

Capitalist Workplaces Set Bosses Up To Be Authoritarian Tyrants



Prof. Elizabeth S. Anderson - University of Michigan

Long before the growing interest in economic inequality facing contemporary capitalist societies, radical thinkers and [union](#) organizers were concerned about the authoritarian governance in workplaces. Unfortunately, this concern seems to have taken a back seat in political philosophy during the present era. Elizabeth S. Anderson, a professor of philosophy and women's studies at the University of Michigan, is seeking to remedy this with her trenchant analyses of the coercive and hierarchical nature of capitalist firms and corporations. Her book *Private Government* offers an important reminder that bosses tend to be dictators and that workers' lives are essentially at the mercy of private government.

C.J. Polychroniou: In your book [Private Government](#), you analyze the different facets of modern workplaces and argue that firms and corporations operating under so-called "free market" norms and arrangements are actually coercive and hierarchical in nature, and rule over workers' lives as authoritarian governments tend to do. Can you elaborate a bit on these highly challenging ideas, as most people don't seem to view workplaces as dictatorships?

Elizabeth S. Anderson: Look at the organizational chart of any firm: You will see a hierarchy of offices, with subordinates reporting to their bosses, and bosses issuing orders to subordinates that must be obeyed on pain of sanctions such as getting fired, demoted, harassed or denied decent hours. That's all it takes to make a little government — the power to issue orders to others, backed by threats of punishment. If the workplace is a government, we can ask, what is the constitution of that government? The answer, in nearly all cases where workers lack union representation, is that the constitution of workplace government is a dictatorship. Workers don't get to elect their bosses. They don't have a right to participate in the firm's decision-making about the terms and conditions of their work. For the most part, they have little effective recourse if their bosses abuse them, other than to quit.

Workers even lack the power to hold their bosses to account for a wide range of abuses at work — *even when those abuses are illegal*, such as [sexual harassment](#) and wage theft. The scale of [wage theft](#) — effected by forcing workers to work off the clock, work overtime without extra pay and numerous other scams — is vast. It exceeds the sum total of all other thefts in the U.S. The vast majority of workers who are sexually harassed face illegal retaliation at work for complaining. So most keep silent. More and more, employees are forced to sign mandatory arbitration agreements, which strip them of their right to have their case be heard by a neutral judge following legal procedures. Instead, they must go to an arbitrator chosen by their employer, who is bound by no procedures, and knows that the arbitration contract will not be renewed if they render too many judgments in favor of the worker. No wonder workers under mandatory arbitration are far less likely to win their cases, and when they win, receive far less compensation than workers who sue their employer in court. It's a recipe for mass abuse. While many workers — particularly those in management or with rare skills — get decent treatment, millions of ordinary workers suffer under awful working conditions, low pay, unstable hours, and subjection to discrimination, wage theft and other illegal treatment.

Dictatorial employer control over workers doesn't even end when workers are off-duty. The default rule in the U.S. is "employment at will." This means that, with a few exceptions (mostly having to do with discrimination), employers are legally entitled to fire, demote and harass workers for any reason or no reason at all. This rule opens the door to punishing workers for things they do while off-duty. Many

workers have been fired because their boss disapproves of their choice of sexual partner, support for candidates and political causes the boss doesn't like, unconventional gender presentation, recreational use of marijuana on days off and other personal decisions. When a Coke worker can be [fired for drinking Pepsi](#) at lunch, it's easy to see that the scope of employer control over workers' lives is nearly unlimited.

You maintain that most people can't see what private workplaces are all about. Do you mean to say that employees can't see where authority lies and that they don't realize the power that employers have over their lives? How could this be possible? Is it related to the pathology of "free market" ideology? Is this what grants legitimacy to capitalist firms and corporations in the eyes of employees and the general public?

