From the Workplace

A collection of Worker Writing

Notes from Below

NOTES FROM BELOW

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Introduction

Notes from Below

Why work?

The Notes from Below project is centred around a simple focus: that the experience of work matters for understanding the world and struggling to change it.

We focus on work for two reasons. First, that work is central for understanding capitalism. From an individual's perspective, it might be difficult to see how capitalism relies on our labour. Yet, without us working, capitalism as a system would shut down. For example, we saw this playing out during the COVID-19 crisis. As more of us were forced to work from home or were unable to work because of closures, the world economy slowly grounded to a halt. Governments in the US and the UK, Brazil and India, rather risked our health and our lives to keep us at work, in order to save companies' profits. Therefore, we believe that through sharing our experiences of work across different parts of the economy, we can begin to build a picture of how capitalism operates.

The contradictions of capitalism are expressed in the divi-

sion between employers and us as workers (whether we have employee status, formal contracts, or not). When we agree to work, there is always a negotiation that takes place about how hard we will work - whether explicit or not. For the employer, they want the most out of what they have just purchased: our time and labour power. As workers, we have different interests. Whether we want to try and avoid work as much as possible or not, or be paid a greater share of the profits we produce, we want to have some time and energy left for the rest of our life once the workday ends.

This basic contradiction comes up again and again. Perhaps as clearly as a struggle over the length of our workday, perhaps over the intensity or speed of our work, or maybe about greater control over how our work is organised and carried out. It is expressed in the form of the bullying supervisor, the demand for unpaid overtime, oppressive managerial practices, the lack of health and safety equipment, the use of new technology, the exhaustion at the end of the day, the worries about stable employment - these are all smaller expressions of the overall structure of society. The specific experiences of each of these issues in each workplace matters for understanding the system as a whole.

Secondly, because capitalism relies on our work - both in our particular workplaces and generally across the economy - workers also have the potential to wield significant collective power. Through the processes of work we have shared experiences that bring us into contact with other workers: our struggles over specific issues at work can be connected to that of others as we discover that managers and employers use similar strategies and levers of power to make us work harder. In the process we also discover that if we take them on together, we

can fight back and undermine their plans. This is why, at the most fundamental level, we believe that it is necessary for us to build new networks that share stories and experiences about our workplaces, our employers' strategies and our resistance to them - in order to collectively identify what worked and what did not.

This is why we think our experiences of work matter.

When we push back against one part of the work process, whether striking for higher wages or just demanding a new kettle in the breakroom, the implications of this go way beyond the individual workplace. New tactics of resistance and collective power are constantly being tested in practice. Many of these are not shared - or they become lost as people move on to new workplaces, retirement, or unemployment. However, managers certainly learn from each other, sharing tactics and techniques to keep workers in line through employers' conferences, company handbooks and training days, and even sector wide blacklists.

While many employers talk of "human resources", we know that we have a life beyond our work for which our resources must be saved. That need points towards other ways of organising society - in the bonds and solidarities we develop with each other. These support us through work, but also shape our ability to respond and collectively organise.

Why workers' inquiry?

This is why at Notes from Below, we have tried to develop ways to give a voice to workers to describe, analyse, criticise and - hopefully - help people to change their own conditions of work. The aim is to share stories, strategies, and tactics, in order to

start building networks based on our collective experiences of work and the struggles against them.

This approach is based on the idea of "workers' inquiry", first developed by Karl Marx. He attempted to connect his general theory of capital to the everyday experience of factory workers. To do so, he used a postal survey. Since then, others who followed in his footsteps developed other ways to connect research to organising, theory to workers experience. This involved attempting to make sense of changes at work, by doing what is called a "workers' inquiry." The term reflects the intention to look into work systematically from the perspective of the people actually doing it, to develop as accurate a picture as possible of society and the process of production that sustains it.

Later on, this was developed by Italian Workerists with the idea of "class composition." They argued that the inquiry can show how work is changing at a particular point (with a new composition), helping to contribute to a bigger picture of the overall relations of society (a new class composition).

For Notes from Below, this method involves featuring workers' own writing, hosting leaflets and bulletins in order to inspire others to use them or create their own, carrying out interviews with workers and organisers, as well as publishing analytical pieces to accompany these. The project is an attempt to develop methods and theory from the class composition tradition of Marxism. This seeks to not only understand the world from the worker's point of view, but also to try and change it.

Workers' inquiry provides a way to ground our politics in the perspective of the working class. The connection between research and organising means it has to involve action: helping

to circulate and develop struggles, building workers' confidence to take action by and for themselves.

Why write?

As a starting point, we believe that workers writing about their own conditions matters. We think that workers are best placed to understand their own work. Through workers' inquiries, this knowledge can be shared and compared with that of others. We believe that workers have the power to change their own conditions as well as that of others and that the starting point for them to do so is to collectively reflect on their working conditions and their tools of resistance.

There are too many experts who write about other people's work, without ever doing it or taking workers' experiences seriously. There are also too many commentators that propose solutions for the current crisis without these ideas being grounded in working class experience.

We also know that writing can take time. It can cost money to travel and pay expenses, spend time speaking to other people, or just finding the time and space to work on it. That is why we set up the "Workers' Inquiry Fund" for new worker writers, providing resources to workers who want to detail their own experiences at work, study their workplaces, and analyse the relations of conflict, exploitation, and resistance within them. We know that writing can be a difficult process and we have worked with worker writers with a great variety of experience and confidence. It was supported by the Barry Amiel and Norman Melburn Trust, providing grants to cover these costs. Before Covid-19 took hold, we held workshops with worker writers who were interested in starting their own inquiries.

These were an opportunity to share ideas, experiences, and resolve problems collectively.

Writing is not an end in and of itself. We understand writing as part of a process of organising, seeking to understand conditions in order to change them. Worker writing projects that take inspiration from workers' inquiry must be connected to organising. We are committed to supporting this at Notes from Below. The chapters that follow each offer a glimpse into working conditions today, and hopefully this collection can start discussions between the writers and their coworkers as well as workers across the board on similarities and differences between their industry and others, their experiences and that of other workers, and potential avenues for resistance and solidarity.

Indeed, while the pieces contained in this issue come from a variety of industries, from call centres to kitchens, courier bikes to warehouses, classrooms to online platforms, bars, supermarkets, and editorial offices, they also underline striking similarities in the organisation and experience of work today. Exploitation, insecurity, surveillance and isolation are themes that repeatedly appear in the contributor's accounts, as do deep contempt for managers and companies that impose these conditions.

These inquiries provide vital insights into the working of capitalism today. These are insights that can only be generated from the workers perspective. Workers' experience matters. It is the raw material of class struggle. It provides maps and tools to get us out of the current crisis. It is the basis for taking successful action. Beyond that, it begins charting the possibility of other ways to run society. As we have quoted many times in Notes from Below before: there can be no politics without inquiry!

Amazon inquiry

John Holland

I'm a worker at the Amazon Distribution Warehouse in Rugeley in the West Midlands. Amazon calls its warehouses 'Fulfillment Centres'. The centre in Rugeley covers 700,000 square feet, has at least 1,500 staff, and distributes up to 600,000 items a day. Since the coronavirus pandemic hit the UK, Amazon has responded to a surge in demand by bringing on extra workers (mostly agency staff), whilst making a lot of changes to the way work is done to ostensibly comply with social distancing rules.

Division of labour

Work in the warehouse is divided into small repetitive tasks, with different teams of workers focusing on only one of them throughout the day. It's highly organised, everyone functions as a mere cog in the machine, barely aware of what the other cogs are doing. By my understanding, there are five different types of worker at the warehouse, not including the various levels of management and support roles. These are:

1. Receivers: These are the workers who spend their days un-

loading boxes from lorries as they arrive at the Fulfillment Centre, and sending them to be prepared, or 'prepped'.

2. Preppers: These are the workers who prepare the goods so that they are ready to be stored. This generally involves opening each box, attaching an Amazon specific barcode to each item, and then putting them back in their boxes and sealing them again. Some items need to be placed in specific bags. The boxes are then sent for stowing in the four floors of thousands of storage aisles that make up most of the building.
3. Stowers: These are the workers who store the goods once they have been prepared. Each stower is assigned to a specific location within the building close to a lift, where carts of goods will constantly come up and be pulled out for the stowers to take away and store in the aisles. Each stower has a scanning device which records their work. Their job is to take a cart and scan each item by its barcode, store it in a bin in the aisles, and then scan that bin's unique barcode to record it. This process is repeated until the cart is empty, at which point another cart is ready to be sorted.
4. Pickers: When orders are made, the items are collected from the bins by a team of workers called 'pickers', who walk up and down the aisles with their own carts, each holding a scanner giving them instructions about which items to pick and where to find them. They then scan the item, as well as the bin they took it from, to log on the system that it has been removed. When their cart is full they take their items to the deliverers
5. Deliverers: Lastly, these are the workers who go through the items picked from the bins and sort them into specific

> individual orders and pack them so they are organised by geographic location for more efficient delivery, after which the items are packed into lorries and taken away for delivery.

These groups have almost zero contact with each other. In fact, the way work is organised means you can quite easily go all day without ever having a conversation with a coworker. If you were to construct a work system primarily to prevent workers organising, you wouldn't be far off this. Since working at the warehouse, I have mostly worked as a Stower but have occasionally been moved to work as a Prepper on some days. Amazon must have a system to calculate what proportion of their workers they need on each team for any one day to ensure the wheels keep moving efficiently and so no team is ever kept waiting by another earlier in the process. Whilst working in the Prepping area, I've also been asked to help out with moving pallets of goods that need to go into a specific section from one area of the warehouse to another. I've been repeatedly told that I will receive training on how to do this and it will happen very soon, but for now me merely saying that I know how to drive a pallet truck was good enough. I don't actually have any certificates, I just remember how to do it from copying someone else at a previous job. They don't even require us to wear steel toe-cap footwear working in this area, although I wear them voluntarily as I've already dropped a couple of boxes on my feet and would not like to try that in my trainers.

Maybe I'll drop a pallet on myself next week and sue Amazon.

There are also staff who don't fit into the categories I outlined above, whose role is to provide extra organisation for the workforce. Each team has a 'Leader', whose main role seems

to be to provide motivational speeches at the beginning and end of each day and tell us to come speak to them if we have any problems. They are not well liked by the workforce. Speaking to them regarding any problems usually just results in condescendingly being told that there's nothing that they can do about it and that we're just making a fuss. Making fun of our Leader is probably the main way me and my co-workers keep ourselves entertained, and it does give us a sense of collective identity against the bosses, but this is mostly counter-acted by how everything seems constructed to prevent workers organising.

Another important group are the 'Problem Solvers.' These are workers who stand around behind 'Computers on Wheels' (called 'Cows' by Amazon) monitoring the work process for errors and correcting for them. For example, if you scan an item's barcode and it comes up on your scanner as a different item, you need to hand it to a 'Problem Solver' as clearly something in the process has gone wrong. A common error is that items which are supposed to be restricted to a specific section are mixed in with others. For instance, Pet Food and Poisonous Substances must be stored in their own specific sections, lest Amazon unwittingly kill someone's dog. Much of this work feels like it would be quite easy to automate. In fact, the constant going back and forth to 'Problem Solvers' feels like we are Alpha Testing Amazon's systems, so that all the errors in the system can be ironed out before the inevitable introduction of robot workers who will take all of our jobs. Despite essentially being managers, the Problem Solvers aren't paid any more than we are. To get to a higher paid position you must get some managerial experience first, so workers essentially accept being promoted for no extra pay. All these layers of management

undermine worker solidarity quite effectively. Really we're in the same boat as the Problem Solvers, but the way work is organised makes us feel the opposite.

Working at Amazon

Something peculiar about working in Amazon is the strange language you have to pick up, which can be bewildering at first. I've already mentioned that warehouses are now 'Fulfillment Centres' and 'Problem Solvers' work on 'Cows'. Well, workers are not called 'staff' or even 'employees' here. We are all called 'associates.' Whether we're workers or bosses, we're all supposed to be the same, and our relationship with the corporation is made to feel all cuddly, though really it's just made more distant. The workers are aware of the implications of this. One staff member talked to me about a 'propaganda video' (their wording) Amazon uses to teach their management how to identify and prevent union organising among their 'associates'. This can be found on YouTube for a taste of how these people talk.[1]

I live in Birmingham, around 35 miles from the Fulfillment Centre in Rugeley. Since I don't own a car, my only way of getting to the Centre on time for my 7:30am shift is with the buses Amazon puts on, which leave Birmingham City Centre at 5:50am or 6:10am. They charge us £4 to be driven straight to work, and £4 again for the journey back. I've been told that the service used to be free, but Amazon has since realised they can charge workers for it and they still come - so why not. I have been keeping count and the workers who get the buses are mostly male (as is the workforce in general) and overwhelmingly non-white, a lot more so than the workforce

once you arrive. I assume the white workers are more likely to have cars or live nearby. I should note however that although 'White', the majority of these workers are not British. Most seem to be Romanian or Polish. I leave my house to cycle to the City Centre at 5:30am, catch the bus at 6:10am to start work at 7:30am. My shift ends at 6pm and then another bus leaves for Birmingham at 6:30pm, arriving around 7:20pm, and then I cycle back home, arriving around 8pm. Including travel time it's a 14.5 hour work day, four days a week.

There are two different kinds of workers, those of us who are employed by Amazon, called 'blue badges', and those who work for an agency, who are called 'green badges'. We have to wear these coloured badges with our personal details on lanyards all day, so we're easily identifiable. Those of us who work for an agency and have been brought in during the pandemic to help meet increased demand are designated as 'heroes'. This reminds me of how the government is calling NHS workers heroes for being so brave working against the coronavirus without adequate PPE. At Amazon, it's another strange use of language that they take even further, as each agency staff member is literally given a badge with a Superhero on it (e.g. Hyperion, Drax The Destroyer, and so on - I'm not good with superhero names). They are then told to check the Heroes Board every morning to see which section of the building they have been assigned to work at for the day. We generally work in a different place every day, so we never really get to know anyone, which makes organising very difficult. I find calling workers 'superheroes' incredibly patronising, although my co-workers find it more funny than anything else.

From my conversations with migrant workers, I understand that many of them live together in shared accommodation in

and around Rugeley. Generally, one of them has a car and drives the rest to work each day. The pay is £9.50 an hour, with 1.5x pay for one day of overtime a week and 2x pay for the 2nd. The British workers mostly seem to be people who are on furlough or have been laid off since the coronavirus pandemic started. One co-worker told me he doesn't believe that his job will actually be there when the furlough scheme ends, so even though he's getting enough money from that he wants to secure new employment before losing his old job. Another says the 80% pay they're on isn't enough to cover their expenses so they needed to find work. I must say there seems to be virtually no tension between the migrant and British-born workers, which has not been the case in many of my previous workplaces. They share a common contempt for Amazon management and the frustrating rules imposed on us all.

Rules of the work

Ah, the rules. They are rarely fully explained to you, you just find out about them whenever you're either caught breaking them, or a co-worker explains them to you to try to keep you out of trouble. For instance, there are a set of rules about the speed of your work. For stowers, you must stow at least 1 item every three, four, five minutes (the precise time changes regularly), or you will be logged as 'idling' and are liable to have your pay docked for 'idle time'. You must also meet a quota of items stowed. I'm told that there's a room somewhere in the building where someone is constantly monitoring everyone's work speed, and can send someone out to find us if they notice someone is idling a lot. At the moment, I'm told you must stow an equivalent of 35 large items or 178 small items per hour, or

you will be classed as idling unless you can give a valid excuse. Running out of work due to delays earlier in the process is a valid excuse. Going to the toilet is not. We do get told that we're allowed to have toilet breaks, which is technically correct (the best kind of correct), but in reality there's no way you can get to the toilet and back in time to prevent being flashed as idling - unless you're lucky enough to be working right next to one. By my count there are 4 different toilet facilities open to workers located around the 700,000 square feet building, all on the ground floor, so good luck with that one.

We have two 35-minute breaks in our shifts. The rule is that you must be working each minute on either side of it, which can be monitored by your scanner. So, for instance, if you go on a break at 12pm, you must make a scan at 12:00pm and another at 12:35pm, or you will be classed as overstaying your lunch break and are liable to have pay deducted. Of course this means the breaks aren't really as long as advertised, as the time it takes to walk from your workplace to any one of the five canteens scattered around the huge building can be anything up to 10 minutes, especially with 2 metre social distancing rules being enforced - meaning you can only walk as quickly as the slowest person in the corridor. In reality my break time is more like 20 minutes before I have to walk back to my shift area so I can be on time to make another scan the minute I'm back.

For this reason, I rarely bother buying food at the canteen, as the extra time it takes queuing up means you barely have time to finish before you need to start walking back. You are allowed to bring in packed lunch or other items into the building, provided you use a clear plastic carrier bag that Amazon provides you with. It's never been explained why exactly this is necessary. I'd normally guess it's to ensure we don't bring weapons into

the building or something, except the rules have got far stricter with the pandemic so that doesn't make sense. It feels like going in and out of prison.

Another rule you will soon learn is that you must be on your feet the entire shift, as sitting down encourages idling. This gets very frustrating when you have to stow lots of small items in the bins located at the very bottom of the aisles, as you're instructed to bob down on your feet or on one knee to do the job but nothing more than that. I also saw one worker get a stern telling off for having a sit down on the stairs while waiting for work to arrive. We'd been waiting on our feet for around 20 minutes. One of the jobs of the 'Leaders' seems to be patrolling the corridors to scold any workers they find breaking the rules. I have overheard some of my black co-workers complaining that they feel racially profiled by these patrolling disciplinarians, and that they get the same feeling as being the black kid suspiciously watched in a corner shop for no reason, while the white kids run around as they please. One black worker told me on the bus back that they had been aggressively threatened with the sack for having their mask below their nose whilst working on the top floor where it's really hot, when they were certainly not the only one who'd been doing that. The heat and amount of walking you have to do here can get quite tiring. I've used a step counter app this last week, and I'm averaging 7.1 miles of walking a day during my shifts.

As well as the Leaders constantly walking around keeping an eye on you, something you can't help notice working in this place is the CCTV. There are cameras absolutely everywhere, I don't think there's a single spot in the building where you aren't under surveillance by at least one CCTV camera. I feel this has a profound psychological effect on all of us, the awareness that

we are constantly being watched. I had one worker advise me to never ever put an item in my pocket, even if I just wanted to carry something and my hands were full, as it could be interpreted as an attempt to steal.

Another thing you need to be careful of is making any errors in the storage process, mostly doing something in the wrong order or attempting to stow something in the wrong place. For instance if an item you scan comes up as 'Flammable' you should know it has to be stowed in Flammable Land (more on that place below) and thus must be taken to a Problem Solver if you're not already there. An attempt to stow it anywhere else can result in a message on your scanner telling you you've made one mistake too many and that you need to go report to your manager to explain yourself before you can start working again. Quite disconcerting! It all adds to the feeling of being constantly monitored. Not as disconcerting as the noisy conveyor belt you hear all throughout the stowing aisles though, which makes this constant 'dah dah dah...' sound at almost the exact same pitch and tempo as the opening guitar riff of 'Take Me Out' by Franz Ferdinand so you're constantly anticipating the words *SO IF YOU'RE LONELY...* to burst out from the PA System before you remember that it's just the conveyor motor.

Or maybe that's just me.

An example of worker solidarity and resistance in this place is how workers are constantly coming up with tactics to get around the monitoring and game the system so they can bend the rules but not get flagged up on the system. For example, if you want to go to the toilet without being flagged for idling, a good get-around is to carry a few small items with you (e.g. a lipstick) and just scan and stow one every few minutes as you're walking down the aisles, so the system never picks up on you

being away from work for very long. I don't mind describing that one as I'm sure management have worked out that people do this already, but that's just to give you an idea of the tricks workers come up with to keep the automated monitoring off their backs.

Flammable Land

Another interesting feature of this workplace is the fire safety routines. All my co-workers agree that during our initial training period, we were told repeatedly that if a fire alarm was to go off, we must all immediately drop whatever we are doing and follow the green lines on the floor, which would lead us to the nearest fire exit. Sounds sensible enough. Then one day I thought about it and looked at the ground, and then suddenly it hit me.

What green lines?

I must have spent 10-15 minutes one morning trying to find where these green lines were. There's plenty of yellow, white and grey lines all over the place but no green ones. This is not a very useful fire safety procedure. I guess if a fire alarm goes off I'll just follow everyone else and hope for the best. Your chances in a fire seem very much dependent on where you're working anyway.

As I mentioned earlier, although most goods can be stored anywhere, there are a few specific sections in the building for storing goods that must be kept separate from everything else. One of these sections is called 'Flammable Land', which sounds like some kind of theme park for pyromaniacs. There is a constant theme of making out that working here is enjoyable. The Team Leaders even seem to be told to shoehorn in the

phrase "have fun!" in their speeches to us. But anyway, Flammable Land consists of aisle after aisle of flammable substances, not in the sense of "will burn" like paper, but things that will burn very quickly like petrol, certain perfumes etc. The idea is, if there ever was to be a fire in the building, it wouldn't spread very quickly because all of the things that would easily go up in flames are all kept separate, so we'd have plenty of time to evacuate the building. Now, what exactly is supposed to happen if the fire *starts* in Flammable Land has never been explained to me. I guess if you're working in there and hear the fire alarm, just run like hell following the green lines which aren't there before a raging chemical inferno engulfs you.

Because of the pandemic, there has been yet another group of rule enforcers created. These are called the 'Social Distancing Champions', whose job is to patrol the site looking for any workers who are within 2 metres of one another and tell them to step away. The vast majority of workers seem to already be trying quite hard to stick to the social distancing rules, so this hasn't caused many issues that I can see. Although the role of Social Distancing Champion seems to have attracted some people who are more interested in telling others what to do rather than in health and safety. I did tell my manager about the social distancing disaster that is the Heroes Board. Every morning I see loads of agency workers all coming in at once to look where their shifts are, at which point social distancing collapses as they don't feel they can wait long enough to all look at it one at a time for fear of being flagged as idling. It's quite clear that enforcing social distancing would be made a lot easier if Amazon would just relax its 'idling' and 'quotas' rules so workers don't feel that they have to constantly rush around pushing past each other to not get caught out. But that would

hurt profits. The only real step they've taken is moving the time the bus leaves from 6:10pm to 6:30pm, so workers now have an extra 20 minutes to get the bus after finishing their shift so there isn't a huge rush for the doors all at once. But I guess that's a change that doesn't negatively impact Amazon in any way, it just means workers get home 20 minutes later.

I witnessed the social distancing regime truly break down when we had our first real fire alarm since the pandemic. Firstly, after the alarm went off I had to explain to several Romanian workers who I'd found continuing on, that they had to leave the building. They didn't seem to realise that this one wasn't a test, although it'd been explained to us that the tests were at 12pm Wednesday and Saturday, so this must have been a real fire. Several hundred workers all dropped tools and followed invisible green lines leading them out of the building into the car park, where they were all clumped together and told to wear strange tin foil overcoats that made us all look like the Cybermen out of Doctor Who. I'm not sure what the point of that was. Maybe it was to keep us dry in case it rained? At least we got a bit of excitement. But the true highlight of the fire alarm was finally discovering these legendary green lines. There's two of them. They're around 6ft long extending immediately in front of the fire exit door, so totally useless as a guide unless you happen to be standing right next to it, by which point it's pretty obvious where the fire exit is anyway. The mind boggles at why they spent so much time training us about these fire exit green lines.

Building solidarity

It's very difficult to establish bonds with other workers here. You're constantly being moved around from section to section working with different groups each time, and everyone is working a variety of shift days and break times. If you were to set up a work regime primarily with the goal of hindering union organising, this is exactly how you'd do it. On top of all that, there is a big turnover in staff. Workers leave regularly because they can't put up with the working conditions long term, especially the new workers who've come in during the pandemic. Amazon never seems to stop hiring new people, so they're obviously replacing others. I suspect they periodically just sack workers for not meeting targets enough so they can be replaced with newcomers, and thus constantly increase their efficiency averages.

I was warned one day that my stowing speed had dropped to less than 50% of the average of everyone else that morning and was told to explain myself, but it was more bad luck (for example, lack of shelf space slowing me down) than me working slow so this wasn't repeated. Someone told me on the bus going home that a lad had turned up to work that morning at 7am only for his entry ID not to work when he tried to scan in, and was then told it didn't work because he'd been released. Must not have seen the email.

Yes 'released' is another Amazon Language word, nobody is ever sacked here. I first heard that word when I was late one day and off sick for a day not long after, and was told that if I had another sick day I would be released. Not sure what the timeframe of that was, surely not forever, but I haven't been off sick again to find out. This does seem to undermine

their strict anti-covid stance though, when they're essentially incentivising workers to come in sick or else risk being sacked for poor attendance.

Still, I do think there are ways union organising could succeed here with a lot of effort put into new strategies. I've also overheard another coworker at lunch telling people that he'd got his union involved (as an individual, no unions are recognised) after having to explain absences in a disciplinary meeting, when he'd already told management that he'd had a death in the family. One issue is a lot of the workers are Romanian, and they're mostly cut off from the native workers. I don't see a unionisation effort succeeding unless the union is willing to invest in a Romanian-speaking organiser. Also talking to workers directly outside the premises (as I understand GMB have attempted) is probably a bad idea. Workers are still nervous about being monitored. Some form of online outreach is probably necessary, but if we need physical interaction it'd probably be smarter to go to the bus drop off points in Birmingham, Wolverhampton, Walsall, and so on and speak to workers there where there are no Amazon managers snooping around.

It doesn't take much imagination to realise how very poorly paid we are for the amount of value we're generating for Amazon. At the time of writing Jeff Bezos has a net worth of $189 billion. If this place stopped functioning it'd probably hit the whole economy of the West Midlands with how dependent people and businesses are on online deliveries in these times. How many other workplaces can say that? Higher pay really should be an obvious thing to organise for, although I don't hear many workers actually complaining about that, we're still all paid slightly above the living wage and many people's

expectations are low enough to consider that acceptable. The biggest thing people are unhappy with is the complete lack of control they have to decide anything in their workplace - the excessive surveillance, arbitrary rules, aggressive management methods, and so on. Aiming to get management off our backs and just make this a more pleasant place to work would probably be more galvanising.

Living as a Turker

Sherry

I have been working on Amazon Mechanical Turk since February 15, 2015. I was sent the link from a friend and used that to sign up. It was a very simple process, but they did ask for my social security number and other personal information. It wasn't an instant approval process, I believe it was three days before I received an email stating my account was approved.

When I first logged in and saw the 'hits available' page, I thought what have I signed up for. It was all very overwhelming. I just kept scrolling and looking for probably over an hour. I'm sure it was probably another hour before I finally got brave enough to actually accept a hit. That's when I found out that most of the time you have to wait days for your money and even then it's not guaranteed that requesters will pay you - more on this later.

The funny thing is back then I had no clue that I should be keeping records of my bonuses that requesters said I earned. I'm sure there were plenty that never sent what they said they would. I think on my first actual day I earned $2.00 that was already awarded to me. I remember being limited to only 100 hits per day in my first ten days - and that I couldn't transfer any

of my earnings during that period. I can also remember reading some instructions on the hits and they were so complicated that I thought I was reading another language. My first experiences with Turk were very confusing and honestly I thought they would be my last. I then started researching and that's when the real fun began. I learned how to Turk and be successful, because without the proper tools Turking could possibly be the worst job you've ever done in your life.

Learning to Turk

Amazon Mechanical Turk is a crowdsourced platform for requesters, whether they are researchers or businesses, to post Human Intelligence Tasks (HITs) for 'Turkers' to complete. The tasks can range from research studies, surveys, data processing, and many other tasks computers can't complete.

When I first started I worked mostly alone. Some of the time I worked with a friend from New York that I had met in a movie group on Facebook. She knew I was having trouble with bills and things because the economy of my area was turning to shit with all the coal mines closing and my former husband wrecking my finances. Those first days I was amazed that there was so much work posted. It didn't matter what time of day or night, I could always see work. I was fooled though by the high paying transcription hits at first. I wasted so much time trying to earn a decent hourly wage, but it just wasn't going to happen. If I had to estimate how much time I wasted, I would say at least 2-3 days because I even went back repeatedly to try again. The monetary value of the hits were just so large that they were hard to ignore.

After a day or two, my New York friend invited me to a

Facebook group for new Turkers called "Turkers 101." It was a small group of maybe 20 people that were active, but none who really made any money on Turk. They had the goal of making 5 dollars a day and there's no way I could support my family on that.

I started making money. At first I thought it was just hobby money, but I realised I could make more. So I started searching for other turkers. In the group they had a list of scripts to help with the work so I started downloading them. Although after trying to use them I was really confused, so I started to watch YouTube videos about them - because you know YouTube knows everything. That's when I saw videos of people making good money and I developed my plan. For reference, I made 128 dollars in my first 8 days on Turk.

