



**Selected Papers of #AoIR2023:  
The 24th Annual Conference of the  
Association of Internet Researchers**  
Philadelphia, PA, USA / 18-21 Oct 2023

## **THE EMERGENT R/ANTIWORK REVOLUTION AND MANAGERIAL ALLIES**

Ari Stillman  
University of Edinburgh

The subreddit *r/Antiwork* and the eponymous movement it launched has introduced phrases like ‘Quiet Quitting’ and ‘Act your Wage’ into the media lexicon (Kilpatrick 2022) and garnered the attention of businesses from Goldman Sachs to Kellogg’s for its threat to labor force participation (Chueng 2021). Heralded by some as the successor to #OccupyWallSt (O’Connor 2022), *Antiwork* is the other side of the Great Resignation for those who cannot afford to leave their livelihood. Yet it differs from #OccupyWallSt in its scope, which critiques capitalism as a whole rather than money in politics; its scale, with 2.7M members globally on Reddit alone (*Antiwork FAQ*); its longevity, ongoing for ten years; and its varied demographics (toberic 2021) whereas Occupy protesters tended to be educated white men (Conover et al. 2013). As Occupy sought collective mobilizations at government buildings, *Antiwork* fosters individual, less public forms of resistance to capitalism. James Scott referred to such ‘infrapolitics’ as weapons of the weak, as the lack of capital of the oppressed in all its forms often precludes more direct forms of protest (1985).

Drawing from two years of digital ethnography of *r/Antiwork* and interviews with members, I ask what impact *r/Antiwork* discourse has on the offline behaviors of its members who are empowered to improve workplace conditions: managers. Members of *r/Antiwork* often solicit and respond to work advice, vent and seek social support, encourage each other to do minimal work, brainstorm solutions to systemic issues caused by capitalism, and call attention to non-violent forms of resistance – consistent with themes of quitting employment and mental health revealed by topic modeling (Medlar et al. 2022). While members often share stories about their work experience, less common, though no less salient, are testimonials from managers who describe how *r/Antiwork* has changed their views on labor or otherwise support their workers. These conversion narratives and affirmations, which occasionally mention accompanying actions, are universally met with approbation by working members – reifying their grievances through expressed desire for similarly sympathetic management.

Suggested Citation (APA): Stillman, A. (2023, October). *The Emergent R/Antiwork Revolution And Managerial Allies*. Paper presented at AoIR2023: The 24th Annual Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers. Philadelphia, PA, USA: AoIR. Retrieved from <http://spir.aoir.org>.

The attention and participation of managers in an expressly anti-capitalist space is important not just because of the potential for implementing changes mentioned above, but also because managers have been largely overlooked in conversations, considerations, and frameworks about class consciousness (Moody 2022). In the polarizing Marxist rhetoric of proletariat against capitalist interests, managers occupy “contradictory locations within class relations” (Wright 1979) in that they socially reproduce capitalist interests and values without themselves owning the means of production. While management literature expounds on practices of social closure and carrot-on-a-stick outlooks whereby managers seek to protect their own interests (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005), the economic and professional precarity impacting their once-secure livelihoods have given cause for some to turn a corner. As the proletariat becomes class conscious, they may find un-historical allies in managers who suddenly find more homophily with workers than their own upper management and owners (Mann 1973). With the role of middle management evolving to focus more on collaboration than supervision (Zhang 2023), thereby reducing manager-worker distinction in practice, such a contingency for re-evaluating traditional class categories seems tenable.

Through interviews with managers in r/Antiwork, I learned that rather than being outright converted, r/Antiwork has served to reinforce their previously existing gripes with capitalism. r/Antiwork functions as an anti-model and helps managers keep a pulse on the concerns of workers that wouldn't usually be disclosed in a professional relationship. In doing so, it fosters sympathy for the plight of workers – with many identifying as working middle class not apart from those they manage. This is supported by longitudinal changes in the profession highlighting the importance of collaboration over supervision (Zhang 2023) – though indubitably exacerbated by recent changes in the economy at large. Given that bigger picture, manager participation and resonance in r/Antiwork suggests a more expansive class consciousness than traditionally segmented and the mediating role of the internet in shaping it.

Both the bridging of worker-manager professional distance and the revolutionary consciousness of r/Antiwork forming a digital counterpublic (Hill 2018) were enabled by the affordances of the platform itself and governance of the subreddit (Massanari 2013). Most pertinent of all is that users engage with the platform pseudonymously. This affords users a safe space to discuss work-related politics whereas doing so on social media on which their identity is attached could result in professional repercussions (Van der Nagel and Frith 2015). Effectively, anonymous engagement flattens a power dynamic that otherwise deters speaking out (Brown et al. 2018). It also invites the potential for bad actors, although good-faith actors can be verified by clicking on a Redditor's user activity to situate a comment or post against their previous activity (Panek 2022). Likewise, as managers have traditionally been left out of conversations pertaining to class interests (Roy 1999), anonymity has allowed them to observe, absorb, and participate without their presence threatening workers or compromising power dynamics.

Although r/Antiwork was founded by anarcho-socialists who were more interested in abolishing capitalism than reforming it, meteoric growth of the subreddit membership from less than 100k members at the start of 2020 to 1.6M at the start of 2022 ushered in new members with broader political views wanting to feel represented (Todd 2021).

Contrary to the ideology of the veteran members, r/Antiwork saw an influx of users who were keener on capitalist improvements such as higher wages, more paid time-off, and a slew of benefits to working life. As a result, r/Antiwork moderators expanded the scope of the subreddit broadly: “to start a conversation, to problematize work as we know it today” (Antiwork FAQ). While such dilution of community scope is typical of sudden, expansive growth (Faraj et al. 2016), more interesting is that so many users who didn’t share the hardline ideology of the subreddit at the time found their way to r/Antiwork. As my interviews uncovered, this was due to no other mainstream online platforms affording a dedicated space to vent about and critique capitalism as well as resonant, low-commitment personal action frames (e.g., Act your wage) (Bennett and Segerberg 2012). Additionally, media reporting and virality contributed to r/Antiwork exposure, thus fueling the ranks and spurring Human Resource officers and business publications to monitor r/Antiwork for competitive intelligence (Comber 2023).

Since r/Antiwork’s membership swelled, and following an incident of bad publicity on Fox News that caused r/Antiwork members to interrogate r/Antiwork’s scope and leadership (Stillman [Forthcoming]), r/Antiwork members branched out and/or defected both on Reddit and other platforms. On Reddit, more focused niche iterations of Antiwork emerged such as r/WorkReform for those who just want better working conditions and r/WorkersStrikeBack for those more inclined to activism. On other media, with Antiwork having gone mainstream, groups emerged on Facebook while #Antiwork trended on TikTok. More noteworthy is how Antiwork discourse has been commodified and redeployed by ‘thought leaders’ on LinkedIn (Schawbel 2022). In this digital space, without directly referencing Antiwork, managers, recruiters, and business owners critique strawmen business practices and assert how they better serve workers. As a professionally performative platform, this is unsurprising; though it signifies both the impact Antiwork discourse and recent changes in the labor economy have had on the professional sphere and how managers participate differently across platforms.

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