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**Waiting for Work:
An Ethnography of a Day Labor Agency**

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This paper addresses the shifting temporal dimensions of work brought about by the flexibilization of employment. Drawing upon ethnographic fieldwork in a corporate day labor agency located in a West Coast city, I examine the way in which uncertainty is both produced and experienced in an effort to analyze the mode of domination captured by Bourdieu's concept of "flexploitation." Specifically, I examine the organization of the hiring and job allocation process, workers' experience and understanding of this temporally uncertain employment relationship, and the way in which management manipulates this temporal experience as a technique of labor control. I argue that the enforced waiting period that is endemic in this industry is not only a strategy of externalizing risk (through "time funneling") but of manufacturing a reserve army of labor that is highly disciplined.

Introduction

The world of work and employment has undergone a perplexing set of changes in recent decades, as is meant to be captured by widespread pronouncements of the “new economy.” Two of the most fundamental, and hence consequential, transformations include the rise of contingent work and the increased use of labor market intermediaries (Osterman 1999, Osterman 2003, Smith 2001). While the former has contributed to the widespread uncertainty and unpredictability of employment, the latter has contributed to an increased structural ambiguity of employer-employee relationships (Chun 2005, Gonos 1997, Peck and Theodore 2002). As Heidi Gottfried (1992) notes, these changes – exemplified by the increased growth and import of the temporary help industry (THI) – have fundamentally altered “standard assumptions about temporality in the organization of capitalist production” (447).

Drawing upon ethnographic fieldwork in a corporate day labor agency located in a West Coast city, this paper addresses the shifting temporal dimensions of work brought about by the flexibilization of employment. Three issues pertaining to this “regime of precarious employment” are discussed (Theodore 2003) in this paper. First, I examine the organization of the hiring and job allocation process and the consequent blurring of the boundary between work-time and non-work time (or, in this case, employment and unemployment). Next, using the metaphor of “time as a container of meaning,” I examine the phenomenological experience of this temporally uncertain employment relationship, as well as the meaning which workers assign to it (Thompson and Bunderson 2001). Finally, I examine the way that management manipulates this experience of time as a technique of labor control and strategy of inculcating disciplined

dispositions. I conclude this paper by linking the implications of this analysis to Bourdieu's (1998) concept of "flexploitation."

Literature on Time and Work

There has been a recent surge of interest in the work-related aspects of time. The bulk of this research focuses largely on the issue of work/family "balance" among those "squeezed for time" (Epstein and Kalleberg 2001, Hochschild 1997, Kalleberg and Epstein 2001, Rubery et al. 2005, Schor 1992). Scholars have sought to explain causes and consequences of the rising number of work hours as well as the changing temporal dimension of work itself. One of the most widespread findings is that the distinction between work and non-work has become increasingly blurry (Hochschild 1997, Kalleberg and Epstein 2001, Shih 2004), as workers put in long hours to "signal the kind of commitment and visibility that employees believe firms demand" (Evans et al. 2004, 2). As Shih (2004) put it, "There has been a substitution of an objective work schedule with the subjective demand for commitment" (234).

A general consensus in the literature is that while people with higher incomes may work more hours than ever before, "workers at the lower end of the income distribution often have difficulty finding enough work" (Evans et. al. 2004, 1-2). As Evans et. al. (2004) stated, we would therefore expect that for workers at the lower end of the income distribution, "the issue of finding work would overshadow the issue of finding time" (31).

While such a statement may indeed be quite accurate, it overlooks the temporal demands of agency-mediated job searching, therein failing to recognize the significant temporal investment and expectation that accompanies employment uncertainty. Scholars have long ago pointed out that "the distribution of waiting time coincides with the distribution of power"

(Schwartz 1975, 5). The time of the poor and marginalized is considered to be less important and therefore more expendable than the time of the privileged, leading Nancy Henley (1977) to suggest that many societal institutions function as “time funnelers,” siphoning time from the poor and giving it to the rich. Thus, she concludes, the poor *must* have a lot of “time on their hands” because they are inevitably going to spend a significant portion of their lives waiting (Henley 1977, see also Bourdieu 2000 and Pappas 1989).

