “‘I got fed up,’ ...explaining he felt employees were not being treated well and others should know about it.”²³ In late 2020, another viral rant spread across international headlines, this time recognized as one more ‘quit video’ in a series extending back to Racicot’s rant. This time, Shana Blackwell of Lubbock, Texas signed on to the Walmart store intercom system to say “I hate

22 Shamsan, Jacob. “‘Nobody Should Work Here, Ever’: A 17-year-old Walmart Employee Dramatically Quit his Job over the Store’s Intercom, and Everybody Cheered” *Insider* December 14, 2018.

23 Martin, Nathan. “Teen Quits Job at Grand Prairie Walmart with Epic Rant” *Edmonton Journal* December 7, 2018.

being another number for some stupid corporation that doesn't appreciate me." Even more virally popular than Racicot's rant,²⁴ Blackwell's rant concluded with the dramatic lines: "This company treats their employees like shit...Fuck the managers, fuck this company, fuck this position...I fucking quit."²⁵

Since that time, threads about dramatic moments of quitting big-box retail jobs have proliferated. In 2021, both Beth McGrath and Megan Gray released similarly popular videos of quitting their big-box retail jobs. On r/Walmart, several workers even uploaded pictures to capture their moment of defiant quitting. One particularly popular post showcases a custom cake made by an employee, decorated with a picture of himself, the declarative statement 'I Quit', and several parting salutations. A brief scan of any major Reddit community for big-box store employees today – r/Walmart, r/Target, r/Lowes – undoubtedly yields one or more threads dedicated specifically to proud acts of quitting. Though none of the workers that I spoke with had personally quit in such a dramatic fashion, the popularity of these acts helps us to see how common the experience of quitting that we have been exploring truly is.

Post-retail Pathways Away from the Corporation

Since individuals pursued many different paths after making an exit from retail, it is difficult to summarize the directions that individuals lives took as a whole. Workers described *what* was better about their lives after big-box retail by focusing on criteria like purpose, morality, and human connection. For workers like Ellis, Nathan, and Tanya, leaving big-box retail behind them allowed them to grow in a variety of important realms of life outside of the workplace – even if they were not able to transcend class barriers themselves. Among the nine workers that focused primarily on the next jobs that they moved on to, the theme of personal growth being defined by meaningful connection and

24 While Racicot's video certainly got well over 200,000 views, Blackwell's video has been viewed well over 800,000 times.

25 Weinberg, Abigail and Shana Blackwell. "The Walmart Stocker Who Quit and Told her Bosses Off Over the Intercom" Mother Jones November 20, 2020.

moral results has come up again and again. Most of the workers in this category ended up moving to some kind of care work – care for the elderly, the disabled, the ill, etc. All identified that these caring labors were more meaningful than their time in retail had been.

Even more profound were the six narratives that focused on more meaningful and moral pursuits almost exclusively. It is worth considering, as one example, the post-retail path of Zach. Though Zach had been fired from Walmart, he quit his job at Target voluntarily. Years later, though he still struggled financially, he framed his jobs and pursuits very differently than he had before his time in retail. As he described, “I now just work for mom and pop shops, I no longer work for big corporate companies.” Having firmly decided that ‘big corporate companies’ were inherently unethical, Zach came to avoid them and to pursue other pathways. Beyond working for ‘mom and pop shops’, Zach also sporadically worked fixing houses that have been impacted by natural disasters. He found it very meaningful to be able to help people that were in need.

Beyond this pursuit, Zach had also developed an engaging new hobby: riding freight trains around the country. For an individual who had been born and raised in an area in which most people do not leave, being able to travel far and wide around the country held a great deal of excitement for him. Furthermore, doing so by means of illegal freight train riding was a point of further value for him, as he took great pride in his adventures and exploits along these journeys. Not only had Zach not pursued anything more economically gainful in his years after leaving retail, he had instead pursued a lifestyle that often took him out of the legal capitalist economy altogether.

