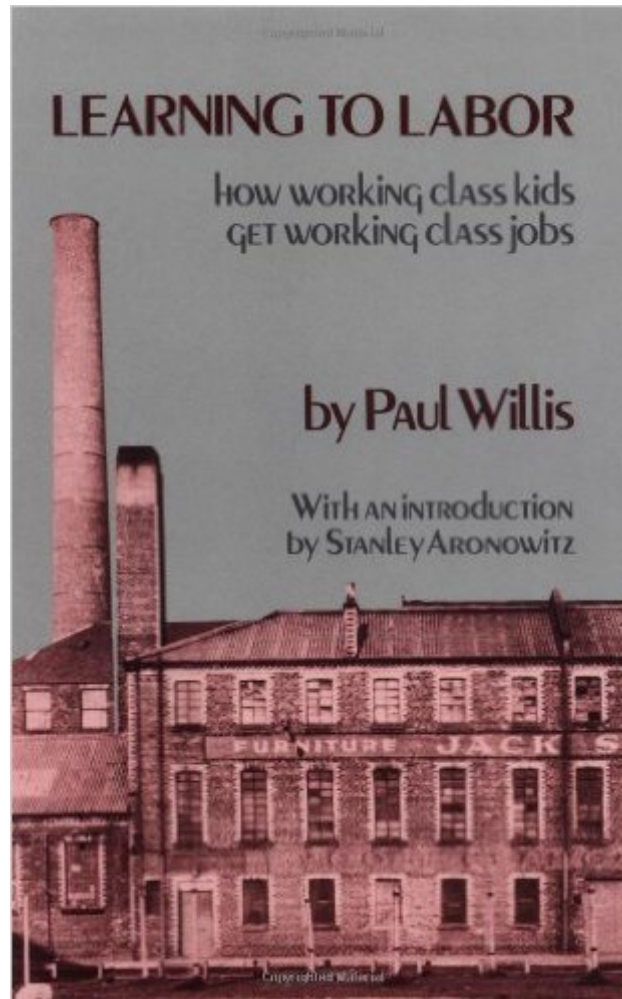


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# Learning To Labor: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs



## Synopsis

Hailed by the New Society as the "best book on male working class youth," this classic work, first published in 1977, has been translated into several foreign languages and remains the authority in ethnographical studies.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

The two books that have contributed most to the way I think about the social world and what it means to be are Simone DeBeauvoir's *The Ethics of Ambiguity* and Paul Willis' *Learning to Labor*. The first one hundred pages of Willis' book are loaded with insights and antidotes to conventional wisdom: Why are working class students often anti-school and generally anti-authoritarian? Because schools ask a great deal in terms of work, conformity, fun foregone, and deference to school officials, but they offer little or nothing in return: working class children are almost certain to become working class adults. Thus, the absence of a basis for exchange generates hostility and resentment. Is that such a bad thing? It's tough on teachers, counselors, administrators, and on students who see reason to conform. But in the 1970's when *Learning to Labor* was written, a working class life in a British industrial city was reasonably comfortable and had its own rewards. So from the classroom to the shopfloor was a natural and easy transition to the world of work for the sons of working class fathers. For readers in the U.S., the absence of interest in upward mobility may seem self-defeating, and may be taken as evidence of family dysfunction. Oddly, however, the families studied by Willis seem supportive and warm; sons admire their fathers and have respect

and affection for their mothers; fathers and mothers share their sons' alienation from schooling; and their reasons seem readily interpretable and in no way manifestations of family dysfunction. The anti-authoritarian students embrace the ethos of masculinity and toughness that provides their occupationally devalued fathers with self-esteem.

Paul E Willis<sup>1</sup> 1976 *Learning to Labour* is a model work of the Birmingham Centre CCCS and initiated the ethnographic turn in Cultural Studies. It is based on a field study among unruly working class school leavers in the industrial town of Hammerton. Willis observed counter-school culture among twelve white working class boys during the last two years of school and the first year of their working life. The first part of the study consists of a thick ethnographic description of counter-school culture and behaviour. Opposition to school is principally manifested in the struggle to win symbolic and physical space from the institution and its rules and to defeat its main perceived purpose: to make you work. Opposition is mainly expressed as style in areas such as dress, smoking and being seen to smoke, violence and subcultural code of honour, stealing as a source of excitement, drinking and sexism and sense of superiority towards girls. Willis extensively quotes from discussions with the boys. The second part of the study consists of an analytical reconstruction and is written in an interpretative mood. Willis discovers 'penetrations', impulses towards the discovery of the conditions of their working class existence. The counter-school culture partially tends to understand the realities of capitalism. Its scepticism about the value of school diplomas and qualifications is one aspect. The 'educational exchange' situation in school has parallels with the exchange of labour power. Willis also finds 'limitations' to the penetration of the working class existence, particularly in sexism and racism. Willis is one of the founders of 'Ethnography' within Cultural Studies.

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