

## Work Poetry / Poésie de Travail

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# WORK POETRY/ POÉSIE DE TRAVAIL

Brian Burch

## *AT THE BOTTOM OF THE HEAP*

Supply teachers  
are at the bottom of the heap.  
Students, other teachers  
and administration share jokes  
about us, treating us with everything  
from contempt to denial.

Entering a classroom taking over the work  
of a person I'll never meet, I am expected  
to be the master of every subject, a person  
able to control 35 strangers who all have  
something better to do.

Waiting for a 7:30 a.m. phonecall for the chance to work  
for the first time in two weeks, a supply teacher  
is trapped. If they aren't available every day  
they won't be called in. If they get other work  
to cover rent and food, they'll miss calls  
and be dropped from the list. Supply teachers  
are expert lottery players---Will I get a call?  
What are the odds?

The Toronto Board of Education trustees claim  
that they can't guarantee us work or wages.  
They also claim that they can't keep  
enough teachers available to fill the demand.

Logic would solve this problem--guarantee wages and we'll guarantee workers. Logic never governs bosses. In Toronto, our bosses gave themselves an 86% raise. They feel that without such a raise "The right type of people won't stand for election."

You know you're at the bottom of the heap when a demand like 'work and wages' is seen as greedy by those with an unlimited trough to slurp from.

### *A SIMPLE ACT OF CHARITY*

Mist rolls across the field  
followed by scraggly lines  
of labour.

The mist lies low across the fields,  
clinging to everything  
with a musty sweetness.

A few coughs, some spreading rashes later  
and the workers finish their trek  
across the grape fields.

At the edge of memory  
a child is being formed.  
At the edge of memory is a reminder  
to not go into the fields during spraying.  
At the edge of memory is the foreman's promise  
that nothing is going to hurt you.  
At the edge of memory  
a child is being formed.

### *LESS FOR MORE*

Another form to fill out, begging  
for money from some department  
of some bureaucracy. What you want  
is being put aside. The form seeks  
an untruth. The vision of justice

is diverted towards some statistical phenomena.  
 Two community gardens to be developed, jargon  
 about community development. Education  
 about why food is scarce, money scarce,  
 beauty scarce is not a category. The proper  
 mix of agency veto and myth of community control  
 must be described. Through something  
 about avoiding dependency, don't let them ever  
 feel they are able to trust you, prepare to  
 abandon the project when funding priorities change.  
 The progressive fundraiser continues to ethically  
 seek the money that, with each successful application,  
 moves the agency from being with the outcasts  
 to yet another bureaucracy that can get more from  
 those in power while doing less to increase the power  
 of those outside.

### *JUST ONE MOMENT BEFORE*

Just one moment before  
 I stepped out to join the Labour Day Parade  
 and march to Toronto's C.N.E.  
 a friend of mine from the peace movement  
 reminds me that today military aircraft,  
 some capable of dropping nuclear bombs  
 and firing nuclear-armed missiles  
 will be proudly flying past. Shame  
 flowed over me and I turn aside,  
 not willing to let my presence  
 give moral force to labour's presence  
 at an arms display. The labour movement  
 I belong to supports peace, the movement  
 going to the C.N.E. just doesn't care.

### *BENDING OVER, THE DANCE*

Bending over, the dance continues:  
 Weeds dug; Weeds dug; Weeds dug;  
 Vines trimmed; Vines trimmed; Vines trimmed;  
 Rashes Grow; Rashes grow; Rashes grow.

Tomorrow, the planes come by. The next day  
we return. Tomorrow, the planes come by.  
The next day we return. Tomorrow, we visit  
the doctor and the priest. The doctor will say,  
"Nothing new." The priest will say, "I have  
no miracles." Tomorrow, the planes come by.  
The next day we return.

Felipe still believes he will grow arms.  
Twenty friends had miscarriages. Jose lacks fingers.

Tomorrow the planes will come, spraying the fields.  
The next day we return. The priest says maybe  
we shouldn't work so soon but he can't feed us.  
The doctor says its dangerous but he can't feed us.  
Tomorrow the planes will come, spraying the fields.  
The next day we return.

Bending over, the dance continues:  
Weeds dug; Weeds dug; Weeds dug;  
Vines trimmed; Vines trimmed; Vines trimmed;  
Rashes grow; Rashes grow; Rashes grow.

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