Zach’s post-retail narrative of riding the rails and scorning corporations across the US helps us to begin to consider shifts in thoughts and beliefs within these desertion narratives. Beyond describing their successful post-retail transitions thus far, many workers also expressed feelings about what their dream job *would* be like. Not a single person described a dream job in retail, although a few workers didn’t seem to have a lot of personal dreams and aspirations to share. What workers did describe in

terms of ideal job positions often had to do with meaning and purpose, not with narrow economic interests. Just as Zach had a dream of being able to fix the homes of those in need for free, Rebecca had a similar dream of offering free medical care to those in need. Both were defined solely around the free benefits they could offer to others.

Other ideal jobs were described in similar ways. William perhaps put it most simply in defining his ideal job: “to help people...to make people’s lives better in some way.” Nathan, though much of his life was defined by significant economic hardship, imagined his ideal job as an ‘angel investor’ – a position that in his mind would allow him to freely give money to those who wanted to improve their lives with it. As in other worker narratives, the focus is in the act of giving and helping, not on personal greed. Even Michelle, the only worker I spoke with who actually sort of liked her job at Walmart, described her ideal job as being a teacher. She liked being able to help people and she liked kids, these were the best things about her current life working at Walmart after all. But as a teacher, she imagined, she could engage in helping people even more. Though not quite as altruistic in motives, Oscar also claimed that he would have liked to just devote himself entirely to the study of mathematics and physics forever. Engaging in the act of learning – and presumably contributing to future learning within the mathematics community – seemed like a much more important path to follow than anything which would be recognized by an economist as a ‘job’.

Many workers offered intriguing visions not just of their own future work arrangement, but by extension about possible political futures in general. Imani wanted to become a ‘wildlife rehabilitator’, a position which she described as “being like a Jane Goodall in person...a humanitarian.” Fiona’s ideal job also looked to a more natural future: “Going on an island and taking care of animals. Taking care of the island, and live off the land. I don’t want no cellphones, no computer. I don’t want to deal with anything but animals, and fish, and wildlife, that’s the kind of deal my job is.” Like many other workers I spoke with, Fiona was primarily interested in ‘taking care’ of other living things when defining her

ideal job position. However, Fiona also went further in declaring her disdain for ‘cellphones and computers,’ suggesting that her ideal ‘job’ position would be based on the kind of non-industrial ‘living off the land’ which has been the norm throughout most of human history. Echoing the non-industrial imagination of her coworkers, Teresa suggested that she would have liked to be some kind of a park ranger: caring for the forest and interacting very little with people. Sadly, Teresa’s previous career as an environmental scientist had been somewhat close to this situation, before the exigency of the capitalist economy forced her into a world of retail goods that she thoroughly despised. Fiona, Imani, and Teresa expressed desires to get away not just from Walmart but from industrial society in general, as their ideal futures were defined more by the act of caring for nature than by anything relating with money.

Many ex-worker looked back on their time in retail as traumatic, perhaps even akin to slavery. These ex-workers then continued to avoid the corporations in question, now realizing what a bad force they were in their community. Many of them even went on to become small-scale anti-corporate activists, educating and helping others in their community to avoid the corporation as well. Zach, for example, not only ‘no longer works for big corporate companies’, he also goes out of his way to tell others to avoid Walmart as well. After finishing her time with Target and concluding that she was ‘not too keen on the corporation’, Zahra also came to actively discourage others from working or shopping at the store. Teresa also indicated that she warns others to stay away from Walmart at all costs, though she had felt similarly even before she worked there. Gina admitted that she had on occasion used Walmart’s online ordering platform, but she echoed the sentiment that she had come to avoid the store itself as much as possible. Benjamín would ‘never’ work for Walmart again and he actively discouraged others from considering working there, also generally avoiding even shopping at the chain. The one exception was that he occasionally stopped in at the one his friends still worked at, where they would help him to get ‘special deals’ - which is to say the kinds of organized thefts that he had formerly participated in while he was employed there.

