

“Jobs” Don’t Work!

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With mind-numbing regularity, we are expected to trudge to the polls and cast votes for politicians who promise to pursue policies that will “fix the economy” and “create jobs.” Predictably, nothing much changes. Why do we expect politicians and their policies to affect “the Economy,” when the rest of the time we treat it more like the weather, something that gets “better” or “worse” according to events beyond anyone’s control? The label “economy” is used to cloud in abstraction specific choices made by specific people that shape the rest of our lives for better or more usually, for worse. By framing our own daily lives of work within the abstract framework of “the Economy” we disconnect ourselves from a deciding, subjective role in determining our own activity and instead leave ourselves as unaware and relatively helpless pawns of forces beyond our knowledge or control. “The Economy” becomes a mystifying category, full of nonsensical and inexplicable categories that only experts can decipher; it is our era’s religion, an explanatory framework that offers fictional and strangely “natural” explanations for what are simple (albeit confusing), observable relations between human beings. Politicians and economists who claim they will fix “the Economy” are playing the role of contemporary priests in the Church—they and they alone are competent to communicate with the higher power that ultimately controls our lives.

This underlies the emptiness of our democracy. Clearly there is little democracy in our lives when it comes to “the Economy.” Our much-vaunted “freedom of choice” supposedly allows us to “choose” any jobs we want. By this “free choice” we exercise our tiny influence over the giant “invisible hand” of the market. But as we all know, most of us are only “free” to take one shitty job or another (or several!). In taking a job, no one asks for our ideas about what kind of work the enterprise *should* do, how the company impacts the environment locally and beyond, or what quality standards our work should meet. We have no say over who works there or how hiring is decided. In fact, on the job we lose most of the basic rights we take for granted as citizens in a democracy, including freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, freedom from search and seizure, freedom from random drug testing, right to due process, trial by peers, and so forth. On the job we are wage-slaves—if we depend on our wage, our condition can easily be construed as a version of slavery “with a human face.”

Curious, then, that people across the political spectrum, especially “progressives,” are so ready to demand “jobs” without a murmur of qualification or criticism (at best, the demand is qualified as being for “good jobs”). Most jobs today are a waste of time at best, if they aren’t actually pernicious. As a social mechanism for allocating tasks that keep us all alive, “the Economy” and its foundation on “jobs” could hardly be *less* efficient, less fair, or a bigger waste of time and resources. One of the most glaring failures of the so-called free market is the well-paid elevation of patently useless and/or dangerous activities and the unpaid denigration of vital human tasks. Juxtapose bankers and weapons designers to child care workers and nursing home employees, for example. Even within ostensibly useful human work, for example, doctors and nurses, at least half of their work time is spent fulfilling the parasitic, useless demands of insurers and the bureaucracies of business, instead of providing the medical care that so many can no longer afford.

San Francisco’s current economy is awash in the inflated equity of a housing market unmoored from historic values. This has greatly rewarded the lucky fraction that owns at the expense of the majority of renters. Meanwhile people work in offices, restaurants, stores, and hotels where real wages are stagnant or actually falling. In a city with a dozen major hospitals and tens of thousands of medical workers, at least a quarter of the residents are uninsured and prone to destitution through catastrophic illness or injury. A construction boom fueled by the dot.com frenzy, sustained after the frenzy’s collapse by the spiraling inflation in real estate and long-term infrastructure programs of the city (San Francisco airport, BART, and MUNI expansions, Bay Bridge retrofit, Moscone Convention Center expansion, Transbay Terminal) is also helping to keep economic collapse at bay for the moment.

But all the signs for a major reckoning are before us: Unsustainable debts (government, corporate, and individual); absurd investment in useless office towers and unneeded hotels and shopping centers; stagnant or falling incomes and savings; soaring rates of illness and unmeasured workplace injuries; radically increasing homeless population; food programs serving more meals than ever—the list goes on.

In the face of the one of the most severe impending economic collapses in history, the recent mayoral campaign managed to avoid facing the catastrophe. No one wants to vote for a gloom-and-doom naysayer, so neither candidate offered a frankly pessimistic view of the city’s near and medium-term future. Gavin Newsom’s winning campaign featured dozens of detailed position papers that offered warmed-over platitudes about private-public partnerships,

eliminating waste, and improving government efficiency.

