

#ComicsBrokeMe



Ian speaks with journalist Shea Hennem about their article on #comicsbroke, in which workers in the comics industry shared their stories of tight deadlines, unreasonable workloads, and low pay following the death of cartoonist Ian McGinty. For the article, which appeared at solrad.co, they applied an analysis that synthesized communist and anarchist traditions in order to identify a multitude of sites of political struggle, challenge systems of domination and violence, and chart possible ways forward, similar to analysis applied in the movement to abolish the Prison Industrial Complex.

They discuss past efforts to organize within the comic book industry as well as current organization efforts, such as the formation of the United Workers of Seven Seas, a union of workers at Seven Seas Entertainment, Comic Book Workers United, a union of workers at Image Comics, and Cartoonist Cooperative, a cohort of cartoonists committed to mutual promotion, skill and info sharing, and efforts to make industry wages and practices more transparent. They also discuss possible ways for comic book readers to offer support.

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Ian: Can you tell the audience your name and pronouns and any affiliations that might be relevant to our conversation today?

Shea: Yeah, my name is Shea Hennum. I use they/them pronouns. I am a proud member of the IWW, and I am a member of an organization called The Incarcerated Women's Clemency Support Project, which is a new organization sort of working to help women and queer and trans people and people of other marginalized genders in Virginia prisons with their clemency and parole petitions and campaigns.

I: In early July, on solrad.co, you wrote about the death of cartoonist Ian McGinty and the resulting discussion of cartoonists working conditions that appeared under that hashtag #comicsbroke. I mostly saw it on Twitter. I'm not sure if it was extended to other social media platforms. Can you talk a little bit about what you got out of interacting with that hashtag and a little bit about your history and current relationship with comics and cartooning? Kind of a big question.

S: Yeah, I'll try and start with the second part of that question. I have been reading comics my entire life. One of my earliest memories is being two years old and going to the comic book store with my father while he collected, in the summer of 1985, the X-Men crossover Age of Apocalypse. And the thing I most remember about this is asking my father, can he purchase this Deadpool comic for me? And he said no. That was probably for the best.

I have sort of grown up around comics. My father was a comics reader from a young age, and he sort of got me into them. Then as I got older, I started collecting comics and reading them more regularly. My relationship to comics as a reader is lifelong. I'm about 30 years old. Well, I am 30 years old now. But it's been pretty much my entire life I've been around them, reading them, engaging them.

When I was a teenager, I started making my own comics, and I continue to do so in amateurish and crude ways today. And for the last 10 years or so, I have been writing about comics as a critic and as a journalist for places like The A.V. Club, for The Comics Journal, and now for SOLRAD. I'm also, for the last five years, I've been a teacher, and I tend to teach comics. So I've been reading comics for my entire life, I have been making comics in some form or fashion for about two decades now, I've been writing about comics for about a decade, and I've been teaching comics in the classroom for about half a decade now.

I: You mentioned that transition from reading to making comics, what appeals to you about making comics? I know that you have some background in writing, what does making comics do that writing doesn't for you?

S: Yeah. I want to answer that question, but very quickly, it occurred to me I didn't quite answer the first part of your first question. So I will just say, I mostly saw the hashtag circulating #comicsbroke on Twitter as well. I'm not on any other social media platforms, so I don't know what the conversation was like there. But I think, like you, and maybe some people listening to this, I mostly just saw people articulating their experiences in the comics industry. And as you mentioned, the poor working conditions, the demanding deadlines, the low pay, things like this, and I think we'll come back to this over the course of the interview.

To answer the second question: What appeals to me about comics is... You know, when you sent me the list of questions that you'd be asking me today, you mentioned that comics have a pretty low barrier of entry, that comics are a pretty accessible medium. And a part of my sort of general concern is the role and function of art, and art making, and art practices in social life, and the political dimension to that. I'm really concerned, more generally, with, on the one hand, what art can contribute to political struggle: how it can be a place to work out ideas, to proliferate ideas, to express aesthetically certain political perspectives. And I'm also concerned with the role and function of art in any kind of imagined, revolutionized society. So I'm really concerned with, in a hypothetical future in which many of the problems we're dealing with today have been ameliorated or obviated in some way, what will art and art making look like?

Consistent with that thinking, what's always appealed to me about comics is, as you mentioned, there is a kind of low barrier to entry. Obviously, at a certain level, comics making and comics publishing is not necessarily accessible, but comics is also something that... Anyone listening to this can go and grab a piece of paper, and a pen or a pencil, and they can make their own comics. You can print them out on a laser inkjet printer that many people have, you can go to Kinko's. This is a big part of the history of comics, is that you could go and make your own comics and produce them and distribute them really easily.

So it's always appealed to me, in a sense, because I see comics as having a kind of, again not in all contexts, and not in all instances, but the sort of art form itself, at the most general level, is one of the most accessible forms of art that people have. I'm a big proponent of this, that people make their own comics and share them with their friends and family members. Even if they're not necessarily good, this is a form of art that can be easily folded into everyone's lives.

That's really the appeal for me, is that I see it as a sort of immediately accessible and highly, highly... I mean this is a qualified statement, but it's a highly, highly democratic form of art that's easily accessible to people without means. You don't need to go buy a \$300-400 instrument like you do to make music. Sometimes some of the comics I've made, I'll go to work, I'll go to the office, and I'll take paper and I'll take pens, and I'll make simple crude comics out of these resources that are, that

I'm sort of appropriating from my employer. But this is an option that's open to, you know, pretty much anyone listening, and so that's really the appeal to me for comics is that they are so accessible to people.

I: To kind of go back a little bit to what you said earlier about, you mentioned that you incorporate comics in your curricula. Is this for students who would typically be exposed or typically read comics? And, you know, for those students who may not have been exposed, how do you find that they are received?

S: Yeah, it's a good question. I think it varies from class to class and semester to semester. One of my good, successful strategies for getting students invested in the course and things like that is I sort of make this appeal to manga and anime and these really, really popular forms of Japanese comics making. Most of the students have some familiarity with this, so there is some engagement, some knowledge of some kind of comics-making and comics production.