This paper explores these ideas by analyzing the temporal dimension of work in the burgeoning day labor industry, an industry that, as we shall see, operates in much the same way as Henley’s conception of a “time funneler.” With no criminal background check, no drug test, no need for references and no skills required, day labor agencies have become leading “employers”¹ for parolees, ex-convicts, former welfare recipients, the homeless, immigrants (who have, or who can successfully forge, legal documentation) and the unemployed, simultaneously *mopping up* and *wringing out* the contemporary “reserve army of labor.”² Day labor agencies, therefore, are key to understanding the income-generating strategies and labor market attachment (or, more pertinently, the lack thereof) of the urban poor.

This paper aims to refocus our attention away from the question of temporal allocation toward the question of temporal experience and control. In doing so, my aim is to understand how uncertainty is not only produced, but experienced.

¹ I use parentheses here because the legal status of temporary help agencies as employers is a source of frequent contestation and considerable confusion (Smith 1998). Gonos (1997) refutes the notion that the rise of temporary work has been a natural and inevitable response to changes in the U.S. economy, evolving organically out of the need for workforce flexibility. He documents the decades-long postwar efforts of the temporary help industry to transform employment regulations to their advantage, lobbying to shed their legal status as “employment agencies” and achieve the legal status of “employers.” The ratification by the courts and state legislatures of the temporary help arrangement as legal and legitimate spurred the dramatic growth of the industry, beginning in the 1970s. Far from an innocent bystander seeking to grease the wheels of supply and demand, the day labor industry actively shapes labor market norms and conventions. See also Peck and Theodore (2002) for similar analysis.

² Although, as Bourdieu (1998) astutely pointed out, “the term ‘army’ is inappropriate, because unemployment isolates, atomizes, individualizes, demobilizes and strips away solidarity” (98).

Background and Methodology

The temporary help industry (THI) is one of the fastest growing sectors in the U.S. economy (Osterman 1999, 56). Although precise figures are difficult to come by because of definitional ambiguities and inconsistencies across studies, it is estimated that temporary jobs constitute a full quarter of all new jobs created since 1984. In 2005, the temporary help industry employed an average of 2.9 million temporary employees per day. Although this represents less than 3% of total U.S. employment, this figure fails to capture the net total of people who cycle through the industry and significantly underestimates both the role temporary agencies play in shaping the contours and norms of the labor market as well as the disproportionate impact of this industry on the labor market experiences of disadvantaged populations.

The THI is a highly variegated industry, reaching all sectors of the economy, from professional-technical “itinerant experts” (Barley and Kunda 2004), to clerical workers (Gottfried 1992, Henson 1996, Rogers 2000), to manual day laborers in industrial and construction settings (Kerr and Dole 2005, McAllister 1998, Peck and Theodore 2001, Roberts and Bartley 2002). This paper focuses on the relatively unexplored, yet fastest growing, segment within the broader temporary help industry: the formal day labor industry, also referred to in industry rhetoric as “on-demand staffing” and colloquially as “labor pools.” Far from an exotic outpost in the U.S. economy, day labor is a well-entrenched, multibillion dollar industry that is organically linked to the core of the U.S. – and increasingly global – labor market, supplying “just-in-time,” disposable workers to its leading corporations in a wide range of industries.

This paper draws upon participant observation (on average two days per week over the course of fifteen months) at a branch office of InstaLabor, one of the nation’s leading providers

of temporary manual labor.³ Following in the tradition of other workplace ethnographers (Appelbaum 1981, Burawoy 1979, Kondo 1990, Rollins 1985, Williams 2006) and inspired by Wacquant's (2003) call for apprenticeship as a technique of ethnographic investigation and interpretation, I took on the role of day laborer by signing up each morning at the agency between 5:30am and 6am, waiting around for work and, when chosen, going out on the job. This kind of embedded and embodied ethnographic fieldwork provided unparalleled access to the operations of the agencies and enabled me to gain a depth of understanding – on the corporate practices, the nature of the work, the embodied subjectivity of workers and the all-pervasive sense of uncertainty – that I would not have been able to acquire through interviews alone.⁴ Becoming an active participant in this world and subjecting myself to its temporal, physical and psychological demands was a fruitful method for forging trusting and meaningful relationships with other job-seekers. However, I did enjoy relative financial stability throughout the course of this research, which undoubtedly mitigated my experience of the temporal and psychological uncertainty of this world.