David had simply come to hate a corporation that he saw as treating its workers like ‘part-time slaves’. Anna, like Teresa, had very little to do with Walmart before starting her job there, so it was easy for her to avoid it after she quit. Tanya used her position of cycling through many other temporary job positions in the region to warn others to avoid Walmart. Like other workers in this category, Tanya was able to quickly and permanently cut Walmart out of her shopping activities as well. Fiona similarly indicated that she encourages others to keep away from Walmart, a practice which I witnessed myself when she introduced herself through public criticism of Walmart in a cafe. She was likewise proud of the fact that she came to cut Walmart out of her shopping habits as well, saying she now ate mostly ‘fresh produce’ from a different grocery store in the area. Fiona summarized her views with pride: “I have everything I need, I live simple. I don’t need it.” Oscar explained why he dislikes all big-box stores and how he never shops at them, condemning the ills of a ‘consumer culture’ producing ‘nondescript crap’. If he does need to buy something, which he tries to avoid in general, he tries to shop at thrift stores first and foremost. For these workers, working in big-box retail had taught them that they fundamentally ‘do not need’ institutions like Walmart and Target in their lives in general.

The Anti-work Movement and Resigning Retail Workers

The retail workers in my study, with their fiery critiques of capitalist workplaces and their eventual desertions, are clearly echoed in recent trends around ‘the great resignation’ and its associated cultural transcript. We can find more of this transcript by looking towards the aforementioned Reddit communities of dissenting workers. Two workers, Quentin and Fiona, specifically urged me to look into these dissenting Reddit communities. Both r/walmart and r/target are filled with daily transcripts of dissenting workers. Workers post daily absurdities, offer practical advice to each other, and above all openly critique the corporation. One of the most common kinds of daily threads is a ‘Quit post’: a post detailing the reasons why a specific worker has chosen to walk away from the company, generally

being showered with solidarity from other workers and ex-workers thereafter. A commonly used phrase in both communities is that a worker ‘promotes themselves to customer/guest’, implying that quitting and becoming a customer is obviously a move upwards. r/target even has a formal and frequently used tag called “I’m Promoting Myself to Guest”.

These forums for worker dissent have directly intersected with the ‘anti-work’ movement that has taken off around the related community Reddit community of r/antiwork. The community describes its mission: “A subreddit 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 want personal help with their own jobs/work-related struggles.”²⁶ Far from institutional reformism, the politics of this movement are decidedly anarchist and anti-capitalist. The group is openly associated with a number of anarchist groups, including r/anarchism (240k+ members) and the IWW. The group’s ‘Anti-work Library’ includes works on the abolition of work, communization, and working class revolution. Though it was originally founded in 2013, this group started growing exponentially in 2020, booming from 180,000 users in October 2020 to having more than 2.2 million active users today.²⁷ Reddit itself eventually admitted that “it was one of the most popular communities of 2021” and it remains one of the most popular communities on the web today.²⁸

Though this ‘movement’ isn’t the driving force behind the broader ‘resignation’ trend itself, it has been consistently looked to as showcasing the otherwise hidden discourse of the resigning workers that it has grown along with.²⁹ Following the concept of a ‘hidden transcript’ articulated by authors like James C Scott and Robin DG Kelley, it is important to take this ‘cultural transcript’ as a part of a serious and deliberate politics. Scott suggest that ‘everyday’ forms of resistance form a complex ‘hidden transcript’ that exists within an exploited community, even though they attempt to hide it from

26 “Antiwork” [Reddit](https://www.reddit.com/r/antiwork/), <https://www.reddit.com/r/antiwork/>

27 Mitchell, Alex. ““Anti-work’ threads on Reddit are fueling the Great Resignation” [New York Post](#), January 17, 2022.

28 Blum, Sam. “The ‘antiwork’ movement boomed on Reddit in 2021” [HR Brew](#), January 31, 2022.

29 Isbrucker, Asher. “Antiwork & the Great Resignation: Why workers are quitting their jobs” [Reuters](#) January 25, 2022.

their exploiters.³⁰ As Kelley put it: “despite appearances of consent, oppressed groups challenge those in power by constructing a ‘hidden transcript’, a dissident political culture that manifests itself in daily conversations, folklore, jokes, songs, and other cultural practices.”³¹ Though retail workers may appear to consent in front of their managers and the security cameras, the memes, jokes, and generally dissenting political content that is posted to these workers’ online communities speaks to the existence of a hidden transcript that runs deeply through this workforce.

