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Journal Mandate: Established in 1977 *Alternate Routes* is committed to creating outlets for critical social research and interdisciplinary inquiry. *Alternate Routes* works closely with scholars, labour and community researchers to promote the publication of heterodox critical social research, as well as provocative and progressive analyses that may not find a forum in conventional venues. *Alternate Routes* seeks to be a public academic journal and encourages works that advance or challenge theoretical, historical and contemporary socio-political, economic and cultural issues. In addition to full-length articles, we welcome review essays sparked by previously published material, interviews, commentaries, book reviews as well as poetry, drawings and photo-essays.

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The Paradox of Low-Wage Work

Carlo Fanelli¹ and John Shields²

“The worker becomes all the poorer the more wealth he produces, the more his production increases in power and size. The worker becomes an ever cheaper commodity the more commodities he creates. The devaluation of the world of men is in direct proportion to the increasing value of the world of things. Labor produces not only commodities; it produces itself and the worker as a commodity – and this at the same rate at which it produces commodities in general.”

“It is true that labour produces for the rich wonderful things – but for the worker it produces privation. It produces palaces – but for the worker, hovels. It produces beauty – but for the worker, deformity. It replaces labor by machines, but it throws one section of the workers back into barbarous types of labor and it turns the other section into a machine. It produces intelligence – but for the worker, stupidity, cretinism.” – Marx, 1844

In the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx wrote of work and labour as central to human existence. Whereas classical political economy assumed but did not explain the existence of private property, Marx took the estrangement of labour under capitalist social relations as his starting point. The process of alienation was intersectional and multifaceted, including: the estrangement of working people from the products of their labour and the work process itself; from nature and conscious life activity; and from other persons. For Marx, then, the estrangement of labour simultaneously established the conditions for capital’s gain at the expense of labour’s pain: “Accumulation of wealth at one pole is, therefore, at the same time accumulation of misery, agony of toil, slavery, ignorance, brutality, mental degradation, at the opposite pole, i.e., on the side of the class that produces its own product in the form of capital.” Contrary to classical political economy’s conflation of

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capitalism with exchange (i.e. distribution or “the market”), the root causes of alienation resided in the social relations of production, and the instituted compulsions of capital, wherein relations of domination and subordination ruled.

The conditions of particularly harsh worker exploitation which Marx spoke to were from an earlier phase of *laissez faire* capitalism, a condition that to some considerable degree appeared to be mitigated in the developed West during the Keynesian golden era. However, neoliberal capitalism which took hold beginning in the 1980s has once again brought to the fore a more social Darwinian approach to capital accumulation rooted in a logic that celebrates the growth of deep inequality, aggressive social exclusion and a tolerance for the widespread existence of the working poor. Sharing parallels with the processes so vividly described by Marx long ago, contributors to this volume of *Alternate Routes* critically deconstruct the paradox of low wage work under neoliberal capitalism.

Contemporary neoliberal capitalism has championed the rollback of Keynesian-based social policies, de-unionization, labour market restructuring, the individualization of risk, and the promotion of falling living standards for vast sections of the working population. A new age of intensified insecurity and widening socio-economic risks have been downloaded onto individuals and families. The growth of employment precarity and the need for a living wage by large sections of the population rest at the heart of this volume. Using quantitative and qualitative approaches and informed by critical conceptual analysis the reader is treated to a detailed examination of the lived experiences and the broader implications of precarity and low wage work. The validity of Marx’s insights regarding class exploitation and the degradation of work, as captured in the passages quoted above, for the contemporary period of neoliberal capitalism are uncovered in the essays that follow.

The issues and concerns explored here were first raised in a series of panels explored at the conference *Labour Pains, Capital Gains: The Paradox of Low-Wage, No-Wage Work*, which was held at Ryerson University on March 27, 2015.³ We would like to thank the Centre for Labour Management Relations and its Director, Gerald Hunt, for their tremendous support without which both the conference and this volume would not have been possible. Thanks are also due to the Department of Politics and Public Administration, and the Office of the Dean at the Faculty of Arts, Ryerson University, for their continued support.

³ These presentations are available for viewing at <http://www.alternateroutes.ca/index.php/ar/pages/view/Labour%20Pains>

We would like to welcome Henry Giroux, Jamie Peck and Sorpong Peou to *Alternate Routes*' Editorial Advisory Committee, and Jeff Noonan as new Interventions editor. A warm thank you and well wishes to Priscillia Lefebvre who has served in a number of roles since 2010, Jordy Cummings who served as interventions editor since 2014, and Rebecca Schein who served as book reviews co-editor for this volume, for their time and commitment to critical social research as they move on to new avenues of their work. Thank you also to Pance Stojkovski for recording and editing conference presentations. Finally, we wish to express our gratitude to authors and reviewers who worked under extremely tight deadlines in order to meet our publishing schedule.

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