Scripts are used to increase Turking efficiency by altering the default behavior of Turk or adding new functionality. Turkers use these scripts to maximize their income and minimize the time spent looking for work. Some scripts are used to automatically catch HITs as they are posted on the site. Most Turkers use PANDAs (Preview And Auto Accept) to maximize their ability to catch the highest paying HITs. An issue I experienced with this system is that if your internet speed or computer processor speed is slower than others, you have less of a chance to "catch" the work before others do. Despite this competition, you can still find workers from all over the world in groups of Turkers willing to help each other. Some groups are focused on creating things to make Turking easier, but others are more focused on the camaraderie of developing friendships.

When thinking of all the groups and different forums that are out there for Turkers, it really does show that most of us still strive for that personal connection, even when working quietly

from our own homes. I have personally developed lifelong friendships with people all over the world. In the process, I have learned so many things about different cultures that I would have never been exposed to living in a rural American town. This is a big reason why I have developed such a passion to make this work better, so others can hopefully capitalize on the great opportunities and learning that comes from working as a Turker.

While I worked I kept branching out and looking for other Turkers that I could relate to. Eventually I found another large Turk group. I had never seen a group in which people helped each other so much before. They had a daily hit thread sharing all the well paying hits and tagging people to help each other. I regularly participated in the thread and loved the companionship of having an office crew of sorts. The overall structure of the group seemed to be like "a water cooler" where you could share anything - whether it was HITs or something happening in your life. The sense of companionship became really important - so much so that some members were upset that the daily HIT thread wasn't just HITs but people sharing about their lives and the drama was just too much!

A select group of us broke off into a smaller subgroup. Some people got left behind in the process. They said they missed us so we started adding them and others back in. Over time we added more and more, to the point where it's now above 2300 members. There are daily HIT threads that I still converse with. It seemed the more you would share the more people would converse with you and give you pointers. They all had their own language and abbreviations for HITs and if you didn't know them you would probably miss a batch before they answered you back. The overall feel of the group made me really feel

like we were co-workers and we were supporting each other through both the good and the bad times.

How I Turk today

Nowadays, I'm more of a lone Turker. I work with a small group of about 8 people that I know I can talk about anything with. I've become a much more secluded Turker because now that my husband works, I don't have to dedicate as much time to Turking. I still need to make some money for us to stay afloat and make it from paycheck to paycheck. I found that when I started working less, I didn't want to take from the other group when I wasn't contributing "my part."

Most days I start out turking by grabbing my necessities for the day: caffeine and nicotine. I know that once I sit down if the work is there I won't be getting up until it's gone. That's the thing about Turking, you never know when the work is going to be there. Or to put it another way: you never know when the good work will be there. I have my computer running PANDAs and HIT Notifier 24 hours a day, just so I won't miss the higher paying hits when they are dropped or returned for some reason by another Turker. I usually go through HIT Notifier first to see if there are any good HITs that I need to PANDA and set my PANDAs for them. I always have anywhere between 4-8 PANDAs running at any given time - and that's all the time. One old Turk friend of mine has the motto ABT - "Always Be Turking." Because guess what: if you want to make a good wage at this, that's what you will be doing.

My life today as a Turker is more based on helping other Turkers learn the tricks and tools to make decent money on Turk. I scan forums and groups to see who is having issues. If

I find something, I reach out to show them links to help get their rejections overturned or show them a tool they could use to help maximize their earnings.

The effects of Turking

My work affects other Turkers. Not as much now, but before I was always told I caught all the good hits and I knew how to look for work. I had developed a system to start my day, setting my scripts to work. I've helped many turkers learn what timers to set their PANDA catchers to, how to look for hits through Turkopticon for certain requesters, and set up searches to find the good work. I think a lot of Turkers can suffer from jealousy seeing what other people make on the platform. And that carries over when some don't make as much as others. I've had people block me because I had better earnings than them. They couldn't catch the hits and acted like it was my fault.

I had set out to make the best of Turk and that's what I did. It didn't matter if I worked 2 hours or 10 hours - sometimes as high as 14 hours! - I sat there until I made what I needed to. I found myself gravitating to people that worked like this. I had a Facebook Turk group named "hardcore home workers" (which is kind of funny thinking how that came about now) where it was all full time Turkers. I can remember actually making phone lists to call people when good hits dropped. We were all from different parts of the country but had enough respect for each other's life stories that we would help each other make a living. I can remember talking to friends on chat, trying to keep each other motivated to finish batches of work - even after working 4 or more hours straight on the same task, just going as fast as we could.

Turk affects my family as they would love to have mom take a day off from work. I can't remember the last day that I didn't log on Turk on my laptop. It is not something that I have thought about, but it is a strange feeling looking back at how often I log on. I can say that I have had the convenience of working when I wanted to, but sometimes I would have to work double time to make it worthwhile. I can't tell you the times my husband has felt neglected due to my work on Turk. We could be in the middle of a conversation, but if a HIT dropped I would have to tell him to hold on until I was finished.

Leverage on Turk

The leverage I have comes from knowing some Turkers respect me. I'm passionate about Turkers getting fair treatment whether it be fair pay, fair treatment from requesters, or transparency for qualifications. I'm not scared of Amazon because I feel that if I don't stand up for what I believe then I'm just being a sheep. I have built a lot of different connections over the years that I can reach out to and bring in more support if needed. For example, I received a mass rejection several years ago. A requester rejected over 70 HITs at one time because it seemed they didn't want to pay for my work. I realized something was really wrong with my system of work. I had always been a careful worker and made sure to not do bad work, but then a requester (who had no history on Turk) came in and ruined that for me in my eyes. I emailed the requester and Amazon repeatedly, getting no response from either. For the first time in my Turk career, I felt totally powerless. I decided to reach out to Turkopticon (a worker review site of requesters) to leave a review of my experience with this requester. Then

it dawned on me: no matter what happens, this was all the leverage I had at the time..

Last year was a bad year Turking for me. The wages went down, the quality of the requesters depleted, and the overall Turk system seemed to be getting worse. I felt like I was getting to the end of my Turk career. It would have to improve or we would never be able to make it from week to week. I was talking with my husband about a particular requester and how they have ruined things. While ranting about the latest problems with Turk, I realised that in order to actually change things I would have to stand up for what I believe in.

I decided that now was the time. This meant finding a way to get a voice to Amazon, telling them that we wouldn't take this sitting down. It was time to make the Turker's voice heard: a time for change and to stand up. I believe that requesters can't be allowed to continue rejecting good and honest work just because they want to - or they want to scam the system and not pay. In turn, Amazon can't stay silent forever while their whole force of Turkers continue to be treated unfairly.

Speaking honestly, I love Turk and it has opened so many avenues for my family. But I guess the old saying holds true here: fool me once shame on you, fool me twice shame on me, fool me three times and I have become a fool. As Turkers, we need to stop being fooled by the flexibility of Turk and realise that we are humans and deserve to be treated as such.

After all these realisations, I saw an email from Turkopticon. They were calling for help to revamp their website. The creators had been operating it for over 10 years and wanted to turn it over to be Turker organized and owned. Turkopticon had always been so helpful for me to find good work and I didn't want to lose it. I still had many friends that used the site. That's when I

knew I had to sign up and get involved. As Turkers, we needed a system for us to be able to communicate the crap work to others.

Over the next couple of weeks I was eagerly checking my email to see if they had replied. When they did, I was excited to see and hear what was happening. The first workshop I attended with Turkopticon was so eye opening. I saw how much Amazon relies on Turkopticon to take care of the bad requesters. It got me thinking whether it was really Turkopticon's place to do this. I felt Amazon was really missing the mark by not letting Turkers have a say in how to deal with the bad requesters.

I am now involved working and finding other Turkers to actually make Turk work better for everyone around the world and finally be heard as the hidden tech workers!

Notes from the road

Alex Marshall[2]

Eight years on the road. Eight winters endured. One Beast from the East. One record breaking hottest day. And this year: one global pandemic. Throw in the various crashes, bicycle mechanical failures, and most recently a redundancy, I am still a courier. Word on the street is that some of the more experienced couriers do not acknowledge you until you have done a few winters and earned your stripes. Then again, some couriers just will not acknowledge others no matter how many winters they have done. I guess this is one of the main draws of the job: beyond making sure you respond to calls from control and picking up and dropping off packages at the right time, there are not many rules you have to abide by. The conventional constraints of society do not seem to apply in the courier industry.

This is an important factor that attracts a wider variety of people from all sorts of walks of life to become couriers. You can get by with a very basic understanding of the English language and as a result there are couriers in London from all over the planet. Many have worked in different cities all over the world, moving on as they get bored of the streets or if the weather

turns too nasty. Many have pounded the same London roads for decades, yet will tell you they are still finding new places to sit and eat their lunch and get some peace, or new covered alleyways to hide in when the heavens open. Regardless of people's backgrounds or what paths they have taken, they all share one thing in common: they are couriers.

This means becoming part of a subculture operating outside the conventional parameters. The job also reminds you of this as it takes you into offices all day long; the epitome of rules and regulations. As a courier you are given a free pass to skip in and out of places where people are dressed smartly and bound to desks, while you are clothed in whatever you like. Your desk is your bicycle, your office the streets of London.

Although the job can be quite isolated - often you can spend hours at a time not having a proper conversation with anyone - there is a huge sense of community with others on the road. This sense of community is brought about by a common respect of doing a job that is high risk, precarious, physically tough, and mentally strenuous. There have been times that I have left my house at 8.30am in the morning and had rain streaming down my nose like a waterfall by the time I got to the end of my road. When you are riding into work with a day of torrential rain ahead, you really cannot see yourself making it to the end of the day. Pedalling in, you feel water seeping through your multiple layers and the dread really starts to sink in. But then you suddenly pull up next to a fellow courier at a set of red lights who is in the exact same situation as you and you can't do anything but laugh at the dire situation. This exchange reminds you that there are hundreds of others just like you who will be enduring these conditions, a lot with less weatherproof equipment, and that sense of solidarity with others on the road

is enough to give you strength to push on through. I have had numerous conversations with couriers recounting the "worst ever days" endured on the road, and although even reminiscing about these days can make you shudder, they are always told with pride and a keen sense of gallows humour.

I have been a courier for eight years and I started at the bottom earning just £180 for a 5 day week of 47.5 hours. This £180 was a guaranteed amount that you only got for completing a full week. If you missed a day or turned up late to work on one of the days you would lose this guarantee and drop to a pay per job mode of payment. This could see wages drop drastically and is a method used by courier companies to force couriers to work long hours and full weeks whilst still insisting they utilise a "flexible, self employed" workforce. I chased the pound sign, moving from one company to the next in the pursuit of more money and more stability. I had fallen in love with the job very quickly but just as quickly I had realised that the pay and conditions couriers were subjected to needed to be drastically improved - otherwise it was not a job I could build a future around.

Working for TDL

I ended up at my last job as a medical courier at a multinational, multi million pound private medical company called The Doctors Laboratory (TDL). It is a medically-led laboratory, established in 1987 and has become the largest independent provider of clinical laboratory diagnostic services in the UK. A huge part of TDL's work comes from the privatisation and consequential dismantling of the NHS. TDL provides their customers with the laboratory information required for diagnosis and treatment of medical disorders. It is the courier's job to travel to various

client locations and deliver test results or collect specimens and bring them back to the laboratory for testing.

TDL is the UK subsidiary of Australian based Sonic Healthcare. They are the world's third largest provider of pathology/clinical laboratory services and were the first company to do so on a global basis. They employ around 36,000 people and enjoy strong positions in the laboratory markets of eight countries, being the largest private operator in Australia, Germany, Switzerland and the UK; the second largest in Belgium and New Zealand; and the third largest in the USA.

Everyday I call TDL at 8.30am from my house in East London and tell them I am ready to start. As a courier I am working from the moment I make this phone call and jump on my bike. (However, this is something I had to force the company to acknowledge. They believed that despite sending me collections before 9.00am, I was only officially working from that time). As I live fairly centrally, I am often sent the addresses of collections straight away and I start cycling to these places. If there are no immediate jobs I will head to the Liverpool Street area and wait for work to be sent to me. After picking up these first jobs I then cycle to the main laboratories on the Euston Rd to deliver the specimens and await more work. This is the first physical contact I will have with my colleagues and management and will be limited to sporadic passings as we come and go throughout the day.

I work in a fleet of around 150 couriers whose mode of transports ranges from van, motorcycle, pushbikes, walkers, and even railers (people who bring specimens in by train). The courier management consists of a main manager who oversees all operations. There are also several controllers who are responsible for distributing the work amongst the couriers,

as well as responding to client queries. The courier department is somewhat segregated from the rest of the 12 storey building as deliveries are made through the loading bay and access to the rest of the building is limited. However couriers do interact with some of the laboratory staff at the specimen reception where they drop off and collect specimens.

Couriers congregate in the loading bay or on the street outside the building when they are waiting for work. This hub for activity and the congregation around it has been vital in organising the workplace. Couriers usually have quite a nomadic existence which poses difficulties for not only having one on one conversations, but makes it nigh on impossible to discuss things in groups. There is only so much you can say in a chance meeting at a red traffic light before it turns green and you whizz off in different directions! The loading bay and the street outside TDL have been the location that brought together many grievances and plenty of group discussions amongst the couriers.

The courier work is distributed by controllers, through an app or over the phone. If you are not getting on well with a controller, or if you have questioned something they have done wrong, they have the power and authority to give you a hard day by distributing awkward work. For example, giving you deliveries with long distances or making sure you have breaks late in the day. This can lead to sycophantic behaviour as couriers attempt to avoid mistreatment. The way the work is allocated through an app or over the phone distances these controllers from the courier. I believe this can, at times, detach them from callous acts that they may not have done if they were face to face with a courier. At the click of a button they can ruin hours of someone's life. We have managed to move

away from a pay per job model, but when this was in place workers' behaviour was more affected and the chasm between a good and a bad day was even more pronounced. The courier managers themselves are controlled by senior management, often receiving one-way instruction which can be misinformed. Their resentment and frustration is often taken out on the couriers.

Organising at TDL

When I started working for TDL they, like many other courier companies, had adopted an employment model of engaging couriers on sham contracts that asserted they were independent contractors. The reality of this relationship was actually more akin to an employer/employee relationship as couriers were afforded minimal flexibility, punished in the form of wage deductions for not attending work, were fully integrated into the business, and had no say on the rates that were offered for their services. These were the main characteristics that revealed it was a sham relationship. However, there were various other aspects that reinforced that the reality was very different from what TDL claimed. Couriers were treated like employees, but given none of the rights. They were said to be independent contractors, but were neither paid increased rates (that are usual to being self employed) nor given any flexibility as to how they operated. The couriers suffered the worst or both worlds!

This is an employment model that the vast majority of companies within the courier industry use. It never really sat well with me. It was when I became a courier at TDL - a company that was not only making millions per year, but also making a large part of these millions by dismantling the NHS - that I

just could not put up with the poor pay, lack of rights, and sheer injustice anymore.

I tried to resolve small issues on my own. Although I had some relative success, I found myself making little progress with the larger issues such as pay, wage deductions and lack of rights. The next natural course of action was to try and resolve the issues of all the push bikes collectively, as not only were they suffering from the same problems I was, I thought that it would be harder for management to deny a group of us as opposed to just an individual. Despite the issues being raised coming from a larger section of the workforce, I was still met with the same excuses and delay tactics I had come up against before. TDL were not taking our concerns seriously and were easily deflecting the pressure we were putting on them.

After an extremely hot summer week in which we were incredibly understaffed, I approached the manager and explained that I thought it was only fair for couriers to receive a bonus. We were having to work twice as hard to cover the work but due to the reduced workforce the company was actually saving money. The manager nodded and agreed, promising that we would receive a bonus on the next pay run. The pay run came and there was no bonus. The manager apologised and said it would be on the next one. This happened another couple of times and eventually I demanded a meeting with the manager. He agreed to meet me at the end of the day to discuss the issue. I went to his office at the end of the day determined to get the money we had been promised for our hard work and pushed the door to his office open. As the door swung open I was met by an empty office and I realised that he had gone home instead of meeting me. The straw had now officially broken the camel's back!

It was at that moment that I realised these issues were not going to be resolved via the means I was currently using. I decided it was time to call on the help of my union: the IWGB. Until then I had thought that there were so many couriers in London in worse paid, more precarious situations than myself and believed that they deserved more urgent attention. However, having tried various methods to improve my circumstances and being met with the same contemptuous fobbing off that all couriers were, I realised that no level of exploitation was acceptable and it all had to be dealt with urgently.

Along with the other push bikes from TDL, we arranged a meeting with the General Secretary and the Vice President of the IWGB and voted to start a campaign against TDL. The General Secretary sent an email to TDL explaining that the push bikes had decided to unionise and "the chickens were coming home to roost!" It was time to get what was ours from this exploitative company that was making huge amounts of money off the backs of precarious workers like us. The strategy involved continuing to recruit amongst the couriers and push for trade union recognition. At the same time we launched an employment tribunal[3] claim against our bogus employment status. The aim was to pressure the company into giving us the rights we should have been legally entitled to.

The next day, I arrived in the loading bay and with the rest of the couriers. I was met with mixed emotions. Some couriers felt elated that someone was finally standing up to their long term abusers, pushing for justice for the courier fleet. Those who felt like this did not take much convincing to join the union. They were ready to start our fight for recognition and rights. It was not so easy with other couriers. Some felt what I had put into motion could cost them wages or even their jobs. At

first, their fear manifested as animosity towards me. Couriers who had spoken to me everyday since I started at the company turned away when I walked past them or muttered things under their breath. As you could imagine, these couriers were harder to convince to join the union.

Every day felt like I was on the campaign trail. When I climbed off my bike in the loading bay I was met by couriers with questions about their futures. I was constantly reassuring them that we were only asking what we were legally entitled to and that they should not feel scared to demand this. However, through a combination of the precariousness of the job and never having had these rights before, I was always met with firm resistance to my arguments. I heard the same things many times: "you will ruin it for everyone" or "if you don't like it you can go and get a job somewhere else" and a personal favourite: "didn't anyone ever tell you not to bite the hand that feeds you". There were days where I just wanted to forget about it all, accept the exploitation, and just ride my bike. However, I kept at it, the need for justice always spurned me on.

The tribunal case that ran alongside this push for union recognition kept momentum up. Around the time we were hitting the 50% membership threshold needed to gain statutory recognition, TDL had already backed down in court. They offered the four claimants either employee contracts or limb (b) worker contracts.[4] In just under two years we had unionised a workforce, won trade union recognition, and completely changed the way the majority of the fleet were employed by the company. We were the first union to be recognised within the gig economy. Through collective bargaining we won benefits - meaning some of the couriers who had been in the industry for over two decades had paid holiday for the first time. We had set

a benchmark for the gig economy.

Now that we had secured paid holidays and pensions we were able to move onto issues of pay. Many of the couriers at TDL were paid on a piece rate and this could be irregular and unpredictable. This was incredibly unfair. Others were paid on a day rate. While this was more reliable, once you subtracted the costs incurred for doing the job, many actually took home less than the living wage. We continued to recruit members to the union and pushed for a more stable and fair pay structure.

The IWGB and workplace representatives attended meetings with senior management to agree on a new pay proposal. It was not long before it became clear that TDL had entered into the recognition agreement with bad intentions. The meetings were plagued with false promises. There were no signs of them actually wanting to listen to the vast injustices that their current pay system produced. If there was any doubt about their lack of good faith, the CEO David Byrne only attended the first one, excusing himself from all further meetings!

After several of these meaningless meetings, we were forced to continue ramping up the pressure. We organised a huge demonstration outside the TDL's offices in October 2018. Then in December 2018 we staged a protest outside TDL's Christmas party. This was pitched as a party for all TDL staff, yet most of the couriers were not invited. We donned Christmas hats and brought our own trays of mince pies. We met the other staff with a soundsystem blaring out Christmas tunes as they entered the event. As a result of the Christmas Party demo, a small section of long-serving PAYE van drivers[5] received a pay rise of a few thousand pounds that we had been pushing for.

In April 2019, the IWGB officially entered into dispute with TDL and our members were balloted for strike action. In May

2019, over eighty couriers took part in two days of strike action outside TDL's central London 12 storey building. The first day saw the roads around TDL full of parked, revving motorbikes emblazoned with IWGB flags and the sounds of samba music from a live band. At one point the couriers, supporters, and the samba band stormed the loading bay and occupied it, before spilling back onto the street for a rally. Day two involved the couriers mounting their vehicles and driving in convoy protest to the Harley Street area.[6] Many of TDL's clients are located in the densely populated area and the high paying clients were the perfect target. Making them aware of TDL's exploitation, especially in the way we would do it, could have caused incredible embarrassment for the company.

After a hugely successful two days of strike action, we planned a further day. Just before this day of action, TDL requested we join them for further negotiations. After two days of negotiating, a deal was agreed and the fleet received improved pay and conditions. The couriers had come together and forced the company to give them what they deserved.

Covid-19 as a medical courier

As the Covid-19 pandemic spread to the UK, we started to see more and more Covid-19 specimens in yellow bags being collected by couriers for testing. There was little warning or preparation from TDL, despite the havok we had seen Covid-19 cause in China and then Italy.

The lockdown announcement saw the streets of London reduced to a ghost town. Piccadilly Circus, Trafalgar Square, Covent Garden all empty except for other key workers. The usually bustling streets of Soho were reduced to just homeless

people and delivery couriers. The homeless people begging for money with their hands, and the delivery couriers begging through an app.

On one day I rode down Tottenham Court at around midday. Usually the street would be littered with people heading out to buy their lunches, but on this day it was only me. You could hear someone cough from a mile away. The only members of the public I saw were in the long queues outside supermarkets. I felt very overwhelmed at times working during this period and seeing central London like this: to see a deadly virus transform one of the busiest cities in the world so dramatically was an emotional sight. Every day was spent battling against a sense of fear of being out on the streets while so many were safely indoors. I felt a sense of pride in doing the important job of collecting Covid-19 specimens from hospital wards, drive-in testing points, and care homes. There were a few times that I cried riding down an empty street as the emotions became too much.

TDL did very little to support the couriers during this time. We were forced to demand better protection at work. After being approached by many anxious couriers, I wrote to the CEO of TDL listing the various fears people had. These included both hand sanitiser and other basic PPE arriving late and in sparse amounts. Couriers were left feeling scared and unprotected as the risks of doing an already extremely high risk job increased daily. I put forward what I believed were very reasonable solutions. We askedTDL to rectify this immediately and do what they could to make couriers feel safe at work.

The self-employed couriers were only offered £95 per week statutory sick pay if they were forced to self isolate due to showing symptoms. Instead of facilitating the couriers to make

the correct decision of self-isolating if showing symptoms, TDL put this burden on the couriers who, in some cases, would find it incredibly hard to make this decision. We demanded full pay for self-isolation to make sure this was not a privilege granted only to those who could afford it.

As couriers collecting Covid-19 specimens we were travelling into places that not only contained people infected with the virus, but also into places in which those considered high risk resided. It was not unusual to collect Covid-19 specimens from a hospital in the morning, then in the afternoon collect other specimens from a care home or a fertility clinic. It was possible that couriers could become super spreaders of the virus. It was therefore incredibly important that we were not infected. For this reason, we demanded that couriers were regularly tested to guarantee we were not spreading it amongst the public.

Government guidance had outlined people with certain underlying health conditions and higher age groups as high risk if infected, recommending the extreme steps of staying at home for three months. We believed that due to the increased chance of infection doing the job, it was not safe for some couriers to continue working. These couriers were either very close to the high risk age group, had underlying health conditions, or lived with people who might be considered high risk. We believed it was dangerous for them to be collecting Covid-19 specimens. We demanded that these people were offered full pay to remain off work while the job was too dangerous to do.

I sent the letter to the CEO David Byrne and received a response saying no to every single one of my requests. In response to the regular testing, he said that "regular testing is of no value." I found this astounding coming from a company whose vast wealth was built on the value of regular testing.

This response in particular epitomised the utter resentment the company had towards us as couriers. They preferred to undermine the claims of their own business, rather than give in to the very reasonable requests of couriers carrying Covid-19 during a pandemic. David Byrne ended the letter asking that "we pull together" during this time. If anything, we had never been further apart as the couriers continued to provide a vital service under increased risk on the streets of London while the CEO sent orders from the comfort of his house.

Throughout the pandemic I was incredibly proud of the service I was providing and the people I worked alongside and the key workers I came into contact with every day. However, I was ashamed of the company I worked for. Despite everything we had achieved at TDL, the lack of respect shown towards the couriers during the pandemic showed just how much resentment the company felt towards us for forcing them to give us what was legally ours. There was still plenty of work to be done at TDL and the rest of the industry to rebalance the power between the employer and the workers.

The road I have travelled as a courier to find myself where I am in now is one that has been signposted by exploitation. I became a courier with the intention of doing a job that I thought suited my needs, however I quickly became aware of the appalling pay and conditions that are rife in the industry. I had little knowledge of trade unions when I started out but the mass mistreatment of couriers led me to the IWGB. As part of a community of riders who were fighting for better conditions I became aware of what can be achieved through collective action. Having felt like I was struggling alone for so long, it was incredible to be part of a group of couriers who were not tolerating exploitative conditions any more. Beyond

the couriers branch, I became part of a union that was fighting back in an array of industries and I was inspired by the unity of workers from cleaners to gamesworkers, from security guards to foster carers. Now my eyes have been opened to this way of organising and a collective way of trying to make a difference to so many, there has been no turning back. It was a lonely road that led me to the union, but now I have found it, there is no other way of travelling but in large numbers of people with the same goal: change!

Cycling in the city

Alice Barker

Food delivery couriers are now a ubiquitous part of any city in the UK, including Edinburgh, Scotland's hilly, cobbled, capital. Cycling here can be a challenge for the most experienced rider, particularly on the rainy, windy days we are accustomed to on the east coast. But it's also one of the most beautiful places to work in, from the medieval Old Town with the steep volcanic spine of the Royal Mile running between the Castle and Holyrood Palace, contrasting with the grand sweeping Georgian streets of the New Town - together they form a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Even in winter, when it gets dark by 3.30 PM and the temperature often drops below zero degrees, the streets become empty and you have the city to yourself.

The often young and male couriers are highly visible due to their turquoise jackets and large cube boxes bouncing around in the wind and over potholes. Many workers sign-up to the job looking for part-time and flexible work, something to do in between university assignments and over the weekends. Adverts on Gumtree promise: "earn up to £16 per hour, completely flexible, be your own boss!". There are indeed couriers who will experience this sort of pay. They are probably fit and healthy,

own a decent bike and work a few evenings to make some extra income on top of student loans. This is certainly the image companies like Deliveroo and UberEats want you to think of. But it conceals a more complicated, varied picture of who riders are, their background and motivation.

Despite the variety of reasons people work for these platforms, there is often a shared sense of precarity. The job hooks you in with promises of good pay, flexibility, and freedom but ultimately you are at the whim of the companies. Pay fluctuates outside your control, there is a highly sophisticated algorithm that dictates who gets orders, and apps are designed to gamify each task - oh don't forget that there's no access to basic working rights! The platforms provide us with opportunities to "earn", not work. Riders get sucked into this, and what is intended to be a short-term side-job becomes a regular part of life. Workers keep searching for those elusive days when they make great fees, dismissing all those quiet winter months when there are no jobs, long unpaid waiting times in restaurants, even customers who pretend you didn't deliver (risking your job) just to get a free meal. All for £16 an hour, right?!

How I became a courier

I've been working as a bike courier since 2016, beginning with Deliveroo but moving on to other companies as they came to Edinburgh, including UberEats, City Sprint, We Bringg, Beelivery, Just Eat, to name a few. The way I started was similar to many. I was finishing up my undergraduate studies and was looking for work over the summer before I started a part-funded Masters program in September.

The decent wage and promise of flexible working drew me

in, both, because those sound good, but also because it wasn't another minimum wage bar job. This is an important element of the gig economy which I think is often overlooked: even if it is unpredictable and precarious, there's the potential to earn more than the £8.71 you receive for other kinds of busy, stressful work. Often you're micromanaged by senior staff and following a schedule which changes every week. You have little responsibility or sense of valued contribution, all to put profits in someone else's pocket. I remember being told so many times: "if you're leaning, you should be cleaning!" while I was behind the bar. All of that combined with the emotional labour to keep smiling however I felt, deflecting questions about my personal life or appearance from customers... This has left me in no hurry to go back to hospitality work if I can help it.

