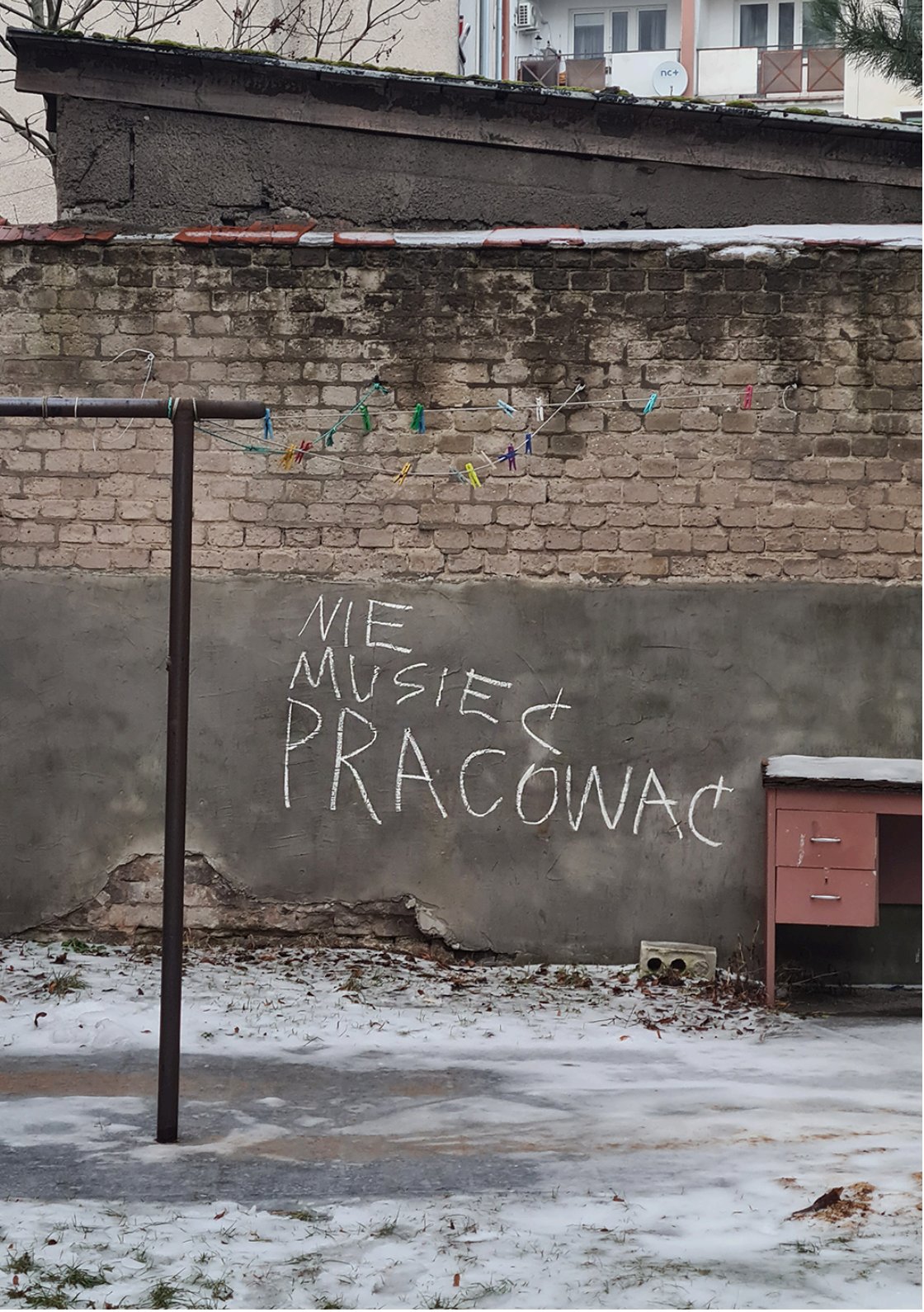
NIE
MUSIE
PRACOWAĆ

The text visible
in the cover photograph reads

“Nie musieć pracować” (Polish)

— “Not having to work”

Not having to work.
Refusal of work

A year-long post-art experiment of living without work
as a refusal of disobedience to the capitalist regime of productivity,
a decolonization of time and a new economy of abundance.

