

# SIMONE WEIL ON LABOR: Her Insights Applied to Current Sweatshop Labor

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Simone Weil's analysis of what is good and bad about laboring is a unique approach and differs dramatically from the Marxist critique with which many of us are much more familiar. Perhaps due to its uniqueness, it is rarely used to analyze contemporary crises in globalization and underdevelopment. This paper hopes to introduce a wider audience to Weil's concepts and then use her ideas and experiences (especially her critique of machines and workplace organization, and her account of the spiritual aspect of labor) to analyze aspects of the contemporary sweatshop labor as well as anti-globalization activism.

## **1. Background: Her Life and early experience with labor**

Simone Weil was born in Paris in 1909, of Jewish descent, and her life had been greatly upset by Hitler and the Nazi party in Germany and the unfolding of World War II. Upon completion of her studies in philosophy, Weil got a job in philosophy, teaching at a girl's Lycee. She also had an active political life. She left her job in philosophy to find out what labor was like. Weil's manual labor was always voluntary, motivated out of conviction and not economic hardship. Since Weil, according to Fiori, often suffered from migraine headaches and had poor manual dexterity, her accomplishments in labor were sometimes meager, but her willingness to work and her efforts were substantial.<sup>1</sup>

As McFarlane explains, by 1934-35, Weil sensed that Europe was preparing for another war. She didn't want to join efforts on the Left, which she feared would help Russia and embolden the Franco-Prussian military alliance. But she felt that liberation of the workers was of utmost importance. So, she applied for a leave of absence from her work of teaching at the Lycee so that she could work at the Alsthom factory which made electrical equipment to be used in streetcars and subway cars. She insisted on living on the wage she would earn at the factory in order to more fully experience the situation of the workers. She looked forward to making "a hard but joyous contact with 'real life.'"<sup>2</sup> But her actual experience was much worse than she had ever imagined. However she continued to work, as long as her health could endure, at a total of three factories, from December 1934 to August 1935.

How to explain Weil's project, and her tenacity in clinging to her goal under such formidable circumstances? From what I have read I would speculate there were two main motives. First, Weil knew that exploited labor existed, and she wanted the liberation of workers. But she wanted to be able to see workers' problems from their own perspective, both to avoid imposing a solution from without (she had seen such insensitivity in colonial domination), and to understand what had been puzzling to her – why more workers did not become politically active in opposing their own oppression. But secondly, I suggest that Weil relished the idea of leaving academia for the realm of hard physical labor, because of the connection she drew between labor and spirituality. She hoped to have a spiritual experience at the factory. Her harsh experience of exploited labor did not make her give up her claim regarding the connection between spirituality and labor. Due

to constraints of space this paper will only discuss the first motive listed above..

## 2. Weil's insights into laboring

Weil stresses the need for craftsmanship's revival, with its emphasis on the experience of molding matter to fit a pattern that one is aware of; a feeling of pride in one's product, rather than alienation; a use of machines that is subservient to human needs. Weil argued that in the factory, work should become education. From a position of subordination, workers should become subordinate-collaborators and finally collaborators. Weil, herself, thinks factory labor could be radically transformed into more fulfilling work, if only both capitalist ownership of production and the relations of production were changed. What degrades the workers the most, she asserts, is the hierarchical relations of production, which keep the workers subservient to the bosses, and ignorant of the workings of the factory. Weil argues that political changes in the factory will affect the quality of workers' labor experience (not just their rate of pay).

Her factory experiences prove that labor in this most restrictive form, without any room for human freedom, is dehumanizing, and not even "human" labor at all. Because the laborers were desperate for money (a situation made chronic by low wages and unemployment) they were willing to do any job. The functions were repetitive and at a dizzying pace. Thinking was not possible, for all one's concentration had to be focused on the task in front of one so that a big machine did not chop off one's hands, or so that a piece was not ruined which would result in a major bawling out by the foreman. The heat was tremendous, the hours long. The laborers were dominated by the foreman and in competition with their peers (for each wanted to do the most piecework for the highest money, or else the easiest and least dangerous work). Even after-hours "free" time was spent in exhaustion from the day's work. Wages were so low that nutritious food and other of life's necessities could not be adequately provided. Miklos Veto notes that during the years of her life which were devoted to harsh physical labor, her fatigue, pain, worries, and the impression of her absolute subordination, engendered the feeling that she counted for zero. She noted then that "Slavery had made me completely lose the sense of having any rights."<sup>3</sup>