A Zogby poll of U.S. workers about 10 years ago found that 25 percent regard their workplace as a dictatorship. Why don't they all recognize the reality? I think this is because political discourse about work frames vital issues of worker freedom in terms of "freedom of contract." Because workers are always legally free to refuse a job offer or to quit, people talk as if workers are free. But this free-market freedom only guarantees workers the freedom to starve. The critical questions should focus on what employed workers are free to do at work and off-duty. Talk about "free markets" distracts us from recognizing that the standard employment contract puts workers under the thumb of their bosses and strips them of their rightful freedoms. Thousands of slaughterhouse workers lack the freedom to use the bathroom during their eight-hour shift. They are told to wear diapers to work! When employers restrict even the most basic bodily functions of their workers, it's ridiculous to pretend that these workers are free. While the *acceptance* of the employment contract is, from a legal point of view, voluntary (even when workers are desperate for a job), the *content* of the contract puts workers under the subjection of their employers.

Free-market ideology refuses to accept this framing, because it insists on the illusion that the content of the employment contract represents a meeting of minds over terms that have been freely negotiated between the parties. In reality, the vast majority of employment contracts are oral, not written, with workers knowing none of the terms other than what the employer chooses to tell them. This is possible, because the *state* has written the default terms of the employment contract in its laws regulating work. In that sense, the default

employment contract is much like the default marriage contract, the terms of which have also been written by the state. Quick question to married readers: Do you know whether your marriage follows common law or community property? This follows from the state where you reside, not (unless you have a prenuptial agreement) from terms you negotiated with your spouse. The vast majority of workers never get an opportunity to negotiate, either. This is because the state has already decided, in the default employment contract, to deal virtually all of the authority cards to employers. Since employers are already holding the authority cards, they have little incentive to deal any of them back to the employee in negotiations. So, most don't bother to hold negotiations.

What about all the latest trends in many workplaces where the tendency is to get employees to feel, through various creative schemes, that they are all part of the big picture? I have in mind such corporate tactics as group meetings on leadership ("everyone can be a leader"), encouraging communication in common areas, rewarding individuals as "employee of the month," and so on and so forth. These schemes are obviously designed to increase employee satisfaction and productivity, but are they not also designed to promote a further sense of "false consciousness" about power relations between employers and employees?

While employers have immense legal and practical power over workers, it's important to recognize the vast diversity of worker experiences. These are often dependent on their skill level, rank in the organization, experience, and demographic characteristics, such as their race, gender, sexual orientation, age and health status. Firms also vary a great deal in their work cultures. Some workers have great jobs, where they enjoy the respect of their co-workers, interesting jobs, autonomy in fulfilling their duties, good pay and enough leisure to have a life outside work. If these workers suffer from false consciousness, it is mainly in failing to appreciate how little protection they have if circumstances change. An economic downturn, a new boss who is petty or abusive, a pregnancy, illness, or any number of other circumstances could turn a dream job into a nightmare, with few recourses available to the worker.

Yet, there was a time, not that far back, when workers' resistance to private dictatorships was rather widespread and in fact, quite well organized. What will it take for employees to recognize the coercive, hierarchical and oppressive nature of private workplaces?

Labor unions have always played a critical role in generating the knowledge, as well as the organization, that workers need to defend their interests. In our

individualist culture, with its rhetoric of “personal responsibility” and freedom of choice, it is all too easy for atomized workers to blame themselves when something goes wrong at work. “Is it just me? Am I oversensitive?” are often the first questions victims of sexual harassment ask about their experience. When workers come together to share their experiences, they recognize that problems for which they blamed themselves are due to the system to which they are subject. A revival of the labor movement is needed to raise workers’ consciousness beyond our individualist discourse of free markets and freedom of contract. It’s already happening, with the [Fight for \\$15](#), teachers’ strikes in several states, and organizations outside traditional union structures, such as ROC United. But we have a long way to go.

One final question: Do you think that the emergence of the gig economy will result in a new organizational setting for the modern firm that will deviate from the description you have provided of private workplaces as dictatorships?