The kinds of comics I tend to teach in class are a little bit more unfamiliar to them. So I've taught sort of the classics like *Maus* or *Persepolis*, these autobiographical comics. But in other cases I've taught... I don't want to say obscure because for people familiar with comics they won't be, but maybe for a more general public they are a little bit more obscure. So for instance, this semester I'm teaching a couple progs of *Judge Dead*, and I suspect that that will be my student's first encounter with *Judge Dredd*. It really varies from class to class. I think that the overall experience that they've had is that, even the students for whom there is no familiarity, that this is the very first time they're encountering these things, they are far more receptive to this form of media than, say, trying to teach some of the novels I've taught or some of the essays, which are a lot more difficult and require a lot more work and patience for the students to sort of grasp even basic things like what's happening in a narrative. Again, my experience has been that it's a form of art that you can sort of come into and it's pretty accessible as a reader. I mean, there's some learning curve, you know, and some students have a little bit more difficulty than others, but by and large, it's a form of art I can hand to the students and they can grasp relatively easily. Which, again, I think speaks to its potential as a sort of highly democratic form of art because even with no familiarity you can get the hang of it pretty quickly.

I: So reviewing the comics broke me hashtag, it seemed to appeal to creators in multiple facets of the industry. Can you explain to listeners, just because you broke it down so well in your piece for SOLRAD, the various ways in which labor tends to be divided in

comic book production? And is there any...could you liken comic book production to other industries?

S: Yeah. Again, the thing... and this will come out more, I think, over the course of this conversation, but some of these statements are highly qualified. As I mentioned, comics is a thing that you can do, pretty relatively easily you can write it, draw it, letter it and ink it, etcetera, sort of by yourself. And there are plenty of people who do this, especially non-commercial comics making, or what's often talked about as "art comics" making, and the margins of comics publishing. There are plenty of people who do every facet of comics production themselves, but this is by and large pretty rare. Even among those cartoonists, those artists and illustrators and writers who are considered auteurs, the work is really thought of as being the product of an individual. These people generally don't do more than write and draw and ink. They'll usually bring someone on to color it or letter it. By and large, not exclusively, but by and large there is a collaborative element. There's multiple people whose work and labor and time is going into making these things. Most commonly, the labor is highly, highly divided.

You have these cases where it's sort of split between a couple people, maybe one or two, maybe three. But within comics publishing, and especially within the comics making as a profession, as a job, as a full time job, the work is intensely, intensely divided. You have one person who's responsible for writing or scripting the book until they produce something very close to a screenplay. This has become... The screenplay comparison is, I think, increasingly apt as more and more people have thought about comics as being analogous to film, and they brought over learning how to write comics from learning how to write screenplays.

So you have a sort of version of the story, a version of the work, that begins as a script. Then you have someone who comes in and draws it in pencil. These are what's referred to as "pencillers." Then you have people who ink the work. Inkers sometimes get highly denigrated. Listeners who have seen the opening sequence of Kevin Smith's film *Chasing Amy* will know that there's a long standing joke about inkers not really contributing much to the work, as being worth little more than tracers. I actually think inking is one of the most profoundly important parts of comics. It's where the artist adds texture and depth and weight. It's really so crucial to the success or failure of a work of art.

So you have scripters or writers. You have pencillers. You have inkers. You'll have colorists who come on, and they add that other layer. They'll make decisions about what colors to use, and even within that you'll have people who sometimes complete that process by themselves. Other people who hire out certain aspects of the process. So you have colorists and then flatters who will flat the colors and prepare them for publication. And then you'll have people coming in and letter.

And again, some people will letter themselves, some of the artists or the inkers. Again, lettering is a really crucial and important, often overlooked component of comics—

I: Can you explain what lettering is for those who might not be familiar?

S: Yeah, so lettering is essentially going through and adding all of the words, so the text, caption boxes, word balloons, thought bubbles, sound effects in some cases. These are people who are artists in their own right. You'll have certain artists will hand draw the letters, and this will be a really important dimension of the overall work. Other people, they'll do it digitally. There's all these variations on how the work is performed. But you have... to summarize, you have the writers, by and large, pencilers, inkers, the colorist, the flatters, the letterers, and then that's before you get into editors, assistant editors, editors-in-chief, publishers. You have all of these additional layers of subdividing the work at some of these larger corporations.

But by and large professional comic making is you'll have one person writing, you'll have one person penciling, one person inking, one person coloring, and one person lettering. The comparison I make in the piece that you mentioned is to assembly line factory. There are some cartoonists, as I mentioned, who don't work this way and took some umbrage with this description. But by and large professional comic making is highly divided in this way, much like assembly line work is, where you have one person doing one task, and they'll cycle through, they'll perform that same task on multiple products that come down the line. There's many, many ways in which comics making is not at all like factory work or assembly line work, but when it comes to the division of labor, it's not at all different from how a Chrysler factory or a Ford factory operates and how it allocates and divides labor among people.

I: Okay, so with that in mind, going back to some of the posts we saw with in that hashtag, it seemed like a primary complaint by creators was that the associated wages were not in keeping with the level of demands and the level of constraint under which they produced. Can you maybe explain how this works at different strata of comic production? Meaning, from the person who is maybe a hobbyist to the person who is producing for a wide audience. It seems, you know, ironically, and probably predictably, that the folks who were on the tightest deadlines, working for the lowest wages, were also those folks who are working for the biggest companies, producing work for the biggest intellectual properties.

S: Yeah. You know, as you mentioned, a big thing that people were complaining

about was this combination of low wages and tight deadlines. There's an expectation that a lot of work produced very quickly and wasn't being remunerated at anything close to living rates. What those rates were, as you mentioned, it varies pretty significantly from publisher to publisher, the kind of work that's being done, and in many cases, the level of celebrity. So of course, people with a higher profile, people whose names sell more books, they're able to negotiate, just like in a lot of these other culture industries, like acting or directing—if you have more of a name, you have more celebrity, you can sort of command and demand better working conditions, higher rates, longer deadlines, things like this.

But absolutely, even the major corporations, what we think of as Marvel or DC, but also in traditional book publishers that have gotten into comics, like Scholastic, which is actually their sales sort of dwarf Marvel and DC's much to the chagrin of many comic book readers. They sell enormous, enormous amounts of books. I don't have these figures in front of me, and they do vary, in some cases pretty widely. But when you break down some of these advances that people get where the expectation is they're paid a sum of money, and then expected to produce a product within a certain period of time, the rates break down to less than minimum wage.

