

Why We Need to be Able to Say No at Work

Article by Kristof Calvo, Marguerite van den Berg

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For most of us, life revolves around our jobs. As a result, efforts to improve people's lives have focused on improving working conditions rather than challenging the centrality of work in our lives. Sociologist Marguerite van den Berg sets out to do just this in her recent book *Werk is geen oplossing* [Work is No Solution]. In this conversation with Belgian green politician Kristof Calvo, she explains how workers can recognise and assert their power.

Kristof Calvo: You write that everyone is tired and that no one has time, yourself included. Where did you find the time to write this book?

Marguerite van den Berg: I had a six-month fellowship at the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study, and that gave me time to work on the book. But the pandemic shook things up. Suddenly everything that makes life worth living stopped – except for the work. I had to deal with that craziness. Suddenly I felt even greater urgency to write the book.

Every author has their own method. How did you work? With fixed days for writing or by finishing a short piece each day?

I already had some parts on paper, but I wrote as much as I could in the mornings. Our kids were still at home when my fellowship started in February 2021, but things improved from May onwards.

In your book, you argue for a different view: a shift from “I am tired” to “We are exhausted”. Is this the essence of your story?

Yes. I wanted to show that everyone is struggling on a personal level. Few dare to mention to those close to them that they are worried about how they will get through the next week. I felt compelled to acknowledge this collective feeling of exhaustion as well as its political dimension. I specifically did not want to reduce it to the vulnerability and precariousness of certain groups. Exhaustion does not only occur on the “margins”; it is happening across the full breadth of society.

Your message is clear. You don't shy away from offending anyone in your analysis.

I address everyone directly by using “we”. Where I make a distinction, as when I speak of a “boss”, it's a deliberate choice; I'm not referring to the person but rather the hierarchies at work that demand more and more from us.

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You've criticised unions for their response to the pandemic and the Dutch childcare benefits scandal. Why is that? [In late 2020, it emerged that the Dutch government had accused over 20,000 people of making fraudulent child benefit claims. The ensuing scandal led to the government resigning and early elections in March 2021.].

When the government decided to let the virus circulate, I expected the unions to stand up and protect people at work. But the unions have come to believe that it is good for everyone to have jobs and they focus on protecting jobs rather than workers.

Unions should have a better understanding of where the struggle between capital and labour is currently taking place. To a large extent, this struggle is over reproductive labour, the work that creates the conditions for people to do paid work and the work that is necessary for people to live. [In the benefits scandal,] in addition to institutional racism, working parents who outsourced care for their children became targets of the system. I find it incomprehensible that the unions did not beat their drums more forcefully at that point. The Christian National Trade Union Federation recognises this point, and recently argued for a 30-hour workweek without pay cuts.

So you think that seeing paid work as a form of women's liberation is the wrong focus for feminism?

For women to do paid work they first have to outsource all kinds of difficult things to other women who have it even harder. Besides, a hierarchical relationship with a boss is a crazy place to look for liberation. Paid work can certainly be a means of emancipation. But I would like to see more imagination beyond the current economy and beyond paid labour. This theme runs throughout the book. I want to look beyond traditional thinking about our relationships, work, emancipation, and liberation. There are so many ways we can live together.

You claim that, from a historical perspective, the emphasis on paid labour is quite exceptional.

The idea of wage labour is recent; it originated in the industrial revolution. Before that, there were broader forms of work. A society based on commons, for example. Places where you lived from exchange, and where people shared things with each other. Fortunately, there are still many things we do for each other. But in a capitalist system, the market increasingly shields us from the basic things we need to live, forcing us to pay for them instead.

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Do you see your book as the beginning of a new conversation? Have you had any reactions from unions or feminist groups?

The book is still fresh. But I am open to a dialogue about the idea of work as a means of economic security. That idea runs very deep, and the unions are its biggest advocates. But when you see how much the welfare state has changed or broken down during its development, I find it remarkable that we keep falling back on old dogmas. We must think about alternatives.

Paid work is imperative for almost all political movements. A plea for living differently and slowing down is not so obvious for progressive politicians either...

Yes, I understand that. But we undermine our capacity to be good people when we fixate on work. We also damage the planet. That is not a theme of this book, but it is connected. As long as economic growth is the only way forward, green policies will be impossible. Living differently is about stopping the violence against people, animals, and the planet that accompanies capitalism.

You distinguish between the precariat, precarity, and precarisation. And you talk about precarisation as a strategy: using uncertainties to create new uncertainties.

I disagree with the so-called gap between the precariat and people who have their affairs in order. The 99 per cent suffer from insecurity; it affects us all. As long as we all fear ending up on the wrong side, we are willing to accept anything and everything. The only way to do something about this is to organise certainties outside capitalism, and therefore outside the market.

Is the acknowledgement of shared vulnerability important in stopping the contest where there are winners and losers?

Today, people are forced to join in the competition. They have no choice. This also applies to housing, for example. But you can deal with competition in two ways. Betting on winning with the constant fear of losing is one way. Or you can say: "I don't like this game". There is enough for everyone to live on; the question is how to organise it.

Uncertainty makes us work harder. How do you invite employers and governments to be more imaginative?