I strategically chose InstaLabor for its rapid growth, soaring profits and ubiquitous presence on street corners of low-income neighborhoods throughout the country, luring in cash-starved individuals with its promise of daily work for daily pay. Employing well over half of a million people (e.g. temporary workers) to over 300,000 customers (e.g. businesses who contract with InstaLabor for just-in-time laborers) on an annual basis, InstaLabor is one of the nation's largest private employers. Moreover, given its dominant status in the industry, InstaLabor seems

³ InstaLabor is a pseudonym.

⁴ Erving Goffman's (1989, 125) description of participant observation is particularly relevant here: "It's [a technique] of getting data, it seems to me, by subjecting yourself, your own body and your own personality, and your own social situation, to the set of contingencies that play upon a set of individuals, so that you can physically and ecologically penetrate their circle of response to their social situation, or their work situation, or their ethnic situation, or whatever...I feel that the way this is done is to not, of course, just listen to what they talk about, but to pick up on their minor grunts and groans as they respond to their situation."

to be fairly representative of the industry as a whole, having set industry-wide standards in terms of marketing, recruitment and the organization of the hiring process.⁵

Although day labor companies are subsumed within the broader temporary help industry, they operate differently from firms which cater to clerical and professional employees. First, employment contracts last no longer than a single day, meaning that on any given day individuals may succeed in getting work, but will be again unemployed by sundown. Thus, day labor represents an extreme degree of labor market insecurity, as can be gleaned from InstaLabor's application for employment.⁶ When I managed to get a copy of the application from the dispatcher, using the argument that I wanted to have a record of what I had signed, she retorted, only half-jokingly, "you're basically just signing your life over to us." An excerpt from the application reads as follows:

I understand that my employment with [InstaLabor] is on a day-to-day basis. That is, at the end of the work day, I will be deemed to have quit until I report to the dispatch hall and begin working a job assignment. I understand that merely registering my availability to work does not constitute employment and I am not re-employed until I actually begin working a job assignment. Regardless of my employment status, I understand that I will not be entitled to receive any fringe benefits of any type from [InstaLabor], including such things as health insurance, pension plan and vacation. I understand the significance of my exclusion from these programs and irrevocably agree to my exclusion.

The second distinctive characteristic of day labor agencies is that job seekers are required to physically report to the agency each morning in order to be considered for the opportunity of employment. Whereas temporary clerical workers have to repeatedly call in or be "on-call" to secure their next assignment, day laborers must wait at the agency, under the supervision of their would-be employers, without pay, for hours on end in the hope of securing a day's work.

⁵ This paper does not address non-for-profit day labor centers, which operate on an entirely different model and largely serve an entirely different population.

⁶ Jean McAllister (1998, 221) captures metaphorically what it is like to work under such extreme conditions of uncertainty: "Like Sisyphus, condemned to push a stone from the bottom to the top of a hill for all eternity, each of these workers struggles up from the bottom rung of the ladder of employment each day only to wake up at the bottom again. Their daily efforts are erased overnight so that each day's labor has been, and will likely continue to be, no more rewarding or secure than the day before."

Findings

Ushering in uncertainty: The job allocation process

Most workers arrive at the office by the time the doors open at the pre-dawn hour of 5:30am. Some compete to be first in line and form a queue outside the agency's doors as early as 4am. Dispatchers routinely instruct new registrants to arrive at the agency as early as possible – “ready to work” – and to sign up on a numbered sign-up sheet to register their availability for employment. Workers take diligent note of their position in line and their number and arrival time become frequent topics of conversation – as well as contention – throughout the rest of day. Thus, the list appears to serve as the official mechanism of job allocation and, accordingly, both workers as well as dispatchers act *as if* jobs are allocated on a first-come-first-served basis, what Schwartz (1975) considers to be “the normative basis for most forms of queueing” (93).

Nonetheless, the list does not determine the daily distribution of jobs, a fact which generates considerable confusion, even rage, when it is brought to light. Arrival time does, of course, matter, since one's chances of getting work are greater if one arrives at the agency by 6am than if one shows up late in the day, by which point most of the jobs will have already been sent out. Yet, there is no necessary correspondence between the order in which the men and women arrive at the agency and the order in which they are dispatched for jobs (Schwartz 1975, 93). Indeed, there is no rational basis upon which one might predict or calculate the chances of getting a job on any given day.

