The Future of Work Environment Reforms
Does the Concept of Work Environment Apply within the New Economy?

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With the economic crisis in the 1930s, and the world war following it, a general cease-fire was declared in the battle between work and capital. Antagonism gave way to a long and very profitable period of mutual back scratching, commonly referred to as 'the golden years'. This was a pragmatic period, wholly devoted to increasing the standard of living. During these years the work protection organisations in Sweden grew significantly. This expansion was not part of a union mobilisation or forced by state legislation. Rather, it was brought forth by the mutual commitment of the employer and employees to the problems concerned.[1] Most of the protective measures introduced were directed against the immediate hazards of manual labour. The different measures were focused on particular hazards and their causes. The individual causes and causal relations were not always easy to detect but they were generally considered simple. Once the causal relation was detected, the protective measures could either be directed against the source of the problem or against the individual suffering from it, whichever was the most practical course of action. The work protection programs during these years were pragmatically rather than ideologically motivated. They were carried out with the purpose of saving lives and money (not always in that order). Although the employer and the employees had different interests and did not always agree on the necessary measures to take, they were equally aware of the consequences. Nor was it always easy to negotiate the terms of these measures, but the line of argument was in most cases pretty straightforward. Accidents and loss of lives caused delays and cost money.[2]

When the concept of "work environment" was framed in the 1960s it meant two things. First of all it meant taking a more comprehensive view of working conditions. Specific problems were no longer treated in isolation. It was recognised that problems interacted with each other and had a joint impact on the worker.[3] This recognition suggested a more general approach to the afflictions of labour. As a consequence "the leaking valve", "the noisy fan", "the dangerous saw-blade" were all brought together as "work environment issues". As such they

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[1] Tucker (1994).
[2] On co-operation despite conflicting interests during this period, see Thörnquist (2001).
[3] Gustavsen & Hunnius (1981).

could all benefit from government funding, scientific research, legal treatment, decrees and legislative measures, etc. The introduction of a work environment concept thereby integrated the different problems of the work place into a whole. But it also changed their proportions and raised the level of abstraction. A safety measure was no longer merely a practical answer to a particular health problem. It was part of the great attempt to reform working life. This magnified perspective invited a pursuit for more complex as well as less obvious causal relations. Through this the protective ambition reached into other areas of work, previously closed to reformatory measures. In the 1970s management, work organisation, and the so-called psychosocial environment of work were gradually given increased attention as potential work environment issues. The reformatory ambition also extended beyond its traditional beneficiaries. Unlike the "work protection measures" against shop floor hazards, "work environment issues" were not limited to the working conditions of manual labour.

The other thing the concept of work environment meant was the exclusive focus on the environmental side of the various issues. The worker was considered to be at the receiving end of the problem and thus a victim of his or her working conditions. The individual, her abilities and behaviour, was thereby ruled out of the problem a priori. This exclusion was, in the Scandinavian more than in other countries, done for ideological reasons. The *idea* was to conform the working conditions to the worker and not, as it was argued, the other way around. The workers had a right to demand working conditions suitable to their needs. Furthermore, this right was not confined to the practical needs at the work place. Since the worker, or so the ideology claims, evolves as a human being and as a citizen through her practical participation at work, her needs as a human being and as a citizen must also be fulfilled through her work. In Sweden this ambitious goal was put in concrete form by a general program for "the Good Work", drafted and adopted by the Swedish Metal Worker Union in 1985 and further developed by the Swedish Trade Union Confederation in 1991. It was also endorsed through the Work Environment Act of 1977, and the law concerning the right of participation in decision-making (MBL) of 1976. Thus, "a link came to be forged between work environment and industrial democracy".[4] In the ideologically inflamed setting of the 1970s and early –80s, work environment issues were no longer merely about the particular health hazards of the shop floor; they were also about the future of democratic society. Subsequently, the whole work environment program gradually changed its direction. In the Work Environment Act of 1991 the aim was no longer to eliminate the hazards of labour, but to ensure the personal and professional development of the workers.

The inflation and politicisation of work environment issues were of course not the effects of the concept itself. Rather, the concept was brought forward by and

[4] Gustavsen & Hunnius (1981) p 131.

