

# The 'Private Governments' that Subjugate U.S. Workers

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*Corporate dictatorships—which strip employees of fundamental constitutional rights, including free speech, and which increasingly rely on temp or contract employees who receive no benefits and have no job security—rule the lives of perhaps 80 percent of working Americans.*

*These corporations, with little or no oversight, surveil and monitor their workforces. They conduct random drug testing, impose punishing quotas and targets, routinely engage in wage theft, injure workers and then refuse to make compensation, and ignore reports of sexual harassment, assault and rape. They use managerial harassment, psychological manipulation—including the pseudo-science of [positive psychology](#)—and intimidation to ensure obedience.*

*They fire workers for expressing leftist political opinions on social media or at public events during their off-hours. They terminate those who file complaints or publicly voice criticism about working conditions. They thwart attempts to organize unions, callously dismiss older workers and impose “non-compete” contract clauses, meaning that if workers leave they are unable to use their skills and human capital to work for other employers in the same industry. Nearly half of all technical professions now require workers to sign non-compete clauses, and this practice has spread to low-wage jobs including those in hair salons and restaurants.*

The lower the wages the more abusive the conditions. Workers in the food and hotel industries, agriculture, construction, domestic service, call centers, the garment industry, warehouses, retail sales, lawn service, prisons, and health and elder care suffer the most. Walmart, for example, which employs nearly 1 percent of the U.S. labor force (1.4 million workers), prohibits casual conversation, which it describes as “time theft.” The food industry giant Tyson prevents its workers from taking toilet breaks, causing many to urinate on themselves; as a result, some workers must wear diapers. The older, itinerant [workers that Amazon often employs](#) are subjected to grueling 12-hour shifts in which the company electronically monitors every action to make sure hourly quotas are met.

Some Amazon workers walk for miles on concrete floors each shift and repeatedly get down on their hands and knees to perform their jobs. They frequently suffer crippling injuries. The company makes injured employees, whom it fires, sign releases saying the injuries are not work-related. Two-thirds of workers in low-wage industries are victims of [wage theft](#), losing an amount estimated to be as high as \$50 billion a year. From 4 million to 14 million American workers, under threat of wage cuts, plant shutdowns or dismissal, have been pressured by their employers to [support pro-corporate political candidates](#) and causes.

The corporations that in effect rule the lives of American workers constitute what University of Michigan philosophy professor [Elizabeth Anderson](#) refers to as “private governments.”

These “workplace governments,” she writes, are “dictatorships, in which bosses govern in ways that are largely unaccountable to those who are governed. They don’t merely govern workers: they dominate them.”

These corporations have the legal authority, she writes, “to regulate workers’ off-hour lives as well—their political activities, speech, choice of sexual partner, use of recreational drugs, alcohol, smoking, and exercise. Because most employers exercise this off-hours authority irregularly, and without warning, most workers are unaware of how sweeping it is.”

“If the U.S. government imposed such regulations on us, we would rightly protest that our constitutional rights were being violated,” Anderson writes in her book “[Private Government](#): How Employers Rule Our Lives (and Why We Don’t Talk About It).” “But American workers have no such rights against their bosses. Even speaking out against such constraints can get them fired. So most keep silent.”

Once workers sign contracts they essentially cede their rights as citizens to the corporations, except the few rights guaranteed by law, for the duration of the contracts.

“Employers’ authority over workers,” Anderson writes, “outside of collective bargaining and a few other contexts, such as university professors’ tenure, is sweeping, arbitrary, and unaccountable—not subject to notice, process, or appeal. The state has established the constitution of the government of the workplace; it is a form of private government.”

These corporations, by law, can “impose a far more minute, exacting, and sweeping regulation of employees than democratic states do in any domain outside of prisons and the military.”

These myriad corporate dictatorships, or private governments, ensure American workers are docile and compliant as the superstructure of the corporate state cements into place a species of corporate totalitarianism. The ruling ideology of [neoliberalism](#) and [libertarianism](#), used to justify the corporate domination and social inequality that afflict us, sells itself as the protector of freedom and liberty. It does this by subterfuge. It claims workers have the freedom to enter into employment contracts and terminate them, while ignoring the near-total suspension of rights during the period of employment. It pretends that workers and corporations function as independent and autonomous sellers and buyers, with workers selling their labor freely and corporate owners buying this labor.