The distribution of jobs at InstaLabor follows what the company calls a “best match for dispatch” policy, which means that dispatchers – commonly referred to in the literature as “man catchers” (Anderson 1998) or “flesh peddlers” (Parker 1994) or, in the words of my informants,

“slave traders” – have full discretion to send out whomever they best see fit for the job.⁷ Yet, as Henson (1996) points out, “Temporary workers rarely have adequate and reliable information about how their agencies actually match available assignments and workers” (53). Here at the bottom of the labor market, in an industry that trades in “warm bodies” (signifying disposability and interchangeability), companies do not engage in skills testing, ask for references or demand a record of previous work experience. Thus, there are no “objective” indicators whereby one might reasonably determine the “best fit” between a worker, his or her skills and the requirements of the job.

Decisions about what kind of match constitutes the “best fit,” therefore, must be based on criteria other than skills. Existing research has shown that dispatchers reward first and foremost those who are “reliably contingent,” those who display the right attitude and who are deemed loyal and reliable by showing up to the agency each and everyday (Bartley and Roberts 2006, Peck and Theodore 2001, Roberts and Bartley 2002). Thus, given both the unpredictability of job opportunities (due to fluctuations in demand) as well as managerial discretion with respect to job allocation, workers aim to behave in a way that meets their understanding of what is being sought by the managers.

Unsurprisingly, these characteristics of the job allocation process make it vulnerable to both corruption as well as accusations of favoritism. On multiple occasions, I have documented dispatchers asking workers for favors of one kind or another. Mariah, a thirty-one year old, African-American dispatcher, repeatedly asked workers to go fetch her coffee and Krispy Kreme donuts from the deli down the street. On one occasion, Mariah turned to Tommy and said, pointing to a garbage bin below the counter, “I thought I told you to take all this out?” “I’m

⁷ Based upon fieldwork among a predominantly African-American workforce, I have found that workers at InstaLabor make sense of the triadic employment relationship and “dualistic control” (Gottfried 1991) characteristic of the temporary help industry by referencing the idiom of slavery, an institution of forced labor, racialized in the American case and thus particularly resonant for black men toiling at the bottom of the labor market. Workers are depicted as slaves, dispatchers are depicted as slave traders and bosses are depicted as slave drivers.

sorry” he repeated several times, as he rushed behind the counter to pick up the bin. As he walked towards the back of the office, garbage bin in hand, Mariah, now facing the computer with her hands placed on the keyboard, mumbled, “Yeah, I know I can get you to do anything and I don’t even need to pay you.” Caroline, another dispatcher, once called John up to the counter and announced that she would give him five bucks if he went to the store for her. This led one of the other guys in the room to start complaining, “Caroline, why can’t I go to the store for you?” “Because,” she replied, “he always go to the store for me, that’s why.” I was once asked by Caroline to go drop off some mail in the mailbox around the corner, a favor I enthusiastically agreed to, in the hope of currying favor and further recognition. Such requests, in other words, are rarely, if ever, declined and yet this “rule through loyalty” leads many job seekers to conclude that the job allocation process is rife with favoritism. Favoritism is frequently perceived through a racial lens as when Silvio, a Mexican-American Vietnam veteran and former member of the Hells Angels, told me that that the problem with InstaLabor is that Mariah, an African-American female dispatcher, “favors the brothers [the black men]... ‘cuz she’s ghettoized, through and through.”

Although the “best match for dispatch” policy is noted in fine print on the application for employment, it is only mentioned by the dispatchers to job seekers in moments of heated conflict, when, as is relentlessly the case, a worker admonishes the dispatcher for “passing her up,” “sending someone else out before him,” or “playing favorites,” as in the excerpt from my field notes below, where a female day laborer accuses the dispatcher of “tripping.”

“Caroline [the dispatcher], you be trippin’,” the woman yelled in a loud and irritated voice. “You be trippin’ on something.” Caroline stood up and yelled back in defensive rage. “We work on a best-match-for-dispatch policy, not first-come-first-serve, ‘cuz we have to please our clients, that’s our first priority. I told you you’d have a better chance if you came at 5:30am, but I never promised you no work. You all know that there’s more people here than there is work. And y’all keep showin’ up anyway. I don’t tell nobody that they have to show up.” The woman continued, “So why’d you send out that other woman when I been sittin’ here all morning?” Caroline replied, “Do I know you? No. How many days you been here?” “Everyday,” the woman shouted back. “Bullshit,” Caroline replied. “I’ve seen you two days. That’s it. I don’t know you, I can’t trust you, I don’t know what kind of work you do. I know that [other] woman and I know she can work, so don’t tell me I be trippin’, that I ain’t being fair!” “Are you sayin’ that

I don't know how to work?" the woman asked in a tone of utter and complete disbelief. "Cuz let me tell you one thing. I know how to work. Trust me." Caroline took the last word and yelled, "And let me tell you one thing. You betta' change your attitude if you want any chance of getting a job."

