

CLASS POWER ON ZERO-HOURS



Contents

[Introduction](#)

[Layers of Organisation](#)

[Chapter 1: West London](#)

[Chapter 2: The Solidarity network and local campaigns](#)

[Chapter 3: An overtime “strike” at Waitrose and a slowdown at Sainsbury’s](#)

[Chapter 4: The newspaper](#)

[Chapter 5: Working class families and women’s realities — in and beyond work](#)

[Chapter 6: Syndicalism 2.0 and the IWW organising drive](#)

[Workers’ Inquiry 1](#)

[Chapter 7: Food in capitalism](#)

[Chapter 8: Working and organising at the Bakkavor ready-meal factory.](#)

[Workers’ Inquiry 2](#)

[Chapter 9: Food distribution in capitalism](#)

[Chapter 10: Working and organising at a Tesco customer fulfilment centre](#)

[Workers’ Inquiry 3](#)

[Chapter 11: 3D printer manufacturing plant](#)

[Revolutionary strategy.](#)

[Chapter 12: The current moment and criticism of democratic socialism](#)

[Chapter 13: Class power and uneven development](#)

[Chapter 14: Revolutionary transition and its conditions in the UK](#)

[Chapter 15: Organisation and advanced struggles](#)

[Appendix: West London workers’ history.](#)

[References](#)

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angryworkersworld.wordpress.com
workerswildwest.wordpress.com

Dedicated to Peter, a gentle stalwart, excellent comrade and friend.

Introduction

In January 2014 we chose to move to a working class neighbourhood on the fringes of west London. We felt an urgent need to break out of the cosmopolitan bubble and root our politics in working class jobs and lives. We wanted to pay more than just lip service to the classic slogan, “the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves.” Over the next six years, comrades joined us and we worked in a dozen different warehouses and factories. We organised slowdowns on shop floors, rocked up on bosses’ and landlords’ doors with our solidarity network, and banged our heads against brick walls as shop stewards in the bigger unions. We wrote up all our successes, as well as the dead-ends, in our publication, *WorkersWildWest*, which we gave out to 2,000 local workers at warehouse gates at dawn. We tried to rebuild class power and create a small cell of a revolutionary organisation. This book documents our experiences. It is material for getting rooted. It is a call for an independent working class organisation.

At the time, we didn’t have to leave “careers” to do this. We were either already doing blue collar jobs or floating about in Berlin, not really sure what to do next. One of us had worked in NGOs for ten years, leaving the sector with a sense that “everything is corrupt” and trying to “change government policy” was a waste of time. It therefore wasn’t a massive leap to decide to move to a working class area where there were larger, more “strategic” workplaces to get jobs in. It didn’t feel like “dropping out” as much as getting “plugged in”. A lot of people we knew were either doing boring office jobs, lonely PhDs, or burning out in their pursuit of a high-flying career. So, we didn’t have too much FOMO.

We weren’t part of a bigger group at the time, so our only option was to lead by example. Get cracking and fingers crossed, people would hear about our efforts and join us. This was going to be a hard sell. Nobody on the London left had even heard of Greenford, not surprising due to its status as a cultural desert, in zone four on the Central line. But it’s where we chose to

go, having done a few walkabouts beforehand to check out the scene. First impressions are that it's a totally nondescript place where people are simply getting on with their humdrum lives. However, we quickly came to realise that this was a place that epitomised the daily realities behind the sensational headlines of the times: "the flood of Polish immigration"; "the scourge of zero-hours contracts"; the phenomenon of low wage growth and high employment; migrants in low- skilled work; the growth in warehousing and logistics; the low-waged sector boom after the financial crash in 2008; the hype of automation and robots taking over our jobs. Many left-wing commentators weigh in on these topics, but do they really have a clue what they're talking about? By getting rooted in areas like this, we would be in a much better position to find out.

The endz

When you leave the tube station, the first thing you see is the Polish shop over the road. Next to that is a barber's, an estate agent and a chicken shop. You turn left, go under the railway bridge and Railway pub, past the bus stop that gets very overcrowded at certain times of the day with workers wearing high-vis jackets, another fifty metres further along and you hit the industrial estates and logistics parks. These include Tesco and Sainsbury's distribution centres, a massive Royal Mail depot and a globally connected vegetable packing factory. The area is a mix of warehouses surrounded by overcrowded suburban residences. Greenford is small enough that people work and live locally, but big enough for us to not be blacklisted too soon once we started agitating with our co-workers. It was also a convenient bus ride from the Park Royal industrial area, one of the biggest in Europe and where one of us would later get a job at a food processing plant, as well as Heathrow Airport, probably London's biggest workplace. It is locally concentrated and, at the same time, internationally connected. We were on a stretch called the "western corridor", the main artery into London from the west, dotted with workplaces that made use of the global and national transport links. 60% of the food consumed in London is processed, packaged and circulated along this "western corridor". This area typified one of capitalism's main contradictions: that workers have enormous potential power as a group, especially if they could affect food supplies into London, at the same time that they are individually weak. This is due to the

fact that they have to scrape a living in the government- led “hostile environment”, with few social safety nets and effective organs to fight back against deteriorating working conditions in the modern low-waged sector. As revolutionaries, we wanted to support some self-organisation amongst these workers who have largely been ignored and neglected by the left.

So we packed our bags and headed from east to west London – a real culture shock! From inner city housing estates and vibrant food markets to rows of suburban terraces and golf courses. We got a £450 a month room in a shared house advertised in a local newsagent’s window, paid the deposit and moved in. It was easy to get jobs. You just needed to sign up with a local temp agency, of which there were several, and they would send you somewhere the next day. We knocked up a CV and typed up our own reference letters (they weren’t checked anyway). Initially it was just the two of us, but over the years we were joined by other comrades from Hackney and Essex, as well as further afield: Poland, Spain, Slovenia, Australia, India, and France.

Between us we worked at a lot of local workplaces. One of us worked at the Jack Wills fashion warehouse, eyeing up the hundred-pound bags that were unceremoniously wrapped in plastic and gathering dust on a bottom shelf. We were made to run around with trolleys made of cardboard, picking items and putting back returns, having to meet high targets, your speed being measured with a scanning device – all in boiling hot temperatures and under the brutal surveillance of a petite Nazi woman from Poland. One of us worked in a garden furniture warehouse, three of us worked at the Sainsbury’s chilled distribution centre, and one of us spent six months stealing samples from a Neal’s Yard cosmetics warehouse – where they certainly weren’t treating their workers more ethically than their botanical ingredients. One of us drove around on an electric cart, lugging drinks around to be sent to Waitrose supermarkets. One of us worked at a 3D printer assembly plant, getting an insight into what’s behind all this talk about “liberating technology.” One of us did a hectic unpaid trial at the Charlie Bigham’s food factory, another at a factory that makes Indian fried snacks and samosas on piece-rate. One of us was a Bendi forklift driver, filling up on fry-ups in the free canteen at Alpha LSG, an airline caterer. We waited on business twats at a Premier Inn hotel, swept leaves and collected

bins with Amey, outsourced to do the street cleansing for Ealing Council. But we spent the most blood, sweat and tears at two places: as a delivery driver for supermarket giant Tesco, and as a forklift driver at a food manufacturing factory, Bakkavor, which supplies all the major supermarkets with houmous and ready-meals. Our work and organising reports from these employers make up the biggest section of this book, in chapters 7-10.

Where we're coming from

A lot of stuff has been written over the last few years about the conditions of modern workplaces. From the journalist “going undercover” to work at Amazon, to the whistleblowing headlines from Sports Direct where “a woman gives birth in toilet because she was afraid of missing her shift”. These “exposés” reveal a few things. Firstly, they all subscribe to the idea of workers as “victims”. They are downtrodden and nobody is fighting for them. Secondly, they usually reveal a migrant workforce, and as such, they are indirectly blamed for a worsening of conditions because they are putting up with what “British” workers wouldn’t. Rarely are their voices even heard above the liberal-lefty outrage at the “Dickensian” conditions. Thirdly, unions are either absent, or using media coverage to promote themselves as the “saviours” who will represent the interests of these voiceless worker victims. Lastly, they give zero indication of workers’ own recourse to action in these situations. Apart from “joining a union”, which, in our experience, often jointly presides over such misery with management, there are no hints that workers can, and are, fighting back.

One aim is to do the opposite of all that. Firstly, this isn’t a book about “journalistic impressions”, where we fly in and out of crap jobs, merely describing and complaining about the “terrible” conditions. We intervene in the class struggle. This doesn’t mean going in and telling our workmates what to do. Like everyone else, we spend time finding our feet and working out what’s what. We learn from each other, but we’re not shy about providing support where we can to encourage some roots of wider self-awareness, self-confidence and collective action. This book attempts to document this effort. A revolutionary organisation should exist and act

within the class, not in its place, or as outsiders. The program doesn't exist on paper.

Secondly, we put a spotlight on what workers are doing themselves, what we have tried to do with our workmates, what worked, what didn't, and why. Only by basing our politics on direct experiences like this, where we are putting down roots in working class areas, rather than just knocking on their door when election time swings around, can we build a real, grassroots counter- power – one that actually involves working class people! It's definitely not as glamorous as a young and hip Corbynista party. It's a hard slog, what with the dawn rises and monotonous work. But it's a relief to not have to pretend you love your job. And there's a real pleasure in getting to know people that many on the left just read about or claim to speak for.

We are publishing this book at a time when many on the left are licking their wounds, despondent at their missed opportunity to implement a socialist program through the Labour Party. The calls for a “period of self-reflection” about how to “reconnect with working class voters”, however, have been largely sucked back towards the navel, as commentators and leftist groups at the start of 2020 now obsess over the Labour leadership race. We're not sure when “voting” and “elections” became the only fodder for far-left debate, although Brexit certainly gave parliamentary “democracy” the equivalent of a defibrillator shock.

The main stumbling block to pushing past electoralism though is the fact that there seems to be no other viable alternative or strategy from how we get from where we are now to where we want to go. We can all agree that we want a society free from exploitation and oppression, where we're not killing the planet, where emancipation means real freedom, not just the freedom to vote for someone every four years. But when we watch the news and look around us, we seem to be getting further rather than nearer to this goal. The news is full of BoJo's drivel and Labour's infights, but they tell us little about the massive uprisings in Chile, Sudan, Iraq or even the strikes in France. The UK left is firmly focused on internal politics, and even that is often detached from working class realities. We tried to keep the focus on the advanced movements of our class across the globe, while planting our

feet into the local working class conditions at the same time. This book deals with the field of tension in between.

We are only a small group. For those who like to categorise, we put ourselves on the communist left. That might not mean much to many, and it isn't really important, other than to say that our approach to revolutionary politics lies firmly in workers' self-organisation. Everything we do centres around this perspective: that in order to really change society, working class people have to take matters into their own hands. We don't think the state is a neutral force that we can bend to our will by just getting the right political party elected. States always have been, and always will be, the main arbiters in maintaining class relations (for more on this see chapter 12). History has shown us that all governments are self-interested, even if they think they'll be different. From Syriza in Greece to Podemos in Spain to Chavez in Venezuela to Allende in Chile – global capitalism is no match for perhaps well-meaning, but nonetheless nationalist socialist policies.

We suggest a different kind of class politics, one that is embedded in the daily lives of working class people. It may sound simple, but the fact that many on the left have no concrete relationship to working class areas or working class people is a big problem. You end up either lamenting their status as victims of capitalism's deindustrialised past (as much of the Brexit voters are); as robots (as Amazon's tech-savvy warehouse workers are); slaves (as many low-waged workers in modern workplaces are); or destitute (as the rising numbers of homeless and those affected by benefit cuts are). How are robots, slaves, the destitute and victims supposed to be a force worth reckoning with? This totally disenfranchised notion of the working class will not allow us to unearth its revolutionary potential. This is exactly what the ruling class wants.

We're not denying that things have gotten relatively worse for a lot of people. But what these victim narratives perpetuate is a surface level analysis. In order to scratch the surface, we have to get back to basics and engage in a process of discovery, together with our co-workers, in order to see where our power versus the bosses actually lies. The first step to take with our fellow workers in an inquiry to understand the objective conditions: how is production and our co-operation organised? Is it done by management alone or does it rely on us? Is our co-operation limited to the

four walls of our workplace or does it reach beyond borders? Does IT technology reduce workers to mere puppets of the central control room? Within the framework of these objective conditions, we then need to analyse the subjective ones: what kind of ways workers have already found to resist.

This “workers’ inquiry” takes its starting point from the immediate workplace, but cannot be limited to it. We have to understand the wider global changes of the working class. There is no static or homogenous “working class”. It isn’t an identity, like the white miner in a flat cap. Rather, as capitalist social production changes, the regional centres and dominating industrial sectors are also transformed. We can see this in west London, where the workers used to be ex-miners from Wales working in the construction industries, and how this changed to light industry and factories with a majority of workers from the Indian subcontinent. Within this process of changing industries, “the working class” changes too, so we have to talk about specific “class compositions” during specific cycles of history or stages of capitalist development.

These changes in the production process transform the way workers struggle and to what ends. For example, whereas the tendency since the 80s has been to break up units of production into smaller units, as well as relocate production overseas or across wider geographical areas, newer tendencies in how production is organised are bringing larger numbers of workers back together again.

The dispersal of production from the 80s onwards was a political response to workers’ power in the 60s and 70s. It is dangerous when you get high numbers of workers working together under one roof or in close proximity to each other. They tend to start talking to each other, comparing their situations, making common demands, and questioning why we even need bosses. This was why these strongholds had to be broken up, even if this made the production process more complicated. That complication requires a growth in logistics to plan supply-chains. In turn, this has led to a reformation of bigger logistics hubs and warehouse complexes, bringing larger groups of workers together. This makes it easier to harness a potential collective power. In the last few years, we have seen this led to strikes and actions in many warehouses across Europe. Capital, however, finds new

ways of managing the fact that you have workers coming together in bigger numbers by developing techniques that divide us and keep us isolated from each other. We have to know what those are, and think creatively about how to overcome them. This is part of the workers' inquiry too, which is why we dedicate some pages in each of our workplace reports to this wider look at the food industry and the production process – from global supply-chains all the way down to the shop floor and relationships amongst the workforce.

These two things – more workers coming together, what we call a “concentration process”, and daily co-operation between workers – are the actual bases for the revolutionary potential of the working class. At work, we are in the position to discover that we ourselves produce this world, and that connecting our struggles beyond our individual workplace can give us the political and economic clout to seize power. The fundamental question is: how do we turn this “working together” and co-operation into a weapon against the system? How can we use this knowledge as the starting point for organising ourselves for our own goals, rather than the goals of capitalism?

Our organisational proposals have to refer to these actual conditions, rather than some airy-fairy notions of the “precariat” or “the multitude” and their assumed needs. It's all very well to sketch out a vision of what we want the classless utopia to look like, but if we can't even decide when we go to the toilet, or how we manage our own work, this will continue to be an unrealistic pipe dream, totally detached from our daily lives. Together with our fellow workers we have to create a culture of collective analysis: depending on our own capacity, what kind of steps can we take to put pressure on the bosses, and how can we increase our numbers and strength?



Aerial view of Park Royal industrial estate, one of the largest in Europe

Our workplace reports are an attempt to answer these kinds of questions. They also deal with our experiences within the trade unions – as members, and also as shop stewards with GMB and USDAW. Although we knew about the limitations of trade unions as institutions, but hoped to be able to create some space for workers’ self-organisation within the company union structure. We produced union newsletters, organised workers’ meetings, pushed for strike and work to rule. Unsurprisingly we found that the modern union framework is built to stifle initiatives on a rank and file level. Even when small windows of opportunity arose, for example with a more militant union official, it became clear that the larger union apparatus would not support this for long.

Levels of organisation

Let’s be more specific about our thoughts on what an organisation should be doing. Our idea for a local organisation works on four levels. We’ve already mentioned *workplaces* and why we think our ability as producers is crucial in our aim to create another society.



The “western corridor”

At the same time, people are obviously struggling outside of work: with shoddy landlords, visa agents, the job centre and welfare regime. So we set up a *solidarity network*, which supported dozens of local working class people. The solidarity network addresses the fact that the current system individualises us and, at the same time, creates a dog-eat-dog atmosphere. To say out loud that we are here to support each other as workers, not as experts, is itself a political act. It is an ear to the ground of the class, we can hear and learn about its’ conditions, and make friends.

The solidarity network acknowledges a historic fact: middle class leaders, be they religious or political, were able to mobilise the more isolated and impoverished parts of the class against the organised sections of the class. They do this by offering a material and ideological community to people who feel like outcasts. This is what the fascists did, and this is what the Muslim Brotherhood and mafia gangs do. We have to drive a wedge between the middle class and the lower ranks of the working class, through direct mutual aid, action and solidarity. It had another potential function: to provide a local mob that could support workers’ minoritarian actions from inside the bigger workplaces.

The third level is our *newspaper*, WorkersWildWest. We distributed 2,000 copies of each issue in front of two dozen factories, warehouses, as well as Heathrow airport, job centres and industrial areas. A workers’ publication is necessary to be able to share experiences from the solidarity network and from workplaces and to reflect upon them. The distribution of

the newspaper gets us in physical contact with other workers. It can create new bonds, which is more than an anonymously written blog-piece can do. We can use the newspaper to spread information about relevant struggles around the globe. But the newspaper is more just than a mirror of the class. It is a medium to discuss our positions on the wider social situation, for example why nationalism does not offer the working class a route to emancipation. We can look into the history of our class and put forward ideas about a future social transformation. In the longer run, newspapers and other forms of self-education will be an additional tool to undermine the separation of manual and “intellectual” workers. Finally, the newspaper is a focus for ourselves, as it forces us to be organised in practice and precise in our thoughts and language.

All this needs organisation. Organisation is not a label, a party name, a holy grail. “Organisation” is us thinking and acting together and reaching out to others. It is a process of learning together independently and to undermine individual careerism. We need organisation to hold together the solidarity network, the activities in workplaces and the newspaper, and to give it all a direction. We need organisation to reflect on our activities and to present them to comrades in other regions. As an organisation we take on a responsibility. The responsibility to help turn the global co-operation of workers, which is mediated through corporations and markets, into their own tool of international struggle. Our organisation has to be of practical use for the class and at the same time provide a compass: these are the conditions for our class to act independently from the parliamentary and state system, and these are steps the movement can take to capture and defend the means of production.



Billboards advertising temp agencies in Greenford

In our neck of the woods, we tried to create a tiny example of such an organisation. We wanted to take on a territorial responsibility for that small part of the world. This meant, for example, visiting the local Amazon warehouses and telling workers there about the struggles of our sisters and brothers at Amazon in Poland. It meant organising film nights about warehouse workers in Italy in local community centres for workers here. It meant passing on French comrades' reflections on the Yellow Vest protests to local workers through WorkersWildWest. It meant picketing a restaurant during the Deliveroo strike to spread the actions from central London.

We hoped to be able to create a fruitful dynamic between the different levels of class organisation, which would allow for a qualitative leap. For example, we met some truck drivers from Punjab through the solidarity network. They were employed in a small tin-pot company, being ripped off by a boss of "their community". We helped them and, in return, they supported us in our organising drive with the rank and file union, IWW, at a local sandwich factory where there were many Punjabi workers. They could talk to workers in Punjabi and increased the level of trust between us and workers there.

Later, they got us in touch with another truck driver at Alpha LSG, one of the world's largest airline caterers where we had been distributing the newspaper for some time and workers knew us but hadn't contacted us

independently. The solidarity network and the close personal links within the local class had helped us to advance from a contact in a minor enterprise to a contact with a group of workers at a multinational corporation and their concrete grievances. At this stage, when we told them there would be no easy legal fix, they decided to not go further.

But what if they had? With the support of a class union, we could have embarked on a dispute. Alpha LSG is a crucial workplace in this area: not only do hundreds of local people work there, they also have links to many thousands more in other local workplaces, many contending with deteriorating conditions in outsourced companies. Alpha LSG workers keep the operation at Heathrow airport going – and they can therefore disrupt it. The fact that a local dispute could kick off under conditions many low-paid workers in this area could relate to would have a ripple effect amongst the entire local labour force. The newspaper could spread the news of the strike from the point of view of the workers themselves to other local workplaces, forging new links and offering practical solidarity.

This doesn't sound too far-fetched. While we didn't manage to get that far this time, who knows what could happen in similar situations, especially if you had more comrades on the ground? We maintain the organisational framework is a good one. It certainly beats going to the usual lefty meetings where you've got five old men and a dog talking about Durruti. Or going on a demonstration, waving placards from an SWP front organisation and being roundly ignored by those who make the decisions. The main problem is that these four levels (workplaces, solidarity network, newspaper and organisation) have to all be done at the same time in order to create something bigger than the sum of their parts. The solidarity network can help people take initiatives at work; struggles at work in turn can give local campaigns more power versus the local authorities. These practical experiences give people more impetus to discuss the bigger picture and to get organised politically.

To create a dynamic between these levels is not easy. Comrades might manage to get a good local solidarity initiative or a workplace group in gear, but they remain isolated experiences. Other comrades produce beautiful analyses and programmatic declarations, but drift in space without roots. Their thoughts are not tested by the class. This is why we insist that

we have to see the levels as a cohesive, complementary organism that lives and breathes within the class. We see organisations in the revolutionary milieu, in particular amongst our anarcho-syndicalist comrades, who formally address all these levels. The problem is that, more often than not, they substitute their own organisation for the class. While we think that the organisation should act through the class and its ever-changing movements, they suggest that the class acts through the organisation. These are not dialectical games. These differences have practical consequences, which we will address in the chapter on revolutionary strategy at the end of this book.

Our efforts in west London were not about “organising” as such. Our aim is to build a political organisation of the class. Not just a formal organisation people can say they’re a member of and then sit back and not do anything. We want to build an organisation that consists of many local collectives like ours, that are rooted in working class organising and discussions about fundamental social change. Through the organisation, these local collectives could debate their experiences centrally and contrast them with wider developments of class struggle in order to decide on common practical strategies. We hope the book will inspire small groups of you to make common plans together and perhaps set up similar organisations in your areas. We will talk more about concrete proposals in the last part of this book but for now, we would just say that you don’t need a lot of resources to get going. You don’t need external funding, or fancy publications and logos. You can do a lot more than you think when your “political life” and “normal life” isn’t so divided.

Our reader

This book is for anyone thinking, “what next?” You might be in a big town, or a small town. Chances are, you’re near some larger workplaces of strategic importance. Maybe you don’t even know it, you’ve gone past these areas on the bus and didn’t think much about what was going on there. Why don’t you do a walk-around and find out? If you’re not near anything potentially interesting, why don’t you move somewhere else? You don’t necessarily have to get a shit job. But if you’re doing a shit job anyway, why not start writing a work report about how the work is organised, how the workforce is composed, where the pressure points are and your and your co-workers’ experiences? If there’s a group of you, you

can set up a solidarity network and a small publication at the same time. Document your experiences, and get in touch if you want to discuss things through in more detail. We hope this book can inspire you. You can dip in and out of it, depending on your specific interests.

Chapter summary

In the first chapter, we start by taking a closer look at this area of west London, and its recent history in particular. We want you to get a sense of the area we're in and important struggles that have shaped the class formation here. The following three chapters go into more detail about our experiences: the second chapter talks about our solidarity network and the local campaigns we were involved with. The third chapter is about a workplace action we were involved in at the Waitrose and Sainsbury's chill warehouses in Greenford. In the fourth chapter, we talk more about the role of our newspaper in our organising efforts, as well as sharing some snapshots from our interactions during the newspaper distributions.

The fifth chapter focuses on working class family life, as well as the stories of women workers we've met here over the last few years. The sixth chapter shares our experiences of the organising drive we did with the London branch of the Industrial Workers of the World union (IWW), as well as our general thoughts on the upsurge in syndicalism and syndicalist-style organising.

The next section contains our workers' inquiries from three local workplaces: Bakkavor (a food processing factory), Tesco (as a delivery driver in a customer fulfilment centre), and a 3D printer/ink cartridge refilling plant. The seventh chapter is an introduction to the food sector in capitalism, looking at "Food production from the field to the processing plants". We recount how class struggle for a better life pushed capital into the Third Agrarian Revolution and the industrialisation of food processing, as well as examining the position of workers in the global food supply-chain. Chapter eight is a detailed account of "Working and organising at the Bakkavor ready-meal factory": it includes an overview of the company so we know who exactly we're dealing with; a detailed look at the workforce composition; how the production process was organised; the main issues we were facing as workers in a repressive assembly line regime; the barriers to building workers' power; as well as the workings of the GMB union that

had recognition at the factory, particularly during a pay campaign to get £1 more an hour for everyone.



A high vis on Hangar Lane

We start the ninth chapter by analysing, “Food distribution in capitalism”, in order to provide context for the workplace experience in one of Tesco’s warehouses. In order to understand the background of our organising attempts and how Tesco has managed to restructure the company without major disputes we have to analyse “The union and struggles”. The three years of employment at Tesco were confined to a specific and probably most modern segment of the company, online shopping and “Grocery home deliveries”. We check out if this form of work is just a modern and temporary fashion or whether it’s part of a deeper and long-lasting transformation of how food will be distributed in the future. In order to get to grips with this we give more attention to “Ocado – the highest point of development”. This is also important to get a better understanding of the automation hype and new forms of capitalist enterprises. Ocado defies the leftist presumption that companies which rely a lot on their share market value tend to shy away from long-term investments. Things then become more subjective and immediate, as we talk about “Work and organising experience at Tesco” in chapter ten. You’ll get to know the workmates, the daily grind and management’s nightmares. We look at

informal resistance and the contradictions of being a union rep. There will be many union delegate tears flowing, and even Jeremy Corbyn will make a guest appearance.

Chapter eleven is a work report from our time working in the 3D printer assembly department of a local enterprise that also refilled printer ink cartridges. The company fits much of the Labour left's criteria when they speak about alliances with the entrepreneurial sector against finance capital: it is a start-up company, it has an ecological ethos, it produces products for the dreamworld of "luxury communism". If you want a sobering account of the automation hype, this is essential reading.



A makeshift trolley in a modern warehouse

We end the book, between chapters twelve and fifteen, on AngryWorkers' thoughts on revolutionary strategy. We look at the division within current protest movements between square occupations and street protests on one side and strikes on the other. We raise the question of how a takeover of the means of production can be imagined once these means are scattered around the globe. We try to talk about the process of revolution as a process of basic tasks for the working class, rather than a mystical moment. We end this section with our organisational proposals to you!

We conclude with some personal remarks and critical self-reflection about our six years in the western badlands.

We wrote this book in six months while working manual, low paid jobs and while continuing our work around the solidarity network and workers' newspaper. We don't want a medal for it, but it's relevant in two regards: we use it as an excuse for the fact that the book is rough and raw; but we also want to make the point that writing something relatively substantial doesn't mean you have to become an academic or journalist or take on any another form of intellectual profession. The more we can write for the collective and international debate, as workers in struggle, the better. We look forward to hearing from you!

In solidarity,

Some (still) AngryWorkers

We would like to thank all the comrades who came some way with us on this (opposite of a psychedelic bus) journey. To Magda, Krzysztof, Elena, Klemen, Jakub, Vincent, Victor, Achille, Jack, Tomasz, Noel, Stephen, Isaias, Alvaro, Harsharan, Lucy, Linda, Andrew, Joachim, Fred, Eve, Oli, Nelio, Darwinder, Gurdev, James, Allan and Camille.

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Layers of Organisation

Chapter 1: West London

Greenford tube station. People wearing Sports Direct polyester with bags under their eyes. Groups of youngsters in safety boots, the bins overflowing with energy drinks and fags, skunk in the air. Lunch break at the Wincanton warehouse. Goofing around. Who cares about zero-hours contracts and the fucking pick-rate? On the wall, stickers of Warsaw ultras. Dozens of handwritten “room to let” ads in shop window, most of them in Polish, Hindi, Tamil. “Room only for vegetarians”. Probably Gujaratis. Ugly rows of inflamed bay windows staring onto the North Circular. We share a room now. Next door the landlady, her husband, who used to work as a model in Mumbai and now sells sofas in Wembley, and their screaming new-born. Upstairs the Romanians. And a Bulgarian who we only discover after two months because he works nights. The Polish guys next door smoke weed and then practice boxing or target shooting with their crossbow. They help us split wood, barefoot. They look tough with their pet snake, but love Shakira. Their landlady – the woman who signed the rent contract – is a single mum from Katowice who drives buses out of Acton depot. She said the atmosphere got sour after the referendum. Hostile. This is the suburb. Hardly anyone goes central, ever. Working, having some cans, cooking dhal for the family, working more, unloading, packing, sending all kinds of shit to the rest of Babylon. All coming from somewhere further east. Biding the time here in weekly pay instalments. Rent hikes, the pound drops and that’s that. In the meantime, we stick it out with each other, learn some Somali from Abdi, get some cheap cigarettes from Pawel and have a laugh with Jyoti, on our break in the plastic-chaired canteen of this or that tin-walled hell-hole.

Before we moved to the western outskirts of London in 2014, we lived more centrally in the east of town. We were active in a libertarian communist and a socialist feminist group. These were decent organisations but they primarily operated like other left organisations, their main interaction with “the class” happening in times of sporadic mobilisations, such as during the public sector workers’ strikes against austerity or the odd

student protests. The left in London tends to be more transient, and due to the city's character in general, more dominated by students and "professionals". We felt the need for a class politics that was more deeply rooted in workers' daily lives and that developed strategies based on concrete conditions in workplaces and working class areas.

At the time, we had been inspired by the strike wave of migrant warehouse workers in Italy, who broke the regime of fear within the low-wage sector by making use of their strategic position in companies like TNT, IKEA and in big distribution centres. Our comrades in the Wildcat collective in Germany had started their own inquiry and interventions in bigger warehouses and we discussed the re-emergence of big workers' concentrations in the logistics sector together. So we decided to move to the logistical nerve-ends of the city, to the western badlands. During the course of this book you will hear a lot about the industrial and logistical workplaces out here – in a city that is seen as one of the most radically "deindustrialised" metropolitan area of the western world. While people emphasise the disappearance of the London dockers and local manufacturing at the expense of the City's growing financial fire power, industrial workers have been shoved to the fringes and been made invisible.

At this point we knew only one worker-comrade in west London, who he was working in a fruit and veg packing and distribution plant in Greenford. We went for visits and found out more about the area. In terms of infrastructure and function, the so-called "western corridor" plays a vital role for London's daily survival. This is basically the area around two arterial roads into London, the M4 and A40, and a global connection via Heathrow airport, which employs around 80,000 workers. There are warehouse units around the airport and in neighbouring Hounslow and Southall with an additional 10,000 workers, Greenford and Perivale close to the A40 with around 15,000 workers and the main industrial area Park Royal with around 40,000 workers. Distribution of goods and food processing are the main industrial activities. Around 60% of all food consumed by over eight million people in London is either handled, packaged or processed along this western corridor.

The workforce in the warehouses and factories is predominantly migrant, mainly from South Asia and Eastern Europe. Most of the workers

live close to their workplaces in the large areas of suburban semi-detached houses. Built in the 1930s and 1950s these houses were meant for nuclear families of four to five members. Due to high rents, workers now tend to share these houses, often with up to ten people. Before we take a closer look at the current constitution of the western outskirts, we take a look at the area's recent class history.

West London history

The development of the western fringes of London was determined by changes in infrastructure, industries and working class migration, producing different forms of class struggle. What were the main shifts?

The first transport link was the Grand Union Canal, which connected London with the industrial areas around Birmingham, and the Great Western Railways, both built in the second half of the nineteenth century. The latter turned Southall into a railway town and the first factories were built in the vicinity, for example, glass and tea factories in Greenford or margarine factories in Southall. Still, large parts of the area remained rural and provided fuel, in the form of grass and hay production, for London's main transport engines at the time: horses. In addition, there were brick kilns and orchards which also supplied London.

During World War I bigger ammunition factories were built in Park Royal. In the 1920s large numbers of workers from the Welsh mining valleys arrived in west London, escaping local unemployment. They worked on the construction of Western Avenue (A40) and later on in the rapidly-expanding light engineering and food processing industries. During the decades between the wars the area witnessed significant US investment, companies like Firestone, Hoover, Gillette or Heinz employed several thousand workers. Many of the workers were women.

With the rearmament in the 1930s, the aviation industry became another major industrial sector of the area. By that time the Communist Party had gained significant influence in the industries and led strikes such as at Firestone (a tyre factory) and HMV (which was a sit-in strike at a gramophone turned ammunitions factory in Hayes). After World War II the main new group of migrant workers entering the area came from Ireland. Like the Welsh before them, they were initially greeted with anti-migrant and anti-working class sentiments by the suburban residents. In the 1960s the focus of disdain then shifted towards the increasing migration from South Asia, mainly Punjab, and the Caribbean. These workers found jobs in the manufacturing industries, which were still expanding at the time.

The 1960s and 1970s were dominated by the unrest of an industrial working class that came largely from a migrant (peasant) background. These workers faced repression not only from the bosses, but also from the

racist state and fascist groups like the BNP. At work the existing trade unions were initially reluctant to organise the new workers. The area witnessed a series of offensive factory strikes, such as at Woolfs rubber plant, the Trico automotive factory or the Grunwick photo processing plant, and street fights, such as the Southall uprising against the fascists and the police in 1979. By the end of the 1970s engineering went into decline, and west London lost 22,000 engineering jobs between 1979–81. The restructuring brought forth struggles such as at the Lucas plant, where engineers and skilled workers raised the issue of workers' self-management and "socially useful production". These disputes remained isolated incidents, confined to the skilled section of the workforce, and were not able to put a halt to mass redundancies.

During the 1980s job cuts in engineering were partly compensated by the massive extension of Heathrow airport and logistics and warehouse districts.

These jobs initially employed mainly workers from South Asia. Many of them had come to England and settled in places like nearby Wembley, after the "refugee crisis" caused by the expulsion of Indians from East Africa (Uganda, Kenya) in the late 1970s. However, migration levels declined sharply during the 1980s and 1990s. A layer of the first generation of migrants from South Asia now formed the local middle class – as landlords, bosses, politicians and "community leaders". During the 1980s the main political expressions were either integration into the Labour party apparatus or religious fundamentalism such as the Khalistan independence movement in Punjab. During these decades, Park Royal and the other industrial areas changed from an industrial area of aerospace and automobile engineering into an archipelago of food processing plants, warehouses, small manufacturing units and offices.

This was a short summary of the main historical changes in local class relations – you can read a more detailed description in the appendix.

The new millennium

While it was canals in the 1900s and the extension of the western railway in the 1930s it was the expansion of Heathrow airport during the 1980s and 1990s which not only created local jobs, but also reshaped the wider logistical network: fresh produce, parcels, electronic parts arriving in the belly of tourist passenger machines are sorted and packaged in dozens of warehouses and distribution centres. Heathrow airport employs directly and indirectly between 80,000 and 150,000 people – most of which are manual jobs – which is more than the local engineering industry ever did. In addition, and often connected to the proliferation of information technology, industrial areas like Park Royal saw a certain re-industrialisation in the form of smaller and more specialised manufacturing units.

The main shift in terms of the local working class happened during the mid-2000s onwards. During the 1990s the new imperialist global order (Gulf War 1991, NATO interventions in Somalia and Afghanistan, civil war in Nepal) led to a new increase in asylum-related migration – in our area whole housing estates were packed full of refugees from Somalia. Nationally, this was followed by a surge in migration from Eastern Europe as a result of liberalisation in 2004 and 2007. The average annual net migration between 1991 and 1995 was 37,000, compared with 249,000 between 2011 and 2015. From the 2000s onwards, west London areas like Perivale, Greenford and other parts of far west London have seen the arrival of many Eastern European workers, who now account for more than half of the workforce in many warehouses and production units, together with recently arrived workers from the subcontinent. Many of these workers from Poland or Romania know little about the history of ex-colonial migration and their own racist prejudices mix with the fact that, by now, many of the middle managers, landlords and small business men are “old” Asian migrants from the 1960s and 1970s and/or their children.

Unsurprisingly, the new concentration of workers around Heathrow airport has led to conflicts, for example, at the airline caterers Alpha LSG in the late 1990s and Gate Gourmet in 2005. In particular the Gate Gourmet strike stands out, as agency workers recently recruited from Eastern Europe were used to undermine the resistance of more settled workers of predominantly Punjabi background against restructuring. The Unite union

put pressure on Heathrow baggage handlers to stop their wildcat support strike. Hundreds of mainly women workers lost their job. The Gate Gourmet strike and its defeat is still in the minds of the local class. Workmates of ours who now work at the Bakkavor food factory or the Tesco warehouse either took part in the dispute or know people who did and they have been deeply influenced by it. Over the last six years we continued distributing WorkersWildWest at Alpha LSG and Gate Gourmet and tried to support individual workers.

We think the union's behaviour during the Gate Gourmet dispute was less of a "racist betrayal" than a tactical decision to retain influence with management and New Labour in times of global restructuring. We can also see that this restructuring process – that was imposed on capital by its own crisis, not through mere "greed for profits" – has turned sour for the bosses. The dismantling of industry has reconnected workers in a global supply-chain; the logistics revolution has led to a re-concentration of capital (as we can see with companies like Amazon). At the same time, the large-scale employment of temp and zero-hour workers has destroyed all illusions and created a mass of disaffected workers. Since 2010/11 we have seen an upsurge globally in militancy amongst workers who have little professional status or sectoral boundaries to defend. This creates the basis to overcome the legal boundaries set by the state/ trade union arrangement. The question is, if a (radical) left that is focused on "racial and gender norms" on one side and Labour Party involvement on the other, is able to help unearth this potential.

The "western corridor" today

The area is still dominated by a sprawl of bleak terraced houses and big white boxes with trucks idling in front, interspersed by the odd golf course, temple and tower block for student accommodation close to the tube stations. Polish supermarkets next to Indian restaurants. You will find more Gujarati speakers in Wembley and more Punjabis in Southall, the newcomers from Eastern Europe have to blend in. Some workmates from Poland initially had difficulties understanding the social and cultural codes. *"When I first came here, I moved to Southall, as rents were cheapest there. Seeing all the Sikhs with long beards and turbans I thought I landed*

amongst the Taliban”. People tend to stick to themselves when it comes to living arrangements, but they are forced to mix at work.

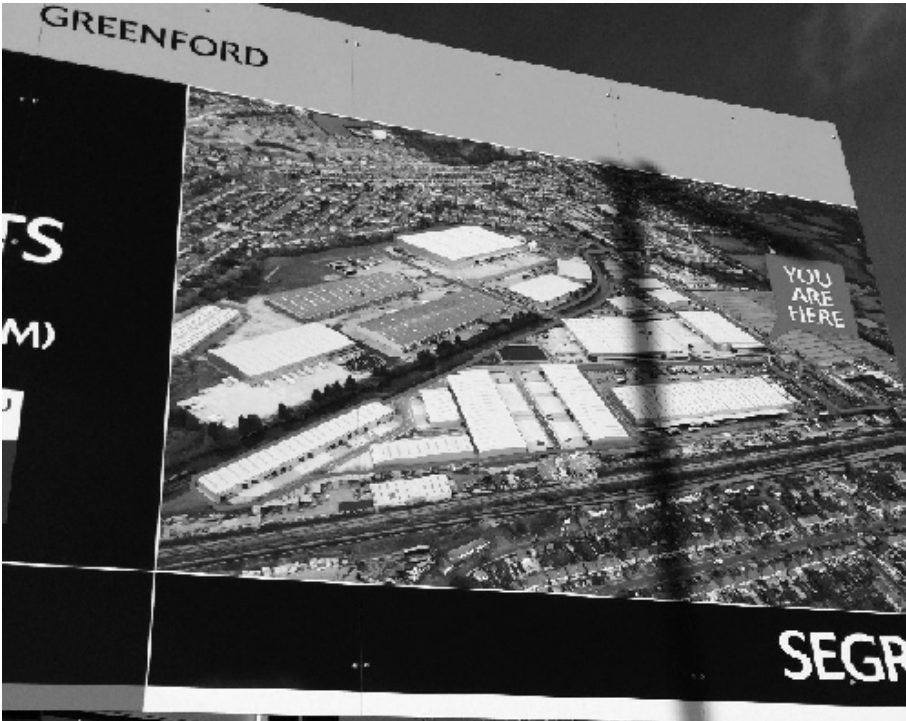


Women strikers from Gate Gourmet lock-out in 2005

Most workers in the area are on the minimum wage or slightly above and a quarter of workers are either employed through agencies or on zero-hour contracts. It is a largely “unskilled” workforce. Often there are significant daily and seasonal differences in workload because of just-in-time delivery systems. To manage the workforces within this context, bosses use lots of temp workers (so there is often a middle layer of agency bureaucracy and discipline) and shifts usually span 24-hours. Working weeks of fifty, sixty hours are the norm. Migrant workers in west London don’t come from regions with recent experiences of struggle, such as South America or the countries of the so-called Arab Spring, which influenced migrant workers’ struggles abroad, for example, the logistics workers in Italy. This also means that Brexit or the Windrush “scandal” hangs over workers’ heads, as possible threats to their future in this country. Management is using the old divide-and-rule tactics, by giving lower management positions to Polish, Romanian, Asian people, who become the “middlemen” for workers of their respective backgrounds.

In 2015 net migration to the UK was 333,000 out of a total population of 65 million. After the Brexit referendum numbers declined slightly to

273,000 in 2016, which is only partly due to a more hostile social environment. It is more likely an outcome of the relative wage decline due to the devaluation of the pound. Since the referendum the pound has lost 15% of its value compared



Segro billboard in Greenford – an industrial area in suburbia

to the Euro, meaning that a British wage now doesn't go as far as it once did back in the home country. Around half of the migrants who arrive in the UK are from EU countries and they first go to areas where it is the easiest to find work: around 40% of all migrants live in London. Every year over one million people come to work or study in the UK for less than a year, which means that turnover is high. Workers who stay for a short period of time are under pressure to earn the money they have already spent on travel. There are a few people in the bigger workplaces in our area who don't have a legal status. Police raids at bigger factories, such as Greencore (sandwich maker) or Noon Kerry Foods, are frequent and are meant to "catch illegal immigrants" as much as to teach the rest of the workforce a lesson in state power.

The political propaganda and actual material changes to migrant workers' status impact heavily on the confidence of workers in local warehouses and factories. Since April 2014 EU migrants have officially been placed onto the lower ranks of the social hierarchy when it comes to access to social benefits: they can claim basic social welfare only after having worked for at least three months, they are entitled to housing benefit only after a year, limited to a maximum of six months. While the actual share of EU workers who claim benefits is small, these measures, which curb benefit access, result in more pressure on workers to find and keep a badly-paid job at all costs. The state also erects higher hurdles for non-EU migrants. Workers with a residence permit have to earn at least £18,600 a year to be able to bring their spouses over – a minimum wage job will fetch you only around £17,000, which explains why many of our workmates work mad hours in overtime. If you also want to bring your child over the required annual income increases to £22,400, which is why some of our colleagues from India haven't seen their children for years.

Unemployment is not an issue in our area of town. You can find a shit job any time. This reflects the low unemployment figure across the UK, which stands at 3.8%, a 44-year low. Still, despite unemployment being low, workers don't seem to be able to put much pressure on wages from below. According to a study of the TUC the average real wage dropped by 10% between 2007 and 2015, which means that the UK is only topped by Greece in terms of income loss amongst industrialised nations – but in contrast to Greece the UK economy grew during the same period. This is an expression of structural weakness, which can only be explained by the specific composition of the class. The Gate Gourmet strike showed how migration and agency work was used against local workers. Over the last decades there were also other ways to undermine workers' terms and conditions:

- The introduction of the minimum wage that currently stands at £8.72 per hour. Implemented initially by Blair's Labour government, the minimum wage stabilises the low-wage sector by making workers accept legally instituted low wages. Currently around 20% of the entire working population earns around or only slightly above the minimum wage.

- The expansion of zero-hours contracts. Around 4.6 million workers have contracts that don't guarantee weekly working hours and therefore no regular income; the number of zero-hour and similar contracts has increased by 30% between 2014 and 2018, also as a consequence of state- induced casualisation of the labour law.
- The state encouraged self-employment in various ways (taxation etc.) which has led to the increase of largely bogus self-employment by 45% since 2002 – to 4.8 million workers in 2018.
- Attacks on wages from above for example, by introducing a wage freeze for 5.4 million public sector workers in 2011 and an annual wage cap of 1% since 2013.

Urban logistics

In general, individual workers, and migrant workers in particular, are in a structurally weak position. But we want to contrast this individual weakness with the potential collective power, especially in areas like west London. As mentioned above, 60% of the food consumed in London is processed here. One of the world's largest airports depends on local workers' labour. A town like London depends heavily on the logistics work on its fringes. In London around 80,000 people were employed in the logistics sector (warehouses, goods transport) in 2009, which grew by 6,800 workers between 2011 and 2014. This figure does not include retail companies which operate their own urban logistics activities. These figures are matched by national figures of an increasing importance of logistics. Even during the five years after the financial crisis between 2008 and 2013, the numbers of workers employed in warehousing and support activities for transportation in the UK increased from 256,000 to 315,000.

According to Transport for London figures from 2015, on a typical weekday in London, logistics transport workers make 281,000 journeys, delivering to 290,000 businesses, travelling around 13 million kilometres. London has grown to such decadent dimensions that urban logistics faces various breaking points: traffic itself is so slow that it squeezes the margins of logistics companies' budgets; pollution levels are the highest in Europe; lack of warehousing space overstretches the supply-chains. The system tries to cope by centralising warehouse operations, for example, in the form of "London Borough Consolidation Centres". Local councils made a deal with

the logistics company DHL to run a central warehouse for the supply of over 300 council buildings across the four boroughs in Central and North London. Due to the lack of space, warehouse prices and rents have increased considerably, which in turn means that warehouses are more likely to be owned by a few large developers.

In west London the main company developing warehouse and industrial areas is called Segro. They started as the owners of Slough Trading Estate in the 1920s. This industrial area near west London is Europe's biggest industrial zone under single ownership – around 20,000 workers are still employed there. They also developed the industrial estates in Greenford, where we worked at Sainsbury's, Tesco and Jack Wills and they run many other logistics parks in the area. In 2010 Segro bought a 50% share of the Airport Property Partnership, bringing large areas of UK airport-related space under company control, including most of the cargo assets at Heathrow airport. In London their logistics parks are home to 415 businesses including Brompton Bikes, Rolls-Royce, DHL, DPD, Post Office, Camden Town Brewery, British Airways and Sotheby's. They also run industrial areas in Europe; their total real estate assets are valued at £9 billion. We've run into trouble with the company's security guards and managers at many of their sites when we've been distributing newspapers or leaflets to workers employed in warehouses and factories "on their land". Their understanding of how far company property reaches into the public domain differed substantially from ours. More than once they've called the cops, who have tended to be on their side.