Technology now enables firms to hire workers by the task, rather than the job or the career. But the short-term nature of this work doesn’t change who is calling the shots. Firms such as Uber claim that their drivers are independent contractors, even while they minutely regulate how they do their jobs, and the terms and conditions of their work. Such misclassification of employees as independent contractors is pervasive, offering workers the illusion of personal autonomy, while depriving them of the benefits they are legally entitled to have as employees. Many firms hire temps to do work identical to that done by their regular employees, at a fraction of the pay and benefits, and with far less security. For the most part, the [gig economy](#) is generating a new precariat, not a class of self-employed, autonomous workers. If gig workers organized, however, they could win better conditions for themselves. There is no substitute for collective action. Contrary to all the hype about the gig economy, tech alone won’t secure their freedom.

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C.J. Polychroniou is a political economist/political scientist who has taught and worked in universities and research centers in Europe and the United States. His main research interests are in European economic integration, globalization, the political economy of the United States and the deconstruction of neoliberalism’s politico-economic project. He is a regular contributor to *Truthout* as well as a

member of *Truthout's* Public Intellectual Project. He has published several books and his articles have appeared in a variety of journals, magazines, newspapers and popular news websites. Many of his publications have been translated into several foreign languages, including Croatian, French, Greek, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish and Turkish. He is the author of [*Optimism Over Despair: Noam Chomsky On Capitalism, Empire, and Social Change*](#), an anthology of interviews with Chomsky originally published at *Truthout* and collected by Haymarket Books.

Previously published: <https://truthout.org/>

Jane Austen 1775-1817

Jane Austen, 41 (16th December 1775 - 18th July 1817) was an English novelist known primarily for her six major novels, which interpret, critique and comment upon the British landed gentry at the end of the 18th century. Austen's plots often explore the dependence of women on marriage in the pursuit of favourable social standing and economic security. Her works critique the novels of sensibility of the second half of the 18th century and are part of the transition to 19th-century literary realism. Her use of biting irony, along with her realism and social commentary, have earned her acclaim among critics and scholars. Presented by Lucy Worsley.

Rosa Luxemburg Internet Archive



Rosa Luxemburg
Internet Archive



“Freedom only for the supporters of the government, only for the members of one party - however numerous they may be - is no freedom at all. Freedom is always and

exclusively freedom for the one who thinks differently. Not because of any fanatical concept of 'justice' but because all that is instructive, wholesome and purifying in political freedom depends on this essential characteristic, and its effectiveness vanishes when 'freedom' becomes a special privilege." - The Russian Revolution

The Library: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/index.htm>

21 juni 1943



Begin van de zomer! Het zou een stralende zomerdag moeten zijn maar het regent. Gisteren was het warm, een onweer zorgde voor regen. De langste dag. Voor ons blijven het lange dagen.

De schrik van vorige week zit nog in mijn benen en omdat ik Hans eigenlijk zaterdag verwacht (soms komt hij onaangekondigd), zit ik alweer in angst. Stilletjes, want ik

mag de anderen niet aansteken, maar mijn angst om Hans en Inge groeit elke dag, neemt enorme proporties aan. Ik weet dat mijn zenuwen me die streek leveren maar de angst om je kinderen is ook zoiets verschrikkelijks.

Morgen komt misschien Inges vriend (vorige week kwam hij niet) en ik blijf onrustig over hoe het met het kind gaat, of zij zich kan aanpassen, of ze kan blijven.

Van Sigrid Undset heb ik *Ida Elisabeth* gelezen. Wat schrijft die vrouw mooi, eenvoudig, en juist in de eenvoud van haar stijl ligt haar meesterschap. De moeder in haar laat haar zo prachtig schrijven. Baren is alleen het onbewerkte materiaal leveren, laat ze Ida zeggen, daarom mag een moeder haar kinderen nooit loslaten, totdat ze volwassen zijn. Zo dacht ik ook altijd, ik ging nooit op reis, en ik hoor daarover nog steeds verwijten van mijn man, die me dit nooit heeft vergeven.

Van Pierre Benoit heb ik zijn beroemde boek *Atlantis* gelezen.

Wat een geluk dat hier een tamelijk goede bibliotheek is. Benoit fantaseert over het door Plato beschreven verloren land Atlantis, midden in de Sahara, met koningin Antinea, die een verzameling Europese minnaars aanlegt en die diverse gestrikten - uit liefde gestorven en door een onbekend procedé gebalsemd - in een zaal van haar paleis bewaart.

