

# the VOCAL LOCAL

THE OFFICIAL VOICE OF  
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GEORGE BROWN COLLEGE FACULTY,  
COUNSELLORS AND LIBRARIANS

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## Ode to opseu556.org

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*If information you must get,  
Check your Union Local on the 'net*

*Local 556 has a new site  
With info on employment rights*

*Want to know if you should grieve?  
Or what's involved in long-term leave?*

*The site can answer many questions  
About workload, safety and your pension*

*If you want to learn more about your SWF  
Or find out about benefits in a jiff,*

*Check out Local 556 in cyberspace  
For all the answers in one place.*

Yes, we have good reason to wax poetic. OPSEU Local 556 is pleased to announce the launch of your website. The rumours are true: **opseu556.org** will go live by the end of February. Check your college email for the launch alert, coming *very* soon.

OPSEU 556's new website will help you find clear and quick answers to many questions. What are your rights and responsibilities at work? What do all those letters and numbers mean on your SWF? Where can you get a Sun Life claim form? The answers to these and many more questions are on **opseu556.org**.

**opseu556.org** has helpful info for all members, full-time, partial-load and new hires. You can find out about special deals available to OPSEU members, Local 556 scholarships and how to maximize your salary. Trying to figure out when you can afford to retire? Why, there's even a link to a handy pension calculator.

And the best part is that this information is available to you 24/7. No more frustration when you want to check something about your work or benefits, from home, at 3:00 am.

**opseu556.org** is a user-friendly hub of information; think of it as "one stop shopping" for queries related to your employment here at George Brown and how OPSEU and Local 556 can help you.



# The Workerless Economy: We're All Going to Be Team Members & Managers

by Ed Ksenych

*“The Great Recession may be over, but this era of high joblessness is probably just beginning. Before it ends, it will likely change the life course and character of a generation of young adults.”*

So wrote Don Peck in his article “How a New Jobless Era Will Transform America” last year in *The Atlantic*. Permanent job loss, high unemployment, precarious work and deepening personal debt are not just realities for Americans, but Canadians as well. However there’s been another development occurring besides a jobless recovery which has been changing the course and character of working people – the emergence of a “workerless” economy.

This development has been underway for some time and I want to draw attention to it because it makes it even more difficult for those affected by a jobless recovery to effectively respond to the situation. While most of us who are working are doing so in more intensified, rationalized working environments, fewer and fewer of us are “workers”. My concern with this is that by not meaningfully identifying ourselves with who we are in this economy, we lose a connection to what we are actually doing, and fail to access the organizations and resources that have historically arisen to assist workers in addressing persistent negative aspects to how work is currently organized – exploitation, oppression, alienation.

Such words are not pleasant. But they do refer to realities that occur often enough at the workplace. And their occurrence doesn’t require the existence of malevolent managers or greedy owners. They are a persistent consequence of the very dynamic, productive economic system that is cur-

rently in place, and of people conducting themselves in accordance with that system by dutifully fulfilling their occupational responsibilities.

A key characteristic of our current social world is the gradual elimination of the “worker”. By that I don’t mean the elimination of people who work in contractual relations with those who manage and/or own organizations. Nor am I just referring to the reduction of people engaged in skilled manual labour occupations (the classic blue-collar worker) as the service sector expands. Rather what I’m referring to is the gradual elimination of the idea of “worker” as a social category that situates people in some meaningful manner in the social world and that they can, and do, identify with.

Consider the following example. I stopped by Wendy’s the other day and saw a “career brochure” on the wall. It was encouraging people to apply for work there because the company offered, not just a job, but a career. Then it listed the following ladder of positions within the company:

- Division Vice President
- Director of Area Operation
- Franchise Area Director
- Field Training Manager
- District Manager
- Training Store Manager
- General Manager
- Co-Manager
- Assistant Manager
- Shift Supervisor
- Crew Member

Afterwards I came across a Burger King ad in a newspaper that was also encouraging people to apply for work at their organization with the following positions listed:

- Restaurant Managers
- Senior Assistant Managers
- Assistant Managers
- Shift Coordinators
- Team Members

“Team members” and then “managers” all the way from there on up. Layers and layers of them with various titles – coordinators, supervisors, directors, and of course, managers. But where were the “workers”?!

The flyers I mentioned above are significant. I don’t think any of the positions listed in them encourage, or enable, individuals to easily identify themselves with being a “worker” even though they are, of course (or at least in classic socio-economic terms), workers working at Wendy’s and Burger King, including many of those in allegedly managerial positions. Instead they are being encouraged to locate themselves within a “Wendy’s world” or “Burger King world”. More generally, workers throughout service industry corporations are being encouraged to situate themselves in their particular “company worlds”, usually as members of the company “team”.