Anti-work is an entirely concordant progression of the worker’s cultural transcript that my study has documented. Nathan was critical of “capitalist government”, Oscar was critical of a “consumer culture”, Zach was critical of “big frickin chain companies”, Quentin was critical of “big-box stores”, Benjamin was critical of “the system”, Others, like Teresa, Gina, Anna, David, Vanessa, and Tanya directed their criticisms at the nature of Walmart itself. Zahra directed her similar criticisms towards Target. Their lines of thinking suggested an exit *away* from these corporations, not the dream of reforming them. The way that many workers used frameworks of resistance to understand their coworkers foot-dragging, thefts, and desertions is also reminiscent of antiwork’s anarchist thinking.

To get a sense of what is discussed on a typical day on r/antiwork, it is worth noting the most popular post in the past year: “Quit my job last night, it was nice to be home to make the kids breakfast and take them to school today! Off to hunt for a new opportunity, wish me luck :)” The post garnered over 291,000 upvotes and well over 12,000 comments – in many ways it is representative of an average antiwork post. It comprises a screen capture of a text conversation with the poster’s ‘Boss’ in which the boss is scolding the poster for sitting on a stool during their shift. The worker is offended and mentions their high productivity in defense, the boss snaps back about “being respectful” and how speaking back is the wrong “type of behavior”. At this point the worker decides they are going to quit and signs off

30 Scott, James. Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts. New Haven: Yale, 1990; pgs. 8-14.

31 Kelley, Robin D.G. “We Are Not What We Seem: Rethinking Black Working Class Opposition in the Jim Crow South,” Journal of American History vol.80, no.1, 1993; p. 77.

with “No thanks. Have a good life.” Popular comments made fun of the ‘boss’ (surely sitting down at the time), offered support and solidarity for the worker, and lamented the broader capitalist structures of class inequality that treat workers “like slaves”. Posts like this appear pretty much every day in the community, often from a first time poster who is just at that moment quitting their job. In each case, anywhere from dozens to tens of thousands of fellow anti-workers rush to offer them support for their brave decision to ‘reclaim control’ and ‘assert dignity’. This discourse of workers ‘reclaiming their dignity’ through desertion echoes the sentiments we heard from authors like Hodson, Karlsson, Reich and Bearman.

One example of a post that directly crossed over from r/walmart to r/antiwork showcased a poster located in a worker space that read: “Things that don’t require effort: Being on time; Work Ethic; Effort; Body language; Doing extra; Being prepared; Attitude.” The poster was graffitied by a worker with the words “All of this requires EFFORT”, which the poster echoed. A particularly popular comment noted: “What it really means: things that don’t cost the company money”. Though the post garnered over 2,500 up votes in r/walmart, after it was cross posted to r/antiwork it received over 5,800. These daily struggles around how much ‘effort’ workers should or should not be exercising at work are reminiscent of the worker narratives I collected, many of which focused on foot-dragging and dispirited coworkers specifically.

Another example can be seen in a particularly popular post on r/target in June 2022 that detailed an individual who had suffered a great personal tragedy and was not granted any time off. He reacted by ‘promoting himself to guest’. His story received over two thousand up votes, dozens of comments saying ‘fuck target’, ‘target is disgusting’, ‘no one should ever shop there’, and a cross-posting to r/antiwork. Sometimes the crossover is less direct than a cross-posting. In April 2022, an (ex) Walmart worker posted on r/antiwork about being fired by Walmart for having a miscarriage while at work. The

post received over 35,000 upvotes and dozens of awards, with thousands of comments decrying Walmart's injustices.

In August 2022, the second most popular thread on r/walmart focused on the term 'quiet quitting', suggesting that it was a new 'Gen Z' term for simply "not being taken advantage of". With over 1,600 up-votes, the hundreds of comments echoed agreement that 'quit quitting' was a good strategy at Walmart – at least until full desertion becomes an option. That same month, the second most popular post on r/target focused on an employee whiteboard with a variety of political messages on it. Messages critiqued the wealth of Target's CEO, decried 'unchecked corporate greed', encouraged unionization, and encouraged workers to 'act their wage'. This last term, 'act your wage', is immensely popular throughout the Anti-work community. Whether it is called 'quit quitting', 'acting your wage', or something else, the crossover in thinking about workplace struggle and worker agency runs deeply throughout each of these communities. These transcripts of dissent, emerging regularly from the most popular internet forums for both Walmart and Target workers, suggest that at least some workers make the specific progression from their dissent against their big-box retail job into broader critiques of capitalist work arrangements. These progressions of Reddit posts can document this process in real time.