De geest van de mens die ons door zo'n boek steeds weer bezielt. Het goddelijke in de mens en in de natuur dat je ertoe dwingt te denken dat er toch iets tussen hemel en aarde bestaat wat wij niet begrijpen. Het is alsof een vroegere geest in het hoofd van de nu levenden is gekomen en deze beelden uit oude, oeroude tijden voor ons doet herleven.

En dan de werkelijkheid. Ik word wakker uit een mooie droom als ik zo'n boek lees en ons zie zitten met z'n drieën, ondergedoken, omdat we weer zoveel eeuwen zijn teruggeworpen.

Dutch Prize Papers



HCA 32 / 1845.1: A box with ship's documents, court papers, ship's journals, cash books and a wallet with a small French prayer book, seized in the 17th century during the Second and Third Anglo-Dutch Wars. Source: Sailing Letters Journal IV,

Zutphen: Walburg Pers, 2011, 12;

picture: Erik van der Doe

The Prize Papers are documents seized by British navy and privateers from enemy ships in the period 1652-1815. These papers are kept in the archive of the High Court of Admiralty in The National Archives in Kew (London). Approximately a quarter of the Prize Papers originates from Dutch ships. Apart from ship's journals, lists of cargo, accounts, plantation lists and interrogations of crew members, this collection also contains approximately 38,000 business and private letters. The letters originate from all social strata of society and most of them never reached their intended destination.

Research

The huge variety of the Prize Papers makes it suitable for different types of research. It means that the Prize Papers can be used for a wide range of research topics, for example, for developments in language and dialect, trade, material culture, social relationships and knowledge transfer from the 17th to the 19th centuries. A large international research project by the universities of Oxford and Birmingham led by Jelle van Lottum focused on the migration of sailors and the distribution of human capital, based on records of interrogations of crew members. This [research](#) was financed by the Economic and Social Research Council (2011-2016).

The Sailing Letters' project carried out by the National Library of the Netherlands in 2004, introduced the Prize Papers to a broad group of Dutch researchers. Five *Sailing Letters Journals* were published between 2008 and 2013 to make this rich and versatile resource even more widely known.

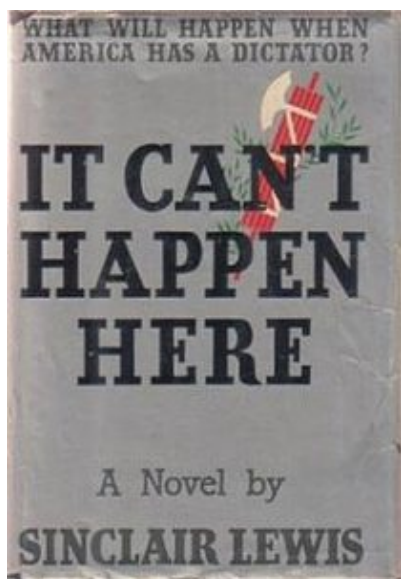
Preservation and digitisation

The award at the end of 2015 of a substantial subsidy to Huygens ING by *Metamorfoze*, the national programme for the preservation of paper heritage, made it possible to preserve and digitise 144.000 pages of selected documents.

Go to: <https://www.huygens.knaw.nl/dutch-prize-papers/>

or: <https://prizepapers.huygens.knaw.nl/>

Sinclair Lewis ~ It Can't Happen Here



First edition 1935

It Can't Happen Here is the only one of Sinclair Lewis's later novels to match the power of *Main Street*, *Babbitt*, and *Arrowsmith*. A cautionary tale about the fragility of democracy, it is an alarming, eerily timeless look at how fascism could take hold in America.

Written during the Great Depression, when the country was largely oblivious to Hitler's aggression, it juxtaposes sharp political satire with the chillingly realistic rise of a president who becomes a dictator to save the nation from welfare cheats, sex, crime, and a liberal press.