I'm grateful to Notes from Below for giving me this opportunity to share my thoughts on my experiences of working within the gig economy. It's also has given me a chance to reflect and go over things which have happened. I have chosen to write mainly about my experiences with UberEats, but I also include information and thoughts on Deliveroo and others. After all, I see my courier work being a composite thing, as I tend to chop and change or work multiple apps at once, rather than having multiple jobs. Of course, each company has its differences as well as similarities. This piece uses the worker's inquiry method. It is 'from below', as it involves me as a worker, leading the production of knowledge. It begins with a brief background of Uber Eats, before moving on to discuss the technical, social, and then political dimensions of the work.

Background to UberEats

UberEats launched in Edinburgh in April 2017. It is currently available in over 250 cities and is a key player in the food delivery scene, alongside Deliveroo and Just Eat. It is hard to assess the true scale of UberEats presence, including numbers of orders by customers and how many couriers there are. Data by Edinburgh City Council gives figures for those who are self-employed but there is no breakdown of this data further to give any indication how many are in traditional self-employed roles, such as plumbers or hairdressers, and those working in the gig economy. In lots of ways, this lack of data contrasts with the high visibility of riders on the road with their delivery cubes. Even then it is impossible to tell who is working for which company, as many multi-app at the same time. Wearing a Deliveroo jacket and using an UberEats bag is not uncommon as we no longer have to work exclusively for one company at a time, and they can't require us to wear a set uniform.

The technical details of the work

An issue across the gig economy is the arrangement where we are classed as "self-employed subcontractors." Platforms like UberEats claim that couriers run their own "micro-business" and that the companies, therefore, do not have the legal obligations they would if we were employed. This includes the minimum wage, holiday or sick pay, pension and National Insurance contributions, and protection from unfair dismissal. For some, these might be a cost they are willing to pay, but I wonder how this will manifest itself in the future. For example, what happens when people reach retirement age and have many

gaps in their contributions? On the other hand, considering consequences so far ahead is outweighed by the need to survive and make ends meet in the here and now. It is concerning that this is the reality for so many people living and working in one of the richest and most developed countries in Western Europe. The uncertainty of retirement and future of work is of course not restricted to couriers and many young people today are facing this changing world of employment.

A consequence of being a "freelancer" is that work becomes a "free-for-all." UberEats works on a free login basis, meaning that you can access the app any time during opening hours, and from any point in the city. This goes for every courier, regardless of how high the demand is. This is the flexibility which UberEats (and Deliveroo) cite as being important for couriers. However, it is only part of the story and rather than shifts, couriers are managed in more subtle ways, including where and when they might work. We also do not control many aspects of the job, except for whether we work or not. One way that couriers are managed is by "boosts." These are in different areas of the city, displayed onto the app's map. Each one has a "boost" that multiplies the "base fare" which fluctuates according to demand. Usually, this is by the time and day – for example, a higher boost might be in the city centre on Friday dinner time – but it can change over holidays or other events. This is a covert way in which UberEats can try to distribute couriers without having set areas or shifts to work in. Couriers are incentivised to go to the higher boost zones, where UberEats wants to have a steady supply of couriers to meet demand. However, there is no obligation to accept orders, and likewise, UberEats do not guarantee you will receive any. This can mean waiting in a higher boost area and receiving few

orders if there are more couriers than the demand requires.

Speaking of waiting times - they are not paid. Whether that is waiting to receive an order or once inside a restaurant and the food is not ready yet, UberEats and Deliveroo do not count this as working time. During the lockdown, waiting while logged on but not receiving any orders was a big problem, especially for cyclists as the algorithm prioritises motorised vehicles. As we are only paid per delivery, this meant earning very little money. Sometimes I have been waiting outside a restaurant getting nothing but watching the same few moped drivers come and go multiple times. During the end of March, I was logged in for over 60 hours just to make £100. This was so frustrating and depressing. I was doing all I could yet felt utterly powerless. The companies had no interest in supporting us, yet pushed for us to be considered "key workers" so we could still log on and move orders around the city.

Another strange feature of lockdown was that UberEats claimed they would pay couriers who became ill with Covid-19 or had to self isolate but would not have given sick pay for any other illness which prevented them working. There are many other occasions where UberEats made public promises that did not materialise. For example, PPE (Personal Protective Equipment) was purported to have been given to all couriers, yet many found their order did not arrive for over a month, and when it did, the package included a couple of disposable masks and a small bottle of hand sanitiser. So much for being key workers...

When a problem arises, there are a limited number of ways to access support. These have reduced over time. When I first started there was an office where we went to sign up, to "onboard" (their term for hiring), pick up equipment, or

generally ask questions. At first, this was in a temporary location, giving it a transitory sense like the companies were not even sure themselves how long they would stay in a city and could leave any minute. Later, Uber moved to a permanent office, but it wasn't very accessible. It was only open two days a week for a few hours and often you would not be seen without an appointment. The staff were focused on signing up restaurants, couriers were a second thought. Although they did order food quite often! We were so numerous we were regarded as disposable, however long or hard we had worked. In theory, there is a phone line you can call with an issue while on an order, but it often doesn't connect. We are now directed to use in-app help or email, which has limited help too, as it is either automated replies or someone with a script they must stick to. It is so frustrating to get an automated reply to a concern you have got or a genuine problem on the road. Everyone has a story of someone being asked "Can you still deliver the food?", after reporting a crash – a bleak reminder of UberEats priorities.

Tying in closely with hard to access support is the issue of being "terminated" and account suspensions. As we are "self-employed", we don't have a right to fair dismissals and UberEats aren't obliged to give us any evidence to support their reason for closing an account. Reasons range from specific things like allowing someone to substitute using your account (without prior approval) to the vague "unusual patterns in deliveries." Once again, the power balance is skewed against the courier, with the word of a restaurant or customer against you being almost impossible to counter. It is not because these claims are always hard to evidence, it is about the lack of will to engage and listen to the courier. If a restaurant manager decides they don't like you, they can flag your account on the

system. This can mean having your account suspended, either for a few days or forever. Writing to Uber support is a thankless task. This difficulty with communication is one of the most frustrating parts of doing this job. All platforms use this tactic of stonewalling you until you give up and go away.

The withdrawal of support could be another way that the company deliberately distances itself from couriers and responsibilities. Call centres are outsourced to other countries, and face to face contact is now impossible to receive in the UK. It also follows a trend where companies are using the pandemic to cut budgets and restructure, knowing this can happen without the same level of scrutiny as in normal times. For example, "boosts" are now the lowest I have ever seen, making our earnings drop despite doing exactly the same job. However, brief moments serve as reminders that this huge company still exists in a world which is inherently connected, and in unpredictable ways. For example, at the start of lockdown UberEats suddenly became unavailable for hours, with no explanation. It turned out that the Philippines (where the call centre work has been outsourced to) had gone into emergency lockdown, impacting couriers as far away as here in Edinburgh.

A community of couriers

Edinburgh has a strong hospitality and service industry, with many people working in cafes, shops, restaurants and pubs. Tourism is a vital part of the economy, with the Edinburgh Fringe and International Festival (amongst others) bringing huge numbers of visitors to the city every August. There are four universities and a college with several campuses around the city - all prime sources of both customers and riders. In

recent years, Edinburgh has become an important financial centre in the UK outside of London and emerging sectors such as biotech, AI, and data sciences are growing areas of research and employment. Living costs are relatively high and it is one of the most expensive cities in the UK – except for London, of course.

Despite the expense, many people are drawn to work or study in Edinburgh, particularly from Europe, and Spanish or Polish are often heard as you go about town. UberEats is no exception, with the workforce including a wide range of nationalities. Amongst my colleagues, Deliveroo is made up of more Western European nationalities, like Spain, France and Italy, perhaps having moved here to study. In contrast, UberEats drivers are often from Eastern Europe, including Poland, Bulgaria, and Romania. Almost all drivers (rather than cyclists) are male and older, perhaps with a family, and work full time. While I am waiting in restaurants for an order to be ready, I keep myself to myself and don't often engage in conversation with other riders or drivers. Differences in culture, background and age make it harder to connect socially. Many of the men do speak with each other and there is a clear feeling of comradery between them. This is a big change to when I did Deliveroo full time, where I would frequently see friends and colleagues around and catch up while waiting.

Sometimes I will keep getting orders within an area outside the city centre, which can mean seeing less familiar faces while working. Combined with the reduced interaction while waiting, this can make the job quite isolating and lonely. The impact of this work on mental health is an important topic for me – and often not talked about. I have experienced poor mental health since my early teens and I know that bike courier work

has both helped me deal with it, as well as making it worse. Do I continue taking jobs long past when I meant to go home, feeling anxious because I need to work while it is busy (and there is no guarantee how long that lasts)? Should I meet with a friend who is only free on Friday evening and miss a potentially busy dinner run? Friends and colleagues that I see on the road frequently talk about how much money they have made that day. Asking "you been busy?" is a common opening question. On a good day, people happily show you their phone screen with the total deliveries done, other times you see guys putting on a show of bravado, saying how much they made yesterday so it does not matter about today, they are sure it will pick up for them later anyway. I find this ritual uncomfortable and anxiety-provoking. Imposter syndrome comes up, am I going to be disregarded for not being strong or fast like my male colleagues? I know I have gained a lot of experience since I started this job. I am as agile and determined as any of the guys, but insecurity is still there for me and the anxiety of precarious work makes those moments of individual competitiveness find a weak point in my self-confidence.

Getting organised

I first became involved in unions soon after I started doing Deliveroo work. Although I had not had any experience with them before, I was lucky to meet a couple of friends who were union members and activists, involved in campaigns such as the Living Rent and Fair Fringe campaigns. We joined up with a project run by Unite called Better Than Zero (BTZ). They work with young people on zero-hour contracts in the hospitality sector. BTZ are keen to get involved but there was a feeling that

established big "business" unions do not know what to make of us as couriers and are not sure whether they can include us within their organisation.

Our initial organising was inspiring and looking back I am impressed at the different things we did together. The main actions were a letter to Deliveroo's Managing Director, outlining our grievances as riders in Edinburgh, and a petition calling for public support of our efforts to hold Deliveroo to account. The grievances we raised were identified through an online survey we conducted amongst riders. Back then, Deliveroo was still a relatively new company and most riders were in touch and connected on WhatsApp groups. Three of us wrote up the survey using the group chats as a basis to form questions, with space for people to add their comments. This was positive in a few ways. Firstly, it gave evidence of our claims. This was important as Deliveroo would often say their data represented drivers' views. Secondly, it brought riders together - not only in understanding our shared problems but also to take tangible action to try and remedy these. Deliveroo responded to our letter, dismissing everything we had said and parroting their usual script about how x% of riders are making £x amount and enjoy the flexibility the job gives.

Whilst it was incredibly frustrating, getting Deliveroo to respond was positive. Today Deliveroo rarely engages with riders. Silence is a powerful way of shutting down debate and dispersing anger. Our petition gained around 3000 public signatures, including high profile leaders such as Jeremy Corbyn and Nicola Sturgeon. Unfortunately following the flat response to our letter, momentum started to dwindle in Edinburgh, and our organising struggled to get going again. This was compounded by losing the other two in the initial group, who moved away

or took up other jobs. The transient nature of much of the courier workforce is something which makes organising hard and maintaining this quite a challenge.

After this first bit of organising, by mid-2017, I was working full time. After experiencing some mental health issues myself, I took a little time out to visit a friend in France and ended up travelling around the country for several months. Initially, this was to take a break from work, but I soon found myself involved with a self-organised group of riders in Lyon. They were very motivated and engaged with the campaign, which was pushing back on many changes we had already begun to see in the UK, such as changing from PPH (pay per hour) to PPD (pay per drop). I learned a lot from seeing how the group interacted with each other and some of the creative ideas they had for direct action! For a few weeks in August, different events were planned such as boycotting certain restaurants, doing press interviews, putting up posters in busy areas, and holding a protest outside Deliveroo's main office, all trying to force them to engage in dialogue. These actions culminated in a final evening of action: a coordinated mass "fall over." Riders called Deliveroo support to say, unfortunately, they had been in an accident and could no longer deliver the food, which was then given to homeless people. Customers were informed of this action a week prior and only the larger restaurants were targeted. Following this, a critical mass of riders came together to form a "flying picket." Making lots of noise and holding banners we cycled throughout the busy city centre, Lyon's famous restaurant district where many tables are set out on the street. Riders joined as we made our way around the area. We were not hopeful that the changes would be reversed, but these riders were not going to go out without a bang either.

Upon returning to Scotland, I found my contract had changed too. I was no longer earning £6 per hour (plus £1 per order), but now only a flat £4.25 per order. At first, this felt wrong and troubled me – what if I got no orders? – but I realised I was earning more, and it was more motivating to catch those drops. Now if things had remained stable, we might have continued business as usual. It was by no means perfect, but the money was good. Jobs were regular and there was a community of friends all on the roads together. But of course, things are rarely that simple. More changes were introduced: now fees were calculated by distance, over-hiring began again, and the zone areas were dropped. Suddenly people were being offered long orders to be picked up across town for fees which were becoming a joke. A minimum of £3.90 was introduced but this soon became the average.

Soon after, a new rider told me about a group called the Couriers Network that was forming branches across the UK. They were being supported by the IWW. I had lost my job at Deliveroo, and while I didn't have much hope that I would ever get it back, I was interested in having another go at organising. The idea behind the Couriers Network was that riders would come together to self-organise, and be supported by their local IWW branch. The Network would be free to join but participants were encouraged to join the IWW union. Cities would be autonomous but connected, allowing space for specific local issues to be addressed, but not isolated as many problems were unfortunately shared. Our first meeting was well attended, with over 40 people turning up! Much to the horror of the national coffee chain, I was working for at the time, where we decided to meet. I was excited to help get something going but I also didn't exactly know what that would involve. Similar

to other meetings, a big challenge we found was how to move meetings towards action, or at least discussing what we could do.

I have a lot of respect for IWW and it's members, all of whom are volunteers and I do believe they are pushing for change. However, we encountered a lot of challenges organising as a Couriers Network. There were a lot of pressures on people's time, a lack of resources, and a diverse range of views on what the main problems and solutions were. The creation and ambitions of the Courier Networks were great, but it was a much bigger challenge to create and support this in real life. There was also a bit of a separation I was experiencing, between my colleagues and friends (some were members of the Couriers Network, some were not), and the friends and colleagues I had in the union. In some ways, I felt like my role was to negotiate between the two and try to explain each side to the other.

In October 2018 there were protests by restaurant workers and couriers, supported by the network. In Edinburgh, we held a protest outside of McDonalds but it was mainly IWW branch members rather than riders. Later that month I went to a large international meeting of riders held in Brussels. Many groups of riders came, some supported by trade unions, others had formed independent associations. There were riders from across Europe, including France, Spain, Germany, Austria, Finland, Norway, Italy and the UK. It was inspiring being with a broad range of voices, all engaged and motivated to push for change. This meeting launched the Transnational Federation of Couriers. As it was an initial meeting and the first of its kind, much of the time was spent understanding the differences between each country and discussing what action had been tried. Nevertheless, it was a positive experience and while I don't feel

like there is much political engagement back in Scotland it is good to hear what else is going on further afield.

We tried to restart the Courier Network a few times in 2019. It was hard to remain motivated and enthusiastic when we were quite isolated in Edinburgh. Other cities were struggling too. In the summer I visited London and took part in some IWW organised protests outside of Deliveroo Editions kitchens, mainly attended by non-courier branch members and friends. I appreciated how different working and organising within a huge city like London is. Later in the year, I decided to join the IWGB (the Independent Workers Union of Great Britain). I had not joined so far, as they had focused traditionally on Deliveroo riders in London, but the union is expanding and starting to have a presence across the UK – including Scotland! I was impressed with the IWGB: group chats for each company, which are (mostly) moderated, caseworkers, an office with resources and regular meetings. As I have returned to university to try and (finally) finish my Masters, I am unable to commit a lot of time but keep in touch and continue working with UberEats and Just Eat.

As 2020 started, we all know what happened: the UK was turned upside down with Covid-19 and suddenly we were in a national lockdown. Much of IWGB's work continued, but now online. Whilst everyone has experienced the pitfalls of Zoom meetings, they are still useful and I gained a lot socially and mentally from being part of this community during the lockdown. Work is very difficult, no protection from companies and wages plummet to the worst they have been. Sadly, this experience is still not uniting riders in Edinburgh and the community is quite dispersed. Some people are doing well, running multiple apps (and accounts) at once, they may be

living with their parents or are on furlough from other jobs. Some are really struggling, with long empty days hanging around waiting for an order to come in. Much has changed during my time as a courier, but it is now clear that the idea we are "all in this together" was a myth. The platforms still refuse to communicate or support workers through Covid-19.

At the periphery of journalism

Sam Dee

To be a news subeditor is to mark and remake others' work. Subs assure the quality and accuracy of news stories. They fashion the copy filed by journalists into clear-cut prose and pictures that grab a reader's attention, while protecting publications from lawsuits and disrepute. The subeditor is there to help the mass reader, the reader who doesn't trust a publication. Reporters and editors, however, make up the face of a publication. The work is under their name, but its subtext is the subeditor's.

I came to be a subeditor at a weekly financial trade magazine, because I was nearly broke after finishing a graduate program and needed to quickly find a job to make rent. I had worked in book publishing, but I didn't want to shepherd manuscripts for grumpy mathematicians anymore. I had never heard the term "subeditor" before I came to the UK, but it seemed similar at first to the copyeditors I knew back in the US.

Rather than follow a rigid list of rules, subeditors use judgment and meticulous attention to decide when and how to follow convention. Cleaning copy, however, is a thankless task.[7] But why? I'm fascinated with how little books or magazines are understood as resulting from systems of material production.

Tiny letters in ink or light somehow obscure all of that.

I conducted this worker's inquiry to show that, despite the glamor of the written word, copy is not abstract. It is a material subject to conditions of labor exploitation like other commodities. Workers produce copy. Copy is woven and tailored. It is cut into shape, flowed into a layout, kicked down or run up in paragraphs. Quotes are pulled and caps are dropped, with neat lines of copy hugging their contours. This vocabulary remains from lead or paste-up composition, which made these metaphors much more literal. But the symbols writers manipulate are still material, even if they are stored digitally.

In starting this project, I was wary of the dangers in early workers' inquiry, where researchers made undue generalizations about working conditions in the name of a better argument.[8] To that end, I interviewed several current and former subeditors who are colleagues or friends to ask about their experience of the role as well. I want to thank all of them for taking the time to talk with me about this article. Too many textual workers, particularly as news and publishing become professionalised with degree programs and certificates, do not view themselves as workers. By discussing my invisible production work at a financial magazine, I hope to overthrow that idea.

Sitting with the subs

The subeditors where I worked were a small group. There were five of us when I started, and six later on. Almost all of us had university degrees, but most of us hadn't worked as reporters before, which is unusual for subs. Having reporting experience

gives subs familiarity with the newsroom, but it also gives them credibility. One of my interviewees stressed that trust was the main resource of a sub. If you point out people's errors regularly, they'll bristle unless they trust your judgment and know you mean well. The quick turnover of subs also stood out when I first interviewed for the job. All but one of the subeditors had worked at the company for less than two years. When I joined, half of us had been there for less than a year.

In addition to an interview, subeditors have to take an editing test. Our hiring manager said an aced test was worth more than listed experience. We were selected for our skill with language, not our interest in the subject matter. Financial news companies benefit from newsworkers not understanding the underlying mechanisms of those services *too* well. I was also asked, pointedly, if I ever wanted to become a writer; it was made clear to me that I should not expect writing opportunities from the role (how wrong they were).

Half of us were not UK citizens, so our position was somewhat precarious and depended on Brexit negotiations and visa status. In comparison, the magazine editorial staff I worked with were almost all English. As a foreigner, I often didn't have the background knowledge necessary to check journalists' writing. Almost all of the editorial and subediting staff were native English speakers. In publication hiring, an unfair bias is often given to native speakers. Being able to judge dialects of English and code switch for different publications was key to our work, as was being able to refer to each other's judgment.

The subeditors were nomadic within the company. They once were part of editorial, with the reporters and editors; they shared a manager with the designers when I joined; and they answered to the head of advertorial content when I left. We

were divided into pairs responsible for a single magazine, both the print issue and its website, and senior subeditors would divvy up extra editing work. This work sharing and isolation from other teams made the subs a close-knit group. We had each others' backs.

A pressing week

Our press week, the basic unit of time for us, began as soon as the last press day of the previous issue had ended and that issue's last pages had gone to the printers. The production department would figure out with sales how many ads we had that week. If sales couldn't sell enough spots, we wouldn't have an issue. Sales also had priority for where ads were placed, including pairings. They would place ads that needed to be on the same page or spread as an article with a certain topic, like "investment" or "real assets". Suddenly the editors would have to fulfil the pairing by finding an article that discussed "real assets".

Working around pages reserved for ads, we and the assigning editors would come up with a flatplan—a list of what articles would appear on what pages, with what word counts. The subeditors and editors would juggle reporters' assignments, current events, and the columns and sections of the magazine, until we had a preliminary placement. This placement also let production divide the magazine into three press days: the middle portion of the magazine went first, then several pairs of pages (spreads) outside of that, and finally the pages at the very beginning and end of the magazine, which usually contained the most newsy stories.

Between when we had a flatplan and when pages first went to

the printer, we usually had one or maybe two days. As reporters filed copy, an editor would edit and pass it to us, the subeditors. We would divide those articles among ourselves, although we would both read each article if we could. As we read a story, we corrected grammatical and spelling errors and edited for brevity and to avoid repetition. We also factchecked data and names and looked for any glaring structural problems with the piece (like if it sounded too much like a promotional article, one of the more common problems we found). Finally, we would write a headline and standfirst and source pictures to make the most appealing, informative layout.

Once a page was subbed, we layed the text out in Adobe InDesign using templates. We would typeset the article so the headline, standfirst and subheadings were all in the correct font and make typographical tweaks so the article fit the allotted space. A layed out page would be printed or, after the pandemic, made into a PDF and sent to an editor for checking. Any changes they suggested we would key into the InDesign file. The designer would make a final PDF for us to proofread and then they would send the page to the printers. Once all the day's pages were done, so were we. On a busy press day, we would complete more than ten pages. On a slow day, less than four. The last task of a press week would be to generate an online version of each article, which an editor would put on our site.

What I described above is the ideal. If the interview for a news page didn't come in, breaking news happened that day or if the editors had forgotten something that needed to go into the week's magazine (which happened often), we scrambled to find something, anything, to go on the blank pages.

When I started, the editors wrote their edits without standard proofreading marks and would ask us to extensively rework

headlines, standfirsts and pictures. Even though we did not report to them, the editors' closer connection to the company's executives meant they could claim to be held responsible if we *didn't* make a change. Copy hardens into place. The closer to print it is, the less you can or should change it. As subeditors, we had to stet (veto) changes likely to introduce errors or that were unnecessary. We couldn't always. These discussions were often negotiations—how to fit something into too small a space or keep it consistent with the pages that went yesterday.

For the site, the speed of online publishing sometimes left us out of the loop as journalists raced to break news. Stories would go up with typos or inconsistencies, and we would have to fix them after the fact. At one point, I altered a headline to remove an excessive detail about the suicide of a fund manager. I received a barrage of emails from editors and reporters complaining that I had made that change, because the new headline divided their reader analytics. In the interest of "analysing engagement", I was to "consult with editorial" before doing my job.

It was expected that we stay as late as necessary until pages went to press, although we would try to come in late the next day to compensate, when we could. This happened on most press days. I can't emphasise enough how stressful and disorienting they usually were. I would finish some days and realize that I'd needed to go to the bathroom for hours but felt like I hadn't the time to spare.

The news company and its structure

While the company I worked within bills itself as a source of news and "insights" for financial workers, it relies on advertising and data brokering (as many media companies do). The main legal company is registered as a periodicals publisher and "Other information service activities not elsewhere classified". The company is partially owned by its executive officers, Thomson Reuters, the newswire service, as well as a hedge fund research group and an offshore fund manager.

Most of the executives helped found the company, which resulted in both a relatively horizontal structure and one prone to sudden changes depending on those executives' convictions and whims.[9] It also meant the company was pockmarked with nepotism. If there was a young person in a position of authority, we would try to figure out if they were the child or cousin of an executive or someone in government. It was usually a good guess.

All the magazines were free to subscribe—they were paid for by ad spots and advertorials (articles written by advertisers, disguised to look like articles written by our journalists). Each of the five to ten ads in our weekly magazine would make somewhere between £1,000 and £2,500, and a "cover wrap" would make over £10,000. From public disclosure documents, I learned that each of the company's 22 administrators earned, on average, £168,900 in 2018 in salary alone: the highest salary among those was £571,200. The company made a profit of £4,921,500 that year. In 2019 to 2020, my yearly salary was £26,000.

While the job listing described a trade news publisher, the company had other ways to make money. Its data collection

service would collect data on how registered users read and clicked through our sites, which would then be repackaged and sold as a "precision" tool for advertisers to address our readers, or subsets of our readers by occupation, stories read, areas of interest, etc.

The company also ran conferences that "delegates" from financial companies would attend, where they would be fed and entertained. In exchange, they would attend "master classes" where companies who had paid for the conference would give an hour-long spiel advertising their offering. The money made from these events exceeded all those generated by publishing advertising; they made up over half the company's revenue.

When my application was accepted, the contract had some eyebrow-raising clauses. One indefinitely waived the Working Time Regulations act of 1998, which gives workers the right to work no more than 48 hours a week. I was able to remove it, but most of my coworkers waived that right when they were hired. There were also clauses forbidding or restricting freelance work. I knew coworkers who freelanced or pushed the boundaries of those contracts. Still, the company could enforce compliance as and when it wanted.

With the Covid-19 outbreak, the company followed UK guidance to a tee, so we stayed working in the office as long as was allowed. Several employees became sick shortly after the office closed, suggesting they had been infectious at the workplace. We started receiving a weekly email from the CEO about the company's state to reassure people. Meanwhile, most events employees were furloughed.

People were confused and fatigued all the time as we switched to working from home. Videocall and chat software also introduced ways to keep track of workers. Our magazine editor

instituted a daily videocall at 9:00 am sharp so they could catch up with all the journalists. These would often run almost an hour long. Advertisers dropped their ad spots, so we started to run less frequent print issues. This changed how we published articles—they are now often online-first and then reprinted (mostly unchanged) in a magazine two weeks later. The chief executive suspended his pay, but not for any of the rest of management. All pay raises were frozen for the year.

History of the subeditor

Here I want to briefly describe the history of the subeditor to explain how we wrote the most-read parts of the magazine—headlines and standfirsts—but were also often overwritten. As UK news periodicals developed in the 19th century, the distinction between printers, writers, and editors began to grow. While printers and reporters were more traditionally working class, editors often came from the middle class. The editor is, in essence, a manager of writers. The subeditor (and copyeditor in the US) arose as an assistant to managing editors or night editors.

Every day newspapers received reams of submissions from news wires and correspondents for the next edition of the paper. The subeditor sorted through that material, cut whatever wasn't worth printing, and baptised it with a snappy headline. They determined what was worthy of printing and at what length. Because writers then were often were paid by the word, the subeditors' remit, of cutting and cajoling copy to fit a layout, gave them authority.[10]

Over time, the news industry grew and industrialised. The capitalist management of serial publication changed writers

from the producers of a physical object (the book or newspaper) to that of the "commodity text", which is both alienating to its writer and marketable.[11] Newsworkers also unionised slower than printers and compositors, so they had less opportunity to dictate the division of labor. Copyeditors and subeditors developed into a separate group, the copy desk, and being detached from editorial management reduced the status of copyeditors. Copyeditors and subeditors were transformed from a class of managers to one of laborers.[12] To this day, editorial hierarchy gives status to those furthest from production (assigning editors) over those closest to print production (subeditors or production editors).[13]

The 1986 Wapping dispute at Rupert Murdoch's News International papers was an example of this hierarchy playing out in the UK. The workers who made the lead-type compositions then were type compositors or "comps". They were organised by the National Graphic Association and the Society of Graphical and Allied Trades unions. With each news page, a "stone sub" would go to the comps. They would work together on layouts over metal tables—printers' stones—with a sub on one side, a comp on the other. The subs weren't allowed to touch any of the lead.[14]

In Wapping, Rupert Murdoch secretly built up staff for phototypesetting, a new production process that would bypass the comps. When they went on strike, he fired all of them.[15] News management deskilled production work, which allowed them to place workers with less experience and ability to bargain for themselves. Some of the ideas for this inquiry came to me when I realized that a coworker had, in essence, scabbed against the printers' unions early in his career.