Weil contrasts two quite different scenarios in the work place: "A team of workers on a production-line under the eye of a foreman is a sorry spectacle, whereas it is a fine sight to see a handful of workmen in the building trade, checked by some difficulty, ponder the problem each for himself, make various suggestions for dealing with it, and then apply unanimously the method conceived by one of them, who may or may not have any official authority over the remainder."<sup>4</sup> There is something in the setup in the factory, with its emphasis on swift repetition and hierarchy of orders that makes the interaction in the second scenario described impossible. Both capitalist and communist factories treat workers as unthinking cogs in their machines; Weil was upset to hear that Stalin praised American "efficiency," because this stress on efficiency ensures that subordination of workers becomes extreme.<sup>5</sup>

While exploitative labor was the norm, that did not inhibit Weil from her experiments in labor. She still devoted three years of her life to working in the auto plants, even in an exploitative context and at great suffering to herself. Certainly within a short period of time she could ascertain that such laboring was not the ideal condition under which to experience "attention." Yet she persevered. I want to suggest that she did so out of a commitment to solidarity with laborers. Not only did she want to experience their hardships so as to understand laborers better, but she also wanted them to know that she cared about their plight. By sharing their dilemma,

however temporarily, she demonstrated her seriousness. By voluntarily giving up the privilege of a profession of thinking (academia) which involves minimal physical labor, in order to suffer as laborers do, she hopes to convey the message that labor should have dignity, and those who labor are due respect and recognition.

Weil advocated and demonstrated a voluntary program of the redistribution of labor. That individuals would choose to lift the heavy burden of labors from others helps their actions to be an occasion for spiritual growth. Weil was a critic of some of her contemporaries, who during the 1930s started a movement and a journal called *Ordre Nouveau*, led by Robert Aron, Arnaud Dandieu and others. The group proposed to solve the problem of labor by spreading the burdensome tasks which the bourgeoisie had placed upon the proletariat, by imposing 18 months of compulsory labor upon everyone. Weil criticized their solution, arguing that “a people subjected to a short period of compulsory unpaid labor will not really work except under pressure from a despotic central power and under the threat of severe punishments.”<sup>6</sup> Such persons would not have learned to love to labor; their sharing of the burden would not have been self-motivated.

#### **4. The Current Context of Globalized Capitalist Manual Labor**

Many of us are already familiar with the problems of globalization. In our contemporary international division of labor, Northern companies specialize in computers, high-tech, financial, and management services, while southern countries supply (and are under-compensated for) raw materials through their agricultural and mining labor. Samir Amin notes that trans-national corporations haven't helped Africa move beyond an international division of labor; Africa still provides the raw materials for Northern countries.<sup>7</sup> While contemporary India is a seeming success, known for its high-tech boom, there are not enough high-tech jobs for the amount of university graduates seeking them.<sup>8</sup> To discuss the flight of high-tech jobs to the global South goes beyond the scope of this paper, which focuses more narrowly on manual labor jobs. The majority of jobs which have relocated from the North to the South have been in manufacturing, and so Weil's description of factory labor, such as she experienced in France in the 1930s, is still a current reality for many in the global South (as well as some in the North).

Many factories and sweatshops relocate to struggling impoverished countries where workers can be hired for very low wages. Some locate in countries where unions are banned. In the case of some countries where the laborers have fought hard for their right to unionize such as in Indonesia, and have won modest gains in their pay, find themselves having to compete with the low wages of China and other countries that ban unions. “Every country is now competing to reduce worker rights,” according to Rustam Aksam who is president of the Indonesian Trade Unions Congress.<sup>9</sup> Such a situation calls for a global response, an international movement that puts pressure on the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and other organizations that shape regional and international economic laws.<sup>10</sup>

The inhumane conditions in sweatshops are well known. Twelve to fourteen hour workdays, six to seven days a week, with some occasions in which workers are forced to produce for a 24 hour shift. Women workers especially are subjected to physical and verbal abuse. Guards engage in invasion of privacy while conducting body searches for goods women might smuggle out with them. Long days would include only one or two brief bathroom breaks, often in stalls with no doors. Unions are banned and those who attempt to organize unions have been harassed, fired, and even threatened and killed. Policing of workers goes beyond the workplace into their private

lives. Geocities notes that “Women are often forced to take birth control pills or abort their babies, and in extreme cases are forbidden to marry or even fall in love!”<sup>11</sup>

But while the large scale protests are valuable and continue, activists are also engaging in smaller-scale ventures. Maquila workers in Nicaragua and Honduras joined unions and women’s groups, largely motivated by a conviction that worker solidarity and collective strategy were important values, and the best way to ensure betterment of working conditions and wages.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, North American students and concerned members of the community have gone to the countries where sweatshops exist, and try to experience first-hand the conditions and the life of the people who live and work in the sweatshops, some of them located in “Enterprise Zones” which are heavily guarded. Most cannot, unlike Weil, volunteer to work in such sweatshops for a few years, because security is tight and managers are on the look-out for “trouble-makers.” So they try to come as close as they can to such first-hand experience. While certainly the main thrust of activism should continue to be from women workers organizing themselves,<sup>13</sup> this paper will focus on the second aspect, solidarity of North Americans with the sweatshop movement.