Matt Gonzalez’s “progressive” approach to “the Economy” failed to break with the basic categories and assumptions of all mainstream politicians. Gonzalez himself cannot be blamed, since nobody could get elected at this point by staking out a radical rejection of the capitalist organization of life. Progressives skate between the impossibility of thoroughly rejecting the framework of business, wage-labor and taxes imposed by capitalism, and the sheer impotence of policies they can actually promote and implement if elected.

Some of Gonzalez’s rhetoric pointed to a deeper understanding of San Francisco’s municipal economics when he intelligently attacked the *laissez-faire* boom and bust “mono-crop” attitude of previous regimes, especially Willie Brown’s. But finally, between Gonzalez and Newsom, San Francisco’s public debate remained thoroughly stuck in a reactive and self-defeating logic that defers to the initiative of capital and the world market when it comes to determining what San Franciscans are to do with our physical and mental resources.

Gonzalez promised to “put San Franciscans first” in his platform. To do this he proposed to develop an economic policy that has at its heart “the creation and retention of jobs, held by San Franciscans, which pay enough to afford the cost of living in San Francisco.” Contrary to the open courting of business and “private-public collaborations” by Newsom (a patently empty strategy that he is still pursuing as mayor), Gonzalez at least clearly acknowledged that San Francisco “cannot simply follow the economic agenda of businesses but must meet the economic needs of its residents.” It sounded vaguely promising, but since he lost the election, there was no chance to see this rhetoric translated into concrete actions.

In his campaign literature there were already plenty of reasons to be skeptical. Accepting the limits of a municipality’s dependence on tax revenue and such revenue’s source in capitalist business led him to assert the consequential tautology “jobs generate tax revenue.” Accompanying this apparent “fact” Gonzalez also endorsed the notion that a city government must make equal priorities of retaining existing businesses as attracting new ones, precisely to solidify the “necessity” of tax revenue. The only way out of this conundrum is to identify the city’s wealth not in taxes but where it is actually created: labor. San Franciscans are multitalented and resourceful but thousands of residents are wasting themselves at dumb jobs that no one ought to do (bank-

ing, real estate, insurance, advertising, military, and so on). What if all that talent were directed to solving problems and radically improving our lives?

Gonzalez deserves credit for suggesting that economic development has goals beyond *itself*: it should sustain communities, strengthen public education, the arts, and “community-based development initiatives,” and ensure that existing communities are not destroyed by it. But after some simple reforms to reinforce local hiring and restructure the payroll tax, he jumped with both feet back into the abyss of government subordination to business when he stated “The primary challenge facing the next Mayor of San Francisco is securing sustainable employment opportunities for San Franciscans. The key responsibility of the city in securing such employment opportunities is insuring that the city’s “human infrastructure” is so skilled that businesses will compete with each other to employ them . . . As Mayor, I will focus on unifying San Francisco’s educational infrastructure, and along with business and community leaders, devise and implement an integrated program aimed at offering San Franciscans the education we need to compete in a 21st century economy.”

Not even three months later the newspapers were filled with reports of “outsourcing,” the increasing transfer of the Bay Area’s much vaunted high-tech and service sector expertise to India, China, and other low-wage, high-skilled areas. These new boom zones have been knit together precisely by the globalization spearheaded by San Francisco-based multinationals (Standard Oil of California, now Chevron-Texaco, Pacific Bell, now SBC, Southern Pacific Railroad, now merged into Union Pacific, and Bank of America have all fled, though Bechtel, Levi’s, The Gap, Wells Fargo, and PG&E are still homegrown, world-spanning engines of economic exploitation and environmental devastation). “Competing” in the twenty-first century means lowering wages and giving tax breaks, creating conditions for the maximum profitability of business. If lower costs and bigger tax “incentives” are offered somewhere else, most jobs these days are pretty easily moved.

