

# Bruno, R. (2024) *What Work Is*. University of Illinois Press.

## Review by Stephanie Ross

A moving and thought-provoking book, *What Work Is* explores an age-old question central to our collective future. Robert Bruno centres the voices and experiences of “worker-students” who have taken his labor education courses over the past 25 years. Bruno takes as his material the responses to the six-word essay assignment he’s used to generate class discussion, in which students complete the sentence “Work is \_\_\_\_.” Bruno argues that “in order to develop policies and practices about work for the future, we should ask the workers right now what work is so that they can be the architects of their own destiny.” This approach runs contrary to how work is generally understood and discussed by the dominant economic and political forces in society.

A professor of labor and employment relations at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign and director of their Labor Education Program, Bruno has long been interested in working-class experience and identity. His own working-class upbringing in Youngstown, Ohio led to his work *Steelworker Alley: How Class Works in Youngstown* (1999), based on extensive interviews with retired steelworkers and their wives and which he cites as one inspiration for *What Work Is*. Other inspirations include National Public Radio’s “Race Card Project,” which similarly asked listeners for short meditations on what race means, and the poetry of former US poet laureate Phillip Levine, whose poem about working in Detroit’s auto factories inspired the title. Bruno deftly weaves his students’ words together with insights from Marx, Smith, Polanyi, Goffman, Russell and many contemporary labor scholars. These influences converge in a compelling and poignant read that alternates between philosophy, social science, and memoir.

The book is organized thematically according to the answers that came up most frequently and generated the most class discussion: time, space, impact, purpose and subject. Bruno weaves together these answers with reflections on work from scholarship, art and poetry, and his own experiences and research.

In “The Time of Work,” Bruno depicts students’ sense that work is ever-present, consuming their lifetimes and stealing time from other more valuable things (like family or leisure). Work is a claim on their time they have little power to refuse. However, work also gives meaning to workers’ past, present and future – it is the basis of a legacy, the structure of one’s days, and the way people strive for a better future for their loved ones.

“Work and Space” depicts the way that work both occupies every space on the planet but is also carried out in particular sites with their unique forms, purposes, and impacts on people and their environment. Who gets to decide what those forms and purposes are is a key question and makes workplaces into sites of “contention and struggle.” The fact of alienation strips workers of ultimate control over their places of work, which can be places of danger and degradation. Yet this reality also generates contradictory experiences of the worksite because it is where workers connect with

others, develop and use their skills, and do useful, pleasurable or meaningful things of which they are proud. Some workers even come to see the workplace as an embodiment of themselves, especially if they've worked to create or maintain that space.

“Work’s Impact” explores how work transforms us and the world, how “our labors come with a cost, a price to be paid, a return on investment, a reward, a sacrifice, a gift.” Even when workers emphasize the meaning they derive from work that serves others, makes a difference, or allows them to use their skills and discretion, there is also a price exacted in their bodies and minds, a price they pay long after the working day or even their working lifetime is over.

In “The Purpose of Work,” we see how work is about earning money, doing what needs to be done to survive and to provide for others, but also fulfills the desire to do something important, even when that something wasn’t necessarily chosen. Finally, “The Subject of Work” examines who workers work for and reveals a fascinating outcome – while workers were well aware that they work for employers who take an inordinate benefit from their labors, this was not who they were “working for.” Instead, as Bruno writes about his parents, “They worked for me. They worked for my brothers. They worked for each other. They worked for their friends and neighbors. They worked for the community. They worked for themselves.”

Throughout the book, Bruno shows how working people have a very clear sense of the contradictory experience of working under capitalist conditions of alienation, unequal choices, and employer power. Work both traps workers like “a worm on a hook” and fills them with pride, accomplishment and a sense of usefulness. In several places, Bruno emphasizes that students understood it was not work itself that was “evil” but rather “the rules of the political-economic system that coerced workers into jobs they needed to survive.” Bruno’s students collectively articulate a moral economy of labor that stands in stark contrast to the dehumanizing vision of capitalist employers and the politicians who abet them. By pointing to and clearly articulating the conditions that rob workers of their power and dignity, we are better able to envision the conditions that would better deliver on work’s transformative and empowering potentials.

Bruno is clear that workers’ situations and the capacity to change them is about power – the power of employers to dictate the purposes to which workers’ labor is put but also the collective power of workers themselves to remake the workplace and the economy. If there is a gap in this book, it is the thin exploration of what collective agency could make such a transformation of work possible, particularly given the challenges faced by unions, workers’ political parties, and progressive social movements in an era where authoritarian and anti-worker politics are ascendant. However, through the voices of his students, Bruno helps us renew our commitment to the urgent search for an effective politics to transform work.

*What Work Is* should be read widely by policy makers and labor studies educators. This book inspired me as a labor studies professor about how to engage students to talk about their experiences of work. The stories here also resonated with me as someone from a working-class family like Bruno. Perhaps the most important audience for this book is workers themselves, then, whose insight, grit, dignity and desire for a better world shine through Bruno’s careful prose and humanizing approach.

**Reviewer Bio:**

**Stephanie Ross** is Associate Professor of Labour Studies at McMaster University in Ontario and co-author, with Larry Savage, of *Shifting Gears: Canadian Autoworkers and the Changing Landscape of Labour Politics* and *Building a Better World: An Introduction to the Labour Movement in Canada*.