This neoliberal economic model, however, is defective. The relationship between the corporation and the worker is not the same as the relationship between a self-employed baker, for example, and his customers. The self-employed baker and those who buy the bread appeal to mutual self-interest in the exchange.

“The buyer is not an inferior, begging for a favor,” Anderson writes. “Equally importantly, the buyer is not a superior who is entitled to order the butcher,

the brewer, or the baker to hand over the fruits of his labor. Buyers must address themselves to the other's interests. The parties each undertake the exchange with their dignity, their standing, and their personal independence affirmed by the other. This is a model of social relations between free and equal persons." (Emphasis by the author.)

Once a worker is bonded to a corporation, however, he or she instantly loses this dignity, standing and personal independence, especially if the job is temporary, entry-level or menial. Relations are no longer free and equal.

"When workers sell their labor to an employer, they have to hand themselves over to their boss, who then gets to order them around," Anderson writes. "The labor contract, instead of leaving the seller free as before, puts the seller under the authority of their boss."

The worker either fulfills the demands of management, which he or she has little ability to question or formulate, or is reprimanded, demoted, sanctioned or fired. The corporate manager wields total authority over the worker.

"The performance of the contract embodies a profound asymmetry in whose interests count," Anderson writes, "henceforth, the worker will be required to toil under conditions that pay no regard to his interests, and every regard for the capitalist's profits."

Neoliberalism posits that the choice is between a free market and state control, whereas, as Anderson writes, "most adults live their working lives under a third thing entirely: *private government*." Neoliberalism argues that the essence of freedom is free enterprise, while never addressing workers' surrender of basic freedoms. Neoliberalism holds out the promise, which has not been true since before the Industrial Revolution, that workers can become self-employed if they are hardworking and innovative. We all have the ability to achieve economic independence or become industry leaders if we draw on our inner resources, according to the neoliberal mantra, one popularized by mass culture. The neoliberal ideologues' solution to the cannibalization of the economy is to call for fostering a [nation of entrepreneurs](#). This is a con. Corporations and their lobbyists write the laws and the legislation, creating a two-tiered legal system in which poverty is criminalized and we are controlled, taxed and punished. The corporate oligarchs, however, live in a world where monopoly, fraud and other financial wrongdoing are legal or rarely punished and taxes are minimal or nonexistent. Among the population, only a tiny percentage—most of whom come from inherited wealth and have been groomed in elitist, plutocratic universities and institutions—dominate the corporate hierarchy. Public discourse, controlled by corporate power, ignores this one-sided power arrangement. It cannot address a problem it refuses to acknowledge. Subjugation is freedom.

Anderson calls this corporate economic system communist—that's communist with a small "c"—because these private governments "own all the nonlabor means of production in the society it governs. It organizes production by means of central planning. The form of the government is a dictatorship. In some cases, the dictator is appointed by an oligarchy. In other cases, the dictator is self-appointed." Private governments, their sanctioning powers lacking the state's ability to imprison or execute (although they often have internal security forces with the power to arrest), ensure compliance by using wholesale surveillance and the

threats of demotion and exile, plus the potential rewards of salary raises and promotions. Also, there usually is a steady barrage of company propaganda.

“We have the language of fairness and distributive justice to talk about low wages and inadequate benefits, we know how to talk about the Fight for \$15, whatever side of this issue you are on,” Anderson writes. “But we don’t have good ways to talk about the way bosses rule workers’ lives.”

American workers have never achieved the array of rights won by workers in other industrialized countries. At the height of union representation in 1954, only 28.3 percent of American workers were union members. This number has fallen to 11.1 percent, with only 6.6 percent of private-sector workers belonging to unions. Wages have for decades declined or been stagnant. Half of all U.S. workers make less than \$29,000 a year, effectively putting their families in poverty.

Workers, lacking unions and the ability to pressure management through collective bargaining, have no say in their working conditions. If they choose to leave abusive employment, where do they go? The inequalities and the workers’ loss of liberty and agency are embedded within the corporate structure. It is impossible, as Anderson warns, to build a free, democratic society dominated by private governments. As these private governments merge into the superstructure of the corporate state we are cementing into place an unassailable corporate tyranny. It is a race against time. Our remaining freedoms are being rapidly extinguished. These omnipotent dictatorships must be destroyed, and they will only be destroyed by sustained popular protest such as we see in the streets of Paris. Otherwise, we will be shackled in 21st-century chains.

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