Workers attempt, albeit unsuccessfully, to garner some control over the daily hiring process by keeping dispatchers in check. Thus, a worker named Maurice got into an argument with Caroline because she sent someone out with a car who had come in after him. When workers sign up in the morning, they are asked to report whether they have a car and are willing to shuttle workers ("Y" for yes; "N" for no).

"I told you I had a car," Maurice yelled from across the room. "I couldn't tell," Caroline replied, "your Y looks like an N. That ain't my fault." "Why'd you give that job to that other guy? You know I been sitting here since five and I told you I had a car. I'm gonna report you. [more authoritative] Give me the name of your manager, I'm gonna report you." Caroline scoffed, stating, "Go ahead and report me. It ain't gonna do nothin'. I'll tell you one thing, you ain't gonna get nowhere with that kind of attitude."

Dispatchers thus routinely find themselves in the position of having to defend their decisions about the allocation of jobs, yet in so doing, they further reveal the arbitrary basis upon which these choices are made. As Caroline once explained, "I don't favoritize. I try to be fair. I ain't gonna cheat you and I ain't skipping over nobody...I'm not just going to let anyone do any thing. He [the client] don't like many of the people we send him and he'll just send 'em back. That guy [pointing to an older guy sitting a few chairs down from me along the other wall] can't go out because he's still filling out his application forms and she [pointing to me] is not going because it's heavy stuff."

The co-existence of these two competing principles – the illusion that there is a rational, predictable order to the distribution of jobs (codified in the list, or sign-up sheet) and the realization that arbitrariness governs the distribution of jobs (codified in the "best match for dispatch" policy) – illustrate Burawoy's (1985) observation that a consequence of the rise of temporary work is that "the distribution of jobs is clouded in mystery" (265). The list does not simply serve a symbolic function, as Bartley and Roberts (2006, 53) suggest. Rather it serves the practical function of ensuring that the company is able to make available a sufficiently large pool

of job-seekers, ready to meet employer's uncertain demand, for indeed, the very success of companies like InstaLabor rests upon their ability to provide labor "on-demand." Just as employers aim to reduce costs and increase flexibility through externalizing employment to temporary help agencies, temporary help agencies themselves aim to externalize risk by siphoning time from the workforce.⁸ In other words, the increased calculability and flexibility on the part of employers is made possible by the increased insecurity and temporal investment on the part of the workforce. As Nik Theodore (2003) put it: "Day labor agencies have become the primary source of underemployed workers who can be deployed virtually instantaneously in response to periodic increases in labor demand, in effect institutionalizing the reserve army within the corporatised sector of the economy and providing firms with a reliable, stable and organised source of underemployed workers" (1824).

As a result, one way of looking at the consequences of this particular job allocation process is to highlight the way in which managerial control extends beyond the realm of "working time," encroaching upon the "personal time" of the men and women who wait for work, without pay and without any assurance that their waiting will be "worth the while." Although the workers wait in the office of their legal employers, they are not actually employed until they arrive at the client's worksite. Nonetheless, they are subjected to managerial control not only of their time (as I have just described), but also of their attitude, comportment and physical activity.⁹ In this way, day labor agencies blur the boundary between employment and unemployment in their ongoing efforts to generate an easily accessible and highly disciplined reserve army of labor.

Temporal Experience

⁸ See Kalleberg et. al. (2003) for discussion of the externalization of employment.

⁹ These themes will be addressed in greater detail in a forthcoming paper.

Scholars have argued that waiting is one of the quintessential ways in which we consciously experience the passage of time. As Schwartz (1975) explains, “waiting draws attention to time itself which...passes more slowly precisely because it is attended to” (168). Bourdieu (2000) similarly suggests that “time is really experienced only when the quasi-automatic coincidence between expectations and chances...is broken” (208).¹⁰ In this section, I explore the day laborers’ experience of waiting as well as the meanings they assign to that experience.