Primary education in San Francisco, not to mention the rest of the U.S., is abysmal. The destruction of public education corresponds to a destruction of skilled work and a reduced need for intelligence at work. (To say nothing of the problems created by thoughtful, critical citizens!) Beyond some thousands of programmers and the skilled trades, most jobs are easily learned in a day or two, and most workers are easily replaced—skills are much less important these days than attitude. And even if you have great skills and a Mormonesque enthusiasm for your job, chances are the company will move or restructure

or change its focus to increase profitability—leaving you out of work and wondering what to do next. In those increasingly rare examples of stable companies that provide decent, steady wages, and benefits, there’s still a total absence of self-management or worker participation in determining *what the company does*, what its ecological impact is, how it connects to subcontractors and suppliers and *their* practices, and so on.

In 1991, former police chief Frank Jordan was elected mayor. As soon as he took office, he began trumpeting the northeast Mission district as a new “industrial zone” (Northeast Mission Industrial Zone, or NEMIZ) for the emerging biotech sector. This chimerical planning never really took hold due to neighborhood objections and an indifferent business community. The NEMIZ eventually filled up with the short-lived “Audio Alley” and other dot.com startups, only to empty out again after the dot.com bubble burst. Meanwhile, a mile eastward a whole “new neighborhood” (anchored by a forty-two-acre parcel for the biomedical campus of the University of California) called Mission Bay was started during Willie Brown’s regime. Again, the assumption is that by investing public money in a fancy new campus and giving incentives to the developer (Catellus Corporation, a spinoff of the former Southern Pacific Railroad real estate division—“owners” of a real estate empire spanning the west, gained through corrupt land grants provided by the federal government in the nineteenth century as an “incentive” to build the railroads!), jobs and housing will be created. For over a decade, San Francisco has been waiting for the biotech ship to come in.

But that ship is just another in a long line of Potemkin-village promises of so-called “good jobs”:

On bad days Toby said he worked as a “pipette bitch.” With no interests other than computers, a few select hormones, and science fiction novels, Toby was perfectly poised to work as a low-level researcher in yet another lab where the muckety-mucks studied genetic tagging. And so that’s where he found himself most days, holding his trusty pipette over a box of clear gel attached to some electrodes . . . Usually he thought about nothing at all. He didn’t achieve a Zen-like state of pipette-mediated calm. There was no enlightenment. He simply immersed his entire consciousness in the tiny movements of his body, the precise measurements and procedures . . . After almost a year of unbroken routine . . . Toby realized he could spend an entire 24-hour period without ever having a single, extended thought . . . he didn’t have the kinds of multilayered or complex ideas he used to have back when he was hacking hormone pathways in graduate school.

*Here he was, a hypereducated twentysomething, his whole life before him, and his supposedly professional middle-class job had turned his brain into nothing more than basal ganglia . . . according to all the usual news sources, his job was hot. Supposedly Toby was at the center of an economic revolution in biotech. The most-wanted jobs of the new millennium were in genomics; cities like San Francisco were developing vast office parks full of proto-wet lab spaces and special cold rooms for all the code-crunching clusters . . . Toby [felt] like he worked at McDonald's: The plastic gloves were practically the same. But more important, there was an almost unbridgeable gulf between what he actually did for a living and the hype about it. Reading the papers was like looking at one of those glossy ads suggesting that women kicked off welfare would have great futures if they just took jobs at fast-food restaurants. Look at our shiny kitchens! Full of happy people in hair nets and gloves making toasty burgers and crispy fries! Fast food is at the center of the restaurant economy! Just like biotech.**

This pattern of exaggerated expectations attached to what are quickly discovered to be boring, routine, mind-numbing jobs is all too common, and yet rarely reported with such clarity and wit. Another place to find compelling accounts is among the “Tales of Toil” featured from 1981–1994 in San Francisco’s *Processed World* magazine (full disclosure: I was a participating collective member). From word processing to desktop publishing and web design, jobs in new technologies paid relatively well until the field filled with thousands of people following the false promise of “good jobs,” only to find that high pay rates had disappeared. Irrespective of the pay, the crucial issue of content—of what we do, why, for whom or what, and usually how—is never confronted. And with almost no exceptions, the creative component of any job is what disappears soonest, replaced by management-controlled pacing, productivity demands, routinization, and bureaucratization.