Heathrow

Heathrow airport is probably the biggest single workplace in the UK. Although spatially concentrated, this workplace is very segmented at the same time – there are hundreds of different companies that engage in various activities to keep the whole show running. We distribute our newspaper at the central bus stop. The night buses which run every twenty minutes through various parts of west London are full of workers around the clock. We speak to cleaners, security guards, catering workers, shop workers, but you never meet the same person twice. It would need a group's full focus to grapple with this giant concentration of workers. Our main contacts were established through working in other bigger workplaces in

the area. We got to know skilled airport maintenance workers during trade union rep training sessions and former workmates have shifted from driving Tesco vans to truck driving on the airfield.

The planned expansion of Heathrow is a major political issue, not just locally, but nationally. While some conservative politicians oppose the expansion because the increased air traffic would also affect their middle-class areas, trade unions like the GMB speak in favour of it, due to the additional 10,000 or so local jobs that would be created. We distributed our newspaper denouncing the fatal “jobs vs. health” trap. We got to know some people at “Grow Heathrow” who occupied a piece of land that was supposed to become the third runway. They campaigned against it for obvious environmental reasons, but they also tried to connect to workers at Heathrow airport, local working class residents and initiatives against the deportation centre on airport grounds. They’ve built structures on the occupied land, invited local residents to do gardening and other projects. Unfortunately, the initial goal to also try and fight the expansion from within was given less priority and the green and hippy-ish character prevailed. Still, we had beautiful nights at campfires listening to neo-folk and slam poetry – a bit of relaxed culture in the machine’s hard backwaters.

Park Royal, crown jewel of a workers’ vanguard

The other main workers’ concentration is Park Royal, employing around 40,000 people across 1,500 businesses. Most of these jobs are manual jobs. The area has experienced strong growth in recent years: employment has increased by 20% since 2009. The area is thirty minutes from Oxford Circus on the Central line by tube. Still, if you ask most people on the London left if they have been or even heard of Park Royal, most won’t have. The working class has become invisible, not because it physically doesn’t exist, but because workers haven’t found an expression of political power under the current conditions. Back in the day workers riveted sheet metal for helicopters or buses, which is an obvious act of creation. Masses of workers saw their productive collectivity represented in the big red buses or magnificent flying objects. Today workplaces are smaller. Only 20-30 companies in Park Royal employ more than 250 people, most which are food production plants. A further 4%, meaning around 80 companies, employ between 50-250 people. Things have become more complex, but if

we dig deeper, look behind the warehouse unit's sliding doors and discover the composition of productive activities in Park Royal today, we can see a potential mass brain and social workshop of a working class movement.

The local working class is multi-skilled. A local survey collated data about different activities going on in Park Royal in a year: 40,000,000 plumbing fittings manufactured – 90 online interactive magazines created – 1,400,000 postal and freight deliveries – 12,000 lorries repaired – 2,000 custom print jobs delivered – 7 full length studio films processed – 94,000 hotel guests accommodated – 3,000 hires of recording studio – 42,000 hospital patients transported – 300,000 sushi rolls produced – 500,000 tonnes of building waste processed – 3,900 tonnes of laundry cleaned – 1,000 tonnes of nuts roasted – 50 tonnes of steel processed – 600,000 ink cartridges re-filled... A wealth of productive knowledge within a few square miles.

We worked in Park Royal, in the biggest humus factory in the UK and in a medium-sized plant assembling 3D-printers. We visited various workplaces with our newspaper and one of our solidarity network drop-ins was in the ASDA supermarket café in Park Royal. We delivered Tesco shopping to various companies in this industrial zone, but even after six years Park Royal still surprises us. You open a door and you find an industrial Italian pasta-making kitchen full of Romanians. The next unit might be a radio station for Mormons. Then a studio full of hipsters who manufacture architectural models. A workshop that strips old computers and laptops and refills ink cartridges. There is the hospital slap bang in the middle. A trailer park of Irish gypsies who gallop their horses down the road, past loading bays and car garages. A big sushi factory – because there will be sushi on the barricades! And you find the other side of working class existence in Park Royal: close to the 24-hour ASDA superstore two dozen guys hang out on a street corner and wait to be picked up for cash-in-hand labourer jobs. Close to the Ocado warehouse, on the wasteland next to the Piccadilly tube line, dozens of people live in tents.

It would be beautiful to be able to concentrate solely on this area and its multinational working class. To be able to reflect in a newspaper on the various conditions of exploitation and struggle, but also the collective productive and creative wealth of workers in this locality. The clear

boundaries and concentrated character of the area would make it possible to imagine a local wage campaign: “No one under £12” or something similar, that could spread from unit to unit, making use of the various social spaces, like workers’ cafes and shisha bars as places of subversion. At the edge of the area hundreds, if not thousands of international students live in apartment blocks and pay high rents to real estate developers – links could be forged. We have to contrast the strategic joy of engaging with this potential jewel of a working class movement with the stale and often airy Labour party politics and internal power-fights that many London lefties prefer to get involved with. We ask ourselves: what the fuck?!

The political class

Many decisions concerning the development of the western corridor depend on central planning and the national government, for example, whether a new runway will be built at Heathrow or not. Other decisions depend on local government, which in Ealing council's case is led by Labour. This council has been particularly successful in terms of managing the contradictions of crisis in an area which has a sharp income gap within its population. Over the last decade, the council has enforced, or at least co-managed, austerity measures such as the closure of libraries, children's centres, swimming pools, job centres and hospital departments. These cuts have hit areas like Southall particularly hard, as it is densely populated and now deprived of much basic social infrastructure.

Like any other Labour council in the UK, the first step to mediate these cuts is by passing the buck and blaming the budget cuts from central government. In Shaggy's immortal words, "It wasn't me!" they cry. More importantly, due to the links that still exist between local politicians and "the community" (either because of their ethnic or religious background or previous activism within the anti-racism or trade union movement), they are probably more able to pull off "peoples' consultations" before the decision to close libraries, which give the cuts a semblance of grassroots participation. Given the historic links between Labour and the co-operative movement, Ealing Labour council is also more apt to propose running libraries by "volunteer groups" or privatising the National Health Service by setting up "domiciliary care co-operatives", which would have to operate with a limited budget that no private company would accept. Social services in Southall are dependent on various largely volunteer-run charities, which in turn have to apply and compete for minimal funding from the council.

While resting its political legitimacy on the "community", the other leg of the Labour council is firmly resting on its "New Labour" style relations with real estate developers. Ealing as the "Queen of suburbs" has always attracted middle class or middle-waged sections of the population and has more land available than inner city London. That is why you'll not only find relatively large areas taken over as golf courses here, but also many new apartment block projects, most often located near central transport links with central London. In Southall, Ealing council gave the green light

to a huge brownfield development close to the planned Crossrail station, a new fast-link train between the eastern and western outskirts of London and the inner-City financial districts. The development of the site caused carcinogens to be released from the contaminated soil, causing a surge in respiratory problems, especially amongst children. The developed apartment blocks will more likely increase rent levels for the local working class than lower it, by attracting higher earners.

The “communities”

Within the working class in west London, “community” structures such as temples, churches or cultural associations play a significant role. “Communities” in the sense of cross-class social structures of people with “the same background” are not natural entities. They thrive in specific conditions. For example, in situations where there is a lack of welfare provisions due to austerity or under conditions of recent migration, which makes you depend materially and emotionally on ties with already settled members of your language, ethnic etc. background. We have to emphasise the double character of these community structures: they are not mainly an expression of lacking “class consciousness”, as they do help working class people survive materially; but, at the same time, they are the basis for super-exploitation of its working class members and for their political integration into the trajectory and career of the so-called “community leaders”.

In areas like Southall, Sikh temples and their daily provision of free food play a significant role. Financial means for the temples largely depend on (middle class) donations. Homeless or poor proletarians, even those from Eastern Europe, accept the temple as a source of survival. The temples also help newcomers to find accommodation, jobs and emotional support. During the month-long Gate Gourmet lock-out, temples provided material support – and community leaders will have played their role in encouraging workers to “remain patient and peaceful and listen to what the Labour councillor has to say”. During the 2011 London Riots, the Sikh temples in Southall mobilised hundreds of men to protect temples and Sikh businesses in the area. In Birmingham the “Bearded Broz”, a young cross-class Muslim organisation, cleaned up and collected rubbish in the largely Muslim areas of town during a week-long rubbish collectors’ strike in 2017

– acting as volunteer scabs. After the Grenfell fire, Muslim charities were on call to provide food and shelter long before the public sector got its arse into gear.

Workers from Eastern Europe have more difficulties finding community structures, as the last wave of migration, for example, from Poland or Hungary, happened during the late 1950s and early 1980s and was politically motivated. There is only a small Eastern European middle class. Even the bigger “Polish” supermarkets in our area, which only sell products from Poland, play Polish radio and advertise for Polish events, are actually owned by people of South Asian origin. When anti-migrant media propaganda increased in the run up and aftermath of the Brexit referendum result, workers from Eastern Europe were forced to react. In the absence of a visible middle-class strata, and the absence of a left-wing force, it was the far-right and Catholic church who organised the first demonstrations in London to protest against “anti-Polish” slanders. Similar organisations then organised the “Polish strike” in 2015 – which was basically a media stunt by wannabe community leaders to tell the public that Poles are the better migrants. There have been demonstrations of fascist groups from Poland in our area, but they’ve remained small and infrequent. Still, the need and urge for some form of community is prevalent. Our neighbours take part in martial art clubs connected to Polish football clubs. Another neighbour formed a “Polish motorcycle club” on Facebook and a few weeks later organised a weekend party with three hundred bikers from beyond the area.

Sometimes the fact that these community structures become the backbone of super-exploitation is very obvious, for example, when it came to the construction of a Hindu temple in nearby Wembley. It is very ornately made, all carved stonework. During construction the temple management flew over specialist workers from India, paying them 30p an hour. Attempts to get a union involved was seen as a betrayal and those who did support the workers saw it as a chance to discredit the incumbent temple leaders in their attempts to take over the temple management themselves. Other forms of community exploitation happen in more hidden forms, for example, most of our solidarity network cases concern workers who have arrived fairly recently from areas like Punjab and are paid less than the minimum wage by well-established bosses of the same background. The bosses always

justify it by saying that they're helping their newly-arrived countrymen and they get very touchy if these workers get "outsiders" involved – more about that in chapter 2 when we talk about our experiences with the solidarity network.

Struggles

Relationships between workers and their consciousness about their situation as a class don't develop gradually. It develops in leaps and bounds – in struggle. Ask a fellow worker in a situation where they haven't experienced any collective action and you will hear all kinds of opinions: “nothing will ever happen”, “everyone is racist”, “the migrant workers are to blame” etc. All of this will be thrown up into the air in moments of struggle, bonds and minds get shaken up. The work of revolutionaries is not really to convince individual workers of the right path towards the promised land. Neither is it really our task to “organise” individual workers into a fighting force. Our proposals of both how to struggle and what to struggle for will only really be fruitful in moments of collective action. Revolutionaries can only forge deeper links when moving from dispute to dispute, finding brothers and sisters who want to go further.

If this is our understanding, if we believe that struggles are crucial for our work, then the years from 2014 to 2020 in west London were a thorny desert. This is an area where there are thousands of companies with hundreds of thousands of low-paid workers and we can count the incidents of open conflict between workers and bosses on a pair of hands. Most of these disputes were short strikes within the remaining cores of the union movement: a bus drivers' strike in Acton, a strike in a London Underground depot, a dispute by British Airways staff at Heathrow and by tax office workers in Ealing. We might have forgotten one or two, but what is more important is the fact that the huge underbelly of the low-wage sector kept on rumbling. It also meant that our own involvement in strikes, our chance to learn together with other workers and to build new friendships between militants remained limited. One of the struggles which was more interesting and where we had some minor involvement happened two months after we had moved to the western fringes, a cleaners' and porters' strike at Ealing hospital.



The rowdy Medirest picket line in 2014

The Medirest strike

This is what we wrote at the time and later on distributed in the first issue of WorkersWildWest:

“We made a short visit to the Compass Medirest workers picket at Ealing Hospital. It’s their second 48-hour strike, they plan further action in early March. There are 150 workers (GMB members), most of them working in housekeeping, as porters, cleaners, and in the canteen. Many of them have been working there for ten, fifteen years and they are still on the minimum wage of £6.31, even though Medirest workers doing the same jobs at other London hospitals get over £9.

The atmosphere was very lively, especially when the Medirest boss came out only to instruct them to stay off the road for “health and safety reasons”. This was followed by collective chants of “Medirest Bye Bye!” The whole thing feels very rank and file. Because the workers have been banned from going too near the hospital and threatened with dismissal if they enter to distribute leaflets, we decided, as members of the public, to take on that task instead. We printed up some flyers about the strike, which asked people to go and support them outside. We set about handing them out to patients and staff inside the hospital, all of whom were supportive and sympathetic – even the scabs!

We managed to talk to a couple of the scabs, who were Medirest workers taxi-ed over from other hospitals for the duration of the strike.

They had been told there was a strike, and they could have refused. Instead they preferred to accept the reported £18 an hour strike-breaking wage. The ones we spoke to were from Homerton Hospital, so we think for the next strike, which is planned for early March and will be a five-day strike, that some of us will distribute flyers at Homerton to try and persuade other workers not to scab.

While workers we spoke to were supportive of the GMB union and their rep, they also said that it had taken a year and a half to get to this stage...

Even though the company is bringing in workers from other places, the GMB did not contact other unions which organise Medirest workers at those hospitals, and from which the “scabs” are sourced. And it is quite a step for workers to do this independently. The Medirest workers at Ealing Hospital face a considerable opponent. After all, Medirest is part of the

Compass group, a very large corporation that has mass NHS contracts, as well as caters for high-profile sporting and entertainment events...

We suggested a kind of assembly meeting, which was difficult to make happen. When people finally quietened down and gathered around to talk to each other, the dynamic of them listening to outsiders, somehow as an audience, was difficult to break. The main suggestion we had was to go drum up the support of Medirest workers in other hospitals. We also suggested they think about putting pressure on management in other ways, for example doing a demo at one of the high-profile glitzy events that the Compass Group caters for, such as Chelsea football stadium, Madame Tussauds, Wembley Arena or the Queen Elizabeth Conference Hall. As long as management can keep the workers on the roundabout, twenty metres away from the hospital, getting signatures for their petition, they can contain the struggle and isolate the workers. Embarrassing the company and talking to other Compass workers could break this impasse. People agreed it was a good idea, but we're not sure whether they'll take up the idea yet. There is a division amongst the workers to the extent that decisions are deferred to the more "outspoken" workers and reps. We tried to create direct contacts with the cleaners at SOAS, who were about to go on strike, and at Kings College, where Medirest has another cleaning subcontract.

Politically the most important element of this strike is that a largely "migrant" and female workforce very clearly denounce the minimum wage, in slogans and on placards. The GMB ended up calling the strike off after the first day of a seven-day strike. Management agreed to a £1 pay increase, but the other demands, for example, for sick pay and holiday pay were not met. The only way to take on the bosses and win is to take the struggle into our own hands! We have to self-organise. The first steps are to figure out how we can hit the company hardest and how we can involve as many other workers as possible."

The left

The suburban working class areas in the west are a political desert, far away from the university campus-based left in the centre or the initiatives inspired by tenant and migrant workers' unions in the south-east. Formerly inspiring groups such as the Southall Black Sisters nowadays largely concentrate on "legal and advice work". The main left initiatives in the area are focused on NHS campaigns or organised around Unite Community. These initiatives are carried out by, and mobilise, mainly older comrades in their sixties, who have been active in trade unions, the Indian Workers Association, Trotskyist organisations or the Communist Party in the 1970s. It is this generation that also forms the main base of Labour and Momentum locally. There are hardly any ties with the young, migrant, working class. We met half a dozen young comrades, who ended up west due to lower rents, but they tend to leave the area quickly as it is a cultural wasteland. This situation left us with mixed emotions, swinging from feeling isolated to feeling relieved that we don't have to deal with the usual self-centred bullshit that dominates large parts of the far-left.

Conclusion

These parts of town are the real working class melting pot. The area is full of tension between the individual powerlessness vis-à-vis the bosses and the state with their zero-hour contracts and migration policies on one side, and the potential structural power of workers who feed Europe's biggest city and operate the nation's main gate (or rather run-way) to the world on the other. Any offensive strike that expresses the anger about low wages, high rents, the work intensity and bullying imposed by the logistical regime could spread and generalise like wildfire. The mediating forces – the influence of politicians or trade union bureaucrats – are weak. The problem is that workers are in a situation of permanent suspension: what will happen with Brexit? Will my wife and family get their visa? Will the bank grant me a mortgage if my wife gets her overtime? Will the situation “back home” get better? Some of these conditions, for example, the extreme dependency of the bosses on migrant labour, the virtual non-existence of unemployment or the dominance of labour intensive industries, are very specific to west London. This is why we need an organised exchange with comrades from other parts of the region, in order to fully understand the current situation our class finds itself in.

Chapter 2: The Solidarity network and local campaigns

In this area of town, where English is a second language and people are getting to grips with the bureaucracy of a new country, navigating life and work can be tricky. We should find ways to support each other in this kind of dog-eat-dog environment without having to become a “service user”. Solidarity networks propose mutual aid and direct action when it comes to day-to-day problems with bosses, landlords, state machinery (like job centres, immigration) or racist and sexist violence. The basic principles are rooted in the idea that we don’t need experts or “community” middlemen to sort out our problems for us. To say that it is up to us to deal with our problems – with the education, medical or police system – is a political end in itself. In this way, the class character of these common situations can be brought to the fore, as an alternative to an individualising advice service.

Normally, the only recourse that poorer sections of the working class have to resolve their issues is to enlist middle class leaders, such as the media or lawyers, or other kinds of professionals like paid union officials, religious, “community” or political leaders. Southall and Wembley are full of them. “Solnets”, (as solidarity networks are often known), try to break these relationships because these leaders will always try and exploit that material and ideological dependency. For example, they’ll help you just to get your vote; or they will ask for stupid amounts of money; or they will use your story to push a certain agenda. One work colleague was asked to pay £75 for a short letter she wanted written in English for a grievance she was submitting by a high street solicitor. If that wasn’t bad enough, when we read it, the English had loads of mistakes. These kinds of parasitic relationships need to be called out for what they are, and alternative practices set up. Historically, this dependency of the lower sections of the working class on middle class populism is the material basis for fascism. In this sense solnets are the most effective form of “anti-fascism”.

Solnets aren’t new, and we know that they come with problems. Even though you consciously want to enable people to fight for themselves, it can

be difficult to break that “service provider” expectation. The daily grind makes it difficult for individuals who have been supported to keep being involved and to support others. The network often depends on a handful of activists to keep itself going. The various experiments with solnets from the US to Western Europe tend to confirm this.

However, we think that the key to breaking this dynamic is the link that solnets have to the organic collective power of people within their workplaces. Without this link, things can easily just become individual pieces of case work. Or individual campaigns and protests that peter out, with nothing left that holds people together more longer-term.

Therefore, the biggest challenge for solnets is to create a synergy between themselves and workplace-based groups. This is about building power and politicisation. Power in the sense that under the current conditions we often need an “external support army” to encourage workers to break through the blanket of fear within factories, warehouses and other workplaces and take collective action. This also acknowledges the fact that normally, at the beginning, only a minority of workers decide to fight. One way of supporting these workers is to provide a group of external supporters, which solnets could provide in order to, for example blockade a workplace, spread the word to other workers in the area, or organise social events to build more support amongst the workers inside that workplace. And politicisation in the sense that the solnet in relation to the workplace can help bring to the fore all the aspects of working class experience that trade unions tend to ignore, for example the conditions in the domestic sphere and repression from state agencies.

The solnet helped us get to know more about the general conditions in the area, as well as establishing contacts with local people outside of the immediate workplace. In the following we want to reflect on our concrete experiences and illustrate some of the difficulties.

Our first solnet “cases” evolved organically out of contacts at work – workmates had trouble with visa agents and getting holiday pay from temp agencies. We responded collectively and successfully. At the same time, we tried to invite people to a monthly workers’ assembly in a community centre to “watch documentaries and support each other with problems at work or with landlords”. We put up loads of leaflets in the area, but we

hardly got anyone we didn't already know to come along. In a cultural desert like Greenford, people didn't seem to be too interested in short films and discussion evenings!

We had to change tack. We decided we would have to be more explicit about what we can offer, namely, "if you have an issue with unpaid wages, housing conditions or injustice at the job centre, contact us." We said that we are a network without leaders or money involved and that "nobody will fight for us – it is up to us and our fellow workers". Instead of a monthly meeting we invited people to weekly one-hour drop-ins and provided a solidarity network phone number. Instead of the community centre, the drop-ins were in more accessible places: an Indian cafe in Southall, a McDonald's in a retail park in Greenford and the 24-hour Asda cafe supermarket in Park Royal.

The new poster and the change in the meeting format had positive results. Initially we put up dozens of posters and the response was overwhelming. We were receiving phone calls daily. This was an indicator that times were getting harder and that all authorities and exploiters – from language schools to landlords to bosses – thought that migrant workers were free loot to be taken advantage of, in particular after the anti-migrant propaganda-fest around Brexit.



Our solidarity network poster we put up around the area

Most people phoned up before they came to a meeting, although some just turned up. Nearly all people were migrant workers, some women but mostly men. They came mainly with individual problems, most of which related to issues at a job they had just left. Initially more people came to the weekly drop-ins, which was good, as people could see that other people had similar issues. Here is one report from a meeting in the Indian café in Southall:

“The Polish family came with their baby – Indian sweets helped to keep it happy. The kitchen worker came, as well, and the cleaning worker. It was a big round in the end and we had to keep on ordering more tea and sweets to keep the café owner happy. We talked about problems with landlords and with management. The kitchen worker told stories about how the area has changed over the last thirty years, the cleaning worker talked about how things are back home in Goa. The baby was passed around and we agreed to take some action the following week.”

We were aware of the type of working class people in our area. English not being the first language often creates extra problems when dealing with authorities. The usual NGO or state-funded advice or community centres have suffered from years of austerity and cannot cope or are inaccessible for the mass of recent migrants. Many people who approach the solidarity network individually do so from a weak position, often not knowing the legal situation or being tied up in more personal forms of exploitation within their “communities”. In the first instance we didn’t expect to overcome a certain “service” position – we were there to inform and help up to a certain point. We gave legal advice when necessary and used our position as members of the IWW rank and file union to write scary but effective official letters to bosses.

In order to undermine the inevitable service relationship that solnets elicit, we made sure to tell people that we are workers in this area ourselves and that we did this voluntarily in order to create a support network. We talked about how we see the local situation, the mixture of anti-migrant propaganda and low wages, and always tried to emphasise that these were common rather than individual problems. We always asked them about the current jobs they were in, even if their “problem” related to a previous job. We usually passed on our local newspaper, which puts forward a

revolutionary position. In the newspaper we also started reflecting on the most recent solnet cases. We emphasised that more often than not, the issue will need direct action, with little chance of a quick legal fix.

The solidarity network took up three hours per week on average, including the one hour sitting at the drop-in. Over the last three, four years we've had over two dozen cases with a dozen or so people who would support actions. After a while we had to limit the number of posters we put up, as we had only two or three people who actually took on cases. Each of us couldn't deal with more than one case at a time. This was a shame, as having lots of ongoing cases would mean more lively meetings where we could all come together, see and talk to each other, bringing home the fact that we are not alone with our individual problems. But as we will see when we look at the cases in detail, the main problem was not that we couldn't take on more of them. Rather we didn't have the capacity to follow up on the strategic potentials that most of the contacts brought with them.

We had many smaller cases of supporting self-employed builders and drivers or cash-in-hand undocumented workers. These cases had only limited capacity to go beyond the immediate issue and the individual struggle for survival. The following cases had a bit more potential.

Sainsbury's warehouse worker from Punjab, visa agent scam

We met the friend while working in a warehouse together. She told us that she gave £10,000 to a "visa advisor" in Southall. His company offered to give her IT training at his (apparently Home Office registered) company that would sponsor her visa application. She only got two weeks training, and was then given fake documents to apply for a visa. She didn't want to play this game and demanded her money back, to no avail. This is one of many cases where "community middlemen" take advantage of recently arrived migrants. We went to the office in a bigger group, (we even had a local Catholic priest amongst us!) with placards and leaflets to try and get her money back. The visa agent tried various tricks. He tried to intimidate our friend, then appealed to her not to get "outsiders" involved – but in the end, after we kept hassling him, he coughed up all the money. This action cemented the friendship and we managed to understand more about what it means to live and work "undocumented" and to depend on the middle-class segment of the "community". For example, the friend now cooks and cleans

for richer Indians and her husband works night shifts in huge, but pretty informal vegetable warehouse, both obviously paid cash-in-hand. We went to local temples together and learnt about connections between various local landlords who are profiting from their need to keep a low profile.

Jack Wills warehouse workers from Hungary, outstanding holiday pay from agency

Four of us who were employed through the ASAP agency in Greenford and who used to work at the same Jack Wills warehouse, took action together to get the holiday pay we were owed. Everyone had lost their job when they relocated to Sheffield but we had all exchanged phone numbers so were able to contact each other and find out we were all in a similar situation. We were owed money ranging from £70-£150. Our individual attempts to get our money back over a couple of months ended up going nowhere. So we went to the office together – three of us agency workers plus five of our friends. We had made a leaflet to give to people who were registering with the agency, telling them how the agency had treated us, and gave them out in the reception area. The managers quickly sussed out that he should pay up before things escalated and we got our money within fifteen minutes. We didn't manage to stay in touch with the female agency workers from Hungary, but met one of them two years later when working as delivery drivers at Tesco together.

Amey street sweeper, outstanding overtime payment

One of us worked as a road sweeper for Hays, the temp agency supplying workers for Amey – the company subcontracted to do street cleansing and refuse collection for Ealing council. After he left, Hays refused to pay him for three days. He tried his luck writing to ACAS – a government institution that tries to solve issues before you go to labour tribunal. They asked him: “What kind of proof do you have?” He said: “They don't give no proof for temps, no clock-in card, no signed time-sheets.” ACAS said: “No proof, bad luck”. We did an action at the depot, distributing leaflets about the situation to the workmates. Finally, Hays coughed up the dosh. We published this “victory” in the next issue of the newspaper, which we handed out to Amey workers. This had particular relevance as Amey workers were undergoing a wave of redundancies and bouts of work

intensifications – and the union, GMB, was doing little about it. We hoped that the news about a small success through direct action might encourage some workers to step things up.

Language teachers and students from Romania, unpaid wages and false certificates



Protest outside Amey to get outstanding pay

A student-worker from Romania who lived in the area contacted us. He and his co-student hadn't received their certificate after finishing a language and adult education course. In addition, the company owed him several weeks wages for teaching entry-level English classes. The students had taken government loans to attend the course and had started paying back the money. There have been various "scandals" of such private education companies which fuck over migrant students, cashing in on their loans. The good thing was that he kept in touch with many former students, mainly through Facebook sites of Romanian migrants. We and IWW union comrades met with four former students and drafted a letter to management. Management seemed happy to sort out the issue of the certificates, but said a sub-agent, himself from Romania, was responsible for the English classes (using rooms in their college). We would have insisted that if the work was performed in their building and with their students, that they had the obligation to pay. Unfortunately, the teaching worker from Romania chose

not to pursue the issue, partly because he was working long hours, which would make taking part in activities to recover the wages difficult. We had said we couldn't do it all for him, that he would need to take an active role. The school is located in central London, which made it difficult for us, as well. Still, this was a good potential to get a foot in the door of the considerable “English teaching” sector in London – a sector which became a focus of activity of the IWW some years later.

Family from Poland, conditions of flat, trouble with landlord



Solidarity network protest outside local timber merchants to get outstanding wages

A family from Poland contacted us after their private landlord had threatened them with eviction. They had got into rent arrears after their housing benefit payments were stopped due to “overpayment” – which later turned out to be a minor sum. They had appealed against the housing benefit office decision, but this process took several months while they were left without payment – she works as a retail worker, he is recovering from serious illness, they have a baby. The landlord has various properties in the area, most of them in bad shape, for example fire alarm equipment is missing and electrical wiring is unsafe. He also threatened neighbours of

the family with eviction, they are also from Poland. We suggested that all neighbours should get together and make the case more public, which seemed difficult to achieve after some of them decided to hand things over to the lawyer. The landlord took advantage of the general post-Brexit atmosphere and told them that if they don't move out, "they will be deported". We suggested writing a letter to the council to ask for an inspection of the property, which would at least delay the eviction. The landlord wrote to us: *"The reason why I am responding to your letters is that I have a special relationship with the above tenants as they were suffering in bed and breakfast with a small child, however as they have got you involved this has now changed everything and eviction will take place."* In the letter he also mentions his good relations with the local Labour council. The eviction didn't actually happen, but it showed that we had a certain responsibility and we had to be able to back up our counter-actions. We could see how the changes in the benefit regime and the discrimination of EU workers played out concretely. We visited the woman at her job in a local retail park, but after a while the contact fizzled out.

Kitchen worker from Senegal, outstanding sick pay

This worker contacted us after he had been sacked by his company, where he had worked for over a year. His brother had died and it had hit him hard. He asked for one month's unpaid holiday to cope with the bereavement. The company refused and ended up sacking him, which aggravated the worker's mental health. He lived in bed and breakfast accommodation in Southall with his wife and daughter, who suffers from sickle-cell disease and needs a lot of care. The company didn't provide sick pay, so he only received the statutory sick pay of £17 a day. The worker appealed against the dismissal and we accompanied him to the appeal hearing. Despite the fact that he was able to provide sick notes for the entire period of absence, the company upheld their decision to sack him. At this point the worker didn't want his job back, given the stress that they had caused him. Instead he demanded full payment for the entire period of sickness up to the appeal hearing date – which legally speaking, the company had no obligation to pay. We organised an action at his former workplace, a swanky start-up office space in Hayes. We came with a megaphone and some leaflets, informing the office workers about the shoddy practices of the catering

company that served them their lunch. They called the cops but, unusually for the snouty snouts, they said we could stay. Then the boss of the catering company who had sacked the worker zoomed up in his sports car and promised to pay if we ended our demonstration. They paid £1,500 in the end to avoid further embarrassment with the company they were catering for. The worker moved onto jobs in other major catering companies like Compass and facilitated contacts to other workers, mainly of African background. These would have been good entry points to organise within the massive “outsourced” sector, but the workers he put us in touch with ended up backing out when we explained the methods necessary to get results.

Greencore factory worker from Morocco, sick pay

We had been distributing WorkersWildWest at this major sandwich factory for years, but had never managed to establish deeper contacts. Independently, a worker contacted the solidarity network about outstanding sick pay – unfortunately after he had left the job. We initially tried to use the union law to have a meeting with management as his IWW union reps, which failed. We sent various letters and planned to organise a leaflet action at the factory. If we’d have been able to show our success in getting the money for the worker, this might have created further contacts inside Greencore. Unfortunately, the worker had to go back to Morocco for a longer period of time and the case fizzled out. When he came back, he started a job at a nearby McDonald’s, which could have been a valuable contact during the IWW campaign of Deliveroo fast-food delivery workers.

Building worker from Punjab, unpaid wages

We were approached by a building worker, originally from Punjab, who had worked on a shop conversion of a beauty parlour for a female boss from the same background. His English was pretty weak, he had arrived some years back, whereas she and her family were well established and own various properties in the area. They didn’t sign any contractual agreements before he started working. He worked on the site for two weeks, after which he was paid £420 in cash. He was promised further payments, of which he had proof in the form of text messages, but the payments were never made. After a few letters we visited the store with two comrades from the RMT,

the builder and a friend who the solidarity network had helped during a previous case. We spoke to the people inside the shop, but the boss was not on site. The people inside were beauticians who hire their seats from the boss. We said that we will unfortunately have to tell people to boycott the shop as long as the outstanding wages were not paid – and that we understand that this will also impact on the beauticians’ income. We asked them to put pressure on their landlady to cough up the money. The boss reacted by phoning the builder and threatening him with the police, accusing him of harassment. She also mentioned during a phone conversation that the builder and his family, “actually live in my aunt’s house and I could have them kicked out”.

A week later we organised a second picket, this time the boss was present and filming us. People on the High Street were generally supportive when they found out the reason for the protest. After an hour, two police vans and a police car arrived. A group of (female) cops said that the boss felt harassed by our presence. We told them that any boss would feel harassed about a picket and that we did not call her private phone number or stand in front of her private house, but a business address. The cops insisted that, “if a person feels harassed, then it is harassment” and told us that if we didn’t end the picket we could be arrested and/or issued with a harassment warning. We decided to stop the picket at this point and get permission from the council to organise a peaceful protest. After this picket the boss called the builder and told him to, “drop the case and leave the outsiders out of this”, offering him £500. The builder decided not to accept the offer. We organised a third picket, this time a male family member of the boss arrived, ready to distribute his own counter-leaflet to local people! One of the self-employed beauticians helped him. In the leaflet he tried to smear the reputation of the builder. The cops didn’t turn up this time. After this action the builder said he wanted to go through the courts. We told him that this would take a long time and cost money. We also told him that we would need another witness for the fact that he worked on site for that period of time. He said this might be difficult, as most of the beauticians are part of the “boss’s community”. After two weeks we got back in touch, but the witness was not willing to speak out. This was a pretty unsatisfying result, but not uncommon, given the type of work (cash in hand), the

“community pressure” and the legal system (harassment charges and court fees).

Sainsbury’s and hotel worker from Sudan, fine for littering, tax debt

This worker was employed on night shift at a Sainsbury’s supermarket and had a part-time job as a cleaner in a new hotel in Park Royal. Ealing council gave him hefty fine for littering, after a plastic bag with rubbish and a letter with his address was found by an outsourced worker – they get bonus payments for dishing out littering charges. He also had tax debt, due to letters from the tax office which he hadn’t responded to, as the letters got lost in the multi-occupancy house. This was basically a case of dealing with authorities which nowadays don’t have local offices and operate mainly with recorded voice computers. At the same time the authorities survive by dishing out fines to people who have less knowledge about how to appeal and deal with the system. This struggle is very difficult to collectivise. Still, we managed to get him off some of the fines.

He had been working at the Sainsbury’s supermarket for a long time and when they tried to shorten the paid breaks for night shift there was an opportunity to organise something with his co-workers – unfortunately at the time we and the IWW didn’t have the capacity to follow this up. He also gave us some good insights into the working conditions at the new bigger hotel in the area.

Bus depot cleaner from Somalia, unfair suspension

A night shift cleaner at a local bus garage contacted us. He had worked there eleven years. In 2011, the contract for cleaning public buses at this depot was taken over by Leadac. Recently Leadac lost the contract to another company. In preparation, management had been targeting and bullying workers over the last year. The worker was shifted from his depot to a different bus garage without notice and received three disciplinary letters in one year to try and intimidate him. He was finally suspended without reason. He called UNITE, they said they would call back, but didn’t. The other colleagues, mainly Goan, were scared and needed the overtime. Apparently, “they bribe managers with gifts”. The worker told us that the depot manager was racist and that he had announced that he wanted to get rid of everyone, replacing the black workers for Polish ones. We sent

some letters but didn't get anywhere. Then we went with the worker to the bus garage and spoke to the manager directly. Our friend accused the manager of pushing out twelve people and he replied: "I know, but now I have a good team". There was an argument but after one week he was taken back to work without any investigation – he received full wages for the time off. We were going to look into issuing a collective grievance against the depot manager but shortly after being reinstated, the worker unfortunately decided to leave the job. The depot and the outsourced nature of the cleaning work would have been a prime target for the IWW to organise. Shortly after, we had a similar case with a worker from Goa who had worked through the AGS agency as a track and platform cleaner on London Underground. We helped him get his outstanding holiday pay. In return he came to a protest against work accidents at the Noon/ Kerry Food factory that we organised.

House of Fraser warehouse workers from Bulgaria, unpaid wages and unsafe working conditions

House of Fraser is a major department store chain with around 60 stores in the UK. Their warehouse in Milton Keynes is run by the logistics company XPO. XPO hires temp workers through an agency called StaffLine. During peak season, between October and December, StaffLine hires a large number of workers directly from Bulgaria. House of Fraser, XPO and StaffLine hope that they can squeeze the workers from Bulgaria to the max. They do this by making the workers more dependent on the company. For example, they say in the contract (between StaffLine and House of Fraser) that only a quarter of the 500 workers from Bulgaria have to be able to speak English. Without proper language skills they think you are less likely to speak up or change your job. StaffLine also organises accommodation for the workers. The side entrance of the hostel in Luton town centre even has a sign above it saying "StaffLine". They hope that the fear of not only losing your job, but also your room keeps workers quiet. Although they don't expect workers to speak English, they don't issue them contracts in Bulgarian and they don't explain their "banked hours" system to them. They say that workers are guaranteed 30 hours pay every week, even if they initially work less hours. It is difficult for workers to get proof of how many hours they've actually worked. When the peak season starts, the company

says that workers “owe the company hours” and ask them to work overtime. Workers said that they worked up to 72 hours per week. StaffLine also kicked people out without notice or disciplinary procedures.

A group of four workers were kicked out for allegedly “giggling” during the one-minute silence on Remembrance Day, when workers were gathered on the warehouse shop-floor. With all this pressure on people you would expect that workers do whatever management tells them. But at some point, a group of eight workers had enough. They spoke to their co-workers and at the end of November they told management that the majority of workers – 60 to 70 of them – would stop working crazy overtime. They also asked to see their “banked hours”. Management reacted by easing the pressure on workers and making promises. We visited some of the workers in Luton and tried to support them with the outstanding wages. Unfortunately, they called us during their last week at work so there was little chance to put pressure on the company. Still, as it turned out, these workers shared our solidarity network number with other workers from Bulgaria who were working all over the UK.

Amazon delivery drivers from Bulgaria, unpaid wages

We were contacted by two courier drivers who work for MPH England Ltd. in Kent, as self-employed courier drivers at a local Amazon parcel distribution centre. The workers hire the vans from the agency and only work for Amazon. They often work seven days a week – the agency puts them under different names in order to circumvent driving regulations. The agency tried to withhold three weeks wages in one case and £560 for alleged damages in the other case. We sent letters from the IWW pointing out the illegal nature of such wage cuts and threatened to complain directly to Amazon about the agency and their practices. They paid up immediately.

Apple farm workers from Bulgaria, piece-rate protest

A worker from Bulgaria who was involved in an overtime boycott at XPO warehouse in Milton Keynes contacted us after he was sacked from an apple farm in Kent run by AC Goathams. In September 2018 workers there had disputes with the supervisors, who imposed arbitrary penalties. These penalties resulted in a drop of hourly earnings below £5. A group of twenty workers stopped working in protest. Our contact translated for this group of

Bulgarian workers and was subsequently sacked. We contacted management as the IWW union, but the worker had already found a different job and didn't want to return to the farm. Shortly after we received a call from another farm, where workers complained about the bad living conditions in trailers. The main issue is that these workers from Bulgaria are well connected and mobile, but we aren't. These cases would be a great potential for unions like the IWW to expand their field of activity, but as usual it is a question of being able to be fast, responsive, mobile, and having a critical mass to start with.

Truck drivers from Punjab, outstanding wages

The problems with the contacts of workers from Bulgaria was that their workplaces were several hours drive away from where we lived. A similar "series" of cases developed with truck drivers from Punjab, who worked and lived locally. These cases came closest to the potential that we see in solidarity network activity.

The first worker who got in touch is originally from Punjab, he came to the UK in the mid-2000s. At first, he worked without documents in local food factories. By the time we met him he worked as a truck driver for a small logistics company, run by bosses from the same "community". He contacted us because he had £630 in outstanding wages. We also found out that many of the drivers are on fake self-employment contracts. We sent a few letters from the IWW union and managed to get the worker the whole £630 he was owed. We then asked for his payslips. When the boss could not give them to us, he agreed to pay another £330 "tax return" instead. We pushed for more and finally got another £90 for a disputed overtime payment. This worker got us in touch with a friend who worked for a similar company, a medium-sized builders' merchant. We sent some IWW union letters and the company finally paid £600 for failing to give him a week's notice – something they didn't legally have to do.



Solidarity action where our demands were met within half an hour

A few other cases followed. In one instance the company reacted to our initial demand letter by going to the driver's house and threatening him and his family. We supported the driver and, in the end, managed to get a court order of back payments totalling over £7,000.

We went to the bleakest of industrial estate near Heathrow, criss-crossed by flyovers and overshadowed by the chimneys of the tarmac factory. The truck driver and his two friends were already waiting, talking with their former workmates who were still working in the builders merchants yard. We went straight to the office. The little boss said he wouldn't pay. We began to wave our placards and distributed leaflets to a few of the customers who arrived in their vans. The little boss came running after us, speaking on the phone to the big boss. Discussion with a builder from Afghanistan. He supported our action, but he said that workers without papers also need bosses like that, to give them a job when nobody else will. That is true. But then when workers were poor enough they also needed bosses who employed their children. The conversation is interrupted by the little boss: "The money will be there on Monday, please just go". We all go to a nearby caff for a full-English. A good way to start your day.

These cases have similar patterns: the bosses use recently migrated workers of "their community" and exploit their dependency. The problem is that workers also collude with their bosses, for example the bosses show on

payslips that the workers only work part-time, which means that the worker can claim housing and other social benefits at the same time. The boss then pays the rest in cash, which is obviously illegal. The wage itself might be below the legal minimum, but thanks to the extra benefits it seems like an “okay deal” for the workers. Here we insist that it is not about charity, but that our pickets and actions are meant to encourage workers to break this deadly mixture of dependency and collusion – as it undermines wages and working conditions for the wider working class.

Some of these workers became friends and stuck around. They helped translate the solidarity leaflet into Punjabi and distributed it in local temples. They came to organising actions at other food factories and spoke to workers from Punjab there. They finally got us in touch with truck drivers employed by one of the world’s largest airline catering companies Alpha LSG near Heathrow airport. Comrades of ours had worked at LSG and we had been distributing our newspaper there ever since. However, the contacts created through the newspaper distribution had so far been pretty flimsy. The new contacts, established through the solidarity network, told us that all LSG drivers hired after August 2017 receive 40p less per hour than the more senior drivers although they do the same work, for example driving food to the big A380 aeroplanes. Unite the union had agreed to this pay gap on a national level. The two workers hoped that the Equal Pay Act would allow them to claim equal pay. We had to disappoint them. We told them about the IWW and the possibility to act as an independent union. We were now in a situation where the IWW could actually play a role in a major multinational corporation. This was a qualitative leap. The problem is that our capacity is limited in terms of actual (wo)men-hours that we can put into this. Nevertheless, these are the type of connections – between small backyard enterprises and potential industrial power – that any working class organisation would have to create, or rather, unearth.

Conclusions

The solidarity network was a good way to get to know conditions and people in the area. Once located strategically it can help open the door to workers employed in bigger workplaces in the area. Nearly all cases where we took some action were successful in the sense that our opponents paid up. This in itself is a good thing and a political act: we help each other, without financial interests and without experts.

But we had difficulties expanding the active core of the solidarity network.

Most workers somehow kept in touch, but only a few continued to support us actively. We organised monthly “social events” in a local community centre, hoping that once all the workers who we had helped would meet each other a new dynamic could develop. We had two, three meetings where around twenty people attended and it was a good mixture of sharing news from workplaces and life and having a good time with each other. More often though, only five, six people came along. Most people are struggling, and making an extra journey on a Friday night might seem too much of an effort.

We never really “formalised” the solidarity network. We had the posters, but otherwise our leaflets and placards were makeshift. We didn’t have fancy logos or banners, we didn’t propagate the network as “an organisation”. Perhaps it would have helped to create some kind of “formal identity”, which is visible and where people can say: I belong to this organisation, something along the lines of groups like Acorn. At the same time, we know about the emptiness of many of these types of organisations. You run the danger of creating yet another fetish: it appears that it is “the organisation” which creates material power, while only the organised practice of working class people can actually change things.

In the end it is about reaching a critical mass or dynamic. What would be needed to cause a qualitative shift in what the solidarity network and the wider collective could be? We came up with a medium-term scenario:

- to expand the solidarity network to 70-80 workers who are willing to support other workers ready to take action at their workplace. This support could be anything from blockading the company, to

informing workers in the immediate surrounding about what was happening, or trying to expand the conflict by other means;

- to be able to enforce demands not only to local employers, but also to the local authorities. This could be achieved by the sheer force of numbers in the solnet as well as the economic pressure of cores of organised workers in local workplaces. This is a stepping stone towards a local counter-power that can actually shape how “local resources” are used;
- to increase the number of workers active in writing and distributing the newspaper to twenty, workers who are willing to organise a process of self-education and who actively participate in building a network of similar collectives in the UK and beyond.

This scenario is still a long way off. We accept that this process won't be gradual and is influenced by “objective conditions”. For example, any change in the state's migration policy might force workers to go beyond their state of “fear and acceptance” and to actively defend themselves and others. A sudden increase in inflation post-Brexit combined with the inability of the government to compensate through minimum wage increases might push people over the edge. The solidarity network, workplace groups and newspaper distributions are our ears on the ground – dormant contacts created over the last few years will come back to life.

Community action? Experiences with local campaigns against the closure of a leisure centre and libraries

With friends of the solidarity network we got involved in campaigns around “local issues”, for example, the demolition of our swimming pool and the closure of local libraries. In the first case, Ealing council, which is led by the Labour Party, announced it was selling off a large plot of public land to a private developer to finance a new leisure centre. The developer would demolish the existing leisure centre (because apparently it was cheaper to build a brand new one than fix an existing hole in the roof!) and would be building high-rise apartment blocks on the land as well. They promised that some of the flats would be “affordable” based on average wages in the area. The problem is the enormous wage gap within Ealing. In 2016 the average wage for Ealing was £29,000 per year, whereas the majority of local

working class people will have earned more like £17,000. What is deemed “affordable” is actually not.

This was an issue close to our hearts as we were regular visitors to the leisure centre, mainly because of the sauna – a sweaty haven under our grey skies:

“Strangers hardly ever speak to strangers and because in London everyone is a stranger, nobody ever speaks to no one! People stare into their mobile phones on the tube or sweat in awkward silences in the waiting room of their GP or at the job centre. But if you know where to look, there are places where people talk freely – little islands of random chats between people who often haven’t seen each other before. One such island is the sauna at Gurnell Leisure Centre. Me and my friends like to go there after a week in the Chill, going nuts on the assembly line, or after pushing brooms in the drizzly Perivale rain. Most people there are working people from Greenford, Ealing, and around the world. People talk about life and politics. Older geezers tell young guys from Poland how they arrived from Jamaica in the 1970s to work in industrial laundries in Acton or for Royal Mail. Gujarati ladies talk about the fact that the picking at the H&M warehouse in Wembley aggravates their arthritis and exchange tips about natural remedies from Kenya. We discussed the situation of mining workers near the frontline in Ukraine with a Ukrainian forklift driver and his Bulgarian friend. We discussed the NHS being sold off and how much worse the situation is in America where one guy had lived for a while, that if you get sick there, you end up bankrupt. We might disagree about whether to put mint oil on the stove (not allowed but what the hell?!), but most of us agree on some basics: the politicians cannot be trusted, the poor are getting poorer, the rich are getting richer and something has to be done. There are not many places for these types of conversations. Maybe you have to be in a semi-dark room for it, with ten half-naked sweating people? In any case, we have to create more of them and defend them: Ealing council has agreed to sell the leisure centre land to a real estate developer. The leisure centre will be closed and demolished in 2017. The real estate developer has promised to build a new one (together with unaffordable flats), but who knows if that will actually happen. We should defend the leisure centre as long as it exists!” (WorkersWildWest no.4 – Autumn 2016)

In the second case Ealing council announced that, due to government cuts, they would have to close six local libraries, or alternatively, replace the paid staff with volunteer groups to run them instead.