Conclusion: The Climate Crisis and the Destitution of Big-box Retail

The long term trajectory of retail worker resignation and the anti-work movement is unclear, but there are reasons to consider it appropriate to the current political context. Big-box retail institutions are not worth attempting to reform, or even to bring under worker control. As with most global corporations, they are firmly based on hierarchical and unequal structures in their organization of humans.³² Even more dire, they are based on entirely unsustainable material practices in terms of their

³² Human Rights Watch Staff. Discounting Rights: Wal-mart's Violation of US Workers' Right to Freedom of Association. New York: Human Rights Watch, vol. 19 no. 2, 2007.

global supply chains.³³ Both Walmart and Target do of course pay some lip-service towards ‘sustainability initiatives’ in their corporate propaganda, but these minor accommodations do little to mitigate the extreme unsustainability of the big-box retail model itself. A thorough critique of Walmart’s ‘greenwashing’ practices in recent years concluded:

“The environmental consequences of Walmart’s ongoing growth far out-weigh the modest reductions in resource use that the company has made. Walmart’s business model and its future success depend on further accelerating the cycle of consumption, industrializing our food supply, and exacerbating sprawl. It’s not just Walmart, but also Target, Home Depot, and other big chains. The big-box model is ‘efficient’ only to the degree that many of its costs are borne by the planet and the public at large. As these retailers take over an ever-larger share of the economy, more sustainable enterprises and systems of production and distribution are squeezed out.”³⁴

These corporations’ very existence – the ‘environment’ that they comprise as part of how people meet basic daily needs in our current capitalist model – is what cannot continue. They are based around unnecessary throw-away consumption of plastics, unsustainable industrial food production, and endlessly expanding global supply chains that consume ever more of the planet’s dwindling resources.³⁵ Indeed, many workers I heard from identified these same issues in their own critiques. Every existing Walmart supercenter makes a large number of more sustainable and locally oriented practices – from subsistence farming to bartering – untenable as long as it stands.³⁶ There is no ‘good’ version of Walmart that could be sought out, it is only a question of moving away from this institution as a whole.³⁷

The unsustainable and undesirable nature of retail corporations reflects the broader ecological condition our society finds itself in today. The old institutional reformist model is increasingly irrelevant in the face of the escalating climate catastrophe, resource depletion, and the urgent need to

33 Johansson, Erin. Wal-Mart: Rolling Back Workers’ Wages, Rights, and the American Dream. American Rights at Work, 2005.

34 Mitchell, Stacy. Walmart’s Greenwash: How the company’s much-publicized sustainability campaign falls short, while its relentless growth devastates the environment. Portland, ME: Institute for Local Self-Reliance, 2012; p. 25.

35 Mitchell, Walmart’s Greenwash, p. 7.

36 Mitchell, Walmart’s Greenwash, p. 21.

37 Mitchell, Stacy. Big-box Swindle. Boston: Beacon Press, 2007.

move away from the economic growth model that unsustainable big-box retail corporations depend on. Our world is a closed system with a finite quantity of expendable resources and a finite capacity to absorb industrial pollution, a fact which has been scientifically established for decades.³⁸ Addressing a United Nations summit on the climate catastrophe in 2019, famed Swedish teenager Greta Thunberg summarized the views of the millions of young people who had recently taken to the streets in the global Fridays for Future movement: “People are suffering. People are dying. Entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are in the beginning of a mass extinction, and all you can talk about is money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth. How dare you!”³⁹