Gonzalez’s program might, at best, have opened up new avenues to change the relationship between the city and the work that is done in it. But if public monies were invested in training citizens to become so skilled and desirable as workers, we would still have to question which world economy we are getting prepared for. And just how this training would make San Francisco workers so well-paid (that is, expensive for their employers) that they could afford to live here! Everything going on in economic development—locally, nationally, or internationally—indicates the key trends continue to be lower wages and higher productivity (that is, longer hours, harder work).

A real alternative is called for. Tens of thousands have been meeting in the

* Annalee Newitz, “Techsploitation: Pipette Bitch Blues,” *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, February 18, 2004.

World Social Forum for the past five years, most recently in Mumbai, India. While participants have reported frustration at the absence of concrete alternatives, many representatives of cities from around the world are confronting the same problems that faced our progressive mayoral campaign. And clearly the answers require a break with the dynamics of a world economy that pits city against city, country against country, human against human. The role of government, so diminished as the power of corporations has grown unchecked during the past quarter century, requires revision. Limiting local government to public spending on infrastructure and training for the benefit of private business is clearly self-defeating. Limiting local economics to a system in which private capital employs people as wage-laborers is to guarantee that the logic that imprisons us in a suicidal and degrading system will only grow stronger.

With my tongue only partly in cheek, I propose that San Francisco take the lead in visionary urban transformation. “Jobs” as we know them are an obsolete way of organizing life. I propose a complete rethinking of what municipal government does, no longer “governing” so much as facilitating, allowing us to grow together, to begin building a life outside and against the Economy. If we are nearing a collapse in housing and other asset bubbles fueled by the insane expansion of credit, as it seems we are, then visionary politicians and citizens need to start redesigning the role of local government *now*, while we still have time and resources and before the coming depression and collapse begins. Not entirely seriously, but not altogether frivolously either, I propose the following New Department of Public Commons for a New Municipality, all of which can and should be integrated into our public education system for children and the continuing education of adults. A casual examination will reveal that there is a lot of work to do! But not the kind that generates private profits and sales.

Department of Public Commons

Overall, the city must focus its efforts on an economic strategy that grows the commonwealth and steadily shrinks the private sector. This is a program of decommodification, reframing work as a shared adventure in shaping and extending the quality of our lives.

- A. DIVISION OF PUBLIC SPACE** In charge of plazas, parks, and common lands, and their expansion, maintenance, and programming, this division would administer public libraries, tool and technology

libraries, and public workshops, amply stocked with materials recycled from existing stocks. It would also begin the process of converting many streets into gardens and parklands (see “H” below).

- B. DIVISION OF AGRICULTURE** With the goal of San Francisco feeding itself as much as possible, it will expand community gardens, urban farming, and aquaculture projects, working with the Division of Public Space to reappropriate the vast acreage dedicated to moving and parking cars. Relationships will be cultivated between existing slow-food restaurants, local farmers, and local markets to create an unprecedented abundance of outstanding, healthy, tasty food, eliminating hunger and radically reducing dependence on fast-food outlets.
- C. DIVISION OF AQUIFER AND LIQUEFACTION MANAGEMENT (AND DECONSTRUCTION)** Irresponsible building patterns on historic mudflats and landfill should be removed *before* the next big quake; plans will be made for how to manage collapsing streets and buildings and how to reuse areas prone to liquefaction. Expanded use of existing aquifer will promote local self-reliance and reduce current dependence on quake-vulnerable aqueducts.
- D. DIVISION OF CREEKS AND WETLANDS** Working with the three previous divisions to open streets to make creeks visible, restore wetlands, and establish areas for aquaculture, farming, fishing, and recreation.
- E. DIVISION OF HIGHEST-EVER TIDES AND SEAWALL CONSTRUCTION** Preparation is needed for rising sea levels and catastrophic high tides from global warming. Technologies to protect the city from inevitable flooding should be explored now. Also, San Francisco’s strong technology-savvy population can take the lead in developing techniques for adapting existing transportation and structures to widespread flooding.
- F. DIVISION OF WORK REDUCTION** Most work done in this culture is a waste of time, if it’s not actually dangerous and counterproductive. This division will facilitate the creative reappropriation of our time and talents, redirecting our work (which is inherently *social* after all) toward socially determined needs and desires (see “I” below).
- G. DIVISION OF CO-OPS AND COLLECTIVES** Businesses will be encouraged to convert themselves from private ownership to worker-owned and -run co-ops and collectives. As much as possible, such enter-

