Is "More Jobs" Sustainable or Necessary in the Post-Peak Oil World?

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What was required for a growing economy, that was supposed to uplift all of modern humanity, is at root a false notion for the manipulated public: the overwhelming majority must work for others to enrich the few so that all of society benefits through unlimited expansion. This problematic profit-scheme is failing to hold up, what with general economic uncertainty on the rise (apart from “Hope”) and the advanced depletion of easily extracted, cheap oil.

To put even greater pressure on our bankrupt (in so many ways) system, the ecological crisis is knocking at the door ever more threateningly, demanding not mere policy adjustments but a radically different approach to treating the Earth and all its people and species.

The system for unrestrained greed would have long ago been abolished as unnecessary and unfair but for the population-management advantage of divide-and-conquer competition. One can seek refuge with, “I’m not greedy, I just want a middle class life and I work hard for it.” This dream is less and less tenable for the majority. One may as well espouse peace while unquestioningly buying increasingly subsidized gasoline, as profitable wars recur or rage on -- even though the oil will be running out.

Employment has pay-offs but they are unreliable and uneven, depending how easily satisfied a regimented individual or family chooses to be. Ultimately we have seen that society's approval of greed is shown by the legal funneling of unrestricted wealth to the influential top. However, we refuse to stop feeding the process when we retain our highest faith in more laws, elections and “Hope.” Demanding more jobs as a solution to our problems is unimaginative and only exacerbates a fatally flawed system. Look around, is it getting better? Have brakes been applied to truly gross profit-taking and the corruption that goes with it? Hardly.

The emperor has no clothes -- nor adequate oil to keep the mass materialist illusion going. Calling for more employment is a beggar's cry when the stores of food are low and the promise of prosperity is empty.

Even if the current dismal state of affairs and blindly clinging to the status quo were somehow acceptable, a return to growth to create improved lives for everyone willing to work (or able to find it) is no longer feasible.

With the departure of cheap, abundant energy upon the peaking of oil extraction -- the engine of the economy's expansion -- work as we know it is going by the wayside. This will bring about liberation for a high proportion of the population, if not everyone, and more importantly see our natural environment become our partner rather than exploited victim. However, for this to take place while we still have a chance to salvage what we need for a livable planet, collapse of the corporate economy -- the global-warming machine -- must be embraced and accelerated. For there is a better way to live, starting with survival.

The not so illustrious history of work

The dominance of work, like so many aspects of Western Civilization and its economy, is seldom discussed openly beyond disorganized griping. For we are asked as good citizens to not question the idea of work. Indeed, we are required not to question it. Jobs are sacrosanct. However, that belief may be part of the old paradigm that is being ushered out as the pace of change keeps up.

Hard work has been relatively recently been enshrined as a natural obligation, while it conveniently maintains the state and its ruling elite. For the vast majority of people, work invariably confers no equity stake in the enterprise or product. Whether it's called civic participation or a right, or whether it is as Nazi Germany depended on it (Arbeit), work as we know it is an acquired trait and a recent phenomenon in human experience -- that is, when it is a form of evolved slavery for the masses of people. Perhaps 99% of our time on Earth has been as hunter–gatherers, habitually spending on average much less time on what could be called work, compared to members of agricultural and industrial societies.

By recognizing work as forced, and not particularly kind for the body, spirit, or the Earth, we can regard work as linked to overcrowding -- or overpopulation. A large, hard-working population produces surpluses, fueling more population, especially with technology to help. We are now overdosed on technology applied regardless of consequences. Doing more work isn't going to help if it's to cater to endless growth or to further technology for its own sake. It's like digging a hole deeper for no good purpose. To differentiate between such work and purposeful, voluntary activity that benefits the whole community, we can create a designation that means the work is vital and widely appreciated: “Chosen Work.” Chork, anyone?

The use of machines and the production and consumption of mined and refined, toxic materials can be summed up as an unnatural and oppressive punishment: carried out for the generation of others' vast profit. The Industrial Age saw a hard fight for basic human rights to be recognized, thanks largely to the union movement. But these gains were not completely fulfilled, and work was still barely questioned. Technology was supposed to save time and deliver us from drudgery, but it turned out to cost jobs and take up more of our time at the expense of human interaction and communion with nature. When a labor movement only takes the brutal edge off overwork, there are still a lot of struggling workers or former workers with basic needs unmet. Unfortunately, the U.S., among other places, does not utilize resources such as tax funds in such a way for most people to enjoy decent social services. Rebudgeting the funded priorities would take care of almost all our problems, if this could really be attempted, except for the fact that the generating of surpluses engenders wealth, greed and ecological destruction.

Living first, working second

Work as a vestige of slavery does not mean any enterprise or business must automatically involve exploitation and pollution. Between friends and neighbors – in a close community – there can be more material reward for the ring leader who may have conceived of the enterprise and who put in the most work. This would be Voluntary Work or Chosen Work for all concerned, as opposed to Desperate Work.

Despite industrial society’s imperative to work our lives away, the involuntary-unemployed level is at a near historic high. There has indeed been hardship caused by the "Great Recession." But we must question solutions that offer only more of the same, even if the "solutions" are from critics of the White House and Wall Street. Aside from the impossibility of constant economic expansion and full employment in an overpopulated, energy-constrained world, how we live our lives deserves to be re-evaluated: as if freedom and more efficient, sensible and ecological ways of living are up and running right now.

Workers are really trying to obtain the necessities of life and to enjoy a bit of leisure. They aren't truly in need of devoting the best part of their lives at machines or in cubicles or behind the fast–food counters. Instead they want and need to secure their food, shelter, clothing and heat for survival and a decent life. As parents they almost all would like to be the ones to raise their children rather than see it done by institutions or day care mills (which are costly). Many workers would like not to have to put in time at a job in order to pay for a car habit mainly for getting to work. A labor union, even a scrappy and gutsy one, isn't likely to buck the model of isolating family members or take a stand against car culture -- let alone question employment in favor of a local-economy, mutual-aid barter society, a.k.a. the gifting economy.

The dollars for one's basic "living cost" aren't themselves the point of today's work, but rather they are to obtain what the dollars buy. Traditional societies obtained the essentials from nature and from communal cooperation. Considering climate destabilization and the potential for greater global devastation from war, the society we need must center on the community's providing essentials from the local ecosystem. For that to work, egalitarian social structures are necessary. They involve a different kind of work -- shall we say, living -- that is tribal or ecovillage living, trade via sailboats, and all manner of collective organizing

Trying to achieve freedom from the employment-syndrome and the capitalists' grip is not a pipe dream. For if enough people do not buy corporate items, and money is kept in the local economy, this can demolish the corporatocracy and put infamous greed into the ashcan of history. Localism also creates community relationships to co–produce and trade for the food, shelter, clothing and heat that people need. If this strategy is called unrealistic, because people will "always" buy distantly made corporate products or accept any job-job, that doesn't wash — for petrocollapse will soon take down consumerism and the high-entropy employers as well as bring about bioregional, community-oriented economics.

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Unlucky to have a job: Prospects for social change amidst the culture of work, by Jan Lundberg, 18 June 2007, Culture Change Letter #162 (expanded on June 27, 2007)