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interacted with the winds of change blowing through the 1970s. However, the concept was so empty to begin with that it almost insisted on being inflated. As long as work environment issues were concerned with preventing health hazards in the work place, the concept had a certain natural legitimacy. But when its conceptual applications ventured too far beyond the traditional work form of industrial labour, adding more and different working conditions to its field of responsibility, it became increasingly unmanageable, even irrelevant.

This became painfully clear when the work environment concept was expanded to accommodate the so-called *psychosocial* environment. This expansion was controversial from the start. There was a debate about what this environment was and how it was to be interpreted. Was it an objective feature of the environment that could be unambiguously diagnosed? Or, was it only distinguishable within the subjective realm of experience? The question was never really resolved. Rather, the different answers anticipated two equally problematic futures of the psychosocial concept. Those who advocated a subjective approach to psychosocial problems frequently had the social relationships within and between workgroups in mind. In practise, the subjective approach soon established workers and management as the principal environmental factor for each other. As a consequence, different problems of social interaction were observed: deficient group dynamics, inadequate leadership, social, sexual and ethnic harassment, etc. The diagnosis and even more so the therapeutic-like treatment of these problems were generally regarded as an unwelcome intrusion into the work site, an intrusion that alienated management and most of the manual workforce against the reformatory ambitions behind it.

The objective approach to psychosocial problems was no more successful. Its advocates were mainly interested in the organisation and structural framework of jobs. They were concerned about the restraining features and lack of sovereignty at work, particularly low qualified work. Identifying these features was a problem in itself. Persuading the workers that they were subjected to a restraining environment that was repressing their psychosocial development was another. The major problem, however, proved to be what preventive measure to take. Nothing short of a complete reorganisation of the jobs in question was required. But, to reorganise the individual jobs it was necessary to reorganise the production in its entirety, and to reorganise the production it was necessary to reorganise the company, and the reorganisation of the company was a question of management and strategic development. To really change the organisation of a single job, the whole company, including the top management, would have to commit itself heart and soul to the reformation of the work. Mere safety measures were clearly no longer enough; instead a change of attitude and general direction was called for. In this way the objective approach to the psychosocial environment often got caught up in exaggerated schemes leading nowhere. In the process it lost sight of the indi-

vidual workers whose health it was entrusted to protect and, more importantly, they lost sight of it.

It is not unreasonable to suppose that the dwindling interest in work environment issues that we have seen in the Scandinavian countries since the 1990s is related to the propagation of their conceptual applications; a propagation which has been diluting their meaning and exaggerating their general applicability. Also, the politicisation of work environment issues made them highly susceptible to the political changes of the 1990s.

In this article we maintain that the conceptual propagation of work environment issues has passed its peak, and that its application within the flexible working conditions of modern labour is limited, if not pointless. An increasing number of jobs do not have a working environment; still more have trouble identifying one. This does not mean that the problems themselves have disappeared or become less urgent. It only means that they are to a lesser extent being identified and dealt with in the uniform and participatory manner typical of work environment issues. Instead, the problems are treated separately, not on a shop floor level and not necessarily with regard to the workers' perspective. To put it bluntly: the democratic reformation of work environment is being overtaken by a consumer demand for user-friendly artefacts. It is important to point out, however, that the flexible conditions of modern labour are not common to everyone on the labour market. They are probably not even common to most people. The tendency towards flexible conditions of work varies very much between jobs. Many jobs are still subject to traditional conditions. Even new jobs are adopting these conditions. Many more are experiencing minor changes in some of the dimensions of work. Others still are developing very flexible conditions. This diversity of working conditions is so apparent that we would call it another general tendency.[5] Thus, the point we wish to make is that the diversity and flexibility of modern working conditions are reducing the relevance of the work environment concept as a general framework for reforms of working life.

What Exactly Do We Mean by Work Environment?

At first glance the concept of work environment seems pretty uncomplicated. The work environment is simply the environment in which we work. Already in this statement, though, it is obvious that the concept makes certain assumptions about work and the circumstances surrounding it.