Now news organisations are cutting copyeditors and sube-

ditors from their newsrooms, as well as public editors and ombudsmen—all part of a system of editorial self-regulation. In academic publishing, copy editors have already mostly been outsourced.[16] Even though subeditors are considered journalists and can get membership in the National Union of Journalists (as I did), their roles are more at risk of being outsourced or replaced.

Resistance and working identity

There are many resistance tactics that office workers share, but there are two particularly open to subeditors: wasted time and lack of oversight. For the first, the uncertainty of how a press week will play out actually opens up free time for subeditors. If there's no copy to edit or layout, there's little the company can ask you to do. And because we are often on call for copy to arrive means that we can't be too immersed in some random project. This and the fact that subediting work is often shift-based mean subeditors can often work on personal projects, freelance, or just do other things during company hours, reclaiming some of that time. This opportunity became more pronounced during the pandemic.[17]

This time could indicate the subeditor as belonging to the class of what anthropologist David Graeber calls "bullshit jobs", makework jobs society could do without.[18] I think, however, editorial work has always had an uneven cadence. My hours were fairly regular, but an oral history example from 1974 shows how that unevenness gives power to a proofreader:

> I never know when I'll be working, and it almost doesn't seem like working. ... One of the older guys

> was telling me how amazing he found it that I would sit there oblivious to the boss and read a paper. That's something he would never do. It ran against his ethic. I think there's too much of an attitude that work has to be shitty. … We do the job and we do it fine. But [the boss] doesn't know why.[19]

The second element of a subeditor's ability to organise their own labor lies in the unsupervised responsibility they have for copy. There are checks by editors, yes, but only the subeditor sees the pages just before the designer sends them to the printer. If an editor's changes were too long or contradicted the purpose of an article, we could simply omit the changes as if we had missed the instruction. As a last resort, we could also argue for a story to be "spiked" and replaced.

Copy is also hard to appraise at a glance, a beneficial material quality for the subeditor. Usually, when you start a copyediting job, another editor will check your work for several weeks, but that oversight can't continue forever. You have to be trusted. Short of obvious mistakes like typos, it's hard to see what has been changed about copy that might alter meaning. This provides an opening for subeditors who want to subtly change the meaning of copy to their own ends, or to cut corners without scrutiny. While reading this article, one of my coworkers pointed out that the opacity of copy also made it easy to undervalue our work—no one else could "see" it.

If you view media as a form of encoded communication interpreted by its viewer, the subeditor has the opportunity to write subtexts for readers to find.[20] The official, licensed position of the writing still belongs to the reporters and the editors, but the subeditor can put "oppositional" alterations

into the copy. For a glowing interview about a CEO who temporarily suspended his pay as a PR move, I made sure an infographic on the page listed his personal net worth of several million pounds. In cases when fund managers expressed a gender essentialist view of women (that they're inherently better at performing emotional labor than men), we'd cut that copy or reword it.

Another organising benefit we had was the consistent conversation among subs at different publications. We could check with each other to see if what we were being asked to do seemed reasonable. An editor once asked me to spend an afternoon filling an Excel sheet with financial data so he could use it to write stories. The subs told me this wasn't something in our job description. These group chats also provided a venue to save clips of bad writing that had been published without us or to discuss our group response to style decisions (like whether we should define certain acronyms).[21] We would screenshot instances of financial workers describing the global pandemic or the climate crisis as an investor "opportunity"—we wanted to tally how far they would go to co-opt issues for their own benefit.

Beyond these low-level tactics, however, there was not much opportunity, particularly because of our context in financial publishing. Our access to the professional identity that comes from journalism's view of itself as the "fourth estate", a check on state power and a bastion of democracy, was limited. Financial journalism historically developed as a form of boosterism for capitalism and self-help for its readers. It is more like a fan press, like much of games journalism, that supports an industry and depends on it. It advertises and suggests solutions through financial tools, most of which involve further capital

investment or charges for financial workers.[22]

As an example, our journalists and editors wanted to encourage "financial education". Since our audience were financial advisers, however, these suggestions were self-interested. Our readers would go to schools to teach children how to be "responsible" with their finances, which was defined as placing their credit into investments. In this way, people who don't have access to complicated financial constructs are made to appear to lack education. It sets the conditions for another extraction, rather than revealing why those people are not able (or don't need) to find financial advice. It also gave our readers a sense of purpose, as if they contributed to society (even if the majority of their clients are wealthy). Our pages provided legitimacy and meaning for financial workers by, for example, documenting their philanthropy as if they were challenging societal problems, rather than passing on scraps that fell from the table of wealth inequality.

We were also limited by our separation from editors and reporters. The reporting journalists were defined by their skills like interviewing and shorthand and their role as a conduit for managements' decisions. The subs had a different skillset and identity. We weren't even *part* of editorial anymore, as subs have been historically.

The executives would only speak to the editors, who would then dictate to us. By having control over that information source, editors could selectively share or hide information. By placing priority with sales and dictating what topics journalists should dedicate their time to, management that owned stakes in the company removed the editorial independence that is the basis for most news sources' credibility.

I also think there was less ego in our work than the editors

and reporters. They wrote pieces with bylines, but they also had to blur their professional and personal identity at work—they were expected to use social media accounts under their name to collect information and spread stories. Their visibility gave them influence with readers and social media followers. They received benefits and social influence others didn't: a finance company shipped all of them beer and vodka so they could have a videocall drink session with the company's employees.

The subs' names were not attached to articles, and we did not represent the company publicly. We didn't care or buy into flattering interviews or the company's desire to market itself in our pages. (We would cut our own magazine's name from copy whenever we got the chance.) This sometimes lead to disputes over what to cut or keep, but because we usually learned about these things last, we had little leverage.

By breaking us off from editorial, the company management proved that a professional identity is not enough to unite workers. The profession, as a construct, promises many things a union does, like control of working conditions, colleagues, and standards of work and safety. The profession, as opposed to the trade or occupation, is a bourgeois organising tool, as evidenced by its popularity with doctors and lawyers. Journalists also professionalised in the 20th century as it became popular for the middle class and journalism graduate programs proliferated.[23] As they did so, the editor adopted more and more managerial qualities. For me, I more often received support from production and design workers. Where I worked, the subeditor is at the periphery of the journalistic profession.

Conclusion

After spending so long perfecting others' opinions, it has felt good to have this chance to express my own. I undertook this inquiry out of frustration with the lack of research into media production. The representation media grants is like a spotlight—it can illuminate others, but it also makes those who wield it hard to see. So many work so hard and only a few are applauded for that work. The work of the others is made invisible. There are many roles I couldn't address here because they labored beyond my view: the printers and the delivery drivers, the photographers and developers.

Subeditors, copyeditors, factcheckers and proofreaders are a cornerstone in newsrooms' assurance that they inform, rather than distort, but newrooms are removing those roles everywhere. Trust is required for a subeditor's work, and the company I worked within went to immense lengths to undermine that trust. One of my interviewees told me that the isolated sub is particularly vulnerable in the newsroom: "You have to be able to speak up. If you're silent, you disappear."

Subeditors share a group identity, but production editors are caught between professionalised editors and designers, as well as other print production workers. I would hope that each would see the common cause they share with each other. When media producers organise, they can make news in new forms that doesn't fuel consumption or pad the pockets of capital.

Organising Agency Teaching Assistants

Two anonymous Teaching Assistants: A & B

Background

The closure of schools, pushed by the National Education Union (NEU) among others, was one of the first demands the British left united around, in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic. It was a necessary measure to reduce the spread of the virus, particularly among families where parents have not had the luxury of 'working from home'. This demand, however, came with a consequence for a large minority of the same unions' members. Many of us on outsourced contracts, whether teaching assistants, supply teachers or cover supervisors, immediately lost income on 23rd March. This is an account of attempts to organise for continued pay during the pandemic from the perspective of agency-contracted teaching assistants, and of what this has taught us about the composition of the workforce, as well as the trade union we have found ourselves in. The proliferation of outsourcing in the education sector demands industrial alliances - across job roles and 'professional' status - which are currently not easily forged

within and between the main unions agitating in schools: Unison, GMB, the NEU, and NASWUT.

Outsourcing in the public sector is nothing new. Since the 1988 Education Reform Act, private contractors have been invited into state-maintained schools, supposedly bringing with them the benefits of 'competition.' Just last month, the trade union United Voices of the World (UVW) won full sick pay, the London Living Wage, and safer working conditions for outsourced cleaners[24] working for the MAT (multi-academy trust) Ark Academies. While private agencies have supplied labour to state-maintained schools since the 1980s, the coronavirus pandemic has laid bare the consequences and cruelty of such agency contracts, and the wide gulf between the conditions of many workers who, day to day, do the same job as each other.

Nature of the Work

In March, when schools closed for coronavirus, we were working as teaching assistants (TAs), working in both academies and local government controlled primary and secondary schools. The work of a TA is various, but can roughly be divided between 'Learning Support Assistants' whose job is to compliment the work of a teacher with explanatory work and academic assistance, and those specialising in SEN (special educational needs), often providing 1:1 support to a particular child. In reality no-one does one or the other of these: most TAs will be expected to be able to deal with 'behaviour' (so the teacher can concentrate on curriculum and attainment), give English Language support to INAs ('international new arrivals'), lead reading and literacy 'interventions' with smaller groups, support the well-being and pastoral care of children with 'additional needs' and much

more.

Where our choice of job-description becomes somewhat political, is on the question of covering lessons, and 'teaching' *without* 'QTS' (qualified teaching status). Increasingly TAs, especially those on agency contracts, are asked to do the work of teachers, in all but name and pay. For now we will only introduce this type of role, but we will go on to explain how the agencies' increasing attempts to market this role, this service - to both school-client and worker - is exemplary of the way in which outsourcing pits the interests of sections of the workforce, qualified or not qualified, against each other, and demands quite a serious re-thinking of industrial strategy in the unions operating in this sector.

Nature of the Contract: Why We Organised

Before we can understand the nature of a TA agency contract, it's important to understand the nature of agency supply teacher contracts, and how they are distinct. Melanie Griffiths, an NEU activist, has traced the origins of private agency presence in the school labour market to the 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA).[25] Supply teaching can include long-term cover, e.g for maternity leave, but it can also include short-term stand-ins for ill or unavailable permanent staff, otherwise known as 'day-to-day' supply. It's important to understand how the necessity of short-term, readily available 'cover' for the functioning of a school, creates a technical structure of the workforce which lends itself easily to privatisation, and the chance for people's labour to become a 'service' to be sold. Outsourcing isn't always cheaper for the client-employer who uses it, but it does mean an easily hirable and fire-able

worker. What's happened, though, is as the education agency business has boomed, it's branched out into an opportunity to force precarious conditions onto another section of the school workforce: teaching assistants.

Teaching Assistant A: Since I started doing union work with other agency teaching assistants, I haven't come across a single agency TA who was doing day-to-day supply work, or covering any permanent staff who were absent for any reason. To the schools who employ agency TAs, we are increasingly a permanent feature of their budgets - just an expense which can be dropped or picked up with great ease.

'Day-to-day' should be a contract term which only refers to *genuinely* day-to-day - moving between different schools covering different teachers - supply work. But our agency TA contracts are officially classed as 'day-to-day'. It's basically a 0 hours contract, even if they tell you you'll be employed until at least the end of the school year.

But before we'd even become aware of the complete lack of guarantee of hours or work in our contract, what made us angry was the amount of 'deductions' which appeared on our payslip, slicing off large chunks of what was already barely above minimum wage. These were the first conversations about the terms of our work I had with other people I worked with. Me and the other agency teaching assistants at my school were persuaded by our agency to sign up with an umbrella company, a third 'employer' who would facilitate our wages, once we'd *already started working*. We were told this would increase our wage yet we'd also have to pay a fee to use the service. On top of this fee, we found ourselves paying employers' national insurance - because we are classed as self-employed although we are anything but. Despite taking work expecting to be paid a

wage of £60-80 a day, in actuality our umbrella company wage is an aggregate of National Minimum Wage, accrued holiday pay, and 'additional bonuses.' This was only exposed when we finally won furlough, and saw our furlough calculated from NMW, without payment during what would have been school holidays, but still without any 'holiday pay' - more on that later.

My first real awareness of the nature of my contract came on my interview day, as I was shadowing an older, and in-house, TA. She asked me whether I was with an agency, and when I said yes, told me that I should try and get out of that as soon as possible, describing our pay as 'peanuts.' The widespread acknowledgement and empathy towards us on agency contracts was both a blessing and a curse; most of the (especially younger) TAs had themselves been through agency contracts initially, and successfully negotiated (independently and informally) being brought in house. They gave us vital tips in how to make sure we did this before the summer holidays, (where pay would completely grind to a halt otherwise), but when it came to more serious conversations about changing the system we all agreed was horrific, it was harder to get people interested. The short-term nature of most agency TA contracts - and the attendant idea that they are a 'stepping stone' towards either in-house job or teacher training - means it's very hard to come across people who have spent long enough on these contracts to seriously organise. The pandemic threw a massive spanner into the usual, quieter, plan of suffering for a few months or so, before the 6 week summer break.

What's been most striking over the last few months is the way the real financial system which controls the terms and security of our wages is hidden by both the everyday structures of the workplace, and the organisational structures of our union.

The terms of our conditions and pay are set by the agency - but unions' bargaining agreements, and the negotiating and enforcing of pay scales are with schools and the government. We are often hired for an academic year - but academised schools, with their board of trustees and CEOs, operate on a financial year. End-of-March Pandemic met a Start-of-April Chance-to-cut-costs.

There are things to note about how the presence of agencies in the job market structures our experience of work in a way which will likely worsen as the unemployment crisis deepens. It's not just that it makes obvious the way our service is *sold* but that it is presented as if the commodity isn't our labour, but the job itself. These positions - abundant on Indeed, Total Jobs, CV Library etc, sites which the many of us out of work will be all too familiar - are presented, often, as if the agency providing them is the one providing the service, rather than the worker. The 'graduate teaching assistant' is particularly pernicious: positioned as a stepping stone to better horizons (teacher training), and the consequent union-backed mandate for better pay that comes with QTS. (This idea that the job itself is something of value, a service, offered by the agency has been epitomised by the way I was eventually dropped from the agency, due to being 'unhappy with the service', which is how they termed our meagre efforts to get paid).

So there's two things going on with this structure: our service is something to be sold, which structures the three parties' (school, worker, agency) interests in strange ways, and the 'job' is treated as a service in and of itself. It's certainly something to be *sought after*: we will always be better off when we have one. What happens though, through both effects of the agency structure, is that in both instances our interests align more

closely to the agency than they do the school. The agency takes a cut from our wages, and we get more from working for them than from any state provision, so it's in both our interests and that of the private agency that we keep working. I imagine that as the unemployment crisis deepens these companies - and possibly also the internet platforms which host them - will 'benefit'; they offer a service in a market themselves, and the more value of the thing (the 'job') they offer, the less they'll have to give as a wage. It's telling, I think, that increasingly searching on these job websites the vast majority of jobs listed are those of agencies.

This system hands power to private agencies, rather than the school system itself, to subtly shape the kind of jobs and roles offered in schools, often at odds with the terms set out in the Burgundy and Green Books[26] which are supposed to dictate teaching and support staff pay and conditions respectively. This impacts not just the material conditions of the workers who do these jobs, but the way we organise industrially in our trade union. Agencies, as part of their servitised style, try and present their lowest-paid jobs to prospective employees as somewhat 'desirable': they apparently offer the 'experience' required to open the doors to something which would eventually pay you better; namely, teaching. The job is not really a job, and we're not really workers: they want us to think that *they* are the ones offering something of value, masking the reality that the thing of value, and the thing really being bought and sold, is our own labour power. This leads to the advertising of positions such as 'cover supervisor' where the pay is little different to that of a teaching assistant, but the role includes expectations much closer to that of a teacher with QTS. When schools seek out supply teachers, it's obvious how they might find the existence

of something which offers basically the same service, but for less money, attractive. While they might fear the professional capacities of an 'unqualified' teacher, the terms and conditions of the contract they are committing to mean they can drop that worker at the drop of a hat.

How We Organised

A: There was only one other agency TA at the school I worked in, in the same agency. By pure coincidence I also have a friend, living in another city, working in a school on exactly the same contract, with the same agency. There was one other person at her school on the same contract with the same agency. These were the first three other people I spoke to, before we worked out what to do - and what trade union to join.

The social structure of the working day - where you have lunch and who you have lunch with - was at odds with the (industrial) alliances we would end up trying to make with supply teachers in the NEU. It was mainly TAs, on in-house contracts, who we interacted with. Most of the TAs in my school were, or had been, with Unison. We knew it made more sense to join the union where most of our colleagues were in, but there was only an NEU rep at our school. It made sense to try and join a union with a recognised presence; at this point in time, the school seemed like it should be our primary focus. I knew the NEU was calling for closures, I assumed it would be simple to summon some industrial weight to ensure jobs were protected alongside the necessary arrival of these closures.

In practise, our decisions were rushed and random. We called both the Unison and NEU local branches and while Unison told us they couldn't even speak to us without us becoming

members, our NEU district secretary spoke to me for ages and tried to get me to join the committee before I'd even joined the union, despite the NEU not currently having formal collective bargaining rights for TAs (more on this and the creation of the union later). Many people - including members of the union - aren't aware of this caveat. Independently of our panics around pandemic-pay, I went to a general political meeting in my city about opposing police presence in schools, and befriended a teacher and NEU rep at a different school who has, for want of a better word, mentored me throughout all this and been a huge source of confidence. It's stuff like this which affected our decision. I still don't know if it was the best idea, joining the NEU, but we acted on impulse and with what felt easiest at the time. The whole thing felt rushed. Everyone was panicking about the pandemic and we knew we had to act fast: the one month waiting time before a union could help you warped our judgement - (we weren't to know that it would take months, possibly will take years, to win anything) - and with Unison stressing on the phone that even in joining there may be a month before assistance, we ended up joining the NEU.

Our experience highlighted what we believe is at once the NEU's greatest strength *and* weakness: the primacy of school-level organising. In a well-organised school, securing the continued pay of agency staff as normal was one of the first demands NEU reps negotiated across the country. However, as soon as the fight is pushed out of the immediacy of the workplace, along the confusingly structured national lines which agencies operate on, things are trickier.

Once we'd joined the NEU, we attempted to do everything via our workplace rep. She was initially kind and supportive, but made clear she didn't really know what to do, largely

because we were TAs, and not permanent staff. The week before school formally closed I had to stay home because of COVID-19 symptoms, and a few days later the other agency TA got ill too. Out of the classroom it became even harder to track down our rep; she never replied to our texts or emails, despite giving us her personal number in our first conversation. There was going to be a meeting of the board of trustees of the Academy trust - an occasion, I had learnt from an NEU rep at another school, was the place where decisions around lockdown and pay would be made - but neither the NEU rep or the NASWUT rep (the other main teachers' union) replied to our emails suggesting we hold a cross-union meeting, or make some demands to the board of trustees. I'll never know whether either rep attended this meeting or made any demands of it; neither ever replied to us. The day after this meeting, the other agency TA (still in school) had a meeting with our headteacher, while I was already off sick. He made it very clear the decision had already been made and there was nothing we could do about it. Noone even bothered to inform me of this, just knowing I'd be told by my fellow agency TA, and my line manager didn't reply to any of my emails asking what was happening. I had to call the headteacher to ask for his confirmation.

The phone call really illuminated some of the mess of conflicting interests that the agency system creates between the worker, and the person they experience (and who does still ultimately hold hiring and firing power) as their boss, and the agency itself. The headteacher blamed the system, the parasitical agencies, with their 'millions' he suspected: they were the ones exploiting us and the ones with the means to pay us. He, on the other hand, was a leader with a social responsibility for the children. He cited proposed government cuts to free school meals - the

conversation was tense and fast-paced and he never elaborated, but I assume he meant the impact this policy[27] would have had on the primary school within the academy trust - as a reason why he could no longer pay us. He talked about how the extra fees the agency took for their profit meant we were simply too expensive.

This is what outsourcing does: by commodifying labour into a service for employers to purchase, or temporarily *rent* more accurately, from an external company, our interests as outsourced workers can align with the agencies whose existence is the reason we're being exploited. It's in their interests, too, that we keep working (and keep receiving our wage): this means they're still able to sell their product. Where I think our strategy ultimately failed, (although we have been successful in demanding basic sustenance off of the umbrella company who our agency outsources its payrolling service to), is taking the fight away from the workplace all too quickly. The UVW's recent dispute at an academy school in London, over the pay and conditions of outsourced cleaners, while propagandising around the outsourcing company's bad practise, focussed its leverage on the ultimate responsibility of the school. It's almost as if we need to sort of pre-figuratively imagine who our 'legal' employer *should be* in accordance with the reality of the work, and focus attention there, rather than negotiating with the agency or umbrella company, posing as our employer, who shouldn't really exist.

Another experience of organising

Here we move into a joint discussion comparing experiences of organising Teaching Assistants. After speaking together, A advised B to get in contact with her District Secretary to lay out her concerns.

Teaching Assistant B: The advice from the union was to go directly to the school and ask them to continue my pay in line with the Joint Union Advice (issued alongside NAHT and ASCL who represent most headteachers) which said:

> "All supply teachers must be fairly treated– kept in post, supported if unable to work and employed as a key part of local authorities' response to this crisis. The Department for Education (DfE) has made it clear that the additional costs schools incur as a result of managing this crisis will be reimbursed. As unions, we are currently in discussions with the Government about how this will work."

On this basis, my District Secretary was clear that I should be retained and paid after Easter as this would have been the case if it weren't for the pandemic and that I should contact my Union Representative in my school. Following this my District Secretary emphasised that schools in my authority should not be furloughing supply staff and all we can do is to act collectively in response.

With all my correspondence with my District Secretary, they referred to "supply staff/teachers". This false equivalence between "supply staff" and "agency staff" further showed how little agency TAs were acknowledged by the union and that the

union wasn't fully equipped to support them. Before I'd even taken any action, my District Secretary was fairly pessimistic, stating the difficulty of organising union members in my school, saying it would be difficult to write a letter to the Chair of Governors asking them to honour all agency staff employments as there was a small and inactive membership.

Whilst pointing me towards my Representative in the school, he emphasised how they were also "not terribly active." This left me feeling deflated, as an agency TA I didn't have a school email, so once schools shut and I was pushed out of the workplace I could also no longer have in-person chats. I needed help from the District to even get in contact with the rep. Little advice was given, so with no way of contacting my Rep and no clear idea of what to do, we didn't organise on the school level.

At this point with no scheduled pay, it seemed that the agency was the best way to seek furlough payment. Arguably, this was our biggest mistake when organising. We should have done more on the school level but at the time it seemed impossible with no contacts in school, little support from the union and the inability to "act collectively" with no collective bargaining rights for Teaching Assistants in NEU.

A: I remember a friend saying to me when Rishi Sunak announced the Job Retention Scheme that this could potentially take the heat off the bosses and neuter trade union militancy. At the time this pissed me off: I was waiting for Universal Credit and trying to navigate the labyrinthine process of getting Statutory Sick Pay off my umbrella company, and something like this seemed an easy way out to paying me and others in my situation. Looking back, it's pretty clear that, at least in our case, the policy quite literally encouraged an affirmation and reproduction of things as they were. Whereas the militancy

of outsourced workers can be transformative- by acting out a relation to the boss which echoes the reality of the workplace, rather than the arbitrary exploitation of contracts - we began to be engaged in a process of lobbying for bail-outs for a boss who shouldn't really be our boss, to retain a job we couldn't retain.

I should be clear: we never fully gave up on attempting to negotiate for the extension of our contract with the school, and my colleague was eventually successful (months later) in using AWR (Agency Workers' Regulations) legislation to get the school to continue to pay her, albeit at 80% of her wages. But after the headteacher's call, and our district secretary's seeming inability to push the headteacher using AWR legislation, we felt somewhat unmoored from any obvious, localised paths of action. We had 4 of us across two schools (all completely inexperienced in any kind of trade union activity), the agency which tied us together, and the union. We were weak both in terms of numbers, and in some kind of institutional representation. My next steps were an attempt to remedy both of these: learn as much about the NEU as I could and speak to anyone who would listen, and find more agency teaching assistants. After probably annoying too many union people, we learnt that the NEU's 'supply network forum' was where we were supposed to be. I would later learn that this institution has no formal democratic powers and faces its own crisis of representation within the union - but more on that later.

My method had two main tracks: go via NEU (the branch, officials, and pestering any teacher I knew to look out for agency teaching assistants) and joining lots of general teaching assistant facebook groups, searching the words 'agency,' or 'umbrella company,' and slowly talking to everyone mentioning

it, adding them, and getting them in a whatsapp group. I had a lot more success with the second tactic than the first. In the first couple of weeks I set out to call every number I got.

It was easy getting people on side *politically*, but much harder *organisationally.* It's obvious why things were bad: people felt humiliated by the ease with which they were dropped from school pay-rolls, and the ways in which the agencies relied specifically on someone (a school) wanting to buy our labour power became clear. People I spoke to in multi-sector agencies were offered care work before they were offered furlough: they knew that the agencies would make more profit from them continuing to work. This was always more tempting to the agencies than even the unprecedented government bail-out in the form of the furlough scheme. It was harder to convince people that we'd be better off doing something via the union, and I'll admit I wasn't exactly sure we would be myself. Quite a few people joined the union. In the main, people had difficulty garnering support from their local branches. Often a TA might be the only agency TA in a single school. While I do think it made sense to seek out a bloc with a shared industrial position, the very system which had caused our loss of income scattered us across workplaces and regions, and across the union structures and bargaining agreements which come with them. Ultimately, any real success would have come (and did come, as we've mentioned previously, in well-organised schools) at the level of the workplace.

The WhatsApp group has mainly operated as a support system, sharing email templates and resources to lobby agencies and umbrella companies, informing each other of rights that we have, and assisting each other with universal credit applications.

My investigation into the structures of the NEU took me to the 'NEU Supply Teachers' Network', a facebook group which loosely organises alongside the National Organising Forum (OF) for supply teachers, with elected delegates from each of the unions 5 geographical regions. It was made very clear to us that, following the NEU's creation in 2017 and consequent acceptance of support staff members, all agency support staff were welcome and should feel represented in the section. The network, autonomous and independent of the union, operates somewhat distinctively from the OF. It took me a long time to understand that neither structure has official power within the union, or how meetings took place. I accidentally called the first meeting of the network (not the OF) on zoom, and ended up chairing it. The network has almost tripled in size since I joined, and has gone through surges of extreme (and justifiable) anger from the membership. It's predominantly served as a communication network for self-education among members along the various stages of our interaction with furlough legislation. Through a lot of lockdown I was, in a way, taking 'lines' from the network on what to do next, and communicating this back to the WhatsApp group I'd created. It felt reactive. During the two months between school closures and when nearly all affected outsourced educators received furlough payments, there were quite a few points where the membership of the facebook group was talking about, and 'facebook polling' about, industrial action and boycotts. I remember a phone call with the OF rep for my region where I suggested a plan to encourage supply educators to commit to (in future) refusing to work with agencies which didn't furlough their staff, the only way it seemed we might be able to leverage anything while on Universal Credit. He liked the idea, TAs in the

whatsapp group liked the idea: it was completely unclear how we were supposed to democratically decide anything like this. Possibly we should have just ran with stuff, I don't know. More recently as this rearguard action moves to attempting to lobby agencies to continue furlough til September, there is serious disgruntlement with the union, and more specifically the lack of serious democratic representation of supply members in the union.

As well as this whatsapp group where we sought to form a political alliance between those of us wholly underrepresented in both our workplaces and the various unions nominated to operate in them, the four of us who shared an agency took matters into our own hands and sought to win ourselves furlough money.

B: Our strategy when demanding furlough from our agency and umbrella company was sending collective emails with concise questions and clear demands that we thought could not be dodged. From school closures until the start of May, we were in a back and forth with both the agency and the umbrella company, initially simply asking for clarity. For instance, when I asked why my Basic Pay was £7.70 an hour, when I had signed a contract which was for a Daily Rate of £70, they directed me to HMRC and told me my tax code had changed and this had changed my pay breakdown. My change in tax code has nothing to do with my basic pay. Throughout this time we demanded clarity and transparency; neither were given. They would attempt to hold all conversations on the phone with individuals rather than replying to our collective emails, so there was no paper trail. They would emphasise how, along with their lawyers, they were trying to disentangle the government guidelines concerning the Job Retention scheme, referring to

a "grey area". From the government guidance we quoted to them, it seemed pretty clear that we, as agency workers, paid through a PAYE, were eligible to be furloughed and receive support through this scheme.[28] Even the FCSA, the board which governs Umbrella Companies, had called on the government to say that it is unacceptable for all agency employees to be furloughed at 80% of their basic pay, not their actual wage.