The conditions are really horrible because in comics you are paid typically by the page. You're not paid for your time. If you're getting paid 100 bucks a page to draw a comic, and you can draw it in an hour, pay 100 bucks an hour, that's not too bad. But no one can physically do that. I mean, simply no one is capable of doing that. It typically comes down to 100 bucks for a full day's or a day and a half's worth of work. When you break it down into how long this work takes to produce versus what you get paid for the product, it comes out to be subminimum wage payments.

As you mentioned, it's not always the case, but there is this weird inverse relationship where the larger publishers, they're often the worst. Their page rates are low, they haven't moved in decades, in some cases, and in some cases, people are making less per page now than they were 20, 30, 40 even 50 years ago. Then you have some publishers like Image, where they have a very different publishing model. There are some exceptions to this, but they typically don't give advances. The expectation is that creative teams will produce work, and then they will sell it, and then they will divide the profits amongst themselves.

That can be highly lucrative for some people, again, if you have a name that sells and you believe that you can move a lot of product. You can end up making a lot more money this way, but there's no security, there's no short term remuneration, no money upfront. So the compensation for this work is very, very different.

As in the case of Scholastic, they give you what would in other circumstances be a sizable advance, but broken up over the course of a year for the amount

of work that's being expected, it's not livable. But then Scholastic, again, they sell a lot of books, but unlike traditional book publishing, the authors will not get, on some of these licensed properties, they won't get any kind of back end pay or royalty. Whereas, you know, in traditional book publishing, you write the book, you may get an advance, you may not, but then you have the ability to make that up in royalties on the back end, where that's often not an option for people. The total compensation, even if you sell 100,000 copies, it's subminimum wage living.

Again, the specific numbers, they break down differently from publisher to publisher, but by and large, it comes out to be, for most people... again, there are some exceptions who are very, very successful, and they make extremely comfortable living doing this work. If you are hired at a company, you're being paid by a publisher, you are, generally speaking, being paid subminimum wage for the amount of time it takes you to complete the work.

In the case of hobbyists it's a little different. There's often less of an expectation that you are going to make much money [laughs]. The market is much smaller, but at the same time you have much more freedom over your time, you have much more control over what the finished product looks like, how resources are allocated, and if there is money to be made on the back end through sales, you have a much larger cut of that. This is part of the difficulty of talking about the comics industry is that it does vary so widely from person to person, publisher to publisher, the kind of work being produced. But by and large, it's fair to say that the work is paid a subminimum wage.

This is disastrous when combined with, as many of the people using this hashtag a couple of months ago we're talking about, these publishers and editors, the expectation for the work is essentially what killed Ian McGinty, which you mentioned at the top of the conversation. They have no sense of how long this actually takes to produce, what a reasonable or sustainable pace of work is. You have this combination where people are being paid not enough to live on, and the demands being made of them are also sort of degrading their health and their well being. You have this convergence of these two really intolerable conditions of work that makes making a living in comics really difficult financially. It also makes making comics professionally really difficult from a health and well being standard as well.

I: Just to kind of backtrack on a few of the things you said, just to put it into context: whenever, say, a listener walks into a comic book store, they see the rack of floppy comics, the stuff that comes out every month, how many pages of story would you say are in that?

S: They're typically 24. You'll sometimes get variations. They like to make the total pages divisible by eight because it's more convenient for the printer, so you'll typi-

cally get page counts that are divisible by eight. But 24 is the standard, at least that's what it's been as long as I've been reading comics more or less.

I: Okay. Another question I had. You mentioned the three big wheels in the industry: Marvel, DC, and Image. Who were the names, if you can name them, that were coming up as frequent offenders in terms of these intolerable working conditions within the hashtag? If you're comfortable naming them.

S: Yeah, I would say Marvel and DC, they were pretty bad. There was some concern, especially at those publishers, where they had a reasonable budget for the books, where per issue, the editors had enough money to spend overall that would have made the work sustainable. But a disproportionate percentage of that was allocated to the writer, who may or may not have been a big name. It may have been someone like a Joss Whedon or Brad Meltzer or Jodie Picoult or Ta-Nehisi Coates, these people who make their names and become widely read outside of comics and come into comics and can command a higher page rate. You saw a budget that would have allowed for everyone to have a more sustainable wage, but it gets largely eaten up by one member of the team, and the other three or four members of the team are left to fight over scraps.

These publishers specifically, this was a major concern. It was also a major concern at some of the smaller publishers like Oni Press, IDW, Dark Horse, who simply don't have the money to throw around that these larger publishers do. They do not have the sales, they do not have the brand recognition. So the long and short of matter is that they are not able to pay at the same rates that the larger publishers do. Again, the larger publishers do not split the money they have in any sort of equitable way. But the money isn't there at these smaller publishers, the money simply is not there. Which is, you know, I'm really resistant to this idea that these problems can be solved by simply commanding people to sell more comics or purchase more comics, which is something I do hear from people sometimes. That's not really a feasible or scalable option.

The solution for the smaller publishers is, they can't really pay a fair wage, the way that some of the larger publishers can. That said, they could still provide opportunities for creative teams or authors with less overhead or younger cartoonists just breaking out, who the expectation is not that they're making as much money as some of the larger names. But the problem with larger publishers is unequal distribution of the money that's there. The real problem with the smaller publishers is the sort of unequal distribution of time, where even though they don't have that money, which is just the reality of the matter, they are nonetheless sort of demanding illustrators and writers and letterers and inkers. They are making even

more demanding demands on people's time and effort and energy than the larger publishers. You have slightly different problems at different scales.

I will also add with a caveat that at some of these smaller publishers, you do have some of these licensed properties, like Steven Universe or Adventure Time, these titles that do sell a significant amount of money and that do bring in quite a bit of money. The money that you're not able to offer up front at these publishers, it could be compensated with money that is there on the back end in sales that is not being remunerated to the people actually making the work. Again, with comics, you have different publishers having different issues.