prises should be encouraged to contribute to the commonwealth without measurement or pay . . . from each according to their abilities and to each according to their needs and desires.

- H. DIVISION OF RECYCLING AND REUSE** This important division will be responsible for innovation in more than just recycling garbage, but also in spawning whole industries to rehabilitate and reuse the discarded junk of the twentieth century. *Long-term goal: Stop importing new junk!*
- I. DIVISION OF CRACKPOT REALISM** Thousands of techies, artists, and tinkerers live in San Francisco. Already this city has served as world HQ for rapacious exploitation of huge swaths of the planet. It’s time to make it up. Technology transfer of global-warming-reducing technologies: energy efficient transit, shelter, appliances, and communications. Reengineering technologies to last at least twenty-five years with minimum maintenance and energy use (see “J” following). (Bechtel engineers, for example, should be encouraged to direct their own time and creativity towards projects of social importance—something *useful* for a change!)
- J. DIVISION OF NO HOME IS A CASTLE** Housing is one of the most intractable problems facing any social transformation toward equality. A focused effort will be made to raise everyone’s dwellings to a shared standard of space, safety, comfort, and beauty. Land trusts will be established to remove all land from the market, and housing will be owned and controlled by those who live in it. Reengineering every dwelling to be as self-sufficient as possible in water, power, and waste management (fertilizer manufacturing for “B” above).
- K. DIVISION OF FREE MOBILITY**
- First on the agenda will be the creation of a Bicycle Library with a fleet of 5,000 yellow bicycles. A municipal contest will be held annually for bike design and local manufacture with local materials.
 - To support the Bike Library—a network of 100 bike huts and repair shacks will maintain the publicly owned fleet of bikes.
 - The Panhandle will be expanded and extended on converted streets in dozens of directions to crisscross the city with greenways. The DFM, with the Division of Creeks and Wetlands and the Division of Public Space, will build green corridors along the natural terrain of creeks and shorelines, with meandering

bike and multiuse paths.

- Public transit will be free, with radical expansion of routes for full city coverage. Rapid development and adoption of new transit technologies based on wind, solar, biofuels, and magnetic, “frictionless” tracks will revolutionize energy use.

L. DIVISION OF PUBLIC MEMORY

- Publicly owned and produced media will be expanded, and multiple daily newsheets and Web sites advanced, with independent editorial boards elected by districts.
- There will be oral history collection booths, and the Living Archive of San Francisco history will be available online and at a new city museum. Satellite museums in every neighborhood, where techniques of oral history collection and digitizing of archival materials is shared and learned, will reduce social amnesia.
- Public history forums will be held regularly throughout the city, debating various points of view on how life has changed over the years in San Francisco.

M. THE JAMES BROWN MEMORIAL DIVISION OF FEELING (GOOD)

- Everyone will have free comprehensive health care—state-of-the-art preventive care covering medical, dental and mental for all. San Francisco is a town overrun with care practitioners of widely differing quality and philosophy. A clearinghouse and licensing system will help residents get what they need.
- We will encourage the public declaration of desires, whatever they may be.
- Fear abatement will get top priority with programs to help people overcome fear of others, fear of disapproval, fear of speaking out, fear of not owning enough, fear of losing possessions.
- There will be a vigorous program of shame and guilt reduction.

- N. DIVISION OF PUBLIC ART** This division will involve itself in all urban projects, ensuring a high level of artistic participation in urban design, food preparation, historical presentation, and transportation design. Sculptures, paintings, multimedia installations, soundscapes, and new art experiments will fill the city, eliminating the visual blight of advertising in favor of art.