As we waited for the Government Portal to open, it became evident there were two key issues: for us it was whether we would be paid 80% of National Minimum Wage, for the umbrella company it was whether they would need to pay us holiday pay. We were told, "if HMRC continue to be of the opinion that holiday pay accrues as normal, then this will have extreme consequences for any payroll scheme. This could potentially leave payroll and Umbrella companies with a huge bill, that could well lead to insolvency, as the potential liabilities are significant. Naturally this would not be to any of our interest if companies were to be forced to close due to their incorrect strategy." The primary concern of the umbrella company was keeping themselves afloat - a corporation which quite literally profits from paying outsourced workers but hasn't factored in paying workers adequately.

Yet when my concerns about the working practices were communicated to my District Secretary, their advice was to "find a new agency", find alternative employment, find in-house employment where the union can represent you. There was little motivation to make the agencies and the umbrella companies accountable for the countless dismal working practices, instead we were told to move away and the next cohort of unemployed graduates could take our place. When we finally had confirmation from the umbrella company that we were

furloughed, we were sent a furlough agreement that we needed to sign and return before the 1st of May or face not being furloughed at all.

A: at this point, some of our more militant comrades in the NEU advised us to refuse to sign, until it was confirmed we'd get 80% of our actual wages. We knew we had no leverage, though. Even if we'd been more than just 4 of us (spread across the country), without the threat of a strike, we had no real power to make any demands.

B: Despite all our efforts, it looked as if the agreement was to be furloughed at 80% of National Minimum Wage for hours that didn't reflect our working days. Prior to the pandemic I was working 35 hours a week, but my furlough was for 29.68 hours a week. When asking my District Secretary for advice concerning this situation, they told me I had little choice but to agree or presumably the alternative was to be paid nothing. Worryingly, he reassured me that schools are likely to re-open after half-term (June 2020) and I could find further work. This went against the union's position, which held it was not safe to open schools. He was encouraging agency staff to go against this, undermining their own safety and that of the children, their families and the whole community, just to get adequate payment, whilst permanent staff quite rightly were campaigning for schools to remain closed to prevent the further spread of the virus. In some ways, the union saw any furlough payment as a victory, not a point from which to inspire further action. My interaction with the agency, umbrella company and union at this point left me feeling helpless. I did go on to sign the furlough agreement in order to receive the very small sum of money which was closer to 50% of my wages opposed to 80% and continued to receive Universal Credit.

There were a number of obstacles to working collectively, on a union level and between the agency TAs. As well as problems with the union, what struck me was the division between the individuals who were situated similarly as agency TAs. As a result of the individualised contracts and isolated nature of our work, we are incentivised to act alone and not form solidarity with others. The other agency TA in my school lived closer and was working in the school for key workers throughout the lockdown. She had been there for a year longer than myself. We were on paper in a very similar situation and at the start it seemed hopeful to have someone in the same workplace on the same contract. This quickly broke-down once favourable treatment was received. She was in the school working and saw it as a blessing to be able to go back to work with the school reopening, and my continuing struggle with sub-par furlough was left behind. For her, she was more concerned with upholding relationships with the same school staff instead of making sure we got the wages we deserved.

A: More recently, via some good luck and coincidence, we've managed to get contacts to expand the small group beyond our single agency. We've had two online meetings so far, and plan to use this group to collectivise our grievances, and act on our shared belief that we've been seriously underpaid, even below the pay cut which comes with an 80% furlough package. On average, between us, we're currently getting around £35 a day from furlough. A 7 hour day on minimum wage (considering most of us with this agency are under 25 years of age) is £57.40. Aside from the fact that our original wage was *higher* than this, what we've been getting since March is 60%, not 80%, of national minimum wage. I don't have to explain why we're angry. How we interact with the union as this new group,

however, remains to be seen.

The Union

A: So far I've managed to basically skirt around what's possibly one of the biggest, and most confusing, aspects to our efforts the last few months: what are we doing in the NEU? What is the position of support staff in the NEU? How does the agency system undermine the distinctions between sections of the workforce, (and most worryingly the collective bargaining agreements associated with them)?

The National Education Union formed out of a merger of the National Union of Teachers (NUT) and the Alliance of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL) in March 2017, following a ballot of the membership of both these unions respectively, and then a joint special conference. The ATL included membership of some teaching assistants and support staff, thus bringing them into a shared union with teachers, and creating a sort of proto-industrial union for the sector. In reality, although the NEU's website[29] writes that it 'welcomes into membership all professionals working in the education sector: teachers, teaching assistants, examination officers, technicians, librarians, lecturers, managers, administrators and ancillary staff', its ability to function as an industrial union is severely limited by an agreement with Unison, Unite and GMB shaping the terms of the new union's creation.[30] The substance of the agreement rests on the distinction between 'support staff' and 'teachers', and collective bargaining agreements confined to different unions respectively, operating on the local and national levels. I hope to make the argument that this distinction in role-based collective bargaining agreements is severely threatened by

outsourcing and agency work, and is not currently fit to respond to these assaults.

As I've previously discussed, the prevalence of agencies offering roles to 'unqualified teachers', well below QTS pay grades, is of chief concern to supply teachers within the NEU. At points, in the 'NEU Supply Teacher Network' Facebook group, this has veered into outright hostility and condescension towards the workers who take these jobs, or to the TAs who are increasingly asked to 'teach' by management. We've been called 'phoney teachers', with suggestions that NEU members should operate a 'closed shop approach' and 'refuse to work' with this section of the workforce - this obviously isn't what 'closed shop' actually means. I've seen comments laughing about how stupid TAs are, how we can't do simple maths. These comments are *by no means* majoritarian opinions within the union or the network, and I don't want to give the impression we've been treated badly. But these comments don't come from simple cruelty or out of nowhere: I'd argue they're the troubling consequence of craft unionism under hardship. The material experience of supply teachers is one which has seen their wages massively eroded, in a large part due to the existence of these contracts. If they remain part of a union and a strategy which seeks to advance their professional interests in isolation from - and, to some extent - in *opposition* to the workers taking these jobs, no wonder these kinds of ideas emerge.

The thing is, we - particularly 'graduate teaching assistants' floating in on short-term, precarious contracts - are actually, in effect, a form of scab labour, in the sense that in so far as we *aren't* unionised, and *aren't* in formal, democratic alliances with supply teachers and in-house teachers and TAs (with shared collective bargaining possibilities), we *are* a problem

for the rest of the membership. It's for this reason that supply teachers' discomfort *makes sense*, where comments asking that 'union members refuse to work with these phoney teachers' come from, but the conclusions drawn are not only morally wrong, but strategically dangerous for the very supply teachers who make them. Only by unionising (industrially and with equal representation) those workers brought in, via agencies, to undermine teachers' previously won stringent pay scales and conditions, will those rights ever be upheld, and collectivised to workers *beyond* the limited fraction of 'qualified teachers.'

As it stands, the union's main weapon which it can use to uphold the proper pay of supply teacher's on agency contracts, is the pay scale category assigned to the teacher based on their qualification and experience. This is resulting in a failing - and increasingly divisive - strategy. Supply teachers will talk about being too 'expensive' for schools today. The higher the pay grade of the teacher, the more incentive there is for the school to seek to hire a greater proportion of 'unqualified' cover supervisors. The continued assertion of these 'rights' of a section of the workforce is only going to help exacerbate the economic and political divide between sections of the workforce: the divide in wages further incentivises the client (the school) to employ cheaper labour, and the political divide, the failure of a union and collective bargaining system to unite all those who share an employer (be that a school or an agency), only worsens the already limited leverage power the union of teachers already holds.

And then we come to the realities of the current bargaining agreements for education workers, be they teachers, TAs, cleaners, caterers, cover supervisors, or something in between. The TUC agreement between Unison, GMB, Unite, and the NEU

contains this line:

> *"The National Education Union accepts that the GMB, UNISON and Unite are the only unions recognised for collective bargaining purposes within the NJC for Local Government Services. GMB, UNISON and Unite accept that the National Education Union is recognised for collective bargaining for education staff on Soulbury terms and conditions and for Teachers in Residential Establishments."*

The thing is, agency TAs aren't bargained for within the NJC, and agency supply teachers aren't bargained for within the School Teachers' Review Body (STRB). Both groups can only, reactively, use AWR legislation to argue they be paid to scale, at the same rates as their in-house colleagues doing the same work, after 12 weeks of work.

Supply teachers very much face their own crisis of representation in the union, even if it's not as obvious as that of support staff. Recently, supply teachers organising within the NEU 'supply teachers network' have sought to get a review of the effectiveness of the democratic structures for supply and agency members, from the Union's leadership, after the pandemic has shed light on the structural barriers to our organising. This has, so far, been rejected, and individual activists are currently being targeted for 'bringing the union into disrepute', among other charges.

By the same logic that without working with those of us whose contracts are specifically designed to undermine the terms and conditions of supply teachers, supply teachers will struggle to advance their own interests, permanent staff in

the union should take extremely seriously the disgruntlement of the hundreds of thousands of members in their own union whose loss of pay in the pandemic is only the tip of decades of precarity and exploitation. An industrial unionism isn't merely a formal category, it should be a political outlook which seeks to organise the most precarious of not just the current membership of a union, but of the sectoral workforce (often the non-members are those who most need to be members), and ultimately looking towards the most precarious of the whole class. UVW's recent victory for outsourced cleaners in Ark Academies has been celebrated by a lot of NEU activists - but it should also wake them up. The NEU and the 'support staff' unions can all, according to their websites, represent these cleaners. Why haven't they? The reality of the political economy of schools today - how they are funded, who labours for their functioning, how we are all paid - demands serious re-thinking of our industrial strategy.

South London Bartenders Network

South London Bartenders Network (SLBN)

South London Bartenders Network grew out of the experiences of hospitality workers in Peckham and Nunhead, motivated both by the universally dire conditions of work in the industry and the unions' lack of capacity for supporting long-term organising in the sector.

The idea for the network had been developing since workers at The Ivy House pub went on wildcat strike in 2018 and won their demands (union recognition, fixed-term contracts and the rehiring of unfairly dismissed staff). While the campaign was a success, bolstered by informal support from Bakers, Food and Allied Workers' Union (BFAWU) organisers, the subsequent negotiations over terms of recognition and new contracts dragged on until 2020, with an exhausted workforce ill-equipped to sustain a cohesive strategy and unwilling to let union officials take over. Workers at The Ivy House had hoped their strike could be a catalyst for widespread organising in South London more broadly, but exactly how this might come about remained unclear while many workers lacked capacity for further organising.

In winter 2019, the BFAWU organiser who had supported

workers during the strike of the previous year returned to Peckham with the Fast Food Rights campaign. One of a few campaigns in the UK making in-roads with Community Unionism, it immediately struck a chord as an alternative to tried-and-tested models of organising we'd seen attempted elsewhere in hospitality. Witnessing the appetite for organising among local fast-food workers and the strong community networks already existing within South London, a few bartenders from The Ivy House began speaking to friends working in other pubs. The response was enthusiastic. By January, around half a dozen workers were seriously interested, and when Covid-19 reached the UK we realised we couldn't afford to delay any longer.

We set up a basic website, Twitter account and our first zoom call soon after lockdown kicked in. Six months on, around 30 active members from a dozen sites across South London, organising with BFAWU, Unite, UVW and IWW respectively, have shaped a network of mutual support that - as far as we know - is making history as the first of its kind in living memory in UK hospitality. This piece is drawn from hours of transcribed conversations between members, and the writers' grant from Notes from Below will be used as the basis of a strike fund for hospitality workers in South London. In order to safeguard workers, most of the sites and cases discussed are anonymised.

The Workplace

Members of SLBN are working in very different workplaces with different structures, including:

- A community-owned, not-for-profit pub run by a volunteer committee that employs a General Manager (GM), who

in turn employs Front of House (FOH) and Back of House (BOH) staff, and a cleaner via an agency. (The Ivy House).

- Multiple pubs from a medium-sized chain that franchises out sites to GM's (who set up as self-employed), who then employ staff. GM's claim back a (low) percentage of all takings from the chain, out of which they pay themselves, their workers (including cleaners/security if needed) and buy stock. GMs are estimated to earn 12-15k annually on average. In some cases, GMs are drafted in by head office to run sites directly.
- A pub owned by Star Pubs and Breweries (Heiniken) with independent leaseholders (zero hours).
- A social enterprise coffee roastery owned by a parent company of multiple regular ventures and social enterprises (self-employed).
- A free house pub with an owner who also has two other sites (zero hours).
- A brewery spanning two sites owned by managing partners who hire a GM.
- Multiple pubs from a small chain based mainly in South London (zero hours).

With the exception of The Ivy House, no sites pay London Living Wage or higher for ordinary staff (i.e. not management). Workers are young, and for many this industry is their first experience of employment. Many are studying or have side-hustles as artists, writers, musicians, designers (freelance or part-time jobs in unpredictable industries), or are between other forms of employment and need to earn some extra cash. These factors - combined with the relative ease of finding another hospitality job (pre-Covid) - contribute to high staff

turnover.

The lack of consistent structure throughout the industry makes the prospect of organising within it particularly daunting. While in some independent sites, the GM reins supreme, in other chains GMs are arguably as much the victim of exploitation as the staff they exploit in turn. In one site, every single member of staff is on a different wage, and members have been hauled into "informal chats" warning them that discussing pay at work is unacceptable behaviour. In another, 5 GMs have come and gone in the last 12 months, unable to handle the stress of working 60+ hour weeks for half the national average annual salary for full-time employees . While managers and sometimes supervisors are expected to work more than 48 hours a week, not all of them have actually signed an opt-out of the European Working Time Directive.

While the specifics of power relations vary from site to site, a consistent attitude among many workers is that they do not actually deserve more for what they do. Precarity and poverty pay are not only taken as standard, they are framed as a fair price to pay for access to a romanticised lifestyle of socialising, drinking and drug-taking, and a job that nominally requires little commitment or skilled labour.

As anyone who has worked in hospitality is aware, however, our labour is hardly unskilled. Pouring a pint or making a good cappuccino might just require some training and practice, but conflict de-escalation; safeguarding ourselves and customers in situations involving alcohol; spending 7-13 hour shifts on our feet, often understaffed; delivering good customer service to people whose disposable incomes often dwarf our actual incomes; cleaning up vomit, excrement and shards of glass - to do this labour week in, week out, in the knowledge that a single

complaint from a customer can put your job at risk, is no easy thing.

Social Relations

These dynamics of exploitation are obscured by the uniquely social aspect of the work. On the one hand, the emotional labour of counselling customers through divorces and bereavements, depression and the stress of their own working lives, can take its toll. On the other, we share milestones - weddings, funerals, birthdays - with them, and genuine friendships can develop across the bar.

But while it's true that there are communities formed within and around pubs, bars, tap-rooms and cafes, these communities are often rhetorically weaponised by management against staff. There's a common idea that the pub as a community venture is doing God's work, as one of few remaining social institutions fulfilling the role of a community centre where people come together. While this is true to an extent, it's equally true that we're essentially legal drug dealers being exploited to keep these community centres open.

The capacity to challenge exploitation is softened through close personal relationships with management in some cases. Each site pushes the perception of the workplace as one big happy family, where you have disagreements but all get along in the end. There remains, of course, a power disparity and fundamental difference between our interests as workers and theirs. Their behaviour is often excused in much the same way as putting up with a problematic friend is justified on the basis of long-standing association. Yet their behaviour directly impacts on our ability to make rent.

Further complicating the presence of consistent solidarity among workers is that we are not usually treated equally. Bosses play favourites, microaggressions and privileges manifest along the lines of gender, race, age, sexuality and gender expression, and poor behaviour is tolerated for some workers while swiftly punished for others.

At the same time, codependent relationships between workers are common in a high-stress, drink- (and drug-)fuelled environment that occupies evenings and weekends that would otherwise be reserved for socialising and relaxing. Our co-workers are the friends we see the most, the ones who know the most about our lives outside of work and have taken care of us on messy nights out. Outside of the routine of the 9-to-5 norm, we lean into the idolised subcultural lifestyle of extremes that customers tell us we're lucky to experience. These strong bonds do foment solidarity; it just takes a coordinated approach to bring it to bear in the workplace itself.

One key advantage within hospitality, which informs our approach to organising, is the revolving door of workers moving between sites. All of us know workers in other sites, living in our neighbourhoods or frequenting our own workplaces. In fact, many of us have direct access to workers at breweries and coffee roasteries - suppliers that our workplaces could not function without, and whose workers experience comparable problems. We've all been complaining about bosses and customers at industry nights and after-parties post-shift since we joined the industry - the challenge is *to reframe that anger into something strategic, to build up the community of workers to counteract the atomisation of our site-specific situations, and from that perspective to cement clear understandings of how power operates.*

Organising

The hospitality industry is notoriously challenging to organise within. Most workers are precarious and on poverty pay, and in a Covid-19 context anxieties around loss of income due to organising have been heightened. Many workers do not see hospitality as a career, and this makes them reluctant to put energy and time into organising - to do so could be seen as a concession that hospitality is more than a "stop-gap". Workers who have been at a site long-term and do see it as a career are often reticent for the opposite reason - they intend to stay at their current job, and don't want to create a difficult atmosphere.

For those of us interested in organising, it can be difficult to be consistently evangelical in social circles that we spend most of our waking hours in. As one member puts it, it's hard to avoid being seen as "an Avon Lady for socialism". This is partly why we stress the support element of the network over the political language favoured by some organisers - not all workers want to seize the means of production, but a fair few would quite like to get some basic respect, or for a racist manager to face consequences, or for their employers to pay a living wage. We try to be as accessible as possible in our language but we trust that workers have the ability to grasp the issues at hand and strategies available to them with relative ease: we aren't here to lead the proletariat - at its core, SLBN is simply about telling people who know they're getting fucked over that we'll stand by them if they want to do something about it.

Our approach to organising is rooted in the idea that workers can self-organise effectively, and direct their own struggle. This is inspired in part by experiences of some workers at

The Ivy House, and in part by experiences of other workers in campaigns where paid organisers took the lead and campaigns became unsustainable as a result. The network is not affiliated with any one union, and members do not have to be members of a trade union to join or make any specific commitment in terms of time or intention, and there is no membership fee. We meet weekly (usually via zoom) to discuss developments in organising, casework and updates from working groups.

We reject the prevailing view of trade unions as "insurance policies" - the labour movement must be an active participant in society more broadly, must demonstrate its utility to workers before demanding a direct debit and must have the central aim of empowering communities to fight their own battles. While some of us are rooted in the labour movement, we see our role as *within and against* our respective unions, recognising that in even the most militant unions workers must build their own power in order to organise sustainably.

We are engaged in community construction as much as we are workplace disputes - and that means that no single member is indispensable. Founding members of the network have been able to step away due to lack of capacity and it has continued to function, with working groups developing power analysis models, social media campaign ideas, taking on casework when unions are slow to respond, arranging rep. training and continuing to bring in new members.

Our work is as much in the tradition of mutual aid (in its truest sense) as it is in the tradition of trade unionism. We are not service providers - emotional and material support is reciprocal - but if anyone (a member or not) has issues at work half a dozen members can be on a zoom call within hours, centring the worker while coming to a consensus-based

decision on strategy. This is solidarity in action, and multiple members have voiced its centrality in motivating them to fight back against bad bosses. At the same time, we always defer to the workers themselves - we have held off on publicity stunts and direct action when workers weren't confident enough to escalate.

So far, we've helped multiple members through disciplinaries when trade unions simply did not respond in time, or when workers were not yet unionised; we've educated ourselves on workplace rights and unionised whole sites within days where big unions failed even to gain a foothold; we've made contact with community spaces and new solidarity networks in the surrounding area (particularly Croydon Solidarity Network), local mutual aid groups and trade union campaigns (particularly the Fast Food Rights campaign), and the local TUC council and Labour party branches, and strengthened links with local media; we've empowered members to begin organising within their unions in parallel with SLBN, and we've planned outreach strategies that are innovative by the standards of the labour movement.

Once it's safe to do so, we'll be facilitating 5-aside football tournaments between local pub staff, hosting monthly industry nights where we can reach "non-politicised" workers, putting on interactive workshops on workplace rights, hosting banner-making sessions in anticipation of direct action, and running panel discussions on organising approaches within different unions. Long-term, we're looking at media and social media strategies to raise our profile, we hope to get merchandise made (think crop-tops rather than pin-badges) and to assist similar networks to grow across London and elsewhere (we have contacts in East London, Central London and Bristol who

have expressed cautious interest).

Building local cultures of solidarity takes time, but each victory has an impact - doubly so in sectors like hospitality and fast food, where wins are rarely expected. As well as changing the dynamics of our localities collectively, each worker who has experienced solidarity has the potential to bring that same will to fight to their roles in other sectors (the arts, journalism, music, careers following current education pathways etc), in the future or currently. The fact that hospitality work functions as a key financial channel towards these other forms of precarious labour sets it up as a key site for organising against precarity, not only to make the hospitality sector a better place to work but also to highlight the precarious nature of all employment in the 21st century. Workers who experience successful organising against casualisation in the hospitality industry will hopefully take this with them as they move into other casualised sectors and therefore provide vital links of solidarity across sectors.

"It's the most anti-social social situation you can ever be in."

Below are some extracts from our last "ranting circle" (a loosely directed conversation between workers about our experiences and feelings), to illustrate the emotional, mental and physical toll hospitality can take, that both inhibits and drives attempts to organise in the sector.

A: When I was working in Brixton, we were getting paid nothing. When we did work it could be 60 hours a week or 6 hours a week. We had a really disunified workforce, you didn't want to rock the boat - you wanted to take all the perks offered instead of proper pay, like the vodka/coke/weed that was always

on offer. So then you're drinking all the time, you're tired, your sleep schedule gets fucked, you don't have any money to do anything else, you can't actually socialise with people when you feel you need to; you don't feel you can step away from work even though you're being overworked and when you do you can barely think let alone mobilise. For me, it led to a level of housing precarity, and also to going without meals - that's exacerbated patterns of disordered eating that I still struggle with today.

B: One week I might be working Friday-Sunday, maybe I'm doing 2 full day shifts one after the other - I'm exhausted. Then, on Saturday night I get sent a rota saying I'm working Monday through Wednesday. Now I've made plans - minor personal plans, nothing major, so I cancel them. But in this industry you just lose the small freedoms you should have. I should be able to plan my week out, even though I'm just working a shitty bar job. It doesn't make any difference. There's a basic lack of respect for our lives outside of work. We're treated like machines.

C: I really relate to that. There's lots of different experiences - students, people with families, single people ducking and diving to make rent - everyone's got slightly different concerns.

D: Same at my workplace - you have graduates, students, people with families, everyone's in a different level of precarity. It's very stressful, it weighs a lot on everyone's mental health. I've seen and experienced breakdowns mid-shift, and it doesn't seem like anyone's immune to them. Shiftwork generally does bring you down a lot.

E: Well it's inevitable, right? You're constantly working, and then you drink after shift to relax, and then you sleep all day and then roll out of bed in time for your shift. Hospitality specifically is a lifestyle as much as a job. The people you see at your work

are the only people you see every single day, they become your support system for that period, and it's really damaging for your social life. It's the most anti-social social situation you can ever be in.

F: In so many jobs they expect you to give your life to the company and live and breathe the brand - in hospitality it's in a much more pernicious way. You're thrust into a situation where you miss out on the social aspects of the rest of your life because you're usually at work, and then you're driven to drink and drugs because you're being overworked in a situation where drinking heavily is so normalised.

G: Also, this social friendliness can be used to get away with shitty stuff. It's difficult to organise around how some managers behave because no one wants to dob in their mate. It's hard to call things out, and then you end up feeling like an Avon Lady for Socialism. It can become really incestuous with staff and managers dating or hooking up, but there's also a weird expectation of absolute respect for your superiors. I've received complaints to my general manager about not being deferential enough.

E: My attitude problems have been talked about too. I was speaking to [redacted] from Head Office, because she didnt know what the fuck she was doing behind a bar but was trying to be in charge of everything while being so rude and condescending at the same time. As soon as I spoke back to her, I was in trouble, told I needed to watch my tone. I'm not gonna treat someone like they're better than me just because they are above me.

G: Being rude to you is seen as a managerial quality. I got told off for not being managerial or disciplining enough, even though there weren't any issues with staff and everyone was

doing their jobs properly. I've always been encouraged to bollock people but it's never worked in my experience.

F: People in a position of authority should be earning respect - it shouldn't be a given. When they are rude to people the fact that they expect people to roll over is disgraceful.

Thinking more broadly about what we're all trying to do here...things like shift work - they might have different effects on us, but they do affect all of us. These are things people can rally around. What are we trying to do with the network? Are we trying to fix some small things or have a massive overhaul of the whole industry or just improve working conditions?

B: I think it's an amalgamation of quite a lot of the things you just said. Obviously we're looking at changing our workplaces individually, but if you can shift the mentality of how people in this area at least feel about bartenders, or the way things are managed, it'd be good. The more momentum we can pick up, the more people's minds we can change. Obviously, the first step is trying to sort out our individual workplaces first.

H: I'm hoping if we can launch this campaign and win our demands, that will inspire more people in our area to do the same thing. And if we're organised as an industry and campaign over the same issues and win them, then as an industry we can set the bar even higher. That's kind of why I'm here as well. It doesn't seem like there's many unions that do much organising in hospitality.

A: It's been interesting to me personally, to see that given we don't know what the fuck we're doing, there's appetite for what we're trying to do. People are hearing about it even during lockdown. There's definitely a need for what we're trying to do here.

Post-Script: The Road Ahead

SLBN began as lockdown hit the UK, in anticipation of an accelerated need for effective counter-mobilisation against the most precarious period of work in living memory. The government's late-announced furlough scheme came too late for many workers, who were summarily laid off and therefore initially ineligible for furlough. Workers who had recently moved jobs - and there were many in an industry characterised by high staff turnover - fell through the cracks. Nevertheless, the furlough scheme has thus far provided some small level of security to some workers, allowed a greater capacity for organising and delayed the worst effects of the crisis at a larger scale. Covid-19 has not disappeared - but these safeguards are about to.

In the midst of a global pandemic, the oncoming great recession is going to change our experiences of work almost unfathomably. Much has been said of localised lockdowns: less has been said of localised furlough. Evictions on a scale not seen in recent years are on the cards, and the benefits system has been squeezed to its most punitive, cruel and inadequate iteration yet. The carceral cosmopolitanism of the Hostile Environment is advancing to unprecedented levels, and rhetoric pitting migrants against non-migrant workers will reach new heights. Austerity - the effects of which are ongoing and worsening - is going to return in full force, and vital services cut once again. Businesses - often at the mercy of exploitative landlords - will shut down. Workers who demand more are going to be blamed.

We need to get ready for this, and we need to do it quickly. There isn't time to wait for the antiquated machine of the labour

movement to lurch into this new reality - it was barely equipped for the old one. Organisers have a vital role to play in educating and empowering workers, but the only power that can last is in the collective. We desperately need structures to support and connect workers that aren't solely reliant on the capacity and capability of overworked union employees. Embedded in communities, these structures have a role to play in supporting migrant solidarity, anti-gentrification, public space conservation, renters' rights, anti-austerity and (women's, LGBTQ+'s, people of colour's) liberation campaigns, too. Since our struggles are linked, so must our strategies be.

If you're interested in setting up your own network, please get in touch. If you're in South London and want to join SLBN, whether to help us develop into a network that can make a difference in the hospitality industry, or just to come to some socials to meet other hospitality workers and complain about your boss, sign up at: https://southlondonbartenders.com/

Email: southlondonbartendersnetwork@gmail.com

Twitter/Insta: @SouthBartenders

Love and solidarity,

South London Bartenders Network

A few accidental years in London hospitality

Jacek Żebrowski

I became a vegetarian after the things I saw in London restaurants.
– London pest control inspector

In 2015 I took up a temporary job for the company named Best Parties Ever Ltd. It is a company that has been hosting the largest Christmas and New Year's Eve parties in the United Kingdom for years. We were assigned to handle large events in Maidstone, Kent: the service involved an average of 900-1200 customers per one Christmas event. There were usually 3 main managers plus 6 of us, event managers. Working hours started at 8am and ended around 4am. Despite the hard physical work I took up the job consecutively for three years between 2015 and 2017 each November and December. Year by year, the rate was higher and higher, but we also got more and more hard work to do, despite our requests to hire at least 3-4 more people to help.