Roy Scranton similarly summarizes the threat situation faced by our current economic model realistically: “We face the immanent collapse of agricultural, shipping, and energy networks upon which the global economy depends, a large-scale die-off in the biosphere that’s already well under way, and our own possible extinction as a species.”⁴⁰ In sum, “global capitalist civilization as we know it is already over” in that we know as scientific fact that economic growth cannot continue.⁴¹ Scranton, an Iraq war veteran, takes seriously the risk of death posed by the escalating climate crisis in a way that perhaps only a survivor of past trauma can.⁴² Though individual death is certainly a part of this risk, the ‘death’ in question is much broader: “we have to learn how to die not as individuals, but as a civilization.”⁴³ Scranton offers some vision about what this learning process might look like:

“We’re going to need new ideas. We’re going to need new myths and new stories, a new conceptual understanding of reality, and a new relationship to the deep polyglot traditions of human culture that carbon-based capitalism has vitiated through commodification and assimilation. Over and against

38 Boulding, Kenneth. “The Economics of the Coming Spaceship Earth” Environmental Quality in a Growing Economy ed. H. Jarrett. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1966.

39 Thunberg, Greta. “Transcript: Greta Thunberg’s Speech at the U.N. Climate Action Summit.” NPR. September 23, 2019.

40 Scranton, Roy. Learning to Die in the Anthropocene. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2015; p. 19.

41 Scranton, Learning to Die, p. 24.

42 Scranton, Learning to Die, pgs. 14-15.

43 Scranton, Learning to Die, p. 21.

capitalism, we will need a new way of thinking our collective existence. We need a new vision of who ‘we’ are.”⁴⁴

In short, “learning to die as a civilization means letting go of this particular way of life and its ideas of identity, freedom, success, and progress.”⁴⁵

It is in this political context that we can perhaps best appreciate the political stances of the retail workers that this study has been focusing on. The approach of economic reformism is premised on the presumption that a growing economy can exist and will continue to exist. In fact, union struggle itself can be seen as tying workers *even more strongly* to the idea of economic growth. As Louis Althusser once described, reformist union struggle ultimately fights in defense of a particular ‘profession’, and hence by extension in defense of the national capitalist economy in which that profession exists.⁴⁶ By contrast, we should consider big-box retail deserters in the context of arguments made by anarchists like James Scott: political actors can effectively turn towards evasion, mobility, and experimentation with social structure for the purpose of avoiding states and their systems of exploitation.⁴⁷

A worker who does not take her job seriously and deserts it when she is able to might think of herself alternatively as a farmer, as a mother, and as a part of a larger ecosystem. Many workers I heard from did so: including Michelle who thought of herself as a mother, Anna who thought of herself as a gardener, or Hakeem who thought himself as a caregiver. Some ex-workers, like Teresa or Fiona or Imani, thought of themselves as moving away from modern society altogether. The direction these ex-workers have traveled in echoes the political project called for by ecofeminist authors Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva, who have argued for “the substitution of money or commodity relationships by such principles as reciprocity, mutuality, solidarity, reliability, sharing and caring, respect for the individual and responsibility for the ‘whole.’”⁴⁸ They argue for a move away from the exploitative logic of

44 Scranton, *Learning to Die*, p. 19.

45 Scranton, *Learning to Die*, p. 24.

46 Althusser, Louis. *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*. Trans. G.M. Goshgarin. New York: Verso, 2014; p. 116.

47 Scott, James C. *The Art of Not Being Governed*. New Haven: Yale, 2009; p. x.

48 Mies, Maria and Vandana Shiva. *Ecofeminism: Women, Culture, Nature*. New York: Zed Books, 1993; p. 319.

economy and corporations and towards subsistence, care, and community. Silvia Federici has similarly suggested that the most meaningful political activity today is that which moves us towards an ecological and political commons, not those activities which attempt to prop up the hierarchy, racism, and sexism of the capitalist state a little longer⁴⁹. Unlike committed industrial union activists, at least some of the deserting workers considered here can be seen moving in these new directions.