2026
arek parasite
refusalofwork.parasite.pl

Polish version of the text:
odmowapracy.parasite.pl

NOT HAVING TO WORK. REFUSAL OF WORK

arek parasite, 2026

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I.
Introduction: A brief history of labour enslavement

It was only with capitalism that work became a moral obligation and a primary measure of human worth. Work became a kind of everyday religion, with rituals of long hours of effort, the sacrament of productivity, and a constant confession in numbers, spreadsheets, and reports. Jan Lucassen, in *The Story of Work*, defined work as all human activities performed outside of leisure time. My refusal, however, concerns wage labour, the kind of work subordinated to economic necessity and therefore made a condition for survival.

Henry David Thoreau wrote as early as the 19th century:

> *„This world is a place of business. What an infinite bustle! [...] It is nothing but work, work, work"*

This "infinite bustle" has today become total. Capitalism does not merely organize work; it colonizes imagination, imposes rhythms on our bodies, and appropriates the time of our lives. There is no idleness. There is no right to be unproductive. Work has ceased to be

a means, it has become meaning itself and the central organizing principle of life.

As early as 1883, Paul Lafargue wrote in his essay *The Right to Be Lazy* that modern civilization suffers not from a lack of work but from a pathological love of it. He regarded the right to work not as an emancipatory achievement but as a curse. Labour, instead of liberating us or even bringing us closer to freedom, has become a tool of moral training and discipline through which we learn to hate rest, idleness, and our own bodies. “Work in capitalism leads to the degeneration of body and mind and destroys the capacity for joy in life”. Lafargue already saw what we today try to silence with coaching culture and the psychology of productivity: work has been elevated to the status of a cult, almost a religion. It has literally made time control possible. Temporal discipline, imposed through the introduction of the clock, was violently enforced worldwide.

Fredy Perlman in *The Reproduction of Daily Life* (1969) exposed capitalism as a system that reproduces obedience. Work produces not only goods but also workers, habits, daily rhythms, and relations of power. The refusal of work therefore, interrupts the very mechanism of this reproduction. As Ha-Joon Chang aptly writes in *23 Things They Don't Tell You About Capitalism* (2010): “Expect the worst from people and you will get the worst from them”. Capitalism has done exactly this, but not all at once. The process of enclosure began in twelfth-century Europe and spread worldwide. It was a reorganization of property and an act of economic violence. People separated from land and the commons were forced to sell and trade their time to survive. This is how capitalist wage labour began to emerge. Only afterward did capitalism proclaim that humans are naturally lazy and must be disciplined by work, thereby concealing the violence it had created in the first place.

A culture of *workism* emerged: an ideology in which work stands above society, above politics, and above the satisfaction of human needs. In *Bullshit Jobs*, David Graeber described many contemporary occupations as meaningless, maintained primarily to

keep people within the structures of discipline. The collective Krisis Group wrote in *Manifesto Against Labour*: “Labour is not the source of wealth, but of modern poverty”.

In 1953, Guy Debord wrote on a Paris wall: “Never work”. It was a rejection of the false distinction between work time and leisure time. According to Debord, leisure time in the capitalist system is an integral part of the production process; it is merely a phase of regeneration, a spectacle designed to restore the strength necessary for further exploitation. Alienated labour turns all time into dead time. Consumption merely anesthetizes it.

Automation, instead of bringing liberation, has been used to intensify control: more tasks in less time, greater responsibility without greater meaning. As Jason Hickel writes in *Less Is More* (2021): “It is not growth that produces prosperity but social organization, equality, and the decommodification of life”.