My last year of working for Best Parties Ever in the year 2017 ended with our strike and "walkout" from the workplace demanding a raise or at least an additional bonus. We did

a "walkout" an hour before the main service which included serving 1200 customers waiting for the main dinner. We were in contact by phone with other venues of the company that at the same time served clients in other cities, mainly around London. Workers from other events also left their workplaces. The floor manager walked out with us. The head manager, the woman who was in her first job after college, was hysterical. She called the main owner of the company, who, after hearing our requests, agreed to pay us a double day's wages, and something like a "reward" or "benefit" upon completion. We also requested additional people to clean up after the events. Needless to say, the company was so keen on our opinions that they agreed to all our demands. We were paid by a quick transfer to our bank accounts before the event started, and then we received "envelopes" after the end of work – that is, the money that was given to us from the owners of the company for silence about the strike and the conditions in the company.

After working for Best Parties Ever, I moved to London. It was January 2016, and as you may know, finding a job in Great Britain between January and April each year was almost a miracle, even in metropolitan London. Once again I had to rely on simple, hard and badly paid jobs, at the bottom of the social ladder. Because at the same time I was interested in working conditions in the capitalist world capital – in addition to the intention of quick earning for rent, food and books – I used a qualitative research method which in social anthropology is called "participatory observation." I worked in places like food factories, production kitchens, drink bars, fast-food bars, pubs, hotels, events, clubs and also for low-, medium- and high-quality restaurants, as a production operator, runner, waiter, barman, kitchen assistant, kitchen porter, pantry chef, commis

chef, waiters' supervisor, and event manager. I worked mainly through employment agencies. Only three times I worked under a contract. As a result, for almost four years I worked in over 150 places related to gastronomy in London – from the city centre to the most distant zones, from high-class restaurants to the worst bars. Having unregulated working hours, which I arranged for myself, taking into account the state of my finances and my creative work in translating, writing and publishing, I "wandered" from place to place on the London map of gastronomy, depending on which agency sent me where.

The first job in London was a so-called "shitjob" at the Edler's Patisserie in Wimbledon – a factory producing biscuits, chocolate bars, and other sweets. No health and safety or hygiene regulations were observed. There were fights and quarrels between racist women from Poland and women from Africa. Dirt and mess reigned, supervisors were mostly from Central European countries, and the English managers didn't give a damn about anything. Just to go home quickly. Marek, a Polish supervisor was suspended from his duties for his racism. Before that, he fired my girlfriend from work for standing up for African women against racist attacks by Polish workers. The company merged with another one to increase profits as demand was rising and they moved the factory to Chichester.

London restaurants. Tourists from all over Britain, Europe and the world come to the capital of capitalism and pop culture to eat well in bars serving almost every dish in the world. Do you really want to eat there? Let us listen to some chefs who have spent the last 10–15 years in London restaurants, starting from the position of kitchen porter and ending with a chef's position.

Michal:

> If you look "under the carpet" there are tons of things that go against any work ethic. We had a mouse infestation in two of the places where I worked: Benugo at the Bishopsgate Institute and J&A Cafe at Farringdon. I was forced to kill 3-4 mice a day because the manager left glue-traps at night, and I was the first person to open a restaurant in the morning, so I was forced to kill, remove, and clean dead mice. Why should I have to do it, not some cleaner or ratcatcher?

I have also personally witnessed many anomalies in the workplaces I've been to, including dirt and dead animals. In the heart of London, hotel restaurants boasting a high standard of cleanliness had kitchens full of rats or mice, cockroaches, flies, and all kinds of insects. Not to mention out-of-date food ("so that nothing is wasted") or semi-finished products imitating "real" food.

Michal:

> The entire place was cross-contaminated by mice. The company prided itself on having everything fresh. Vegetables and fruits were kept outside, which had not been kept in refrigerators overnight, and were nibbled and pissed on by mice. Nobody washed anything there, neither vegetables or fruits – nothing. Of course, the nibbled items were asked to be thrown away ("hide it somewhere for a health and safety inspection") and that's it. It was in Benugo on Bishopsgate.

I met Michal at J&A Cafe in Farringdon where he worked as a

chef de partie and I was a kitchen porter for three months.

Michal:

> J&A Cafe was a private business run by Aoife and Johanna Ledwidge, two Irish sisters in Farringdon, London. This place was totally decimated by the mice that were on every level of the three-story building to the point where the vendors who came to us with food (such deliveries are delivered at 5-6 am), who had the keys to the building (some vendors leave it at the door, and some have the keys and leave those deliveries inside) were thrilled by this fact. One of them took me aside and said, "You have a plague of mice here. I don't know where to put these supplies in, because you'll have everything gnawed by them".

Darek, the head chef, over 10 years in London restaurants:

> When it comes to hygiene, it was, well, rather strange and creepy sometimes. In the backyard, just behind one of the bars in Hackney, a piece of pavement collapsed and a tunnel full of rats "opened up". The pest control man said the yard was "full of rats". I could imagine what was happening underneath all these buildings there and all over London. We had a storage in the basement which was nicknamed "where it smells like a dead rat" – there a dead, rotten rat was found between the floor and the ceiling. One pest control man told me that he "stopped eating meat because he saw 'a lot' in London restaurants." They saw so many creepy things that if you would

> even try to cheat them, you won't cheat them anyway, because they really, really saw "a lot".

Working conditions in many restaurants not only violate all health and safety regulations. The physical and mental health of bar and restaurant workers is often at risk. At J&A Cafe where I worked with Michal, we were crammed into literally a few square meters, where 3-4 chefs and a kitchen porter worked. The temperature during cooking and washing with the ovens and dishwasher on, reached several dozen degrees Celsius. In these inhumane conditions, kitchen workers were often drunk or under the influence of drugs, which the bar management paid no attention to.

Darek:

> I worked in a bar-cafe in Soho with vegan food. I have experienced first hand what it is like to work without a kitchen window. There was a terrible problem with the air supply, buildings in Soho are side by side. There I experienced a hot summer and it happened to me that after entering the kitchen after 5 minutes, after turning on all the air vents, turning on the stoves and starting cooking you just poured litres of sweat.

Michal:

> I worked in a top restaurant in central London, where after work the employees would drink until around 2 am and the next morning they went to work again at 6-7 am and came still drunk. I've been working with people who just staggered on their feet,drunk. A

> colleague of mine witnessed a guy getting so drunk during the service that he pissed under himself. And he was cooking non-stop, all the time! I worked in places where the owners knew perfectly well that the employees were like that. The head chefs do the same – they also drink a lot, they also come to work with a heavy hangover. We worked in a place where the owners, that is, the people who owned this business, who paid us our salaries, who should take care that our clients had fresh food delivered, who should take care that the workplace was safe, they didn't really care about any work standards at all. They ignored it completely. We worked with our colleague who was drinking brandy while he was working: he drank a bottle of brandy and continued to work. We worked with people who drank a dozen beers until 3 in the morning and came to work in the morning, snorting a dash of cocaine on their way to work to somehow stay on their feet.

The normal thing in restaurants is to shift responsibilities and increase duties without any chance of winning a raise in salaries. Each question about a salary raise usually ends with the dismissal and employment of another person who "will not cause problems.

Darek:

> In a cafe on Hackney, I asked for a salary raise. The entire management gathered to debate my obvious request. I told myself that if it was less than £ 1 more I would quit my job. They sent me an email saying they

> would give me a 50p raise. I didn't even write back to them. The head chef and most of the employees had already left. On top of that, they wanted my own recipes for gluten-free and vegan dishes that I had proposed for this restaurant. Moreover, they wanted to pay me in... overtime! Eventually, the cafe was closed by the owner of the tenement house. It was an interesting place after all and interesting people working there, interested in art and culture.

Michal:

> On my job as a chef, the only one who earns proper money is the owner of the premises. Anyone who is "under him": head chefs, executive managers, waiters, kitchen porters have no proper profits. This is bloody hard work in damn hard conditions, from which, despite some financial benefits, you have no other gainings, because it's hard to distance yourself from this type of work. This is a job that is "taken home" with you. French labour law protects the employee so much that during your day-off no employer has the right to send you an email or text message related to work, and shifts for employees are scheduled long in advance to be able to plan something. Just compare this situation to London, where I finished a shift at 11 pm and didn't know my rota for the next week, which started in an hour!

I myself experienced a similar situation while working at Vinoteca in Chiswick as a kitchen porter. When we arranged the

rota with the other kitchen porter, and I passed it on to the head chef, that kitchen porter for some reason unknown to me forgot about it. In February 2020 I went on a short holiday – the first one since August 2019 except Christmas break. On the first day of my holiday, I received complaints on the shared WhatsApp list from a Russian woman who worked in the kitchen for not cleaning a pot, and the other kitchen porter was sending me abusive messages on Messenger, threatening and insolently lecturing me. My one and an only short holiday in six months were destroyed by nasty restaurant employees, probably incited by the venue manager, Sandro, an alcoholic with "swinging moods". Snitching on, grassing up, creating intrigues and gossip, fomenting division among employees is normal in this business on every level, no matter if it's a high-class restaurant or a dive-bar.

Michal:

> During 10 years of work in gastronomy, I have worked with many chefs. I met about 150-200 people in various restaurants, both people with whom I worked regularly, that is, a year or two in one kitchen, also people I met at events or on agency shifts. On the fingers of one hand, I can count those who have arranged their personal lives or some standard of living with which they are satisfied. 99% of the people in this business are lost: they are people who drink, take drugs, are damaged, exhausted, stressed, have damaged nerves, shattered personal lives. I know people who worked 100-120 hours a week for Michelin Star restaurants, some of them having to do cocaine several times a day to keep up the pace and

function normally.

Darek:

> When I was working at Brick Lane, we were given a lot of responsibilities. If the health and safety regulations should be followed, some things would be almost impossible: deliveries that arrived at night were left under the building, at the emergency exit, which we brought to the bar in the morning before the shift began. Once, when a health and safety inspector visited us, he ordered us to throw everything away, because according to British law, we cannot keep food like that. As it was very busy, there was no time to clean the dishwasher, so in a short period of time, several hundred plates were rinsed in the perpetually dirty dishwasher (we called it "mud rinsing").
>
> After 4–5 years of this work, I was fed up with working in large companies. There I had to work with meat, even though I indicated that I am vegan and I don't want to do it, but that was over ten years ago and it was hard to find strict vegan restaurants back then. Working in a restaurant is often long working hours, there is no time for private life. I used to come in at 10 am, but I finished very late at night and missed a lot of things: concerts, meetings, parties, it's hard to enjoy London life then.

I have not had proper training in any of the restaurants where I worked as well. Usually, I had to guess what to do, and often, driven to irritation due to the stupidity and ignorance of

managers, I would get into arguments and slurs. When I was working for the agency, a few times I just walked out in the middle of the shift, saying goodbye with vulgar words. Employment agencies also ignored it, because they knew perfectly well where they sent their employees, so the advantage was that I didn't have to come back to some places again. In one of the production kitchens, I had to regularly hear and watch vulgar slurs from the head chef towards the other chefs. Harassment, insults, aggression, hostility – this is an integral part of work in London gastronomy.

Darek:

> I had one of the jobs on Old Street, where the owners wanted to combine a cafe with a bicycle service. The downside was that I was still traumatized after working in the bars in the City and I didn't like the fact that during the lunchtime it was packed with people, terribly overloaded. The people were great because they hired young people, hipsters, but we got along well and there were interesting people to go for a beer, a coffee with. It was fair that we changed positions: everyone worked as a chef and as a kitchen porter. But the kitchen was very badly arranged. It was similar when the same owners opened a second bar in Hackney. It was also very busy there, some people couldn't bear it mentally: one girl cried because someone didn't come to work once and she had to work for two people. One of the owners was choleric which was terrible for the staff. He often had outbursts and "swinging moods".
>
> With the owners, I often talked about bad training

> of new employees, who were often put into a new position without proper training. It irritated me that I had to take care of the kitchen at the same time when taking care of the delivery goods – which usually took me an hour – and on top of that training new employees, explaining all the nuances to them, and above all, to completely clean the bar before the service. Often, new employees were surprised by my attitude. When you work with people who already have some experience, 3-4 years in different places, you can see immediately what kitchens they have gone through, since they cannot maintain the correct standards. Starting from not washing your hands, to ignoring the 'no cross-contamination' principle, and even not knowing the colours of the boards. Most people didn't even know how to keep food in refrigerators and not mix vegetables and meat, for example!

Managers, especially guys with hang-ups and frustrations, are very often pushed into managerial positions by business owners so that those at the top have "clean hands" because the dirtiest job is done by those who are in the lower ranks of the power machine. They often exceed their competencies and use their power to unload their problems on employees. At Vinoteca, I had a constant war with a venue manager. Once, when we were returning from the smoking area, he closed the door and refused to let me into the restaurant, and another time he wrongly accused me of giving him dirty cutlery – on that day he had a huge hangover, he told everyone about it in the morning. When I protested in this regard to prove him wrong ("the manager

is always right, because he is a manager") as a "revenge" he threw a small saucer of olive oil into a container with clean plates. Of course, I didn't hesitate to take a beautiful "artistic" photo of this dense green mud by my phone and post it to social media as an example. One evening, out of his laziness he did not want to put a fork into a box of dirty dishes, so he threw it from a distance aiming at my head. He could clearly see the fork bounced off my head and landed under the cupboard. He couldn't do too much, because as a kitchen porter, I was under the aegis of the head chef, a nice young man just starting a career in this dirty and rude business. It was only thanks to him that this job was bearable because as a beginner he was still idealistic about his profession and tried to be fair to everyone. It wasn't about the venue manager doing everything he could to get me fired but his lack of understanding, the excess of alcohol drinking and too many duties prevented him from creating an intelligent plot. I even witnessed a random conversation between him and other restaurant employees when he made threats about me. The lockdown during COVID-19 came to his help - and for me.

But let's see the story of Michal who was rudely and unjustly fired from Mildred's Dalston restaurant.

Michal:

> It seems to us that we have a piece of paper called a contract, but it is in no way obliging to anything because if someone wants to get rid of someone, they will get rid of them in one way or another. Any evidence can be fabricated afterwards. I was the victim of this "procedure" two or three times in London.

So was I. During the pandemic, at the behest of the venue manager, I was dismissed without cause. When I spoke to the head chef, I pointed out that after the pandemic I was ready to go back to work, although my initial plan was to only work until the end of July (The venue manager later claimed that on February 20th I gave a two-week notice, which is obviously not true, because there is no such thing as a two-week notice, but a month's notice, and besides, during my conversation with the head chef we agreed that I would work until the end of July). In March and April, a secretary from Vinoteca deceived me with evasive e-mails. They probably wanted to collect 'furlough' for me from the British government without paying me anything. I wrote an email on several points, asking for a detailed description of the situation and threatening them with a lawyer, I demanded a P45. In 2 days I had a P45 and an email with fabricated evidence full of lies and distortions. And that was information, of course, from the venue manager.

Michał dispels my doubts as to notice:

> A contract that you get also does not guarantee anything, because your notice period is twice as long as the employer's notice period in relation to you, e.g. a pub has a notice period of 2 weeks, and you can give 4 weeks notice. The longer you work, the more this period becomes. British labor law favors employers, not employees because if you do not work in a given place for two years, you have fewer rights.
>
> I had a situation when I was working in one of the top places, Nopi Restaurant in central London. The head chef wanted to get rid of me because my son was just born. I became an uncomfortable employee

in the business. They were pushing me to work 65 hours a week. The head chef wanted to skip the entire grievance procedure and gave me a piece of paper to sign. I called the manager with a complaint, but I was mentally forced to leave my job. In London, if someone wants to get rid of someone from work, they are often overloaded with duties, or vice versa: you take all the duties off someone, that you then feel like a "redundant" person at work and you can clearly sense the negative energy that is directed at you . Nobody will help you at work either, because everyone is afraid for their ass. There is no longer any employee solidarity in the workplace, everyone is selfish and only thinks about their piece of cake, from which they can get something.

I worked from March 2019 to February 2020 at Mildred's on Dalston Junction which is the oldest vegetarian restaurant in the United Kingdom. There was a change in the position of head chef and the new head chef suddenly began to cut my working hours drastically. I did not receive any complaint, no warning - neither oral nor written - during this year there was not a single complaint against me, not a single warning. Out of 4 shifts, the company cut it to 1 or even no shifts and I was left without any source of income overnight. I wrote to Sarah Wasserman, Head of Development, who informed me orally that I was fired and that she would not give me any more details about my dismissal, and only the people at Human Resources and Payroll would do. They obviously didn't know anything, as well as

> the general manager for the entire Mildreds chain. When I wrote to HR, Payroll and the general manager, I got the reply that they didn't know anything about it. After 9 months of very good service and work, I got kicked out just because I was asking about cutting my shifts. Only and solely because I stood up for my rights as an employee. I had to find out for myself why I was fired. All the evidence against me was fabricated after the fact.
>
> I asked a woman from Human Resources about the grievance procedure and the employee handbook in an email. It turned out that the oldest vegetarian restaurant in the UK, in the 21st century, in London, in a country that fought for employment rights, has neither a grievance procedure nor an employee handbook, and the company cannot even fire you properly and you need to ask for it. My personal dignity and that of an employee have been trampled underfoot. People in the UK often say "work ethic, work ethic", they like to wipe their lips with it a lot, but most employment relationships in the UK are against any ethics. This is a modern form of slavery.

Long after the interviews were done, Michal sent me an e-mail that can be a perfect summing up of the subject:

> People in this dirty business love to explain themselves with "business needs", "procedures" and in fact, it is an obvious lie and cover-up with the company's image. They pretend it's never anything personal – in fact, it's just the opposite. The "face" of

the company and its "needs" is a typical slogan that everyone wipes their mouths with when they want to fire you just to get rid of the moral ballast. You should point the finger at all bar and restaurant managers and say: you are all personally responsible for all this, not the companies.

Diary of a Doorman

Nick Francis

My work before Covid-19

When Covid-19 hit I had been working as a door supervisor (read: bouncer) for almost a year to the day. The job provided about 60% of my income, with the rest coming from odd jobs I worked everything from admin support to site labouring, removals, and gardening. Some weeks I could work as little as 15 hours, others as much as 70 hours. I was self employed, so I had no holiday or sick pay entitlement: if I didn't work I didn't get paid. As difficult as that can sometimes be, I still preferred it to being on a PAYE contract[31] or working a 9 to 5.

Door supervisors tend to work for security companies that offer their services to multiple venues across a city. The other door supervisors who worked alongside me were in a similar position.We are all self-employed and many work a variety of different jobs throughout the week. For example, one I know is a wealthy tradesman who works the door for a bit of extra cash, another is a migrant postman working to keep a roof over his family's head. Rates of pay are agreed individually

between the security company and the door supervisor rather than their being a standard rate for the job. Security is provided at blue chip venues, hotels, posher bars and clubs, and high class corporate events. Some staff are GMB members, but I couldn't say exactly what percentage. The workforce is diverse in terms of ethnicity and nationality, but I could count the number of women who worked alongside me on one hand.

Job loss

On Wednesday 18th March my boss told me via WhatsApp that my door supervision shifts had been cancelled for the foreseeable future.

I worked at a bar and the last couple of weekends had been surprisingly busy. The bar staff get a bonus £60 if they manage to sell over a specific amount on any one night, and they had made it both times. So it wasn't a decision taken because the owners were making losses. Presumably the government's offer of a business rates holiday and loans must have given them the confidence that they could close and not face a crippling financial hit.

So, I was one of probably hundreds of thousands of security and bar staff that found themselves suddenly unemployed. When we were working, I imagine that more or less all of us were on insecure contracts or bogus self-employment.

Luckily, I still had an account open with Universal Credit.[32] January and February are always fallow periods for work so I had signed on back in December. The payments over the winter had helped supplement my income from door work, and I had been able to convince my work coach that after March I would be back on my feet with a minimum 40 hours work a week. I

was all ready for them to close my account down by the time Corona hit Britain, and I thank God they hadn't got round to it. If they had, I'd have found myself in a queue of 500,000 people. An announcement was sent out to existing Universal Credit claimants explaining that they were going to prioritise getting new applications onto the system and forget about us for a bit.

ASDA (19th/20th March)

Despite being told by Universal Credit that they wouldn't be chasing me up to look for jobs, I chose to go out and look for work. Universal Credit payments just about covered the rent, bills, council tax, and food, but didn't leave any money to pay off overdrafts, debts, or for any emergencies. I saw a few posts on Facebook that said Asda were doing a massive recruitment drive to keep up with new demand. These posts seemed to be made from the personal accounts of Asda HR managers at stores across the country, finding their way into local gossip and buy/sell groups on Facebook. I went along to my local Asda and was directed to the customer help desk. I was quickly joined by three young men, all who were looking for work. We were all told to come back the next day.

I returned the next day to the customer service desk. There were already around ten people waiting. We were led upstairs to the staff area. On the way I got chatting to an older woman who had just been laid off from her job at Debenhams. I met two other door supervisors who had been banking on working big events over the summer which would have earnt them nearly half of their yearly wage. Some I spoke to had been bar staff at venues that had closed down.

There were almost a hundred potential new recruits crammed into the staff kitchen. The majority of them looked under 25. While we waited for our induction we had to give the Asda employees our passports to be scanned and fill out a couple of forms. Social distancing or any additional hygiene measures were not being observed and passports and forms were handed between dozens of people. I had to wait two hours until my group of fifteen were piled into an even smaller room to undergo our Asda induction.

We were met by a David Brent like caricature of a manager[33] who explained to us why we were there. ''Asda'', he said, ''has been broken''. The problem was not that there was not enough stuff being made: the producers had managed to keep up with increased demand. The issue was getting the commodities from the lorries into the cages and then onto the shelves. It was a logistics problem, not a manufacturing one. We were given the standard work spiel about good practice, how to efficiently stack shelves, the companies 'values' and so on. When the induction had finished I made my way towards the nearest Wetherspoons for what would turn out to be my final burger for some months.

While waiting to hear back from Asda I was contacted by one of my other employers who needed a second man for some removal jobs. He had predicted (correctly) that there would be a mad rush of removals at the beginning of lockdown and then a quiet period throughout lockdown.

Many of the bigger removals companies had already shut up shop, leading to customers frantically phoning around trying to find someone to move their stuff. There were some people who needed to move as a matter of urgency. Losing a job, escaping from an abusive partner, or having signed all the papers to move into a new house and only to be dropped at the last minute by

their removal company. These were arduous ten to twelve hour days, moving two houses a day. At this point I had no idea if I'd be offered any more work, or get any benefits, and so I was taking every hour I could.

Going *out* to work, especially in the early days of Covid-19, caused some tensions at home. My housemates were in a position where they could work from home. They were understandably very worried about me going out, potentially contracting the virus, and then bringing it back into the house. Eventually we agreed that it was my right to go out and work.

Security Work

I got a call early on a Saturday morning asking me to go into Asda for an induction. I was already on my way to a removal job and asked them if I could come in the next day. They said they'd be in contact but I never heard back from them. I wasn't too worried as I'd already been in contact with one of my doorman colleagues about some potential security work at a small supermarket.

A few days later he got in touch again about starting work there. It's a bit of an unusual place: an ethical cooperative, rather than a Tesco express. But the job wouldn't be that unusual, just working on the doors a couple of days a week to keep numbers of customers in the shop at a certain level, enforce social distancing measures, and ensure that customers took baskets and used hand sanitizer. The wages were good (better than I would have earned at the bar) and the staff were incredibly sweet and caring. This was hands down the kindest and most good natured workforce I've ever worked with. Hippies are alright really.

The vast majority of customers were also pleasant and compliant. Although some clearly didn't like being told what to do. There were a few ejections and banning orders for customers being rude, abusive, threatening and not following the rules - but these were few and far between.

Probably the most interesting type of customer I came across were the "conspiraloons." I've always been fascinated by conspiracy theories and so was more amenable than most to listening to them rant on. One woman told me that the whole Covid-19 thing had been planned decades in advance by The Pilgrims Society (who include everyone from the Royal Family to Henry Kissinger). Another anti-vaxxer wanted to give me a DVD and started talking about the Zeitgeist films. The conversation ended with us agreeing that it's probably a good idea to nationalise pharmaceuticals and the banks. We had to ban one woman who consistently caused issues in the shop. She returned the next day to chastise me for denying her right to buy organic food. Another lady with anti-5G leaflets was incandescent with rage at the use of my number clicker (although, to be fair, she wasn't sure what it was at first). These are just a handful of cases. At least once a shift there would be a customer who mentioned some sort of conspiracy to me.

Labouring

While I was only working two or three days a week doing security at the supermarket, the rest of my time was spent labouring on a small building job. Removals had dried up by this point. There isn't too much to say on this point. My work continued as normal and as I was only working with one other person social distancing wasn't too much of a problem. The only

issue was getting access to building materials. Covid-19 had severely disrupted supply chains and merchants were operating on reduced hours, so some materials took a lot longer to come in and others weren't available at all.

Boris Bucks

I was delighted to hear the announcement of a people's bailout package for self-employed people from "Red Rishi Sunak"[34] (dubbed either the "Sunak Package" or simply "Boris Bucks"[35]). As my earnings had technically been disrupted by Covid-19, I was eligible for the grant. The actual process of applying for the grant took less than five minutes and within a few days I had a huge chunk of money in my bank account.

The payout was calculated from 80% of my earnings for the last three years. As I had earnt a fair amount between 2016-19 (more than I'm on at the moment), I was quids in. For those of us who could continue to work cash-in-hand throughout Covid-19 (or who could find alternative employment, but still prove that their normal business work had been disrupted by the crisis) we could do very well financially. My heart went out to all those self-employed people on normal incomes who had quite rightly diddled their taxes and couldn't work throughout lockdown, therefore getting a fraction of what they actually needed. But for me, the pandemic was practically a business opportunity.

Covid-19, Combat Sports, and BLM

When I'm not working, I train at a local combat sports gym. It's a multidisciplinary place that specialises in striking. All sorts train there: everyone from beginners to older guys trying to stay in shape, top quality professional fighters, and more. It's a diverse place, too. In a pretty white city, I train alongside a fair few Muslim guys and immigrants from everywhere, from Europe to Iran, Bangladesh and Tajikistan.

I'm only an amateur. Training helps me stay fit and it can be useful for work. Lots of doormen train down at combat sports clubs. It's how I got my job; the head coach knew the manager of the security company I work for and got me the job.

All combat sports clubs are struggling to stay open at the moment. One local club had to close its doors after the landlord doubled the rent, despite the club being unable to trade due to lockdown measures. The sense from trainers and gym owners is that the "UK's combat sports and fitness industries are being left to die.'' As the pandemic has gone on, their confidence in the government's ability to support gyms is waning. If gyms like mine did go to the wall, it would be a real social problem. Our gym offers free kids classes to many. I know of others that do this too. They bring arsehole kids down to size and teach mutual respect. It's an important place for the community.

I sometimes talk politics with the people down there. Most people's points of reference are all over the place. The best analogy I have for it is like Joe Rogan, and how he picks things up from everywhere with no coherent framework to tie it together. Just a hodgepodge of ideas from fifty different sources, some left wing, some right wing, some outright loony. Everyone shares a base line of anti-racism, though. It might come

from the diversity of the gym. We're all training for fights and working alongside each other every day. There is a great camaraderie at the club. There has to be when you are punching each other in the face three times a week.

On June 14th, there was a big BLM (Black Lives Matter) demo in town. The crowd was very young, with an average age of about 20 - making me feel weirdly old. When I looked around I could see lots of people from the gym. Whilst I was there a part of the crowd broke off and started going on a mooch looking for "the EDL.". They were all young kids, but they still knew what the EDL (English Defence League) was - even though it's not been a functional street organisation for years and years. I think in this case it was acting as a cypher for young black and asian youth to describe any organised racists. On the day, though, they did not find anyone to have a pop at.

I think the general common sense amongst the people I train with is that kind of broad, socially liberal: "we're all the human race" type thing. They saw BLM as a protest for equality rather than as a protest against any particular system or opponent. In America they're fighting cops, but here most participants are just being generally anti-racist. Not that that's a bad thing. It was impressive to see how proud everyone was of the necessary anti-racism and egalitarianism of a combat sports gym. Ethnic and racial differences disappear when you get into the ring. You can't be racist to your training partners, it doesn't work that way.

Conclusion

The first two months of Covid-19 felt like a new reality. The streets were dead and the buses were empty. Even though it was only a few months ago, while writing this it's hard for me to properly remember the dreamlike state I was in. It was a real interregnum for most people, but I was still out working as normal. I don't think mine was a typical experience of your average worker throughout the Covid-19 period. People in low income PAYE work with family to look after have been completely fucked, but I got away pretty unscathed.

I feel lucky to have actually done well out of this period. This is down to me being a single young man and having a variety of different jobs, many which pay cash in hand and which are considered essential employment.