The mystification of the distribution of jobs and the insecurity of employment propel many workers into a profound state of anxiety, condemned as they are to wait for an indeterminate length of time, never knowing from one day to the next whether they will get work.¹¹ Indeed, as Eviatar Zerubavel (1981) states, temporal irregularity, by which he means the lack of a “highly reliable repertoire of what is expected, likely or unlikely to take place within certain temporal boundaries,” “contributes considerably to the development of a strong sense of uncertainty” (12). On his first day at the agency, Nikolai, a white, twenty-three year old who had grown up in foster care and aspired to go back to school to get his G.E.D. so that he could someday achieve his dream of becoming a union electrician, muttered, “I hate waiting around for work like this. This is nothing but the role of the dice.” Nikolai’s statement is suggestive of how many of the job seekers experience the daily job allocation process. Looking for work is nothing but a game of chance, in the hands of the “all powerful,”¹² to whom many day laborers fatalistically submit themselves.

The following excerpt from my field notes is particularly revealing, both with respect to workers’ confusion vis-à-vis the allocation of jobs and with respect to workers’ unbearable sense

¹⁰ Bourdieu continues, “It is the discrepancy between what is anticipated and the logic of the game in relation to which this anticipation was formed...between a subjective disposition and an objective tendency, which gives rise to relations to time such as waiting...” (228).

¹¹ For an analysis of the link between waiting and mystification, see Schwartz (1975, 35-6).

¹² “The all powerful is he who does not wait but who makes others wait” (Bourdieu 2000, 228-9).

of anxiety. Reggie is a black, 38-year-old, fast-talking, former Marine who comes down to InstaLabor in the hopes of earning some extra cash on his days off from his “real job” at a private investigation company (although, as one of our co-workers for the day put it, “He seems like more of a hustler than a private investigator, if you know what I’m saying”).

Reggie shook his head and said, “Today sure is slow...slow like a turtle. A dead turtle. Damn, ya know, I got here at four thirty, thinking I’d be the first one here with a car but, sure enough, there was another guy here already. You gotta be number one or two on the list with a car in order to get out.” I said, “Yeah, I haven’t quite figured out how this place works.” He quickly explained, in a serious tone, “Oh, it’s first-come-first-serve, that’s why you gotta get here first thing in the morning.” After a moment’s pause, Reggie turned back to me and admitted, “Anyway you look at it, it’s a wobbler coming down to this motherfucking place. Damn, if I don’t get out today, I coulda stayed in bed sleepin’. I hate this shit. I hate being all anxious and shit...the anticipation... Every time that motherfucking phone rings, I be all hopin’ and prayin’ it’ll be me next. [louder] Man, I wanna go out today.” “You and me both,” chimed in Mike, who was pacing around the office and just happened to pass us by as Reggie was talking.

Reggie’s comment about the telephone highlights the way in which day laborers’ experience of waiting is shaped by the search for indications of their chances of getting work. One morning, upon hearing the phone ring, Mark sat to attention and listened, only to comment disappointedly, several seconds later, “that was too short. They couldn’t have been looking for work.” The hopes of men and women who wait each morning in the hiring hall are raised whenever they hear the ring of the telephone or the sound of the printer (both of which can indicate a job order). Other workers attempt to engage in what Gasparini (1995) refers to as “equipped waiting.” They try to engage in activities that minimize the negative effects of waiting and that therefore make “time fly.” A young, African-American named Anthony was, on one morning, particularly frustrated that he had not yet been sent out on a job. After repeatedly and sporadically bellowing out, “Can I get a job?,” he opened up the local newspaper and mockingly read aloud his horoscope: “Today you will find work.” He yelled out to Caroline, “Yo, can we get an arcade in here? If we have to be waiting all day, we might as well have a little PacMan and shit. Or a little fozz ball.” The request elicited no response from the dispatcher.

As Schwartz (1975) pointed out, “delay is not only suffered; it is also interpreted” (7). Thus, to analyze the job seekers’ experience of waiting we must also examine the meanings that they attach to that activity. Waiting – and the temporal irregularity it entails – is interpreted by many to be an indication of their uselessness and powerlessness. Troy, who several people in the office refer to as the “agency alcoholic,” is white and in his late forties. At the time of the following conversation, he had been laid off from his job in a furniture warehouse fifteen months earlier. (“It was my holiday bonus,” he noted sarcastically.)

