

# Guide for the Exploited Nonprofit Workers

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titubas.revenge@gmail.com

## MYTH BUSTING THE NON-PROFIT WORLD

### Myths and Reality Checks

#### MYTHS OF CARING WORKERS

*1. "Nonprofit workers are not concerned about their salaries because they care and they are doing something that they love."*

As a largely feminized profession, nonprofit service is devalued because nonprofit workers, who are majority women, are seen as having the "natural ability" to care for others and thus higher wages as compensation for our work is not necessary. Because we are often connected to the communities we work with, and because we work with limited resources and inefficient bureaucratic structures of the workplace, we often end up over-utilizing our own emotional capacity to complete our jobs. Nonprofit workers are workers too who face workplace issues and labor abuse.

*2. "Nonprofit workers should not leave their clients or strike if they truly care."*

The dependent relationship between the communities in need (the poor, people of color, women, people with disabilities, queer youth, etc) and nonprofit services is not a responsibility of individual nonprofit worker, but rather, a result of the capitalist development in which people cannot meet their own needs and are forced to reproduce

for themselves (e.g. childcare, shelter, housework, emotional self-care) without adequate means and resources. Since the structural neglect on reproductive resources is causing the need in the first place, it is not possible or sustainable for nonprofit workers to be the only ones held accountable to their clients' welfare. The structural problems of capitalism need to be challenged through collective struggles from below.

*3. "Nonprofit workers need to be disconnected from their clients to maintain professional boundaries."*

It is certainly beneficial that nonprofit workers share similar experiences with their clients because they have a genuine understanding of their needs and struggles. But the professionalization of the nonprofit workplace demands the detachment of the workers from the communities they are from – academic credentials, implementation of workplace hierarchies, and bureaucratic documentation requirements ensure that most nonprofit administrators are White, Upper to Middle class, and highly educated. These processes are meant to maintain the class division between the nonprofit workers and the clients, preventing them from building mutual support and networks.

## TITUBA'S REVENGE

We are a group of anti-capitalist nonprofit workers who are majority queer women of color in NYC. The professionalization of nonprofits has drawn a significant amount of women – progressive activists from our communities in particular – into the low-wage, long hours, and non-unionized working conditions. We feel that there is a vacuum in the analysis of the exploitation in the nonprofit workplace. Nonprofits are serving as an integral part of the capitalist society rather than operating outside of it. We want to dispel the myths we are told about nonprofits to create an active project aiming to develop an anti-capitalist analysis of the material oppression of the communities we work within through fighting against our shared exploitation in the workplace.

## MYTHS OF RADICAL NONPROFITS

### 1. *“Nonprofits are radical because they have radical history.”*

It's true that many nonprofits come from radical histories, but this does not mean they are still radical today. When political organizations become nonprofits, they are forced to adopt a bureaucratic structure in order to maintain their ties to the state and private funders for financial means. Even if individuals in these structures have radical politics, it is difficult for them to prioritize the communities' needs since the organization is incorporated into the system that creates the oppressive conditions in the first place. In order to maintain the relationship with foundations and the state, nonprofits can't do anything that could actually address the fundamental material oppressions of their “clients”—such as engaging in direct attacks against capitalism.

### 2. *“Nonprofits are led by queer youth, Black women, homeless people, etc., and therefore they represent and empower oppressed communities.”*

There are a number of existing nonprofits established with the explicit goal of being led by oppressed groups. Many of these nonprofits engage in good progressive work. However, they consistently resort to electoral politics, legislative advocacy and economic negotiation. These types of activities are oppositional to forming real “from below” power, which can force concessions from the state and capitalists and build autonomous political groups.

Furthermore, nonprofits often select individuals from the oppressed groups to be peer advocates and members who are granted “opportunities” and empowered to “rise above” their conditions. These workers, while receiving a stipend for their involvement, get paid significantly less than other credentialed nonprofit workers, and are not involved in high-level decision-making. In the meantime, nonprofits benefit greatly from those second-class workers who lend legitimacy to the nonprofits so they can maintain their “authenticity” among radicals and progressives, as well as funders. This doesn't mean that such workers don't gain

from their experiences in these groups, but the organization benefits more from their work, and meanwhile, the workers are not developing into autonomous organizers.

The nonprofits, instead of making real from-below changes, focus on the identity of their “members” and not the politics of the organizations. Most of these “radical” nonprofits use revolutionary rhetoric, for instance, based on black power or queer liberation, without actually engaging with those revolutionary strategies. Instead, they funnel work into the Democratic Party or legislative reform, which does not develop power in oppressed communities.

### 3. *“Nonprofits are healing communities.”*

The structures of nonprofits are hierarchical and bureaucratic. The management does not exist to create “healing communities” but to control the workplace. Individual managers or executive directors may be nice, well-intentioned people, but their personality or intention does not eradicate the nonprofit structure or the crisis of capitalism itself. A nonprofit is like any other workplace within capitalism.

### 4. *“Nonprofits are progressive because they participate in public actions, rallies, and marches.”*

Nonprofits *benefit* from being in public actions by utilizing the publicity to increase chances of funding and attract potential clients. They use public actions to support their own organizational agendas instead of building revolutionary movements.

Nonprofits *bribe* people to participate in public actions by giving people metro cards, food, and “economic incentives.” The employees are given “credit hours” or required to participate in the actions as part of their job obligations. The primary goal of nonprofits is not to politicize people to be autonomous organizers or activists who operate outside of the model of community services organizing.

*Our next issue will discuss the relationship between capitalism and nonprofit structure, and how to organize within nonprofits. Stay tuned!*