Over the last month I've noticed a big pushback from self-employed people, and people employed at the margins of the economy, against "going cashless." The crisis seems to have pushed many to embrace some pretty looney ideas. People have a sense that they are getting fucked over. They are being told what to do by the new petty enforcers of social distancing rules like me, they are losing their jobs and businesses are closing. There is a correlation between people opposing the move to a cashless society and the people embracing conspiracy theories around Covid-19. These ideas provide some sort of explanation and rationalisation as to why this is happening. The people around me at work are grasping for something to explain their lives, and the answers they are finding usually have something to do with 5G.

If there has been any light throughout this period it has been in the BLM movement. It suddenly stirred people from a state

of passivity and inactivity into engaging in real political action. It tied in wider layers of society than any movement I had ever seen before in my political lifetime. No other politics ever ended up as a topic of discussion down at the gym.

Now, night time venues are opening up again I'm going back on the door. I'm looking forward to seeing my colleagues and the customers. I'm uncertain as to how long my employment will last, however. A second lockdown or an outbreak of Covid-19 could leave me jobless again very quickly. Luckily the money I've saved over the period will provide me with some safety net if this should happen, but it is never nice to not have even some job security.

The work that helps you get back to streaming

Igor Burtan

Who's speaking?

I work as a customer service representative at an international call centre operating for a global video streaming platform. Yes, Netflix. I am not hired directly by Netflix though. I used to be, when I started, but at the beginning of 2019 the whole operation was sold and outsourced to an external customer relations company, a Benelux division of a global German corporation. All employment contracts were transferred together with the ownership of the Amsterdam site.

The Amsterdam site delivers customer service in multiple languages covering the EMEA business region (Europe, Middle East and Africa). The streaming platform's customer services are spread out between several call centres all over the world. We work in massive open-space environments covering almost all of a 12-floor building near Sloterdijk station in Amsterdam. We sit at desks that are grouped in "islands", typically of 6 or 7 desks, divided by small separation walls from other desks to

filter some noise out. Those groups of desks don't necessarily reflect teams. we move around and sit at a desk we find not yet taken, bringing to the desk, from a locker nearby, a box with our tools – a headset, a personal electronic identification key to sign into the system on computers (there is a Chromebox, two screens, a keyboard and a mouse at every desk).

We are available to take calls straight from the start of the shift. We take only incoming calls – Netflix does not call anyone back. We solve customers' problems (from Netflix freezing on their devices to failed payments to hijacked accounts) by being connected to an immense searchable database of user accounts and technical knowledge about all sorts of devices, as well as errors and issues that can possibly happen on them. We, the 1st line of support (CSR1) workers, look for a solution by searching the database for the most up-to-date information about that issue and steps to solve it. When we cannot figure out the solution to the problem, we escalate for help to the 2nd line of support (CSR2), a much smaller set of experienced, tech savvy agents who take on our escalations and have access to a more restricted database of new issues and errors that are still being researched by Technical Research teams, the solutions to which have not yet been concluded, and are subject to more research. There are around 400, more or less (the numbers fluctuate) of CSR1 and CSR2 agents on our site. The gross pay per month for a CSR1 is $2100, before any additions for work on weekends or holidays.

Even on teams that support English language, many of us are not native speakers. Recruiters have a preference for bi- or tri-lingual people, and native Anglo-Saxons rarely are. The reason for recruiters to have such a preference is that having people who speak fluent English along with at least one more language

at the same level of mastery, gives them more flexible resources at their disposal. Work volumes fluctuate all the time and they do so unevenly – some markets get busier, while others get dull, for reasons very specific to those markets. A multilingual workforce can be shifted around, switched from German or Dutch or Romanian or Polish to English, and vice versa, without having to hire and train someone new again. Instead of having to suffer someone else suddenly doing nothing for half a day, or even for weeks, they can promptly move them from one language team to another or simply switch the language in which they receive calls.

So, who are we? Most agents are young, in their twenties, in their early thirties, a few are around forty. There are agents from the Netherlands, they cover almost uniquely the Dutch market which is small but the most popular method of payment in the country (what they call an iDeal payment) often fails or produces processing delays and therefore generates disproportionately more customer calls than payments from most other countries. There are agents from Romania and Poland as well as from the UK and Canada, occasionally from Australia and South Africa, and an odd one from the US, every now and then. They are often young, in Amsterdam to discover Europe or with someone they moved here with. There are teams of Turkish people, but they handle Turkish only – it's quite a big market and one where people like to make a phone call quite a lot. There are also agents from Germany, Sweden and Finland, and quite recently new teams were added: Czech and Hungarian. Teams are of varying sizes, from around 12 to maybe 19. There is a significant number of Greeks, even though their language is not supported from the site. This may be because there are, in general, quite a few young

immigrants from the crisis-stricken country in Amsterdam. As is probably a rule in customer services everywhere, the workforce is predominantly female. I have no way to make a reliable calculation but from my observations I'd estimate the women to men ratio as somewhere around 7:3.

There are more patterns, some quite peculiar, that one can observe when comparing different teams and "origin countries" of agents. Among teams and agents from peripheral European countries (Eastern Europe and Greece), there tends to be more men than among "Western" teams and agents. Average age of agents is higher in Eastern European and Turkish teams, as well as a number of agents aged around 40. It seems to reflect a discrepancy of job opportunities based on national and ethnic origin, in the Netherlands just like in any other "Western" EU country, despite all the lip service paid to open borders and equal treatment. Agents from the UK, Germany, Netherlands, and Nordic countries are younger, sometimes it's their first job, or only an adventure. They quit after a few months, or more often after just a year, because they go to university, can find other, better employment, and can do so more easily than those from Eastern Europe or Greece or Turkey.

We, Eastern Europeans, Turks and Greeks, often have no choice but to stay in this job for long, to take this job despite having master's degrees or years of work experience, sometimes even in what is commonly referred to as "professional" occupations. One Romanian agent has worked in film production back home. Another one was a marketing manager. A Polish worker used to work in web and media localisation. One tried to be a journalist back home. A Lithuanian woman, who just left because she couldn't take some types of customers any longer, had a degree in supply chain management. Someone's

got a degree in anthropology. Some were English teachers back home. And so on.

Hidden work

Our work affects, in the first place, obviously, Netflix customers who are struggling with a problem, which they cannot or don't know how to fix. But here's the thing: only 2% of all Netflix users globally ever contact the company's customer service. Like many online platforms, everything is designed so that everything goes as smoothly as possible and a user does everything for herself. The most important target on the basis of which our individual and team performances are measured is what we know as Return Call Rate (RCR) – how many customers have to call back within 7 days. We are supposed to keep that rate as low as possible, the target being 15%. Our ideal is to get everything fixed in one call, even if it takes an hour, as long as they don't need to call again. For a platform with hundreds of millions of users globally, the less actual service its customers need, the less resources it takes and those resources can go to more directly "productive" parts of the business (developing the IT side of the platform, apps for more devices, improving their functionalities and removing bugs; producing and commissioning content, acquiring content licenses).

What if the biggest secret of our job is that, in a way, assisting customers, is only a mask for something else where the real value that we "produce" for Netflix lies? After all, we are trained and constantly reminded to assist customers in such a way that they ideally never need to call again, and most technical errors on most devices already have instructions on how to fix them – published, ready for everyone to use, on the company's Help

Centre pages. The customer is meant to do most of the work themselves. It's as if we were there in order to minimise any need for our own work in future.

Perhaps we are some sort of foot soldiers on the frontline of information gathering. We mark each call with a category of the issue that brought the customer to the phone – to create statistics for trends. We tag calls with specific hashtags for problems too narrow for those categories or for issues that are currently being investigated (like, how many people get through to us in a language that we do not support yet, or outside the hours during which we support those languages at the moment, what languages are they, and what product feedback do the customers give). We have a chat channel specifically for reporting these things, and whenever a new trend is spotted, other agents leave marks to confirm if they also just have had similar cases or where to add more context that transpired from their contacts.

We report that payments suddenly keep failing from one specific market and when this is spotted, we can dig deeper, ask the next customer having the same issue for more context, like what type of card they use, or which bank issued this card, has she already spoken to the bank and what the bank said.

Maybe even more crucial element of the information-gathering aspect of our job is when we encounter a new error, or an error not so new but one that suddenly doesn't get fixed the way it used to, or started happening on devices that it never happened on before. A CSR1 then escalates to a CSR2 who opens up a ticket that the research team may already have on the new behaviour or, if not, reports the new behaviour. We then start collecting more information from other customers reporting the issue, as well as try and test with them troubleshooting

steps that Netflix IT guys want to try out. Sometimes the customer, if he or she is willing to cooperate, may be called back, in an arranged timeframe, after this initial information undergoes some preliminary analysis, by a technical researcher who will then continue with more advanced research, while having the affected customer in front of their affected device.

This is why it feels like even though we are officially doing customer service, the real value that Netflix extracts from us is much higher and totally different, and lies in reality in that information assembly process. The work of information research got outsourced not only onto outsourced agents paid only for customer service, but also clandestinely onto the customer who believes he's just being assisted.

Discipline and punish

Some ways through which we are being kept disciplined are technological, through the use of electronic tools. Our time is logged and recorded throughout the day. Have we been logged in and ready to call from the very first minute of our shift, and if not, how many minutes late were we? Have we exceeded our lunch break by a minute or two (we've got 30 minutes)? Have we exceeded the time we've got for small breaks throughout the shift (3x10 minutes if on an 8 hours shift)? Those small breaks are not up for grabs whenever we want or need them, they are planned for us by the workforce management team whose main concern is to ensure sufficient coverage in accordance with market predictions based on historical, statistical data (what days in what months are busier, or less busy, at what times of the day).

If we need an urgent break at other times of our shift – say,

for the toilet – we have the right to take it by changing our status in the system we are logged into to Personal Care. But beware, your right to it is very limited and you may have to explain yourself if you do so too often. It is largely discretional, based on your relationship with your Team Leader. And you keep in the back of your head that if you use it too much, this may one day be used against you. When the end of your current contract approaches and market predictions say that there are currently a bit too many agents and letting some of them go would be beneficial for the business, HR may use this as one of the factors to determine who's not going to have their contract extended.

Other ways of keeping the workforce disciplined are linked to that very fact: that most CSR1s and a good number of CSR2s are working on the basis of fixed-term contracts. That is how everyone is initially hired: one-month probation, 6 months for the first contract, 8 months for the second and 9 months for the third one.

If the volumes drop significantly and prediction algorithms don't see them picking up again any time soon, nothing easier than to locate a number of agents whose current contracts are about to expire, be it next month, or the following one. They are going to hear some excuse about why their contracts cannot be extended. "You've been on Personal Care breaks too often"; "You've lasted too long on dead air calls" (instead of hanging up after 30 seconds);"You didn't integrate enough with the team" - these are all real reasons people were given. There is little room for promotion – out of almost 400 agents on the site, perhaps 8 of them, maybe 9, got a promotion last year, mostly to the role of CSR2. Promotions to Team Leader or to other departments, like workforce management or administration, are much rarer.

Organise, organise not

We are grouped into teams but these teams don't work together much, as strange as this may sound. They are mainly a framework for individual management by team leaders and by the software that monitors our performance and time adherence. Within each team, shifts are distributed in a way that its members cover all seven days of the week and the whole span of business hours for their language on the site. If the team has, say, 15 members, each month every member will have two days a week off. Their shifts will also start and end at different times, as smaller languages may have shorter support hours than English. We can't just leave work at the same time and stay together for a pint in the nearest pub or bar. We can't just arrange for all of us to meet somewhere at the same time, without some of us taking a day off, some swapping their shifts with someone else, and so on. It takes a while to learn names of your team members in such conditions, not to mention get to know one another and create meaningful bonds.

Workers who have to take so long to get to know one another won't set up a union any time soon. Hence we are not unionised and haven't had a pay rise in years. But it's a double-edged sword. A workplace full of hundreds of workers totally estranged, alienated from one another, is not great in the long run either. Eventually, the risk grows of everyone not giving a toss about anything anymore, nobody helping anyone, nobody caring about personal and team targets.

One remedy to this risk is "projects". One would need to raise the idea with a Team Leader, have it written down to fit the format designed for those ideas, and ask for approval. These projects can range from something very creative – like making

an internal newsletter or organising an exhibition for artworks made by employees – to something very organisational.

The insidious thing about this, on the side of the company, is that it turns a lot of tasks, from admin to organisation to team building, into something that can just be outsourced to people paid only for their customer service job. In the end, this is one reason why the company can do with so few promotions: so much work that would otherwise require promoting people to other departments or roles, and giving them a pay rise, gets done by agents who never get either.

One reason why people take up these projects is that they give us a break from the monotony of speaking to customers 8 hours a day. The other one is that agents realise that they need to gain "visibility" if they ever want to get noticed and appreciated enough to stand a chance when applying for a promotion. They have to get involved, be seen, be proactive, be inventive - even though projects are, quite possibly, precisely the reason why there can be so few promotions. While, not enough of it can deprive you of your next contract, can make you a target of your team leader's complaints. I'd call it additional emotional extortion.

It is hard to implement any form of collective resistance in these conditions. Atomising shifts distribution, competition in "engagement", fear of not getting the contract extended when it expires, huge rotation of staff.

The only ways to resist, then, remain just as individualistic and lonely as the work itself. Some come to refuse to be nice to awful or irritating customers. Or speak for too long, even during an hour, to a particularly nice customer. Some may also change their status in the system to After Contact Work, designed for the situations when you have to complete doing something

(leave notes on the accounts, close all tabs and actions on a complicated investigation) when in fact they don't have any more actions to complete. Just to have a moment of quiet, just to be able to step away from the desk and get a coffee or a snack – as this status stops new calls from coming in. The advantage of this status is that when the statistics of your work and time adherence are later aggregated, this status leaves no trace in them, these minutes go counted as Busy work, the same as when you actually speak to someone, no difference. The disadvantage – or the risk – is that when you are on that status, you may be caught by a particularly keen team leaders or Real Time Analysts. Other individual resistance strategies involve distancing oneself from work, learning to think of it as temporary, and soon start looking for another job, hoping it will come.

The most radical of those personal strategies is claiming that one is experiencing a burn-out. This is treated very seriously by Dutch doctors and the Dutch state. The work may be so draining mentally and emotionally that it is not so difficult to convince a doctor that you are experiencing a burn-out and some agents go for it as an act of ultimate resistance. In some extreme cases agents stay on this burn-out sick leave for a number of months, and use this time to restore their sanity, apply for other jobs, prepare and go to interviews.

Transitions

As I said earlier, I was initially employed by Netflix itself, by its Customer Service division. Later it was announced to us that the whole site would be sold off, and then operations outsourced, to another entity, an outsourcing customer service

division of Bertelsmann that was still seeking a new name in a massive merging/rebranding coup. Our employment contracts were meant to be transferred, with all conditions unchanged, if we agreed to be part of the transfer. We could say no and go somewhere else, or accept and sign new contracts. Those who did accept were to receive a retention bonus, equal to one month's salary, spread-out in three monthly instalments after the official transition. This is one example of an individual resistance strategy: many agents stayed as long as the retention bonus was paid out, and left just after.

What we've experienced from almost day one of this transition is that ways were being sought to deliver the same service while squeezing more out of us. This must have been the most significant expertise of our new employer.

Booking any time off suddenly became a challenge. Balances of time available were taking forever to update from one system to another, making agents lose a lot of room we had previously had with planning our future holidays or just days off. It was enough that we were constantly confused as to how many days off we still had available to take within our current contract and our requests were delayed or interrupted by an impressive avalanche of errors in the system. Intended or not, it was yet another de facto tool of increasing the rate of our exploitation, forcing us to suspend or constrain our requests for holidays or just single days off until the new system was clarified.

During a few months of this transition, an incredible amount of errors and delays happened to our overtime and extra pay : portions of the salary paid a week or a month later, overtime gone missing from the calculations, "under investigation" for months. All this was subsidising our employer with an interest-free credit in the form of hundreds of payments delayed without

any penalty.

When this mess was over, there came another shock. Even though our Netflix contracts stated that we were entitled to get our work schedules with at least one-month notice, in reality schedules were released even 3 months in advance. However inconvenient they might have been, we had some time to plan our lives in advance. Hidden in an all-site email was a line informing us that the future notice about our working hours would be reduced to two weeks. Only a couple of weeks after the email was sent round did some colleagues (with kids they have to arrange care for in advance) actually got back to that correspondence and read it carefully. They started pointing out that line, questioning it in group and private chats and we all looked back into our contracts to see what it said. Once the issue was discovered, the discontent spread immediately.

Eventually we managed to defend what was written down in our contracts – one month's notice – but nothing more. We lost a lot of control over our own lives, over our work-life balance, over our freedom to arrange our life outside work.

Time of the Plague

I am writing these words in the time of the novel coronavirus pandemic. When it eventually got to the Netherlands as well, some of us were really troubled by the level of inaction Majorel displayed. When the company did react in March, did the company introduce hand sanitiser dispensers (one per floor) – and some precautions were taken in how the food was handled in the canteen. This only happened because of the pressure from the agents. None of this came from management's own initiative. When the decision to equip us so to work from home

was finally made, even this was done taking into account only what is easier for the management to organise, instead of what a decent sanitary protocol would advise.

As time went on, even though Netflix is one of the businesses considered to have made a killing during the pandemic, a wave of membership cancellations took place. New users stopped arriving as Netflix halted all production of new content due to the pandemic. Many subscribers watched everything they wanted and seeing not enough new content flowing in, went somewhere else. Others lost their jobs and had no choice but to reduce their spending..

In July significant headcount reductions were announced, across many language teams, from English, to Polish and Turkish. Just as performance or work seniority play no role in our pay, none of this played any role in reductions either. HR just located those agents who were still on probation (like a dozen or so Polish people), and those whose temporary contracts were about to expire this summer, no matter if they had been working only for a few months or were approaching two years and were expecting to finally get their permanent contract. We were all told that our contracts would not be extended. It was simply easier this way, legally speaking. Once more we were shown how disposable of a resource we are for the employer and for Netflix.

Nicosia calling

Jane Chelioudaki

It is said that call centres are the factory floors of the 21st century. In the piece that follows I am going to describe my experience working in one of them. An experience that has traumatized me in many ways but still an experience very valuable concerning my understanding of organizing myself and my coworkers. I hope that by publishing it, this experience will be a companion to my fellow workers around the world.

I was born in Greece and I have a Bachelors in English Language and Literature. Having to work for a living from an early age, I became active in many political worker organizations and trade unions while living in Greece. In 2019 I migrated to Cyprus and joined the Industrial Workers of the World. It was, and still is, very difficult to find a decent job in Nicosia, the capital of the island, especially when you are a migrant with no connections whatsoever, so I accepted a job offer at an insurance company call center.

The call centre is actually a branch of a larger company located in Greece, which itself is a subsidiary of a Dutch firm. As a result, we do not have any contact with our employer, only with mid-level management. The workforce of the company mostly

consists of two groups of workers, a small group of back-office employees and a larger group of call centre representatives; other than having different duties, the only difference between the two groups, that I am aware of, is that the former work on a steady schedule while the latter are on a random shift schedule. I work as a call centre representative, so I am going to write about that experience here.

The call center deals with a number of duties quite complicated that need the worker's full attention in order to avoid mistakes which can lead to the further suffering of the worker. We are trained to handle two main categories: car insurance and home insurance. Each of them has a sales and a service subcategory. When we answer calls concerning the sales department we are supposed to promote insurance products and sell policies and when we answer service calls we help already existing clients with their insurance policies, questions they may have, changes they want to make, payments etc. The service part is awful as there we deal with all the complaints and the angry customers and also we read legal texts to them asking for their consent for changes to be made. Those legal texts are very specific in what the worker has to say and what information, dates etc they have to include so we need to be concentrated and often with a yelling client over our heads that is almost impossible. If mistakes are made we often receive harsh criticism from the management who explicitly require that "NO MISTAKES MUST BE MADE". Many times they try to terrorize us by describing the consequences that the company will endure in that case, and subsequently our job performance. We also make outbound calls and handle a number of tasks given by the management. For example we call clients that have emailed the company asking for an insurance offer or we

call clients to inform them that their insurance is cancelled or the change they are requesting cannot be done leading us to receiving even more yelling. We are also advised not to connect the angry clients with management even when they are asking for them, and we are told to say "I am the manager of your contract and I am responsible to help you". That infuriates the clients even more and we end up swallowing all the falsely directed anger.

There are around eleven call centre representatives working for the company, from young people paying for their studies to people with families and children. Most work full-time (eight hours a day), while the rest, like me, work on a part-time basis (four hours a day). We are not officially employees of the insurance company; we work for what can best be described as a shell company, which our actual employer created and paid the company's personnel trainer an extra 100 euros to appear as one of the directors.[36] We are supervised by two team leaders, who used to be call centre representatives themselves. Both management and workforce are almost exclusively female, with most workers being Greek-Cypriot and the rest migrants from Greece like myself.

The training process

I began working for the company almost a year ago, I was hired along with five other women. During the interview we were informed that we must go through two weeks of training and then take an exam and become certified insurance agents, in order to be able to properly work for the company. Those exams are mandatory for someone to be able to work in an insurance company in Cyprus. There are a number of certificates to be

taken but the obligatory ones are the first two that are included in the first level, the Basic knowledge of Insurance. The first level includes two books, 100 pages each, full of legal, financial and insurance regulations and therefore they are quite hard and extremely time-consuming to memorize. We were getting paid during the training, and the exam's costs would be provided by the company; it was only after we began our training that we found out that it would be extended to three weeks and that there would be two consecutive exams instead of one, a month after the training was to be completed. That meant that for almost two months our entire "free time" was devoted to studying rather hard and complicated information, because if we failed either test we would have to pay ourselves for the opportunity to take it again. Not to mention that many of the trainees, including me, were completely unfamiliar with studying such regulations. Furthermore, contrary to what the job description said, the work actually demanded extended computer knowledge, while many of the girls did not even own a computer. And that was not the worst part.

Our training under the personnel trainer was rife with insults, yells, humiliation and generally unacceptable and degrading behaviours. The worst had been the tests at the end of each week; the situation was made so dreadful by the trainer that people cried or fainted during these tests. One of my fellow workers started losing her hair due to stress and lack of sleep, while a couple of others had to turn to a psychiatrist for prescriptions of sedatives to cope with it. This situation was especially hard on the mothers in the group – I remember countless phone calls of desperation due to sleepless nights, as the only time they could study was when the babies and kids were asleep. Things got out of hand when one colleague made

an insignificant mistake during a call and the reaction of the trainer was to violently grab and take off her headphones. She pulled so violently that our colleague's head was dragged along and some of her hair got pulled with the headphones. All this oppression and the need to help each other led to the creation of strong personal bonds between us, and eventually a united cry against the abuse took place, in the form of formal complaints during the designated meeting with our team leaders. This bore significant results – the trainer was forced to completely change her attitude towards us and towards the group of workers that came after us, and she eventually left the company. However, those results came too late for two of my fellow trainees, who resigned before the exams took place. Most importantly, it was a situation that management was clearly aware of, since employees who were already working for the company had a similar experience. It was a lesson for at least some of them that in order for changes to take place, collective action is needed.

First impressions (are never right)

It is important to note that initially everyone was excited about working for this insurance company, mostly due to the five-day work week and the paid sick leave that it provided. We were interviewed by two young happy looking women (the personnel trainer and one of the team leaders) and during the interview we were told that although the work is quite stressful and we would be put under a lot of pressure, the company has a lot of rewarding policies and we would have chances for promotion very soon. The first part was proven correct; while at first we were told that we were only going to do phone calls about sales,

during our second week of training the team leaders announced that we are to take up service phone calls as well. These are much more difficult than sales since they not only require much more experience, knowledge and familiarity with the work, but on top of that you are often faced with an angry unsatisfied customer who is not above insulting and swearing at you. The latter part about rewarding policies and chances of promotion was a blatant lie. The pay is just a few euros above minimum wage,[37] their rewards are gift cards for certain shops and there are neither pay raises nor chances of promotion – unless a team leader quits in the future. Furthermore, overtime, which part-time workers are often called on to do, is paid on a 1:1 basis. Moreover, although it is very rare that our last phone call will finish right at the end of our shift, overtime only counts if we complete at least thirty minutes of work after our shift has finished. Last but not least, although the company does provide full pay if we miss up to three days of work each month due to sickness, the team leaders are prone to pressure us to come to work while we are sick.

Even before we came to realize the harshness of the job, certain events, combined with the aforementioned behaviour of our trainer, began to dent the friendly family-like atmosphere that the team leaders were trying so hard to cultivate. We only found out that we were not officially employed by the insurance company when the head of HR brought us our contracts to sign during our second week of training. Some of us demanded copies of our signed contracts and the confidentiality agreement, and we were promised that we would get them as soon as they were signed by the headquarters in Greece. Two months later and after a number of emails to the head of HR demanding she provides the papers, we were informed that

they were misplaced and we had to sign them again. When the contracts finally arrived we realised that they were very roughly written. Important personal information such as social security numbers and id numbers were missing, while many other sections regarding our earnings were completely blank or crossed out. Moreover, they even went as far as to refuse to give us a copy of the confidentiality agreement because, they said, it was the company's property and we were not allowed to have a copy. Only a few of us, aware of our rights, did not accept that excuse and strongly insisted on receiving a copy of anything that contained our signature, and eventually we got it, contrary to those who did not insist. This event cracked the facade of the company's professionalism, and further cultivated the awareness that knowing our rights and making demands accordingly was the only way to get results, an awareness that would become crucial in the weeks that followed.

The day of the exams was the first chance we got to meet outside of work and away from the supervision of our managers. We were a mixed group of newly hired employees and people who had been working for the company a few months already. As the discussion went on, we realized that we were all very dissatisfied with the workload, the long working hours, the unpaid overtime and the behaviour of some of the team leaders including the trainer mentioned above. The conversation was heated and a lot of us sounded very decisive and willing to take action. The beauty in all that was that even though we all recognized that we had different needs, some of us more urgent than others, we did not let that get in the way at the time and we were all united in agreeing that we needed better wages. It did not matter if it was for more beers or for more diapers. We were all in this together and as a result strong bonds

started forming. We did not seek help from our team leaders any more but mostly from each other and the atmosphere at work was starting to feel really hostile against management. We knew everything that happened to each of us, every angry manager email. We knew about every insult, every incident, big or small, because we had established a strong network of communication.

The overtime strike

Soon after, I was approached by one of the other part-timers who wanted to become a full-time employee. Cyprus labour law demands that such requests are at least acknowledged by employers, and that satisfying those employees must be prioritized over hiring new people. However, the company was not interested since the four of us who were part-timers were providing them with the needed work by working overtime whenever they asked us to. After realizing that we were paid overtime as regular working hours (which we had to figure out by doing the calculations ourselves since our contracts were missing information and our superiors avoided answering our questions about this), my colleague proposed that we stopped working overtime. We discussed it with the other two in order to have a coordinated struggle so that none of us would work overtime until they raised the remuneration as well as provide our colleague with a full-time job. For approximately one month no part-timer was working overtime, which got the managers riled up since they could sense that we were all in this together, even if we had not come forward yet. They sent assessment forms and anonymous questionnaires regarding working conditions, manager behaviour, etc., to all

of us working the phones, and although we had not planned it we all complained about the behaviour of the trainer and the team leaders.

Almost immediately after we submitted them, meetings of two or three employees with team leaders were called, where we all had to repeat what we had written, not anonymously any more, and within a week the trainer "quit" and the team leaders adjusted their behaviour. With the unofficial "overtime strike" still going on, management concluded that we were in need of better communication. One-to-one and team meetings entered the weekly agenda, in which team leaders had these notebooks where they would write down anything the employee complained about and after the session the employee would actually feel relieved even though absolutely nothing had changed in their reality. The group meetings were a chance to speak up about the most burning issues, like better wages, unpaid overtime and a lighter workload, and to see where our co-workers were standing after observing the blatant refusal of management to talk about these issues. However, the one-to-one meetings worked in the company's favour since some of our co-workers started feeling that the managers were their friends who honestly wanted to support them.

Vis-a-vis the "overtime strike", certain obstacles to communication and coordination had arisen that let to misunderstandings and mistakes, the most important of which being that we had not managed to meet up and officially announce our reasons to the managers, resulting in the unceremonious end of the strike, which caused rifts between us. At that point we did not have the discipline, determination and coordination necessary to organise a struggle, due to a lack of consciousness that we should be united as workers with common concerns

and interests. Our relationship was based instead on liking each other to the point of becoming friends. The failure of the "overtime strike" demonstrated the necessity of developing stronger relations and a more steady communication network - a necessity intensified by the fact that already some of us had left the company, while new people were being hired. The opportunity presented itself when a member of a group of newly hired employees took the initiative of creating a Viber group[38] for all of us call centre representatives, mostly for chatting and sharing work information such as the work schedule. I helped her gather everybody's information, in the hopes that having more public-like discussions would help form solidarity bonds between us. In that same spirit I decided to create a private Facebook group, as a safe place where we could exchange experiences of work, difficult experiences as well as generally support each other and have more work-related discussions, instead of friendly chit-chats. I started by posting memes relevant to our workplace experiences, and at first it went extremely well as everybody had accepted the invitation to the group and many were reacting favourably to the posts.

