**A Word with Wolfgang Streeck:   
some critical insights into the discussion on well-being in the workplace**

An interview by Massimiliano De Falco to Wolfgang Streeck, Professor of Sociology and Industrial Relations at University of Wisconsin-Madison, and Director of the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies in Cologne.

The interview took place during the 13th Edition of ADAPT’s International Conference, «[Towards a Workless Society? An Interdisciplinary Reflection on the Changing Concept of Work and its Rules in Contemporary Economies](https://internationalconference.adapt.it/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/ADAPTConference2023_programme_v291123.pdf)», held in Bergamo from 30 November to 2 December 2023. Wolfgang Streeck participated in the event, delivering a presentation titled *Why work so hard? The origins of the capitalistic work ethic and its subsistentialist enemy* during [*Plenary Session #4*](https://www.youtube.com/live/_VqRjqySzpo?si=O8vMOuq2u_2Ct4sU).

***As a result of the post-pandemic “Great Resignation”, do you think workers are looking for something new in work? Specifically, does wellbeing (broadly understood) can be one of the new elements of the exchange of the working relationship?***

Don’t confuse employment with work. Work is part of our anthropological essence. Employment is a historical form under which people must work, or are allowed to work, i.e., as Marx says, to “produce and reproduce themselves”. To the extent that work takes place in an employment relationship, it cannot in the end satisfy human needs for autonomous “praxis” (Marx again) as it is subject to the employer’s work discipline. It is true that, depending on political and market conditions, workers can more or less successfully demand that, figurately speaking, the share of praxis in the work they do in employment is increased. But the need to turn a profit for the employer remains and limits the possible space for worker “well-being”. Even slaves have always looked for something else in their work than the drudgery that was extracted from them; a lot of the music we love today comes from the Africans being worked to death in American cotton fields. Don’t buy the slogans of today’s human resource management. Perhaps workers at the lower end of the wage scale, where their wage comes close to what is a politically indispensable political minimum wage, can ask for better working conditions as an alternative to leaving the labor market. The mechanism at work is not new.

***How important do you think the work-life balance dimension is in the post-pandemic context? Do you think that the measures envisaged for this purpose can have an impact on the well-being of workers, or that it is a “slogan” once again?***

In the debate on organizational well-being, it must always be considered that, in a capitalist economy, the important well-being is that of capital, not of labour; the latter can be granted – i.e., extracted by labor, either by unionizing or by threat of exit from the labor market – if it assures the former. If not, workers are fired rather than pampered, or capital disappears and moves to countries where they can afford to pay less attention to worker “well-being”. Also, beware of slogans like “work-life balance”. Employers pay attention to it only if in this way they can secure their labour supply, in terms of an adequate and loyal workforce. As to telework, for example, it will be granted to the extent that it increases the productivity of the worker – i.e., his or her profitability. Details need to be fought over: who pays insurance, how is surveillance implemented, how often can a worker take a break, etc. etc. Telework is not the end of work discipline, in fact often to the contrary.

***If not in the workers' well-being, what do you think are the fields in which industrial relations actors can play a decisive role? In other words, what do you consider to be the main challenges for the social partners today?***

The relative “well-being” of workers at the workplace is the result of a struggle, often an ugly one, between individual workers with or without market power, trade unions, HR manger, employers and related associations, etc. At the lower end of the labor market, it is incidentally not the industrial relations actors that care for worker well-being but only where present, the trade unions and the workers, often without success, especially as you get down in the wage scale. So, the primary challenge for the social partner is to satisfy the capital markets by making employers as much profitable as their best competitors. If “worker well-being” helps them in this, it’s an investment. If it doesn’t, it’s a cost that needs to be cut.

[*Massimiliano De Falco*](https://moodle.adaptland.it/mod/page/view.php?id=25710)

*Doctoral School in Learning and Innovation in Social and Working Contexts, University of Siena, ADAPT*

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