

PART TWO

Reorganizing the Workplace

Introduction to Part 2

The following two chapters analyze workplaces at opposite ends of the organizational spectrum—a state bureaucracy and a collective bakery. In the Mandana County Welfare Department, regulations and job classifications order the workplace, while at Wholly Grains Bakery there are a minimal division of labor and ever-changing guidelines. In different ways and with varying success, workers in both organizations seek to maintain or expand their control over the work environment.

In the Mandana County Welfare Department there are two types of workers: professional social workers (MSWs), who provide social services to clients, and eligibility workers (EWs), who determine clients' needs for economic aid. They are organized into a common union, which develops strategies to resist the erosion of workplace autonomy. At Wholly Grains, collective members have rejected conventional work arrangements and constructed their own work organization. They struggle to maintain a flexible division of labor against pressures toward deskilling, rigid hierarchies, and specialization.

Within the Welfare Department MSWs and EWs oppose the bureaucratic regulation in different ways. MSWs are protective of the one portion of their work that cannot be easily quantified or regulated: client counseling and recommendations. Their grievances cite the incompatibility of standardized tasks and their professional responsibilities to clients. Heavily surveilled and lacking discretion in any of their duties, EWs simply refuse to meet the steep production quotas through slowdowns. The duties EWs deem most onerous, providing highly standardized services to welfare clients, are publically rejected by them as unnecessary. Working within a heavily supervised and regulated workplace, welfare workers nonetheless attempt to fight and, in some cases, subvert the administrative control over their work.

In the late 1960s public sector unions formed effective coalitions with clients to oppose the regulations and budget cutbacks that distressed both clients and workers. Today welfare department workers no longer forge alliances with clients, and they have sacrificed broader political goals. However, they do continue to use clients as a resource: client work, often taking place outside of the view of supervisors, becomes the social workers' rationale to avoid further routinization of their work. EWs, who lack any discretion in their dealings with clients, nonetheless deploy their own critical definitions of clients in the media and with politicians. Welfare workers who are given a measure of authority to define clients' needs use their welfare clients to negotiate a compromised workplace control.

Founded in 1975, the Wholly Grains bakery collective was one of thousands of experiments in building alternative social and economic institutions that grew out of the countercultural movement of that period. Most were short-lived, but a few like Wholly Grains proved more durable and continue to be vital organizations. But this survival has not been easy. Organized around principles of worker ownership and control and a minimal division of labor, collective members must be constantly vigilant against pressures to normalize their structure and workplace relations.

Maintaining a flexible nonhierarchical division of labor was particularly difficult for the collective. The delicate tension between the need for coordination and the rejection of managerial domination has resulted in crisis and the need for reorganization. Ann Ferguson focuses on the pressures toward evolution into a conventional business enterprise and on the resources that the collective draws on to mitigate against such degeneration.

Both Ann Ferguson and Alice Burton found that workers and collective members draw on resources outside of the workplace in their struggle for control over their labor. These lateral linkages, neglected by contemporary theorists of work organization, are crucial factors in shaping struggles. Collective members draw on a rich community network of institutions and cooperatives for moral and material support as well as for potential members. They also take advantage of an expanding market for what they produce: craft-made, healthful, whole-grain bread. Contemporary welfare workers, now without political alliances with clients, use them instrumentally in bargaining for workplace control. Workers who are able to make alliances with others with similar interests can still stem the tide of bureaucratic rationalization.

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