First of all there are the assumptions following from the environmental concept. "Environment" is a spatial metaphor. The circumstances thereby referred to are the extended and organised qualities of space. This does not mean that work environment issues are only concerned with spatial features. The environment

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[5] Härenstam et al (1999).

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concept is as we said metaphoric. It does, however, refer to a surrounding reality, that is, an *external* reality. The mapping of this reality is what we may call *the theory* of work environment issues. The theoretical task involves the identification and isolation of individual factors and a demonstration of their effects. Apart from the more obvious conditions, knowledge of the work environment therefore presupposes scientific investigation. Science, however, is a quest without limits; the mapping and rearranging of the working environment is not. Since *everything* surrounding the worker is a potential work environment, the work itself must be relatively well-defined if there is to be a reasonable chance to investigate and control that environment. The first assumption of the work environment concept, then, is of a relatively well-defined job within a relatively well-defined set of circumstances.

There is also another assumption involved here. As a spatial metaphor the environmental concept relies on the Cartesian distinction between subject and object. Consequently, the work environment must be categorically *independent* of the worker. Take for instance your working hours. If you have the opportunity to set your own working agenda, that agenda is probably not considered to be part of your working environment. If, on the other hand, your working agenda is set for you, and all you have to do is to comply with it, that agenda is most definitely considered to be part of your working environment. This assumption coincides with another assumption. For the absolute distinction between environment and worker also follows the division of responsibility characteristic of wage labour. The employer is fully responsible for the working environment, but not necessarily for the worker. This means that the work environment unfolds out of the worker's perspective and is only restricted by the employer's responsibility for the means of production. This being so, the work environment concept also presupposes an employment relationship. We are primarily referring to the legal aspects of the employment relationship, as an agreement of mutual responsibilities and commitments between two opposing parties.

We are hereby entering what we may call *the practice* of work environment issues. The conceptual applications of work environment issues presuppose a certain practise. The practical task involves negotiating the terms for generating, accepting, treating and implementing the theory of work environment issues. To *identify* something as a work environment issue is to prescribe for it a formal and action oriented treatment. To get something *accepted* as a work environment issue is to have its alterations registered as a precondition for doing the work. Consequently, what is to be considered a work environment issue, and on the whole what is to be considered a work environment, is ultimately a question of negotiation between the conflicting interests of an employment relationship. The second assumption of the work environment concept, then, is of a negotiating order through which the work environment can be named and framed as a set of issues to do something about.

We see then that the theory and practice of work environment issues co-operate to determine the issues. Theory and practice presuppose each other. To treat and negotiate a problem that it is not possible to identify or isolate is as pointless as trying to identify a problem without hope of having it accepted and treated as such. If there is to be any point in talking about a work environment issue, it must be possible to identify and isolate it as well as to deal with it within a given order of negotiation. Hence, our conceptual understanding of a work environment presupposes a relatively well defined job with a set of relatively well defined conditions; conditions that, furthermore, may be treated within an established order of negotiation. Any attempt to broaden the concept beyond these considerations runs the risk of obscuring our understanding of it and, above all, of undermining the order of treatment that ultimately is the very purpose and legitimacy of the concept.

The Traditional Conditions of Work

Within what we tentatively may call "traditional work", there is usually no problem complying with these assumptions about the work environment concept. On the contrary, traditional work is well defined in almost all its dimensions.

It is, for instance, clearly defined in *time*. For over a century the working engagement has been precisely delimited and monitored by its working hours – not just of the day, but of the week, the year, and the life span as a whole. The working day itself has also been minutely scheduled, sometimes down to a fraction of a second.[6] Traditional work is also unmistakably delimited in *space*. Since the beginning of industrialisation, the geographical location and extension of the workplace has been monumentally fenced off from the rest of society. Within the workplace itself a narrow and clearly defined workspace has traditionally been assigned to each task. There are also other demarcations within the workplace. The boundary between the office space and the shop floor is, for instance, generally unmistakable.[7]

Traditional work is furthermore regulated in its *organisation*, both horizontally and vertically. Managing the *horizontal* organisation of work has been the objective of industrial engineering since it was conceived. Whether it is technically controlled, like the Fordist conveyer belt, or standardised through operating procedures acquired by practice, the sequentially monitored labour process is generally the core of traditional work.[8] Managing the *vertical* organisation of work has an even longer tradition. Traditional work is typically governed through a hierarchical division of responsibility.[9] Beyond, or encompassing these four di-

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[6] Blyton, Hassard, Hill and Starkey eds (1989), Contensou & Vranceanu (2000).
[7] Fischer (1997).
[8] Thompson (1983).
[9] Perrow (1986).