It is not for nothing that the goal of labour policy in Europe is called "activation". In practice, this means a punitive welfare state that aims to get people to work. Activation increasingly means that you must pull your own weight; there are no longer any guarantees. I call that precarisation.

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accompanies capitalism.

Unpaid internships are another example. You often find them in NGOs and in politics. People are prepared to work temporarily without pay for a job that is in line with their ideals.

There is a kind of love in that, but at the same time it makes people so vulnerable to exploitation. Doing a year-long internship after graduation is a violation of the minimum wage and only accessible to people who receive financial support from home. I still find it strange that NGOs also make use of unpaid internships. It is almost suspicious if someone wants to work for money. Sometimes people are shocked when I say that I work for money.

Is it time for a general strike?

Yes. Bosses can't do anything without our labour. If we collectively stop working, everything will come to a standstill. And, due to the climate catastrophe as well, this is necessary. The call to work more to guarantee economic growth can be turned around: strike now, since continued economic growth is destroying our planet.

Our interests have always been enforced by collective actions. If you cannot join large strikes, organise something in your own smaller group. We must set limits on what our bosses ask of us. It's always more; it's never enough. There is always another request, another question, just as nurses are asked to take on extra shifts. The only limit is to collectively say "no". You are not your work!

Sometimes employers and employees share a passion. Surely their socio-economic interests can coincide.

My point is that we must learn to distinguish between our interests and those of our bosses. When employees of the Berlin-based start-up Gorillas complained about overwork, their CEO asked them to understand that his company was in the "building phase" in the competitive market of rapid grocery delivery. This is quite shocking. It shows the boss presumes a shared interest as though the delivery people biking around the city with heavy groceries on their backs should be happy to contribute to his capital accumulation. These workers should be able to refuse back-breaking work and make their boss responsible for the health impacts of their job.

You encourage saying "no" more often. But in doing so, don't you place a great deal of responsibility on the individual employee?

That's why I've come up with five guidelines for how to tackle these challenges. I also stress that if you don't succeed, this should not be seen as a failure. Saying "no" to the boss on a specific subject with a group of colleagues takes a lot of organisation and effort. But sometimes you can save your energy with small things. For example, you can switch off that screen at home and go and sit in the garden or the park for an hour.

Working at home offers the opportunity to take more control, but now our home is also the boss's home.

I find it problematic that employers are aiming for fewer workplaces. In that case, they should also take over part of our housing costs. A place with the means to do one's job is a basic and legitimate demand of workers. We have the right to refuse to work if there is no telephone, Wi-Fi connection, or an ergonomically designed workplace.

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Everything starts with the realisation that there is room to say "no"...

Yes, and then to not feel guilty about it. The boss already takes a lot from you. We should be able to distance ourselves from the work ethic in which we feel such responsibility for our work.

Is how we live as humans also related to this?

The current way offers little opportunity to do things together. Nuclear families in isolated households all have their own kitchens, bathrooms, and washing machines. We can think of ways to better share reproductive labour. In the book, I give a few examples of what that might look like. Taking care of each other's children without the need for a market player, for example. Feminist literature teaches us a lot about the detrimental effects of the isolated nuclear family, not least because of the violence against women and children.

In thinking about alternatives, you end up with a plea for more commons.

People have become very attached to their own homes and their own cars. We could share a lot more, and that can happen without the help of a Silicon Valley platform.

That sounds wonderful, but these are extra jobs that require time and organisation.

Indeed, but there are also many drawbacks to the way things work now. Women do the bulk of the world's reproductive labour, and that leads to a very specific kind of exhaustion. The commons must be organised in such a way that this kind of task is shared. This will create all kinds of new problems and frictions and conflicts. I do not have a romantic vision about that. But outsourcing more and more work to the market is even more disastrous.

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capitalism.*

Would a basic income make it easier to say "no"?

I am not so enthusiastic about the idea of a basic income. It only becomes interesting to me if we also manage to undermine the way we produce. As far as I am concerned, giving

everyone 500 or 1000 euros and otherwise continuing with business as usual does not go far enough and creates new problems. I want to move towards forms of global solidarity, and for that we need to get rid of capitalism.

It seems that the love of work, which often exists, is somewhat overlooked. Work can also be a source of pride, can't it?

Absolutely. I just think that there are other ways to live together where we can also find that pride and satisfaction. Then it does not necessarily depend on paid work. Our development and fulfilment can also come from building something together.

What would be your first initiative as a political leader? How would you bridge the gap between your world of ideas and political practice?

I'm not sure if I can translate it in such a way. At the moment, it is very important for left-wing parties to refute [Mark Rutte's Netherlands](#) and show that politics don't only take place in municipal councils and parliaments. Connecting with the various social struggles that are taking place is important, whether it be Extension Rebellion, Black Lives Matter, or the [housing struggle](#). All of these are expressions of the same question: How can we live together with less violence? How can we make things fair for all of us? In the end, all these issues are connected. A left alternative will have to work with all kinds of organisations to arrive at truly left-wing choices.

This interview was first published in Dutch in De Helling.



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Marguerite van den Berg is an Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Amsterdam, where she teaches courses on gender and the city, social policy, the welfare state and public issues. In 2021, her book *Werk is geen oplossing* [Work is not a solution] was published by Amsterdam University Press.

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