Democracy at Work

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No matter what we do—whether it's flipping burgers, harvesting crops, or bringing babies into the world—work requires artistry and finesse. After a decade of interviewing people about their jobs and their relationship to work, I can say with certainty that "unskilled labor" is a misnomer. But the phrase's inaccuracy doesn't prevent it from carrying significant weight. It has been used to determine which immigrants are eligible for visas to work in the U.S. to rationalize low wages and to limit collective bargaining rights. But why, in a democracy, don't all people, regardless of their jobs, deserve freedom of movement, freedom from exploitation, and a living wage?

Those are the questions at the heart of Wage/Working, a project I started with my collaborator Laura Hadden over a decade ago. We set out to interrogate the relationship between skill and wage, and to make the vast gap between high-income and low-income earners tangible in a new way. We wanted to celebrate workers' ingenuity while simultaneously questioning the monetary value assigned to certain kinds of labor.

Laura and I met in the Integrated Media Arts MFA program at Hunter College and bonded over our shared background working as public radio reporters. We'd come to graduate school to push our creative practice beyond journalism and documentary into the realm of interactive art and sound installation. We also shared a love for oral history and the transformative power of listening practiced by oral historians like Studs Terkel and radio producers like The Kitchen Sisters. Our goal was to take recorded interviews and turn them into something people could interact with and experience. It was out of those conversations that Wage/Working was born.

Before I get into the mechanics of the project, it feels important to note that my interest in the artistry and skill people bring to their jobs was motivated by my years doing public health outreach with migrant and seasonal farmworkers. Every August, for nearly a decade,

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I'd go to Maine to help run a mobile clinic during the wild blueberry harvest. Every night of the one-month harvest, I drove a mobile clinic out to the temporary housing where farmworkers lived in rustic cabins alongside the blueberry fields. There we opened the doors to a converted RV and offered basic healthcare. I saw firsthand the wear and tear on farmworkers' bodies. During the day, I returned to the fields to pick up workers who needed follow-up appointments at brick-and-mortar clinics and hospitals where a higher level of care was available than what the mobile clinic could provide. I talked with workers, on those car rides and sitting in clinic waiting rooms, about how they managed to do grueling farm labor day after day.

Wild blueberries, unlike high-bush blueberries, grow close to the ground. Workers bend over and use a heavy metal rake with long tines to harvest hundreds of blueberries at the same time into a plastic bin. Workers must carry the full bins—weighing 25 pounds—to roads surrounding the fields to be loaded onto trucks. They repeat this process hundreds of times each day. On top of being bent over constantly and all the heavy lifting, the workers are exposed to the sun and elements all day. Because workers are paid by the box, there's little incentive to take a break. At the time the rate for a 25-pound box was between $2.50 and $3. How could it be that workers were paid 10 cents a pound when a one-pound bag of frozen wild blueberries went for $10 in the store? Where did the $9.90 go and how much of it was profit? It felt egregious that blueberry workers weren't paid more, especially after watching them pour so much time and energy into carefully harvesting hundreds and thousands of easily squishable berries.

The tricks and techniques they developed to work longer and more efficiently enhanced their ability to earn money, but it also benefited blueberry producers because it meant that workers were bringing in more fruit. Workers devoted a tremendous amount of time to fine-tuning how they harvested the berries—they customized their rakes, they did stretching routines in the morning to be more limber, they maximized the number of boxes they could carry to the road at one time. Those who had done the blueberry harvest for years were proud to pass those practices on to new workers and yet farmworkers are often labeled unskilled workers.

"Unskilled work is work which needs little or no judgment to do simple duties that can be learned on the job in a short period of time," according to the U.S. Social Security Administration. "A person does not gain work skills by doing unskilled jobs."[1]

[1] "§ 404.1568. Skill requirements."

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What's not skilled about farmworkers' deep knowledge of the land or the systems they develop after years in the fields to make the work more efficient? Watch farmworkers toss full buckets of tomatoes up to workers on trucks or broccoli harvesters bend down to cut the stalk and gracefully turn to toss the vegetable to packers working on a moving piece of farm equipment. It's a skillful dance and witnessing that inspired me to talk to all kinds of workers, especially those labeled unskilled, for Wage/Working.

Our project's name was inspired by oral-historian Studs Terkel's book Working. Like Terkel, we wanted to talk to ordinary Americans about their working lives, but with a twist that would draw attention to wage disparity. Rather than publish those interviews as oral histories in a book or play them on the radio, Wage/Working only makes those conversations available to the public as recordings that play from a jukebox, and as excerpts that are edited to the time it takes the worker to make a dollar.