Now this isn’t entirely new. In the 1950s it was called being an “organization man” (Whyte, 1956). Nor is this just another example of sophistry and newsspeak glossing over the realities of the work-

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place – although it is that as well. There’s a real puzzle here. One of the deepest constituent features of a modern liberal, capitalist society is the “work ethic”. Valorizing work is integral to modern economies and the societies built upon them. And historically being a “worker” was considered a dignified way of participating in that economy. So what’s going on with the elimination of “workers”? And what are the implications of it?

I am hardly the first person to be calling attention to this. Three decades ago Daniel Bell (1973) and Andre Gorz (1982) both argued that the “computer revolution” would have profound implications for the structure of modern societies and for the very meaning of work. But it was Gorz especially who theorized the implications of these changes for “workers” and the “working class”. In *Farewell to the Working Class*, he showed how the meaning of work has changed from one historical period to another. With the emergence of capitalism, work came to take on an increasingly “abstract quality” as it became “paid activity”. Computers, he argued, would increasingly displace the unskilled and semi-skilled worker because their work functions could now be easily automated. This computerization of production processes would lead us into a post-industrial society where “work” would increasingly come to mean something different than its traditional definition as “wage-labour”. We would need to redefine “work”.

When it was published, Gorz’s thesis was controversial, especially among left thinking social and political theorists and activists who saw it undermining the working class and the labour movement. But thirty years later, Gorz’s analysis of what was about to occur seems prescient in several ways, although computerization has often re-

structured the work process as much as displaced workers.

There are other accounts of what I’m calling attention to, and they can be heard as complementing rather than competing with Gorz. For example, some argue that under neoliberal/neoconservative capitalism, organizations have managed to control the communication systems of our society and inserted dominating forms of discourse that present what’s going on in ways that serve the interests of those in power while significantly distorting or denying the realities of what’s actually going on. And a key site for this is the workplace. The result is that those working in organizations find going to work to be a kind of surreal experience which involves contending with the gap between what we actually do and how it’s organizationally portrayed. So we have people occupying positions of “status” continuing to be underpaid and overworked (i.e., being exploited), being pressured to accept or passively complying with their situation (i.e., being oppressed), and experiencing a pervasive feeling of estrangement and powerlessness (i.e., being alienated) even though they’re in positions of apparent authority and influence like “team members”, “coordinators”, “supervisors”, “managers”, “directors”, or “professionals”.

And half a century ago, Peter Berger (1964) predicted that the work process would be increasingly controlled, rationalized, and technologized for the sake of predictability, calculability and standardization. As a result, much work would become more meaningless at the same time as people were expected to be deriving meaning from work. One strategy for ameliorating the situation would be to reinvent the status of the positions being occupied so that people would basically end up doing less meaningful work with more meaningful titles.

Pick your account, but in any case the “righting” is on the wall”. Only what does the ‘righting’ mean?

One implication of an increasingly workerless economy is that unions and the labour movement may be drawing on a vocabulary and grammar that continues to be as relevant as it ever was to the interests of the working class as well as marginalized groups, minority groups, and the oppressed. But many people who are workers don’t actually see, or identify, themselves with being “workers”. So one of the projects of the labour movement today is simply going out and persuasively defining, or redefining, the situation that people are in with respect to being a worker. But it’s becoming harder to do because the social category is losing meaning and relevance as part of the emerging social world people inhabit.

Let me frame it another way. At our college we are constantly being bombarded with messages about preparing students to be “knowledge workers” in a new global economy. The difficulty is that knowledge workers don’t see themselves as “workers”. So what are they? How do they situate and identify themselves?

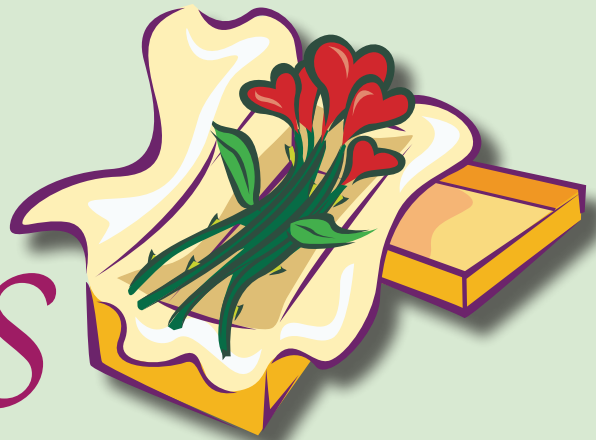
I’m not sure, but I think it might be useful to start asking our students if and how they relate to the idea of being a “worker”. I asked one class of students if they identify with it, and only one out of 35 did. While they do go to work, being a student is their master identity right now. So they’re students who work, not workers.

