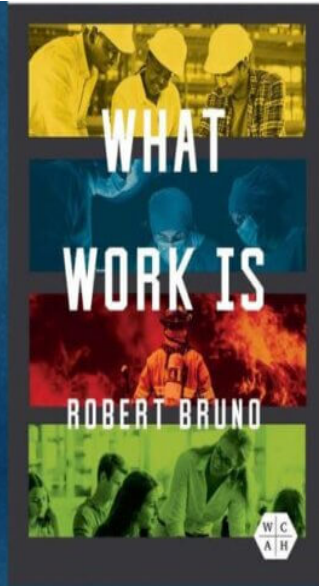




“A debt paid for abandoned goals”: A Reflection from *What Work Is*

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In recognition of Women’s History Month, I offer the following excerpt from my recently published book, *What Work Is*. The book is built around six-word essays written by adult workers who were prompted in my labor education class to complete the statement “Work is ...” The excerpt features the reflections of Cindia “Lynn” Fields from Southern Illinois.



Bob Bruno with his mother and father, circa 1958. Credit: Bob Bruno

I've reflected a lot on the absence of a genuine career choice in my mother's life. She stopped dreaming about being a flight attendant and later in life became a responsible and productive office manager. She didn't lament what she didn't have, but still I wonder. Did mom harbor remorse and some self-blame or not doing more? One student's essay triggered a painful reflection about my mother's life of labor. While students were given the option to include their names on their essays, nearly none did. But Cindia "Lynn" Fields was a very special exception. She is a Sargent at the Southwestern Correctional Center for men in East Saint Louis, Illinois, and President of Local 3654 of the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees, Council 31. Lynn, as she is commonly known by coworkers and union brothers and sisters, has worked in corrections for over twenty years. She holds the distinction of being the first African American female to head a union bargaining unit at an all-male public Illinois institution. When she thought about the writing prompt, she drew inspiration from some cautionary advice she constantly heard from her grandmother when growing up.

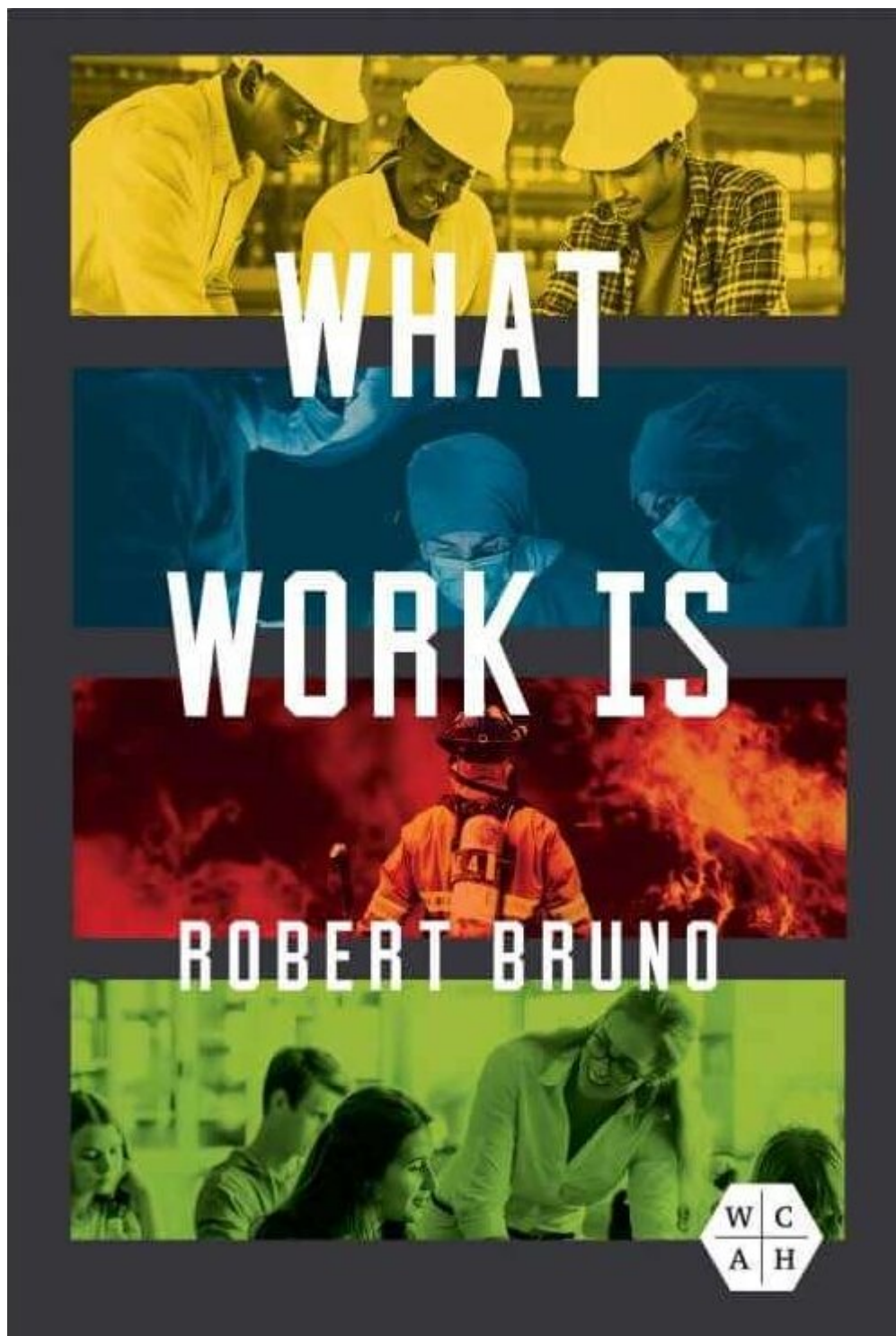


Cindia “Lynn” Fields. Credit Cindia Fields

Lynn’s parents were teenagers when she was born, and she was raised by her grandmother. Her grandmother wanted Lynn and a twin sister to not fall victim to bad choices, as teenagers, that would limit their life options. Work, her grandma pointed out, would be dreadful if Lynn wasn’t able to do something she enjoyed because of life events that forestalled pursuit of her dreams. Lynn had a close example of what grandma had in mind. Her dad was imprisoned as a seventeen-year-old for robbery. Once released, he caught a break. His godfather offered to get him a full-time “union job,” if he could stay out of trouble. Every night, for two years following his prison stint, Lynn’s dad cleaned union halls—often accompanied by Lynn—in the East Saint Louis area. After recreating some stability in his life, his godfather made good on his promise. Lynn’s dad took a position with the Illinois Power company (now Ameren) and became a member of the Laborers International Union of North America, Local 100. Lynn made clear to me that the “union saved [her] life,” because “it saved [her] father’s life.” Her dad passed away in 2009, and her mom holds onto some of his personal belongings, including a wallet. Inside a worn sleeve is her dad’s first union card with his name still clearly legible—Lynn Antonio Maggard. My student Lynn—who chooses to use her father’s name—wrote a provocative essay which chillingly described what my mother may have believed deep down but never

said out loud: “Work is a debt paid for abandoned goals.”

I included Lynn’s story and essay because it said out loud what I believe my mother felt about her life. My mother enjoyed the paid jobs she had but always wanted something more from her labor. In Lynn’s essay I found an expression of how work should inspire but could suffocate dreams. She was good at her job and enjoyed doing it. But she put in six words what my mom felt, and I suspect countless other women feel about jobs that are done faithfully everyday with a sense of regret and resentment. In her essay I heard my mother’s resigned voice.



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