These types of campaigns tend to have a “cross-class” character, which means that both working class people with their issues and middle-class people are involved. During the Gurnell campaign it was a motley crew made up of us, a seasoned housing activist from the SWP, the lefty daughter of a local Tory councillor and a posh lady who thought we could win by using the council’s own administrative tools. Inevitably a split developed over tactics: whether to make the campaign more public, or focus more on some random bit of paperwork that would (supposedly) throw a spanner in the council’s works. The middle-class woman who advocated the latter ended up working on her own.

These clashes of approach are inevitable. This is because these types of campaigns are often led on the basis of “citizenship”, rather than on the basis of being working class. By that we mean that the form of proposed actions tends to either promote (legal etc.) experts or to depend on the support of this or that politician. One bonus of organising community meetings like this yourself, rather than wait for some self-appointed middle class “leader” to do it, is that it allows you to keep the atmosphere as open as possible so more radical ideas can be pursued.

It’s good practice to discuss these kinds of tactical differences but chances are that a consensus won’t be reached. At the very least then, no “single approach” should be able to dominate. The advantage we had as facilitators of the library campaign meetings was that we made sure all ideas could be on the table and that people could basically do what they wanted. If people wanted to focus on petitions, fine, if others wanted to storm a council meeting, that was fine too. We didn’t want to become the official spokespeople for Greenford library, especially because we didn’t want the responsibility of doing everything by the book. This is why the Greenford library march took over the roads and went ahead with no police “authorisation” and a minimum of administrative fuss, whereas the one in Hanwell didn’t even stop the traffic, because the named “leader” was more reluctant to break “health and safety rules”.

As a first step in these kinds of campaigns, we inform people who live in the area about the issue, using social media, posters, street stalls, and door-knocking.



Save Ealing Libraries campaign demonstration 2019

We called for open meetings to discuss further steps. We emphasised that both the leisure centre and libraries are important social spaces for local working class people and summarised Ealing council’s history with real estate deals and austerity.

“The library struggle is of course about defending jobs and refusing to be blackmailed into volunteer work. But it is also about defending working class social spaces. In our area (Greenford, Southall, Perivale) houses are crammed, people need some space to get out, meet other people, have some quiet for homework or reading . These social spaces are not only vital – they are actually life-saving. There is a good book on the significance of “social infrastructure” (libraries, clubs, churches etc.), analysing the tragic heatwave in Chicago in 1995 , where over 700 mainly older poor people died within two days. For the same given poverty and “ethnic” composition, in areas where there was hardly any “social infrastructure” several times more people died compared to equally poor areas who had more of this infrastructure – because people were left alone at home.” (Blog article, March 2019)

We discussed the campaigns in our workers' paper, hoping that workers in local warehouses and factories would get involved. We got in touch with both leisure centre and library workers and made a special effort to involve them in the campaign, which for different reasons turned out to be difficult. In the case of the libraries there were only a few active UNISON reps, who felt that the wider union apparatus did not support them. A Labour Party member, who is on the scrutiny committee voted in favour of the library closures, although she is UNISON full-timer! That's party discipline for you. We spoke to library workers directly, but their mood seemed low; some of them hoped for re-deployment at other libraries and didn't want to rock the boat. In 2018 alone 130 libraries were shut down in the UK. More than 700 staff lost their jobs while the number of volunteers is now in excess of 50,000.

“When I worked in a library in west London it was one of the only free, accessible and warm places in the area. While the stats show that book lending and borrowing are down (and when you aren't getting new stock in, what would you expect?) libraries are the one place you can go to use a computer for free, borrow the Life in the UK handbook, or get newspapers in Punjabi, Urdu and Tamil. Every week parents, mostly mums, Punjabi, Pakistani and Tamil would bring their babies/children to story and rhyme time. They rarely spoke much English but this was a chance for their kids to learn the language, to socialise with other parents and access books for free. Low paid workers, travellers, homeless people all need access to the internet and despite home internet access being up to 90% for many workers, this means access on a smartphone. Applying for Universal Credit, sending off documents to the Home Office, job applications often require being able to scan in documents, type out long bits of information. All of which is much easier in front of a desktop computer with a reliable internet connection. When the council closed down a day centre for disabled adults they were told to come to the library to occupy their time. More and more people with complex needs, mental health problems and the vulnerable come to libraries as they are one of the last places open that won't move people on.” (Report from a friend, March 2019)

The meetings were attended by around thirty people, most of them older “British” working class people, often with a background of “social

activity”, either in trade unions, churches or political parties. Although the majority of people in the neighbourhood and users of the “public services” are younger working class people from South Asia or Eastern Europe, they were under-represented in the meetings. At these meetings we proposed various forms of collective action, from collective street stalls to protests at the town hall to demonstrations. We thought that during the process people might develop the relationships necessary to engage in more direct actions. For us the collective process is as important as the outcome. Fairly quickly the usual “hobby politicians” tried to take over. These people focus on legal procedures, for example, they wanted to discuss whether we can appeal or question the real estate deal on the grounds of the council’s administrative shortcomings. They tend to focus on trying to get the support of individual councillors. Their proposals don’t create collective processes and instead promote experts, professionals and middlemen.

Ealing council is very well-versed in “community relations”. They set up consultation meetings where people are bombarded with facts they cannot check. In one case they split people up into little groups and made them do thought-exercises (“How do you imagine a volunteer-run library?”) The whole show is mainly a tick-box exercise, pretending that the “local community” has been involved in the process.



A “read-in” (after we were thrown out!) at the Labour Party offices in Ealing to protest library closures, 2019

In the case of the leisure centre there was also a sizeable faction of NIMBYs (“not in my back yard”), who did not want a high-rise tower block in front of their house. In this situation we tried to use the meetings as a critical mass to widen the scope of the campaign. Although “petitions” and street stalls are rather symbolic forms of activity, they were a way to “do something together” and to reach out to those working class people who didn’t come to the meetings. In the end the actions did not go further than organising a fairly big demonstration through Greenford, various protests at Ealing town hall (where we also disrupted a council meeting), and a collective read-in at the local Labour Party office.

“The Council’s ‘public consultations’, were little more than a PR exercise. It quickly became clear that they didn’t want any ‘disruptive’ questions to interfere with their ready-made plans. So a group of us decided to go to the Town Hall on the evening when the planning permission was supposed to be submitted. We took some home-made placards to try and make them see that we weren’t happy and they needed to reconsider their plans. The councillors were angry at having their meeting disrupted but we thought it was necessary to intervene in their cosy bubble. They told us that

we were ‘anti-democratic’ – yeah, right!” (Report after walk-in protest at an Ealing council meeting, winter 2017)

“Around ten of us went to the Labour Party office in Acton, with placards and leaflets against the library closure. We walked into the public surgery, where a councillor waited for local residents to turn up. She would not accept us as local residents, though! “You should occupy the Tory office, their government has cut the funding” – “Right! But your Labour council enforces them and has no problems passing the buck”. This went back and forth for a while. In the end we had a nice reading and chatting session in the sunshine outside of the Labour Party office. One of the ‘left Labour’ people, who took part in the protest later distanced herself from the ‘occupation’ of the office, fearing that she would jeopardise her career in the party”.

(Report from Labour Party office “read-in”, Spring 2019)

The question of material power is a difficult one. Proposing to “occupy” a library that the council wants to get rid of or run with volunteers will not create much material pressure. Our main proposals were to expand the read-ins/occupations to sites which would create more nuisance, for example, construction sites of developers with Ealing council contracts, golf courses, or important access roads for local logistics parks. If published widely these actions could have created a stir. We suggested this while the Yellow Vest protests in France were still ongoing, so the proposals were not completely abstract. While we didn’t manage to follow through with more direct collective actions, we did manage to widen the general scope of local contacts. We were able to invite more people who were active in the campaigns to, for example, protests outside of one of our workplaces during a wage dispute.

The demolition of the leisure centre has been delayed by over three years now – the campaign was definitely a big factor in highlighting the cracks in what was essentially a local councillor’s vanity project. Two of the six libraries marked for closure will remain open.

“Brecht once said that when the communist enters the hovel of the poor their soup starts to taste bitter. When the communist enters the sauna in Gurnell Leisure Centre things start to feel lukewarm.

A communist: “Why is it lukewarm in here?”

A slightly sweaty Indian lady: “The fuse went and it took them three hours to repair it.”

A Gurnell swimming teacher from the Caribbean who takes a break in the sauna: “They want to prepare us all for the demolition, make us feel less sorry for the place”.

Another lady with a hairnet: “It took Ealing Council five years to refurbish our estate, I don’t think Gurnell will go that soon. You working weekends, instructing the aqua-aerobics?”

The teacher: “Naw, they want to make me, but I refuse.” An older bloke from Albania: “Good on you.”

The lady with the hairnet: “Yes, good on you. But do something about this sauna, it is as hot as my country in winter”

The teacher: “Where you from?”

The hairnet lady: “Iran. It can be freezing in winter.”

The communist: “It ain’t cold there now, with all the protests.”

The lady from Iran: “Yes, it’s hot, because of the petrol price increase. They killed 257 people, I try to follow the news, but the internet is down. I left in 1981, I was always fighting for the rights of the people. It’s a corrupt regime.”

The sweaty Indian lady: “Everywhere is corrupt.” Everyone nods.

The teacher: “Even Ealing Council.” Chuckles.

The communist leaves to take a cold shower.”

(Gurnell Sauna, November 2019)

Chapter 3: An overtime “strike” at Waitrose and a slowdown at Sainsbury’s

If you’re new to an area, the best way to meet some local people is to find a job in a bigger workplace. If it’s a group of you, even better, you’ve got more chances to rock the boat. Like many recent arrivals, four of us started our working life in Greenford through the temp agency Templine. They supplied workers to two of the warehouses in the area, which were run by the logistics company Wincanton. Wincanton is the second biggest logistics company in the UK. The company became most famous when their petrol truck drivers joined a strike back in 2012, which caused a national crisis. At the time, Blair’s New Labour government considered using the army to drive trucks to the petrol stations instead.

Us pallet-pushing, temp-working pickers had a much harder time making it into the national spotlight. This was also due to the fact that the two companies we worked for – Sainsbury’s and Waitrose – are not really fit for those “human exploitation” scandals that Guardian columnists and others like to report on. Unlike the big meanie Amazon, these companies pay their taxes. They don’t engage in illegal activities. Most importantly, the warehouses where we worked were unionised. All this would leave little for the liberal left-leaning commentators to wring their hands over.

Under these conditions, which were common throughout the area, our first steps were direct and informal, based on relationships at work, using whatever forms and means of resistance we could find. We published articles on both actions in our local workers’ newspaper.

The overtime “strike”

At one of the warehouse complexes – a so-called “multi-user site” – Wincanton does work for various clients: Nike, Primrose garden furniture, Neal’s Yard cosmetics, H&M, Serco prison vans and the biggest client, the supermarket chain Waitrose. The warehouse dedicated to Waitrose picks alcoholic drinks into cages that are then sent on to all the London supermarkets. The whole complex is bleak as fuck. The canteen is a

microwave in a poxy portacabin. Most workers are young and scrawny, with neck tattoos, high on Monster energy drinks, smoking Polish cigarettes furiously under an old bus stop shelter cum smoking area. Through the temp agency Templine, one of us got a job in this lap of luxury as a driver of a LLOP, which is basically a little electric vehicle that can pull two cages with goods. No experience required, they gave you some basic training and off you went. The comrade was from Poland himself, which made it easier to communicate with many of the other guys.



LLOP drivers in the Waitrose drinks warehouse

Here the pay difference between temp workers and Wincanton permanent workers on older contracts was particularly stark – the temps got the minimum of £6.31 at the time, while the permanents got £9.16 for the same job. There is an additional division between these old permanent workers and those hired after 2012, who, at the time, also only got the minimum wage. There were about thirty workers working on one shift, mainly LLOP operators who pick wine cases into cages. These are then loaded onto the trucks, transported to the next warehouse and then onto Waitrose stores. The work in the warehouse is monotonous and exhausting. Workers pick heavy cases and are forced to achieve high pick-rates (about

7.5 tons per shift). Half of the staff are agency workers and half are permanent.

Temps earned minimum wage for their basic hours and time-and-a-half for overtime (£9.16 p/h). This is pretty unusual, as overtime is only paid at the normal rate in most places. Guys worked plenty of overtime, because it paid – at least short-term. In Spring 2014 Wincanton and Templine management cut the overtime bonus for the temps – we were now supposed to work overtime for the minimum wage. In May, some agency workers were called to the agency office where they were asked to sign an agreement for the cut. The cut was supposed to come into effect the following Monday. Workers were surprised and disorientated, especially since most of them didn't have English as a first language and so didn't know exactly what documents they were signing. The majority signed them but started to regret it when they realised what they'd done.

Luckily, we were right in the middle of it but we had to act fast. We managed to write a leaflet that night, explaining that workers shouldn't sign the agreement, and a comrade distributed it outside the warehouse when the shift was starting the very next morning. Our comrade reported that: *“Together with other agency workers I went to the agency office and we told the manager that we wouldn't be signing. In response the managers threatened us, saying that as ‘expensive’ workers we wouldn't be given the chance to work overtime. After that, some temps signed, but the fact that we went there as a group – as well as the fact that we had said we wouldn't work overtime anymore – made an impact on Wincanton management. A few hours later all agency workers got a text saying that the cut would be postponed for a month. Management also put up a poster saying that, ‘after your feedback [sic!] we decided to give you time to think about the matter till next month’.”*

A month later, Wincanton cut the overtime bonus for agency workers. After that, most of the agency workers jointly stopped working overtime, even though it was a very busy time. The company got into difficulties and tried to break this informal overtime strike in several ways:

- They offered dozens of permanent contracts to the agency workers, who took them.

- They started to offer more overtime to permanent staff. Since they get extra money for their overtime, they didn't show solidarity with the temps and agreed to work the overtime, effectively as "scabs".
- Wincanton signed a contract with a new job agency. This brought in new agency workers who did not know about the informal strike.
- Some of the agency workers quit the job in reaction to worsening conditions. Our comrade said: *"We decided to meet in a nearby park to talk about what to do. Around ten people came. Most of them were already pissed so the discussion was a bit shambolic. Still, some people talked about going on an immediate strike. On one hand this was good because it showed that people weren't just willing to accept everything, on the other hand we were not really able to discuss things step by step: if just the temps go on strike, what would the permanents do? What would management do? Are there other ways of putting pressure on the company, for example, working slow? We have to learn to discuss these things when we meet together, otherwise we get trapped between, "immediate strike now" and, "nothing can be done." In the end, amongst all the booze and chaos, we weren't able to decide much."*

The image shows a productivity table with the following visible text:

SLIN 29/06/2018
96
Waitrose Case Per Hour

The table is a grid with multiple columns and rows. The columns are labeled with various productivity metrics, and the rows represent different tasks or categories. Some cells in the grid are shaded black, while others contain numbers or text. A hand is visible in the bottom left corner, pointing at the table.

A daily table that displayed your productivity from the previous shift

The union USDAW has a recognition agreement for this Waitrose site. Of the total workforce maybe 20 to 30% are union members. The "new permanents" are pissed off with the wage gap. There have been various

meetings between USDAW and management about the issue, but without result. The main union reps are older permanents with higher positions, for example, supervisors, trainers or responsible for health and safety stuff. The main rep never addressed the temporary workers with regards to the union. He was a loud-mouth, slagging off the bosses with workers when they were out of earshot, but generally friendly with management. He said that he had been offered a management position, but instead trains new people on the forklifts as well as normal warehouse work, and gets a wage comparable to managers.

When the temps were boycotting the overtime, this douche openly worked double-shifts and on his days off. On days off he earned £22 p/h. He said that he thought it was good that Wincanton had cut the overtime bonus for the temps and that the temps were now refusing to do overtime, because now, permanents got more overtime. He called on the other permanent workers to pick up the overtime “and make the company pay”. He didn’t understand why we called him a scab.

Later on, an external company advisor “analysed” the work and productivity of the warehouse workers for two weeks. The union reps had discussions with management about this and proposed new targets, but excluded the temp workers. The union held meetings with the permanent workers, from which the temps were shut out, but even the permanent workers could not really say what the meetings were about – which is not just a language-related problem. The pick-rate was subsequently increased.

Lack of solidarity between temporary and permanent workers hit both groups, since the existence of lower paid temporary workers puts pressure on the permanent workers. In the long-run, this situation will cause worsening work conditions for all staff. During the overtime strike, workers didn’t manage to break this division between temporary and permanent staff. When agency workers jointly stopped working overtime, Wincanton were able to use the permanent staff as scabs, which saved the company from serious trouble. With the union reps more than willing to help management out, temps were a bit screwed.

But this is not the end of the story. A month after the agency workers lost the overtime bonus, most, including our comrade, decided to work only four days out of five. This was in reaction to the worsening conditions.

While this decision was taken individually, the fact that so many temp workers did it says something about the common way in which people saw their situation. As Christmas came and things got busy, this refusal of work was a big problem for management, who then decided to offer a £25 bonus if temps came in for five days. This was a wage increase of 10%. At the same time management brought the old overtime bonus back!

“Most workers did not see this as the management’s defensive reaction to our absences and general attitude. Instead, workers thought the wage increase was because things had gotten busier before Christmas. But if the workers had always worked fast and come in for five days, management would not have had to offer such wage incentives. Workers’ actions resulted in more than the official demands of the trade union! A union that prefers to “fight” for better wages by discussing with management behind closed doors without any tangible results!” Three years after the boycott another young comrade worked in the Waitrose warehouse for a few months. We distributed a leaflet informing the young temps that Templine used to pay a Christmas bonus of £25 a week – there was not much collective memory of this bonus because of the high turnover. The comrade also put up stickers asking “Where is our bonus?” – management was pissed off for sure. Unfortunately, no collective steps could be galvanised around this.

Five years on, what’s happening? The union is still crap. I meet one of the USDAW representatives at union branch meetings. He is a health and safety manager who has called the cops on comrades when they were distributing our newspaper outside the warehouse. There have been rumours on and off about losing the Waitrose contract, at which point, more temps were given permanent contracts. Turnover remains high and the pay gap between young temps and the older permanents is still the same.

The slowdown

We were pretty chuffed about the fact that we had managed to get the bonus payments at Waitrose and temps had come together, albeit in an inebriated and somewhat individual way! We thought that we should try scaling it up at Sainsbury’s, a way bigger warehouse over the road. When one of us contacted Templine in spring 2014 to get a job there though, the only job they were offering was in the same multi-user site as the Waitrose warehouse. This time though, the job was in another department, a garden

furniture company called Primrose. There weren't many people working there and so it wasn't where we wanted to be, but as a stepping stone we thought we'd give it a go:

"I started in the garden furniture warehouse, while the others were next door at Waitrose and Neal's Yard. The whole warehouse was an asbestos and pigeon-shit-reeking mess. There were twenty of us, picking garden fences, barbecue sets, these little smiling garden buddha statues that give you the creeps or heavy teak table and chair sets. The stuff was piled up to the roof, we had to climb up to five metres over piles of bamboo fencing and cardboard boxes to reach some of the items. This is real bad when it comes to health and safety, but it allowed workers to build little nests here and there in the roof, where you could chill. We came from everywhere, going somewhere and most of us knew that this was just somewhere in-between. We worked till the last truck was full, which could mean 12 to 13 hours. There was no loading bay, so we had to lift all items up to the truck trailer level, items up to 120kg. Early on I asked the little boss from the recruitment agency if he could get me a job in the big Sainsbury's warehouse next door – because this is where we wanted to be. It took three months and then they transferred me. I would later on be joined by two other comrades."



Traffic jams build up at the Sainsbury's chill warehouse

The three of us lasted around eight months.

The job in the Sainsbury's "Chill" sucks for sure. You walk up and down the makeshift aisles in a massive fridge, pulling a pallet that can be the weight of a small car behind you, chucking trays and boxes into cages at high speed, monitored by a wrist watch scanner-unit, while the same three shit songs from Capital FM blare into your frozen brain and ammonia gas slowly fills up your lungs. But somehow, these were the best times ever! The three of us always had a good laugh scheming. The whole atmosphere in the warehouse could get pretty mental: dozens of young men and women trying to finish the pick, slam dunking sandwich and ready-meal boxes over each other's heads into overflowing cages, everyone either frantic on cheap caffeine or stoned. We made some good friends there.

The distribution centre is also run by Wincanton. It supplies groceries to about 180 Sainsbury's convenience stores, mainly around north and south London but also as far away as Portsmouth and Southampton. Deliveries come in from the suppliers – vegetables, sandwiches, meat etc. These pallets are broken down, people then pick orders by putting a certain number of items into "cages". The scanner tells you how many. These cages are then loaded onto trucks and sent to the various stores. In "Ambient" people use electrical vehicles (LLOPs), in the "Chill" and "Produce" people pull pallets around with manual pump-trucks.

Of the 60–100 workers picking in the chill per shift, more than half are employed by the temp agency. Male temp workers stayed on average for three months, female workers longer. As a temp you don't get guaranteed hours. In practice, you are on a zero-hours contract, although they bypass the agency workers' legislation that states that temps should get the same pay as permanent workers after twelve weeks by making you sign a contract with the temp agency. This guarantees you something like two hours a month, meaning you are technically not on a zero-hours contract. This is how the laws around agency workers' rights are circumvented, the so-called "Swedish Derogation".

They might give you five or six days on a rota, but then cancel your shift two hours before you are supposed to start work. This happened a lot. Templine gets the number of orders for the next day the evening before, a confirmation in the morning. According to this "volume", for example, 60,000 items to pick in "Chill" and "Produce", they supply a number of

workers. If the volume is high, they ask people to work overtime or seven days a week, if it is low, people might get only one or two shifts per week. Templine hires an over-supply of people. Why is this? They don't have to guarantee hours, so there are no big costs to hire people and more importantly, it enables Templine/Wincanton/Sainsbury's to use the cancellation of shifts as a way to pressure people to work faster. If your productivity is low – if you are in the lower third of the pick chart – you are more likely to get your shifts cancelled.

How do they measure your productivity? We get a combination of a digital wrist watch (strapped to your forearm) and a scanner (on your finger) to scan items and labels for the shop cages. The whole thing makes you look like a budget robocop. The wrist watch tells you how many items to pick for which shop/cage and it logs exactly how many items you pick per hour. The productivity calculation is arbitrary for example, it doesn't take into account the weight of things and it gives you a higher percentage for picking single items. Your productivity rate is shoved into your face in various ways throughout the day. There are computer screens in the warehouse, which display your individual "CPM rate" (cartons-per-minute), agency office guys walk through the warehouse and tell you your CPM, in the briefing room (where we gather before the shift) they put a daily update of individuals' CPM on the board and last, but not fucking least, they send you a text message in the morning before work, telling you that you either performed well or badly the day before. If your CPM rate is too low for a period of time you are ordered to attend a "meeting", basically a bollocking.

In this sense they have created a classic rat-race: people are afraid to drop down on the CPM list and get cancelled, BUT by everyone working faster they need less people per shift and can cancel more shifts. This is one of the factors why people are scared and feel competitive. The permanent Wincanton workers have less stress and their shifts cannot be cancelled (they are guaranteed at least forty hours a week). Most of the permanent workers are older, they earn 30% more than the temps, but actually often work less. Most of them are from Poland and Nepal, some are born here. Many of them know that they wouldn't find a similarly high-paid "unskilled" job anywhere else.

The whole spiel about “full automation” is bollocks. Here we are, using thousand-year-old technology (er, wheels!) to help us do the bulk of the work, while being controlled by 21st century high-tech. We are cheap, so why replace us with a robot, which would have difficulties fitting the big banana boxes into the small cages anyway. But low-tech also means that the command of work is not transmitted through a big technical apparatus, which we might hate, but at the same time admire and accept. Instead, the command of capital is primarily transmitted through the strained vocal cords of the dumpy managers, who stand and scream at the end of each line: “Andranik, stop talking to Preeti, get a move on!”

Another way to make the temps work faster and to “compete” is the carrot of a permanent job. People work fast if they think they have a chance. The hiring process is even more arbitrary than the CPM rate. Some guys have been working fast for two years, applied four times, but never got hired. Other people got a permanent job after three months. No surprise that people come up with all kinds of “theories”: “the Polish get a permanent job, because lots of the shop floor managers are Polish”, “they don’t like Romanians”, “if your skin is brown, you don’t stand a chance”. Management plays with these “theories”, they like to see warehouse workers from, for example, Poland feeling closer to the shop floor manager from Poland, than to their workmate from Somalia. Big management hires lower management from the respective “communities” in order to create this “middleman” and divide-and-rule effect.

This leads us to another problem of creating connections between us, which is the problem of (language) groups. Obviously, a big mix of people work in the warehouse. You’ve got young women from Romania or Poland (for some of whom it is not only their first job in the UK but their first job at all) and older men from Iraqi Kurdistan (with quite different life experiences). The atmosphere is not bad, but certain people “stick to themselves”, mostly because their level of English makes communication with others difficult. Groups form in various ways, not only along language lines. Young Polish geezers might call Indians “chapattis” and refuse to share tables with them, but their main clique becomes a young male gang of Nepali, Somalian, Punjabi and Lithuanian dope smokers, who share a spliff under a nearby canal bridge before and after the shift. We have fond

memories of the “Polish Rasta”, who spoke in a Polish- Jamaican accent and who lolled through the pick area in the most management-outraging slo-mo style. He ended up camping in our attic for a while.



Picking scanner that told you what to pick as well as measuring your speed

There is a union inside the warehouse, UNITE. But this is targeted to permanent workers, not the temps. In a situation where many temp workers leave after a few months, there seemed little point in joining the union – also because they were not approached with something like a medium-term plan to do something about their conditions. Although the Waitrose warehouse across the road is also run by Wincanton there is no communication between the USDAW and UNITE union. So, how would a temp worker get to know about the union? First of all, there was a union board, which had only one notice announcing that the union had agreed (with a narrow majority of votes) to a 2.2% pay increase for the permanent Wincanton workers. Several weeks after we started working at Sainsbury’s we spotted a union rep on the late-shift, she was wearing her union high-vis. She did stock control. She spoke mainly to our line managers, most likely because they started working with her several years ago and they’d worked their way up together. This was basically all that was seen of the union for several months. We then got to know two permanent workers who were in the union. They had lots of disciplinary meetings with management, mainly because of absences, low productivity or other forms of “indiscipline”. We spoke with them about the situation of the temps and whether they think that something can be done, but it seemed to us that they were rather “individual rebels”, who pitied the temps, but were not interested in collective steps.

What did people do informally to resist? As everywhere, workers find many ways to avoid being sucked dry. Some workers had managed to get hold of the code that you could type into your wrist watch scanner-unit that recorded you as doing “other duties”, meaning that your productivity is not checked. Instead of “other duties” these workers could be found chilling in the locker rooms. The problem is obvious: these workers knew that this would only work if their special knowledge remains their monopoly and doesn’t spread to others. This is the case with many forms of often glorified “invisible acts” of resistance. There were many other little tricks to increase your pick-rate artificially, for example, by taking small dollies with single items. Other practices were more collective. We always had to pick till work was finished and all items had been put into cages. Working longer than eight hours in a fridge fucks you up. So people would just become angry and frantic and bash the trays with yoghurt into the cages from ten feet away. After a while, managers learn that it’s better not to make us work too long past the official end of the shift.

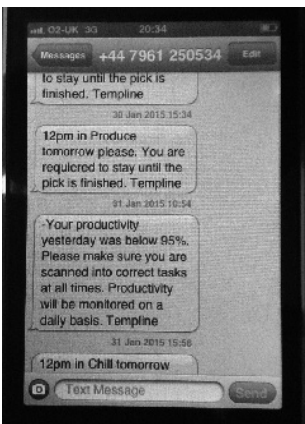
Still, after three or four months and seeing many good people come and go, we thought it was time to propose more coordinated steps. Potential angry allies had either left for better jobs, were sacked for failing drug tests, some even for threatening behaviour towards management. After four months we regarded ourselves as “senior members of staff”.

First, we had to come up with some common demands, which wasn’t too hard. We wanted to have guaranteed shifts in order to undermine the rat-race – as they used the zero-hours to make us work faster. And we wanted the same pay as the permanents – as they used the permanent contract as a carrot to also make us work faster. So comrades distributed a leaflet demanding, “Four guaranteed shifts per week and £9.15 per hour” as a good starting point – at the time we were at around £6.70. But what do you do with such a demand? You have to enforce it. But how? It wasn’t easy to discuss in bigger groups at work. Managers are watching you. People are stressing. You don’t all get your break times together. So there were smaller meetings with five, ten, fifteen people after work. But even meeting after work, around 8pm, is difficult, because people (who come out at slightly different times depending on how quick you manage to escape!) are tired. Still, around ten of us managed to have an initial meeting in a nearby pub.

The obvious problems emerged. People used their various pet stereotypes (“the Romanians won’t join in”, “the girls won’t do shit”) in order to excuse their own lack of balls. We knew that given the numbers of temps – about half of the picking workforce – it would be good to build bridges to the permanents and the truck drivers in particular.

Our friends then distributed a leaflet to temps and permanents against zero-hour contracts and for equal pay. The leaflet was anonymous. The union rep replied to our AngryWorkers email address, saying that she didn’t have any information about the conditions and union activities on the other site across the road. Her reply to our demand for the temps indicated that she didn’t see much chance of doing anything about the situation as long as we were temp workers:

“I hear your problem, but not sure I understand your target. I don’t see how you will get all staff the same rates, but you could represent all members rights. Should it not be your aim to discourage Wincanton to employ Agency Staff, but rather to recruit perm staff to perm. Post?”



A Templine text message on your productivity

By that time two of us had joined UNITE. We had let the rep know, but she didn’t seem too interested and whilst all this was going on, the union never approached us. You would think that if temp workers start joining your union you would make an extra effort to welcome them, hoping that you would be able to organise the other temps, too. But this obviously

wasn't going to happen. This meant there was no practical use in asking our workmates to sign up to the union as there was little chance for a short-term plan of action that could improve things. Given the high turnover, such a plan would not be able to exceed three to six months if you wanted to mobilise people.

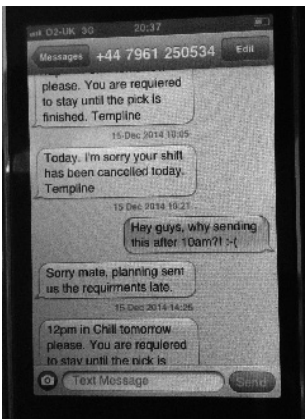
Some people suggested collecting signatures for a petition to Templine. We took a list with the names of all Templine colleagues and decided who we could ask first. We thought that once we had twenty "safe" candidates and their signatures on paper, others who might otherwise hesitate might sign too. While some people were scared to sign, thinking their shifts might be cancelled, it was not difficult to collect thirty signatures. But then people started raising concerns: if a majority of temps would do something, they could easily sack twenty of us, ask the permanents to work overtime and hire new people. While the idea was that everyone should take responsibility for getting signatures, in reality it was only a small number of four, five of us. At that point we didn't hand in the petition.

In the meantime, we heard of protests by temp workers employed at the Mark and Spencer warehouse run by Wincanton in Swindon. We tried to get in touch with them, but only had the contact details of the official union organiser. Longer-term agency workers there were asking for the same pay as the permanent workers, highlighting the Swedish Derogation loophole in the agency workers' legislation. They staged protests in front of M&S stores. Better than nothing, but not enough to make Wincanton or M&S move. We distributed some news articles about their protest inside our warehouse to show people that other temp workers in exactly our situation were doing stuff. Management at our warehouse might have thought at this point that the GMB was behind the leaflets.

At this point friends distributed another leaflet, this time mainly targeting the permanents and drivers. They distributed it holding a banner saying "Wincanton pay us more!", which drivers could see from some distance. The leaflet basically said that we, the temps, will need the support of the permanents – and that at the same time the permanents have an interest in improved conditions for the temps, so that management cannot put more pressure on them: "Look at these temps, they work harder than

you, for the minimum wage”. Some drivers liked the leaflets and sent us solidarity emails – which was great, but not enough to build mutual trust.

We had another bigger meeting at the gates when the shift ended and decided to read out our demands during one of the briefings where everyone gathers before the shift starts. This is when managers tell the temps and permanents that they have to work harder and focus on good stacking. Two people volunteered to read it out. We knew that this would put them at risk but we thought it would be better to read this out publicly and on behalf of everyone – effectively it was coming from all the Templine workers – than giving a petition with individual names on it. Everyone stayed in the briefing room while the two read out the demand, and most people later on thought it was positive and started to discuss more – but again, only in small and separate groups.



A Templine message cancelling shifts at the last minute

Templine reacted initially by calling these two workers into a meeting to find out if they were the ring-leaders. It quickly became clear to them that they weren't the "masterminds", but really just representing the views of a larger group. Next, they sent over a higher manager from Birmingham and over the following week they called all of the seventy or so temp workers for individual "conversations" into the office. They talked the usual bullshit: "We would like to pay you more, but Wincanton won't and actually, if we did pay you £9, there would be so many applications, all young people or people who have just arrived in the UK (people like you!), would not stand a chance – so we are actually doing you a favour by paying

you less!”. Er, thanks? Still, being called in by big management had two results: some people felt encouraged, because they saw that management took us seriously – most people had thought that management would just ignore us; a minority of people felt intimidated by being called into the office alone.

What was the reaction of the permanent Wincanton workers? When people heard that we had read out our demands most of them said: “Yes, you poor guys, they should pay you better. Good luck.” So yes, most people were somehow supportive, but only individually. On the whole, the permanent Wincanton workers are more scared. Either the new permanents are on a strict three- month probation that they want to pass. Or they feel they have more to lose if Sainsbury’s cancels the Wincanton contract – a regular threat by management to keep us compliant.

So Templine/Wincanton now knew our demands. But it was clear from the beginning that they wouldn’t do anything just because we had made our demands known. For several weeks we discussed what to do. The problem was that the discussions happened one-to-one and that the barriers between the three, four main language groups were not broken down. So it always needed three, four people to go from one person to the other, within their groups. The idea of a slowdown was discussed. Given the fact that we can monitor our pick- rate on the big screens, going slow collectively seemed the most logical next step.

We knew that there would be repression and that the best way to avoid it would be to diffuse the coordination of the action. Ideally you would have one person telling the next trusted person about the plan and when to go slow together. At the same time, us three comrades knew that only a minority of people would take on that job, meaning, the chain would have been broken somewhere along the line. We also didn’t want people getting fired if they not 100% up for taking the risk. So what ended up happening was that it was mainly us three plus one or two close friends who spread the word from group to group. Some peoples’ initial reluctance was overcome with the argument that “if we work slower, we’ll work longer and so we get paid more”, which was not exactly the most radical reasoning but definitely increased some peoples’ enthusiasm.

One Sunday about a third of the temps started to work at around 70% of the required pick-rate. We told the others to follow our example and after a while three-quarters of the temps were working at a snail's pace. The atmosphere was good! People were smiling and felt naughty together. After four hours a small prick from the temp office started running up and down the warehouse telling people: "What the fuck are you doing? I had to go to a meeting with Wincanton. If I'll be fucked, you'll be fucked, too". At the same time Wincanton asked the permanent staff to work overtime, which means 12-hours in zero degrees. Most of them did, which was very unfortunate, because after the shift, although productivity was still down, we didn't finish much later than usual. Finishing and sending the trucks out on time is of major importance for Wincanton. They have to pay hefty fines for delays. Nevertheless, many people thought it was a good action and that we should repeat it...but then came the backlash.

It was clear to Templine that they had to do something, otherwise there would be trouble from Wincanton and Sainsbury's. Afterwards we found out that one temp worker had approached Templine that Sunday to snitch about what was going on and in the following week two of us got suspended and accused of "inciting fellow workers to lower their productivity". Managers called temp workers to individual investigation interviews. They asked people who was behind the slowdown and to help them, showed them photos of people. Most people kept schtum, but a dozen out of seventy people snitched. We have to be careful with the term "snitch": some of them are indeed spineless or manipulative traitors to their fellow work-/class-/prison-mates in order to get brownie points. But others are just frightened rabbits staring into the bosses' headlights. For whatever reason, some people talked and that was, at least for the moment, the end of the slowdown idea.

When we had our disciplinary meetings with management after the slowdown "strike" the union rep tried to avoid representing us, even as individual members. We phoned the regional Unite office, but they just referred us back to the shop floor reps. The reps in turn said they didn't want to be "involved in unofficial action". In the end it was clear that the rep didn't want to risk her relationship with management for some unruly temps. This might be understandable from her point of view given the

general weak basis of the union in the warehouse and the aggressive history of Wincanton management when it comes to industrial disputes. So the three of us ended up getting fired, which was alright – we had been working there longer than most temps and people were used to people dropping out for all kinds of reasons. Management increased the wage of the temporary workers by 15p a few weeks later, which might have been the plan all along or might have been connected to the slowdown protest. Most workmates interpreted it as a result of the action.

Still, it was a defeat of some kind. We might have been too impatient and could have tried harder to avoid being singled out. We could have refused to do the action unless we had created a diffuse chain of coordination where everyone is involved equally. We don't think that at this point more solidarity could have been expected from the permanent workers. The only other way to force management to not sack people would have been the threat of a blockade. In Italy, in situations like this 300 militants would have rocked up at the gates and blockaded trucks for a day. We all know that this is not a long-term solution, but it might have tipped the balance of power initially – which might have given people inside more confidence. But then we were not in Italy but in the UK in 2015, where we were happy if we could get ten people mobilised to distribute our leaflets!

We kept in touch with some of the temps and continued to distribute our newspaper at Sainsbury's during the next four years. It is still a place where new migrants arrive and don't stay long, unless they belong to the chosen few who get a permanent contract.

We can hit the bosses hardest in the direct relationship at work, where they depend on a collective force they cannot fully control. How many ineffective pickets have we seen, with workers reduced to whistle-blowers and human placards? Any intelligently and collectively organised work to rule would have been more effective. In these situations, the symbolic formal action is taken under the command and in the interest of the union apparatus to have something to show for. In general, informal ways to fight back are the main weapon workers have, but they have their limits.

The main limit is that informal actions tend to stay within the boundaries of departments and companies. It would need a more organised effort to spread the news about successful collective action beyond the single

workplace. What the class needs at the moment are visible examples of successful workers' actions. Struggles are not always a planned and calculated exercise. An action of multiple individuals might be most effective and risk free. But can it express our collective anger towards the bosses' rule? Sometimes it is necessary to come out into the open, to see each other as a group and to confront the bosses head on. How else can we imagine a chain reaction of struggles, that is able to create new relationships between working people? Here we see a contradiction, given that "visible" ways to struggle are often more prone to victimisation. It should be us who chose the time and place of confrontation – on our terms.

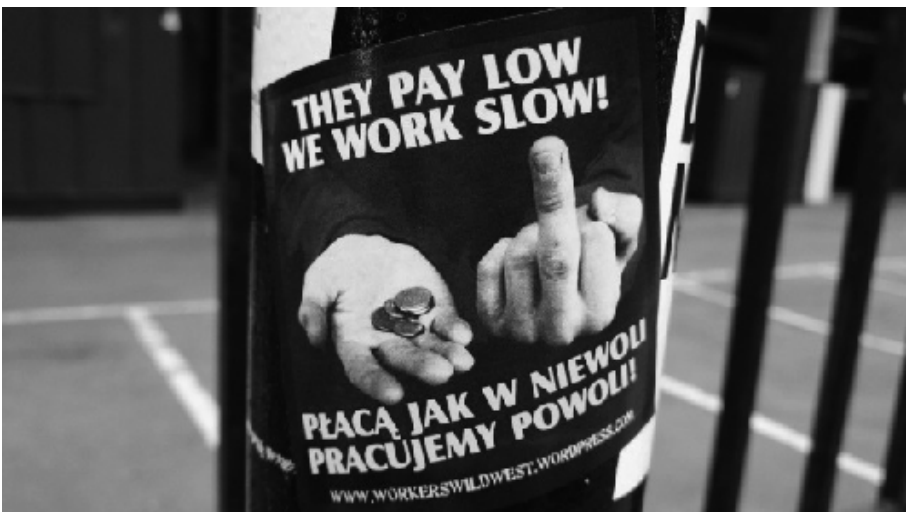
Chapter 4: The newspaper

The traditional views on workers' papers are that they are the propaganda tools or the "collective organiser" of an organisation. Our idea of a workers' newspaper was influenced by, amongst others, the experience of Faridabad Majdoor Samachar (Faridabad Workers News) in India, which started out as a classic Marxist-Leninist publication and over the years transformed into a "critical mirror of the class". The newspaper mainly contains reports from workers about conditions at work and small collective actions. The newspaper is one form by which to show the class what it – or parts of it – is already doing: our day-to-day activity is not only the basis of corporate power, our day-to-day resistance also questions this power.

**** Distribution at Alpha LSG, airline caterer. November 2017. There was the most interest from drivers – one Sikh driver in his 50s came out and said he was working there when the two companies merged and wages and conditions were cut – he was pissed off about that. Now they are trying to cut their holiday allowance to 17 days and the union is not doing anything. A south Indian religious Christian also stopped to chat. He said he was on a flexi-contract, had been there for six months. Said they get less wage, no guaranteed shifts but generally got 40-45 hours per week. He said him and his church were praying for higher wages. I said he'd need more than that! ****

We wanted our newspaper to reflect the different levels of workers' organisation. So we shared workplace reports and descriptions of successful and unsuccessful resistances at work. We also reflected on our solidarity network actions, as well as publishing news of workers' struggles around the world. One aim was to show that while our conditions differ slightly, they are pretty common overall. This is one way to respond to workmates' individual reaction to bad conditions: "I'll leave this job and find something else". This is one way to say that we have common problems as a class. The idea was that the newspaper would become a means of two-way communication. We hoped that workers would use it as their tool to get their news across.

*** *Distribution at Job Centre, Southall. June 2016. A Punjabi guy, who was kicked out from an NHS job two years ago for medical reasons. He complained about the job centre, that they're not helpful. He talked about the fact that he has paid his taxes and that now he is stranded on the dole. He doesn't want to go on incapacity benefits because then it is even more difficult to get a job later on. He said he should have become a junkie like everyone else around here, then he would have a flat and an easy life paid for by the state. You can guess the type of guy: angry, bitter, and a bit lost.*



Local stickering effort

Peoples' problems are not just confined to the workplace. So we also published longer pieces about the question of what it means to share a flat and to live in "overcrowded" conditions. We emphasised how domestic violence against women becomes a release valve for stress and feeling inadequate in this macho- hero world. Instead of just moaning about the bad conditions of working class housing we tried to turn things around: we have to live together, so why not try and make the best of it? Let's not rip each other off by making extra money from subletting; to make everyone's life easier let's try to collectivise domestic chores.

*** *Distribution at Bakkavor, Abbeydale site. March 2018. We were there for the early shift 6am-7am- for the first time, gave out roughly 80 copies. Longer conversation with a guy from Sri Lanka, he had worked at*

*McDonald's in Germany in the early 1990s, then moved to England around 14 years ago, 13 years at Bakkavor as night shift cleaner. He has English citizenship. He said that when he started he earned £4.50, which was relatively way more than what he earns now. He also said that Bakkavor does not make as many people permanent as compared to one, two years ago. A woman from Latvia was very loud and vocal, she seemed to like the paper but said that it was wasted on a lot of the Indian women because, "they don't read". ****

Another focus of the paper is news and lessons about relevant struggles here and in other regions. We reported on what workers were doing at Amazon in Poland and Germany, which was particularly relevant as many workers locally got jobs at the Amazon warehouse in Hemel Hempstead for Christmas, and about warehouse workers struggles in Italy. While this news is meant to spread hope and a "can-do" attitude, we didn't just want to celebrate struggles for their own sake. We tried to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of these experiences of our class and relate them to the concrete local conditions, rather than just presenting them as blueprints for action.

**** Distribution at IHSS. September 2018. Went to Premier Park, mainly for Kuehne and Nagel and Royal Mail. Spoke longer to a guy working for IHSS, they do cleaning of hospital (surgery) instruments. There are roughly 30 – 40 people on three shifts, most of them Africans. They pay okay, starting at £8.23. Spoke to some middle-class women who work freelance in an arty warehouse (or could be antiques). Not many vans going in and out of Royal Mail, handed out maybe 20 to them in total. Kuehne and Nagel/SkyLogistix finishes at 2:30pm, workers mainly leave in cars, in total around 40, which seems little, given the size of the place... ****

The newspaper is more than just a mirror. We think it's necessary to confront the day-to-day experiences within a broader revolutionary position. However, we made a decision to use accessible language that didn't rely on words like "communism" that would more likely alienate people because of their own definitions and associations with these kinds of terms. We wrote articles against the dead-end of nationalism and the Remain/Brexit divide. We tried to tie our "internationalist" positions as closely as possible to peoples' concrete experiences. While nationalism is

not just an extension of management’s “divide- and-rule” tactics of dealing with different backgrounds on the shop-floor, it is related. We wrote a “system-series” putting forward ideas about how this system emerged and how a better society could come about (we collated the series into a pamphlet which can be found on the website). Again, we related this to the way that workmates are currently trying to get to grips with global events – more often than not through random YouTube self-education usually ending up in Zionist conspiracy theories. We want to present the newspaper as a holistic position: revolutionaries are not preachers, revolution is as much about day-to- day self-defence and solidarity as it is about discussions about the future.

**** Distribution at Noon Foods, Southall. February 2019. A. and me went to Noon Ironbridge at 13:15, distributed around 80 papers, met Mickey and some friends who all complained about GI Group [temp agency] not paying on time. They want to write mass email, I will keep in touch with Mickey. Several women workers came out from work. They spoke Hindi. They said they are on piece-rate work, one said that they get around 28p per samosa, that she made around £70 in seven hours, but that sometimes workers have to clean or the pastry is not prepared, then they earn less. Saw Abdi and Abdullah! [ex- colleagues from previous workplace.] ****



Our newspaper, WorkersWildWest

As usual we faced the dilemma of capacity and critical mass. In order to create a dynamic where workers make more active use of the newspaper and where it actually works as a means of communication you would need to publish and distribute it at least monthly. In our area the newspaper would have to be multi-lingual. Unfortunately, we didn't have the capacity. While writing and collecting articles was not so much of an issue, the time it takes to distribute the paper was.