Management's response

However, a couple of weeks after creating it I was called into a private meeting with the highest on-site manager, whom none of us had spoken to before. She showed a rather hostile behaviour in the beginning, questioning my motives for creating the Facebook group and clearly implying that the page should be shut down, going as far as telling me that each and every one of the employees would be called in to be questioned regarding the group and their participation in it. I interpreted

this as an attack on my rights to have a personal life and I actually managed to make her completely alter her attitude, at which point she started explaining herself, claiming that she was worried about us and our happiness in the company and that she was doing everything she could to create a more pleasant environment for us and emphasising that we should be patient.

When I got home I informed all my coworkers about what happened. Despite the manager's threats proving to be empty, during our scheduled meeting the team leaders kept repeating that we were being manipulated by evil colleagues and that the precious family atmosphere of the company should be maintained. This, in addition to the company doing its best to grant any wish employees had, unless it was related to wages in any way, got some co-workers to take management's side, while most of the rest stopped reacting to the posts and used the Viber group mostly to exchange pleasantries. The worst part was that the most active among us became worried and suspicious about who informed management about the group, since it was a private one, and those suspicions were, and still are, making any organising efforts extremely difficult.

It soon became obvious that the only way to build the necessary trust in order to form some sort of collective with my co-workers, would be to follow the company's tactic and meet with them privately one by one. It was a slow process but a rather valuable one as it helped me have a more rounded picture about what was going on in their lives and what challenges they were facing. My main goal was to achieve a gathering with the majority of the employees to discuss and take action on issues that all of us had expressed dissatisfaction about, and after roughly two months we had a group of six workers

interested in doing so. This group not only represented almost half of the call centre representatives in the company, but also the diversity of the workforce: part-time and full-time employees, some working there for years and some just a couple of months, young students and middle-aged mothers, native Cypriots and migrants from Greece. Although this was a very positive outcome, it made meeting all together impossible. Our extremely different lives and responsibilities outside of work, coupled with different shifts and breaks at work as well as the fact that we lived far away from each other resulted in deciding to organise our first meeting with only four of us.

The absence of the two coworkers created a disappointing atmosphere and it was made clear that whining about our jobs was the main priority. Unfortunately, what i came to understand was that my coworkers would just enjoy complaining and sharing bad experiences from work, and every time there was a suggestion for an actual action against all those awful working conditions, they would just ignore it. Whining relieves the anger, sharing it relieves it even more. In my experience, complaining that does not result in something concrete like an action, any action taken, is pointless and harmful to organizing. We managed nonetheless to come up with a plan of action. We created a list of demands to improve working conditions and wages, and decided to try to convince as many of our colleagues to sign it before presenting it to management at a team meeting. This plan seemed agreeable with everyone since it was following the instructions of our team leaders that we should inform them about any and every complaint we had. However, by doing so collectively instead of individually, and using this opportunity to connect with our colleagues, we hoped to turn the company's tactics against it. We spent hours coming up with the demands,

exploring the possible negative consequences of our action and discussing the fact that this action would probably yield only limited results, so more drastic measures would be necessary in the future, after we had convinced more people to join us. All four of us signed the list of demands and the meeting ended on a positive note. However, in the next couple of days two of the signatories called me to withdraw their signatures for various reasons, including pressures from home not to get involved in anything like this.

This development left the group with only four members and a heavy atmosphere of despair and hopelessness, which resulted not only in more limited demands but also in a lot of procrastination regarding their finalisation . Management intensified its efforts to marginalize the voices of discontent within the workforce, which, combined with an increased workload, on the one hand made people angrier with the company, but on the other hand made them too tired and afraid to do anything about it.

International Working Women's Day organising

After weeks of general inaction, a feminist initiative calling for a one-hour symbolic strike on International Working Women's Day provided what seemed to be a perfect opportunity to shake things up. The initiative was supported by not only the major trade unions in the country, but also every political party, the government and even some employers' organisations. As a result it got a lot of positive publicity in the media. Moreover, the symbolic picket line in Nicosia was going to pass right in front of our workplace, which is made up almost entirely of women. I was hoping that under those conditions at least a

couple of my colleagues would join me at the protest.

Sadly, I underestimated the fact that these kinds of actions are completely foreign to most workers in the private sector on the island, and especially the younger ones. The only support I got from the co-workers closest to me was moral. On the other hand, when I made a formal announcement of my intentions to a manager during a team meeting, they were very supportive of my decision while one of my colleagues attacked me by questioning the strike's aims as well as the women's struggle itself. When the time came, I put a post-it note on my computer with strike on it and left the premises, and the only reaction I got was everybody's startled gaze on my back. All in all, it was a quite empowering experience, since the protest was very successful with hundreds of women forming a miles-long picket line passing right in front of our office's windows. However, management handled the whole event quite smartly. An unscheduled training session was organised during the protest so the employees would not get to see what was going on outside. They also did not dock my pay for the hour of the strike, making sure I had nothing to complain about.

In preparation for the Women's Day strike, I went to the headquarters of the largest trade union in Cyprus to get informed about the necessary steps to take part in the strike, and the organiser responsible for insurance companies encouraged me to get a group of colleagues to meet with him to discuss what the union can do to help us. I am highly critical of major trade unions and the mitigating role they play in industrial relations, and if I followed this path there was a considerable risk of alienating some co-workers since this particular union is strongly affiliated with the main "Left" party in Cyprus.[39] However, at that point (re)legitimizing our struggle against

management through the support of a major and influential organisation seemed the only option, especially since the morale of our group was at its lowest. True enough, there was a lot of interest in meeting with the union, even from coworkers outside of our group that we approached with the idea. I made an appointment with the organiser to discuss the details of the meeting. Unfortunately, the day before that appointment the coronavirus disease struck the island. The appointment was cancelled and all of our plans went down the drain.

Covid-19 and beyond

The company handled the Covid-19 situation very professionally and responsibly. It initially sent some of us to work from home for the obligatory distancing to be maintained, and during the two months of lock-down all of us worked from home. This situation, however pleasant it seemed at first, caused issues to many of us, such as invasion of private space and more stress. Our homes turned into workplaces and in many cases hostile ones, since the team leaders managed to use technology in such ways as to control us even more, creating very stressful atmospheres in our very homes. Working from home also created tensions amongst families and roommates as during work hours there had to be complete silence, a situation unnatural for children and highly annoying for the rest.

Also, the company provided us with a symbolic monetary present for Easter, and in May they announced that the shell company we work for would be disbanded and we would all be transferred to the official workforce of the insurance company. This will bring us certain benefits, including a 13th month's wage,[40] which was a consistent demand of call centre repre-

sentatives since our team leaders were working the phones. Of course, upper management tried to take credit for negotiating this deal with the company. This all happened while financial and employment insecurity was rampant around the country, with many companies cutting wages or firing their employees. Under these circumstances, our company has managed to restore its family-like image in the eyes of most co-workers. There are still some who are highly critical of the company's plans and wanting more pay for their work, as well as understanding that any positive change is in direct relation with our actions and demands, however fragmentary and disorganised they were. Be that as it may, with three months of almost non-existent organising, or even physical contact since half of us are still working from home, most choose to quit the company rather than fight for change.

In conclusion, it is important to examine some of the obstacles and challenges that prevented the development of a well-organised united employee initiative. First off, the company, through its team leaders, meticulously tries to maintain the false impression of a relaxed and friendly work environment and a family-like relationship between management and the workforce, going as far as being quite accommodating to almost any personal demand or request that is not related to wages. The atrocious behaviour of the personnel trainer helped us (and the colleagues who were working there before us) to see past the facade, but our early success in putting a stop to her abuse meant that the employees who were hired after our group did not share our experience, nor did they develop the same solidarity bonds we did.

Perhaps the most significant obstacle for developing those bonds was the high worker turnover of the company. A couple

of months before I was hired there, the majority of call centre representatives quit in protest against the unacceptable labour conditions. In the first two months of working there my group of six was cut in half, with the third member of the group being fired just after the exams, and two more of the employees already working there quit. There was a group of hirings that followed ours, and at the time of writing half of them have also quit. This situation not only hindered the formation of strong relationships between us, but also created two groups of dissatisfied but reluctant to react employees: those who viewed the job as temporary and were unwilling to go through the unpleasantness of fighting for change, preferring to quit when the pressure exceeded their limits, and those who needed to keep working there and were afraid of losing their job if they reacted, requiring a certain level of "safety in numbers" in order to get seriously involved in any form of struggle against the company – a safety that the first group was depriving them of.

Another salient obstacle was the difficulties we faced in meeting in person, due to familial obligations, university studies, long distances and, perhaps most importantly, different working hours and breaks. With management's successful efforts to scare people away from using the social media outlets to communicate their grievances in a more collective manner, being unable to meet not only made coordinating any form of action more laborious and time-consuming, but also deprived us of the feeling of empowerment that comes with discussing common problems, solutions and actions with a group - an empowerment that is made even more crucial by the almost complete lack of worker struggle culture within the Cypriot workforce. This situation created a certain level of alienation

between us, and overcoming it was a precondition before any form of organising took place. However, the high turnover mentioned before meant that we often just did not have the necessary time to achieve all these goals.

Organizing efforts and struggles are full of ups and downs. We're supposed to find comfort and inspiration in the ups and learn from the downs. After all, it is a centuries-old battle, but the fact that it is still being fought is all the comfort and strength we workers need.

Conclusion

Notes from Below

> "[W]e will find stones along the road more precious than the gold in the mines: bearings to orient us in the day-to-day class struggle, crude weapons for the offensive against the domineering boss, without any decorative embellishments or any illustrious values. In so doing, we find a mounting succession of practical criteria for working-class political action; each criterion is consciously adopted, one after another, and each level of action is subjectively raised above the last."

It is in those words that Mario Tronti describes, in the introduction to his "Workers and Capital", what revolutionaries can find in the works of Marx and Lenin, as well as in the history of the working class movement and its struggles - as long as they study them not out of intellectual curiosity or for academic purposes, but from the standpoint of the proletariat, with the desire to extract tools for the destruction of class society.

Much the same can be said about the present. Work, workplaces, and workers can be studied, written about, or theorised

about - without ever participating in laying the foundations for their destruction. At *Notes from Below*, we aim to avoid these pitfalls and to mine, instead, for the 'stones more precious than gold' in the marxist tradition, in the history of the working class, and - crucially - in the present experiences of workers and working class communities. And if it is today a cliche to repeat, after Marx, that the liberation of the working class will be the act of the working class itself, this strategic perspective remains, in our opinion, the key to doing so effectively. This oft-repeated but rarely-heeded mantra has to remain the compass that guides us on the way.

A key element in this process, especially at a time where the organic connection between the revolutionary left and the working class has been, if not entirely severed at least considerably weakened, is to take seriously the experience of workers and to strategically privilege the creation of opportunities for these experiences to be shared, discussed, and learned from - both between workers themselves as well as between the latter and those who continue to aim for and struggle towards the reconstruction of working class power from below. It is out of this perspective that this current issue is born.

Indeed, the eleven pieces that make of this issue of *Notes from Below* emerged out of a series of workshops (which were sadly cut short by the onset of the Covid-19 crisis) where workers came together to discuss the process of writing about their workplaces, studying their everyday, and sharing their reflections, their experiences, and the potentialities for resistance. This was a highly enriching process for us and we think - or at least we hope - it was so also for the participants - some of which got involved in organising drives through the process, others got the opportunity to reflect on existing campaigns,

while others engaged for the first time politically with their workplace and colleagues.

As will have been clear to the reader, the different workers who wrote these pieces come from a varied set of backgrounds, in different industries, and are located within a broad spectrum of political and trade union traditions and levels of experience. However, a number of shared characteristics emerge from these testimonies, which shed a light both on the nature of work today and of the challenges that worker organisers face in turning back the tide of ruling class offensives, which have proceeded unchecked in the last four decades. Whether in call centres, bars, kitchens, supermarkets and courier companies, or in warehouses, classrooms, editorial offices and online platforms, the workers in this issue face a number of similar issues, which will undoubtedly sound very familiar to many of our readers.

Exploited and Insecure

First and foremost, and perhaps least surprisingly, the overwhelmingly dominant characteristic of all these pieces is the powerful - at times overwhelming - economic pressure that all the participants are under. It is not only that the rates of exploitation are considerable, that their work is undervalued and underpaid, and that the very notion of demanding a pay rise is cause for dismissal, disciplinary action, or being iced out of the process of shift distribution. It is also that this reality is maintained through a level of insecurity that pushes down on workers and limits their room for manoeuvre.

Organised through agencies, outsourced companies, or precarious contracts, this insecurity permeates throughout the pieces. In that sense it is striking that in schools, courier compa-

nies and in the hospitality sectors workers experience not only similar feelings of insecurity, generated by the constant danger of immediate dismissal or blacklisting, but that this insecurity is constructed through similar tools: short term contracts, the segmentation of the workforce through a myriad of slightly different roles and pay scales, as well as the creation of different contracts and legal definitions through the outsourcing of their labour to agencies and external companies.

While the workplace or the manager might be the same, creating a basis for joint grievances and resistance, the multitude of divisions, the lack of job security, and the uncertainty over how similar or different the conditions of other workers are, all serve as powerful counter tendencies to collective organisation. The anger expressed by bar managers, school officials, or courier companies towards workers simply naming their experiences, discussing their pay and conditions, or expecting equal treatment is a powerful testimony to the centrality of this architecture of insecurity in maintaining contemporary working conditions.

Isolated and Surveilled

The other dominant narrative that emerges across the pieces in this issue is one of isolation and surveillance at work. The feeling of isolation flows from, and is central to, that of insecurity described above. Rapid turnover of workers, short term contracts, lack of shared conditions, as well as geographical dispersion means that workers often experience the pressures of their workplaces alone - and can be led to believe that other workers, in different situations fare better or even constitute a potential danger to their own continued employment. The

reports from schools, online platforms, and editorial offices bared this out particularly powerfully.

In addition, to insecurity and isolation, workers also have to deal with an impressive array of tools of surveillance, digitised and all pervasive, which build up greater pressure towards atomisation and also put up important roadblocks to organising as well as to individual acts of passive resistance. Timed toilet breaks and 'dead time' between clients in call centres. Step frequencies and lunch breaks measured through the necessary machinery for the job in Amazon's warehouses. The time taken to complete jobs monitored through the online platform on which they are distributed to Turkers. The array of methods is as staggering as the continued pressure exerted on workers to self-discipline (and increase) their productivity at work, in order to avoid being disciplined by always vigilant supervisors, is overwhelming.

These are not, it is worth emphasising, stories of automation or flexibility generated by technological innovation and new contracts. On the contrary, these are stories of increased surveillance, discipline, and exploitation. Machines, tools, and at times even coworkers are integrated in a web of control that confront workers daily and integrate them into the collective work environment as individuals, kept apart from one another through the absence of spare time, lack of collective meeting places, or internal competition. This double pressure of isolation and surveillance also gives rise to a series of demands on the part of workers, not only for better pay and conditions, but also for greater control and autonomy in the workplace. It raises the political question of who should control the process of production and for whose benefit. This sentiment is captured powerfully by John Holland, when reflecting on the possibility

of organising at the Amazon warehouse, when he writes:

> Higher pay really should be an obvious thing to organise for, although I don't hear many workers actually complaining about that, we're still all paid slightly above the living wage and many people's expectations are low enough to consider that acceptable. The biggest thing people are unhappy with is the complete lack of control they have to decide anything in their workplace - the excessive surveillance, arbitrary rules, aggressive management methods, and so on. Aiming to get management off our backs and just make this a more pleasant place to work would probably be more galvanising.

Fighting Back

That said, however, these pieces are certainly not accounts of passive acceptance or defeated workers cowed by bosses and managers. On the contrary, each contribution shows, on the one hand, how many workers understand the power relations in the workplace and identify the root of their problems with great clarity - even if they do not always have the confidence or the necessary level of organisation in the workplace to take action. On the other hand, actual acts of resistance permeate all the narratives in this issue, even where collective organising has not yet been possible. Fooling machines to extend bathroom breaks, idling and going slow, or even resigning halfway through a shift with the knowledge that another insecure job is waiting around the corner, are all continuous features of the pieces that point to the levels of frustration and dissatisfaction

that organisers can - and will need to - tap into in order to collectivise this simmering anger.

Passive and individual resistance is not the only fight back in these pages. There are also numerous experiences of organising, unionising, striking, and developing networks of mutual aid and resistance which are as inspiring as they are important to learn from and replicate across the board. Walkouts in restaurants, pickets of bars and courier companies, worker forums for teaching assistants and Turkers, and unionisation campaigns for food delivery workers and call centres. Examples of collective organising and labour militancy, while uneven in their reach and success, are present throughout this issue. They are a testimony to the desire of workers to collectivise their grievances, break through their imposed isolation, and reverse the balance of power in their workplace. They are also important repositories of bosses' responses and tactics - ranging from ignoring workers, belittling their concerns, and decreasing their work allocation to bullying, kicking them off the platform, or sacking them.

As well as the experiences of workers, these narratives also raise the question of unions and their ability to respond to the current realities for many workers in these industries. The dominant thread across the board, regardless of which union workers end up in, is the need they experience of existing both within and without its official structures. Mobilising where possible, pressuring it where necessary, but also acting beyond it to build up trust, networks, and collective confidence. Even in a well organised sector, such as schools, it is clear that the place of casualised agency workers is at best unclear, at worst unwanted, within the existing structures of the local NEU, despite the important pressure the existence of these

contracts exert on the existing pay and conditions of other teachers. The emphasis of our contributors on the importance of self activity, and the sometimes necessary confrontation with existing union structures - within and against, as the South London Barworkers Network put it - without however rejecting the importance of their potential collective power, is an important tradition to reclaim and ampliphy for workers everywhere in the process of rebuilding organisation at the point of production.

And Now?

The Covid-19 crisis interrupted the process of collective discussion that had guided the process until then. It also, and much more seriously, interrupted the lives of the workers and threw many of their work arrangements into disarray. Bosses refusing to follow health and safety advice, loss of work, or drastic changes in the organisation of the workload - these are some of the experiences the writers went through since March this year.

The inclusion of some of these stories in the pieces also reinforces what other contributors to *Notes from Below*, as well as our previous collective international issue, have argued: corona did not fundamentally draw new separation lines within the labour market but drastically increased existing divisions and inequalities. Many white collar workers were moved to work from home - accompanied by a simultaneous increase in workload - while others, mainly blue collar and highly precarious workers, found themselves either out of work or expected to continue to come in and risk their health and that of their families in order to continue being able to put food on the

table. The behaviour of bosses and managers also reinforces the absolute disregard they have for their workers and their welfare, which the pieces in this issue document both before and after the lockdown.

Our hope at *Notes from Below* is that this issue does not end up as a stand alone series of articles but serves as a starting point for further debate, discussion, writing, and - crucially - organising. The workers themselves will receive hard copies to distribute amongst and discuss with their coworkers, those they interviewed and those they organise with. In addition, if other (groups of) workers would like to host a discussion about the issue or launch a similar project, *Notes from Below* would be very willing to participate and/or to link them up with the authors of these pieces.

In the weeks to come, we will also announce the launch of our next project and the launch of a new round of workers' writing grants. Building on this experience, we hope to extend the scope of our focus and integrate worker writings within a broader project studying Britain's class composition. In doing so, we aim to target our grants towards key industries and strategic locations in the economy, link the experiences of workers to wider analyses of Britain's political economy, and to hold collective discussions between ourselves, contributors to *Notes from Below*, and these workers.

As always, the struggle continues.

Notes

AMAZON INQUIRY

1 See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AQeGBHxIyHw

NOTES FROM THE ROAD

2 I have been a courier for the last 8 years and have gone from not knowing much about trade unions to becoming the chair of the couriers branch of the IWGB. In that time I have been involved in multiple campaigns, helped the IWGB to become the first union to be recognised in the gig economy at my previous company TDL and also secured limb b worker status for dozens of couriers. Using strategies of boycotting restaurants, targeting investors with online campaigns and growing a unionised community in an industry that is notoriously hard to bring together we are making real progress in combating the gig economy.

3 An employment tribunal is a form of labour court: an independent tribunal which makes decisions in legal disputes around employment law.

4 Limb (b) worker is an intermediate status in the UK, between employee and self-employed, in which the worker is a 'dependent contractor' and gains access to basic employment rights.

5 PAYE, or Pay As You Earn, refers to a system in which employers collect taxes and national insurance contributions from employees on behalf of HMRC (HM Revenue & Customs).

6 Harley street is famous for its long history of private medical practices.

AT THE PERIPHERY OF JOURNALISM

7 "Copy" refers to the words writers prepare for print. The invisibility of the work needed to bring copy to print can be found at the beginning of the history of the book. Grafton, Anthony. 2020. "The Correctors." Lapham's Quarterly, June 10, 2020. https://www.laphamsquarterly.org/roundtable/-correctors.

8 "[T]he rewriting of the facts is rationalized by the assumption of a

homogeneous and universal experience. … An inquiry into the world of the working class threatens to degenerate into a kind of travel diary; close, meticulous, militant investigation tends to be replaced with entertaining stories about the mystery, exoticism, and strangeness of an unknown world." Haider, Asad, and Salar Mohandesi. 2013. "Workers' Inquiry: A Genealogy." Viewpoint Magazine, September 27, 2013. https://www.viewpointmag.com/2013/09/27/workers-inquiry-a-genealogy/.

9 For more on how managers' personalities change how employees perceive ethics at work, see Jackall, Robert. 2010. Moral Mazes: The World of Corporate Managers. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press. You can find an overview by the author at https://hbr.org/1983/09/moral-mazes-bureaucracy-and-managerial-work.

10 Many thanks to Andrew Hobbs both for his A Fleet Street in Every Town: The Provincial Press in England, 1855-1900 and for pointing me to MacDonagh, Michael. "In the Subeditor's Room." 1897. The Nineteenth Century and after: A Monthly Review, December, 999–1008.

11 "[F]iction writers entered their pages as hand-loom weavers entered a factory, knowing that within that space the publisher had a wide choice of methods with which to capitalize 'the goodwill of the novel'." Feltes, Norman N. 1989. Modes of Production of Victorian Novels. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press.

12 "The copy editor's transition reflected newsroom management's ability to define and redefine a job's tasks, skills, status, and authority in the absence of sustained worker resistance. The resulting structure of newswork has endured into the twentieth century, as has the grim status of copyediting." Solomon, William S. 1995. "The Site of Newsroom Labor: The Division of Editorial Practices." In Newsworkers: Toward a History of the Rank and File, edited by Hanno Hardt and Bonnie Brennen, 110–134. University of Minnesota Press.

13 For an example of this tension, see this interviewee quote from Vandendaele, Astrid. 2018. "'Trust Me, I'm a Sub-Editor': 'Production Values' at Work in Newspaper Sub-Editing." Journalism Practice 12 (3): 268–89. https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2017.1291312: "'Production' … I don't like the word very much because it sounds very technical, it sounds like somebody in overalls with a spanner, although we are metaphorically using spanners with copy. Actually it's everything that has to be done to get it from when the reporter has finished writing, everything that has to be done to get those words to the reader."

14 Banging Out: Fleet Street Remembered, "Putting it to Bed". London: digital:works, 2014. https://vimeo.com/100246126. For documentation of the switch from hot lead to phototypesetting in the US, see David Loeb Weiss's wonderful 1980 Farewell, Etaion Shrdlu. https://vimeo.com/127605643.

15 The National Union of Journalists (NUJ) supported the compositors, but as one interviewee explained to me, phototypsetting would give journalists less work for more pay. Only eight of the journalists at The Sun offices voted against moving to Wapping. Banging Out: Fleet Street Remembered, "Wapping". London: digital:works, 2014. https://vimeo.com/100246126.

16 In a previous position I held as an academic editor, our research publications in mathematics were given a round of peer review and then read by outsourced copyeditors with no training in mathematics. This kind of behavior adds weight to the concerns the open access movement has raised for commercial academic publishers—what do they add to the work? For an example of the arguments made by newsrooms to outsource subs, see Byrne, Ciar. 2002. "Is This the View for Future Subs?," November 4, 2002. https://www.theguardian.com/media/2002/nov/04/mondaymediasection.dailyexpress.

17 Cannon noted a similar quality in type compositor's work: 'The length of time that a job takes is difficult to measure precisely: the considerable number of non-mechanized processes in composing makes it difficult to construct precise output norms: therefore the compositor can decide, within limits, whether he needs to 'pull out' or if he is able to slacken his pace of work.' The comps also provide a cautionary example for "production" journalists now. Cannon, Isidore Cyril. 2011. The Compositor in London: The Rise and Fall of a Labour Aristocracy. 1st ed. London: St Bride Library. See also Cannon, Isidore Cyril. 2012. "The Compositor in London: The Rise and Fall of a Labour Aristocracy." History Workshop. July 20, 2012. http://www.historyworkshop.org.uk/the-compositor-in-london-the-rise-and-fall-of-a-labour-aristocracy/.

18 Graeber, David. 2013. "On the Phenomenon of Bullshit Jobs: A Work Rant." Strike, August 2013. https://www.strike.coop/bullshit-jobs/.

19 Terkel, Studs. 1974. Working: People Talk about What They Do All Day and How They Feel about What They Do. 1st ed. New York: Pantheon Books.

20 Hall, Stuart. 1973. "Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse." Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies Selected Working Papers. http://epapers.bham.ac.uk/2962/.

21 Our work chats were on Google Hangouts, with our company provided emails. After the pandemic lockdown, the chat rooms became the preferred manner of communication among groups that worked together often. Emails were saved for less familiar coworkers or messages that needed to be saved, instead of buried in a chat log. The increased volume of messages, formal and informal, made it harder to keep track of who said what when, since the chat rooms had less search functionality than our emails. There was such a proliferation of chat rooms among different combinations of the magazine staff, that it was hard to tell if you had messaged the correct group.

22 Butterick, Keith. 2015. Complacency and Collusion: A Critical Introduction to Business and Financial Journalism. London: Pluto Press.

23 Greenslade, Roy. 2009. "How Journalism Became a Middle Class Profession for University Graduates." The Guardian, July 21, 2009. https://www.theguardian.com/media/greenslade/2009/jul/21/newspapers.

ORGANISING AGENCY TEACHING ASSISTANTS

24 see: https://www.uvwunion.org.uk/news/2020/7/press-release-cleaners-win-stunning-victory-over-ark-globe-academy-in-union-busting-scandal

25 see: https://morningstaronline.co.uk/author/melanie-griffiths

26 see: https://neu.org.uk/media/4561/view

27 see: https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/mar/10/infant-free-school-meals-taxpayer-fund-them

28 see: https://www.gov.uk/guidance/claim-for-wage-costs-through-the-coronavirus-job-retention-scheme?mc_cid=177bacbc11&mc_eid=e326e301f0

29 see: https://neu.org.uk/support-staff

30 see: http://msgfocus.com/files/amf_unison/project_137/Final_TUC_NEU_Agreement_.pdf

DIARY OF A DOORMAN

31 PAYE stands for Pay As You Earn, an employee contract in which tax is deducted automatically.

32 Universal Credit is a state benefit payment in the UK, which includes unemployment and other benefits.

33 David Brent is a fictional character in the BBC television mockumentary The Office.

34 Rishi Sunak is a British politician who was Chancellor of the Exchequer during Covid-19.

35 After Boris Johnson, the British Prime Minister at the time.

NICOSIA CALLING

36 It is useful to keep in mind that Cyprus features prominently in the Panama Papers, and such practices are common. To get an idea about how these companies work, see "The Laundromat" (2019).

37 In Cyprus there is not a universal minimum wage; there are various minimum wages defined either by law or collective agreements that only cover certain occupations (ours is not one of them), and most of them are around 850 euros gross.

38 Viber is a cross-platform voice and instant message app

39 Every major trade union on the island is affiliated with a political party, and most Cypriots are highly political, though on a very superficial level. They choose and fanatically support their respective political party/trade union the same way and manner as they do their favourite football team; in fact, the major football teams have strong ties with political parties too.

40 The 13th (and 14th) wage represents a practice, common in Cyprus and Greece before the 2009 financial crisis, according to which employers would give employees an extra "wage" during the Christmas (and Easter) holidays; the amount of money would not necessarily be that of a full month's paycheck but what's important is that if the 13th wage was included in the employment agreement (individual or collective) or if it was given for a number of years, it becomes mandatory for the employer to provide it.

From the Workplace

A collection of Worker Writing