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mensions are of course the formal terms of employment regulating the rights and duties of work.

These regulations not only control the performance of work in time, space, and organisation. Their significance goes beyond the work place. By settling when, where, and how to work they also settle the opposite. By so clearly delimiting the performance of work they also define the activities that are *not* included in work. Non-work is what you do before and after your hours at work, and during the breaks. It is what you do outside the perimeter of the work place. It is what you do when you are not going through the procedures of the labour process. It is the decisions you make outside of your limited field of responsibility. Non-work is, to summarise it, what you do when you are not abiding by the rules of work. Together these rules define the acts of work, and thereby every act that is not a part of work. So, the more obvious these rules are, the more obvious is the distinction between work and non-work. In traditional work these rules were very obvious and so was the distinction between work and non-work. The reason for this was of course that traditional work was synonymous to wage labour. In wage labour you are paid to do a job, and to do a job is to abide by the rules of the job. This is what wage labour is all about: to be paid to abide by the rules of work. This is also the reason why these rules have been enforced with such harsh measures throughout the history of work.

Since the beginning of the last century, and especially during the post war era, the rules and regulations of work have become almost universally applied. This is due to the development of general technical artefacts and procedures, general agreements, statutory rules and regulations, etc. The consequence of this is that work has been established as an objective and uniform institution within society. It is objective in the sense of being independent of the individual performing it and the specific context in which it is performed. If one person leaves an employment another is hired on the same terms. Work is also a uniform institution in the sense that its conditions are common to most jobs. Even if the specific content varies between jobs, the formal conditions are shared between different jobs, different work sites, trades, market segments, even between different countries (if we restrict the argument to the Western and Protestant part of the world). Hence, you can change your job, work place, trade, and country, switch from the private to the public sector and still recognise the conditions of work as regulated in the dimensions specified above.

The point we are trying to make is that the conditions of traditional work are lucid and well defined. They are, furthermore, subject to negotiations between two distinct parties and certified in an employment agreement. The prototype of traditional work is of course industrial labour with its tangible conditions and sharp divisions of responsibility. However, the traditional conditions of work are, as we have argued, not restricted to industry. Up until the 1970s almost all jobs had these same conditions, or at least tried to enforce them.

The New Rules of Work

In the 1970s, and even more so in the 1980s, the traditional conditions of work and their applicability began to be questioned. Growing international competition forced industry into experimenting with alternative forms of organisation and management. A growing self-consciousness within white collar jobs, health care, and the rapidly growing service sector dissociated itself more and more from the industrial standard for work. New areas of work assumed new forms. There were many efforts, trends and tendencies proclaiming novel forms of organisation and management during these years. Looking back, some of these tendencies are more discernible than others. There was, for instance, a tendency toward a decentralisation of work organisation. The chain of command was decimated and the local division, the work group, and even the single individual were to a much greater extent expected to organise their own activities.[10] Associated with this was another tendency. Management was beginning to focus more on *what* was accomplished than *how* it was accomplished. In other words, the managerial focus was shifting from the procedure to the result. This is what Peter Drucker as early as the 1950s had called Management by Objectives.[11] A third tendency was that the scheduling of the working hours became more open and tasks could be located outside the regular work place. So, if a particular task allowed it, the individual worker could decide for herself when and where to perform the task.[12] The different buzzwords for this echoed through the 1980s: flexiwork, telework, telecommuting, homework, free hours, tele-cottages, mobile telework, etc. A fourth tendency was that the general agreements between employer and employees were getting less and less general. The employment agreements were becoming more specialised and individualised. Other kinds of agreement were also used more regularly: individual agreements, contract agreements, commissioned agreements, temporary agreements, short term agreements, consultant agreements, etc.[13]