Charlie Kernaghan of the National Labor Organization has organized groups of students to go to El Salvador to inspect sweatshops conditions there. Students are visibly moved by their encounters, and have their insights deepened by being able to place concrete faces on a problem they may have beforehand understood only shallowly on an abstract, conceptual level.<sup>14</sup> Kernaghan was originally skeptical of the role that North Americans could play by visiting other countries. He told Barbara Riggs who first suggested the idea that Central America did not need radical tourists, it needed the support of people back in the U.S. Obviously by now he has changed his mind, as he and Barbara Briggs both plan such trips.<sup>15</sup> In Indonesia, James Keady and Leslie Kretzu were not able to get jobs in the Nike sub-contracting factories there, but they were able to join with employees who were active in a labor movement. Also, to take a step closer to the situation, the two resolved to try as best they could to live on the salary of a Nike factory worker for thirty days. Each experienced pain in their bodies, as they were sapped of energy, and then became ill, unable to afford even basic medicines.

Skeptics might point out that merely visiting the site of a sweatshop will not help a North American truly understand what it is like for a worker to work in the factory. The same skeptic would note that Weil did not know what it was really like to be a working-class auto worker in France, she only knew what it was like to be a philosophy professor who worked in an auto plant. I have a two-pronged response to such critiques. First, I must agree with the critic that the visitor’s experience is different, due to their different background. Lawrence Thomas has argued that empathy has its limits; if one is not a member of the same downwardly socially constituted group, and one tries to imagine the experience of the other, there is a great chance that the person will project their own feelings and experience onto the other. With that caution in place, he goes on to say, that the closest we can come to understanding another is to practice “moral deference” -- to listen to them with an open mind, without dismissing or prejudging them.<sup>16</sup> I argue that Weil, by working in the factory, places herself in a position to hear these first-hand accounts from her co-workers, who have both the opportunity, and sometimes the trust, needed to confide in another regarding how they feel about their work situation.

But secondly, it’s important to note that Weil had two motivations for working in the factory. In addition to understanding the workers where they are (instead of presuming their consciousness

as the Marxists did, or not caring as the capitalists did), she also went to have a spiritual experience. Therefore, the reason for Weil or others to enter as much as possible the painful situation of the exploited workers, is to change his or her self.

How does this painful change happen? Here I refer to the works of anthropologist Michael Jackson. Jackson talks of the shock of people who have a “first contact” with those of another group. He draws upon experiences as diverse as the New Guineans first sighting of European explorers, and his own experience as an Australian relocating to America. These shocking first contacts, he states, are “...most immediately experienced not as a conflict of worldviews but as a traumatic rift within the field of consciousness and intersubjectivity that challenges almost all one’s ontological certainties....”<sup>17</sup> By going where one hasn’t gone before, meeting people one hadn’t known, one finds “an unbearable discovery: the world is infinitely vaster and far more complex than one thought.”<sup>18</sup> So, Weil’s project of working in the factory, or Keady and Kretzu’s time spent in Indonesia, can’t wholly be judged on its ability to correctly represent the state of mind of the workers; it must be judged also by its fruitfulness for Keady and Kretzu regarding their expanded world-view, their open-mindedness, their spiritual growth, and the new works that flow from their first-hand insight.

If we look at the case of Keady and Kretzu, they have devoted their energies, ideas, and lives to improving working conditions in Indonesia. They have founded Education for Justice, which brings the message of the plight of Nike workers to U.S. university students, encouraging them to visit their website to be involved in ongoing activism. They have created a multi-media presentation, and they will soon have an independent documentary about their immersion experience. They are playing a crucial role in setting up the Jesuit’s Maryland Province International Ignatian immersion experience, where university students can be placed around the world to live and struggle with the exploited poor.<sup>19</sup>