A retail worker might, like Nathan or Benjamín or Zach, come to think of himself as resistant against capitalist corporations in general. Or, more fundamentally, she might have thoughts similar to those of Zahra, Paul, and David in thinking of herself as being worth more than being treated like a number. We see in these narratives the development of workers' moral economy, of value systems that can point in new and different directions from the control of corporations.⁵⁰ Their situation is reminiscent of what Global South scholars Gustavo Esteva and Madhu Suri Prakash have referred to as "grassroots post-modernism": actors who are actively creating new worlds and new value systems that go beyond the doomed values of the capitalist 'modernity', often due to being excluded from having a gainful life within the current 'modern' order.⁵¹ Though these workers were told that they had to accept the impersonal exploitation of a global corporation, they found methods to escape and to focus more on 'post-modernity' moral values like respect, community, and the natural world.

In recent years, The Invisible Committee has articulated fresh political concepts for the era of resource exhaustion and industrial decline. In contrast to the 'constituent politics' that highlights the creation and reform of organizations, they advocate for the relevance of 'destituent politics' for our current political moment:

49 Federici, Silvia. "Marxism, Feminism, and the Commons" in Re-Enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons. Oakland: PM Press, 2019; pgs. 151-174.

50 Thompson, E.P. Customs in Common. New York: New Press, 1991; p. 188.

51 Esteva, Gustavo and Madhu Suri Prakash. Grassroots Post-modernism. London: Zed Books, 1998 [2014]; p. 2.

“Whereas constituent logic crashes against the power apparatus it means to take control of, a destituent potential is concerned instead with escaping from it, with removing any hold on it which the apparatus might have. Its characteristic gesture is exiting, just as the typical constituent gesture is taking by storm. In terms of destituent logic, the struggle against state and capital is valuable first of all for the exit from capitalist normality that is experienced therein, for the desertion from the crappy relations with oneself, others, and the world under capitalism.”⁵²

Destituent struggle does not seek to confront the powerful directly, much less to become them. Instead it is a way of understanding how regular people might choose to ‘exit’ from poisonous relations with powerful institutions altogether, echoing Scott and the anarchist tradition. Practicing deception and exit can enable people to desert the ‘crappy social relations’ of capitalism in pursuit of new and more fulfilling ways of living. A number of worker narratives that we heard from followed this pattern: they deserted the crappy life of big-box retail for more meaningful engagements with community, nature, and expression.

In sharp contrast with the Marxist dreams of a pre-climate science era, the Committee’s theory of ‘destituent’ politics does not see any point in seizing or reforming the infrastructure of industrial capitalism. They describe the situation:

“capital has taken hold of every detail and every dimension of existence...in doing so, it has reduced to very little the share of things in this world that one might want to reappropriate. Who would wish to reappropriate nuclear power plants, Amazon’s warehouses, the expressways, ad agencies, high-speed trains, La Defense business complex, auditing firms, nanotechnologies, supermarkets and their poisonous merchandise? Who imagines a people’s takeover of industrial farming operations where a single man plows 400 hectares of eroded ground at the wheel of his megatractor piloted via satellite? No one with any sense.”⁵³

Big-box stores, more or less the same as the ‘supermarkets’ referenced in Committee thinking, are simply not worth seizing. Any sustainable model of human civilization in the future will need to rely on fundamentally different means to produce and distribute goods. The actions of a worker who undermines their own workplace and then moves on from it makes political sense in this perspective, as there is nothing intrinsic to these workplaces that is worth struggling *for*.

52 Invisible Committee, *The Now*. Trans. Robert Hurley. South Pasadena: Semiotext(e), 2017; p.79.

53 Invisible Committee, *Now*, p. 85.

Since retail work is the largest sector among the US working class and Walmart is (still) the nation's largest employer, understanding the political perspectives and daily political activities of retail workers contributes towards our understanding of the US working class in general. While it remains true that retail work is the most common kind of job in America today, the experience of *quitting* a job in retail is even more common. Within the trend of the recent 'great resignation', this truth is clearer than ever. The narratives of desertion that my project has captured give us important clues about the beliefs and desires of these workers and ex-workers, as do significant communities of dissent like [r/walmart](#) or [r/antiwork](#). To continue to cling to the dream of loyal workers and gradual union reform campaigns is not only to fail to grasp our current ecological reality, perhaps more importantly it is to ignore the discourses of dissent that we can find among so many workers today. If we are to begin to understand what our society moving away from capitalist structures could concretely look like, these workers and their transcripts of dissent are an essential place to start.