To understand what these tendencies mean we must go back to the different regulatory dimensions of work described previously, for the tendencies indicate that the traditional regulations of work are gradually disintegrating. The formerly absolute regulations of time and space for work are relaxing. Instead of having a fixed schedule to obey, the individual has to decide for herself when, how often, and how much she must work. Instead of having a fixed work place to be present at, the individual has to decide for herself where to perform a specific task. The decisions involved may not be that hard to make or have far-reaching consequen-

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[10] Brooke (1984).
[11] Drucker (1979).
[12] Jackson & van der Wielen eds (1998).
[13] Tregaskis, Brewster, Mayne and Hegewisch (1998).

ces. But a decision is nonetheless left to the individual, thereby presupposing a personal involvement and, subsequently, a consciousness of one's responsibility.

Management is also changing its character from a direct monitoring of performance to an almost visionary guidance. Without a fixed work program to follow, the individual has to initiate, define, plan, and take responsibility for carrying out the assignment herself. Assignments are also becoming more purposeful and goal-oriented and are more and more taking the form of "projects". Furthermore, without an explicit administrative hierarchy to abide by, the individual will have to seek out, establish, and maintain the necessary social contacts herself. As a consequence the administrative structure of work is becoming more informal, almost taking the shape of a "social network". Now, all these tendencies add up to the more general tendency of work being deregulated.[14] We may of course be stretching the argument and pushing the conclusion a bit. The general tendency is, however, quite clear. The regulations of work are becoming more and more *flexible*, in the sense that the expectations on the worker to define, structure, and discipline her own performance are increasing.[15]

Unlike the stable form of traditional work, the form of modern work is therefore becoming increasingly dependent on the individual worker performing the job and on the context in which it is performed. It is becoming increasingly harder to identify and delimit the work itself, and consequently, even more so, the working environment. For many jobs the externally organised conditions tend to drift into the worker's head, so to speak. The formerly overt and invariable performance is replaced by personal initiatives, interpretations, planning, and social contacts.[16] Such conditions, more and more necessary for modern work, are not possible to unambiguously define and isolate. Furthermore, when the previously clear distinction between work and non-work is getting blurred so is the responsibility of the employer, and thereby the front line between employer and employee. This means that the conditions of modern work are in various degrees withdrawn from the responsibility of the employer and the established order of negotiation between the parties of work.

When the preconditions of work do not appear in the form of an independent environment but in the form of personally structured abilities, there is some validity to the claim that there *is* no working environment in existence, at least not in the ordinary sense of the word. As we have said before, this does not mean that the conditions of work or the problems connected with them have disappeared; they have just changed their form. The problems are just not identified, treated and corrected in the uniform and participatory manner appropriate to work environment issues. Consider for instance the act of developing and adapting pro-

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[14] Allvin, Aronsson, Hagström, Johansson, Lundberg and Skärstrand (1998).
[15] Felstead & Jewson eds (1999).
[16] Allvin, Wiklund, Härenstam and Aronsson (1999).

grams and interfaces for computers, arranging a work place for telecommuting within the home, organising the personal agenda, building a professional network, accommodating professional travellers at airports and in aeroplanes, or coping with the expectations of customers, clients, contractors, and co-workers in large projects. These are all activities intended to adjust the conditions of work to the worker. The fact that they are not necessarily done by the employer or after negotiating the terms with a local safety representative does not mean that the conditions involved are not developed or adapted to the user. Nor do these adaptations follow from a reformatory ambition. The adaptation of work to the worker is not necessarily done as part of a coherent strategy. Rather, it is done for many different reasons: commercial, strategic, aesthetic, family, personal, even unconscious reasons. Some reasons are in agreement with each other, others in conflict.