Why a jukebox? Because there's an understood convention that to hear a song, one must pay. That allowed us to advertise "pay a dollar to hear a dollar's worth of a worker's time" on the jukebox.

FIGURE 1. Shannon Nacey selects a worker's story to play on the Wage/Working jukebox on display August 2015 at Old Stone House in Brooklyn, NY.

Like an artist's music featured in a jukebox, each worker we interview gets an album with a portrait—akin to album cover art—and a list of tracks. Instead of songs, excerpts from the interview are titled based on a short phrase the worker said.

For example, the track "Not gonna dance for you" comes from a server in a deli describing how he doesn't like the idea of performing "kindness" in the hopes of making bigger tips.

Why edit the stories to the length of time it takes a worker to earn a dollar? Because the varied duration of the tracks communicates wage disparity without the workers explicitly disclosing how much they make. The inverse relationship between time and wage means the workers who earn the least get to talk the longest. A lawyer featured in an early iteration of the project had 20-second tracks while it took the artisan cheesemaker 13 minutes to make a dollar. Even if the audience doesn't listen to all 13 minutes, it gets the point across that some workers must labor longer to make a dollar.

The other reason we like the jukebox is the way it facilitates a collective experience. The music one person pays for plays aloud for everyone in the space. It's hard to address wage disparity without knowing what we all get paid, a message we hope to communicate by creating a way for people to listen together.

From the Hudson Valley and Brooklyn in New York to Portland, OR and most recently Laramie, WY, people have gathered around the jukebox to hear the stories about work.

Before doing the project in Laramie, our interviews mimicked Terkel's quest to understand what workers glean from their jobs beyond a paycheck.

Work is "about a search, too, for daily meaning as well as daily bread, for recognition as well as cash, for astonishment rather than torpor; in short, for a sort of life rather than a Monday through Friday sort of dying," Terkel wrote in the introduction to Working. "Perhaps immortality, too, is part of the quest. To be remembered was the wish, spoken and unspoken, of the heroes and heroines of this book."[2]

The creative resilience Terkel documented in Working is at the heart of the interviews for Wage/Working too. For the most recent iteration of the project in Laramie, WY the focus of those interviews expanded to explore democracy at work. The Greek translation provides my favorite definition—with *dêmos* meaning people and *krátos* meaning power—democracy is people power.

The questions centered around workers' sense of power in the workplace, how workers navigate using their voices, as well as their desire to be able to effect change at work.

The conversations centered around questions like: How do you feel about speaking up at work? How does speaking up benefit or disadvantage you? Do you feel empowered to make change at work?

[2] Terkel, *Working*, xi.

This new focus grew out of my participation in the University of Wyoming Humanities Research Institute Democracy Lab and was a welcomed addition. The inverse relationship between wage and track length was made even more poignant by conversations with people about agency and power on the job.

Workplaces, for the most part, are not democracies. They are hierarchical, and yet the five workers I spoke to in Laramie in 2023 all had different takes on whether they would want to have more power and more say.

One worker felt empowered to make changes but was reluctant to speak up because he wasn't being paid enough to be involved with the business on that level. That worker preferred the simplicity of going to work and focusing on the required tasks, recognizing that improvements would increase profits for the business but would not guarantee increased pay for employees.

Another worker was motivated to make her workplace safer and more efficient, but challenging the status quo came with the risk of losing her job, and as an undocumented person finding another place to work was daunting. She described staying in a job with unsafe conditions, and not speaking up, because doing otherwise threatened her ability to survive.

There was also a worker who saw ways to make a big impact that brought the risk of retaliation, but instead found smaller ways of making change that allowed her to continue doing her work. While larger structural changes in workplace culture were necessary, she felt tackling those things would interfere with her ability to do the parts of her job she loves the most. She didn't rule out making waves in the future, but had decided this moment was not her time to rock the boat.

I plan to continue gathering Wyoming stories for the Wage/Working jukebox in the hopes of catalyzing deeper conversations about worker voice and power.

A sobering reminder of why this matters is the data on workplace fatalities. Workers die on the job in Wyoming at the highest rates nationwide.[3]

Stories can only be heard from the jukebox. Please reach out to bring the jukebox to your community.[4]

[3] "Work Deaths by State." At the time of publication, the most recent data is for the year 2022.

[4] I can be contacted via email at tennessee.watson@gmail.com.

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