



# Open Source Labor: FLOSS As Union?

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# Basic Definition – FLOSS

- ◆ FLOSS = Free/Libre Open Source Software
  - Combines two essential splinter groups of the same conceptual genesis
    - ◆ Both agree that anyone can contribute and that source code must be available to developers
    - ◆ Free Software Foundation / GNU (GNU's Not UNIX)
      - Richard Stallman – Former MIT AI lab hacker
        - Levy, Steven, *Hackers*, presents interesting background read on this, particularly the first and last sections
    - ◆ Open Source
      - Eric Raymond – Programmer and general weirdo
        - “The Cathedral and the Bazaar” is Raymond’s seminal theory piece
    - ◆ The difference between the two is ideology
      - Free Software emphasizes the freedom of information and intellectual pursuits
      - Open Source emphasizes the pragmatism of meritocracy and open contribution, without concern for the freedom of information

# Main Question

- ◆ What is the nature of FLOSS labor?
  - Is this an alternative to traditional management / labor relations?
  - How much is Ideology versus Organizing Principle?
  - In what ways does the FLOSS movement function as a union?
    - ◆ What are the issues with FLOSS, particularly in terms of its “representation” of programmers?
  - Is this an actual alternative?
- ◆ Surely it's free, so who cares?
  - Open source corporate shift
  - Government influence
  - Direct competition with closed source
  - Ideological claims

# Literature of Labor

- ◆ High-tech workers (particularly contract workers) (Barley & Kunda)
  - Skill
  - Credibility
  - Contingency
- ◆ Labor relationships that strain the traditional Marxist management / labor dichotomy (Fitzgerald)
  - Unrecognized skills
  - Management / ownership tasks along with “labor”
- ◆ Sociological research on the motivations of FLOSS programmers
  - Most join for the Interesting Problems / Challenge (Lakhani & Wolf)
- ◆ Self-descriptions of the FLOSS community by leading members and groups
  - Top 5% of programmers (Richards, Stallman)
  - Free / communal ideology (Stallman)
- ◆ Writings in the nascent IT union movement
  - Lack of success (WashTech, Alliance@IBM)

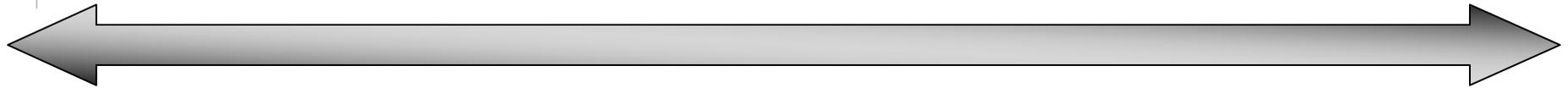
# Waxing FLOSS

- ◆ Initially, no “closed source”... really just little source
- ◆ Companies increasingly seek to “protect” their investment
- ◆ FLOSS counters corporate dominance (born in ideology)
- ◆ Internet changes FLOSS landscape, greatly increasing speed, breadth, productivity, interconnection, cooperation
- ◆ Companies return to open source, to achieve standardization, allowing more focus on value-added software
  - IBM with Eclipse and RAD
  - Sun Solaris basic and extended
  - Sun Java VM and JDK
  - IBM, HP, RedHat with Linux
  - Here is where the Free vs Open debate arises

# Corporate Involvement in Open Source

More likely to be  
Open Source;  
Low Income to  
Company

More likely to be  
Proprietary;  
High Income to  
Company



*Operating Systems*

*Compilers*

*Development  
Environments*

*Application  
Environments*

*Applications*

# FLOSS Labor Categories

- ◆ Day job
  - IBM, HP, RedHat, Sun, Oracle
  - Somewhat typical labor arrangement
    - ◆ Probably elite programmer
- ◆ Hobby
  - Another, usually programming, job pays bills
  - Open source programming for fun, challenge
  - Escaping from typical labor
- ◆ Free lance
  - Supplemental income
  - Open source marketplace
  - Contract labor, as expert
- ◆ Artist
  - People in this category may be in the other categories, as well
  - Labor situation like free lancing

# How Do We Make Money?

- ◆ Get hired by a company to do open source – Day job
  - IBM, HP, RedHat, Sun, Oracle
  - Somewhat typical labor arrangement
    - ◆ Probably still elite programmers
- ◆ Get hired by a company, based on open source credibility
  - Not as common as originally thought
  - Very difficult to arrange, since those hiring are often not reading the code in great detail
- ◆ Get paid for specific jobs – Free lance
  - Highly contingent work, mostly functions as supplemental income
  - Open source marketplace is unstable and in flux (lacks maturity)
  - Must establish and project expertise to win contracts
- ◆ Get paid for jobs related to programming
  - Installation, documentation, education, training, etc
  - Many jobs not as interesting as the coding itself

# Traditional Labor Unions vs FLOSS Labor

Labor Union	FLOSS Labor
Collective Bargaining (with management)	Collective action is possible and has occurred (But is this collective bargaining? Who is management?)
Voting privileges for members (vote on direction of union)	Lack of "hierarchy" causes a de facto democracy
Compensation controlled by bargaining with management	Compensation ruled by what individuals can command on the market
Employees exert control of work environment collectively	"Employee" has complete control
Management deals with the Union as a whole	"Management" deals with an amorphous community
Tenure emphasis	Meritocracy

# Issues with FLOSS

- ◆ Oppression of Management replaced by Oppression of Poverty
  - How will we get paid?
- ◆ Should all software really be free?
  - Compensation for intellectual endeavor? Is FLOSS a challenge to basic copyright idea?
- ◆ Is the software really better?
  - Depends on how you define it. Do you embrace change? Does it do exactly what you wanted it to do, or something really cool?
- ◆ Concerns about support
  - If it breaks, who do i call / blame?
- ◆ Meritocracy – or is it really elitism?
- ◆ Can't i just do a job?
  - FLOSS: more calling than contract (esp. GNU), though the Open Source strain does emphasize pragmatism & profit

# Conclusion

- ◆ FLOSS significantly in flux as a community and as an industry
- ◆ Deep divisions in ideological goals (Free vs Open)
- ◆ Increasing corporate influence
  - IBM, Sun, HP, RedHat, Oracle, etc
  - Increasing corporate control
  - Profit motive
- ◆ In the Union “space”, there are some things that the community cannot do
  - Does not necessarily welcome all comers
  - Unreliable for labor / Highly contingent
  - Not immune from Corporate influence
- ◆ May become another avenue for exploitation of labor under the banner of “freedom”
  - Open Source is not a panacea
- ◆ Remains a powerful organizing force not unlike a union
  - A very unruly union