Image, again, is slightly different, where their publishing model is that, "We do not give you any money up front, we do not provide you any resources, but if your book is successful you'll make a lot of money on the back end." If there's any licensing deals or film deals or TV or anything like this, or merchandising, if your book is successful, you're able to make quite a lot of money on that end. The reality of the market, though, is that most titles, most authors, they're not getting their books optioned. They're not getting merchandising opportunities, they're not getting their titles turned into TV shows, so you have a lot of people doing a lot of work for free, essentially, with very little to show for it on the back end.

The financials and the demands on people are very, very varied across the industry. But it breaks down essentially to the people who have the money aren't sharing it, and the people who don't have the money are not offering any sort of alternative compensation or leniency in work expectations or things like that. Then you have essentially the neoliberal, "be your own small business owner, be your own entrepreneur," you have the freedom to succeed, which is also the freedom to fail. That's their kind of form of compensation.

I: So many places to go from there. These issues are not new. These issues go back— can mostly speak to American comics making and maybe a little bit of UK comic making—back to the 40s, 50s, whenever these mass distribution models kind of came about. Can you talk a little bit about past efforts to organize the industry? And can you talk about what, if any, protections creators have against unrealistic deadlines and unfriendly working conditions? You sort of speak to a mercenary, freelance, highly competitive industry, and it seems like workers who want to get ahead in this industry are sort of either expressly or intrinsically dissuaded from talking to one another. They're just kind of put on their own and told to grind it out.

S: Yeah, so the first part of your question, there have been a number of attempts to organize and unionize cartoonists and comics makers. The earliest one I know of is in the early 1950s, I believe in 1952, the Society of Comic Book Illustrators,

which was spearheaded by Bernard Krigstein. Some listeners may, if they are interested in comics history, they'll recognize that name. He's one of the best to ever do it and just an extraordinary artist who was, very shortly after this, forced out of the industry because the work was not fairly compensated, it was not appreciated, it was highly denigrated. He was a real artist. This early attempt, it was very short lived. I've been able to find very, very little documentation of them. I'd love to get my hands on some of these newsletters they produced just to read them. I know they produce three newsletters. I'm not sure what the contents of them were, but the effort lasted about a year.

Their most radical demand was that art be returned. The original art, which for listeners who may not know, the work is produced on these oversized sheets, typically it's Bristol board, and then it's photographed and then prepared for publishing. And for a very, very, very long time... Now it's sort of industry standard to have that work be returned to the people who made it so that they can keep it for themselves, for sentimental value, they can sell it. This provides another avenue, another income stream, where they can sell their original art. But for a very, very long time, this was not industry standard. This work would be destroyed, or it would be given to people, or people would be allowed to hold on to it. But it would fetch... You hear the stories of people going to Comic Con in San Diego in the 70s, and you could pick up pages by these cartoonists for 20 bucks a piece that now would go for 1000s and 1000s of dollars. But the most radical demand of the Society of Comic Book Illustrators was, "We want our work returned to us." It took about 40 more years before that became industry standard.

You mentioned the UK comics industry. I listened to an interview with Brian Bolland, who's a name that listeners may be familiar with. He talked about working on 2000 AD in the 70s and early 80s, and he would send the work off to be photographed, and getting it back was the most red tape, bureaucratic, onerous process that really, really discouraged people from pursuing it. In some cases, the work would be lost and irretrievable. I even heard him talk about sometimes you'd have to pay for the privilege of having your work returned back to you. So not only would it not be sent back to you, but you'd have to pay. You'd have to pay for the chance of getting it back, which is absolutely horrendous and ridiculous.

It took a serious series of really onerous legal struggles on the part of people like Jack Kirby, who is really the basis for the wealth of Marvel. I mean, he created the X Men, Thor, Captain America, The Incredible Hulk, the Fantastic Four, famously, and a number of side characters. Then there were a number of properties for DC as well. Really, it was his work from about 1960... he creates Captain America in the 40s, but the bulk of his work at Marvel is done in the 60s through the early 1970s. He really lays the groundwork for every single thing. Every penny they make really is built on his back. It takes people like Neil Adams coming to his defense to

get his rights to that original, not even the rights of the characters, but the rights of that original material that he produced with his hands back.

I: Can you tell listeners who Neal Adams is?

S: Yeah, I'll talk a little bit about Neal Adams. Neal Adams is another really famous cartoonist who became notable for a run on Batman and a series called Green Arrow/Green Lantern in the 1970s. He really defined the look of DC Comics in the 1970s. He was also a champion for creators' rights. He also helped spearhead another short lived attempt at unionization in the 70s, which I'll circle back to. But he's a really historically important cartoonist and author and advocate of creators' rights and workers' rights.

This battle with Jack Kirby really comes on the heels of people like Jerry Siegel and Joe Schuster, who co-created Superman in 1938. Superman forms the basis of the entire superhero industry, which is, all told, it's a multi billion dollar industry that the largest media corporations on the planet profit off of. It's really built on the back of these two young, very, very young at the time—they were teenagers when they created this. And no one expected this to go anywhere to be as successful as it was. But they got cheated out of hundreds of billions of dollars at this point. Their children got cheated out of hundreds of billions of dollars. It's people like that, people like Jack Kirby, who fight for decades to get their rights to this material back or some creator participation in profits remunerate them.

As I mentioned, the Society of Comic Book Illustrators, this was a really radical demand in the 50s. It doesn't take off, it's very shortly lived. It lasts about a year. In the early 1970s, you have the United Cartoon Workers of America, which still exists in some form or fashion. I know that Denis Kitchen, who's a historically important publisher and cartoonist in the underground comic scene of the 70s still sells a United Cartoon Workers of America shirt that listeners can go and purchase on his website. But this was an informal group of cartoonists who had a sort of handshake agreement to demand the same wages, regardless of publisher, regardless of celebrity.

It was informal, it was not codified, it was not recognized by any publisher. It's an effort that most people don't know about. It's not one I would describe as being particularly successful because it doesn't have a lot of material wins or gains to show for it, and a lot of the original people associated with it quickly drifted away. This agreement that he sort of agreed on in the 70s is certainly not the working contract that Robert Crumb signs these days. Where he commands... I think his original art is some of the most expensive original art on the art market today.