Bertrand Russell wrote plainly in his essay *In Praise of Idleness*:

> *“The morality of work is the morality of slaves”*

Automation and technology could be the material conditions for freedom, but unfortunately, in the hands of capitalism, they have become tools for intensifying coercion. Our entrapment in the rigors of work stems primarily from a lack of political imagination and a fear of losing control over people. In this world, where work colonizes free time, relationships, imagination, and the body, the refusal to work becomes a political, ecological, and existential act. This annual gesture is an attempt to break out of this cycle, not to take a vacation, but to step outside the logic of work and rest that serves work.

II.

Why do I refuse work?

I don't refuse all work, but wage labour, work subordinated to economic compulsion. The kind referred to in English as *labour*. I do not refuse work understood as action, relation, care, or creativity. What I refuse is labour: the sale of time and energy in exchange for survival, subordinated to someone else's schedules, hierarchies, and the logic of productivity.

My refusal is not a rejection of life. It is a refusal to let the market colonize life.

Because work, in its capitalist form, was never meant to free us.
It was created to govern people and generate profit. Chang writes that "those who need the most bear the greatest costs of economic policies". Work is one of the mechanisms through which these inequalities are maintained.

Because I no longer believe I must work to deserve life.
The cult of work says: "You are worth as much as you produce".
I say: no.
Erich Fromm observed in *Escape from Freedom* that modern humans often fear freedom more than oppression, because freedom means responsibility for one's own life. The work ethic offers an easy escape: submission, routine, and meaning provided from the outside. Refusing work is therefore also a refusal of this constant escape.

Because unemployment is not shameful, it is the future.
As Paul Mattick wrote in *The Economics of Cybernation* (1962): "The leisure of the starving is no leisure at all". That is why the struggle must be systemic; in an era of advancing automation, we should not demand full employment, but full leisure. Under capitalism, unemployment is a punishment, a means of control and discipline, completely stifling the potential for fleeting freedom. That is why my refusal to work extends beyond an individual gesture, becoming

a systemic critique of the fear of unemployment that forces people to accept labour in any form.

Because I do not want to be a cog in an economy driven by planetary destruction.
Capitalist production means emissions, exploitation, waste, and climate crisis. Working at full speed, we are working against ourselves.

Because I am tired.
Depression, burnout, and the "privatization of stress" are not individual failures but consequences of the culture of work described by Mark Fisher in *Capitalist Realism*.
Zofia Smełka-Leszczyńska in *Long Live Work: On The F*-up of Grind Culture [Cześć pracy. O kulturze zap***dolu]* (2024) shows how hustle culture functions as a form of soft violence: it convinces us that if we cannot keep up, it must be our fault. Yet burnout and depression are rational responses of the body to an inhuman system.
Happy Unemployed (1996) revealed something that remains taboo: the absence of work does not necessarily mean unhappiness. On the contrary, many participants described improvements in well-being, relationships, and sense of meaning after leaving the regime of work. Above all, people are destroyed by the systemic fear of unemployment.

Because I want to reclaim my own life.
My own rhythm, my body, my attention, my time, my relationships.

Because it is possible to live differently.
J. K. Gibson-Graham wrote in *A Postcapitalist Politics* (2006):
"Pessimistic critique closes the imagination". I choose openness, experimentation, and heresy.

Because work is a form of violence.
Bob Black wrote in *The Abolition of Work* (1985): "No one should ever work" and "there is more freedom in any moderately de-stalinized dictatorship than in the average workplace". His point was to highlight that work, as an institution, is not socio-politically neutral.

It is based on coercion, hierarchy, and the squandering of life. What is called the “work ethic” is in fact an ethic of submission. And whenever an activity becomes meaningful, voluntary, and joyful, it ceases to be work.

I do not question the value of all forms of work. Society will always need essential activities: care, healing, education, and food production. The key question is: why are those performing the most socially necessary tasks often overworked and relatively underpaid? The real problem is a system that forces most people to work under the threat of economic exclusion and distributes the wealth produced in profoundly unequal ways. My refusal of work is a rejection of that system.

III.

The place I speak from: post-art, parasitism, artworker

This project emerges from the field of art, more precisely from the domain of post-art and artistic labour, where the boundary between life and work has been completely dissolved. As an art worker, I function within a system of permanent availability, flexibility, and endless production, where every activity can be subordinated to the logic of work.