**** Distribution at Tesco/Sainsbury's warehouse. April 2019. Got drivers as soon as they came out of the yard. We've never had any problems distributing there before but this time we hadn't been there long before three big Tesco managers came out to harass us. We think this is definitely due to our last distro of a leaflet about the Tesco Dagenham strike. They threatened to call the cops but only their own security turned up. One manager put her hand into E.'s bag to try and get the newspapers. With all the aggro we only managed to distribute about 20-30 copies. ****

We published roughly two or three issues per year, distributing around 2,000 copies each. We managed to translate some of the articles into Polish, but not into other languages. We distributed the newspaper at particular locations: the same warehouses and factories and job centres; the same entrance roads into logistics parks and industrial estates; the same bus stops where Heathrow airport workers wait in the morning. We didn't want to distribute the paper randomly in the streets, as we hoped to get a more specific communication going with workers of particular workplaces. This meant that we had to get up before our shift or on days off and distribute twenty times for each issue. This is a pretty big effort for five, six people – which explains why we didn't manage to publish the newspaper more frequently.

**** Distribution at Job Centre, Ealing. July 2017. Guy from Somalia, been in the UK a long time. Has been in jail and has problems finding a job. He says the job centre wants to keep you unemployed, that they are not helpful with finding jobs. He has worked in various food manufacturers in Southall, but hated it. He thought that I wanted to recruit people for the army and first did not want to take a paper. We talked about politics a bit, western military interventions and all. ****

The immediate reaction to the newspaper was limited. On one hand, it is different from the usual lefty leaflet distribution on high street stalls in the sense that most people actually take a newspaper, especially once they know that it's about local workplaces and workers' lives. Sometimes, they thought it was a magazine advertising jobs, so we had to be clear that it wasn't. On the other hand, people usually don't talk much early in the morning, especially if their English is limited. But then it is about more than the ability to communicate, it's about feeling confident enough to talk to strangers about what you think about your life. It is not surprising that we had more discussions with, for example, British-born male bin-men than with female factory workers from Sri Lanka. We had longer conversations at the job centres, although they were often a reflection of individualised despair.

Communication during distribution was also made difficult by other factors. At some warehouses people come and go in private cars and security makes it difficult to enter the car parks. Many of the logistics parks and industrial estates are "privately owned", so we had the cops called on us many times. Ultimately though, the newspaper distribution keeps us grounded. We listen to folks and talk to them face-to-face. This is better than just writing anonymous internet posts. People need to see that we're real. We don't want to sell them anything and don't want to convert them. We gave out the paper for free.

**** Heathrow distribution. October 2017. We got on the fairly empty bus at 4:40am in Greenford, by the time we got to Southall, the bus was full with workers. We waited until we'd just passed Southall and then distributed on the top and lower decks. The driver didn't say anything. The last stop is at the bus station (terminals 2 and 3) where lots of buses arrive and drop off workers. One guy approached us on the bus after we'd given him a paper. He worked for a cleaning contractor and complained that the company always have more money and better lawyers at labour tribunals and unions are rubbish. They have reduced the number of workers in the team from 9 to 5 but you're still expected to clean the same amount of stuff. He got off the bus before we could get his contact details. We also spoke to a longer time with an older Punjabi woman from Gate Gourmet (big airline caterer where there was a wildcat strike/lockout in 2005, see appendix for more info). She*

had worked there for 21 years but the strike had not been in her plant. She says the target pressure is increasing and the main source of their problems.



A Tesco driver asleep with our newspaper

We wrote down whatever happened during distribution and circulated whatever workers would tell us about their conditions in the following issue. This was the most basic level of “workers’ participation”. We only got a few written responses to the newspaper. One of these was a long report from an Eastern European worker at the Wasabi warehouse, making sushi and noodles for the restaurant chain. He wrote a diatribe against the “racism” of the south Asian middle management against the Eastern European workers, as well as the poor health and safety conditions. We wrote a response to him in the paper. We had two cases where Bakkavor and Tesco workers found the article about their respective companies in the newspaper online and shared it electronically. We could see that within 24 hours hundreds had clicked onto the article on the website, which gave at least some indication that people were interested. We had a handful of articles that were written by workers themselves, by former workmates, people we got to know through the union or people who contacted us via email and wanted their report printed. At our own workplaces we saw that

people would read the paper in the canteen one workmate fell asleep, probably he got too excited after having read the article on the origins of capitalism! We had some discussions about the paper with various workmates, but given the fact that management was eager to find out who was behind the company reports we could not act as openly as we wanted.

**** Distribution at Amey waste depot. September 2015. Gave out 100 copies to early shift 5am-7am. It felt like less workers came, which was confirmed by statement of “Nazi Ian”, a right-wing road sweeper, that 107 people have been made redundant since the introduction of the wheelie bins. Recycling trucks/on-truck recycling sorting has been scrapped and instead of sweeping he mainly collects “bulk rubbish” (leftovers people complain about). People are pissed off, in particular about the fact that refuse workers have to come back to the yard after the official end of the shift – instead of job knocking (finishing your rounds and going home whenever you finish, getting paid in full even if you leave earlier), which was the arrangement before. ****

We also hoped that the newspaper would inspire the revolutionary milieu and that the debate about the concept and experience of the paper could lead to co-operation. We thought it would be relatively easy to work on some of the central editorials and articles together and then add local reports according to need. While we received many positive responses to the paper, the desired co-operation did not materialise, which leads us to the question of organisation and the difficulty in coming to a collective political commitment in this day and age.

**** Distribution at Bakkavor, Cumberland. November 2018. 6:15am to 6:50am. We distributed 90 copies to Bakkavor Cumberland workers. Pretty good discussion with three Somalian/North African younger men plus one Eastern European. They all work as night shift cleaners. Main complaint was about wages (“situation is racist; outside of London hygiene workers are paid up to £12; here in London they can exploit migrants”). Other complaint was about chemicals used for cleaning (“it’s like Syria here, you can be gassed any day”; “one guy collapsed here recently, he went to his locker after shift and collapsed”). They also said, “we don’t know each other here, we just go to work and go home”; “would be necessary to meet everyone, at least the cleaners on night shift”; “if we all go on strike, they*

can't do anything". We told them about the meeting on Monday but they said it will be difficult to arrange with their working time. Let's hope they get in touch. There are 40 cleaners on night shift, around 30 on day shifts.

Chapter 5: Working class families and women's realities — in and beyond work

Most of the workplaces we've worked in are pretty evenly mixed when it comes to male and female workers. But, as you can read in the workplace reports, there is often a very visible sexist division within that workforce. For example, women are confined to certain jobs, mostly to lower paid, "unskilled" jobs and they have to deal with harassment and other bullshit. In an age of legal equality, how can we understand this? It cannot simply be explained by management's or male co-workers' "sexist attitudes". At the same time the lack of confidence of many women workers poses a problem for organising against the bosses; it is a class issue. To understand the material basis of the sexist division within the class we have to look beyond the immediate workplace and understand how the working class – and humanity in general – reproduces itself, meaning, how we form intimate relationships, have children, raise them, care for the elderly and so on.

Family, and having the main responsibility for having and raising children, is the basis of women's oppression, but this plays out very differently according to your class position. Rich women can buy their way out of the domestic extra-work and social isolation (from "rent-a-womb" to hired nannies and domestic cleaners). Working class women are more tied to the family, as they cannot afford to pay for childcare and need support from other (female) family members. Many of our workmates depend on their mothers or mother in-laws who either live in, or come from, Poland or India to take care of the kids. For these women the closure of children centres, as announced by the local Ealing council in 2019, or social spaces, such as libraries, have an immediate impact on their workload. In the current aftermath of the financial crisis in 2008 working class women have been squeezed between welfare cuts and the increased pressure to work more on one side, and the conservative backlash that promotes traditional family values on the other. This has a practical purpose: valorising the family sets it up as a safe haven or ideal antidote to these times of austerity and hardship – as well as the masculine uncertainties it invokes. But it is

increasingly impossible to both bring in an extra-income and create family relationships where we have the time, space, resources and energy to really nurture and support each other.

We tried to shine a spotlight onto the problem in various ways. You can find a longer text on our website that sets out some general thoughts on racism and women's oppression as class issues – a criticism of intersectionality. For our workers' newspaper, WorkersWildWest, we wrote an article looking at the crisis of the family. We based this article on observations of how we and our workmates in these parts of town live and organise our family lives. We point out that under the austerity and migration regime (cuts to social services, restriction of access to benefits for migrant workers) the family is both a blessing and a curse: we rely on family as a real material community that helps us survive, but at the same time it becomes a cage of tension, conflict and potential violence. Instead of whining about the “bad overcrowded conditions” that working class families have to live in we tried to turn this around as a potential for collectivisation of domestic work. You can find a longer version of this article below. We finally thought that the best thing would be to let women workers speak for themselves, so we interviewed five of our workmates and flatmates and published the interview in a pamphlet. You can find shortened versions of three of these interviews in the second half of this chapter.

The crisis of the working class family

The crisis of the family as a way to live together and bring up kids is nothing new. Working class families have always been portrayed as chaotic (missing dads, single/teenage mums, feral kids), but with the housing crisis and austerity things have become harder and workers are forced into new, and often more difficult, living arrangements. In warehouses, factories and other low-paid workplaces in west London we've had various conversations with fellow workers about how they live – not that there is much time for life after work. We've also had experiences at home, where we have flat-shared with other workers from different countries.

Male worker: “I work with Simon, a white British guy in the street-cleansing depot. He is in his fifties and shares a room with a friend. They both used to work as plumbers in the Dominican Republic tourism sector. At

work he made friends with Mustafa, a worker from Somalia, who was looking for a place to stay. When a room became available at Simon's flat he arranged a meeting between Mustafa and the landlord. When the landlord met "the African Muslim man", the room was suddenly "already taken".

It is no coincidence that most of the women we work with are either under thirty years of age or above forty. Many young, working class mothers still temporarily drop out of waged work. Therefore, this article lacks deeper insight into the conditions of raising children and juggling reproductive work in the current climate of cuts: the situation of local nurseries or other childcare facilities, the problems of migrant workers in getting access to child-related benefits. We merely watch mums from Poland, Pakistan and Somalia sharing the playground in our local park, but we know little about their actual interactions. *Female worker: "She and her husband live in a small double room in Southall. She works day shifts in a distribution centre, he works twelve-hour night shifts in a vegetable warehouse cash in hand because he is here "illegally". Their five-year-old daughter is with her grandparents in Punjab, India. They haven't seen her in four years. Their visa application is pending. Even though they would have a quite middle-class life in India, the woman does not want to go back because she has 'more freedom' here. They have recently had another baby, now the three of them share their nine square metre room. She cannot claim maternity leave because her visa status means that she shouldn't really be working."*

Fifteen, twenty years ago, (migrant) manual workers in this area could earn enough to get on the housing ladder or, at the very least, save money whilst not living in too shitty and overpriced a room. This is no longer possible, although the dream is still alive and kicking. The family as an economic unit is close to bankruptcy: between December 2018 and December 2019 average household debt increased by 10% to a record high of £9,400. Over ten million households have no savings, meaning, if they lose out on a monthly wage there is no money to pay for the basics, like rent and food. This causes permanent stress and self-blaming. Family life has to continue within this context – whether that is being stuck in crap relationships (it is easier as a couple to save money on rent etc.), having

children in single bedrooms or finding new living and childcare arrangements. In April 2017 the government restricted child-benefit to two children, meaning only rich people can really afford to have more than two kids. *Female worker: “We advertised a room for rent in our flat in Greenford. Every second call came from parents with a young child or baby who were looking for single-room/shared flat accommodation. Our flatmates didn’t want a screaming baby keeping them awake when they do shift work so we had to say no to them...”*

Jobs are stressful and time-consuming; we change our jobs more frequently and have to move house more often. All this puts an enormous strain on friendships in general. People have fewer close friends today than they had fifteen, twenty years ago. In a recent study one in eight questioned men said that they have no close friends at all, which equates to 2.5 million men in the UK. Strikingly, married men are twice as likely to have no friends than unmarried men. For them the family becomes the main arena of emotional life. At the same time the family and marriages themselves become more fragile. According to figures from the Office of National Statistics from 2016 around 42% of marriages in the UK end in divorce. This figure is considerably higher for working class families. Compared to previous decades divorce rates have increased: 22% of marriages in 1970 had ended in divorce by the 15th wedding anniversary, whereas 33% of marriages in 1995 had ended after the same period of time. The average length of a marriage in Britain of opposite sex couples who divorce was 12.5 years in 2018. Divorce rates have fallen since the economic crisis, which indicates that more people are “sticking it out” under, we assume “economic imperatives”, but even the re-introduction of a Marriage Allowance (a way to save taxes for couples) by the Conservative government hasn’t changed the general picture much. Families and couple relationships are overburdened both economically (lack of space, financial tension) and emotionally – men (more than women) expect that their partner alone takes care of all the emotional needs.

Male worker: “For two months I worked in refuse collection and street-sweeping teams in Ealing. As a temp you are frequently switched from one team to the other, so you speak to many people. Out of the forty or so men I worked with, aged 20-60, all but three or four of them had split up with the

mother of their children and around a quarter of them had lost touch with their children. Some blokes mentioned injunctions against them and isolated incidences of violence, although they always say they were never really to blame.”

In a world where people have less and less time for friendships and the general social environment is cold and anonymous, “romantic love” and family are seen as a “safe haven”. It is impossible for any “love relationship” to bear all the emotional pressure and needs life throws at you, nevertheless, if those needs are not met it is seen as a personal failure. People blame each other. Family and romantic partnerships are also one of the few places where working class men can feel that they are not the lowest of the low – they have at least one person “below them”. The crisis of working class confidence and community (the destruction of big industry, trade unions, solidarity) has been privatised as a “masculinity crisis” within the working class (depression, more drug-related problems, violence). The social tension escalates at home.

Male worker: “He and his partner share a room in a flat with five, six other people. She works day shifts in a food factory, he works night shifts in a warehouse. After work he smokes weed to wind down. This and the lack of sleep leads to a psychotic breakdown. They go to A&E, but all he is given are sleeping pills. He doesn’t get sick pay, so the partner continues working, although he needs care and cannot leave the room. After a week his father comes from Hungary and stays with them for two weeks to take his son out for walks and to the gym.”

The home is still the most likely place for women to get raped, injured or murdered. While the media largely still focuses on the “violent stranger in the dark alleyway”, in most cases the aggressor is a partner, “friend” or relative: only 7% of reported rapes in London are carried out by strangers. In the UK around a third of women have experienced domestic abuse since the age of 16. This amounts to 5 million women. Every week two women in England and Wales die as a result of domestic violence. Cases of violence often increase during pregnancy or after childbirth, indicating a relationship between violence and an increase of (economic, personal) stress. It also supports the idea of men’s uni-focus on their partner for their emotional needs, as this is undermined when the woman’s attention now has to be

shared with another (small) person. This jealousy is an important factor in violent relationships.

Male worker: “I worked with him on a recycling truck. He and his partner came from Hungary, they have a daughter. After two years in England she wanted to split up with him for reasons he didn’t want to disclose – he said that she found “an English bloke”. He continued texting her, going to her place, harassing her. Her brother wanted to stop him and in the argument he beat up her brother. The ex-partner filed a case for harassment and domestic violence. He is not allowed to see her or the daughter.”

Overcrowding and low incomes means that in a personal crisis working class couples can’t just “give each other some space”, which means that things can escalate more easily and chances for escape become more difficult. Also, there is limited space in refuges because of the funding crisis so there might literally be nowhere for women to go. In England there are around 10,000 journeys across local authority boundaries a year in order to access domestic abuse services. The other victims of the family battle are children. Local authorities in England looked after 68,110 children (at the end of March 2013), the highest level for 20 years. This number increased to 75,420 in March 2018. This is partly because of a rapid rise in the number of children being taken into care following the widely reported abuse and death of “Baby P” in 2007. And partly perhaps because of an increase in cases of abuse or neglect, which account for nearly two thirds of children in care (62%).

We are in a fix. In many situations, the only force that would intervene in an abusive situation – in cases of violence against women or children – is the state, the cops, social services. We cannot preach “right to privacy” in situations where this “privacy” becomes a smokescreen for all kinds of shit going on. At the same time the state and its institutions are brutal abusers towards working class people: look at the lives in prisons, detention centres, kids’ homes etc. It is also up to us – neighbours, co-workers, friends – to intervene!

Female worker: “I live in a shared flat. There are three couples living in three rooms, but we keep to ourselves. Most of us are not on the rent contract, so we wouldn’t be able to claim housing benefit if we lost our jobs.

The lack of space can be annoying, in particular in the small kitchen and waiting in front of an occupied bathroom. So you try and give each other some space. That goes so far that the boundary between ‘giving each other space’ and ‘ignoring each other’ becomes blurry. So when I hear arguments coming from the room next door, I am not sure how best to intervene. The guy seems to bully his partner, I once heard him shouting and hitting her. I asked her about it afterwards, but she said that everything was fine. Her English and job prospects are worse than his. She also stays in her room a lot, alone, waiting for him to come home. So she seems pretty dependent on him, financially and emotionally. Having to share a room and the isolation from others (even in a shared flat) means that it would take a major leap on her part to escape.”

We are not crying about the demise of the family. The “crisis of the family” is not only a sign of general external pressure on relationships. It is also an expression of working class women having gained some economic independence, as well as the confidence, resources and alternatives to leave a partnership. A recent study states that in 2015 around a third of all employed women in the UK were the main breadwinner in their family – this includes single-parent households. Between 1971 and 2008, women’s employment rate in the UK increased from 59% to 70% (whilst men’s fell from 95% to 79%). Since the onset of the recent crisis in 2008 women’s employment rate increased further, while men’s declined – mainly because the share of part-time work increased compared to full-time and women are more likely to work part-time. Also, many male colleagues insinuate that women leave marriages “in order to get the house” or gain materially otherwise. This is generally untrue. While 66% of divorces were on petition of the wife, women lose out economically after splitting up, in particular when it comes to pension money.

Female worker: “Four of us in our flat work on different shifts and days in the week. It was a hassle to go shopping individually, to store stuff individually, to cook your little meals for yourself. We found an arrangement where everyone pays £20 per week into a food kitty. We now share the cooking and tend to eat together more often. Instead of every day, you now only have to cook every third or fourth day. We also save money

like this. It took some time to find out what each of us likes to eat and so on, but that was no big deal.”

Being alone is also no alternative even as more and more of us struggle through life alone. The proportion of adults, mainly in the 25-44 age bracket, living alone almost doubled between 1973 and 2011 from 9% to 16%. This trend continues. The number of people living alone has increased by a fifth over the last twenty years, from 6.8 million in 1999 to 8.2 million in 2019. The majority of this increase is driven by the growth in the numbers of men living alone (72.1%), predominantly aged 45 to 64 years. Staying in and watching Netflix might make the time pass more quickly but living alone can take a heavy toll on mental health with higher rates of anxiety and depression caused by loneliness. At the same time, since 2008 we've seen an increase of working adults living with their parents.

Male worker: “When the crisis hit Spain he left to work in Holland, where he lived on his own for three years. When the job in an airport warehouse ended he came to live with his (Spanish) mother and (Pakistani) stepfather in London. The minimum wage job does not allow him to rent his own flat. Shortly after his arrival his step-dad's younger brother, wife and two children moved in. Both the step-dad and his brother work as cab drivers, their wives do the housework and childcare. Initially they stayed as family guests, but then they didn't find an affordable flat to move out to. Since then arguments are in the air about ‘who works how much’, ‘who uses how much gas and electricity’, ‘who pays for the bills’. The expectations and obligations around helping out your family are put under strain.”

Household patterns diverge within the working class: living with grandparents is largely a family structure of more established migrant workers families, often compensating for difficulties in finding adequate childcare. In 2011 20% of Asian families were living in multi-generational families, compared to 7% of all households in the UK. Overall, adult working class women are twice as likely to be active grandmothers (taking over childcare etc.) compared to their middle-class counterparts. In turn, having grandmothers around often becomes a precondition for being able to juggle work and childcare: 20% of mothers with children aged under four

who have mothers to help with childcare work full-time compared with 6% of those without mothers.

Female worker: “She works in a warehouse, her husband works, too. Their four-year-old son spent a year or two with his grandparents in Poland. They decided to bring him here to the UK, but due to lack of childcare the grandmother came too. She does not speak English and the daughter-in-law is unhappy about ‘living too close together’, but doesn’t have much choice.”

As a result of the family crisis, many working class people in the UK don’t grow up in “traditional families”. In 2010-11, one third of all children aged 16 and under were not living with both of their birth parents. In a study from 2013, 29% of resident parents said that their child never sees their other parent, and 20% of all resident parents said that their child has not seen their other parent since separation. In 2019 22% of families with dependent children were lone- parent families, 86% of them were run by single mums.

Male worker: “He said his ex-wife changed after they had an arranged marriage in India and she had moved over to England. She has turned his whole family, including his mother, against him, telling them he had been abusive towards her. He can’t see his kid and it’s all because, “she is secretly having an affair with a family friend”. When I asked him whether he had any proof, he mumbled something about seeing them talking. He said he’s been depressed for two years, “the bitch” ruined his life, he’s doing a shit job, his life has been ‘a living hell’.”

Like the phenomena of married men having less friends than unmarried men, single-parenting women often actually have a better support network than married women: the necessity to rely on others means they can actually be less isolated. When working class parents split up the whole household is put under economic strain. The state tried to avoid having to support lone single parents by encouraging “private arrangements” in terms of maintenance payments, meaning, raising money from ex-partners. This failed and the responsibility was handed over to the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). In the end it is mainly working class women as the main carers who lose out. Currently, less than half (38%) of single parents receive child maintenance. It is estimated that the DWP spent

approximately 56p for each £1 collected on behalf of parents to keep the system running: a bureaucracy that serves itself.

The most prevalent form in which the crisis of the family expresses itself in the UK is an increase of lone parents, who are predominantly working class women. As part of the general austerity measures against the working class there have been special measures targeting single parents, such as putting more pressure on them to get into (over-) work. This is often accompanied by media propaganda against “irresponsible mums who just want a council flat”. The upper classes have always portrayed us as promiscuous, irresponsible, lazy – in order to explain why we are poor and have to accept their disciplinary measures. Never mind that nurseries are closing and after-school clubs get more expensive: in London over the last two years prices have increased by almost 33%. In 2015 the average cost for a week for full-time (fifty hours) childcare in London was £283.66. Full time, weekly, minimum waged work in London was £288 (before tax). Under these conditions the individual’s decision to have kids becomes an enormous “calculating” business and pressure. While the family is overstretched by economic and social pressures, the economic crisis and the state’s austerity measures push more people back into the family. Many adults cannot move out of their parental home because of rental and housing prices: The proportion of people aged 20 to 34 who live with their parents has risen from 19.5% in 1997 to 26% in 2017, equating to 3.4 million people. The state has scrapped housing benefit for people under 25. The bedroom tax makes it more difficult for adult children to stay with their elderly parents in case of temporary care need or in case of an emergency. Increasing care home prices mean that more old people are cared for at home, putting an extra burden on an already overstretched family structure. We all know the stories of “family tragedies”: the mass deaths of elderly people as a result of neglect or the increase in violence against children.

Male worker: “After splitting up with his wife he had to sell the house and move back in with his parents, who are both over 70 years old. He says that private rents are too high for a minimum wage sweeper job and his parents need help every now and then.”

By cutting the social wage (nursery places, elderly care homes etc.) the state wants social peace: the family is a guarantee that working class people

fight for themselves or kill themselves, instead of attacking the rich and powerful. After the London riots in 2011 all the politicians were lamenting the angry youth who were lacking parental authority. They might have a point – working class parents often used to discipline their kids to become “good workers” and not cause trouble, being dependent on their future contribution to the family income. The ruling class bemoan the lack of parental control, but they have no alternative. Their system destroys the fundament of the family, while preaching family values at the same time. Some advise us to just rediscover traditional family values and stick it out, ignoring all the material reasons for why things go to shit. The fact that the childcare issue hasn’t hit the headlines as a national crisis in the same way as say, homelessness, shows that women are both too over-worked to start really raging collectively about this, and the relative isolation and individual solutions that women are effectively employing to paper over the cracks. Some propose “patchwork” solutions (get a nanny, ask your new partner to work part-time), which are only viable for middle class families with more time, space and money. We have to develop our own alternatives!

If “romantic love” doesn’t last and usually ends in “break-up” which destroys the friendship; if the family increasingly becomes a bad version of “big brother”; if we are often forced to share flats with friends or strangers; if many of our neighbours or workmates have similar problems in their families... then we can raise the “family crisis” as a general problem all of us are facing.

One of the main dividing lines within the working class is between men and women. All the talk about “romantic love” is prone to fail and ends up in us becoming each other’s control freaks. Men and women have to learn to become friends first of all, on equal terms. We – in particular men – also have to learn to trust other people with our emotional shit. Male colleagues often pretend that everything is cool, that they’re tough dudes, while at home they cry into their bottle or take it out on family members.

Another indicator for the crisis of the family is the rise of the “community”: people look for material and emotional support in religious groups, nationalist organisations and so on. Most of these communities are based on clear hierarchies: you will only get support unless you accept and

work for the leaders. If you don't obey their rules, you will get punished or ousted. This is no alternative for freedom-seeking working class people!

If you share a flat and hear domestic violence or abuse going on, if your workmate tells you about trouble at home, get involved. We know that this is easier said than done, but we – as exploited and oppressed people – have to learn to trust each other. We cannot delegate our problems to anyone else.

Here in west London we often live in flat-share situations. Many working class people rip off other working class people by making extra money by sub-letting. They get 30 or 40 quid per month out of it, but the relationships between flatmates are spoiled. Those who “pay more” will treat the others as those who “have to provide or do more”. Open the books and organise the household together!

The only alternative to the family and repressive “communities” are wider friendship circles where we can support each other and share daily house and care work as equals. Friendships need time and space, we have to fight for both: lower rents, (less over-) time at work, more communal spaces to meet, cook, eat, be jolly! Joining up in a solidarity network can be a first step.

When we as women workers stand together against pressure and harassment at work this gives us the chance to talk about other stuff going on in our family life. We have to break the isolation of “honour” and family privacy. We have to use our togetherness at work to start organising resistance against other things that impact us as working women, for example, the current children's centres' or library closures.

In the long run we have to fight for a society where care and other “domestic” work is shared by 200, rather than two people – and where we are not reduced to the boredom of daily repetitive tasks such as cleaning, wiping baby arses etc., but where these tasks are part of wider social and creative activity.

Interviews with three working class women from west London

The women in these interviews bear the brunt of sexism in the workplace, racist border controls and an increasingly punitive welfare system, with little recourse to amplify their experiences through the media or organisations that can represent them. We don't just want to share them as “sad tale” fodder, but as the foundation upon which we can orient our

political work. We need to build working class, grassroots organisations that address working class women's issues.

The three women whose stories you can read below are, or were, our workmates. Hanna is a young and adventurous worker from Hungary; Ramona has been born and raised in west London and is a carer and volunteer worker; and Gurpreet came from the Punjab, she stayed and worked here after her visa ran out.

Hanna

“I was born in Hungary in 1989. I lived with my parents in a small town called Leckemèt. After high-school, my parents wanted me to go to the university. I passed the entrance examination but I didn’t get enough points for a scholarship. So I had to pay more than £1200 per year in student fees.

I went to Budapest and registered to a college. I studied tourism and catering for one year. My parents paid for everything but I felt bad about it. I took a part-time job at Tesco. I was working night shift, stacking shelves. After one year, I wanted to stop studying but my parents wanted me to continue. I shifted to a financial course. It was quite mathematical, which I did not mind, but it was very boring. At the same time, I found work as a room attendant in a five-star hotel. I liked the job but it was paid less than £300 per month. Of course, in Hungary the rents are less expensive than in London, but the food, for example, is just as expensive. During my time in Budapest, I was living in a big private dormitory, four girls in a room. The showers were at the end of the corridor. I paid £90 per month for this accommodation. In the end, they closed it. I lived with my ex-boyfriend’s family for a while, but they were so poor that I felt bad about staying there.

I decided to stop going to college and find a job. With a friend of mine, we registered at an agency called Otto Workforce. This was in 2011. We had interviews in English in Budapest and they sent us to the Netherlands. We were picking in a huge warehouse near a town called Oss. We all lived in bungalows. The accommodation cost around £50 per week. The agency would pick us by car in the morning to bring us to the warehouse and they would bring us back to the bungalows in the evening.

Every day you would learn if you had work for this day or not. There were many Eastern Europeans there. At the beginning it was okay, but then they chose a Polish guy to be the supervisor and he would only give work to the Polish. My friend and I asked for another job. We worked in a chiller for some time. Then they sent us to a place close to Düsseldorf. We lived in dormitories in an old military base. There were people from Poland, Romania, Hungary, Slovakia, Slovenia, Czech Republic. There was not enough work there, we could not pay for the accommodation. It was always harder for women, because some jobs they would only give to men. So we came back to Hungary.

In 2013, I decided to move to the UK. I registered at a local temp agency. They got me a job in a chocolate factory in Park Royal. There were maybe a hundred people working there, plus the agency staff. I met my second best friend in this factory. There were only a few British workers, but many Polish, Lithuanian, Romanians. They put me in production. The shift was from 2pm- 11pm and I worked 6 days a week. It was still a minimum wage job (at the time £6.50 an hour).

I wasn't happy working six days a week because I paid too much in taxes and it was not worth it. I complained to the head of production. I thought she would fire me but in fact she offered me a contract. The hourly pay was £6.66 at the beginning but it went up to £8.75 after six months. This was in February 2015. I loved the job and was really dedicated. But the head of production, a German lady we called "Hitler", was really terrible. I cried almost every day after work because of her. In February 2016, I decided to leave, but I still miss that job. In October 2015 I had moved to Greenford with my boyfriend. I like the area. Now I still live here, but not with my boyfriend anymore. I have to say that life was not easy when I was working day shift and he was working night shift. After a while he could not stand the night shift anymore and had a mental breakdown. It was not only the night work but also the drugs, it was too much. I didn't want to go back to Hungary. Of course, I miss my family, but I couldn't live their lives. My parents live in a small flat in my home-town. I couldn't live with them. My friends at home can't save anything. They don't even have money to go out. Of course, now there is all this talk about Brexit. But I'm not scared. I've been working here for five years. I've got a contract. I don't think they will ask me to leave. And in the worst case, I will go to another country and find another job. I don't think it will be a problem. In any case, I don't want to go back to Hungary. But you have to be strong when you are alone."

Ramona

“I was born in Paddington and grew up in Kilburn. My mum started working when she was thirteen. She is from a large Irish family, she had nine sisters and one brother. She did care work all her life. Care work then is different to what care work is now. You were there all day, you cleaned peoples’ houses, doing the shopping for people, everything. When we were younger, she would take us to work with her, we were sitting on the sofas while she was cleaning. Social services did everything. Things were done properly. It wasn’t this measly hour that you spent with someone, like today, “just make sure to take your medicine and goodbye”. She cared for a person with motor neurone disease. When she came back from holiday and found bruises, she would fight with social services if things weren’t done right.

After my mum and dad split up, I went and lived with my dad in Shepherd’s Bush. When I was five I moved in with my nan, because my dad was working and we didn’t see our mum. When I was eleven my dad got re-married and I lived with them in Willesden, Harlesden area. That was in the eighties. When my dad had trouble with his wife I moved back to my mum. I did City and Guilds, they had just come out. I did plumbing and electrical. I can do these things.

I’ve always worked, even at school I did paper rounds, milk rounds, trying to make money for myself. Things with my mum weren’t that good. My brother even put himself in care to get away from her. He then joined the army when he was 17, went to Ireland. When he left the army he had a building company, painting and decorating, but there was too much cheap competition. He’s now studying to become a black cab driver.

I got married when I was eighteen, basically to get away from my mum. My husband was from Egypt and twelve years older than me. His English wasn’t that good, but we got along. I sorted him out, taught him English, we taught each other the swear words. I got him a job with the council. We had a child. He was born with cerebral palsy so I became his carer. He had to be fed, to be attached to machines to clear his chest. I dealt with that for four and a half years while my husband was working. One lady from Hammersmith Council would take him occasionally, to give me a break,

much better than Ealing council now. Then my son passed away in 1992. My husband and me drifted apart.

We're friends now, better friends than when we were married. I'm also friends with his wife. When we split up, I was working at the time as a park-keeper for the council. I found someone else, a man from Kenya, we got married and had two children. One of my sons studied criminology at uni in Kent. The first in our family to go to university. But after a year, he had to drop out because of lack of funds. He couldn't afford the rents and got into arrears. The university didn't help him. He tried to get some money together over the summer holidays at a warehouse where the manager was a bully. But it wasn't enough. So he came back permanently to Greenford and got an office job at the Kuehne and Nagel warehouse.

My other son was diagnosed with autism at the age of five so I'm his carer, which I used to get paid for. He went to a special-needs nursery here in Greenford. I also ended up getting divorced and the kids don't really see their dad now. When my son turned 21 he had to go for an assessment when they got rid of DLA (Disability Living Allowance) and changed it to PIP (Personal Independence Payment). With PIP everyone is going downhill because they don't understand mental health issues. The people assessing you aren't doctors as far as I am concerned. He was kicked off it and put onto ESA (Employment and Support Allowance), and I was put on job-seekers so I now have to look for jobs. My son has gone downhill fast. If you haven't been given a proper diagnosis, a proper label, you are left to your own devices and nobody helps. With social services you hit brick walls. They put him on anti-depressants, but that hasn't helped.

He's only now started seeing the mental health team but with the long waiting lists, he's been waiting for a diagnosis for a year now. Without a diagnosis you can't go to these places.

He'll only go out once every two weeks. He goes over and over the plan about what he wants to get from the shop. It's non-stop. You have to make him feel okay. You have to prompt him to do things. Everything has to be in order for him. He is always fretful. My sisters helps, she lives around ten minutes away from me. My mum comes around once a week, but it's rather me helping her – she had two knee replacements recently and I had to go

round her house a lot. I am always there for my mum no matter how weird she has been to me throughout life.

My ex-husband did his part, until his job was being an alcoholic. Today I could stand up to him and stick a chair over his head, but back then I was a soft touch. My other half now, he lives in his own place, I see him when I want to. He doesn't pressure me to come round. He knows my kids come first. He's fine with my kids, but I have no men coming round my house. Because it's my house. It's where my kids live. I go to his house instead.

Apart from family there are friends. My get-out is to go to "Community Care", to give me a break from my son. Because I need that break. Community Care is a voluntary charity for people over sixty. It provides help with housing problems, they have somebody from the Citizen's Advice Bureau, we take day trips in the summer, we provide yoga classes – all free, unlike other charities in Ealing. I help out there. I make tea, organise the bingo, travelling to the different community centres around Ealing, there are activities every day in different parts of the borough. Caring at home and at Community Care is different. At Community Care you have a different variety of people around you. It's not like when I'm at home with my son. You can have a laugh and a joke and feel normal. My home isn't normal. You're on edge, you don't know what he's up to next. But Community Care depends on council money, it's ridiculous, why should you have to beg for things like this?

The job centre tries to push me into care work, which I don't want to do, I want to do volunteer work. You've got to sign on, while all the stress is going on at home, and you feel humiliated. The way they look at you from behind the desk. They're rude. I have to go to west Ealing, because Southall job centre closed down. It's all messed up. My doctor said that I need a break, carry on volunteering and be there for your son.

I am a Liverpool supporter through and through. I was always more tomboyish than girlish. I hate handbags. I like football and boxing. I like Tupac. I like cage-fighting and unusual looking cars. But I do care. It's mainly women who do the volunteering at Community Care. You don't find many men, I find that weird. Maybe men think that volunteering is not really something. They were not brought up to care, it's not in their profile."

Gurpreet

“I was born in the Punjab, in India, in a small rural village. My mother, father, brother and sister-in-law still live there. I have two brothers and one sister. I am the youngest. We didn’t have much money growing up. The fields and land around our village were owned by a landowner, who my mother (and occasionally me and my sisters) worked for. It was seasonal, labouring work. At harvest time I helped my mother cut the sugar beet, plus there were rice paddies and maize fields. My grandparents had also done this type of work.

My father was a policeman but was often absent from work because he was an alcoholic. This increased the pressure on my mother to bring the income from labouring in the fields. My parents argued a lot and he was sometimes violent towards her. I didn’t want this kind of life.

I was lucky because I was able to focus mainly on my studies. My older sisters did more of the housework than me. I started school at the age of around six or seven. I went to the local village school, which was a government school, open to everybody. I could walk there in 10 minutes. I was good at school and so when I finished high school studied commerce at the college for three years. The college was in the city, so I travelled by bus for about one hour to get there. I graduated when I was 21.

This is also when I got married. I wanted to start my own life away from my quarrelling parents. My uncle, my mother’s brother, introduced my parents to my future husband’s family. They were a nice and respectable family with more money than my own family. I met my husband once before we got married. He seemed fine to me. We had the marriage in the gurdwara and a small party. I was excited about my future life.

Before I was married, I had already submitted my visa to study in the UK. This was my dream. And in a double stroke of luck, I got news that my visa had been awarded on my wedding day! So I only spent one week in my husband’s family home because after this we both flew to the UK. I was planning to study for an MBA at the University of X.

This was in 2009. My husband came with me on a spousal visa, and at the time, this meant that while I studied, he was allowed to work full-time. His parents had paid for my tuition fees which came to £8,000 for the two-and-a-half year course. They also paid for our rent when we first arrived. A

relative of my husband met us at Heathrow when we arrived. We stayed with them in Hounslow for a month and then found our own place in X.

I remember being nervous about our life in England. I studied English at school, but this was only one lesson in the timetable. The rest of my studies were in Punjabi. There was not much chance to practice speaking English so while my written English and grammar was very good, I could not express myself verbally. Luckily, I was enrolled on a 6-month English course at the university before my MBA started so I was more confident in English when I started studying.

Our visa allowed me to work for up to twenty hours a week on top of my studies but I never found a job. My husband, through a friend, found a full-time job in an Indian grocery store. He was earning around £220 a week then. We rented a room in a shared house, all Indians. Eight people lived in a three- bedroom house, I remember that there was one family also staying there, the rest were single men from India, all working locally. Although we lived in the same house, we did our cooking separately. There were never any arguments about housework – we all took turns to clean the kitchen and bathroom. We paid £350 a month rent.

As my course came to an end I gave birth to my daughter. Because of this I could extend my student visa for seven months while I stayed at home to look after my baby. I didn't get any maternity pay or anything like that, I didn't know if I was entitled to it, there was nobody to ask. Anyway, we were able to survive on my husband's pay from the grocery shop.

We returned to India to visit our families with our new baby. We spent two months there but my husband and I were quarrelling. After my course had finished, we could apply for a two-year work visa. He thought we should use the visa to the maximum and that we should both work full-time in the UK to make as much money as possible. I also wanted to work but it wouldn't have been possible with a baby. We didn't have any family in the UK and there was nobody to look after her. The only way we could do it was if we left our daughter with her grandparents in India. They agreed, thinking that even though they were quite old (my husband's mum was in her late 50s and his father was in his mid- 60s), it would only be for two years.

So we returned to the UK, without my baby, and moved to Southall. I found a zero-hours job, picking in a chill warehouse for a big supermarket chain. It was cold and sometimes they cancelled my shift at very late notice, even when I was on the bus to work. A friend of mine was a manager in this warehouse so that's how I found out about the job. My husband found a part-time job in an industrial bakery. We found a room in a shared three-bedroom house, with six people living there, all Indians again. We spoke to each other in the kitchen, everyone was working in similar types of jobs, through temp agencies or in construction. None of them wanted to go back to India. Everyone knew this was their chance to make some money and even though the work here was hard, they thought it was still an easier life than they'd have in India. All the landlords, who owned and rented out quite a few properties, asked to see our passports and visa when we moved in.

We used a local visa agent to get our two-year work visa. There are lots of visa agents and immigration solicitors around here, and I thought I could trust him because he was a professional – he had his own office, he had the correct qualifications and many people used his services because he could also speak Punjabi/Hindi. His website also said he was endorsed by the Home Office. We paid him £10,000 to arrange IT training at a company that would then sponsor my visa application. But I only got two weeks training, and was then given fake documents to apply for a visa. I didn't want to get my visa this way but he refused to return the money. I was very stressed and was not sure to do. I talked about the situation with my friend at work. She said she could bring a group of friends to his office to put pressure on him to give back the money. So we all went, there were about ten of us, including a local catholic priest! We refused to leave until he agreed to pay back the money. He was shocked and nervous and wanted to get rid of us. After a couple of months of hassling him this way, we got all our money back.

After all this, we submitted our own visa application. But it was rejected. They immediately took away our right to work. We had to go and sign on at the immigration enforcement office once a month. They said that if they caught us working they would deport us immediately. But if we were not working, what were we supposed to live on?

When we submitted our visa application independently after the visa agent had ripped us off, I decided to get pregnant again. I thought we would get our visa and everything would be okay. So it was very disappointing to have our visa rejected. Because we didn't have leave to remain, I wasn't entitled to free healthcare. New rules mean that I had to pay £4,000 to have my baby delivered in the hospital. I agreed to a repayment plan. They wanted me to pay £100 a month. I said yes but then when they said we could not work in the UK, there was no way we could pay this. I said, look, all I can pay is £20 a month. They refused. They sent me so many letters, but I stood firm. I cancelled the direct debit so they were getting nothing at all from me. They had their own targets: they wanted people to re-pay their debt within two years. But I couldn't do this and kept saying we could only pay £20 a month. In the end, they agreed.

Now obviously we have to earn money to survive. The three of us – me, my husband and my baby – share one room in a house where ten people live. We pay £420 a month for the rent. The landlady makes a lot of money from renting this house out to so many people but even so, she is stingy about the amount of heating we use. In the end, because she was using this as an excuse to keep putting the rent up, we said, fine, put a lock on the boiler cupboard door so that you know we are not using all the gas. So now we have a lock on the boiler door – we have heating for one hour in the morning and one hour in the evening. I've had many arguments with this woman but at the end, I know it would be difficult to find another place to live with a baby that we could afford...

Me and my husband both have cash-in-hand jobs. It is the only way we can survive here while our other visa application is being processed. Because my husband works nights though, it is difficult to share the room all three of us. He has to get some sleep during the day and this is very difficult with a small child. Somehow we are coping though... I work as a cook for a couple in a private household. They pay £10 an hour and I do two hours a day for them. In India this would be looked down on – a woman like me, working as a domestic worker? No way! But here, I can do it. It's a pretty easy job, and it allows me to have my own money, to spend how I want. This is important to me.

I haven't seen my daughter since we left her with her grandparents in India when she was almost one year old. She is now seven. We talk on WhatsApp, she knows she has a baby brother but she has never seen him. She says she wants to come to the UK and be with us but we cannot leave the UK unless we don't want to come back. And I don't want to leave. Of course, it is always a worry in your mind, that we cannot legally work, that we might be deported, but at the same time, I still feel more freedom here than in India. I hate the Indian mentality, people always caring about what other people will think, having to always justify where you are going, what you are doing. Here, I don't have to do that. I can work, there will be a good school for my child, there are activities for him to do here, we can earn money. I want to study IT. I can have a future here, but not having the right to work makes everything harder.

What have I learned about being in England? I have learned to be independent, to be self-sufficient, to earn my own money. I have realised my human worth. I work honestly and hard. But I have also learned that you cannot trust everyone. Like the visa agent. That was a big shock to me – that people like that can trick people and make lots of money and think they can get away with it. But I can fight back. Why? Because I know I haven't done anything wrong. I believe in myself.”

Chapter 6: Syndicalism 2.0 and the IWW organising drive

Against the background of declining mainstream trade unionism, over the last decade we've seen a re-emergence of syndicalism and a new debate on rank and file organising. We were inspired by some of these initiatives and visited logistics worker militants of the SI Cobas union in Italy, our comrades organising at Amazon in Poland and the Labornotes conference in the US. In this chapter we want to look at the new quality of some of these struggles. We then briefly summarise our criticism of trade unions in general and reflect on whether or not the current revival of syndicalism can escape some of the pitfalls. We finally present our own understanding of "class unionism" and share our experience of trying to organise with workers in factories and warehouses in west London as part of the IWW.

Why syndicalism?

In May 2015, a few of us from AngryWorkers went to Bologna to meet some other angry warehouse workers. They had been involved in a series of hard-won struggles in the logistics sector. This workers' movement has been a grassroots explosion, the effects of which cannot be under-estimated. The "base", or "syndicalist" union involved, called SI Cobas, had been engaged in struggles against global giants like TNT, DHL and Ikea and in many cases (although not all) they have won substantial improvements, such as higher wages, guaranteed shifts, sick pay and more dignity at work. This is all the more remarkable given that workers are migrants, often with poor Italian language skills, and no social safety nets as their immigration status is tied to their work permits. If they lose the job, they are threatened with deportation. If they stick their necks out, the consequences could be dire. But not only have they become a demonstrable force across the logistics sector, they have managed to do so from minoritarian positions, at least at the start, and have employed tactics that have served this purpose: the blockade. The left have supported them, bolstering their numbers and taking risks where workers feel they can't. Their victories have encouraged

wider worker participation. However, the scale of their victories, militant tactics and disruption have led to them being firmly in the crosshairs of the state: their union leaders and activists have been arrested, framed for corruption charges and even told they have to leave the city.

When we heard of these struggles, our ears immediately pricked up. In a situation where you've got migrants – who are usually blamed for undermining wages and accepting deteriorating labour market conditions—starting to fight back, we knew something special was happening. These struggles were emblematic of the “syndicalist” model of organising, which was experiencing an upsurge in popularity at the time – from SI Cobas in Italy, to IWW in North America, to the cleaners' unions in the UK and Workers' Initiative in Poland. Unlike the usual despondent scene of labour militancy, this organising model was actually winning demands for workers, who were usually on the bottom rungs of the labour market, and who the mainstream unions had been steadfastly ignoring for decades.

Syndicalism is essentially a rank and file unionism. Unlike the big trade unions, there are no bureaucrats; only a few people are paid a wage; it is supposedly non-political; and focuses solely on organising workers – or more accurately, helping workers to organise themselves. There has been a resurgence in syndicalism due to the bankruptcy of the mainstream unions who are unwilling or unable (because of restrictive laws) to help workers really fight back. When warehouse workers in Bologna originally approached the mainstream unions for help, they were told there was nothing that could be done as they had already signed away their rights to higher wages. When workers have joined the big unions, attempts to gain union recognition have zapped their energies. This is because the union recognition process takes so long, requiring at least 50% union membership, in order to force the company to have to accept the union. This is what happened to cleaners and porters at St. Mary's hospital in London in 2019 when they defected from GMB's long-running recognition campaign to the smaller, but more militant UVW union. The smaller, syndicalist unions have been able to work within the restrictive union regulations and go for militant strike action for a number of reasons.

They actively support workers who want to self-organise, even if it is a minority. The main method is through the strike. These days in the UK,

anti- trade union laws are cited as the reason why going on strike is so difficult. However, it is much easier if you don't have recognition agreements with companies that tie unions to formal negotiation processes that slow everything down and demoralise workers. It's also easier to go on strike if you're dealing with a relatively small and committed workforce who already want to do something. SI Cobas' strategy was to go on strikes immediately – even if only 10 workers out of 200 wanted to.