But out of this grew Cartoonists Co-op Press, which again was a really short lived effort. It published a few titles in the early 1970s before quickly dissolv-

ing. And this was, I think, a real concrete thing that cartoonists and people should look to because it was a genuine cooperative where people came together. They pooled their resources, they worked on each other's titles, they shared credit, they socialized and mutualized the risk of publishing. They also shared in the profits, what little there was at the time. That's an example of a real cooperative within the history of comics that we can look to and learn from.

Unfortunately, it only lasted about a year like many of these things. That's in part because in the early 1970s, there was a Supreme Court case that basically ruled that local communities could define their own standards of obscenity. This led to the closure of a lot of head shops, which were where people like Robert Crumb or Spain Rodriguez, Zap Comix, things like this, a lot of this was sold and distributed in head shops. Because of the Supreme Court ruling, a lot of those head shops were forced to close. That sort of distribution network that Cartoonist Cooperative Press were relying on, it sort of collapsed. The market for their work sort of dissolved overnight, and they shut down. I think it's an important experiment. I think it's important in the history of political struggle not to think of these things as defeats or losses, but as sort of experiments and as rehearsals for an eventual victory. So I think that these are things that can be learned from and built upon and improved.

The final effort that I know of is in 1978, Neal Adams tried to form the Comic Creators Guild. This is a really interesting example and one that actually we can learn a lot from. Unlike these earlier instances there's not a lot of documentation. A lot of this stuff was not written down, and documents that were distributed have not survived, or they may, but they're not accessible to most people. Like I said, I haven't been able to find a lot of these documents. But the Comics Creators Guild had one meeting in 1978, again, very short lived, didn't really get off the ground. But unlike these other efforts, Gary Groth at *The Comics Journal*, he published their material, he interviewed cartoonists about what they thought of it, and he attended their first meeting and took notes. So the little documentation of that effort that was produced, it survives with us today.

I've got a PDF, that maybe you can put in the show notes or make available to listeners that collects that material. And he sort of publicized that. That's an example that we can learn a lot from. I don't think we have time to get into it today, but there's certainly a number of key lessons and things that I've taken away from. But again, with all of these things, and in the Comics Creators Guild especially, the thing that keeps coming up was there's a lot of arguments about how labor was divided. There were a lot of people who wanted to be involved with it but didn't trust the people organizing it. They didn't trust them to be organized. There were a lot of concerns there.

There were a lot of concerns with how this would affect their careers and

their livelihoods. There was a lot of hostility to unionization, so it fell apart very quickly. What's really shocking about the Comics Creators Guild is they proposed standardized rates for this work, for writing, for illustrating, for inking, for lettering. There were arguments, just like we're having today, there was a lot of consternation about, "These are ridiculous, these publishers could never pay these rates". And there's just a couple of great lines in this meeting where people are like, "If they can't pay it, if they can't pay us what we're worth, they deserve to go out of business." [both laugh] There's a good line where someone says, "You know, it's a damn shame that Jack Kirby is getting out of the business because he was ready to come in here and shoot the place up."

There's great stuff that emerges in this where they are discussing, philosophically, the role of people like inkers and letterers and the work they do and the contribution to the form. You really start to see among workers, organizing themselves as workers, they begin to develop a sort of philosophy of art and a philosophy of art making. They begin to develop a philosophy of who is the author of a comic book that really comes out from these questions about labor. So it's a really, really fascinating document that we can learn a lot from. But again, there was a lot of backbiting, a lot of betrayal, a lot of refusal to participate, and a lot of mistrust among people. I seem to have rambled my way out of remembering what the rest of your question was.

I: I think you answered my question. Moving on, in the last few years, there have been some significant efforts made to organize within the industry, maybe not the industry as a whole, but I'm thinking of the union at Seven Seas publishing and the union within Image Comics. Forgive me, but I forget their formal names. I think that they are still in various stages of being recognized. Can you tell us what you know about who comprises these unions and how these unions have been received within and outside of the industry?

S: Yeah, you know, I don't know specifically who all is involved in the Seven Seas one. I know at Image, it is the very, very small number of people they have on staff. As I mentioned, their corporate structure is very, very different. It's very, very loose. The people that they directly employ, the number of people is relatively small. But it includes people like editors they might have on staff, people involved in preparing work for publication, liaisons with the direct market, liaisons with printers, but a relatively small number of people. I can't really speak to the roles performed by the people at Seven Seas, but I would assume it's people directly involved in the production of the material and the preparation of the material for production.

I believe Seven Seas has... I may be mistaken about this, but I believe they've

been recognized, and they may have even had their first contract ratified. I know the people at Image—Comic Workers United I believe is the name—and they have had their contract... They've been recognized. I believe Image voluntarily recognized the union, but then fought for a really long time without ratifying a contract, but I believe a contract has been ratified. As far as I know, Image management has really, really fought to implement and recognize the contract. There's been some retaliation in the workplace. That was the last update I've heard about that.

As far as how it's been received, I think that it's like any one of these things: there was a good number of people, especially readers, who really supported the effort when they first announced it. I do know that there were some cartoonists who really, really were hostile to the idea. That was in part to some of the demands that the union was making. So again, at Image, the big draw, the big appeal, is that they give people immense creative freedom, and that there's very, very little editorial oversight, or in many cases editing at all. Again, it's a very neoliberal framework where you are essentially a small proprietor. They don't work out how the profits are distributed at all, which has led to some people exploiting that too. It's "creator owned," in quotes, but really it's one person who owns it, and they become the boss, and they take the lion's share of profits.

Most of the editors who work on those books are hired by the individuals, but they do have a number of editors on staff at Image that Image will let you use for a slightly larger cut of the prophets. I know that the Image workers, one of their demands was that they would be allowed to democratically vote down any work that they felt was in contradiction or in conflict with their values. This is especially salient because over the number of years, over the last few years, there have been cartoonists who are big names in the industry. I'm thinking specifically of Howard Chaykin, he produced work with highly, highly Islamophobic and racist covers that Image was publishing and selling. There was a lot of pushback against this, but really Image had this sort of plausible deniability where they could say, "Well, it's his work he can, he can do whatever he wants." Part of this demand was that the people actually preparing this material who are really instrumental in making this work happen at all, that they would have some power over what gets published. Currently, it's really at the discretion of the editor-in-chief, who I believe is still Eric Stevenson. He's been editor-in-chief for a good long time now. It's really just his "what do I want to allow this company to publish?" The workers demanded some say and some power in that decision making process.