I speak from the position of the precariat, the class described by Guy Standing as living in constant insecurity, without stable employment, protections, or a predictable future. The precarity of artistic labour is the norm today, it is defined by project-based work,

inconsistent income, a lack of permanent positions, and the constant need to prove one's own value. This is often accompanied by a conscious refusal to enter into power hierarchies that demand availability, diplomacy, and social "positioning". For me, this situation clashes with a strong work ethic inherited from my working-class and rural background, where work was a necessity, a moral obligation, and essentially the only promise of advancement. The tension between precariousness and this internalized workaholism forms the foundation of my refusal.

I operate under the pseudonym Parasite, which I have used for years as a figure of criticism toward the status and role of the artist in capitalism (*Manifesto of Parasitism*, 2010). I use the category of parasitism to expose systemic violence, a state in which artists work without limits or pay, sustained by passion, vocation, and a vague promise of the future.

The year-long refusal of work is a continuation and consequence of this existential-artistic practice. It represents a radical departure from a labour-centered conception of art and an attempt to reclaim life from the regime of productivity.

IV.

Scope of the experiment: A year without work

The project consists of 12 months of a total refusal of wage labour:

– no commissions of any kind
– no paid projects
– no grants, honoraria or contracts
– no professional replies to emails
– no waking up “for work”
– no portfolio, CV or deadlines
– no “producing oneself” (self-entrepreneurship)

It is also a refusal of what David Frayne in *The Refusal of Work: The Theory and Practice of Resistance to Work* (2015) calls the “internal supervisor”: the voice that constantly demands explanation, justification and the legitimization of one’s existence and value through usefulness. A year without work is an attempt to disarm this internal police of productivity. Everything I do is meant to remain outside the logic of market value. It’s a conscious, voluntary decision to step outside the capitalist system. Instead of “doing nothing”, I’m choosing a year of living life to the fullest, a life that can’t be reduced to mere productivity.

Guillaume Paoli wrote in *The Manifesto of the Happily Unemployed* (2006) that the happily unemployed person is a dangerous figure because they undermine the moral blackmail of capitalism. If someone can live without working, the entire narrative of the necessity of work begins to tremble. My year-long experiment is therefore not only a private gesture, but also a test of the limits of social tolerance toward an unproductive life.

Meetings, conversations, presence
The project does not mean withdrawing from social relations or remaining silent. During the year of refusing work, I remain open to invitations to meetings, conversations and social situations whose purpose is collective thinking, sharing experiences and talking

about life without work. My approach eschews the format of lectures or educational services. I reject the preparation of content, the execution of scripts, and the pursuit of measurable results in favor of presence and conversation free from pressure to perform.

V.

Material conditions and the framework of survival for the experiment

Refusing work does not mean escaping the realities of life. I carry out this project within specific economic conditions, relying on previously accumulated savings and maintaining living costs at the lowest possible level. For the duration of the experiment I have my basic needs secured, including a rented live-work studio and health insurance resulting from the extension of my doctoral program, within which this project constitutes a key element of my research-artistic work.

I do not possess passive income. My functioning is based on practices that I have used for years: freeganism, zero/less-waste, minimizing consumption and using non-market circulation. These strategies are an integral part of the project, they serve as an experiment in alternative forms of the everyday economy.

For me, the crucial distinction is this:
the goal of the project is not non-earning, but non-labouring.
Therefore, I accept forms of material support, provided they remain free from any obligation of service, production, reporting, or task execution. I view them as a way to enable, and potentially continue, a life without labour.

VI.

Principles and practices: anticonsumption, less-waste, freeganism, ecology

Zero-waste, less-waste, freeganism
In a world of overproduction and resource appropriation, refusing new consumption is an anti-capitalist act. In practice this means:
– living mainly from second circulation, gifts and recovery
– minimal carbon footprint
– processing, repairing and reusing
– anti-consumerist minimalism

What many would call “survival” is in fact a new economy of abundance.
Jason Hickel shows that capitalism produces artificial scarcity in a world of real abundance. Freeganism and zero/less-waste are forms of resistance against the wasteful economy which relies on overproduction to sustain itself.