But what about when they finally get those jobs they’re training for, let alone if they don’t or lose them? Again, I’m not sure. But we need to find out if people who work more permanently at these jobs see themselves as “workers” and as part of any kind of group or class in the economic sys-

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THE GREEN CORNER

# Green Hearts



by Jill Edmondson

*As romantic as Valentine's Day may be, it's not the most environmentally friendly occasion.*

According to American Greetings Corporation, approximately a billion Valentine's cards are sent around the world every February, and more than 35 million heart-shaped boxes of chocolates are sold each year. Red roses are also a worldwide romantic tradition, with over 50 million of them given each year.

It's easy enough to come up with ways to add a little green to Cupid's red and pink. For starters, consider buying cards made from recycled or tree-free (hemp, cotton, etc.) paper. Even better, make your own paper! It's actually pretty easy to do.

All you need are some old newspapers, magazines, wrapping paper, plus a strainer, and a few other household items. The websites [www.make-stuff.com](http://www.make-stuff.com) and [www.pioneerthinking.com](http://www.pioneerthinking.com) have complete do-it-yourself instructions.

Making your own card might be pretty easy, but making your own chocolates takes a bit more work. Instead, buy organic or fair-trade chocolates. Many shops around Toronto and the GTA do indeed sell sustainable sweets, and many of them, such as Delight Chocolates in the Junction ([www.delightchocolate.ca](http://www.delightchocolate.ca)) use environmentally friendly, biodegradable packaging.

Red roses are lovely but they aren't very green. You can minimize your flower footprint by choosing organic, locally

grown, or fair trade blooms. There are a few Toronto florists that incorporate sustainability into their corporate philosophy. For example, Ecostems ([www.ecostems.ca](http://www.ecostems.ca)) near Queen and Sherbourne, recycles packaging, reuses materials, and makes their flower deliveries by bicycle.

*With a little creative thinking, you can be Cupid with a conscience.*



## LOCAL 556 SCHOLARSHIPS

There are several scholarships that Local 556 makes available to our students. More information on these scholarships will be made available to all our faculty in the very near future.

*Please keep an eye out for the info!*

## General Membership Meeting

Tuesday, February 15, 2011

St. James Campus – Room 315A

4:00 pm - 6:00 pm



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tem. My hunch is that the corporate redefining of positions (like the one at Wendy's and Burger King) is leaving workers being uncertain of where they're socially located and who they are in the overall socio-economic system. Or, it might be even more frightening: maybe being a "consumer" is the new master social identity. So, people don't see themselves as workers as much as consumers who work.

Of course what I'm outlining isn't intended to describe everyone who is currently a worker in the work world. For instance, those cleaning hotel rooms, driving cabs, or picking vegetables in fields likely do identify with being workers. Nor is what I'm outlining intended to downplay or dismiss the historical achievements of the labour movement as being outdated. There's plenty of important work that unions and the labour movement can do using the classic socio-economic vocabulary and grammar.

At the same time, something's going on regarding the current social construction of reality that companies have been engaging in for awhile. And we need to get a better grip on it and its effects before we suddenly find out that the "work game" has changed more radically than

we thought. Corporate narratives are very compelling and start to assume the character of a kind of surreal "newsspeak". It's hard not to be affected by the social definitions that you're living your life in terms of even if you distance yourself from them in your head or reject them internally. Ask people who've been labelled.

Why am I raising all this? As teachers I don't think we're helping our students by going along with the new corporate newsspeak. But I'm also not sure we're helping them as much as we can by invoking social categories that they do not, for the most part, identify with. As college teachers we've been assigned the task of preparing students for the world of work. And that means leading, not just instructing, students into the ways of the existing workworld.

Leading involves topicalizing what they will be trying to function within, and perhaps collaborating with them in generating counter-definitions to the corporate view of everyone becoming "team members" and "managers". We can begin this with a few simple questions. If you who are reading this are not a worker (and so few of us are any longer), what are you? If you're not a worker, how much control do

you actually have over the work process and your working conditions? If you're not preparing students to fundamentally be "workers", what are you fundamentally preparing them to be, really, in the existing socio-economic system? ▼

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Send your comments, articles, letters, praise, etc. to:  
VoLo Editor at [opseu556@gmail.com](mailto:opseu556@gmail.com)



# GBC's 19th Annual Labour Fair

## "Debt, Jobs, Wages: Working on a Tightrope"

March 21 - March 25, 2011