A lot of cartoonists pushed back. They said, "this is absolutely ridiculous. I can't believe that they're demanding this, that they would have the gall to try and exert this power." But I think it's a fair demand. I think if your hands and your work and your time are responsible for this thing coming into the world, you should have some sort of democratic say. Even if, you know, you're a minority, and

other people vote one way, and you vote another, you should have an opportunity to have a vote and be part of that collective decision making process.

I: Say your piece.

S: Yeah. That's really the most pushback I saw was from these cartoonists who saw it as an infringement on their entitlement to creative freedom. Other than that, I think among readers, among critics, at least the critics and journalists that I know and engage with, were pretty sympathetic and were excited to see. These bargaining unions at these two publishers are really, really small. The kind of power they can exert is not, it has real limits on it because of that size and because of the roles that they fulfill in the production process. But it was the first time that back end, or back of house workers, were beginning to organize themselves in this way.

The people I know were really, really excited about this. But then again, you had some pushback from cartoonists. How it's been received outside of the industry, I really can't say. I have not seen anyone who's not heavily involved and invested in comics even aware of these unions' existence. I would love for people outside of comics to have any sort of opinion on these things, but I have not seen any real conversation outside of the comics industry.

I: Okay. Another effort that I think is worthy of discussion, albeit I think maybe less formalized, is the recent launch of The Cartoonists Cooperative. I've seen some positive things. I see they're sort of in the process of trying to standardize the rates or at least get that discussion going of what the going rates for the various jobs are. Can you describe the effort, the cohort, and any other necessary information regarding The Cartoonists Cooperative, and maybe speak to how it is different or comparable to cooperative models in other industries?

S: Yeah, it is a really exciting effort. I'm really interested to see what they do and how they evolve. I know that they have a pretty sizable membership. The two cartoonists I know, whose names I recognize, who are involved with it are Zach Hazard and Sloan Leong. There has been a lot of real positive press, especially when they launched. They did a number of interviews, and I was really excited to read those.

At the same time, I had some concerns because they seem to be mostly invested in skill sharing, in mutual promotion. Members will promote one another's books, the organization will promote members' books, they will get together and share skills, how to do certain things and teach one another about the production process. As you said, there's efforts to informally standardize the rates, much the same way that the United Cartoon Workers of America did in the early 1970s, but

my concern sort of stems from the fact that it is highly informal.

That's in part because freelance unions are illegal in the United States. There is no legal framework or legal protections for a formalized, recognized union of freelancers. This is something that members have brought up when pushed on this issue. It puts these pretty hard limits on what they can accomplish and what they can negotiate, the kinds of tactics that they have available to them and the kinds of responses that they can employ when these informal agreements are not being recognized or are not being observed.

This was something I didn't see people really picking up in a lot of this positive coverage. Again, I want my engagement with this organization to be comradely. I like what they're doing, I'm excited about it. I think it's important to get the ball rolling somewhere, but I think it's also important to have these conversations about what these organizations are not. It is not a publishing cooperative, it's not a formalized cooperative. It is not a place that socializes the risk and redistributes the publishing resources to people. And it's not one that socializes the profit. You have a model in which people will promote one another's work, but, you know, it does nothing to get money in people's pockets in a way that a traditional cooperative enterprise would do. I hope that they continue to evolve, and they continue to grow and change and develop.

That's one thing I really think it's important to push back on. What they're doing is great and fantastic, but there are really, really serious, hard limits to what that could possibly accomplish. At some point they're going to need to evolve, or they're gonna flounder. For example, you asked me about how it compares to cooperatives and other industries, and as I've sort of been getting to, it's very, very different. I mean, the examples in the article that we're talking about today that I use that people should look to is the Mondragon Corporation in Spain or the coffee cooperatives in Chiapas, Mexico, which are sort of an extension of the ongoing Zapatista revolution down there.

These are not perfect enterprises. They have their problems, but there's a lot we can learn from them. The Mondragon especially is a big favorite of people like the sociologist Erik Olin Wright, the economist Richard Wolff. The Sci-Fi author Kim Stanley Robinson likes to talk about the Mondragon Corporation. That's because it's a very old corporation. It's a federation of cooperatives. It's the largest corporation in the Basque Country of Spain. It's one of the largest corporations in Spain. So it's far, far from perfect, but it's an example of how cooperatives can be scaled up. It's an example of a highly durable cooperative, and it's an example of a cooperative enterprise that really rebuts and refutes a lot of these arguments we hear about how only a capitalist enterprise can be productive, a cooperative enterprise people wouldn't have any incentive to work. Things like this that I'm sure listeners of this show will know are bullshit.

It is a powerful counter argument to a lot of what we hear, a lot of economic orthodoxy. It's a really great example of an industrial cooperative, and we can learn a lot from them. Same thing with the coffee cooperatives in Chiapas. Again, a lot of these things have come under real military (like literal) fire from the federal Mexican government. Not perfect, but a lot to be learned about the kinds of things that these efforts will have to defend themselves against.

Another sort of resource I would turn people to is this book *Sin Patrón* which Haymarket Books put out about 10 years ago now. It examines the reclaimed factory movement in Argentina after the financial crisis in the early 2000s. The factory owners who were playing shell games with their finances where they would parasitize factory resources and extract huge amounts of money for their own benefit and leave the factory derelict and abandoned. These factory workers and factory unions, they occupied and reclaimed these factories and turned them into cooperatives that are very, very successful in some cases, ceramics factories and metalworking factories. There's a lot of great examples in that book for how a union can transform their workplace into a cooperative, which I think is a sort of improvement.

I think unions are a sort of stopgap measure where they are a place to build collective power and to confront capital and to fight and struggle for better working conditions. But they ultimately leave in place the arrangement where a capitalist purchases workers labor power, and you consent to labor for someone else for whom the profits accumulate. These are examples of transforming the union into something in which ownership is collectivized, in which profits are collectivized, in which decision making is collectivized.