Veganism and the ecology of relations go beyond the scope of diet, redefining our relationships with the earth and animals, which are not my_our property to exploit.

Decolonizing free time
Free time under capitalism is colonized by productivity, self-improvement, self-presentation and content production. In my experiment there will be no:
– “developing oneself”
– “improving competencies”
– “working on oneself” as an investment in future market value

There will be: self-care, care and tenderness, rest, walking, purposelessness.
Decolonizing free time also means breaking with the compulsion to spend time “meaningfully”. As Paul Lafargue wrote in *The Right to Be Lazy*, the society of work hates idleness because idleness cannot easily be controlled.

Nadia C. in the text *Your Politics Are Boring As Fuck* wrote that truly radical practices manifest themselves through the abandonment of boring, exhausting rituals of power, rather than through ideological declarations alone. Refusal of work is precisely such a gesture: instead of drawing up new plans to manage the world, I propose siphoning energy from a system that feeds on our attention and our time.

Resigning from disciplinary tools
Calendar, schedule, weekly planning, KPI (key performance indicator), tasks, multitasking – these concepts do not exist this year.
L. Susan Brown provocatively asked *Does Work Really Work*? (1995), pointing out that the cost of work is not only hours of life but also the loss of autonomy, relationships, and the ability to define oneself. By abandoning the tools of planning, monitoring, and productivity, I regain control over my own rhythm.

VII.

Reclaiming dignity: Unemployment beyond shame

Capitalism produces the figure of the "unemployed" as a figure of lack: someone deprived of value, meaning and a place within the social order. The shame of unemployment performs a disciplinary function, producing obedience even before direct economic coercion appears. It is no coincidence that authoritarian regimes moralize unemployment particularly intensely: it is precisely there that the possibility of refusal becomes visible.

The system simultaneously glorifies work and is repulsed by it. On the one hand it produces *bullshit jobs*, on the other the illusion of elite labour: symbolic, representational, performed in order to justify the accumulation of wealth and maintain the myth that high

incomes are the result of exceptional effort. The compulsion to work applies primarily to those who do not possess capital, while elites function outside it, living from rents (income from capital), dividends and passive income, most often inherited rather than "earned" (see: rentier capitalism).

At the same time it is workers and the unemployed who are accused of laziness, idleness, insufficiency and lack of ambition. As Thomas Piketty demonstrated in *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (2014), under current relations between the rate of return on capital and the rate of economic growth, social inequalities reproduce and deepen automatically and require no work at all. Great inequalities lead to lower levels of social well-being, higher levels of illness, depression, addiction, and crime, as well as declining social trust and social mobility.

The myth that wealth results from individual industriousness conceals the real processes of capital accumulation and inheritance. For some, not labouring is a privilege, for others: a shame and a punishment. As Paul Lafargue wrote in *The Right to Be Lazy* (1883), the greatest problem of modernity is that people must work in order to secure their right to live, to survive. In this context, the refusal of labour becomes a tool for exposing structural hypocrisy, replacing a strategy of escape with open confrontation.

In the text *Happy Unemployed: A Report on the State of Happiness* (1996), unemployment is portrayed as a transitional space toward communal ways of life based on mutual aid, solidarity, and shared time. In this view, dignity stems from the ability to refuse employment. Labour is not a default state nor a natural obligation conditioning the right to live; it is one of many possible forms of activity, dependent on conscious needs and desires. Voluntary unemployment thus becomes a practice of dismantling the narrative according to which life must be earned, worked for and constantly justified through productivity.

VIII.