A strategy of minoritarian strikes would be suicidal if it weren't for the unions' role in bringing in external groups of supporters to give confidence to workers and substitute for mass worker action in the beginning. In Italy, these supporters, who were mainly students and the wider left attached to the big social centre scene in Bologna, blockaded the warehouse gates. Damaging the company's profits was vital if they were going to win without the majority of workers on strike.

Attracting students and activists in London is possible because of the proximity of the struggles. Unions like IWGB and UVW centre their activities on high-profile private and public institutions within central London zones 1 and 2. Not only do they target their campaigns against employers with a reputation to damage, but a high number of students and activists can get involved without having to take too much of a trek. These places are in the public spotlight, a fact that is used to maximum effect with the large investment in media output. Everything is filmed, put on social media, and it appears in mainstream newspapers. This has been vital in spreading the word to workers and activists alike.

Tactics match up with workers' needs and their position in the economy or social production process. Up until now, rank and file unions in London have largely focused on structurally weak sectors, namely cleaners. These workers have no clout as such as they are often sub-contracted, classed as "unskilled", and can therefore be easily replaced. To make up for this, their "associational" power is leveraged through their work for companies that either have loads of money (for example city financial or legal firms) and/or a reputation that can be damaged (universities, hospitals). The tactics invoked to get what they want therefore rely on promoting certain values: decency, fairness, dignity, usefulness. This has proved very effective in shaming companies to concede to the workers' demands, in part by also

invoking these to service or company users. Of course, this tactic would only work in certain conditions where employers care about public opinion, which is why these unions can be quite picky about what campaigns they run. SI Cobas on the other hand, chose logistics, which is a structurally very powerful sector, even though the workers individually are very weak. The blockade was the necessary strategy at the beginning because it hit the just-in-time production process that logistics so heavily relies upon, giving them the opportunity to win victories, and in turn, attract more members.

Another strategy of base unions is their upfront offer of legal advice, which is something that migrant workers are particularly interested in. If they have insecure immigration status, or are scared of being sacked, they want to know they have some sort of legal safety net. Of course, the realities are usually that companies do sack workers with no notice, coming up with some reason or other. The base union would then need to give confidence to workers about plan b, namely that a collective walk-on-the-boss is necessary to reinstate them, and that the charge for victimisation for trade union activities will be pursued with the greatest legal force, something that the mainstream unions (with the exception probably of the RMT) are not inclined to do.

Base unions have a combative attitude that is markedly different from the abysmal track record of mainstream unions. There is usually an underlying understanding that we live in a class society and that bosses are not our friends! *“Take the example of DHL in Italy: When this struggle began, we had some problems. When workers blocked a DHL warehouse in Milano, DHL closed it and took the commodities to other warehouses, in Bologna, Naples, or elsewhere. They close the warehouse in Milano temporarily until the workers get bored and go home. But these workers did not wait until the gates were reopened but drove to the warehouses in other cities and distributed flyers there. They persuaded the DHL workers in other cities to join the struggle. And immediately, in less than one month, there were banners everywhere and the whole camp was in struggle.”* (Karim)

SI Cobas, Workers’ Initiative, IWGB and UVW usually do not do cold organising. Workers approach them so they already have an impetus from the workers themselves to fight – the union doesn’t need to create this

initial momentum itself. Amazon workers themselves approached the Workers' Initiative union in Poznan, even as comrades within the union were getting jobs inside the massive warehouse. By that time, the union's reputation had preceded them. In Italy, things didn't happen overnight. It was a hard slog for the comrades who originally set up the union. Getting a foothold in the warehouse and logistics hubs around Bologna, amongst workers mainly from Morocco and North Africa, took several years. When a small group of workers eventually decided that they wanted to fight back against the terrible pay and conditions, the union was ready. From this one group of workers who were willing to stick their heads above the parapet, the SI Cobas organisers managed to build a dynamic between a minority of workers inside a workplace with the left milieu outside, thus overcoming the common hurdle of starting from a minoritarian position inside the workplace.

We were trying to organise with our co-workers in the warehouses in west London so our interest was immediate and practical in the sense that we wanted to learn from these experiences; we wanted to see if the form of struggle and organisation opens up new political avenues towards workers' self-emancipation. We wanted to get an idea of how they were organising, the dynamics of the struggles and what the general social atmosphere was like. What could be replicated in west London, and what were the specific factors that saw these warehouse workers' and cleaners' struggles really take off?

Scanning the horizon

Since 2012, we had been looking to America where the class conflict seemed to be getting sharper. After Occupy, Ferguson and the Women's March after the Trump election, the question on everyone's lips was, "what next?"



These movements had all somehow come to a limit: both organisationally (how do you sustain a movement beyond the immediate mobilisation or riot?) and in the face of state repression. The gathering and dispersal of forces, mainly on the street, were unable to relate to, and build upon each other, which would have been necessary to present a meaningful challenge to the system. The question for the left in the States was clear: how do we build on these movements to form a real and substantive counter-power? The debate around “organising” came out of this context. Neo-Maoist and neo-Leninist groupings (re-) emerged, building on working class militancy of the 70s. The North American IWW grew exponentially, branches popping up in many cities. Groups like The Marxist Centre sprung up and many local organisations, from across the left political spectrum decided to affiliate, with the idea of “base-building” becoming a common platform to make sense of the experiences in the previous ten years. It was basically the idea that the left needed some kind of definitive organisational model and class line to be able to do more than just engage in defensive struggles or be arrested and beaten by police. The vast geographical expanse of the USA needed to be bridged by concrete groups coming together and combining their experiences and forces.

We could relate to this. In 2015, AngryWorkers decided to go on a UK tour to try and meet like-minded local groups that could become the start of such a network. Although we met some committed individuals and groups like Bradford IWW were actually doing stuff, we didn’t meet other groups that could commit to a longer-term strategy. We talk more about what our strategic proposals are in the final chapters, but for now we can say that the debates around “deep organising” from people like McAlevey and the “base-building” tendency in the USA are important attempts to recompose a workers’ power in the aftermath of neoliberal restructuring. For this reason, we thought it was important to engage with these debates and see how they could be relevant to our situation here in the UK.

To those ends, we attended the Labornotes conference in Chicago in Spring 2017. Over 3,000 people attended, the largest in a long time, which

expressed the shifts taking place there that culminated in the wildcat teachers' strikes in West Virginia. These self-organised strikes where unions were trying to catch up with their members, were all the more surprising because they were in former Trump-voting territories. These were the kind of places that large parts of the left had written off. The fact that such rank and file militancy had taken place amongst low-paid teachers was a huge leap forward and showed the limits of traditional trade unions and their capacity to wage substantive and radical struggles, although a lot of it has now been integrated into Democratic Party structures. This was possible at the time because of large-scale, worker-led actions. These built on the organic links between teachers in similar geographical areas using Facebook organising groups and external support from parents and local activists, largely from local DSA branches, as well as some folks from the IWW who also happened to be teachers in the area. In this case, it was more a situation of how syndicalism could support workers' self-organising, rather than playing an instrumental role per se.

Closer to home, our "organising" role-models were Workers' Initiative in Poland, comrades who had been based in Poznan for many years, with their own squat, trade and tenants union and printing house, who had become part of the city they lived in, who got jobs in the same places as everyone else, who weren't just activists on the weekends. Despite their anarchist label, usually synonymous with navel-gazers who don't do much, (sorry anarchists!), they were not just a self-referential group trapped in their activist bubbles. They had branches of local kindergarten teachers, Volkswagen workers, Amazon workers, they organised with the Women's Strike in Poland against further anti-abortion laws, and actually could organise real (withdrawal of waged labour) strikes. Their base of self-organised workers' branches were the bedrock upon which community struggles could be waged, and this is what we continue to be impressed by. Their links with Amazon in Poland became the basis for our attempts to reach out to Amazon workers in Hemel Hempstead. We distributed leaflets to workers here to inform them about the Poznan workers' Black Friday strikes and slow-downs, and invited other groups in the UK to do the same, based on the information our comrades in Poland were sharing. Solidarity

will only become concrete, rather than merely symbolic, if these roots in such workplaces and communities are built.

Our comrades in Italy had a similar approach. It helps to be based in a relatively manageable sized town, which Bologna is. The “Red City” as it is known has a well-established left-wing scene, albeit a sectarian one. However, the warehouse workers’ struggles recomposed the left when they had to relate to an actual struggle that was taking place. Groups involved in different social centres, different cities and political backgrounds realised the importance of supporting these workers and brought different experiences and strategies to the picket line and general political debate. Those with knowledge of squatting opened up huge abandoned office buildings to house warehouse and other workers and their families who had no other place to stay. A “community of struggle” was formed, which helped to overcome barriers between the different “communities of origin” and which saw Bangladeshi, African, Moroccan and Italian workers come together. We went to visit one of these huge squats when we were in Bologna. People took it in turns to be on watch at the gates. There were regular meetings where the aim (if not always the execution!) was collective decision-making about the space. There was a communal kitchen and a BBQ prepared in the courtyard for families to eat and talk together. It was eventually evicted by the police, but the fact that spaces of resistance based on peoples’ actual needs could be created, seemed a massive step forward to us. The likelihood of something similar happening in London seemed remote. The left is more dispersed geographically, there had been no mass struggles that people (not just the left) could relate to and work together to defend, squatting laws had become draconian. Still, these “communities of struggle” that were based in local working class lives were an inspiration to us, an example of how things could, and should be.



IWW protest at Hanworth McDonalds to support a sacked UberEats driver, 2018

The syndicalist approaches – in Poznan and Bologna – that got these struggles off the ground had some similarities. The SI Cobas union in Italy and the Workers’ Initiative union in Poland come from two different political traditions, the former is from a Leninist background, the latter from an anarchist one. There are historical reasons for this, but ultimately, the strategy they’ve taken up is one that tries to build a real class power. To this end, self-organisation of workers is the starting point. Both SI Cobas and Workers’ Initiative put the onus on workers’ themselves to make their own decisions, decide their course of action, get groups of workers together, and for workers to take the inevitable risks and responsibilities required to get things moving.

Critique of trade unions

This all sounds great. We just need to set up grassroots unions and we build workers' power, right? If only things were so simple. Before we go into some pitfalls of the syndicalist approach, we will start by outlining our problems with trade unions in general. We share the left-communist and anarchist critique that unions, in and of themselves, are not vehicles of revolutionary take-over by workers. Instead, they exist to mediate the relationship between labour and capital rather than break it. Like capitalists, they have an interest in companies being profitable in order to maintain jobs for workers, even if that means accepting their exploitation. Historically, their role was to maintain skill and craftsmanship through guilds that essentially set up a closed-shop. New workers couldn't come in and undercut existing workers who sought to protect themselves by creating barriers to entry for newcomers. Trade unions today often maintain divisions between workers by keeping professions separate, thus weakening their overall power. They also have to negotiate with the bosses. Through their role as mediators and representatives of the workers, a new stratum, separate from the workers, is created. This develops into bureaucratic structures and methods, which are more easily co-opted by the management. Their aim is usually to sign contracts with the company – for recognition and collective bargaining agreements. But nearly all contracts bind unions to adhere to their side of the deal, which usually means not troubling the bosses with workers' actions until the next round of negotiations, or formally completing endless rounds of negotiations before they can consider strike action. Given that unions are legal bodies and have to stick to the national labour laws they tend to be linked to the parliamentary system, trying to influence law-making and industrial policies in their favour. This in turn results in unions manipulating workers in favour of this or that party and government.

We've experienced this first-hand as shop stewards in two large TUC unions, GMB and USDAW. The paid union officials have to maintain good relations with the management of companies in order to not risk their position. The union becomes an organisation in and of itself, concerned with its own viability, separate from its role as a supposed vehicle for workers' power. They want membership money to pay their staff, for which

they need company check-off (where membership dues are deducted straight out of your pay-packet), and access to workers. This comes with a recognition agreement that is usually only agreed to by management if the union toes the line. The union ends up being a co-manager of all the cuts to pay and conditions that the management wants to impose. Their role is safe if they continue to demonstrate their ability to keep workers under control. “De-recognition” does occur, for example, at the Cranswick meat factory after workers staged an unofficial wildcat action. The fact that the union, which was GMB, allowed this to happen, meant they were technically obsolete and management had no qualms about using this as an excuse to boot them out. Workers in turn cease their membership, recognising that not only is the union weak, they don’t even have a seat at the negotiating table. The union does not use this as a chance to become more responsive and militant, choosing instead to denounce the workers’ wildcat actions in the first place.

Union “betrayals” like this are commonplace. The left have responded to this in different ways: the Trotskyists practice entry-ism, with the idea that if only they can get decent socialists into positions of power in the union, they can push the union to the left. However, this misunderstands the nature of the union as an organisational form. Having “good” people in positions of power does little if they are restrained by the law, and if the internal regulations of the union exist to, first and foremost, simply maintain its apparatus. The president of the yellow USDAW union is a member of the Socialist Party. It still continues to be one of the most conservative, anti-worker unions in the UK. You might get one of two officials who are real fighters, but as we see in the Bakkavor example in chapter 8, they are quickly side-lined when things get too hot for the upper echelons of the union bureaucrats.

Critique of syndicalism

Often it is the attempt of syndicalist unions to compensate for the inactivity of workers in “non-revolutionary” times that turn them into ossified forms of organisation. Most people do not have the time or ability to work for free. Everyone has to earn a living, and so political activity often has to be squeezed into the hours outside of work. When a union starts to grow, the amount of work needed to maintain membership and build workers’ confidence can be huge. As such, there comes the inevitable point at which a discussion is had about paying “organisers” or caseworkers. Slipping into a service union model is a real danger. Then, like any other union, a syndicalist union gets new members through victories. The pressure to present oneself as always victorious in turn hinders self-reflection. We asked the SI Cobas comrades under what conditions their struggles had been successful and under which they weren’t. But they refused to reflect on their defeats, only repeating that, “if they were strong and united, they would win.” The same with UVW in London – they have not published any deeper (self-critical) reflections about their activities. We are only privy to their numerous successes.

The “tactic” to give workers hope by making them believe in the strength of a (rank and file) organisation quickly backfires as the organisation itself comes to be seen as the embodiment of power, not workers’ actions. It matters less how many members a union has or how swanky their offices are. Rather, workers’ power depends on being able to interrupt production and to avoid their struggles becoming isolated within a single department or workplace. Organisations have to be glorified and defended and “leaders” become symbols of organisations. This is why in Italy, at a stage where workers should have felt strong enough to hinder production *inside* the warehouses, they continued with the blockades. They chose to carry on their “militant” and public campaign which wound up attracting a smaller group of “fighters”, continually raising the stakes against military-style repression. The kind of open reflections needed at this stage seemed to be lacking, which in turn led to serious defeats when SI Cobas tried to organise meat-packing workers in mafia-held places like Modena, using the same strategies.

Then there are the usual problems of worker leaders becoming sucked into the union, turning them into activists and elevating their status to reproduce internal hierarchies within the class. These visible leaders can be bought or broken. SI Cobas relies on leaders – to agitate, recruit, inspire, motivate – when they should really be trying everything they can to make them unnecessary. Once these leaders are inevitably victimised by the state (or even the mafia), we need to be sure that everything doesn't just fall apart, that workers have the confidence, resources, relationships and structures to keep things running.

Unions become organisations in and for themselves, to be defended at all costs, particularly against other unions. Turf wars and inter-union competition causes aggro and tensions. There have been various clashes between rank and file unions in Italy and it also happened recently in the UK, where UVW was seen to “poach” members of one of the big TUC unions, GMB, at St. Mary's Hospital in Paddington. While it's inevitable that base unions have to tread on some toes if the incumbent union is not pulling its weight, the GMB were actually in the middle of a pay campaign – albeit a slow one because they wanted to get recognition. This caused a lot of tension between the GMB official and the UVW. While it is generally a good thing if workers' organisations take the lead from workers themselves, this is not without its contradictions. Sometimes, immediate demands of an individual group of workers who want to organise with syndicalist unions go against the unification of the wider class. For example, IWW in Brighton and Liverpool, who were supporting Deliveroo drivers, supported drivers' demands for a recruitment stop as a way to maintain their workload and subsequent wages. At a time when hostility towards “immigrants taking our jobs” was rising, this protectionist approach and anti-newcomers attitude went unchallenged by the union. Workers' Initiative in Poland also agreed to put forward a demand for seniority pay for Amazon workers, knowing that in the long-run, it would divide the workforce. Workers' autonomy in these instances can become a fetish at the expense of a strict class line. Here we see the difference between “syndicalism”, which mainly deals with workers' immediate demands, and “class unionism”, which ties the economic demands to political considerations about how to create class unity.

“Organising” has become something of a fetish. We don’t just need more of it, but it needs to be qualitatively of the better sort – and with a political trajectory! The organising Bible came to be McAlevey’s book, “Organising for Power: No Shortcuts”. Her work advocates a break with “the service union” approach. Together with her extensive experience in organising within the big American unions, her methods have been widely discussed and have gained a lot of traction with syndicalist unions like the IWW. The main point McAlevey makes, which probably nobody would disagree with, is the need for a deep- organising model as opposed to the service-union, campaign-style approach that relies on trade union full-timers to do things *for* workers. You couldn’t get much “deeper” than moving to Greenford and getting warehouse jobs, so we got that part. However, her emphasis on deep organising still remains pretty schematic: there are workers, there are organisers, the organisers intervene in their participatory ways but the division between “organisers” and “workers” is always maintained. Workers tend to be seen as individuals, with their own strengths and weaknesses, at the expense of an analysis of collective relations. This type of organising does not start from the practical relations of workers who work together – and the hierarchical relationships that come with it. Instead this approach looks to re-assemble workers as individuals into a group following a common demand. For example, they don’t take the fact that a large group of workers co-operate in a certain department as a starting-point and see how, within that already existing group, certain scared or hostile workers can be dealt with. Instead they look for individual workers who are “militant” or “support the cause” around who they then try to gather more followers.

Her focus on finding the “organic leaders” is problematic too. In our experience, these people tend to be the ones that are bought off by management and the sex/race/class hierarchies tend to be reproduced in their elevated role as shop-floor union organisers. For syndicalist unions to take these specific ideas forward would jeopardise the “one big union” approach, which, to our mind, should be dissolving boundaries of “organiser” and “organised”, “leaders” and “workers”.

Class unionism

Principles can always be undermined when you continue along a certain trajectory, and historically, rank and file unions run the danger of degenerating into the usual trade unionism, see SUD in France or CGT in Spain. So what is our proposal instead?



An IWW organising drive action in Park Royal

We prefer what we'd call a "class unionism" approach. Class unionism shares many traits of rank and file syndicalism: it is a union for all workers, not for certain professions or sectors. It's not a "service union", nor is it overly bureaucratic. However, a class union would be an explicit organisation to fight the bosses, not a vehicle for this or that political cause (which would make it different from organisations such as the IWW in the UK, which speaks in favour of regional and national "liberation" movements). It would also be totally self-organised, meaning no professional organisers. And most importantly, it would have a firmer class line. Syndicalism runs the danger of opportunism in the sense that in order to "win over workers", they will go along with whatever workers want, even if that undermines class unity in the medium to long term. So for example, a class union would not agree to pay differentials for "higher skills", nor seniority bonuses. Temp workers would not be excluded and no

contracts would be signed that would tie workers' hands if they wanted to take action.

There are three material foundations for such an organisation: it can act as a formal and legal vehicle to take official strike action; it can act as a unifying force amongst workers who are in need of "associational power", meaning, in smaller workplaces or where the work processes aren't extensive enough to bring people together organically; it is an organisation for times where the class movement itself is too weak to create more offensive forms of organisation.

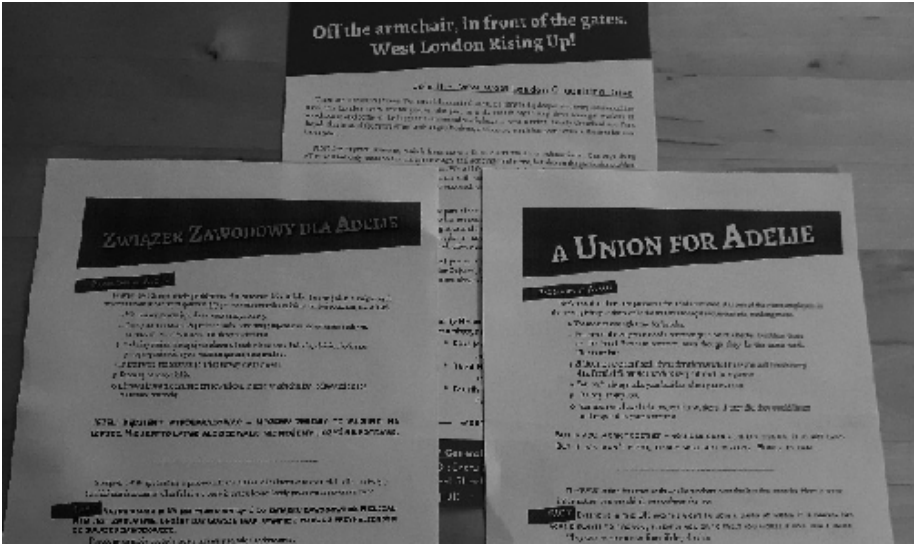
A class union is not a revolutionary organisation, but a vehicle of self-defence. It should constantly remind workers that the real power lies in their own collective action, not in the formal organisation. Groups of workers on the street waving flags can be kettled, whereas conscious groups of workers and their daily resistances can not only shift the balance of power at work, but also hurt the bosses in less visible ways, therefore presenting less of a target for victimisation. It is good to experience solidarity inside an organisation, but even more important to spread solidarity in our daily lives.

Political organisations can encourage debates within the union, but shouldn't make the union their economic instrument. Once the wider class movement picks up and the class develops more politically-conscious forms of organisation, the need for a class union diminishes. There is a clear difference between class unionism and parliamentary politics, as the union is based on the collective force of workers, whereas electoral politics is based on individual citizenship and representation.

Syndicalism in west London

Rank and file unions have been the only organisations capable of breaking the deadlock faced by many workers on the lowest rungs of the labour market in recent years. We could certainly have used such a dynamic in west London! After having been in this area for three years there had been almost no strikes. There had been one strike of Medirest caterers, cleaners and porters at Ealing Hospital in 2015 organised by the GMB union, but not much else apart from some larger public sector struggles. In an industrial area of this scale, with such poor wages and general conditions, it was striking that workers didn't have the opportunity or inclination to gather their forces. However, setting up our own syndicalist union and trying to emulate the success of SI Cobas in Italy or UVW in central London would be much trickier on our patch because:

- our workplaces didn't fit the same profile. We weren't working in places in the spotlight that had a brand or reputation to ruin;
- we were in the hinterlands. If you weren't in zones 1 or 2, you wouldn't get the external support needed to have a regular presence and raise the profile of the struggle;
- a minoritarian struggle in a workforce of 1,000 people (meaning only a minority of workers being involved initially) would have had much less impact than a bigger group in smaller workforces;
- migrant workers around here are not from regions with a recent history of class struggle, such as the migrant workers in Italy ("Arab Spring") or the cleaners in central London (South America);
- workers in our neck of the woods weren't approaching us with the idea they wanted to fight. It was more like trying to convince them that they should. This "cold" approach was immediately at a greater disadvantage than operating from a position where workers approach you, ready and willing to engage.



Some flyers for our west London IWW organising drive

Still, from the many positive experiences of base unions, we thought that there were some things we should try. To that end, we invited the London IWW union to work with us in a six-month organising drive in west London, in some of the medium-sized companies we knew of where there wasn't an existing union so as to avoid getting embroiled in union wars. We also chose these workplaces because we had some prior knowledge of them through small and irregular contacts we had made over the years.

IWW organising drive

Knowing all we've said about the pitfalls of syndicalism, why did we decide to go for this approach? The first reason concerns the union as a visible organisation. The second reason related to the fact that the IWW could act as a legal vehicle to organise a strike for higher wages within a short period of time. Our emphasis had always been to try and build on what workers were already doing at work, in order to build their confidence, strength and trust in each other. This is difficult amongst many groups of migrant workers in particular, who face a tough time in a weak labour market position. Therefore, we thought that presenting a union, that everyone has an idea about, that is a tangible and formal organisation, might give workers the push they needed to take the first steps to self-reliance. The main contention was the fact that workers see certain symbols (like flags and logos and membership) on their own as a sign of "being organised". Pushing the union as a vehicle by which workers can organise themselves and not using the union as an "easy (legal) fix" was a tension we'd have to ride out.



Outside the unassuming Adelie factory in Southall

Our main aim was to build groups of workers who can collectively analyse all possible avenues they have to beat the bosses. This is more complicated to achieve than it sounds! It means getting workers together in one place, where they feel safe to discuss openly without a manager finding

out. You need to trust your co-workers to a large degree. You need to know where your power lies inside the workplace, what weapons you have that make a direct impact on your employer but that are usually invisible from an outside perspective. This approach relies on workers to really analyse what they do and how things work, to come up with ideas themselves. To that end, we saw the IWW effort as a way to get workers together in the same room outside work to start having these kinds of conversations.

In a climate of fear, having some kind of legal safety net, which a union is seen to provide, is appealing to workers. However, legal protection is only worth something if you can enforce it. There is never a watertight “safe” way to struggle. Companies will try and dismiss you for whatever reasons and it will be a show of unity amongst the workforce that will get your job back there and then. Workers would need to be prepared for this.

So in late September 2017 we proposed that the IWW London branch invite friends and comrades to take part in an organising drive in west London factories and warehouses. Members voted for this as London IWW’s strategic focus for six months. We chose half a dozen companies, employing between 100 and 200 mainly migrant workers where there was no trade union present. The response to our invitation was positive and we were able to welcome around 25 new friends to the campaign, mainly students who had gathered experiences during the struggle of outsourced workers on their university campuses. While the teams had a good gender balance we lacked people who shared a similar (language) background as the workers, which posed a considerable problem. All in all, the organising effort was a good and largely self-organised collaboration between people of various groups, from Solfed to Plan C to UVW, and a lot of people who haven’t been members of any particular group before.

We organised a day-school where we learnt more about the area, the background of the local workers and the specific conditions in each of the companies. We formed half a dozen teams which were to focus on one company each. We discussed the first leaflet with which to address the workers, how to introduce ourselves, and what to ask and look out for during our first visits at the gate.

Over the following months we managed to organise four or five visits at each of the companies and distributed hundreds of leaflets, many of them

translated into three or four different languages. We established closer contacts with some of the workers, often by supporting them with individual grievances. We learnt a lot, last but not least that under the general condition of fear created by migration policies and the factory regime, ‘organising successes’ are not easy to come by. Particularly in the food processing and logistics sectors, which are hidden away from the public and dominated by so-called ‘unskilled’ and often female labour and crossed by language barriers.

Workers’ general view on unions is negative, either because of direct experiences or background (for example, Solidarność is known as the sell-out union in Poland). We needed to keep that in mind when introducing ourselves as members of the IWW union. At the same time, “strike” and “union” seem the main thing people come up with as the solution to their workplace problems. When “strike” is portrayed as the main thing to do, then the bar “to do something together” is set very high, also in order to explain why someone is afraid to do anything. We wanted to emphasise that there are other possibilities to take action at work (work to food hygiene standards, warehouse health and safety, refuse overtime etc.). When it comes to organising, the so-called “social leaders”, in particular amongst the South Asian workers, tend to be patriarchal figures who are easily pushed into middlemen positions (union reps, supervisors and in many cases both), and can’t just be “used” as organic organisers.

The most promising workplace: Adelle

The most positive response we got from the organising drive was from workers of a local sandwich factory, where we were able to organise two meetings with over forty workers. We underestimated the amount of people working there – we had initially thought it was around 200, but it turned out to be anywhere between 600-800, which definitely made our job harder. At the first meeting we held, in a Somalian community hut in the dark ends of Southall, around twenty workers showed up. Around three quarters were women – although they had initially used a guy to contact us to set up the meeting. Most workers were from the production department (production operatives, staffers and quality controllers), one worker worked in hygiene/cleaning. Apart from two workers everyone had worked in the factory for more than two years. They were keen to talk about the problems

they faced, everything from being paid minimum wage to not getting regular hours. Even though they were permanent workers, they wouldn't know when they would finish work – it could be 4pm or 9pm, which made childcare and family responsibilities difficult to juggle. They had a long list of grievances that they were happy to talk about. Right at the end, as they were about to leave, they happened to mention a petition they had organised, with over 100 signatures, complaining about the lack of regular work hours and the impact on their family lives. On further questioning, we also discovered that they had all clocked out of an overtime shift together when the management wouldn't give them an extra break. We were really excited that there was some existing collectivity to build on here, but we had to make a big thing of it, it didn't seem like such a big deal to the workers involved.

When the second meeting came around, word had spread, and around forty workers showed up. This was more tricky. We did the union presentation, outlining our bottom-up perspective, and we didn't push people to join the union straightaway. It was more of an exercise in laying out all the options available to them – the pros and cons of going for recognition, what we'd need to do to go on strike, and what they could do in the meantime in their own departments to put pressure on management. We tried to give them some step-by-step proposals. We had also invited some cleaners from Ferrari who had just won the London Living Wage by going on strike with UVW. They were also migrant workers, who could only speak Spanish, and gave a small but rousing, motivational speech, which we translated. By the end of the meeting we'd decided to focus on break-times and being sent home unpaid as the main issues for the moment and put forward the proposal to first collect fifty signatures before handing in an official grievance.

Even though we tried to stress that we need to start from a collective position, people were still quite focused on their individual/departmental problems. We offered support for a group of maintenance workers who management had put on a lower pay scale. We wrote grievance letters and had one-on-one meetings with them. These were male workers who had been working at the company for a longer time and who could have provided more impetus for the wider organising process. We also wrote

health and safety complaint for a group of forklift drivers and went through the job description together with women from the quality control team, in order to find ways to resist management's attempt to enforce extra tasks. We didn't have an easy fix for them, and as a result, only around ten workers showed up for the third meeting.

By that time our own forces were overstretched, many friends from central London became tired of hours on public transport with no "quick success". Adeline workers reported that management were spreading rumours that people would be fired for joining the union and that people are generally sceptical about what can be achieved. Workers who had been in the UK for a longer time said that the "recently arrived" workers just want to keep their heads down and don't understand their rights. They wanted immediate results, if possible through pressing a "legal button" by someone who knows the law. Also, workers said that certain "key figures" had given up, which meant that other workers also got discouraged. This claim was based on people's experiences. For example, one of the most vocal women (from Lithuania) asked two other women (from Goa) to accompany her to a meeting with management about their petition. They initially agreed but then backed out at the last second.

These kinds of incidents substantiated the feeling of despondency that then arose, based on: a lack of trust that other workers would step up ("they say 'yeah yeah' but then they don't do anything"); that the time is not right, that things will become more hopeful after Brexit and there are less workers around to plug the gap; that people were too scared; that people don't have time to come to regular meetings etc. It was very unfortunate that we hadn't yet met the two Punjabi truck drivers, who we later helped and got to know as part of the solidarity network. They only got to attend one of the last factory visits, and when they did, they made a real difference: the fact that they were able to speak in Punjabi and were enthusiastic about our support, thereby giving us some legitimacy, had a positive impact. But by that time, things were already on the slide. It was a shame that after such a promising start, momentum had petered out.

Conclusions

From a quantitative point of view the organising campaign might seem unsuccessful: after six months of activity we managed to sign on only a dozen or so new members. In only two cases management made concessions to workers, for example paying an extra bonus in response to the stir the union created. Perhaps we should have chosen to focus on smaller workplaces where we could have had a greater impact with a smaller group of interested workers. Even though workers don't have the energy for long-running campaigns necessarily, at Adelle, perhaps we could have taken more time. Setting out all the options and putting the onus on workers from the outset might have seemed pretty overwhelming to workers who were just finding their feet. We could have chosen to have more one-on-one meetings with certain workers so that they felt better equipped for the tasks ahead.

On the up-side, we got deeper insights into the local conditions, we got to know many workers with whom we will stay in touch in future and we spread the word of a different kind of union amongst hundreds of working class people who might remember us when the time seems ripe for them. In this sense the organising and learning continues. We would therefore still encourage fellow workers to take a step across the border and try out similar things.

Workers' Inquiry 1

Chapter 7: Food in capitalism

“First comes food, then morality.”

Bert Brecht

The following two chapters are based on three and a half years of experience working and organising in two major workplaces in west London. The first was a multi-national food manufacturing factory, Bakkavor, that supplies most major UK supermarkets with ready-meals and fresh, chilled produce. The second was a Tesco supermarket distribution centre that delivers groceries – a fair share of which is produced in the aforementioned factory – to customers within a 30-mile radius in north-west London.

Our focus during the last few years was to build *independent* workers' power – through informal and “unofficial” actions, meetings and newsletters. After a year on the job we decided to become union reps in the existing unions to see what the scope was for independent organising within these established structures. A self-critical reflection of this effort is an essential part of this text. While working these jobs we continued with the solidarity network and newspaper.

In this workers' inquiry, we look at how we produce and consume one of the central goods in any social system: food. Like no other system before, capitalism has revolutionised food production. The fact that people “believe” in capitalism is not due to ideological brain-washing, but the fact that under capitalism we've seen people's life expectancy increase, population growth, more “disposable income” for the poor – all because of enormous productivity increases within agriculture and food production. As working class militants who want to change the world, we have to understand how these leaps in productivity have been achieved. For us, organising for workers' power should always entail the study of existing work organisation and technology – in order to discuss strategies to take them over and transform them into a force of emancipation. While it is important to point out the negative impacts of the so-called Green Revolution such as soil erosion due to fertilisers and pesticides or the toll on animals and humans in food industries, this does not relieve us from the task of understanding how things work. This is why we spend quite a few pages on empirical research before we get down to the nitty-gritty of our own experiences.

Apart from the big question of how we produce and distribute our food under capitalism, there are further political questions related to the emergence of big (grocery) retailers, such as Tesco or Walmart. In the public discourse the fact that Walmart has overtaken General Motors as the biggest corporation in the world seems to confirm certain political assumptions. These assumptions are shared within the left milieu, from liberals to left-communists, namely that we now live in a service, rather than an industrial society. Walmart and Tesco are seen as “retailers” and therefore part of the service sector and the fact that these retailers allegedly “dominate” or even “exploit” their manufacturing suppliers is seen as further evidence for a qualitative shift.

We think that the left’s understanding of what companies like Walmart or Tesco do, and how they relate to the so-called “productive sphere”, is limited. The rapid ascent of these companies is due to the fact that they’ve actually *industrialised the distribution and administrative system and thereby play a productive role*. The big supermarket chains are closely linked to food manufacturing and the agricultural sector, they invest in machinery and interfere in the production process. In most cases manufacturers don’t produce for short-term demand, but have long-term contracts for a mass output of products. Their industrial apparatus still requires a 24/7 mass production in order to be profitable. Manufacturers like Unilever, Nestle or Heinz, in turn, organise procurement and supply-chain management for the retailers. We will also see that large warehouses with complex machinery run into contradictions of both over-capacities and workers’ concentrated discontent, similar to those in manufacturing. Furthermore, to subsume retailers like Tesco or Walmart to the “service sector” underestimates their dependency on their function as banks, land and property owners and share capital.

The food industry is a prime example of the contradictions of how capital “understands” productivity. In capitalist terms it might be more productive (given the lower production costs) to ship shellfish from the Baltic states to be shelled in Morocco. Or to send four million live chickens from the Netherlands to Thailand to be killed, cut up, frozen, and shipped back to factories like Bakkavor in the UK to be used in ready-meals. This arrangement makes sense because it increases profits, despite the fact that it

creates more work and pollution for society. According to capitalist logic there's no paradox that nearly as much processed chicken meat is imported to the UK as chickens are exported. Large parts of the supply-chain exist because workers' wages are much lower in distant regions – and not mainly because of natural reasons such as climate zones. At the same time many on the left make the mistake and conclude from this that small-scale local production (small farming, artisan production etc.) would therefore be more productive once labour costs cease to be the decisive factor. Here we have to object and maintain that the socialisation of labour – the co-operation of millions – is an enormous productive potential without which any social emancipation becomes groundless.

When we look at modern warehousing and logistics within the grocery retail sector or assembly lines in food production we'll also touch upon the question of automation. From our experiences, we would question the other big ideological hype – after the hype of the “service economy” – that wants to make us believe that capital is about to replace manual labour within the next one or two decades. Automation is not an option when cheap labour is available and the general economic atmosphere is shaky. We will see that the highly mechanised warehouses are extremely vulnerable and that they operate on low profit margins.

We don't engage in this because we want to be the better economists – we're not. We see ourselves as part of a revolutionary working class effort to understand the contradictions of the enemy system and our own challenges to radically transform the productive apparatus – something that cannot be achieved through elections or nationalisations. If we think about a social revolution, we have to think about how integrated our food supply is globally and how the centres of food production will be focal points of a working class insurrection. We hope we haven't gotten too lost in the forest of retail statistics and annual corporate reports and that our political questions remain visible throughout the following part of the text.

A short history of food production and distribution

“By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground...” (Genesis, 3-19)

Today, grocery retail corporations, such as Walmart or Tesco, seem to dominate the world. You can fit the total population of the US into Walmart

stores. In the 2000s Walmart's sales revenue was bigger than the GDP of Argentina or Denmark and higher than the GDP of the Soviet Union during its heyday in the 1970s. By taking a historical viewpoint we can see that their growth is a result of social dynamics within an industrialised class society. There is a link between these retailers and workers' struggles within the wider productive sphere of society. The way we understand these relations will determine our political practice and whether we, for example, focus on changing consumer behaviour, promote small-scale co-operative models, or try to organise with workers in the bigger food supply-chains.

Large-scale commercial food production only emerged once millions of people were forced off their land and compelled to work for wages in order to buy what they needed to live. There lies the basic cynicism of the myth that capitalism is "demand driven" – people who have been robbed of the means to sustain themselves have no choice but to "demand" and buy back some of the stuff they've produced. There is a correlation between early industrialisation and urbanisation with the relatively early development of the retail sector. In the case of the Industrial Revolution in England, the retail sector lagged way behind manufacturing in terms of capital concentration and technology, as well as in terms of the relations between bosses and workers. England was indeed a "nation of shopkeepers".

While we see sophisticated industries developing in the early nineteenth century, food processing and distribution was still largely confined to artisanal forms (butchers, bakers etc.) and small market trading. By the 1850s urbanisation in England reached 50% but working class consumption levels were still pretty low. "Fixed stores" in contrast to market stalls spread slowly. During this period, the most concentrated form of trade involving investment into the most expensive machines at the time (ships), was attached to the colonial plantation system (tea, sugar, coffee etc.). Trade ships and port warehouses were the first industrial logistics systems and became centres of early workers' organisations. Victorian Britain also imported large amounts of wheat, eggs etc. from Europe. The emergence of the first vapour-compression refrigeration systems in the 1840s allowed naval transport of perishable food over longer distances. Where previously ships had to be stocked with expensive and short-lived harvested ice, the new industrial cooling system changed the supply-chain, making it possible,

for example, to import meat on a mass-scale from New Zealand to England in the 1880s.

In the late nineteenth century, the relationship between (largely male) shopworkers and bosses was still characterised by patriarchal domination. In 1891 around 450,000 shop assistants in England were employed under the so-called “living in” arrangement, which meant that their accommodation was organised through the shop bosses. This arrangement meant that bosses could extend their control over workers’ “private lives”, making it easier for them to enforce long working hours. One of the first struggles of the shopworkers unions in the 1890s targeted the “living-in” system, and one of the first strikes in 1902 demanded a sixty-hour week – at a time when ninety hours were the norm.

While the retail end of things was still struggling with the personal form of bosses’ domination, industrial food production gave birth to a new form of work organisation that would revolutionise the world: the assembly line. In the slaughterhouses of Chicago pigs were dismembered on a moving conveyor system. In 1890 it took about eight to ten hours for a skilled butcher and his assistant to slaughter and chop up a cow on a farm. With the new conveyor system it took just thirty-five minutes. This is where Henry Ford got his ideas from and he was later credited with the invention of “Fordist” assembly line production. In turn, the application of modern forms of production in vehicle manufacturing facilitated the so-called Third Agrarian Revolution from the 1920s onwards: large-scale mechanisation (tractors, etc.) and the use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides led to an unprecedented increase in yield rates and productivity.

Between 1920 and 1960 in the industrialised western countries, the share of the population who worked in agriculture fell from around 30% to less than 10%. The enormous output of food production, rapid urbanisation and the logistical challenge to supply a mass army in the first industrial and global war in 1914 created developmental leaps in the food distribution system. During the early twentieth century we see the proliferation of modern food packaging, such as canning, the flash-freezing method, and the installation of electrical refrigeration units onto railroad cars in the US. The latter transformed the geography of US agriculture: certain regions became specialised as the main producers of certain fruits or vegetables. So you

could transport grapes from California 1,000 miles north and send vegetables grown in colder climates down south on chilled rail cars. Certain cities, like Houston and other cities surrounded by desert land only exist because of these developments in long- distance food transport, which keep their populations fed.

The enormous expansion of food production and transportation during this period was not yet matched by a sophisticated food retail structure. Most stores were individually owned in the early twentieth century with very few grocery store chains. Companies like Kroger in the US, a chain which owned forty stores in 1902, was an exception. The first supermarkets as we know them today, based on self-service by customers, didn't open in the US until the 1930s. In the UK the Tesco founder, Jack Cohen, started selling groceries on a market stall in the East End of London in 1919. During that time the biggest distribution and retail structure was based on co-operative societies: through mass working class memberships, in particular in mining and industrial towns, these cooperatives could buy in bulk from bigger markets and undercut the small-trading middlemen. In 1939, over two-thirds of grocery retail in the UK was still transacted through small traders. These artisan traders (butchers, bakers etc.) and shop-owners found themselves squeezed between the threat of cheaper products from food manufacturers and upcoming chains like Tesco on one side and the economic downturn after the 1929 crisis. Hating the big corporations and fearing the slide into urban poverty themselves, these traders and artisans became the backbone of reaction and fascism during the 1930s.

By World War II Tesco owned around a hundred stores. This gave them the social clout to co-manage and profit from the state's rationing system: people could exchange their rationing cards for groceries in selected shops. Of course, Tesco was one of them. In 1940, Tesco expanded into food production by buying fruit farms and entered the stock market in 1947.

Before we look at the rise of food retailers and supermarkets in the 1950s and 1960s we should take a step back and consider the social context at the time. Two things were important for the leap from basic stalls to supermarkets. Firstly, working class people needed to have enough income to buy more than just the most basic staple foods, and secondly, working class reproduction had to be cut from other forms of subsistence, such as

small-scale gardening or collective canteens. In other words, the emergence of supermarkets went hand in hand with the fully wage-dependent, nuclear family structure as the main form of working class reproduction.

Workers weren't just given more money so they could spend it in supermarkets. The absolute consumption level of the working class had increased considerably since the beginning of the century. This was a result of industrial mass organising from the 1890s onwards that meant higher wages and more disposable income. Even more importantly, the revolutionary threat post World War I forced employers and the state to do something about workers' living standards. While paying higher wages was only a short-term fix, increasing productivity levels in food production was the long-term solution. This was the background of the so-called Third Agrarian Revolution. Staple working class foods like wheat and potatoes had become cheaper because of the effects of the increased use of tractors and fertilisers. Wheat flour and potatoes accounted for more than half of the energy intake at the time.

Capital reacted to the working class revolutionary threat primarily with material concessions. Another response was an ideological attack that promoted good citizenship. For the working class to be accepted as citizens they had to accept democratic rules, for example, participating in elections, rather than in riots and unruly strikes. "Citizenship" also included the ideal of an orderly, meaning male-dominated, household. The promotion of nuclear family values went hand in hand with the shifting of proletarian food preparation and consumption from street stalls, canteens and neighbourhood allotments into the private sphere. An increase of female employment after World War II in the UK meant that traditional food provisions, such as making pies or bread, or growing vegetables in the garden, became increasingly unfeasible.

Between 1951 and 1971 the number of married women who worked increased from 24% to 50%. In this situation, the purchase of processed and frozen food, or even a fridge (ownership of which went from 33% in 1962 to 95% by the end of the 1970s) became not a consumer choice, but a necessity. We can see the rapid growth of corporations like Nestle, Heinz and Unilever as dominant industrial food manufacturers. During the 1960s, supermarkets became the superficial expression of this social context. They

supplied food for a private form of working class reproduction under the time-limiting condition of female wage labour. Or to put it more plainly, in the words of a working class woman remembering the 1960s and the change from shops to supermarkets: *“It took a day and a half to get the shop in back then, and I had better things to do with my time. There’s nothing romantic about standing in line to watch a man cut a lump of butter off a block.”* During this period the social significance of “reproductive labour” diminished sharply and a lot of previously unpaid tasks of “housewives” were turned into industrial, waged labour. This social process, rather than “consumer demand”, explains the rapid growth of supermarkets.

By 1959 Tesco had 400 stores, 150 of them with self-service. Stores were still supplied directly by food distributors and manufacturers – at that point Tesco had only one warehouse. There was no modern cold-chain yet, as trucks started to be equipped with refrigeration units no earlier than the 1960s. Still, the larger retail chains continued to expand and their growing economic clout ended up clashing with the legal framework in the UK in the mid-1960s. Tesco, amongst other retailers, attacked the Resale Price Maintenance (RPM), which allowed manufacturers to determine the retail price of their products – which was primarily in the interest of smaller manufacturers who would otherwise have had problems keeping afloat. Labour supported the abolition of the RPM, which ended up happening in 1964/65. From then on, the law expressed what had been established de facto beforehand: the increased integration of large retailers and manufacturers and the emergence of modern distribution systems allowed the retail chains to cut prices. Companies like Sainsbury’s started to influence and finance modern poultry farms in the 1960s, Tesco started importing fruit from the continent. Tesco opened 51 shops in 1966 alone, and by 1969 Tesco employed 12,000 people. Tesco’s turnover increased from £1.3 million in 1943 to £360 million in 1973, selling to six million instead of 60,000 customers per week. The share of supermarkets in grocery sales in the UK increased from 27% in 1961 to 44% in 1971. With people in western countries spending on average half a year of their lives in supermarkets they also became a cultural expression of modern urban existence.

Supermarkets became the hinge between production and working class consumption in late capitalism. Large retailers finally matched the productive capacities of modern, industrial food production. They channel money from hundreds of suppliers and invest it back into the productive circuit, either in the form of investments into machinery (packing facilities of suppliers etc.) or into transport and storage facilities, primarily expensive cold-chain equipment. At this point, retailers cease to be mere trading capital, but fuse production and circulation. This process increased the productivity within food production and circulation considerably: in 1958 UK consumers paid on average 26% of their wages on food, and by 1998 this had come down to 10%.