They're really also great examples of how this labor struggle can be transformative. There's great anecdotes about how people in these occupations, which came under police fire a lot of the times, where in that struggle people's relationships ended, but also people forged new relationships, new romantic relationships, babies were born in these occupied factories. After successfully reclaiming these factories these workers added things like cultural centers, lecture halls, schools. These are, I think, really, really great examples of how in political struggle, social relations are transformed, they're reconfigured, some relations are dissolved, new relations are formed, consciousness has changed, but also how out of that struggle you can make inroads into changing people's culture.

There's this great anecdote where a woman talks about going to work at these factories, and she'd come home, and she'd be tired, and she wouldn't want to do anything. She just sort of prepare herself to go back to work the following day. But now in this new context, she works, she has much more control over the conditions under which she works, she profits more from her labor. But also the factory will host lectures, they will have news bulletins available in break rooms. The workplace, it becomes the site of greater political transformation and cultural

transformation. It really enables people to grow.

Something like that would be sort of my pie in the sky dream for what is possible in comic books, but again I want my engagement with the Comics Cooperative to be comradely, to recognize and appreciate that they have started something, which is more than can be said for most people. It is an extremely steep hill to climb in this industry, which is extraordinarily hostile to these kinds of efforts. So I'm excited by it, I'm glad they started it, I'm excited to see where they go. But also I really want to push them to learn from these other examples and to evolve and change and develop into something even greater than what they are in the context of an industry in which it is legally very difficult to imitate what's possible in other industries because of the nature of how labor is bought and sold in the comics industry, primarily as freelance labor. That is an obstacle that we're gonna have to confront and overcome. I don't want to sit here and tell people I've got the solutions because I don't. I don't know immediately how that challenge is going to be faced. But it is a real limit to what's possible that we were going to need to face and overcome. I think that answers your question.

I: It does, yes. Can you speak to any other collectives or cooperative/semi-cooperative models within the industry worth noting and maybe say a little bit about their efforts?

S: Yeah, I mean, the only one that I'm really aware of is this one that I mentioned earlier in our conversation, the Cartoonist Co-op Press. Again, very, very short lived, pretty unknown. They just immediately were confronted with a market that fell out underneath them and made their efforts sort of impossible. It's hard to say what can be learned because they were in existence so briefly, but that's a real historical concrete example that we can look to and we can try to learn from. Other than that, I mean, that's the closest thing to a real publishing cooperative that I've seen that I'm aware of in comics history.

I: It's been a few months now since that conversation that took place on Twitter, that "comics broke me" conversation, followed by your article. Have you noticed any shifts in the conversation or any sort of acknowledgment of working conditions or dissatisfaction by publishers or editors?

S: You know, I think the one effect I've seen is that people are... We've been talking about the Cartoonists Cooperative, and it was heartening to see more people pay attention to that and take that seriously and get involved in that in the wake of this conversation. Other than that, it is remarkable, it's like any of these other problems. I mean, how long have we been dealing with an ongoing pandemic, climate ca-

tastrophe, a cascade of financial crises and economic crises? Things will happen, it's like with Silicon Valley Bank in the beginning of this year. People, for a week, were losing their minds that this major regional bank, which had an incredibly fucked up balance sheet and was over leveraged on mortgage bonds, which is exactly what caused the financial crisis in 2007-2008. People were losing their minds! "This is the end of the financial world, it's another financial crisis." And very quickly it was like it never happened, people completely forgot.

We're seeing the same phenomenon with this where there was a lot of anger and a lot of frustration, and within a couple of weeks it was like the conversation never happened. It really is, I think, a testament to how people will, in these moments, collectivize their frustration and their anger, and they will articulate the difficulties they've had, but they will very, very quickly go back to business as usual. This is in part because, you know, there aren't really efforts in this industry to collectivize power and to challenge these conditions. These companies and these publishing enterprises have been able to proceed as though nothing changed because for them, nothing has changed. They have not been confirmed with anything that would require them to face these concerns or change these conditions. So things haven't changed for people, and people have sort of stopped complaining. It is as though this conversation never happened.

I appreciate being able to have this conversation with you, months after, to remind people and maybe keep this ball rolling and to keep that memory that... We were all so angry. I mean, people were furious over what happened with Ian McGinty and articulated so much frustration and so much pain and suffering in their own lives. It's like they quickly forgot that they had experienced that and articulated that. I hope this conversation keeps that memory alive and keeps people reflecting on the fact that I'm still angry, I think they're still angry, and they should still be angry. Maybe that anger can be channeled into something, something that forces these companies to change something about how they do business.

I: Just kind of wrapping up... Given all the negative qualities of working in the comic book industry, what do you think is the appeal to working in comics? Seeing conversations and seeing the willingness that people have to do these jobs—I mean clearly, there's passion involved. Do you think that people are kind of sold a line of working at these wages is the price of legitimacy? You know what I mean? And unrelated but kind of tacked on to that is, what can consumers do to stand in solidarity with comics creators?

S: One way of being able to answer your question is, I don't know how I possibly forgot, but sort of related to my history in comics, I spent a couple of years working at a comic retailer and selling comics. That job paid terribly, the working conditions

were horrible. I dealt with some of the worst customers imaginable. I didn't really have any benefits. But I took the job on the one hand because I was 18-19 and I was living with my parents and I didn't need a lot so I made it work. But a huge, huge part of that was this was the comic book store I'd spent 10 years shopping at at that point. I was in every single week. Every single week, 52 weeks a year, for 10 years. I was friends and knew that people who worked there. I looked forward to seeing them. It was a major, major part of my life.

I think that's really emblematic of how a lot of people feel working in this industry, which is the case for a lot of these culture industries like film or television or video games where part of why you want to do it for a living is because you are so passionate about it. You have this love, you have this affective investment in it, and you want to contribute to it. You want to participate in it, and you want to do the thing you love for a living. This is why, in the essay we're talking about, I made the point that comics is like many other industries in a lot of ways and unlike many industries in a lot of other ways, so far as the kind of de-industrialization, what's often called "neoliberalism" that has sort of characterized the entire economy for the last 50 years. Comics was kind of a laboratory for it. I mean, the kinds of working conditions, the way the cost of working was outsourced to employees. The way labor was dislocated from itself and workers were highly isolated and separated from one another. This kind of blend of physical and intellectual labor has characterized comic books from the very beginning.