There is also the example of "burnout". In 1974 Herbert Freudenberger observed a gradual energy depletion and depression among young idealistic volunteers working at a "Free Clinic" for drug addicts in New York. Almost simultaneously Christina Maslach observed the same emotional exhaustion among health care workers in California. They both, independently of each other, called the syndrome "burnout" and described it as a loss of motivation.[17] Unlike being overworked or worn out which follows from working too hard for too long, burnout presupposes a personal commitment. You just don't work a lot; you try to achieve something that is important to you. It is symptomatic that the phenomenon was first observed among human service professionals. A personal commitment to the relationship with the patient or client is an intrinsic part of the job. It is, however, also symptomatic that the phenomenon has since been spreading among the many newly created jobs of the so-called New Economy. Many of these jobs have very flexible working conditions and rely heavily on the personal abilities and commitment of the individual worker. The question then is whether burnout is to be considered a work environment issue or not. Being overworked probably is, since the independent cause most likely can be established in terms of the assigned or expected work quota. A more appropriate work quota can then be settled in negotiation. This may pose a lot of practical problems. In principle, though, the cause of the problem and the responsibility for it are reasonably clear. This, however, is not the case with burnout. Since the burnout syndrome presupposes a personal commitment, there is no independent cause to the problem. Nor is it part of the employer's responsibility. A remedy to the problem can, therefore, not be settled in negotiation. There may, of course, be things to do with the environment that will ease the problem, but it cannot be engineered or negotiated away. So, the answer to the question is that burnout like many other problems of modern labour can not readily be identified as a work environment issue.

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[17] Shaufeli & Enzmann (1998).

The Limitations of the Work Environment Concept

We have maintained that the forms of work are not just becoming more flexible; they are becoming more heterogeneous as well. This means that jobs are becoming more adapted to their particular requirements, and subsequently more particular in their appearance. For that reason it is becoming increasingly difficult to speak of "work" in general. As a consequence, it is also becoming increasingly difficult to speak of "work environment" in general.

The work environment concept, as already maintained, presupposes work as being relatively well defined and located within a relatively well defined set of circumstances that are subjected to an established order of negotiation. Since this is no longer the case with a growing number of jobs, we should expect the field of possible conceptual applications for work environment issues to be decreasing. This means that within the labour market as a whole we will encounter jobs that are severely afflicted by work environment problems and those that are not. This division may, for instance, manifest itself in terms of an inequality in the statistics on work environment issues. Some jobs will appear to have more problems than others do. These jobs will probably be jobs that conform well to the assumptions of the work environment concept. But this does not mean that the jobs that *do not* appear to have any work environment problems are without problems. These are probably jobs that do not conform well to the assumptions of the work environment concept. As a consequence their problems will not turn up in the statistics. Instead, they will be sorted and identified within other more or less adequate categories such as: personnel problems, harassment, difficulties in co-operating, family problems, personal problems, workaholism, stress, burn out, problems with the computer, system failure, as well as, of course, a host of less user-friendly artefacts. Unlike work environment issues these problems are not necessarily part of an independent work environment. Nor are they easily subject to the employer's responsibility or to the established order of negotiation between the different parties. As a consequence they will not be treated in the uniform and participatory manner reserved for work environment issues. Nor will their treatment ever be co-ordinated through a comprehensive strategy to reform the working conditions. Rather, they will be treated as irritating but isolated events, to be dealt with as they appear.

The tendency towards more flexible conditions of work, then, will increase the number and types of problem involving the individual worker's abilities to cope with her work and fellow workers. While the person-related problems are increasing, the work environment issues are withdrawing to the domains of the labour market that have retained more traditional conditions of work. As a consequence, the problems of working life are only to a limited extent going to be identified as work environment issues. When they are, it will mainly be within the more traditionally organised domains of the labour market. Given the kind of jobs still

maintaining a traditional organisation, it may be predicted that problems of the work environment will mainly be an issue for the lesser qualified jobs.

Projecting the idea of an independent and problem-ridden work environment on the labour market as a whole will therefore give the impression of a divided labour market, and of a growing inequality of working conditions. There will be the good jobs, held by highly qualified workers working their computers and travelling business class. Then there will be the bad jobs, held by poorly qualified workers doing manual labour in a very restraining environment. The bad jobs, of course, will have all the problems. Furthermore, the causal relationship between the visible working conditions and the problems will be self-evident. This familiar partitioning of the labour market in the antagonistic categories of "upstairs" and "downstairs" is easily acknowledged since it is well suited to the political institutions and administrative tools of industrial society. It will, however, blind us to the diversity of problems troubling modern labour.

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