From the 1970s onwards modern plastics revolutionised food production in the form of industrial greenhouses – their rapid growth on the production side mirrored the growth of supermarkets on the side of distribution. Yields in greenhouses are up to ten times higher than in traditional field production, which allowed a small and densely populated country like the Netherlands to become the world's second biggest food exporter, second only to the United States, which has 270 times its landmass. In the UK, local glasshouse complexes like Thanet Earth in Kent produce 400 million tomatoes per year. 10% of the entire national output of tomatoes, cucumbers and peppers are grown on only one square kilometre of space! The big European supermarket chains became intricately intertwined with these modern food complexes.

The 1970s and 1980s were the decades of centralisation within retail. This happened primarily through central buying from suppliers and the development of modern warehousing and regional distribution centres. With an increase in the number of suppliers and volumes, direct delivery to individual stores became increasingly inefficient. Trucks would be queuing up and blocking roads around the supermarkets. The establishment of central distribution centres took time: in the 1980s, around 50% of store volumes were delivered through regional distribution centres, which increased to 90% by 2000.

With transport and handling becoming more significant, retailers influenced the form in which suppliers manufactured their products, for example, leeks had to be cut to a certain size and fruit ripened only at a

certain time. The modern cucumber, all straight, is meant to maximise space in packaging boxes. Similar to the use of plastics for greenhouses, the development of plastic packaging, such as polyethylene terephthalate, which can be used for cooked food, became essential for its industrial distribution. Packaging machinery became the central technology between production and distribution. Packaging machines account for the biggest investments in food processing, and their higher degree of mechanisation create an accelerating force on the rest of the production process. At the same time, packaging has to be developed in a form that is conducive to the industrial forms of circulation, for example, the revolutionary brick- form of the aseptic Tetra Pak packaging, introduced in the 1960s and 70s. This allowed liquids to be stacked on pallets and be stored for longer periods. This created a multi-billion-pound corporation, which produced 188 billion units of its packaging in 2018.

During the 1980s information technologies (IT), such as computers or scanners, made the coordination between stores, distribution centres and suppliers easier. The introduction of barcodes started in the warehouse part of the business and was only later extended to check-out scanning. Check-out scanning started at Tesco in 1987, thirteen years after the first scanning of a sold item in a US supermarket. Barcodes required a significant standardisation between retailers and suppliers and international agreements across the entire retail sector.

By the 1990s around 250 Tesco stores were operating sales-based ordering systems – meaning that computer systems transmitted sales information directly to the central warehouses. This meant that a lot of managerial and administrative jobs became redundant. Another form of concentration happened in the form of hypermarkets or superstores. Smaller stores were replaced by bigger supermarkets on the edge of town, reflecting the growth of suburban life, car ownership amongst the working class and increasing property prices in city centres. A further level of centralisation concerned the relation between union and company. Tesco started negotiating central wage deals with the trade union USDAW by the late 1980s. The share of supermarkets in total grocery sales increased from 44% in 1971 to 60% in 1980 and 80% in 1990, controlled by the four biggest supermarket chains.

The 1990s accelerated the internationalisation of companies like Tesco. The collapse of the Eastern Bloc meant a free-for-all for western supermarkets to enter these emerging markets. Between 1993 and 1995 Tesco established a customer base of 1.3 million in Hungary alone, became Poland's biggest grocery retailer and a major retailer in Malaysia and Thailand. This happened not simply through takeovers of local stores, but through the ability to quickly provide new products diverted from the existing supply-chain and the financial power to invest into local cold-chain transport, warehousing and other productive assets. In Croatia supermarkets accounted for only 25% of grocery sales in 2000; this number more than doubled in only two years.

Supply-chains extended globally. "Exotic fruits" had only marginally entered western working class diets in the 1980s, but increased rapidly after Tesco started to invest in farms in Kenya and other places in the global south. During the first half of the 1980s farms in the UK supplied 78% of staple foods, fruit and vegetables consumed in the UK – in the following two decades this number would decline to around 50%. Or to take a longer view: while there were 100,000 hectares of fruit orchards in the UK in 1930 this came down to 16,000 by 2004. By the 2000s, around one ton of every 7.5 tons of goods flown into the UK was food. The supply-chain in the UK became more concentrated, so for example the number of abattoirs shrank from 1022 in 1985 to 380 in 2000; the number of fresh produce suppliers for Sainsbury's went from 800 in 1987 to 80 in 2000.

At this point in time, the supermarket chains entered the social spotlight as the "baddies". They were accused of forming monopolies to "exploit" the farmers, manufacturers, and customers. It's true that in terms of financial turnover supermarkets grew much more rapidly than potato growers or ready-meal manufacturers. But this wasn't due to some in-built drive for social domination. Farmers, manufacturers and retailers represent different phases or functions within the process to make money with food. If you invest in field-based farming the returns are slower, as the "natural cycle" of growing food can only be sped up to a certain degree, for example, through fertilisers. The risk of "natural calamity" are higher. This is one reason why field-based farms tend to be smaller economic units.

Greenhouse growers and meat-producers tend to be bigger, as there is a closer relationship between higher investment levels and higher outputs. In turn, food processing and food manufacturing requires higher levels of investment: the more you invest in machinery and people the quicker you can produce. This is why food manufacturers tend to be bigger companies than farms. To build a supermarket chain requires large amounts of investment into properties and logistics infrastructure. The challenge in retail is to move the largest amounts of goods in the shortest period of time possible. This is what makes them grow faster in terms of total turnover than the manufacturers. The supermarkets act as a funnel of money from various suppliers, which they rotate in the circulation of goods and then invest parts of it back – by using the force of competition they even-out profit margins between different suppliers. The state intervenes and tries to even-out the internal contradictions – 40% of the EU’s total budget goes into farm subsidies.

The “neoliberal” decade of the 1990s allowed retailers such as Tesco to diversify into other sectors, such as mobile telecommunication and banking and mortgage finance – which had previously been subjected to stricter regulations. Retailers in the UK became large property dealers, taking advantage of their land ownership status during the growth of the real estate bubble. Tesco benefitted from the deregulation of opening times in 1994 and hired one of Tony Blair’s closest advisers after New Labour came into power. Tesco reflected the spirit of the decade by joining the telecommunication and real estate bubble on one side and starting various community charity schemes and work programmes for the unemployed on the other. In 1997 Tesco had an annual turnover of £14 billion. From the 2000s till today we have seen further internationalisation and concentration processes, for example, the takeover of ASDA (one of the big four UK chains) by Walmart (by then the world’s largest corporation) or strategic supply-chain alliances between Tesco and Carrefour in France. The process of integration between production and distribution accelerated, leading to retailers like Tesco giving major food processors like Nestle or Unilever the contract to manage the supply and store presentation of all products related to, for example, post-natal care, such as nappies, baby creams, baby food etc. This means that Nestle or Unilever make total profit calculations and

co-manage which other suppliers are chosen and to what conditions. At the same time, the sales of so-called “own brand” products have increased considerably to around half of all sales. Most manufacturers essentially run the same product lines for a number of different retail chains and then just stick different labels onto the finished product. Volumes go up and down depending on sales but the contract to supply the product can last up to three years.

With the further development of IT, platform technology and GPS technology in the 2000s we see retailers like Amazon emerge. Online food sales and home delivery facilitates the general trend towards centralisation and concentration, but poses enormous logistical challenges as, for example, fresh food requires certain timings, temperatures and handling methods. No wonder that the bust of the online grocery delivery company WebVan became the most prominent case of the dot.com-crash in the early 2000s. Online grocery retailers like Ocado operate as tech-companies that “make money” primarily through the increase of their share-market value by boasting about their investments in warehouse automation technology, but they don’t actually create profits as food distribution companies. Given the enormous expansion of supply-chains, certain new technologies are very expensive to introduce as they require implementation across the entire sector. For example, in the early 2000s, Walmart had big plans to attach radio-frequency identification (RFID) tags to pallets and goods throughout its global distribution centres – which would basically make barcode scanning obsolete. The project was abandoned after a breakdown in retailer-supplier relations and the high cost of the initiative.

The 2008 crisis demonstrated the financial fragility of the whole structure, as companies like Woolworths went bust and retailers cut jobs. In the US retail sector, 1.2 million jobs disappeared during the crisis year of 2008/2009, equating to one in seven of all retail jobs. The retail crisis threatened to fuse with the real estate crash: retailers are large and heavily indebted property owners and the mass closures of stores and shopping malls threatened to give the real estate crisis a whole new spin. Still, the bubble continues to grow: in June 2019 the investment company Blackstone Group paid \$18.7 billion to buy a network of US warehouses from GLP, a Singapore based corporation – the largest private real estate transaction in

history. Companies like Tesco slowly try to extricate themselves from the major risks, for example, Tesco had to close down its company pension scheme in 2015 in order to slow down the growth of company debt. In 2018 Tesco Bank decided to stop offering mortgages as part of their customer service, concentrating on (similarly shaky) consumer credits. Still, the intertwinement of big retail, the share market, the real-estate bubble and credit/debt market is an essential part of the business and probably poses a bigger risk to people's food supply than a "no-deal Brexit".

The 2000s have seen the sharpening of a contradiction: the production and distribution of food became more centralised and concentrated in a shrinking amount of companies, whereas the consumption of food became more individualised. The percentage of unionised workplaces with proper canteens has declined from 88% in 1995 to 47% in 2015; the amount of money spent on takeaway home deliveries increased by 73% between 2008 and 2018; home deliveries for grocery shopping was the only booming segment during that period. The individualisation of consumption creates enormous amounts of extra-work, which relies on a growing low-waged sector, such as delivery drivers. The return of such levels of "personal services" is a sign of increasing social inequality and decadence of the system.

Individual home deliveries also contribute significantly to environmental damage through excess packaging, for example, the cardboard used for 165 billion parcels delivered in the US per year, of which Amazon alone delivers half, cost us one billion trees. In the UK the number of miles travelled by home delivery vans increased by 56% between 2000 and 2018. Outside of the urban centres huge warehouse complexes quickly run into over-capacities, while the streets of the metropolis are clogged up with vans, turning "the last mile" of home delivery into an unaffordable bottleneck, forcing high-tech companies such as Ocado or Deliveroo to resort to pre-industrial forms of delivery on push bikes or push carts. Local residents, particularly in affluent areas where companies like Ocado deliver to most, are starting to organise protests against inner city warehouses and the increase in truck traffic in their backyard.

Still, instead of the "big corporation bogeyman", we see today's situation as more promising. Instead of being dominated by a large

intermediate class of small traders, farmers and producers and their conservative political lobby, food production and distribution depends on thousands of workers who are globally connected and facing the same diminishing terms and conditions. Tesco manages to distribute food to 50 million people a week by employing only around 450,000 people, many of who are not directly involved in material distribution, but deal instead with the financial circulation and commodity aspect (advertisement and legal departments etc.) or the disciplining of workers. The leftist and environmental criticism of supermarkets fails to understand the contradictory nature of the capitalist centralisation and concentration process. They criticise supermarkets for food waste, but fail to see that in countries like India where no modern cold-chain system is in place each year around a third of food harvests go to waste. They criticise the environmental damage of large-scale farming, but don't mention that the biggest user of fertilisers and pesticides are small farmers who are desperate to compete on the market.

Recent workers struggles, in particular in the retail distribution centres, global fast-food chains and bigger food manufacturers, demonstrate the potential for the working class to make use of the centralisation process in order to build their own social power and create a social and environmental alternative.

Food production: from the field to the processing plants

Over the last four years, some of us worked at Bakkavor, a major ready-meal and chilled food manufacturing company. Food is one of the most intimate things in human life – we need to eat daily, food can make us strong or sick, eating is social, sensual and cultural. Despite all this we don't think much about how our food is produced, at least not much beyond the “organic” label. Food production and how it is organised is at the core of capitalism. The enormous productivity increase in agriculture freed millions of people to work in other sectors. Technological leaps in food preservation changed geographies, enabled cities to grow in deserts and made industrial warfare possible. Industrial food preparation, ready-meals and fast-food helped to transform the traditional roles in working class families. Before we have a detailed look at the working conditions and discontent in the food factory, let's follow an imaginary potato or an

innocent courgette on its journey from the field to one of our ready-meal assembly lines.

Farming

In the UK, agriculture, although so fundamental for society, actually employs a relatively small number of people, around 500,000 – most of them as seasonal labour. Some 41,000 farms, around 14% of the total, are larger than 100 hectares and account for over 65% of the agricultural area. Most farms that engage in field production tend to be relatively small enterprises, unless we speak of bigger plantation economies in the Global South. They are smaller because of the peculiar nature of agricultural production: we can throw a lot of fertilisers and GPS-controlled machinery onto the soil, but this will only speed up the growing process of plants to a certain degree. There is no quick return of capital investments. Here we can see a difference between field-based production and greenhouse farming or industrial animal rearing, which is dominated by bigger corporations. This is because their production is less dependent on seasons, compared to growing things in fields.

These relatively small farming units, however, are embedded in a global structure. On the input side they depend on global agro-chemical corporations, such as Bayer or Monsanto, and a few global manufacturers of farming machinery. The buyers of farming products tend to be large international corporations too, such as Nestle or Walmart. Given this picture of small field farmers on one side and multinationals on the other, many on the left jump to the conclusion that we should defend the small farmers against the big, hungry wolves. But we do not have romantic ideas of small-scale farms. The production process on the fields depends nearly everywhere – be it in India, the US or Europe – on the brutal exploitation of seasonal migrant labour, often mediated through mafia- type or paramilitary structures. In places like Almeria in southern Spain and in the outskirts of Foggia in Italy, the hours are long, temperatures can go up to 50 degrees and state minimum wages are not paid. Workers were getting as little as 4€/hr in one farm in Nijar in Almeria up until they went on strike (and won) in 2019. Around Foggia, where giant slums house workers from sub-Saharan Africa, armed police were called in to get them back to work.

In major producing regions in Spain or Italy, but also in the UK, the labour is managed by the states' immigration regime. This might happen through special temporary visas such as those now being offered to workers

from Ukraine to come and work in the UK after the EU supply is dwindling. This can happen through direct recruitment from regional detention or “welcome” centres for refugees, like in the south of Italy. This can happen through the explicit decision of the state to let enough migrants enter “illegally” in order to satisfy the labour demand of the sector, such as in the US. The state also intervenes through farming subsidies. The EU pays £50 billion a year to farmers, which is 40% of the total budget. But even with governments splashing out that kind of money, this can only paper over the cracks of the wider contradictions the farming sector is riddled with.

Around 53% of food consumed in the UK is produced locally, the rest is imported. The agrarian sector contributes only a small share to GDP, but it is significant for the wider economy, as low wage levels depend on cheap food, which in turn depends on increased productivity levels in food production. These productivity levels are achieved by relatively bigger agrarian enterprises, which is why over 80% of all EU Common Agricultural Policy money goes to just 20% of farms. State subsidies and trade of agricultural products are one of the major points of contention within global structures, such as the WTO and will be at the heart of any future UK post-Brexit deals. National governmental regulation of the sector is difficult, as both inputs (tractors, pesticides, seeds etc.) and outputs in the form of exports depend on global price developments.

Politically, governmental influence over the farming sector is limited by class relations. Farmers themselves are a conservative social force in many countries, but this doesn't explain why we haven't seen large-scale nationalisation and industrialisation of farming or large-scale direct takeovers by multi-national corporations, unlike in food processing and manufacturing. The specific material conditions of farm production (seasonal, limited chances of increasing turnovers, natural challenges regarding mechanisation etc.) requires a labour-intensive and repressive regime. The farming regime has to be able to squeeze out a maximum of labour during the short seasons and get rid of workers immediately afterwards. Harvest labour accounts for around 40% of the cost of goods sold. It is clear then why here is such a pressure to keep wages for agricultural labourers so low. The Eastern Bloc, with its formerly state-

owned industrial farming enterprises, have demonstrated what happens once agriculture workers become permanent industrial workers: with increased workers' power they develop attitudes and entitlements, profitability and productivity decreases. The survival of relatively smaller farming businesses has to be seen as a political price to pay to keep an agrarian workforce in constant flux and precarity. Given this wider context, even in a "localised" industry, such as agriculture, we can see the limits of (social democratic) strategies that rely on nationalisation or national regulation.

All of these issues coalesce to make food production an excellent example of how capitalist forces combine to the worst effects. Capitalist agriculture is at the centre of the systemic crisis: many farmers, in particular smaller farmers in the global south, are trapped in a cycle of debt, directly linked to the global financial circuit; the sector depends heavily on global oil production and its economic and political instabilities; labour supply is increasingly unreliable both due to the unpredictable changes of the international migration regime, but also due to working class aspirations (whoever can find a different job won't work on the fields and some workers who find themselves stuck in these jobs are beginning to fight back). Then there's soil erosion, and don't forget environmental degradation, with the death of insects and failing pollination, extreme weather events and general climate change all demonstrating the limits of extensive capitalist farming. The stakes are high. The future of the planet and our food supply is inextricably linked to big money and state interests. So it's no wonder that any collective resistance by workers in this sector elicits a strong and repressive response. Revolutionaries have to support workers' struggles along the supply-chain and develop new knowledge of agricultural production, which neither depends on hard toil, nor on environmental destruction.

In relation to the last point, we have tried to connect struggles that were happening between factory workers in west London and farm labourers in southern Spain – who supply lots of the vegetables to this factory. Both groups of workers were engaged in struggles, the first in a pay campaign for £1/hr more, the others went on strike for the minimum wage. A comrade who supported the struggles in Almeria was outside the factory in west

London and organised a solidarity message to be sent – from one part of the supply-chain to the other. It was important for workers to be aware of the commonality of their situations (all bosses say they have no money to pay higher wages), and that both were demanding more. The idea would be to publicise these links amongst workers at a grassroots level so that if organisation within these workplaces ever got strong enough, solidarity actions could mean more than just a solidarity message.

Farm workers' struggles are particularly difficult, not just because of the repression they face, but the fact that the organisation of the industrial process makes a mass movement necessary from the beginning. For example, companies like Unilever source from over 100,000 farmers because they are individually too small to supply all of a big client's needs. These farms can often only compete on the market if they come together with other farmers, for example in co-operatives. In order to have an impact on such a supply-chain, agricultural labourers in one farm would need to coordinate with labourers at all the different farms within the co-operative, which can be tricky when you work 16-hours a day, are exhausted, and do not have access to the information about where those other farms are. These issues would need to be addressed if a movement from this sector were to have real muscle.

This is the social context in which our imaginary potato or innocent courgette is plucked out of the earth or off its plant. What happens next?

Farms don't just grow food these days. As we move up the supply-chain, we see that the "value-added" component makes more money for companies. To put it another way, you make more money selling a ready-meal than selling the original ingredients on their own. This is why many farmers have branched out into some kind of processing, which immediately adds value to the product. Here is an interesting description we came across about Spalding in Lincolnshire, which, not coincidentally, is where the headquarters of Bakkavor, the ready-meal factory where some of us worked, is based:

“Driving along the road from Boston to Spalding, I had no trouble believing that this was the brassica capital of the UK, if not the world. It felt like being on a boat on a dark green ocean. On either side of the road lay

vast tracts of land, seemingly stretching to the horizon, undulating with neat, green waves of leafy crops: sprouts, broccoli and cabbage. (...)

Pretty much the only things that broke up this landscape were sprawling clusters of glasshouses, filled with indoor crops like tomatoes or the odd field- scale crop trial. Lincolnshire is prime horticultural research-and-development territory. Some of these are trials of genetically modified crops (...)

This fen country, traditionally known as blackland, has rich peaty soil, known as Grade I agricultural land. (...) The general flatness of the land helps too. It lends itself to big fields that can be laser levelled, a practice which farmers tell me result in fewer rejections or 'pack-outs' by supermarkets. These nice big fields allow more mechanisation, the use of machines to cut and pick vegetables – work previously done by hand. Everything seemed big here, not just the fields.

As I approached Spalding from the north, the oceans of brassicas gave way to a sea of windowless industrial warehouses whose grey shimmery roofs shone out from far off, making Spalding look more like a sprawling industrial estate than a pleasant market town. (...) Nowadays, these warehouses are home to a number of companies more or less dedicated to supplying our supermarkets. The business has gone way beyond just hi-tech packing: now the companies' facilities include sophisticated chilled distribution, nitrogen generators for 'controlled atmosphere' storage, pre-pack equipment, grading machines, water flotation tanks, ripening rooms, chill blasting and rack storage. Suppliers can no longer afford to do only one thing well. To be sure of keeping supermarket business and remain on the shrinking list of supermarket suppliers, they have to add value. So if these warehouses are not HQ for the production of those hauntingly familiar garlic baguettes, or herbs in pots, of puffed-up-salad bags and stir-fry kits, they are producing that familiar coleslaw, those dips that look and taste oddly familiar from chain to chain, pizzas, ready-meals, soups, sauces, deli-style salads or even sushi. If you see a warehouse-factory around Spalding that is not churning out prepared, chilled food or cut flowers, or bottling, freezing or canning food for supermarkets, there is an odds-on chance that it is dedicated to providing packaging for them, or labels, or machinery; or that it is maintaining equipment or servicing trucks that

transport the whole shooting match, Flick through the local business listings for Spalding and will marvel at how a small fenland town has become a strategic nerve centre for supermarkets' supply.

These companies sell themselves in mission statements that stress their ability to give large retailers an all-year round supply of 'innovative' products. These are made possible by their alliances with large, powerful agricultural trading consortia abroad. They pull product in from Spain, Holland, Israel, New Zealand and South Africa to be processed in their state-of-the-art factories. (...) Effectively, Spalding has become a 365-days-a-year one-stop shop for supermarkets, a huge infrastructure underpinning a supermarket-dedicated supply-chain that has less and less to do with anything local. (...) Curiously, Spalding is the place where supermarket electronic bar codes made their debut back in 1977 – an event that heralded their connection with each other.”

(“Shopped” – J. Blythman)

There are a few of these types of agro-industrial concentrations in the UK. We have already mentioned Thanet Earth in Kent, which is largely run by Dutch agro-businesses. There are about 800 animal rearing “mega-farms” in the UK, farms with over 100,000 chicken or 2,500 pigs. The majority of Britain’s poultry meat is produced by a handful of large companies including Faccenda, Moy Park, Cargill, 2 Sisters and Banham Poultry. As intensive farms have spread, small farms have closed down. According to the Department of Environment and Rural Affairs, about 4,000 farms closed between 2010 and 2016, of which three quarters were in the smallest category (less than 20 hectares of land). The number of big farms – those with more than 100 hectares – remained constant.

Let’s take one such farm called Langmead Farms, based in west Sussex since 1881. Like most (cereal) farms, it started off as a family enterprise. They now own 2700 hectares of land, having expanded into Suffolk and Perthshire in Scotland. In the 1950s they had the biggest dairy herd in Europe. In the 1980s they were all about wheat. Then, they started producing iceberg lettuce for Tesco. The 90s saw them get into bagged salads and prepared fruit. Fast forward to the 2000s and things really exploded: they not only branched out into watercress, juices and dips, potted plants and fresh cut flowers, they invested in bakeries, set up a

property investment company and set up operations in America. In 2015 they built the first automated glasshouse in the UK which produces 5 million pots of herbs a year. By 2020 they have invested into solar power and are now selling electricity to the National Grid. They have built their own grain store designed to intake, process and store 150 tonnes of grain per hour. They are acquiring land for, and building, supermarkets as well as residential properties for rent. Neither do they confine themselves to the UK. They also source garlic from China, spring onions from Egypt and lemons from Argentina. They manage the whole process from seed to shelf so not only do they grow food, they also are involved in processing and marketing. They own farm and production facilities in the UK, Spain, Eastern Europe, USA and South Africa. And they (through their farmer suppliers) supply to the supermarkets and manufacturers like Bakkavor. Now that's what we call a concentration process!

Food processing – The Cinderella of manufacturing

The food and drink industry is the UK's largest manufacturing sector, accounting for 17% of the total UK manufacturing turnover, contributing £28.2bn to the economy annually and employing 400,000 people. And while a lot of fruit and veg is imported, the shelf life of freshly prepared products (FPP) means that outsourcing this work overseas is not possible. All the FPP found in the chilled section of our supermarkets comes from UK factories.

Unlike manufacturing in general, the food manufacturing sector is growing. Over the next few years, it will need 140,000 new recruits to meet projected rises in population and subsequent food demand. Despite some machinery (mainly packaging machines) and lots of big tools (for example, assembly lines, conveyors, mixers, fryers and industrial ovens), it is a very labour-intensive industry. So far, wages in the sector have been low enough (in part due to the migrant workforce) to keep large-scale automation and redundancies at bay. The type of product being produced is also an important factor: a Coca Cola bottling plant can be automated much easier than a ready-meal factory that makes hundreds of different types of products. Pay varies according to supply of labour, workers' struggle, and skill levels, which explains why some food factory workers get minimum

wage and others, like the Polish butchers at the Cranswick meat processing unit get £13 an hour.

After our imaginary potato or courgette has been (wo)man-handled by migrant harvest workers, it is sent on its onward journey.

This journey might be organised by one and the same company. One of many companies that integrate farming, transport, processing and packaging is Wealmoor, here in west London. Wealmoor runs a packaging plant in Greenford, next to the Sainsbury's and Tesco warehouses where some of us worked. Wealmoor is a good example of how intertwined the farming, processing and distribution of food has become on a global level. The company supplies both imported and locally grown fruit and vegetables to all the major supermarkets. Most of the food comes via Heathrow airport in containers stored in passenger machines, from Egypt, Kenya, Peru, India and other places.

Wealmoor is a medium sized company, with an annual sales turnover of around £166 million. The company started as fruit exporters in Kenya in the 1960s and with the migration of the owner to the UK in the 1970s, they established their global base here. The company has their own land and plantations in India and Africa and contracts with 14,000 small farmers around the globe. The company owns Radville Farms Ltd., which accounts for 75% of all food exports from Gambia and employs up to 4,000 people. The company encourages local farmers to plant mango trees for export, as part of a World Bank sponsored development programme. Radville Farms Ltd. exports 1,500 tons of vegetables and 700 tons of mangoes annually. In 2018 Wealmoor bought one of Peru's biggest producer of avocados and mangoes, Sunshine Export SAC. A labour NGO reported on the working condition on the plantations:

“At the Sunshine packing factory in the peak period of January and February the labourers work every day of the week with an average of 14 hours a day... workers have to stay in the factory until all the mangos for the shipment have been processed. Workers get only three months temporary contracts, although they work longer. In this way workers don't get health insurance and other benefits they would be entitled to.” (somo.nl)

In the UK Wealmoor has contracts with various farmers. The company sources broccoli from AS Greens and supported the farming company with

packaging machinery and business channels with Waitrose, one of the major supermarket chains. Wealmoor owns shares in Herb Fresh Ltd. and helped the herb producer financially during a loss-making period.

We can see that the company is more than just a “trading enterprise”; they are plantation and farm owners, political brokers, and provide farming businesses with know-how regarding international quality standards, finance, processing technology and so on. Wealmoor runs two packaging plants in the UK, employing around 800 workers in the production departments and 150 administration staff. One of their plants in Atherstone burnt down in 2007. Four firemen were killed in the blaze and there were allegations that fire safety had been neglected.

We have kept in touch with the situation at Wealmoor in Greenford since 2014. Some friends and family members have been working at Wealmoor over the last few years, on packaging lines, loading stations or as self-employed truck drivers.

“There are around 300 workers in total, on two shifts. Most of them are women from Goa, Sri Lanka or Gujarat. The company pays the minimum, but demands the maximum. We often worked twelve, thirteen, fourteen hours a day, till all packaging for the day was done. The unloading work is tough because the airline containers are pretty low in height. You have to lift out 30 kilo cardboard boxes of baby-corn without being able to stand upright. Muscles are cold from the chilled environment. Once you’re out there is a vacuum crane, but attaching the boxes to the crane and lifting them overhead is dangerous. The work on the four – five sorting lines is tough, too. You have to stand in one spot for hours and hours, the line running in front of you. We have to cut bad parts from large ginger roots which arrived from China, for example. We have to cut them in smaller pieces, then weigh them and prepare them for packaging. The same happens with organic asparagus from Egypt or other places. The workers on the lines do productive work, in terms of cutting to size, quality and packaging work. Most of the workers hardly speak English, which contributes to the brutal tone from management. Most of the lower managers are from Sri Lanka, there is favouritism. Before you start work in the pack-house you get a one hour unpaid ‘induction’ – consisting of a talk about work discipline. The actual health and safety induction is little more

than a walk around the pack-house and being told to wash your hands before entering. The entire 'health and safety' induction takes less than ten minutes. Many workers stay at Wealmoor for years, as they are not confident enough to find a better job. The company pays the minimum to workers, but the directors are on £400,000 plus."

Out of all the workers we distributed our newspaper to, Wealmoor workers seemed the most downtrodden. They almost never stopped and seemed frightened to even take a paper. Like most drivers, the father of a comrade works there as a self-employed lorry driver because they earn a higher shift rate than if they were permanent. There is always competition for shifts as new agency drivers are continually taken on. As well as supermarkets, they deliver to some night markets, in Waterloo, Spitalfields and Hayes probably for restaurants and local retail outlets. Tensions and complaints arise because of disorganisation of lorries being loaded, as well as the state of the lorries. For such a large company, it's important to see that they sometimes can't even get the basics right. Drivers, who have more job mobility and options, tend to leave after a while rather than stick around and fight to improve things.

The GMB tried to organise workers, but gave up after distributing one leaflet. We also tried; as part of the IWW organising drive we went to the plant several times with translated leaflets and offered to support workers. There was a defeated atmosphere. We received two calls from workers who needed help with holiday applications, but we didn't manage to make contact with a group inside that wanted to take the organising further.

Ready-meal production

Our potato or courgette might end up with other brothers and sisters in a sweaty plastic bag on a Tesco shelf. But it might have the privilege of further processing into a ready-meal.

People in Britain buy around 3.5 million ready-meals a day, which easily makes it the leading ready-meals market in Europe. Working hours are some of the longest in Europe, which perhaps explains the demand. It's an industry worth £4.7 billion in the UK. Ready-meals were an American invention. In 1953, the US food company, Swanson, had a disappointing Thanksgiving period and found themselves with huge stocks of leftover turkey that needed using up. With the help of the onset of mass food

production methods, a creative solution to this familiar crisis of overproduction was found: using the leftovers in a ready-meal. The aluminium trays were copied from airline food packaging and were marketed as TV dinners. At the same time, it alleviated some of women's kitchen burdens as around a third of women were in the labour force at the time.

In the UK, ready-meals didn't become popular until the 70's, after more households had freezers. In 1959, as Britain was bouncing its way back to prosperity after WWII, only 13% of homes had a fridge compared with 96% in America. By the 70s though, 58% of British households had a fridge and around a third had a freezer. This rose to over half of British households by 1980. Products began to be developed for household freezer storage, things like Findus Crispy Pancakes, fishfingers, Arctic Rolls and Viennettas. The changing roles of women also played a key part. The number of women working full-time in the workforce in 1975 had risen to 57% so time-saving was a key factor in the popularity of these kinds of products. This facilitated the decreasing stigma of not cooking home-made meals from scratch. Rising divorce rates meant more single men having to cook for themselves, a niche that the ready-meal market was happy to exploit. However, this is also one of the reasons ready-meals did start getting connotations with lonely sad-sacks, eating alone out of their laps. Their quality too came to be regarded as questionable.

The development of a more sophisticated cold-chain and distribution supply-chains fuelled the rise of chilled ready-meals, improving taste and quality. These developments gradually extended the life of the product from three or four days to seven or eight days, making it more practical to move it through the warehouses and the stores, still giving it three or four days in the customer's fridge. Food packaging has also evolved into something that plays an active role in food quality, for example, blocking oxygen and moisture, retaining flavours, or providing antimicrobials to the surface of the food. Without intensive poultry farming, automated processing, global cold-chains, the right kind of plastics and packaging materials that keep food cool, as well as being able to handle microwaves and hot ovens, we wouldn't get our fancy aubergine and our innocent courgette parmigiano with a herb crust smothered in a tomato and paprika sauce.

We can see why food manufacturing companies, such as Unilever, Nestle or even Bakkavor tend to be bigger than farming businesses: they need significant amounts of investment into production machinery and supply-chains. This contributes to the tendency of concentration. A quarter of all the UK's pre-packed sandwiches comes from one supplier. And 85% of all bread consumed is sold in supermarkets, with just two bakeries having 55% share of the market. Half of Sainsbury's sales come from just 100 suppliers, and where in 1987 they had 800 fresh produce suppliers by 2000 it was just 80. Unilever alone sources products from 100,000 farming businesses and employs 97,000 people in its global logistics network. Becoming bigger and more diverse also mitigates against contract or product losses, which can be more easily compensated in other areas of the business.

The UK ready-meal industry relies heavily on imported ingredients. The crashing pound (which has meant good times for exporters of British foodstuffs) has meant rising material costs for companies, and therefore, less profits than before. Post-Brexit trade rules and export tariffs will likely impact on the business. Even as we write this, during pre-Brexit Armageddon, food prices are at their highest level of inflation in almost six years. The weather too has played its part, as ingredients sourced from the fields in places like Lincolnshire have been battered by The Beast from The East's biting winds and snow, as well as intermittent flooding and the odd heatwave. Onions, potatoes and cabbage prices have skyrocketed, so many companies have decided to increase their carbon footprint and source these items from further afield. Bakkavor started getting some of their onions all the way from Poland and China instead.

As well as Brexit, rising food costs, labour shortages, and the weather, the industry has to contend with supply-chain problems. These weaknesses in the supply-chain can be "natural" (such as the apparently global vine leaves shortage in 2018 or the blue tongue virus in sheep), man-made (such as strikes by workers in the greenhouses in southern Spain or workers working-to-rule in packaging plants like Smurfitt Kappa in Northampton in 2015) or technical.

For proof of the disruptive effects of a logistics fuck-up, we only need to look at what happened to KFC in February 2018. 646 KFC outlets were

forced to close because they didn't get their chicken delivered. DHL, newly contracted to deliver the chicken to 850 stores in the UK, couldn't get their (chicken)shit together! They used just one warehouse instead of the six used by the previous logistics company, Bidvest. DHL won the KFC contract by offering the lowest possible costs, but this backfired spectacularly as KFC ended up losing millions because of their supply-chain bottleneck.

Shortly after, in June 2018, the UK drinks and chicken industry was shaken by another supply-chain problem – this time a European-wide shortage of carbon dioxide. Carbon dioxide is a by-product of the production of ammonia used in fertiliser production and there are only a few factories in Europe that process the gas. Unfortunately, most of them were in an uncoordinated shut-down for maintenance at the same time. Carbon dioxide is used to create the fizz in beer, cider and soft drinks, and is used in food packaging to extend the shelf life of salads, fresh meat and poultry. The gas is also used to stun pigs and chickens before slaughter. Finally it is needed to produce dry ice, another product used extensively in the food industry to help keep things chilled in transit. In the UK bottling plants had to close down and the chicken farms were running around like, er, headless chickens.

Let's take Bakkavor as an example where we can see the supply-chain scope, dependencies and risks. Bakkavor sources 5,000 products from around the world to make its supermarket own-brand ready-meals, desserts and salads. They not only make the food, they have their own distribution centres from which third-party logistics companies transport the food to their clients, namely the big supermarkets. The relationship between companies like Bakkavor and the supermarket chains is a mutually dependent one. Retailers like Tesco or M&S have the choice of various suppliers to make their products and this adds to the continuing sense of competition amongst suppliers who are all vying for the same business. It is not unusual for supermarkets to change supplier for a particular product if they feel they can get a better deal somewhere else. This is what happened when Bakkavor Meals London lost the Tesco mash contract, worth £32 million – 16% of their turnover, which put jobs at risk. At the same time, supermarkets try to “develop” their suppliers, granting them investments and longer-term contracts.

At one of Bakkavor's factories we made around 150 different products. You can imagine all the different ingredients we needed – frozen, ambient and chilled goods, not to mention all the packaging and sleeves and labels. 47% of the total food consumed in the UK is imported, although certain products are 100% reliant on imports such as olives or exotic fruits. A lot of the fresh vegetables Bakkavor buys for its ready-meals come from the Netherlands (for example, tomatoes, mushrooms), UK (cauliflower, spring onions, red chillis) or southern Spain (for example, courgettes, aubergines). The supply-chain even reaches to Kenya for things like beans and Costa Rica for the frozen pineapple. Some of the meat comes from the UK, from companies like 2Sisters who made headlines in 2018 for their unsafe hygienic practices and wrong labelling of chicken. Most of the chicken and pork though comes already cut into bite-sized chunks, frozen, from Hungary and Thailand. This is probably because fresh meat carries much lower profit margins (10%) than processed meat (43%). The frozen vegetables largely come from China, also cut-up and ready to use (for example, diced onions, cauliflower florets, edamame beans). The fact that so much of this stuff comes from so far away shows how cheap it has become to transport goods from one part of the world to another. It also massively increases the chances of breaches in the supply-chain.

Things get more worrying when we think about how certain ingredients are used across many different ready-meals. If they become contaminated, the effects across the food chain are far-reaching. This was the case with chilli powder contaminated with the cancer causing industrial red food dye called Sudan I. Back in 2005, hundreds of products were recalled because they all contained Worcester sauce, which was found to have been contaminated with the dye. Little did we know that this product was so ubiquitous across the food industry. This was the biggest product recall in history and the second biggest scare after BSE. There are countless other examples. In April 2017, the UK – incidentally the hoomous capital of Europe – was hit with a “hoomous crisis” that saw shelves emptied across the supermarkets because of a metallic taste in the hoomous produced at Bakkavor. A few of us were working at Bakkavor at the time, but we didn't have anything to do with this. The case was highlighted, not only because the middle class started panicking at the thought of their fridge staple

becoming scarce, but because it shone a light on the supply-chain of mass production, namely that sole suppliers can be responsible for one mass product across the supermarket chains.

These “scandals” show how integrated the production is globally – and they also show the potential power of workers in this supply-chain. They have a certain structural power, given the concentration process and the fact that at least the production of fresh ready-meals cannot be re-located to low-wage countries far away. Automation is a threat in very simple mass production, such as in bottling plants, but ready-meals change frequently and machines cannot be re-shaped as flexibly as human co-operation.

The introduction of any new type of machinery often happens in a more ambiguous way than a straightforward “imposition”. At one of the Bakkavor London sites, after many years of samosas being manually folded, they introduced a samosa machine to improve the finished quality. It took the women around two seconds to fold a filled samosa. This was skilled work. The speed at which this work was required meant that sometimes the samosa filling leaked out after it had gone through the fryer. They thought a machine could do better. However, it was not all it was cracked up to be. In the end, it was turned off for several months while they tried to tweak it, and the women were briefly bought back to their skilled task.

If workers cannot easily be threatened with automation or relocation of production, what remains are more blunt, despotic methods. Bullying in many of these types of factories is rife. The state frequently raids food factories too, as they depend largely on migrant labour. One such raid happened at the Greencore factory in Bromley-by-Bow in August 2015. 32 workers were arrested and led off in handcuffs. Bolt cutters were used to open peoples’ lockers and there were stories of workers being chased down the assembly lines. Greencore also runs plants in west London, where we’ve been in touch with workers. Police raids don’t only target the “illegal” workers – they are meant to instil fear in everyone. But then, as our comrades in the warehouses in Italy tell us: we have to ditch our fear!

Food, revolution and...communism?

What can we learn about social emancipation from modern agriculture and its damaging impacts? What can we learn from ready-meals, the ultimate

symbol of modern society's individual alienation? Should we consign mass food production to the dustbin of history if we had the chance?

Modern food production has drastically reduced the number of hours necessary to produce enough food for a growing population. It has thereby created the material conditions for emancipation, as scarcity and hard, day-long labour for basic food items don't go well together with an emancipated society. We can't go back to spending most of our day kneeling in mud to dig up some organic potatoes.

At the same time modern food production is not sustainable as it is. A revolution would mean creating global social relations that give us the time and space to review the liberating and damaging aspects of modern farming and food production. Most of the global concentrations in farming and most of the trade is due to profit calculations. But then there might be a case, even from an environmental point of view, to concentrate farming in fertile regions with a good climate and use modern means of transport for distribution, for example, having a square mile of greenhouses in Spain and transporting vegetables in bulk might be less damaging than using 10 square miles of forested land in the UK for the same output. Even in an equal society there will be natural inequality between different geographical regions: some have access to water, other not etc. These things can only be debated, decided and implemented as part of a mass social process. This itself needs both time and freedom.

The same is true for food processing. While cooking your own meal or a meal for a few friends can be nice – we don't want to depend on it. To have some large-scale flour mills or chickpea boiling factories can make sense, both in terms of labour and energy efficiency and waste avoidance. Ready-meal production, its assembly line terror and plastic packaging nightmare is not something for an emancipated society, but we can learn something from it. It makes sense to produce fresh food in a big group for a bigger group of people! We think a canteen system, where large amounts of people can be fed at the same time is the cornerstone in overcoming the family unit and the terror of the nuclear dinner table. Workers in food production know what aspects are despotic and what aspects can be used to make our life easier.

Food production is not only a challenge for an emancipated society, but also for the path to get there. The global character and regional segregation of food production in capitalism poses challenges for a revolutionary period (and equally for any alternative attempt to build democratic socialism in one country). Revolutions fail when people go hungry. The global dimension of food production and the global co-operation needed will be the basis upon which the revolutionary impetus will be sustained. Imagine in countries like Egypt, where nearly 70% of their staple food is imported. No regionally-isolated uprising will go so far as to challenge money and the commodity form – or the state as the main organiser of distribution and subsidies – if these basic needs are not met in other, more emancipatory ways. Workers’ existing knowledge, about how we get our food grown and from A to B, will be the foundation upon which food will continue to be circulated, plugging the gaps for areas that are more dependent on imports. More on all this in our chapter on revolutionary strategy.

Workers’ struggles

Would our imaginary potato or courgette dare cross a picket line?

Given that workers in this industry are usually on the bottom rungs of the labour market (meaning that they have little opportunities for other kind of work), it is not surprising that workers’ struggles have been rather thin on the ground over the last ten years. We have been keeping an eye on emerging struggles and they tend to follow 3 patterns:

** A union-led struggle leads to, or close to, a strike ballot but the news story “disappears”, usually meaning that a deal with management has been struck before the struggle goes any further. For example, in May 2019, specialist lorry drivers at Alpha LSG – a company that provides aeroplanes with food – planned to strike over punishing new rotas. Action was suspended at the last minute by Unite and we don’t know what deal was struck. In October 2017 there was a strike ballot at Tulip Coalville, (a meat product producer) led by BWAFFU, the Bakers’ Union. Workers had not received a pay rise in three years whilst also losing things like tea breaks. Workers unanimously voted for strike action, but there is no news*

on the internet after that point, which suggests the strike did not go ahead. More often, thresholds for the numbers needed to win a strike ballot are not met. This is what happened at Bakkavor Spalding in 2018 and probably at Moy Park in April 2019, where, after a strike ballot was held, which would have seen half of its 6,000-strong workforce taking industrial action to defend attacks on terms and conditions after the takeover from a US company called Pilgrim's Pride Corps, no further news was heard.

** A union-led protest stops short of a strike but gives space for workers to make their feelings known, or targets clients higher up the supply-chain.* For example, in July 2016, Bakkavor London protested outside the Tesco headquarters in Welwyn Garden City and the Sainsbury's headquarters in Holborn about shift changes, cuts to working hours and extending the shift times to 3am for its hounous-making division. This was largely a union exercise in which few workers were engaged, neither was it attached to any kind of strike threat. Sufficed to say, it was not successful.

** Wildcat actions by workers that show the level of inaction by, and frustration with, the union.* For example, in Spring 2018, Moy Park workers in Northern Ireland, who provide chicken to the big supermarket chains won a 4% pay increase, but only after they took unofficial action by walking out of the factories. The new deal, which was agreed with the Unite union, protected current terms and conditions, including workers' shift premiums.

In December 2018 there was a wildcat strike of meat processing workers at the Cranswick factory in Preston. This is one of only two such actions that got some press coverage. Around 200 staff (mainly Polish butchers) staged a protest outside the factory at the start of their shift, refusing to go into work until a resolution had been reached regarding their pay, staffing levels and overtime premiums. Having met the GMB shop steward a year later, he told me that since the wildcat action, the union had been de-recognised by the company. The fact that they couldn't control the workforce was used as justification for the move. Trust in the union had dwindled and since de-recognition, membership had plummeted from 40 to 10%. The workers who did the wildcat were on a lower pay rate than an older group of workers. Their action won themselves an increase on par

with the older workers (£13/hr). The older workers had apparently been fighting for £15/hr.

In July 2019, meat processing workers at Karro Foods, owned by CapVest took unofficial action by protesting outside their factory in Malton when they discovered workers at a rival business were getting more money than them for doing the same job. They demanded 50p more an hour, but their actions were not supported by the shop-workers union, USDAW. However, no news since then probably means nothing came of it. We have heard of similar wildcat actions of mainly male and often semi-skilled migrant workers in the meat industry in Germany and Italy.

While strikes have become slightly more frequent since their historic low in 2017, they are still uncommon. In January 2019, Meadow Foods, a dairy ingredients supplier went on strike after they rejected the company's shoddy 2% pay offer. They were demanding a modest 3.2% increase in line with inflation. As no news came after the strike, we can only assume that the workers did not win what they set out to. A Bakkavor site in Bo'ness in Scotland also went on strike in April 2019 unhappy with the final pay offer of 2.75%, which is an increase of just six pence per hour for the lowest paid workers. Unfortunately, they did not get their demands met either. We heard that the company was able to use agency workers to undermine the strike, and that the strike did not affect production.

The struggles mentioned here made some headlines, but we should not forget the struggles that are surely going on behind the scenes, that never make the news. Nevertheless, it is probably safe to assume that, given the below inflation pay increases and longer working hours that the sector has been implementing over the last decade, the situation is extremely tough for workers trying to make even the most modest demands. Different strategies need to be found to tackle this. And it's not all doom and gloom. Warehouse workers in logistics – in Italy in particular – have managed to overcome the barriers to organising themselves (as migrant workers with no social safety nets), blockading warehouses and inflicting financial and reputational damage to those companies that were profiting from their labour. They have managed to win significant pay increases and have reset the power balance between workers and global logistic outfits, all while the state has mounted their offensive through police and legal repression.

These impressive successes of migrant workers, beating the bosses against all the odds, were running through my head when I decided to work at Bakkavor in west London. If they could do it, why couldn't we do the same here? I was soon to learn the hard way...

Chapter 8: Working and organising at the Bakkavor ready-meal factory

On one of our Park Royal warehouse-spotting walkabouts, I remember standing outside the huge Bakkavor food factory on Cumberland Avenue, as steam billowed out of the chimneys, and simultaneously thinking, “I want to work there”, and “I wonder what the hell it’s like inside?” The modern factory is seen as a relic of an old world, belonging either to the industrial revolution, with sooty-faced, scrawny workers heaving round raw materials, or to the 1970s when militant workers fought for higher wages and control on increasingly automated assembly lines. They are certainly not seen as important players in the modern UK “service economy”. Also, the propaganda about automation means people think that relatively few people are involved in making our food, so why should we care about them as sites of potential workers’ organising? A machine mixes things up, a machine plops it out or assembles it along a conveyer belt, it gets fed into an oven, and voila, you get a fully automated meal on your plate. Right? Wrong!