A key part of this is like, you see these signs for these businesses that's like, "Do what you love." "Follow your passion." This language of following your passion and doing what you love is really characteristic of neoliberalism. It really has a long, long history in comics. I think that's a huge, huge part of why people continue to do this and put up with these working conditions. It's because they really love this art form, they really want to contribute to it, this has been a major part of their lives. And so they put up with these terrible working conditions because there is a kind of... In some cases, it's totally delusional. I mean, in some cases people are being worked to death, and they'll still tell themselves that it's okay because they love what they do. They love comics. I think that's a major part.

It's just like film or television where a big part of why these conditions are so slow to change is precisely because there is an endless, I mean, just an absolutely endless supply of people who are willing to do this job for sublivable wages. So there's very little incentive for these publishers to change their practices, to change their conditions, to offer more pay. Because if you don't like it, and you complain as an individual... and comics is a highly, highly, highly individualized labor market, where there's very little collectivization, there's very little collective power, absolutely no collective bargaining power. If you complain, if you act up, if you cause a scene, they will just fire you and hire someone else. There's always, always someone

waiting in the wings to take your job. And for these companies, it really doesn't make a difference.

I mean, the comics they currently produce are largely ugly and unreadable, and it doesn't matter to them. They don't need to be quality. They don't need to spend the money or to placate the people who are actually talented and who actually can make something really fantastic and durable that people want to read and will have a long shelf life because they will make the same amount of money regardless. And there is a steady stream of consumers who will buy up... I mean, when I worked in comic books, we had people come in, and they would spend hundreds of dollars every single week. We had some people who would say, "Get me every single DC title, every Marvel comic" every week, for months, and they've been doing this for decades. And they would complain and complain and complain and say how much they hated these things and how much they didn't like them, but every week they would come back and they would get the same titles month to month to month. There is a there's a large enough consumer base who simply does not care whether or not the thing they're buying is good or not, whether or not they even like it, but it has Batman on it, and they've been reading Batman comics for 40 years, and they are going to continue to buy every single Batman comic that has published.

That's a that's a big part of what you identified, how much of the labor market in comics is driven by people who will tolerate poor working conditions for the opportunity, as though working in comics is a privilege that they've been given. This is really an obstacle to serious change.

To get to the second part of your question, with consumers, that's a big part of it. Part of the reason that these companies not only have this endless supply of labor to draw on and exploit—highly, highly vulnerable labor in some cases... They go off to the Philippines where they can hire a Filipino artist and pay them even less than they pay Americans because it's the Philippines and they've got different labor laws and you need less to get by in the Philippines. They will take that fact and globalize their workforce and exploit people on the other side of the globe. It makes no difference to them who they're working with. It's: "Will this person tolerate the sub minimum wage we're giving them or not?"

A big reason that they're able to do that is on the one hand the affective investment that people have, the passion that really drives this tolerance of the intolerable that that people have. But the other part of this is because there is a large enough consumer base where they don't care. I mean, this isn't the case always. Scholastic is not necessarily selling hundreds of thousands of copies of their books because there's a built-in market for this or that brand. It may be the case with some licensed properties, but they are selling a lot of those books because they're producing a product that young people, by and large, kids and YA readers want to

read and want to purchase. They have some sort of incentive to hire people that will produce work that will be sellable, whereas some of these other companies, it makes no difference to them precisely because enough people will just buy whatever they produce.

One thing that consumers can do is change their reading habits. There's very little an individual can do to force change, but if enough people change their reading habits, the economics of this publishing industry will change. If people listening to this, if they simply want to change their reading habits, that won't change everything, but it's a good thing to do that people should do. Capital can strike, and labor can strike, but consumers can also strike. The more commonplace term for a consumer strike is a "boycott." Consumers can organize a boycott to, in mass, withhold their money, right? To do this thing, that as individuals has very little effect. It is possible, and historically people have done it in other industries and for other purposes, but you can scale up that kind of action as consumers to effect more change that way.

I think that it's really going to take consumers demanding more, spending less money on shit that they don't even like. I mean, by their own words they don't want to read this stuff. If they were just to just stop buying that stuff and read stuff that they wanted to read and have a sort of higher standard for themselves, I think that's going to be really necessary in the long term. It's also going to need to happen in conjunction with labor organizing for people on the back end, like we've been talking about, and labor organizing among people producing these things and actually making the art. It's really, I think, going to take these different groups of people coming together in various ways and at various scales, working together to demand changes to these conditions.

Ultimately I think that the history of comics is really driven by cartoonists articulating themselves as workers and making demands as workers and really seizing control of the means of comics production, how comics are produced, the resources that are allocated, how the profits are allocated, the technology employed. The history of comics as an aesthetic form has really been driven by these types of demands and ways of people organizing themselves and doing that. Ultimately, I think, if these groups of people can in various ways come together and work together to these ends, it's really going to make cartoonists and cartooning a more livable profession. The readers will get better comics, cartoonists will be able to produce better comics, and it ultimately will be to the benefit of everyone.

Except perhaps the capitalists, they are not necessarily my concern. Everyone else, from readers, makers, workers, retailers, et cetera, et cetera, they are all going to benefit, and they all have a stake in improving this industry. They all have a role to play. There are things retailers can do, things consumers can do, things production professionals can do, things cartoonists can do. It's really going to

take everyone contributing to that over a long period of time and really struggling and facing losses and overcoming those losses that is really going to really going to change things. But again, when they change they will change for the better.

I: I feel like we kind of didn't really scratch the surface on all this stuff, but with that said, I think that's a good place to leave it. Where can people find you? [laughs]

S: [pauses]

I: Doesn't matter?

S: Yeah, I don't think it matters. I mean, I write stuff, I've got some stuff. I write irregularly for, as you mentioned, The Comics Journal and SOLRAD and so occasionally I'll have some stuff like that up. But other than that, I am on Twitter. My Twitter is not that interesting, but people are free to follow me. [laughs]

I: [laughs] Okay, well thank you for taking the time to talk to me today.

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