## **5. Conclusion**

In my experience as a teacher, I have come across several students who, when confronted with the low wages made by Nike workers, respond by stating that those people are lucky to have any job, so they can’t complain about the wages. Such responses are hearing the second question and responding with defensive answers. Perhaps it’s time instead to, with Weil, focus on the first question, and respond with compassion and justice. How can one do so? It may indeed call for learning by experience. Goodwin Liu advocates service-learning for university students, suggesting that only by bringing students out of their usual social and work context to a new experience of working with those disadvantaged in our society can they begin to rethink their preconceptions about such people.<sup>20</sup> Keady and Kretzu’s “immersion” experiences aim for the same perspective-altering effects. Engaging in labor in solidarity with the oppressed, and then discussing the meaning of such labors drawing upon Weil and others, could in a small way begin a learning process that would otherwise be intellectually rejected. While service-learning may have the aspect of compulsion that Weil explained so easily turned to resentment, it could, if carefully used, provide students with an opportunity to have an encounter that Michael Jackson called “first contact.” If Weil is right, such approaches are bound to have a most lasting impact on the way we see our world and experience our labor.

## **ENDNOTES**

- 1 Gabriella Fiori, *Simone Weil: An Intellectual Biography*, translated by Joseph R. Berrigan (Athens: Univ. of Ga. Pr. 1989), pp. 48-51, 71.
- 2 Dorothy Tuck McFarland and Wilhelmina van Ness, in *Simone Weil: Formative Writings 1929-1941*. Wilhelmina van Ness and Dorothy Tuck McFarland, editors and translators. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1987), p.152, quotes Weil's *Seventy Letters* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), p.20.
- 3 Weil, "Factory Journal," esp. p. 211; Miklos Veto, *The Religious Metaphysics of Simone Weil*, translated by Joan Durgan. (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), p. 26.
- 4 Simone Weil, *Oppression and Liberty*, translated by Arthur Wills and John Petrie, introduction by F.C. Ellert (Amherst: Univ. Mass. Pr., 1973), p. 101.
- 5 Sylvie Courtine-Denamy, *Three Women in Dark Times: Edith Stein, Hannah Arendt, Simone Weil*. Traslated by G.M. Goshgarian. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2000, p. 73.
- 6 Courtine-Denamy, *Three Women in Dark Times*, p. 72.
- 7 Samir Amin, "Africa: Living on the Fringe," *Monthly Review* March 2002, pp. 41-50, reference pp. 48-50.
- 8 Amy Waldman, "Low-Tech or High, Jobs are Scarce in India's Boom," *New York Times*, May 6, 2004.
- 9 Wayne Arnold, "In Indonesia, Unions Hit a Roadblock: Contract Labor." *New York Times* May 21, 2004, p. W1,7.
- 10 See David Korten, *When Corporations Rule the World* (West Hartford, CT: Kumarian Press, 1995). Also see Jeremy Brecher and Tim Costello, *Global Village or Global Pillage: Economic Reconstruction from the Bottom Up*. Boston: South End Press, 1998
- 11 "What is a sweatshop?" [www.geocities.com/GlobalAmen/Issues/sweatshops/index.html](http://www.geocities.com/GlobalAmen/Issues/sweatshops/index.html)
- 12 Mary J. Bellman, "Rationality and Identity in the Participatory Choices of Female Maquila Workers," *Comparative Political Studies* 37/5 (June 2004) pp. 563-589. Reference pp. 577-79.
- 13 See for example, Mirian Ching Yoon Louie, *Sweatshop Warriors: Immigrant Women Workers Take On the Global Factory*. South End Press, 2001.
- 14 Charles Kernaghan, "Something to Hide," video produced by National Labor Committee and United States Students Against Sweatshops, 1999.
- 15 Charles Bowden, "Keeper of the Fire," *Mother Jones* July/August 2003, [http://www.motherjones.com/news/feature/2003/07/ma\\_447\\_01.html](http://www.motherjones.com/news/feature/2003/07/ma_447_01.html)
- 16 Laurence Thomas, "Moral Deference," *Philosophical Forum* 24 (Fall-Spring 1992-93), pp. 233-250.

17Michael Jackson, *Minima Ethnographica: Intersubjectivity and the Anthropological Project* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 108.

18Ibid., p. 118.

19Jim Spillane and James Keady, “Neoliberalism and the Footloose Global Athletic Footwear Industry: the Case of Nike in Indonesia – A Call for Justice,” paper read at the 2002 International Association of Jesuit Business Schools’ Conference, Fu Jen University - Taipei, Taiwan.

20Goodwin Liu, “Knowledge, Foundations, and Discourse: Philosophical Support for Service-Learning.” In *Philosophical Approaches to Service Learning* (Washington, D.C.: American Association for Higher Education).