Bakkavor is a company on the lower end of the automation and wages spectrum, and it’s where I ended up working for around three and a half years. Working there gave me a great insight into how these kind of big player companies operate, how our food is made, and what we’re up against in terms of building workers’ power in such places. The following account is about my time there, focusing mainly on the kinds of jobs I did, the people I was working with, how the work process is organised, what we tried to do to encourage workers to self-organise, the role of the union, and what we can learn from these experiences.

History to modern times: the growth of the Bakka Brothers

Bakkavor is one of the biggest UK food companies you’ve never heard of. You’ve probably got a Bakkavor food item in your fridge, but you wouldn’t know it because their name won’t be on the packaging. They employ around 17,000 people across various sites across the UK and source 5,000 products from around the world to supply the largest supermarkets with

their own-brand products – from salads, to desserts, to ready-meals and pizzas. They have three distribution centres from which third-party logistics companies transport the food to their clients’ (mainly supermarkets) distribution centres. It is owned by some proper villains – two brothers from Iceland, the Gudmundssons. They were both charged with fraud in 2012 over their role in Iceland’s bankruptcy. One of the “Bakka brothers” got a prison sentence and the other one had to settle a £6.7million legal claim with investors. This hasn’t stopped them from expanding their operations, despite a blip during the financial crisis in 2008, as their reliance on cheap credit to buy up companies took a hit and they were forced to close some of their lower profit enterprises in the UK. This meant many redundancies. They’ve since refinanced and restructured and from November 2017, they have been floating, somewhat choppily, on the stock exchange.

Bakkavor went from a small company with a handful of employees, manufacturing and exporting fish products from Scandinavia in 1986, to having around 20,000 employees worldwide, operating in 25 factory sites in the UK, three distribution centres plus five sites in America and nine in China. In 1996 they still only had 65 employees and a revenue of £4.6 million. It wasn’t until the early 2000s that Bakkavor really started to expand as they started buying up food companies in the UK. In 2003 they sold their seafood operations to concentrate on FPP. In 2005 they exploded with the acquisition of Geest plc, a FPP manufacturer, taking their employee numbers up to 14,000. But the market, dependent as it is on winning supermarket contracts, can be volatile. Bakkavor’s history is chequered with factories closing down, opening up, hundreds being hired and then being made redundant, all based on their ability to win contracts. Rather than rely primarily on agency workers to give them full flexibility, Bakkavor’s own employees make up a majority of their workforce. The weakness of the unions to contest any job cuts, plus the overriding need to move with the economic times, has meant that this has been a relatively fluid process. Easy come, easy go.

Through acquiring new businesses and selling some off, they have managed to consolidate their position as one of the top ten food companies in the UK. This strategy of buying up existing companies means that there is little continuity in terms of the pay and contractual conditions of

Bakkavor employees across the country. For example, employees working for “Katie’s Kitchen” in Harrow kept their existing pay and contracts when Bakkavor bought it in 2001 and turned it into Bakkavor Pizza. This accounts for why workers there are paid more than workers at Bakkavor factories a few minutes down the road. Over time, this differential has not closed because the unions have not managed to equalise pay across the sites, even though it is the same union. The company have used this situation to their advantage and have so far gotten away with paying the lowest wages that the local economy dictates and the union and workers have been willing to accept. They have a number of factories around Spalding in Lincolnshire, near to their farming suppliers. Here, because the supply of labour is smaller than in London, coupled with the fact that their union, Unite, have perhaps been a bit better organised within and across local factories, their base rate operative pay is higher than in London. This is despite the much higher rents that we have in London.



On the assembly line inside one of the UK’s Bakkavor factories

Since working at the Bakkavor London sites, I have heard a lot of rose-tinted tales by older workers who used to work for the previous owners, a Greek family company called Katsouris. I have a certain amount of scepticism towards their stories, not least because the “wonderful previous owners” paid them around £3 an hour (this was before the minimum wage) and they could have, “as much overtime as they wanted!”. Nevertheless, the stories these workers tell are instructive because firstly, they show an acute

awareness of the fact that, despite wages having increased, the overall conditions have gotten much worse. And secondly, the stories highlight particular things that the workers miss and therefore regard as important, namely a degree of autonomy in the work process. For example, they always reminisce about the fact that they could to use the factory to make their own food that everyone then shared in the canteen. When you needed the day off, or an extended holiday to return to India (where most of the workers are from), you could have it, no problem. The levels of discipline and control that are now enforced are seen as the result of being owned by a global company, “with no family values”, imposing their new regime. The changes that have occurred since 2001, when Bakkavor bought the company, have often gone unchallenged. It seems inevitable, and yet, there is, at least among the older workers, some collective knowledge and experience of “better times”.



Who needs a forklift when you have three men to move a ton of cabbage?

Since the acquisition of Katsouris in particular, Bakkavor’s stronghold in the UK was cemented. Their profits skyrocketed, from £2.5 million in 2001 to £90 million in 2019. While they report that this profit is down 45% on 2018, this is due to their investment in a period of expansion, having opened factories in China and the USA.

The London Factories

My factory is part of a group of four sites in and around Park Royal in west London. There is my site, Elveden, which used to belong to Katsouris, that now produces over a hundred different types of ready-meal; a smaller site called Abbeydale, on the other side of the North Circular, which makes mainly fried Indian snacks plus some pies; and Cumberland, the mothership, produces 80% of the UK's houmous, plus some ready-meals. All the sites do their own thing but they are connected: there is an internal transport system that ferries ingredients, trays, pallets and packaging between the sites if a factory needs them; Elveden makes meatballs and some sauces for Cumberland; the stock system is shared between the sites so you can see who has got what. This internal transport system also sends the finished goods from the factories to Premier Park, Bakkavor's nearby warehouse. From there the finished goods get shipped out to the supermarkets' own distribution centres. Third-party storage facilities in huge frozen or chilled warehouses is also used for extra produce, especially at Christmas. The biggest customers are Tesco and M&S, but they also supply Waitrose, Sainsbury's, Aldi and Co-op. Across all the sites, up to around 4,000 workers are employed in total. Around 2,100 people are in the union's bargaining unit, meaning they are permanent, hourly-paid workers. Another 200-400 would be agency workers (depending on product volumes) and the rest office or technical staff. Despite not being far away, the Bakkavor pizza site in Harrow stands apart from our sites, even though it is recognised with the same union (GMB has formal recognition). The Premier Park warehouse has the fewest workers (around 100) and Cumberland is the largest (around 1500 workers).

Each site has its own management team and its own group of workers. There is some cross-over though, as some older employees might have been transferred between sites at some point. Agency workers are also sent to different sites so get an idea of the similarities and differences between them. Many people have family members within the company, either at the same or a different site. The group of internal drivers, who ferry goods around between the sites, have the privileged position of going to the other sites on a daily basis. Through these avenues and grapevines, news can spread, often by rumours and Chinese whispers.

Thug life (on the agency treadmill)

I got my foot in the Bakkavor door as a temp worker. In October 2015 I was told to get to the First Call office in Park Royal at 8am for a 9am induction at the factory. Lots of people were starting at the same time for the Christmas rush. There were some guys from the Congo, some black guys from England, a guy from Goa, two young Somalian guys, one white British fella who looked pretty beat up. Most people hadn't been told anything, not even the shift times. So some people ended up leaving straight away, the times not fitting with their schedules. The assembly line had somehow already begun. People must have been pretty desperate for a job considering how far they had come: some had travelled an hour and a half to get here.

One young Indian guy said the job wasn't for him after the site tour. He wasn't the only one, as the induction was pretty overwhelming. We were shown around all the different areas of the factory: the blast chillers, the meat chillers, the veg chillers, the floor where the assembly lines were, "Low Risk" where they made the pastries and dealt with uncooked food, "High Care" where you only handled cooked food so the rules are tighter around temperatures and contamination. There were blue coats and white coats and different coloured mobcaps and hairnets: agency workers wore green or orange mobcaps (which go over your hairnet), permanents wore blue or white mobcaps, managers wore red ones, and those responsible for health and safety had yellows ones. We got the obligatory "hard-sell" from the union, despite the fact that people were on short-term, fixed contracts. It seemed to me that people were deliberately misled. They were called "permanents", but actually, were only guaranteed a permanent job for three months over the Christmas period, which many of them weren't aware of. The main selling-point the union guy had was that they would accompany us to disciplinary meetings, and that they were the only people recognised to act on behalf of employees. It wasn't much of a sales pitch, but most people signed up – not aware that there was a monthly fee, nor that they would probably be out of a job in three months' time. The whole induction took five hours.

Having worked as an agency worker on and off over the next year, I was sent to work at all three factory sites. I worked the day shift, starting at 7am,

as well as the late shift that ended at 3am. I worked on the assembly line, in the veg room, in “Low Risk” and “High Care”. I worked in packing where I put sleeves on houmous containers, made up a million cardboard boxes, put products inside the boxes, taped up the boxes, labelled boxes, stacked pallets. I’ve spent entire shifts just doing one thing: continuously feeding empty plastic houmous containers into the houmous assembly line machine. Or wiping the burnt edges off lasagne containers with a scoop. In Low Risk I’ve folded pastries, I’ve added chilli flakes and potato mix to samosas, I’ve squirted “glue” (flour and water mix) onto pastry until my muscles ached. I’ve made up the layers of lasagnes and moussakas at break-neck speed, I’ve filled wrinkly jacket potatoes with cheese. I’ve cleaned the assembly lines and mopped the floor. The jobs were numerous but the one thing they all had in common was that they were mind-numbingly repetitive. Even though the ladies on the line were nice to me (after asking me if I was married, had kids and where in India I was originally from), it wasn’t enough to stave off the feelings of despair that such jobs often bring. The language barrier too meant that, even though I could understand what they were saying in Hindi, I couldn’t respond well enough to be able to make deeper connections with people. The worst part was the bullying and treatment of the managers, many of whom are on their petty power trips. One idiot manager told me I couldn’t talk to the person next to me whilst I was on the line, as if this was an entirely normal request. It was an infantilising, and often demeaning, experience.

The only thing that kept you relatively sane was chatting to the other workers. I met some interesting agency people: there was Abby, who used to be a care worker but realised that when you take travel expenses into account, she was being paid less there than if she worked a minimum wage job at Bakkavor. When minimum waged factory jobs (we were getting £6.50 at the time) are a better bet than care jobs, you know that the crisis in social reproduction has reached new heights! There was a guy from the Congo, Jonathan, who used to work at Parcelforce in Park Royal until they all got pissed off with the increasing amount of heavy lifting they were expected to do and he had fucked up his back. He had been getting £12/hr, so coming down to minimum wage must have been a rocky landing, especially with his kids to support. A young Romanian woman, Alexandra,

said she was training to be a nurse at Northwick Park hospital, and unusually, her English was very good. For her, Bakkavor was just a stop-gap.

Maria, on the other hand, a mother from Goa with three kids, was more typical. She was desperate to get regular shifts. Hers was a really tough situation. She rented a room in a shared house with her husband, sixteen-year-old daughter, and three-year-old toddler. There was no space for the 14-year-old son so he was living across the road with a relative. They were paying £650 a month rent. There was no space for the girl to study, and to make matters worse, they were waiting for her husband's visa application to come through so he couldn't work or claim benefits in the meantime. She was the sole breadwinner and working the late shift, getting home at 4am and waking up at 7am with the kids. She was being messed around by the temp agency, getting sent home after being told to come into work quite a few times. She was obviously stressed and worried but had no choice but to soldier on. There were no British-born white people, aside from perhaps a random guy who had fallen down on his luck. They never stayed past a week or two.

I've worked in a few temp agencies – First Call in Park Royal and Templine and ASAP in Greenford. All of them tried to withhold holiday pay and they made loads of payroll "mistakes." Funnily enough, always to their advantage. First Call had a massive ringbinder full of pay cheques that workers had not picked up, probably because the agency hadn't informed them. Some agencies let you start work without a bank account and while you sort one out, they pay you with a cheque. But from the look of this ringbinder, lots of these cheques ended up gathering dust on the shelf, and no doubt accruing interest in the agency's coffers...

The agency also discriminated against women. Because of the sex segregation of the various jobs inside the factories, some "men's jobs" would always be more in demand. The agency would then send out text messages asking for "men only". They didn't specify in the text message which job it was, but this would have been illegal anyway as it was possible for a woman to do all of the jobs inside the factory. Women therefore found it harder to get shifts.

Composition of the workforce

After working there for about a year, chatting to workers and finding out as much as I could, I found out the following information about the composition of the workforce. This is useful in order to know what barriers exist for workers to build shop floor power, as well as what ties them together, which could become the building blocks for collective action.

Ethnic/language differences

Whilst the permanent workforce at Bakkavor London was largely Gujarati, with a sizeable Tamil and lesser Goan minority, the workers at Premier Park (warehouse) are all mainly younger guys from Eastern Europe, in particular Romania. 80% of all the agency workers were from Eastern Europe; in 2016 they were Polish, but now, they are from Romania. The rest are Africans, with a few younger Somalian guys too, who have often lived in other countries like Italy, Norway or Sweden.



The word on the street was “Bakkavor is hiring!”

The majority of the Gujaratis are specifically from the island of Diu, with many of the workers coming from fishing villages, which accounts for their rather “small town” attitudes and “fresh off the boat” look! There are other workers from Gujarat state proper and they are usually of a higher

caste than the more numerous Diu contingent. These workers are longer-term residents of the UK, having come in the 60s and 70s, raised families, and managing to buy their own flat or house. In contrast the more recently arrived Gujaratis will have few chances to afford a house locally. Some of the workers who have managed to get a manager position (the so-called “Red Caps” on account of their red mobcaps) and who earn slightly more money, are deciding to decamp and commute from places like Luton or even Leicester, where they can afford to buy. There are more recently arrived people from Goa at Abbeydale, many still have kids there. There is a large Tamil minority from Sri Lanka too in all of the sites, the men usually working in the Hygiene (cleaning) department.

Bakkavor hold “family and friends” recruitment drives that see hundreds of people turn up to try and get a job. Bakkavor know a good thing when they see it: a largely docile workforce who can be trained by people who speak the same language. They can also spin themselves as a company that likes to keep things in the family, putting their employees and their families first. When I first saw them, all congregating outside at one of the open days, it was quite a sight. Many of them did not even have an appointment, but the word on the street had spread that Bakkavor was recruiting and around a hundred people turned up. Most were turned away, but I remember thinking, hmm, “Farage would have a field day with this scene!” Despite decreasing numbers of migrants entering the UK post-Brexit referendum, there were evidently still plenty of people who badly needed a job. I make this point not to throw fuel on the fire of the immigration debate, but to paint a more accurate picture of the balance of forces between the company and the workers. It helps explain the prevailing attitude of many workers who are wary of struggling, namely that the management have a ready stream of labour available to replace them. They are not entirely wrong.

There is usually the assumption by new Eastern European agency staff, who often have little experience of the Asian subcontinent that all these brown people are the same: that they speak the same language, that they have the same religion, that they all come from the same place. “Do you speak Indian?” is a common question. But of course, there is no one “India”, no one “Indian people”, nor one “Indian language”. Gujaratis speak Gujarati and Hindi. The languages are quite different (a Hindi speaker would not

able to understand Gujarati aside from a few words here and there). The script is also different. Some people from Goa might speak and understand Hindi, but definitely not Gujarati. And it is unlikely that Tamil people speak anything other than Tamil, some English, and probably German, the reason being that many of them sought asylum from the war in Sri Lanka in Germany and ended up living there for many years. So broken English and Hindi are the main denominator languages, but many workers' English language skills are poor to non-existent.

The Gujaratis are Hindu, Goans are Catholic and most of the Tamils are also Hindu, but would go to different temples. There were not many Muslims, but if there were, anti-Muslim sentiments are usually bubbling away under the surface. I spoke to one Muslim worker who started whispering when I asked him what he thought of Modi (the Prime Minister of India with links to a Hindu nationalist group in India called RSS and who is originally from Gujarat). Most of the Gujarati workers I spoke to were full of praise for "their" strongman of politics, and openly denied any participation by Modi in the Muslim pogroms in the state of Gujarat in 2002 when he was the Governor. This Muslim worker, despite knowing the political affinities of his workmates, knew better than to start talking about it openly. He got on well with his Hindu workmates and the "elephant in the room" didn't seem to impact much on a day-to-day level, as long as any conversation on the subject was steered clear of.

Ageing workforce and length of service

Bakkavor has an ageing workforce, the majority in the 55-64 age bracket. The next biggest age group was workers aged between 45-54, fewer again in the 35-44 age range. I think this was a huge factor in the docility of the workforce in general, even when the union was ramping up its activity. There was an aversion to risk, a palpable fear of going on strike, and a resignation that only comes with living a hard life with few victories. This isn't to say there weren't some older workers who were up for the fight. Some of them had worked in many different factories around west London for the last 40 years and had lived through more militant times. But the fact is, that unless you're a city financier or have a specialised skill, anyone approaching pensionable age would face a tough time on the job market. If you can't speak reasonable English, the chances are even worse. So it was

understandable that the older workers in particular didn't want to jeopardise their jobs by making too many waves with management. It also explained why the persistent rumour that the union's pay demands would lead to factory closures had such a fearful effect on the workers.

The ageing workforce, whilst beneficial to the company in terms of their docility, presents Bakkavor management with a problem too. Many of these workers increasingly have medical/health conditions that can impede their abilities to do the job. In the longer-term, they will need to get rid of these workers and replace them with fresh blood, but their length of service means they cannot be dismissed so easily. In response, management has to apply pressure from various sides: direct managers do not stick to the doctor's occupational health recommendations, in effect, bullying workers; which in turn, makes workers' lives very stressful and exacerbates their health condition; the company doctor and nurse are overwhelmed with cases, and often override the worker's own GP and push workers to return to work; more time is spent on absence disciplinaries to bring workers closer to final warnings and ultimate dismissals. This is all very labour-intensive, especially for an already overstretched HR team.

The average length of service across Bakkavor as a whole (across the UK) is 7 years. Across the London sites, the ageing workforce has often been there much longer, normally exceeding ten years. The average turnover of staff in Bakkavor as a whole is 22%, which adds to the overall lack of unity amongst workers.

Sexual division of labour

The London factories have, I would say, over 50% women workers. While there is relative sex parity across the entire workforce, the work roles themselves are strictly divided along sex lines. This is hidden in the Gender Pay Gap Report that all businesses in the UK must now produce. In 2018, Bakkavor's report showed that the proportion of men and women in the lowest paid quartile of jobs seems fairly equal (Bakkavor Group: 49.2/50.8%; Bakkavor Fresh Cook Ltd 42.2/57.8%; Bakkavor Foods Ltd 49.3/50.7). But this is misleading. What we don't see is the breakdown within this lowest paid quartile. Presumably the base rate, semi-skilled and skilled rates are all lumped together in the bottom quartile (because the pay for all these grades is so low) so we cannot see the gender segregation that is marked on the factory floor. In reality, women make up the vast majority of the "unskilled" pay grade.

Only women work on the assembly line, unless there is a machine that needs to be operated, in which case, a man steps in. This machine might only require you to press a button every two seconds but is still seen as a man's job. Machine operators make slightly more money on a higher skill grade. Men take up more supervisory positions at the shop floor level too. This may be because men speak slightly better English and have better reading and writing skills, which itself would be an expression of their more privileged status and socialisation in terms of access to schooling, as well as social spaces where they can develop these skills. But discrimination and sexism definitely does play some part in the promotion process because there are many male team leaders whose English skills and general competency are so poor that you wonder how they have managed to blag it for so long. They get away with poor performance because they are automatically seen as more competent and are therefore given more opportunities to advance.

Dividing lines across contracts and language

However, the main divisions are not across sex lines. Rather they are between: the "unskilled" (who make up 50-60% of the whole workforce) and "semi-skilled" workers and the so-called "Red Caps", who are in management positions and earn at least a pound more an hour; and between the permanent and temp workers. While 75% of the workforce are on

permanent contracts and 10% might be on shorter term contracts for example, over Christmas, like most of the bigger workplaces around here, they use agency staff to a greater or lesser extent depending on how busy they are. The language problems and cultural clashes between these different groups (how much does a fifty-year-old Gujarati woman with three kids and an eighteen-year-old rude boy from Romania have in common?!) make communication difficult. It's not just that peoples' bad English skills means single words are shouted and people complain about bad manners. The general work situation compounds the issue: some of the assembly lines have doubled in speed over the last few years, which adds to the pressure and peoples' irritability. Like everywhere else, it seems that there are more and more middle managers accompanied by more and more disorganisation... No wonder people are stressed and take it out on each other.

Common experiences

Some people have worked there for twenty years, others are brand new. For many people, their job at Bakkavor was their first and only job (if you also count those who used to work for Katsouris). For those who have worked in other places, the same local companies keep cropping up: Greencore, Costco, Kolak. I once spoke to another agency worker and we realised we had worked in the same three places in our last three jobs: Royal Mail, a Japanese dessert factory and now Bakkavor. So people are swinging around the same circles, and over time, picking up experiences that contribute to a collective local knowledge. It's reassuring and provides a common frame of reference. And it's actually pretty amazing that people from such different countries as Romania and Sri Lanka are, for perhaps the first time in history, working together under the same conditions. Our comrade who worked in Hygiene on the night shift wrote:

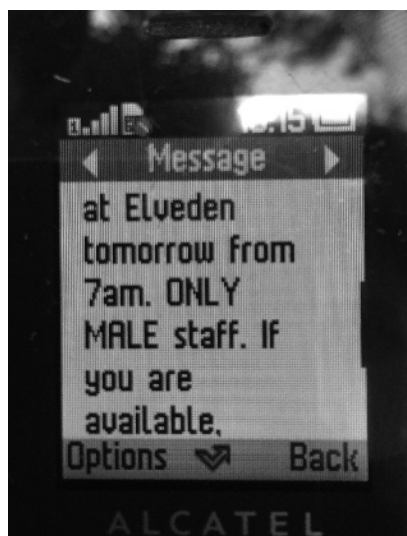
“The hard conditions (heavy and dirty job, working nights, harassment) bring a certain level of solidarity between us. Despite the tensions I have described most co-workers are friendly and willing to give good advice. There clearly is a bond created by the fact of being stuck together in hell... Also, the fact that we have a certain degree of freedom in organising our work and sharing tasks (at least during the first part of the night when we clean the chillers) gives more importance to individual behaviour and personal bonds.”

Despite the chaos and repressive atmosphere created by the Red Caps, and despite the fact that we may not be able to communicate so well, we all still manage to work together to produce thousands and thousands of pizzas, samosas, ready-meals and houmous. And if you make a bit of extra effort to speak to people, you can have some interesting conversations. Everyone has a story in this place. Everyone has lived somewhere else, had other lives. Lots of guys worked on cruise and cargo ships off the coast of Goa. One guy fought in the Lord's Resistance Army and knew Joseph Koney personally! Quite a few Sri Lankans spent long stretches in detention centres in the German backwaters or lived in industrial towns like Mannheim, waiting for their paperwork to go through. Many have sacrificed something to make a future for themselves and their children. Some people remember the Iron Curtain, “the good old times when you

never had to worry about being homeless or unemployed!” Although honestly, how bad must things be now if you can look back on an Eastern Bloc police state with such fondness? Some workers remember their lives in India or a village in the Romanian countryside, where family was close by. For everyone, coming to England was an economic necessity, or held the ticket to their kids’ bright future. It’s strange to think that we all met here, in this Greek-turned-Scandinavian, fish-cum-global food company that makes millions of food products a week – which the workers don’t even eat themselves.

Pay, contracts and shifts pay

Before the government raised the national minimum wage (NMW) to £7.20, permanent workers were earning nine pence more than the previous minimum wage (£6.79). It took a year of fighting tooth and nail for a 16p pay increase above the £8.21 NMW for the “unskilled” workers in 2019. The 2020, the NMW increase up to £8.72 will dwarf any increase that the union is able to negotiate. There is a relatively large GMB union membership (40-45%) inside the company and people pay £14 a month. Workers might get some help with individual grievances and disciplinaries but in terms of health and safety, pay and general atmosphere, workers haven’t really been getting their money’s worth.



Who said the Equality Act was alive and kicking?! A message from the temp agency

When the NMW is introduced, the company always seems to find the extra money, but when the pay negotiations come round, you'd think they were all eating out of dog bowls. Their "poor us!" propaganda held some weight with workers, many of whom believe the company is doing badly, or at least worse than they used to. They base this on the fact that there is generally less overtime available, although this is because the company has become more productive and efficient (for example, they introduced some new computerised systems of work and remaining workers are working harder and faster). Added to that, they are saving labour costs by slowly reducing employee numbers by not replacing people who leave. One Goods-In manager told me that in the last few years the number of people in his department had reduced from 42 to around 20-22, with no huge changes in terms of mechanisation or anything that would account for the reduction. Instead, workers are being overworked, often doing two or even three peoples' jobs, and getting high blood pressure as a result.

There is no supplement for working the night shift but after midnight, pay increases by £1 more an hour. Overtime is paid at anything over forty hours a week, at time-and-a-half. This explains the scramble for overtime when it is available and the grumblings when there is none. The main bonus to working at Bakkavor is that despite the poor hourly rates, the money you can make if you do ten hours of overtime a week really bumps up peoples' pay. Bank holidays are paid at double time (although most workers are sent home after four hours). Each shift, whether you are on a 8.5-hour or ten-hour shift, has two half-hour breaks. One is paid and the other isn't.

In the first half of December 2016 a notice went up on the GMB noticeboards in the various factories, saying that the 2017 pay claim would be in line with the London Living Wage (calculated as the minimum needed to live in London which was £9.75 at the time). After years of below inflation pay increases they wrote about how the increasing pressure on workers was no longer acceptable. This was fighting talk. But it was obvious that Bakkavor wouldn't pay us significantly more unless the whole workforce took industrial action. In some leaflets AngryWorkers produced at the time, we encouraged workers to try and take some responsibility and

not leave all of this in the hands of the union reps and negotiators. But our words were not heeded. The union capitulated – without involving the workers in the slightest. They ended up recommending the deal (15p more than the minimum wage which brought the pay up to £7.65), saying that was the best they could get.

The other big pay development that year was the fact that the union had been working alongside management to come up with a new pay grade system, based on the Hays matrix. This system basically grades job tasks to come up with a hierarchy of task values. At the end, we had four new skill grades: Base (i.e. “unskilled” that women on the assembly lines and Hygiene workers were assigned); Semi-skilled (i.e. for men who used some strength or a simple machine, plus women who did some paperwork on the lines); Skilled (which included forklift drivers, those with more responsibility overseeing the assembly line work or whose job it was to manage some people); and Supervisory (Team Leaders and shop floor head honchos). This pacified many people who were now more incentivised for “career progression” or felt that *their* tasks were valued higher than other tasks – status is everything! But the way I saw it, it sold out the majority of the workforce, (the women on the lines and the cleaners), and pandered to the minority whose English skills were better and who controlled the “unskilled” workers. They had done a pretty good job of dividing the workforce, and with the union’s blessing to boot.

Shift changes and contracts

Soon after I became a temp at Bakkavor at the start of 2016, the management announced the loss of the Tesco mash contract, worth £32 million, which was equivalent to 16% of its annual turnover. Mash was made at the Cumberland site, but the management, never one to miss a trick, was quick to use this as a pretext for a bigger round of redundancies and a restructuring programme that affected workers at Elveden as well. In our factory they wanted people who had previously only worked one weekend day to move to the Friday-Monday “rainbow” shift – not as happy as it sounds – and all for no extra pay of course. Just like that, management expanded their weekend operation for no extra labour costs, and the 10-hour workday was back, an increasingly common tendency across the low-waged sector, in factories and warehouses that need to operate 24/7 as “efficiently” as possible.

This change to the shifts hit women especially hard, impacting on their childcare arrangements as well as leaving them without public transport to get home at 1am or 3am. A larger group of women at Abbeydale confronted HR about this, but at the same time that the GMB denounced the plan, the management were already busy implementing it and threatening workers that if they didn't like the new plans they could find another job. Many workers were moved to weekend rainbow shifts (Friday-Monday) and their paid working hours were reduced by two hours a week. With the threat of job losses hanging over people, this scheme to ‘streamline the workforce’ (in other words, cuts costs for Bakkavor) seemed like a good compromise. Better work late, on weekends and for four days than have no job at all, right? At the time, AngryWorkers responded with a leaflet, entitled, “Let's Mash Up This Place!”, focusing on common things we should be demanding in the face of the planned redundancies and shift changes, things like no loss of hours, or if so, that our pay shouldn't be affected. Some friends distributed these leaflets at the factory gates but apart from the women at Abbeydale, there was no bigger response from workers, even though it affected many of them.

The majority of workers are now on the rainbow shift, (four days on, three days off). Those still on five-day shifts are expected to work at least one weekend day. Having people on different shifts makes it impossible to

get all the workers together, for a meeting or rally. Late shift workers always tend to be excluded.

Work process

After working at Bakkavor for three and a half years, first as an agency worker inside the factory and then later, as a permanent forklift driver, I got a decent overview of the work process in each of the different sites. This is not just geekery. It is useful to have a picture of how the production process fits together, and peoples' roles within this, because this gives us clues to peoples' potential power. Which departments have a greater potential for messing up operations elsewhere? Where do workers co-operate closely and have more of a bond? What machines are used and what happens if they break down? What hierarchies are imposed by the work itself? How do we use our knowledge of the production process to put pressure on the management, and where and how can we push back against deteriorating changes?

Site 1: Cumberland Houmous

Raw materials (chickpeas, tahini, packaging etc.) arrive and are unloaded by forklift drivers. This is taken into different parts of the factory to be stored and unpacked as necessary. The houmous production room contained four or five giant mixers that make the houmous. Only men were given the chance to operate these mixing machines because of the "heavy" nature of the work – they had to pick up and pour in the giant bags of tahini and buckets of chickpeas. (It wouldn't have been impossible for a woman to do, yet they were never offered the chance to be trained up for this "higher skilled" job.) The correct amounts of chickpeas, tahini and oil were fed into the mixer, according to the supermarket recipe. The consistency and texture were checked by the operator. Once it was ready, it was decanted into big metal trolley containers and fed into a machine that spurted out the required amount into the container. One person would be in charge of keeping the conveyer fed with plastic houmous pots. Once I had to do this job for an entire shift and believe me, it was as close to mental torture as you could get. The machine would stop frequently, for example if one space wasn't filled with a pot. Once the pot was filled with houmous, the lid was affixed by hand. Again, this is something you would have expected a machine to do, but think again! The rim of the pot would be sealed by machine and fed along the conveyor into the adjacent part of the factory for sleeving and packing. I only worked in the houmous room once or twice and quickly

realised why it was such a struggle to get agency people to go in there. First it was really noisy. The mixing machines were loud! You had to wear ear protectors which meant that verbal communication was virtually impossible. Plus it stank. Who knew chickpeas could make the air so rank?

When the pots of houmous came through into the packing area, they were funnelled to one of the five assembly lines. At the top of the line, it was four or five women's job to "sleeve", meaning they had to put the thin cardboard sleeve that names the product over the plastic houmous container. You had to be fast because the pots came through in such floods and the line moved fast! Once the sleeve was on, the pots all went through a metal detector. And then the women at the bottom end of the line had to place the sleeved pots into thin cardboard boxes that held six or eight pots. These were put into "outer [cardboard] boxes". Women on the other side of the line would make up these cardboard boxes at lightning speed. The outer boxes had to be sealed with red tape, also put on by hand. There were some tape machines knocking around that could be used, but it was faster to do it by hand, once you figured out the trick to breaking off the pieces of tape. A guy was standing at the end of the line stacking these outer boxes onto a pallet, bent over for hours at a time.

The level of co-operation needed to keep this operation moving smoothly was pretty stupendous. Many things, could, and did, go wrong, especially when us temps couldn't keep up! If you didn't make the boxes fast enough, there was nothing to put the houmous pots into. They ended up falling on the floor. If you couldn't keep up with the line, houmous would stack up and end up falling on the floor. You had to put barcode labels on the finished boxes as they came off the line, and if you ran out of labels, the houmous just kept on coming and, you guessed it, fell to the floor. You get the idea. It was in the interest of the permanents to train up the temps fast, otherwise the whole operation would go to pot. But there is zero autonomy over the work itself. The line dictates how fast you work and you don't have time to think about anything else apart from getting your own bit done. Because your work relies so heavily on the work done before, if something goes wrong, you blame the workers before you who cocked up. This undermines the idea of "working together" because your work is somehow very individualised. Some of the permanents would give you an

extra hand if you were falling behind, but if you couldn't keep up in general, they would complain to the Line Leader and you'd be moved.

The Line Leader's role was to make sure we have the right boxes, labels and sleeves for the different houmous we were packing. They would sort out a replacement for you when you went to the toilet, and fix any immediate problems. They would also be the ones stopping and starting the line. Sometimes the Team Leaders also did this, but the line between the two's role, especially in Cumberland, was not so clear-cut.

The permanent workers did actually care about the work to a certain extent, I mean, it's pretty pointless and demoralising to see your work ending up on the floor or in the bin. The line speed meant your stress levels were higher which often tipped over into grumpiness if someone was messing things up. And the work process meant that you couldn't afford to fall asleep for a second. There were also machinery fuck ups, the most common one being when the belt came off the line and had to be re-fastened by the Line Leader. Also, when the product line switched, for example, from Tesco Sweet Chilli Houmous to Sainsbury's Organic Houmous, you would have a couple of minutes to change everything round – new sleeves, new boxes, new labels. But the general intensity of the work was unrelenting. I tried to use the time by talking to as many people as I could. One interesting thing I realised: nobody I asked had ever eaten houmous!

Cumberland ready-meals

The Cumberland site also had a ready-meals section made up of five assembly lines. The ready-meal lines start by the wall that separates the food processing area with the packing area. A small square opening in the wall connects the lines between the two areas. Next to this opening there is a small window that allows workers to see what is going on in the other department. Nevertheless, communication between the two departments is not easy, which usually produces confusion and delays. The lines in the packing department are very short, less than three metres long. The main purpose of the line is for the product to go under a prehistoric printer and through a scanner that makes sure that the barcode is read correctly. The arrangement of the line and the number of workers changes depending on

the product coming from the ready-meals area. Some products require just two operatives while others might require up to eight workers on the line, who will be standing next to an additional table or just squeezing next to each other in a very limited space. Together with the fact that container sizes are different depending on which product you're packing means that automating the whole thing would be difficult. Again, all the operatives working on the line are women, except the guy who places the boxes on the pallet or inside plastic baskets. Line Leaders in the packaging area are usually women, and everyone working on the line is considered "unskilled".



A tree of hairnets outside the Elveden Bakkavor site in London

Site 2 and 3: Elveden high care and low risk; Abbeydale samosa line; goods-in.

The Elveden and Abbeydale factories are split into two main parts: "Low Risk" and "High Care". Low Risk was where: you made the pastries before they would go to be cooked; where you assembled the layers that made up the lasagnas and moussakas; where you prepared the meat and vegetables; where you cooked up the sauces and things got fed into the fryers. We made pastries such as chicken and chorizo empanadas, or pulled pork rolls, katsu chicken spring rolls, Thai butternut squash rolls, chicken tikka and vegetable samosas, mini *pide*, spicy lamb pastries, Tesco posh pigs... You

could have either one or two sides of the assembly line running, and one, two or three rows of product on each side.

Typically, you would need one woman to put the pastry on the assembly line at the start of the line. If the pastry was sticky and difficult to handle, you would sometimes have another person picking out the good pastry for this woman. If you had three rows of pastry going down, you would need an extra person on pastry duty. Then you would need one person to do the “glue”. This was a flour and water mixture that was squirted out of a bottle around the edges of the pastry to seal it at the end of the line. A third person would put the mixture into the pastry, usually with a small scoop. Then two or three people would be required to fold the pastry into the required shape. One person after that would check that the pastry is properly closed and no mixture is hanging out. The next person would apply the egg wash or butter, the next person would add the paprika, sumac or poppy seeds, the next person would place the finished pastries from the line onto trays. Those trays were then placed onto a trolley, usually by a guy on the end. There are usually one or two men who supply the line with materials and keep them stocked up, for example, meat mixture or pastry, which they bring from the chillers. With a full, two-sided assembly line going at full capacity, you could have 25 people working on one line. So on a regular shift you might have around sixty women in the Low Risk pastry department. Once the trolleys are full, they are wheeled (by men) to the ovens. The cooked pastries are then cooled down in chillers, are then sent to High Risk for packaging.

There were two lasagna and moussaka lines in Low Risk too, both with a couple of machines involved in the work process. While the containers and layers of both products were mainly assembled by hand (the meat mixture, a sheet of pasta, the layers of non-burnt vegetables, grated cheese etc.), and sauces were levelled out by hand too (with the back of a scoop), a machine would squirt out the hot cheese sauce and second layer of meat sauce. Once everything was put together, the containers were placed on large metal trays, each of which would be pretty heavy by the time all the containers of lasagna or moussaka were on them. Each one probably weighed around 400-700 grams and there would be at least sixteen on a tray meaning each tray was around 11kg. Each one was placed onto the trolleys

and when the trolley was full (they can hold around fifteen trays) they were carted off to the ovens.

The line here was really fast, I counted 51 lasagnas per minute! The chain speed was 2.8. When I commented that the line was too fast, the woman next to me said that this was not so fast, that sometimes the chain speed goes up to 3.4! She also told me that the line speed had doubled within the last three years. By looking at the figures I saw on the computer attached to the end of the line, I found that the average products a minute on the lasagne line was about 28-32. This was lower than the number I counted when we were working because it accounts for the fact that the line keeps stopping and starting, sometimes we were waiting around quite a lot while a machine was refilled or we changed the product. Whilst the line was running though, the actual work was very intense. At that time, we produced around 100 trolleys of lasagna on any one day, usually with the day shift producing more than the night shift. One day that week though, they were tasked with doing 140 trolleys between 7am-2.30pm.

Abbeydale had the mother of all assembly lines for the samosas. When I was an agency worker, samosas were all still made by hand. Two women, on both sides of the conveyer belt, put the pastry down; then you had to put the glue along one side; then you had someone putting a scoop of the potato mixture onto the pastry; then you had the amazingly skilled samosa folders who could fold a samosa using four folds in about two seconds. Nobody could call this 'unskilled' labour, nevertheless it was categorised as such. Women were stationed at the end of the line to pinch corners down and make sure no mixture was coming out. Apparently there had been complaints about the finished products as the mixture used to escape in the fryer. In early 2019, a samosa machine was introduced that was supposed to cut the number of people working on the line dramatically from up to twenty-five to two. But it wasn't all it was cracked up to be: the desired quality of the product never materialised and you still apparently needed up to eight people to run the line after the machine was installed.

Low Risk was my favourite department because the lines were slower, the workers were older, there was a bit more breathing space, it was less noisy than other departments – and we would sometimes get an outburst of religious song. A low murmur would turn into a full-on choir, which was

nice but reminded me of the chain gangs at the same time! It was corrupted too: when an important visitor would do a factory tour the management would always want the women to sing as a sign of a “happy workforce”. Sickening.

In Low Risk there was always an unscheduled toilet break in the morning between 8-10am too. Women would take it in turns to go, and the Line Leader or another worker would cover you, but this arrangement only seemed to happen in this department. Once when I said I needed the toilet in the packing department, I was told to wait as there was nobody to cover my station. Ten minutes went by. I asked again. Still, I was told to wait a little longer. Finally, after fifteen minutes, I just walked off and they were forced to stop the line. I knew I didn't have to ask permission to go to the toilet, but the atmosphere is such that it does feel like that. You need confidence to just walk off the line and not care if things drop onto the floor.

As the factory went on to get new contracts and things got even more high pressured, some Red Caps stopped the small toilet break. The increased stress and pace of work meant that simple things like going to the toilet become fraught and contested issues. When women wanted to go the toilet, they were sometimes denied permission. An older woman with some medical conditions ended up wetting herself twice in the space of six months because the manager, who was also supposedly a GMB union rep(!), kept her waiting too long. Other women complained of not being allowed to go but whenever this was raised with management they just said that workers didn't need to ask for permission as such and blamed the women themselves for not going when they needed to. Classic gaslighting! Of course, it would have been great if they had felt able to just leave the line, even if they weren't given cover, but the nature of the work – being “chained” to the line, with other workers relying on you to do your bit, with all your movements surveilled and accounted for – had produced this fucked up dynamic.

The veg room (in Low Risk) was where you stood around a table and cut up the peppers, or cleaned the mushrooms with a small hose that pumped out air at high pressure. It was more relaxed to cut up vegetables around the table because at least you didn't have your pace of work

determined by the speed of the line. You had the chance to talk to people without too much stress and noise, but it was chillier. There were other areas of the factory too, but when I was an agency worker, I didn't have much knowledge or interaction with them. There was the cookhouse, where all the sauces and mixes were cooked up; the meat and spice rooms; there was Despatch and Goods-In where pallets of goods and materials would enter and leave the factory; there were the chillers where things were cooled down and stored until they were the correct temperature to move to the next stage of the production process; there were the ovens where food was cooked, and cleaning areas where things were washed.

In High Care, it was colder and faster. The shorter lines were dedicated to: placing ready-made products such as falafels and koftas into their containers; cleaning up the edges of the lasagnas and moussaka containers; assembling some ready-meals with cooked ingredients such as laksas or cauliflower cheese, where the portions had to be measured out on scales. Because of the faster pace of work, the women working there tended to be younger and less friendly. The Line Leader would usually be stationed at the sealing machine in case something went wrong with it, which happened pretty regularly.

Generally, the thing that people complained most about was the speed of the line and the subsequent quality of the food produced. It was fairly obvious that a line going too fast was going to produce a sub-standard product. You could see it for yourself. Knowing that half of it would be thrown in the bin made people annoyed. Why were we being worked like this if what we made would end in the bin? And why was the management complaining about quality when they were the ones causing it by refusing to slow the line down? It didn't make any sense. Sometimes, in Low Risk, when the Line Leader increased the speed of the line and it was running too fast, some brave soul would turn it down when the manager's back was turned. This was possible because the speed dial was located at eye level – a designer's glitch! But generally, the pace of work was outside of your control. Even though lots of people complained about the speed of the line and won't do more than is necessary – and tell you not to do more either – they would scream blue murder if they experienced a delay caused by someone else. So for example, if they ran out of mix and it isn't

immediately there. Never mind that we get a bit of a breather for a minute. It was almost as if they could never miss an opportunity to act superior to someone else, a chance to break out of their usual position as the ones that were shouted at.

Machinery

Contrary to popular opinion, many tasks are manual. As the factory produces many different products, any automation has to be of the kind to accept a wide variety of products. Things like conveyors and mixers can be used for anything, but complex and modular machines are needed in order to be configurable for different products, like the Proseal machines that seal the containers with plastic. This means that automation is expensive, as you either need many different kinds of machine to handle different products, or complex configurable machines. There is also time lost to swapping or configuring machines that diminishes their theoretical efficiency over manual labour when this needs to be done often. In the more complex and technically advanced assembly departments of the car industry current management philosophy detects the limitations of robotisation: robots have no new ideas, they don't communicate with each other. The more robots, the more rigid and stagnant the production process becomes.

The most common question I get asked is around the quality of the food. Would I eat this stuff myself? Yeah, I would. Seeing all the fresh meat and vegetables being delivered was reassuring. The frozen meat from Thailand was "Tesco Welfare Approved", whatever that means. But I can't attest to the ethical standards of the frozen pineapple from Puerto Rico, nor the environmental costs of the warm water prawns from Indonesia. There didn't seem to be so many additives but the amount of fat and oil we had to dispose of was utterly repellent.

After around six to eight months of working on the lines, I decided to get my forklift licence and try and get a permanent contract in the Goods-In department instead. I managed to do this quite easily as they happened to need a forklift driver right when I turned up. I was mainly driving around on the public road outside, unloading deliveries of packaging, as well as raw ingredients being delivered by third-party haulage and logistics companies. I would be trundling along to the two other external warehouses – one for packaging and one for ambient – as well the big external freezer, ferrying stuff in-between them and the factory. The freezer was a big outbuilding opposite the main site and was being privately rented for over £10,000 a month. Because we were mobile, we'd get to interact with different groups of workers: the delivery drivers; the ambient, packaging

and freezer guys; the outside Hygiene guys; the loading bay guys in Despatch; and contractors.

The good thing was that when a manager from inside was shouting their head off for a particular pallet they needed, you could drive away and pretend you hadn't heard them. You never had to ask to go the toilet. You could talk freely and openly with the delivery drivers when you were signing their paperwork, and we controlled when and how long we took our breaks for. The nature of the job was so different to the assembly line work, you automatically felt more in control. There were fewer of us and you got the sense that people really did rely on *you*. If bottlenecks occurred in Goods-In, there would be a sizeable knock-on effect inside the factory. That conferred a certain sense of power. Not that it was all hunky-dory. I remember sometimes crying because it could get so busy and chaotic, especially in that first year. But over time, as the work process became more efficient and organised – as more chiller space was created, we got four drivers instead of three, and started to act more collectively – things calmed down and we could flex our muscle a bit more to give ourselves some breathing space.

Hierarchies and dependencies

The strict hierarchies within the factories were denoted by what colour cap you wore. But even amongst the same cap colours, there were many gradations. Both “unskilled” and “semi-skilled” workers wore the same coloured cap, but if you could operate an electric pallet truck or worked in the cookhouse, you earned more money. Process Controllers and Team Leaders both wore Red Caps, but the former was much further down the pecking order than the latter. Hygiene workers were probably the bottom of the pile in terms of respect, which is normal for cleaners across society in general, but compounded here because they were usually also Tamil. They are darker skinned, which is usually enough of a reason to look down on them. They had more freedom to move around though, and even though their workload increased over the years, they were never under the same scrutiny and surveillance as the assembly line workers.

The coloured cap divide worked not only to legitimise disciplining and controlling behaviours (you knew who you could shout at and who you had to obey), but provided a route for so-called career progression. This ‘stick’ to Red Cap-dom gave an incentive for those people with a bit of ambition to stick around and stay loyal to the company. It was also a way of dealing with communication problems: you could usually communicate with your immediate line managers in your own language. The Line Leaders had enough passable English to speak to their superior, and Team Leaders a bit better still. In this way, senior managers only need talk to the Team Leaders, never directly to the women on the line. The messages – to work faster, change this and that – were always mediated through this chain of command, partly a response to the fact that language barriers exist, but it also keeps the channel of communication narrowly funnelled and contained. If your Line Leader didn’t speak your language, it was beneficial to have a closer relationship with another Red Cap who could. This way, they could help sort out (usually HR-related) things out for you. This “good working relationship” was necessary to avoid a situation where they could easily make your life hell. They had the power to deny you overtime and holiday requests, they could move you to different departments, they could decide if you got a formal absence warning or let it slide. You couldn’t escape from them, as they’d always be near you on the line and on your breaks.