Called "a message to thinking Americans" by the *Springfield Republican* when it was published in 1935, *It Can't Happen Here* is a shockingly prescient novel that remains as fresh and contemporary as today's news.

Chapter I

THE handsome dining room of the Hotel Wessex, with its gilded plaster shields

and the mural depicting the Green Mountains, had been reserved for the Ladies' Night Dinner of the Fort Beulah Rotary Club.

Here in Vermont the affair was not so picturesque as it might have been on the Western prairies. Oh, it had its points: there was a skit in which Medary Cole (grist mill & feed store) and Louis Rotenstern (custom tailoring—pressing & cleaning) announced that they were those historic Vermonters, Brigham Young and Joseph Smith, and with their jokes about imaginary plural wives they got in ever so many funny digs at the ladies present. But the occasion was essentially serious. All of America was serious now, after the seven years of depression since 1929. It was just long enough after the Great War of 1914-18 for the young people who had been born in 1917 to be ready to go to college... or to another war, almost any old war that might be handy.

The features of this night among the Rotarians were nothing funny, at least not obviously funny, for they were the patriotic addresses of Brigadier General Herbert Y. Edgeways, U.S.A. (ret.), who dealt angrily with the topic "Peace through Defense—Millions for Arms but Not One Cent for Tribute," and of Mrs. Adelaide Tarr Gimmitch— she who was no more renowned for her gallant anti-suffrage campaigning way back in 1919 than she was for having, during the Great War, kept the American soldiers entirely out of French cafés by the clever trick of sending them ten thousand sets of dominoes.

Nor could any social-minded patriot sneeze at her recent somewhat unappreciated effort to maintain the purity of the American Home by barring from the motion-picture industry all persons, actors or directors or cameramen, who had: (a) ever been divorced; (b) been born in any foreign country—except Great Britain, since Mrs. Gimmitch thought very highly of Queen Mary, or (c) declined to take an oath to revere the Flag, the Constitution, the Bible, and all other peculiarly American institutions.

The Annual Ladies' Dinner was a most respectable gathering—the flower of Fort Beulah. Most of the ladies and more than half of the gentlemen wore evening clothes, and it was rumored that before the feast the inner circle had had cocktails, privily served in Room 289 of the hotel. The tables, arranged on three sides of a hollow square, were bright with candles, cut-glass dishes of candy and slightly tough almonds, figurines of Mickey Mouse, brass Rotary wheels, and small silk American flags stuck in gilded hard-boiled eggs. On the wall was a

banner lettered “Service Before Self,” and the menu—the celery, cream of tomato soup, broiled haddock, chicken croquettes, peas, and tutti-frutti ice-cream—was up to the highest standards of the Hotel Wessex.

They were all listening, agape. General Edgeways was completing his manly yet mystical rhapsody on nationalism:

“... for these U-nited States, a-lone among the great powers, have no desire for foreign conquest. Our highest ambition is to be darned well let alone! Our only gen-uine relationship to Europe is in our arduous task of having to try and educate the crass and ignorant masses that Europe has wished onto us up to something like a semblance of American culture and good manners. But, as I explained to you, we must be prepared to defend our shores against all the alien gangs of international racketeers that call themselves ‘governments,’ and that with such feverish envy are always eyeing our inexhaustible mines, our towering forests, our titanic and luxurious cities, our fair and far-flung fields.

“For the first time in all history, a great nation must go on arming itself more and more, not for conquest—not for jealousy— not for war—but for *peace*! Pray God it may never be necessary, but if foreign nations don’t sharply heed our warning, there will, as when the proverbial dragon’s teeth were sowed, spring up an armed and fearless warrior upon every square foot of these United States, so arduously cultivated and defended by our pioneer fathers, whose sword-girded images we must be... or we shall perish!”

The applause was cyclonic. “Professor” Emil Staubmeyer, the superintendent of schools, popped up to scream, “Three cheers for the General—hip, hip, hooray!”

Full text: <http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks03/0301001h.html>

Note:

Title: It Can’t Happen Here

Author: Sinclair Lewis

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