“I’m losing it,” Troy stated. “I hate coming down to this place. I’m about ready to snap.” He looked at me out of the corner of his squinted eyes. “And I hate watching TV all day...I don’t hate it at night, ya know, after a long day of work, but this, this just makes the day go by so slow, just sittin’ around, vegetating, hoping the whole time that you’re gonna go out. We might as well be in a damn rest home.” He paused and shook his head back and forth. “And on top of that, we gotta deal with shit like this all day long” [nodding to a guy who was sweeping the carpet right next to us].

Troy’s allusion to being in a “damn rest home” makes reference to a life stage, as well as an institution, in which we are helpless and vulnerable. John, an African-American man who shows up each day in the same, blue, one-piece mechanic uniform, draws a similar parallel:

“Damn, it’s slow today. I don’t think we’re gonna get out” John said. “It doesn’t look like it,” I responded, given that literally no jobs had gone out so far. “It feels all dark and confined in here. Like we’re sheep that need to be herded. Or babies that need to be watched over. This is like a day care center.”

Whereas Troy sees waiting as an indication of uselessness, John sees waiting as a process of training and discipline, to be played out under the watchful eye of the powerful. These meanings correspond to the two primary functions of the waiting period: (1) to concentrate and make available a sufficiently large pool of workers, ready to “engage” at a moment’s notice and (2) to produce a highly disciplined workforce, by inculcating within these workers a disposition of obedience. Others see the entire process as nothing but a waste of time, as when Ron, who was sitting on a window ledge, asked Adrienne, “Man, they gonna get us out there today?”

Adrienne, holding an unlit cigarette in is hand, laughed and replied, “Hell no, we’re just wasting time!”¹³

Investment in the Game: The Virtue of Patience

In order to keep the workers both disciplined and invested in the game, and therefore to ensure a surplus of workers – eager and “ready to work” – that will meet clients’ unpredictable demand, the dispatchers explicitly manipulate the day laborers’ hopes and expectations, so as to continually remind them that their chances of getting work are neither definite nor impossible (Burawoy 1979, Burawoy 2000). Given that there are almost always more workers than there are jobs, I will focus here on the latter: the question of how dispatchers keep the job-seekers motivated without driving them to despair.

The dispatchers’ primary strategy is to continually reinforce the “virtue of patience.” When a worker complains about being bored, frustrated or sick of waiting, his complaint is likely to be echoed by the dispatcher’s shout of “patience is a virtue!” loud enough for all to hear. As a dozen of us were getting ready to go down to the port to move three thousand, fifty-pound boxes of thawed out, rotting chicken paws on the day after President George W. Bush invoked Taft-Hartley to bring an end to the 11-day long West Coast lock-out, the dispatcher announced to all in the office: “See! Good things come to those who wait!” On another occasion, an employer called in at around 1pm (quite late by construction industry standards) and requested a clean-up crew of a half dozen workers. Although the office had thinned out considerably, there were still nearly twenty men milling about the waiting room. The dispatcher called the crew up to the counter and anointed them as “posterchildren of patience.” Boosting our hopes for a job and

¹³ Although it is clear that some who come to InstaLabor do so without any expectation of actually getting work, I do not yet have enough data to make sense of the other functions these offices fulfill.

therefore intensifying our investment in the daily search for work, dispatchers routinely offer the following advice to assuage our feelings of anxiety: “hang tight,” “things are gonna start pickin’ up down here,” “next week will be better guys, I promise!”

This last comment, unintentionally and perhaps a bit paradoxically, sent Troy into a spiral of self-doubt.

“Next week?” he cried back. “How’s that gonna help me now? Shoot, the man upstairs must be mad.” “Why?” I asked. “Because he ain’t answering my prayers.” When I asked him what he prayed for, he replied, “Oh, ya know. I just say my little prayers, ask God to get me through another day and get me out of this dump. But he must not be listening because I’ve been here waaaaay too long.”

Conclusion

As matchmakers in the deregulated “new economy,” day labor companies have a business interest in expanding the scope and reach of labor market contingency, both on the side of supply and demand. They are thus important agents in what Bourdieu (1998) refers to as *flexploitation*: “a mode of domination of a new kind, based on the creation of a generalized and permanent state of insecurity aimed at forcing workers into submission, into the acceptance of exploitation” (85). By exploring the objective orchestration of uncertainty, as well as the way in which it is experienced and understood, this analysis begins to put some empirical flesh upon Bourdieu’s skeletal concept.

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