Positive outcomes and the horizon of the future

For me
– reclaiming mental health
– returning to my own rhythm
– rebuilding family, friendship and neighbourhood relations: community
– creative space beyond the logic of the market
– the feeling that I can exist without "proving my worth"

For the world
A year of refusing work is a micro-utopia of a post-growth future:
– reduced emissions through low consumption
– less production = less waste, less energy, less exploitation
– more egalitarian relations
– life taken out from under the rules of the market
– showing that freedom doesn't arise from work but from its abolition

"The future is already here — it's just not evenly distributed"
William Gibson, 1993

Degrowth means rejecting excess production at the expense of others and the planet. It is a return to the question "why?" rather than "how much?". As Hickel writes: well-being is determined by security, equality, and access to the commons, which rarely go hand in hand with GDP growth.

Proposals for the future
The following proposals are deliberately utopian in nature and set a positive intellectual horizon. Their order reflects the conviction that the transition to a post-work society is a process requiring phased implementation and changes in material conditions.

– **shortening the working week**
Already, John Maynard Keynes in *Economic Possibilities for our*

Grandchildren (1930) predicted that technological progress would make it possible to limit work to a few hours a day. Reducing working time is the first and most direct step in weakening the role of work in our everyday social life.

– **changing the work ethic**
Moving away from the moralization of productivity, the shame of unemployment, and the identification of human value with employment.

– **full automation without fear of unemployment**
Automation as liberation from the compulsion to work, provided that profits are redistributed equitably, ceases to be a threat.

– **reducing unnecessary production, deintensifying work and pace of life**
Within the perspective of degrowth/post-growth: less work, less production, more time, relationships, and care.

– **development of public services and the commons**
As the foundation of social well-being, independent of one's position in the labour market.

– **reduction of inequalities**
As a condition of real freedom of choice and the possibility of refusal.

– **universal basic income**
From national solutions to global ones, as a tool for balancing opportunities between the Global North and South, and as a material foundation of existential security.

– **decommodification of basic needs**
Such as water, food, housing, energy, healthcare, education and access to time.

– **communal forms of life and economy**
Based on sharing, mutual aid and local networks of support.

– **a shift from competition to coexistence**
From rivalry to co-existence, from efficiency to relationality.

– **abandoning the work ethic and entering the post-work horizon**
A life beyond the compulsion to be productive: active, conscious, and free, free from passive idleness too.

Universal basic income is a logical response to a world in which labour is becoming unnecessary, yet still performs a disciplinary function. A post-work society would be active and free from compulsion.

War, militarism, violence
It is impossible to discuss dismantling the compulsion to work without discussing the contemporary world defined by war. Capitalism as a system of work has from the beginning relied on violence: enclosures, colonization, imperial expansion and the militarization of states. War is its most brutal mechanism for sustaining accumulation. It destroys infrastructures built through years of effort, wastes resources, causes death, crisis and permanent states of uncertainty, and then forces reconstruction for the sake of profit.
In a time of escalating armed conflicts and undoubtedly justified armament in the name of security, the post-work perspective must also include demilitarization, pacifism and the rejection of war logic as a principle organizing the world. Although this may seem even more utopian than abolishing the compulsion to work, since, as Slavoj Žižek observed, it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism, this is precisely why the demand must be articulated. A post-work society cannot be based on violence, mobilization and a permanent state of war or pre-war. Post-work must assume a departure from war as a tool of politics and the economy.

IX.
Conclusion: Refusal as a creative act

"Work less, live more" is a survival strategy.
The words of the U.S. president Bill Clinton, "Any job is better than no job," are a lie. Now more than ever it is necessary to say: "No job is better than any job," because this is a realistic diagnosis of a world in which work has ceased to serve life.

A year of refusing work is a performance, but also a prototype of another reality: more caring, relational, communal, solidaristic, and ecological. A world in which there are more important things than growth and productivity. A post-work world.

As Arthur C. Clarke stated:

> *"The goal of the future is full unemployment"*

Because no one should be forced to do anything to deserve to exist. Bob Black wrote that the future envisions the complete replacement of work with play, care, and voluntary activity, going far beyond the demand for "better work". Happy unemployment, however, is not a goal in itself. It is rather a foretaste of a world in which life is no longer subordinated to work and no one has to suffer because of it.

If another world is to come, perhaps it will begin with a simple gesture: the refusal of work.

Maybe not just for a year, but for the rest of my life.

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