The fact that your work was deemed “unskilled” added to your low sense of worth and placed you firmly as an inferior. That mostly women were in this grade cemented a sex hierarchy. These factors were the background against which sexual harassment of women could flourish. The nature of the work process itself encourages such behaviour, as well as encouraging women’s silence. By this we mean the fact that women working on the assembly lines and who are subject to more control and surveillance by largely male managers puts them at an immediate disadvantage when it comes to experiencing and speaking out against harassment and abuse. When you combine this with a workplace culture of shouting and bullying, based largely on the speed and disorganisation of the work, you have a perfect storm for sexual harassment, which did occur. One manager was notorious for targeting young Eastern European women on the line; one woman was apparently assaulted in a chiller; and one guy was arrested at work because of some kind of sexual allegation made against him. He was back at work again the next week though.

Relationships of dependency were bound up in the reliance on overtime because your direct line manager decided if you would get it or not. Overtime was needed not only to make ends meet, but for a minority of workers, essential to reach the income threshold to bring over a spouse over from India. The current income needed is £18,600. Working on minimum wage for 40 hours a week would not get you there so you needed to do as much overtime as you could get your hands on. Not only that, but you needed to make sure that payroll hadn’t made any mistakes on your weekly payslip because you needed this as proof for the Home Office. Every week, one workmate fastidiously checked and double-checked that no mistakes would be made on the system. And payroll “errors” were pretty common, so much so that we can safely assume that they are part of management’s disciplining repertoire. We can see here how the immigration rules impact upon work-lives. They make you beholden to management: you need to keep them sweet to get the overtime you desperately need, and you need to maintain good relations so they don’t fuck up your payslip. While groups of workers with similar immigration restrictions, such as construction workers in Dubai or “illegals” from Mexico in the US, have fought back in worse

situations, breaking these dependencies is still a big leap for workers to take.

Productive knowledge and work process

The work process is split up in such a way that it is difficult to get an overview, especially as an assembly line worker. If you work on the line, you stay there, with few chances to wander about and see how the departments all fit together. When I worked inside the factory, my geographical perspective shrank to around three square metres. You might go a few metres to collect some scales or put something dirty in Tray Wash, or collect the mops, but unlike the men who serviced the lines and who could walk about a bit more, you wouldn't see the inside of a chiller, or the ovens where the food was cooked, you would never see the pallets leave the factory and be loaded onto the lorries. When I worked outside, I at least had the memory of how the food was prepared and packaged inside so I had a good sense of how the production sequence worked. And I guess if you've been there for many years and you move around a bit, you also get a better idea. But the scope for disembodied work tasks was pretty high. This contributed to the sense of antagonism between different departments: you relied heavily on each other, but they were also the biggest barrier in getting your task completed. Putting together a ready-meal is not too complex, but there is still a division of labour that connects you with, but also isolates you from the work of others.

For regular workers, getting to know other workers in other departments was not so easy because breaks were at different times. You would never meet people from the late shift either as the day shift ended at 3.30pm and the late shift started at 5pm. If you were a smoker there was more chance to chat to people in the smoking area, if you smoked weed, you would find your people. Only certain workers inside the factory had a relationship with the ones outside, namely if you worked in the loading bay areas. Only a few workers would have a relationship with the office workers, in which I include those people who worked in the test kitchens, developing the food. The higher up in the hierarchy you went, the greater the access to the whole of the factory and the greater the sense of how your work fitted in with other departments as your job would mainly be to coordinate between them. For example, if you worked as a cookhouse manager, you need certain ingredients. You have to order them from Goods-In and chase them up with forklift drivers. You'd need to coordinate with the chiller people too. But

while you'd have to work with these other departments, you never really knew their limitations or how they worked which led to frequent misunderstandings, frustrations and shouting.

Red Caps wouldn't necessarily have productive knowledge that is irreplaceable either. Some lower ranking Red Caps would only have access to the knowledge relevant for them; they have their tasks to do (what product they have to make or package; how many; by when). They would have certain paperwork to fill out, recording temperatures, manufacturing and use-by dates and volumes for example. But some higher-ranking Red Caps would have worked there so long that they had a level of knowledge that meant they had become irreplaceable. Things like how to fix the machines that had minor but regular breakdowns, what quantities of ingredients you needed and in what quantities for a particular product, and what strings you had to pull to get them on time.

But this was a risk for the company who then introduced a computerised system that systematised all this knowledge under the guise of efficiency. Everything was weighed out and timed so that planning could be done better, rather than having to rely on certain workers' knowledge. Since then, these high-ranking Red Caps have become more disposable.

Racism and sexism – and self-preservation

Accusations of racism, especially by the small minority of black workers in the factory, and sexism were more an expression of workers' weakness than the reason for it. Hierarchies need to be created inside the factory to divide workers and turn them against each other, but wouldn't be possible if the work process wasn't divided up and organised the way it is.

Splitting up the work process into "men's jobs" and "women's jobs" only served to maintain the sexist skill-grading structure that undermines women's position. In my role as a forklift driver, I challenged the idea that "only men drive forklifts", and I tried to challenge it inside the factory too. At one point, after the monotony of the line got too much, I wanted to do what was seen as a "man's job" – putting the finished pastry-laden trays onto the trolley. It was an easier job in the sense that you don't have to be on the line and you have a few moments to breathe as you're waiting for each tray to fill up with pastries. One of the younger women immediately

piped up that I shouldn't do it because it was the "men's space". I said, "Why? I'm young, strong and can easily do it. I need a break from the line and actually it's easier work!" She replied that if I do it, the managers will think all women can do it and they will ask all the women to do that job. They didn't want to take on extra work tasks, I get it, but I said that the difference shouldn't be between men and women but rather based on ability. Why should men who are too old and frail be doing this task when a fit, able-bodied woman could do it instead? The point should be that anyone doing any monotonous job for too long will be physically ruined, regardless of sex. The young and fit male temps in High Care said they had just been lifting heavy lasagna trays into trolleys for the last two weeks and that their backs were breaking. So, I carried on doing the trays. It was disappointing to see many women themselves upholding this segregated work system. If they see a woman doing a 'man's job' or vice versa, they were quick to step in and shame the individual into stopping. This also happened at Cumberland once, when a young male temp came to make up boxes with me, a job usually reserved for women. The women tried to emasculate him, saying this was a woman's job, and implying he was not a real man if he did it. You can understand the rationale to a certain extent: either they don't want to take on extra work, meaning doing tasks that are usually designated to men, or they are preserving "their" jobs. At the same time, by reproducing the gendered work tasks, they make it easier for the management to exploit the differences amongst the workforce that keeps women's pay the lowest and devalues their skills.

A small minority of black guys complained of racism – in terms of how they were spoken to and what jobs they were given – from some of the Indian workers and managers inside the factory. It's true that most were sent to the packing area, where it is cold and back-breaking work or the cookhouse where it is hot and back-breaking work. However, racism often wasn't the whole story. Younger guys were excluded from certain jobs because of the threat they posed in replacing some of the older guys' jobs, who incidentally were from India because they had been working there longer. All the older permanents were anxious about this, especially as their health deteriorated. This often led to reactionary and conservative views:

putting others down or excluding others was an act of self-preservation more than simple “sexist” or “racist” ideas.

Invoking sexist and racist ideas as an act of self-preservation obviously still perpetuates racism and sexism in the absence of a formal and legally endorsed discrimination. I experienced this when I started driving a forklift. I got a lot of driving advice with the undertone that I obviously needed more coaching. In a way though this was good – I definitely improved fast because of the extra advice. But on the downside I could never seem to escape their attention, which was infuriating. I have been told to, “Smile!” a million times. “I’m a forklift driver not an air stewardess!”, I’d snap back. I was called “babe”, “honey”, “darling”, “girly” more times than I can remember. I have been whistled at before 7am and I am half asleep. Men can be macho in different ways. They insist on carrying the gas bottle when it runs out, even though I can carry it by myself. They found it emasculating to carry the gas bottle together. They are “chivalrous” when actually it is just creepy. They say, “Ladies first”. They are touchy-feely with you. They try and be helpful when all you want them to do it get out of the way. Some start spilling their guts about their romantic lives, thinking I am interested. The ones who have wives seem to be more normal. My mood, dress, hair, actions, were all commented upon but in relation to an expectation that the man had of what I should be doing, or thinking or wearing. It made me self-conscious. I didn’t want to think about myself through the eyes of someone else.

My manager has commented on my weight (“have you put on weight?”) more than once. I told him that I could have an eating disorder, what does he know? He apologised but a couple of months later he did it again. He also mentioned me having kids. “Are you pregnant?” “Are you gonna have kids?” “When you gonna have kids?” I said I might have a medical problem that means I cannot have kids, what did he know? He apologised. When I see him, he sometimes puckers up his lips for a kiss. I give him a look of disgust. But it has turned into a sort of game now, he does that, I react like that.

The first few months were really tough. I was always angry and fuming. I didn’t want to have to deal with this, and I felt I was being forced to. I was always being put into a “woman” box. If I acted friendly to anyone it was

taken as an invitation to flirt and touch me. So I became less friendly to new people. But it's a balancing act. Yes, there are people I've stopped talking to because they've pissed me off one too many times. But overall, you have to learn to let things go otherwise you'd end up speaking to no-one! The patience largely paid off because the situation is a lot better now than in the beginning. The novelty of seeing a woman on a forklift wears off eventually, and that acceptance feels good.

Main issues and grievances

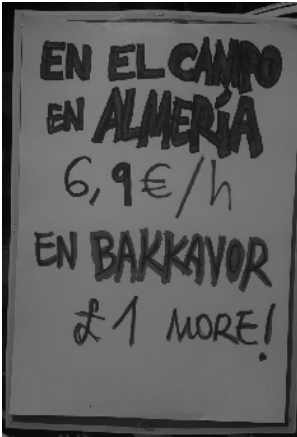
Even just after a few months of working somewhere, you can start to understand who the workers are and how work is organised. You learn to ask a lot of questions, keep your eyes peeled and ears flapping. Having a ‘secret mission’ certainly makes work more interesting, but it’s important to keep a work diary to make sure you don’t forget all the squillions of details. Alongside this information gathering, which can also be described as a more in-depth kind of ‘workplace mapping’, you find out what issues are the ones people are most pissed off about. This then becomes the basis for what you can try and organise around. Here were some of the main ones at Bakkavor:

Temp/perm divide

A tension between permanents and agency workers was a recurrent theme during the whole time I worked at Bakkavor. It wasn’t just that people felt annoyed that they had to constantly train up new agency workers – for no extra money – but because their presence undermined their experience. “Why are they getting the same pay as me on day one when I’ve worked here ten years?” In a situation where everyone is getting crumbs from the table, through our AngryWorkers’ leaflets and my union rep work we pushed the idea that instead of fighting to get half a crumb more than someone else, it is better to fight for a bigger slice of the pie.

Pay, workload and holidays

Everyone agreed the pay was too low, but those who grumbled the loudest were those working in Hygiene, maybe because they were all guys who didn’t want to be lumped in with the “unskilled” women, and maybe because they weren’t personally dominated so much by managers of “their” background. These were the cleaners basically, either working inside the factory, cleaning the big machines, the belts in-between products, the chillers, the floors, the trays and utensils, taking out the rubbish. Or you could be working in the canteen or toilets and corridors, or outside, operating the cardboard compactor, big bins, cleaning the road.



Solidarity placard with agriculture workers in Almeria, who also supply Bakkavor with veg

They felt entitled to the semi-skilled pay rate because they had to undergo COSHH training, which taught you how to deal with chemicals. They complained about this, but didn't do much more.

The ever-increasing workload was another continuous gripe. Work pressure became more intense over the years I was there and there was no way that you could stick to all the rules and still work to the pace that was demanded of you. Some workers in particular were often overworked, doing the job of two or even three people. A few of them were able to make a stand against this and refused outright to work faster or harder. For example, in the Cumberland packing department, workers doing a ten-hour shift would sometimes enforce an extra break right before the end of their shift. Toilet breaks would start to exceed the allotted ten minutes and managers would have to give everyone a lecture about it. But generally, in the absence of a wider co-operation your individual resistance would often mean some other sucker having to do more work.

Holidays too were always a contested issue because so many workers wanted to take long holidays to go back to India or Sri Lanka. You would expect that a company built on the backs of such workers would see the necessity of accommodating these wishes. There had apparently been some rule agreed way back when that workers were entitled to an extra two weeks unpaid holiday every other year. But whether or not this was granted was totally arbitrary and depended on your relationship with your manager. Again, this made this relationship even more important as making waves

could fuck up your chances of being able to, for example, attend your own son's wedding, which is what happened to one woman...

Health and safety (H&S)

In such a dangerous work environment, where H&S actually is important so we don't get killed by pallets falling on our head (which happened at a Bakkavor site in Wigan in 2015) or have our fingers chopped off (which happened at the Bakkavor Pizza plant in Harrow in 2013), it is never enforced or applied in a way that either involves workers, nor actually gives a shit about them. The fines Bakkavor have had to pay because of these kinds of accidents never seem to be enough to actually make them change their ways in any meaningful sense. Instead, it is used pedantically by employers as a method of disciplining and control. One of the forklift drivers was hauled into a disciplinary for not having the delivery drivers' keys when he was taking a delivery. A totally meaningless H&S rule because the delivery driver themselves is in the back of the trailer unloading the pallets so how the fuck is he supposed to drive off in the middle of the delivery? But for *actually* dangerous things like driving into the freezer with its icy, slippery floor, chugging fumes into an enclosed space, oh, that's alright because "we urgently need this or that pallet!" The flexibility by which they applied the rules as and when it suited them was what really got peoples' goat.

H&S is also used as a defensive tool by workers and trade unionists as it has more legal weight behind it to push back against management. But using H&S rules to exert some power can be a sign of over-reliance on formal rules and regulations, where it is just as easy to get stuck. In a food factory though, it was an important tool because you can literally ruin the business if they fuck up publicly. There were regular audits, either internal Bakkavor ones or ones from the supermarkets who wanted to check things like: traceability of the ingredients and whether the technical requirements to produce their products were being met. Some of these were unannounced but either way, things would go into meltdown and it became impossible to do your work as you usually did it. Things would slow to a snail's pace, indicating that in day-to-day operation, the factory ignores many of its own rules in order to function efficiently. This is why in our AngryWorkers Bulletin and chats to workers, we always tried to push work to rule as an

effective strategy. Many times during audits, we would even have to stop taking deliveries entirely and not pass anything into the factory, total lockdown. They couldn't risk anyone actually doing their work as usual because they knew how shoddy things were and they wanted to put on a nice show. In fact, they became experts at, "The audit show". In preparation, all the managers would start running around like headless chickens, barking orders, telling you do this, and do that. It was normally better to just try and hide out or go on your break until it all blew over.

If the auditors really saw what went on they would see frozen pallets left outside in the rain or in the sun for hours, slowly becoming defrosted and then put back in the freezer. They would see pallets waiting outside the chiller for long periods of time when it was busy, bins of rubbish and food waste being taken through the ambient food warehouse or lying around in close proximity to fresh food, pallets stacked too high, dirty forklifts being driven into the freezer and packaging warehouse, potholes in the ambient warehouse, leaky roofs and floods, no separation between forklifts and pedestrians, unloading heavy or rickety pallets on sloping roads next to pedestrians on pavements, agency workers pissing in lonely corners (three guys were sacked for that in the space of a year!). Inside they would see people lifting things that were too heavy for one person, people running around on slippery floors, the occasional mouse scuttling across the packing area, broken down electric pump trucks, machine guards sometimes not in place, electric pump trucks being used in areas where people wore flimsy plastic shoes rather than safety boots, ingredient fuck-ups (like using normal pasta when it's supposed to be vegan pasta), paperwork being falsified to show incorrect temperatures and wastage amounts. I even heard that once, a few years ago, food was sent out of the factory when the metal detector machine had stopped working. The guy that allowed this ended up being promoted and is now one of the factory managers.

The way that the work was organised meant it was often impossible to stick to the rules and protect your body. If you're shovelling red pepper into containers for hours on end, how can that not fuck up your back, even if you do try and follow the manual handling rules? Many of the wheeled containers are too low to push without bending your back. Wheels were often damaged on trolleys and bins making manoeuvring them difficult.

Health and safety checks aren't done properly due to lack of time, people are running around without looking where they are going – the general speed of production and lack of space makes things totally unsafe. But management steadfastly refuse to modify the speed at which things are expected to be done.

Some jobs expose you to more risks. One of our comrades worked in Hygiene at the Cumberland site. As a Hygiene worker you are often contending with chemicals – breathing them in, being burned and so on. Her worst job was cleaning workers' shoes – we all had to wear these horrible little plastic shoes when we went down into the factory that got all sweaty because your feet couldn't breathe in them. A colleague of hers who was also on the shoe cleaning job got an infection – actually some sort of fungus – for which she had to take a strong six-week treatment, with side-effects on the liver. Her nails were all yellow and brittle. When she told the manager about the infection, he said it was her fault, because she did not wear gloves. She did actually wear gloves, but their standard gloves are rather shit and easily get torn up, which is what had happened to her. It's always a struggle to get another pair – it is as if the Hygiene attendant was paying for them out of his own wages!

The recurrent propaganda around H&S was that “accidents are caused by worker's inattention” and so it's actually your own fault. If you slipped and fell, it was because you were walking too fast and not holding onto the railings. If you did your back in lifting a twenty-kilo bag of rice it was your fault because guess what? You had manual handling training and you're not supposed to lift such a heavy thing! “Training” (being read something from a piece of paper and then having to sign it) was often used as a way to blame you if management decided they were going to randomly enforce a rule. “Look here, you've signed this thing that says you know what the rules are so if you break them, we can blame you!” Sometimes I refused to sign things because of this, much to the annoyance of the already-frazzled training woman. Some of the forms stated that the training should be performed by the manager on the shop floor and last half an hour – but instead it is done in the laundry room or the canteen or anywhere the training person can corner you, is purely verbal and lasts for five minutes.

Like everything else, these formalities were just a performance, to be used by the company for their benefit should they need it. Our comrade told us:

“The most critical part is cleaning the conveyor belts’ stainless-steel rollers. I think the only reason is that this is where the test for bacteria is performed... Every morning, one of the Red Caps or even a permanent worker would rub a little test paper on the rollers, enclose it in a tube and scan it through a hand- held device. The result would be displayed as “pass”, “warning”, “fail”. You hardly ever see a “pass” result. When we have a “fail” result, we quickly sanitise the rollers again, but not perform the test again after sanitising.”

Sticking to the H&S rules would have really fucked thing up for the company. This is why we encouraged workers in our leaflets to coordinate together in order to work to rule. Without this coordinated action, the management kept getting away with squeezing people more.

Bullying and repression

A toxic culture of disrespect pervaded the factories, based on the fact that: people from the same language group developed an over-familiarity that easily slipped over into rudeness; the women were seen as easy targets who would not complain or stand up for themselves; and there was an inability to ever seem to improve things based on the large-scale disorganisation that increased the stress and irritability amongst the workforce.

All the stress and bad vibes understandably had a negative impact on peoples' mental and physical health. One guy dropped down dead in the smoking area. Another guy, a night shift Hygiene worker, died in his late forties. A mild-mannered Polish guy from the maintenance department had a psychotic episode and climbed onto the roof, sobbing in front of his workmates. A young office worker who everyone ignored even killed himself. Others had strokes and panic attacks and were taken away by the ambulance, which came with depressing regularity. It wasn't just that they were getting old or smoked, although of course these were factors. I think it was also the type of work and toxic culture that drove many people to their limits. Many workplace injuries were caused as a result. And quite a few people, in my factory at least, became depressed, some suicidal, others starting muttering to themselves. The stress of it all was written onto peoples' faces. Their often blinkered attitude, whereby any attempt to ask them to step back and look at the bigger context, was a threat to their routine: their focus on working, getting through the shift, working as much overtime as possible, thinking about the bills they needed to pay and the mouths they had to feed. There was little give.

Why didn't people stand up for themselves more? The fact is, if you find yourself with restricted labour market options – because you are older and don't have “skills” to market, your English is poor, and you have fewer social safety nets etc. – you are vulnerable to abuse. Migrants are the most likely to fit this bill. But it is not because they are migrants per se, rather their position on the labour market. This doesn't mean that all workers just sat back and took it. Some of the older women especially, would shout back. In the long-term though, the collectivity in those moments never seemed to coalesce into something stronger.

All of the Red Caps on the factory floor worked their way up. You often got the impression that they felt superior to those they had left behind. Keeping things “in-house” also ensured that the toxic culture continued to be reproduced – if you were shouted at and abused and disrespected by managers when you were a regular worker, now that you are a manager, this is how you think managers ought to behave. It was a form of institutionalisation that normalised the fucked up things that went on, for example, a manager who forced a woman to work extra hours even though she told him – in tears – she had to leave to breastfeed her baby. She carried out the manager’s orders rather than go home to her crying baby.

An incident when I was an agency worker really brought this culture of fear home to me. A fire broke out on one of the hounous packing assembly lines. No manager told workers what to do so when we saw these huge flames starting to shoot up, we all just ran for the exit. The fire alarm only started ringing when we were almost outside. Once outside, a manager shouted, “Is everyone here?” but no register was taken. No fire brigade arrived. After literally five minutes, we were all told to go back inside and resume work. The air smelt of smoke and chemicals. Many people were holding up their hands to their noses and over their mouths, but taking their places on the line again. I left the packing department, together with three other agency workers, and went to the canteen, saying we weren’t working in those conditions. None of the permanent workers joined us. A few minutes later, the Operations Manager – one of the most senior managers who looked and acted exactly like Miss Trunchbull (the megalomaniacal headteacher in Matilda) came up into the canteen and demanded everyone return to the floor immediately, otherwise we would lose our jobs. She was ranting and raving, a real bully. I didn’t go back down and chose to stay in the canteen, along with one other young Romanian woman, but the other agency workers got scared and went back down. Okay, maybe because they are in a more precarious position they felt they couldn’t afford to lose the job, but the fact that even permanent workers would not speak up in this situation was a real eye-opener. That they would continue to work with their hands over their faces made me see that this type of exploitation and bullying couldn’t be fixed by anyone else, other than those workers themselves, in exactly these types of moments. And how do we, as

revolutionaries, encourage collective action at these crucial moments? These were the kinds of questions that I was grappling with over the next few weeks, months, and years of working at Bakkavor.

Bullying from the very top trickled down to all the senior and middle managers. Why is it needed? Instead of being a symptom of power, it is instead a sign of the immense weakness of the system that requires a kind of crude, brute force to maintain it. The wages are low, the work is terrible, the hours are long, the conditions are crap. You have agency workers that come and go, that mess things up, that need to be told how to do things, that require constant supervision. You have workers who have little connection to the work they are doing or the product they are producing. There are few incentives for workers to work harder. People are resentful and there is anger and despair bubbling away just beneath the surface. In these kinds of situations, that are commonplace in the modern world of work, in working class jobs like this, there are more sticks than carrots.

Bakkavor and Brexit

Bakkavor, like any workplace, does not exist in a vacuum. The wider social and political climate (Brexit, welfare changes, “hostile environment”) has much bearing upon factory life, not least because of the largely migrant workforce which is at the sharp end of these policies, but also from the business-side with their reliance on global and local food supplies that are subject to everything from natural disasters to traffic jams. A no-deal scenario was mapped out that spoke of massive queues at Dover; import (and export) tariffs; the undermining of competition law as retailers would have to join forces to overcome the supply-chain blocks and bottlenecks. Then there was talk of food shortages and companies stockpiling ingredients. Domino’s Pizza apparently spent £7 million on hoarding pizza base sauce from Portugal. But there would also be a storage problem: the UK would need 30 massive empty warehouses to store just a week’s extra food supply. The Brexit effect on the pound meant it became more expensive to import ingredients from Europe too. No wonder Bakkavor was sweating!

But for workers, the effects of Brexit and the hostile environment before that, are felt more acutely. Several months after the Brexit referendum, in December 2016, a notice went up saying there had been an immigration raid at my factory. Presumably the UKBA (UK Border Agency) could have arrested these people at home. The fact that they chose to do so more publicly at work is a scare tactic, and perhaps the company was working with them in order to minimise the chances of paying a fine for employing “illegal” workers. (When the law changed, employers became subject to fines for not properly checking if workers had the correct papers to work in the UK.) On this occasion, two guys were marched off the site, never to be seen or heard of again. The interesting thing was that these guys had worked at the factory for twenty years! Why and how would the UKBA find out now that one of them had entered Britain so long ago with a fake French passport? People wondered if Bakkavor had reported them. Rumour had it that over the years, one employee, who held a minor management position, had gotten many people employed without papers. The company had probably turned a blind eye for a long time, as they were happy to be getting a steady stream of good workers through the door. Sensing the

harsher attitude by the state after 2016, Bakkavor got everyone to re-submit their right-to-work papers so they could not be held liable for not doing the proper checks.

This incident happened around the same time that the GMB announced that they would try to win the London Living Wage for Bakkavor employees. In this context, you can see how management tried to use the fears around immigration to try and keep people quiet and acquiescent.

Much of the workforce has a Portuguese passport because they are either from Goa or from a place called Diu. The majority of the Gujarati workforce is from this small island of Gujarat that remained in the possession of the Portuguese from 1535 until 1961. The 2001 Indian census put the population at around 21,000, although half of that probably now live in Wembley and work at Bakkavor! The Portuguese law states that you (and your children and grandchildren) are entitled to a Portuguese passport if you were born in a Portuguese colony before 1961. 7,000 Indians with Portuguese passports arrived in Britain between June 2014 and June 2015, taking the total figure to more than 20,000 – an increase of more than 50% in one year. This would include Goans, and those living in coastal towns further north such as Daman and Diu. A minority of workers are from the state of Gujarat proper, and I asked one of these women if there was any difference between them. She said,

“the [workplace] culture is bad here because of the people from Diu, they don’t know how to talk to each other, they are peasants, and uneducated. They don’t fight back.”

I heard this many times at work. The main union rep at my factory, who was also from Diu, used the workers’ “uneducated” status to justify the fact that he never involved or encouraged workers to fight for their own interests. While it might be true that many peoples’ literacy levels were low, this is obviously not a precondition for workers to know injustice and exploitation when they see it, nor to fight for more. What it did have a big effect on though, was a certain kind of village conservatism that meant that many women still wore traditional clothes, did not learn English, or see much chance to break out of their assigned roles, aside from going out to work with other people like them.

Having a Portuguese passport meant not voting in the Brexit Referendum. Nevertheless, the Bakkavor Big Cheese, Agust Gudmundsson, released a joint statement with the union urging workers to vote to remain in the EU because of the company's reliance on EU labour. Voting to remain 'for the good of the business' was pretty galling just as they'd imposed a new shift system that saw more weekend working for no extra pay, as well as in a situation where Eastern European agency workers were being used to undermine the permanent workers (for example, by giving them rather than permanent workers extra overtime). Why would we want more people to come and work in our place, used as it is in general to put pressure on pay and conditions?

Organising

Over the last three years, six AngryWorkers have passed through the Bakkavor turnstiles. One of us lasted a week. Two lasted two to four months. One of us was there for six months, another for two years. I was there for three and a half years. In such a big workplace with different sites, it was good to have a spread of people who could glean different insights – from the assembly line, to Goods-In, to Hygiene, to Engineering. However, we were not there long enough together to develop a more concerted effort, which would have been needed to engage more workers and make our efforts inside the union more of a force.

Leaflets

We distributed our newspaper, WorkersWildWest, to Bakkavor workers even before I started working there. But after we had built up some knowledge about what was happening inside the factories, we went for a more targeted approach. Soon after I first started there, we started distributing leaflets to workers as a way of sharing information and as a way to incite discussions amongst workers about certain issues. Sometimes, when you become institutionalised in a certain workplace, it is important to take a step back. Focusing in on micro-conflicts is the norm, but unless we look at the bigger context in which those micro- conflicts are happening, we lose the necessary perspective to really change things. Leaflets might seem old school, and you could say doing stuff online would be better. But it was important for us to show workers that we were not some mysterious outsiders, that we were real people. And that if they wanted, they could talk to us when we were at the factory gates. Flooding the factory with physical leaflets was also important symbolically: subversive messages had infiltrated the factory walls and were spreading inside. They were physically on the canteen tables. People had to hold them, and would have something to read together over their tiffin.

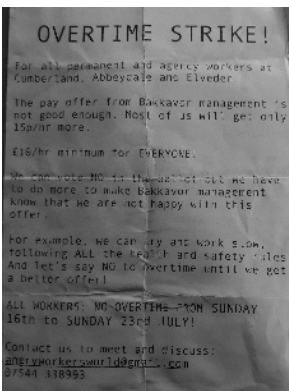
After the first leaflet about the changes resulting from the loss of the Tesco mash contract, we distributed another leaflet, this time outlining the general conditions of work, the problems we all face (including bullying and shouting by the Red Caps), the fact that the London Living Wage had just increased to £9.75 and here we were, still languishing around the minimum wage, which was £7.20 at the time. We called for workers to get in touch so we could discuss what we could do about these things, but the response was muted. We did get some individual phone calls, but no bigger groups came forward.

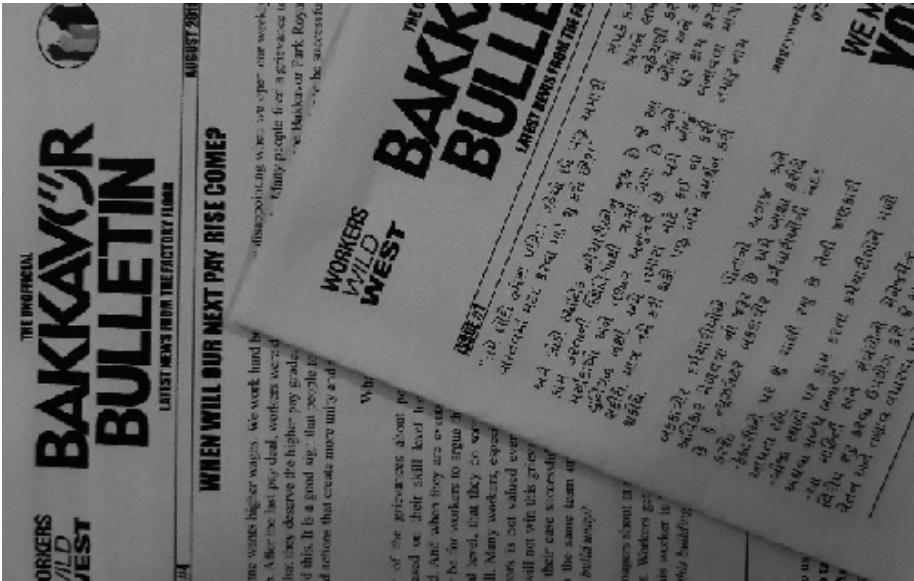
We then wrote a longer article for our newspaper entitled, 'Red Cap Terror on the Moussaka Line', which talked in more detail about the general conditions inside the factories and some ideas of how workers could come together. This article made quite a splash and generated plenty of discussion inside the factories when we distributed it there. Over 4500 people in the UK logged onto the website page. News spread amongst Bakkavor employees across the UK sites, and no doubt, many Bakkavor management

employees also logged on to read the article. Many of my co-workers talked about it and how what was written was all true. The question for us though, was how to turn this existing knowledge into some collective action, especially since the GMB union had now started making some noise about us deserving the London Living Wage.

In our next leaflet in July 2017, we called for an unofficial overtime strike. The 2017 pay negotiations between the union and management had been dragging on for seven months. There was not much information trickling down from the union. In the end, the company offer was just 15p for the base operatives. In light of the union's own weakness in putting up any formal resistance, we called for an overtime strike over a week as a protest. We also suggested people vote to reject the offer in the upcoming ballot and work to health and safety rules to put pressure on management.

Apart from some individuals who might have heeded our call, there wasn't any critical mass or intra-departmental organisation that could enact this overtime strike in any kind of coordinated way. So nothing much came of it. However, the important thing was, that we were sharing information across the sites and giving people an opportunity to discuss a common issue via the leaflet. It was the first time that these workers had been addressed directly in a way that put them at the centre of things, rather than just as passive victims of the pathetic alliance between the management and the union.





Bakkavor rank and file bulletins, which we published in English, Tamil and Gujarati

Bakkavor rank and file bulletin

It was around this time that we decided to quit the leaflets and start writing a more regular rank and file bulletin, fully translated into Gujarati and Tamil for workers. We pooled the knowledge we had accumulated so far and published the first Unofficial Bakkavor Bulletin. The first one was mainly focused on the aftermath of the 2017 pay negotiation where workers had ended up voting for the measly 15p increase. It became clearer to me why this happened when I became a union rep, but at this point, the only conclusion we could draw was that workers themselves had resigned themselves to the outcome and when it came down to it, hadn't been prepared to do anything themselves against the crap pay offer and the union's own failings. We also included news from the various sites and different groups of workers. For example: the reaction of the Hygiene workers to the new pay grading system; a new system of signing in and out for breaks in the Cumberland packing department; and news of the new union official (a fiery guy we'll call Mr. Connolly) who was brought in to replace the previous one who had been banned from site (aka the Bully). More about them later!

The second AngryWorkers Bulletin was distributed in December 2017, this time focusing more on "Using Our Power". We talked about the power workers have organically and how we can use this to our advantage, for example, the idea of working-to-rule. We also mentioned the 2Sisters scandal that had recently broken (where chicken kill dates were changed and meat was picked up off the floor) as a warning of what happens when companies are found out to be cutting corners, which we are all expected to do. We also mentioned the cleaners strikes in central London organised by the UVW union as a good news story, hoping to inspire workers. We also introduced our "Sex Pest of the Month" feature that exposed one of the many sleazy managers throughout the company, along with an article about sexual harassment at work. One male worker had recently been arrested for sexual assault at work so we encouraged women to support each other in the moment and to come together to complain about bad behaviour.

Organising attempts

Organising as a temp worker: pay issues

As a temp worker, getting our correct pay was a constant worry because the agency always seemed to pay us less than we were owed. Once, just before Christmas 2015, the agency payroll cocked up again and paid us all for three days instead of four. Of course, we were pissed off and talked about how the agency was trying to screw us over, especially as some people hadn't even been paid for their induction day yet. A young Polish woman who had been asked by Aggie, the agency full-timer, to sign people in on the weekends – led the charge. She hadn't been paid at all and was the most pissed off. She spoke to everyone as they signed in, letting them know that if we hadn't been paid the extra day by next Friday, we should all go down to the office together on Tuesday. Everyone responded positively to her rallying call and said they were up for it. It felt good and we would have done it too. They did end up paying us the following week though so the march on the office was (unfortunately) called off!

The agency also worked together with the company to keep wage costs down and claw back money by denying agency workers overtime pay. Overtime wasn't paid if you worked your extra hours (anything over 40 hours a week) at another Bakkavor site. The Agency Workers Directive states that this is illegal. If the work you're doing is substantively the same, and is within the same company, (even if they have different sites), you are deemed to be doing continuous work and should get the overtime payment. A couple of us tried to organise a meeting with the agency workers to discuss this issue, especially as it was coming up to Christmas and there would be lots of overtime available. But none of the agency workers came...

Organising with the other forklift drivers: H&S

In Autumn 2016, I became a forklift driver at Elveden, moving from inside to outside the factory. I was so happy that I didn't have to wear a sweaty hairnet anymore or scrabble around looking for some sweaty plastic shoes that always seemed to go missing. When I first started, I noticed that there was only a vague system for when we took our breaks and that there wasn't much communication between the drivers.



Our first pay protest outside the Bakkavor Cumberland site

You started doing one thing and were pulled to do something else. You always had three things to do at the same time. There was hardly any time to stop and talk to the other drivers, it was non-stop chaos. My impression was that men were not asking each other for help. There was no teamwork, which would have required us to communicate more with each other. There also wasn't a culture of going out together after work. And we couldn't even sit and have breaks together because we were supposed to go one at a time. My mission was to try and build some collectivity amongst us, so that we could begin to push back against the problems we faced, the main one being that we were overworked.

Like many drivers, it's easy to become a bit insular as you drive along in your glass and plastic bubble all day long and it takes an effort to break out of it and reach out to other people. Drivers would come and go, some chatty and full of life, fresh from the fields of southern Spain via Romania, others should have retired years ago, half-blind and beaten down. Like in any workplace where agency workers come and go, you ended up waiting to see if they would stick it out before you invested too much time and energy getting to know them and getting them fully up to speed.

The first issue we came together around was health and safety. In August 2017, eight of us signed a joint letter outlining our health and safety concerns. We were sick of the chaos and bad management that put us and others at risk. Plus, we wanted to cover our backs in case something did go

wrong. My factory was pretty old, and not really built for a big factory operation. There was no separation between the forklift drivers, delivery drivers and workers; people would just wander into the road and loading area so we had to be really careful not to reverse into somebody; the road was full of potholes so it was easy for a pallet to come off the forks and kill someone if you went over one; we were forced to go into the super icy freezer with our forklifts when the reach trucks that were supposed to go in there broke down, which was really dangerous because you could slip on the ice, crash into the racking and a pallet could fall on your head; we were unloading deliveries next to the pavement with no barriers to protect passers-by. You couldn't make this shit up!

Once the collectively signed letter landed on our manager's desk – something that had never happened before – he swung into action, promising to take the issues to the factory manager, that he'd repaint the loading area blah blah. Things didn't happen overnight, but with more haranguing over the next twelve months, things slowly did improve. They repainted the loading area to show it was restricted, they set up a barrier so that cars couldn't just drive through our area, they set up barriers between the pavement and the road so that we could unload without pallets and trays dropping on peoples' heads. They set up a zebra crossing for workers, and agreed that forklifts shouldn't be allowed in the freezer or packaging warehouse.

Forklifts in the freezer

This last issue was a constant battle though, mainly because the forklift drivers themselves had to reinforce this rule against pressure and bullying from individual managers. Counterbalance forklifts shouldn't have been allowed in the freezer because of the danger of the fumes in an enclosed space, and their size and manoeuvrability making it difficult to navigate. We agreed we wouldn't go in there and I ended up being the enforcer, getting into quite a few arguments with those drivers who I'd catch going in there. We ended up submitting a formal grievance which went in our favour, although certain managers still didn't adhere to it. I guess the thing is, people weren't used to making decisions collectively as a group of workers, and sticking to them *as a group*. I was confident enough to challenge other drivers when I felt they were letting the side down. But it took repeated attempts to try and maintain some minimum standards. Over time, things did change and we're no longer asked to go in there, even when they're crying for a pallet. But progress was painfully slow. You think you've got somewhere, and then you see a new agency driver break the rule and you have to start all over again. Patience is a virtue, but for workers who are transient, or demoralised, it is often the case that patience is in short supply. Things need to happen immediately, or else it's seen as proof that "nothing changes". This is why the role of a militant at work is to carry on and remind people what has been achieved and to keep pushing forward.

Forklift covers and icy roads

Another thing that took six months was our demand for forklift covers to protect us against the wind, rain, sleet and snow. After one letter, one grievance and much badgering and back and forth over three or four months, we finally got them. But unless there was someone driving this and plugging away at it, keeping the pressure on, it would never have happened. This person was always me. I knew that if I wasn't there, things would quickly slip back to how they used to be, with the drivers being more isolated and not having a longer-term approach to improving things. Some things did happen quickly and spontaneously though. One freezing December morning, I came to work to see the drivers driving at a snail's pace along the icy road. "This isn't safe man!", I complained. "Where's the salt for the road?" We all agreed that it wasn't safe but the managers were not getting the salt on the road as a priority. So I suggested that we all just stop working. We turned off our engines and waited. After a few minutes the "bury-his-head-in-the-sand" manager came out. "What's going on?" "We're not working until you salt this road," we said. And lo and behold, within five minutes, a guy came up the road, dragging a bag of salt.

Making contact with other drivers

In February 2018, we found out that forklift drivers in the Harrow Pizza factory up the road, also owned by Bakkavor, but in a separate bargaining unit, were earning £10.44 per hour. We were pissed off, because we only got £9.28 for doing the same job, having the same union, and being in the same bloody company! I suggested that instead of just complaining, that we go talk to other forklift drivers at the Abbeydale and Cumberland sites so we could band together and demand the same pay as the Harrow Pizza guys. We wouldn't have gotten far if we had made the demand just from our site. For Arvind, the most senior forklift driver, what I suggested might as well have come from Mars. The idea that we could just walk through the underpass and across the North Circular to speak to the drivers at Abbeydale was something that in his eleven years of working there, he had never once contemplated. His first response was, "We're not allowed to do that!" "Why not?", I said. "We could go on our break or after work, there's nothing stopping us." He got flustered and needed some time to come up with an excuse that would let him off the hook. "Let me talk to my solicitor", he said. He made his excuses and after his break he told me that his solicitor had advised him not to do it. I tried to argue with him, but I was angry because his whole cock-and-bull story about phoning his lawyer not only insulted my intelligence but showed that he was a coward, who couldn't just come out and say he was scared. Of course, he knew that it wasn't just an innocuous chat with the forklift driver over the road, he wasn't stupid. He knew it would be the first step in actually organising ourselves. And he didn't want to take the opportunity. I didn't press the issue, and ended up going on my own, but it showed me the limitations people imposed upon themselves and also the fear that was deeply rooted inside this workplace.



Our first pay protest outside Bakkavor Elveden site

Refusing to unload the chemicals

The forklift drivers did have another partial success though, and this time, it wasn't me who decided to push things. In April 2019, our new H&S-conscious Goods-In manager asked us to do chemical training so that we would be safe when we unloaded the cleaning chemical pallets. For the last three years that I had been working there, we had been taking this delivery without having had any kind of training. If there had been a spillage, we would not have known what to do. And now, all of a sudden, because of their request for us to do this training, they had implicitly admitted that we hadn't been properly trained to do this delivery this whole time. The Romanian hot-tempered forklift driver point-blank refused. "Why should I do the training when they're not gonna pay me extra for it?" "Okay," I said, "So are we all saying we're not gonna do it?" This was always my role, to try and make these decisions collectively, rather than just products of individual decisions. We all agreed and we told the manager in his office together. "Well, I can't force you," he said. But of course, he had an alternative plan. He asked the agency guy from the ambient warehouse to do it instead, which he did. We hadn't had time to talk to all the drivers before we made our position clear to management so it was obvious that management would try and undermine us by going straight to the weakest link. We spoke to this guy afterwards and told him that he shouldn't do this task. He said he would try, but it was clear that he had no intention of complying with our wishes. "I'm just agency, they could fire me if I refuse to do it," he said. It was true that he was in a more vulnerable position, and with the lack of a culture of drivers' power that, at the same time, systematically had to contend with agency workers, our appeal that "we would support him if management tried to get rid of him as a result" lacked legitimacy. The result was that all the regular forklift drivers still no longer take the chemical delivery, and every time it arrives, this scab agency guy comes out to do it.

The particular financial and personal situations of people will affect their ability to fight back. As an agency worker, it's true, you have less rights and they can get rid of you easily. Arvind hoovers up the overtime so he can support his kids through university. The Romanian hothead has a second job as a painter/decorator, so he has more freedom to shout back and refuse

to take orders. The freezer guy needs to bring his wife and kids over from Tunisia and so he's on board with group decisions but reluctant to make any formal complaints. These issues cannot easily be batted away with a simple call for unity, although of course, all working class people will ultimately have to overcome these individual difficulties should they decide they want to fight. The question is how to accommodate and work within peoples' personal and financial parameters, (which could include their age, how close they are to their pension, their immigration and employment status etc.), at the same time as pushing people towards a more collective approach that will eventually engender a struggle and culture of power and autonomy at work.

Organising in the union

So, about a year in, we had come up against a bit of a brick wall. The leaflets and bulletins we had distributed so far hadn't yet yielded a visible, collective response. We also found it difficult to get information that, aside from our own experiences, wasn't just based on gossip, rumour and the inevitable Chinese whispers that are part-and-parcel of a (non-English speaking) large workforce. We didn't know what was happening behind-the-scenes between the union and management because the communication with the union members was so bad. Our general critique of trade unions still stood: that they essentially exist to manage the relationship between labour and capital rather than overcome it. But rather than rely on left-communist dogma, we wanted practical experience within the big unions to see how things actually operated. We had some practical questions: was it possible to instrumentalise the union apparatus to create some space for workers' self-organisation? Could we get workers to make concrete demands of the union? How do we foster workers' confidence within the relatively safer space of the union whilst not spreading the illusion that unions will not just fix things for us? It is relatively easy to organise with the workers immediately around you but without links to the other sites and widening the scope outside a singular department, things get stuck. Becoming a union rep was one way to try and forge these links, at the same time, we kept our AngryWorkers Bulletin going alongside it as an independent voice.

I had become a GMB member as soon as I got my permanent contract, but my experiences with them so far had been pretty diabolical. Their handling of the 2017 pay negotiations had showed no willingness to use the power of workers to strike and fight for a decent pay increase. They had ended up recommending the crap pay offer after having said they would fight for the London Living Wage. Afterwards, the union strategy had been to submit individual grievances to challenge individual members' skill grade allocation, hoping to overwhelm the company's HR team. Of course, for all the assembly line women who had been pushed onto the lowest pay grade, there was no room for them to argue their case and win. This was because the framework itself that set out which particular job tasks belonged to which grades was never called into question. It was also a

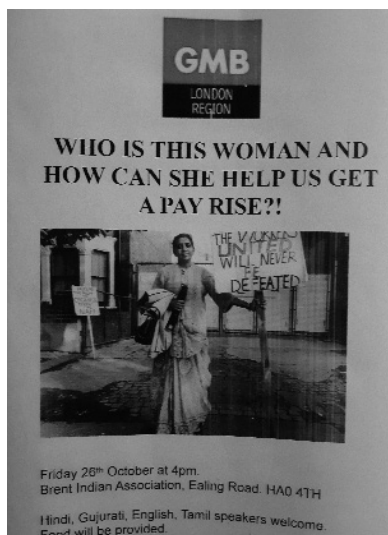
missed opportunity to build on some existing collective efforts, for example, some groups of women and Hygiene workers had submitted their own complaint letters. It took over a year for the company to get through the grievances, meanwhile, workers got bored and demoralised, and many of them lost their case. It individualised the situation so that people were just fighting for more money for themselves rather than questioning the whole rationale that divided the workers and which was based on totally subjective and sexist assumptions about what is “harder” work.

I had also clashed with the union during the final ballot for the 2017 pay negotiations because I saw that they were noting down the people who had voted to reject the company’s crap pay offer. No such thing as secret balloting here! When I kicked up a fuss and said I wanted to take a photo of their markings, they quickly ripped up that piece of paper. Some women even told me that the union rep had filled out their ballot papers himself. The fact that this was happening openly and that these women just sat back and accepted the situation made it obvious that both the workers and the union were weak.

On top of this, the reps were all Red Caps who also sat on the company talking-shop forum, called the SEF (Staff Engagement Forum). There was an obvious conflict of interest in terms of their position as managers over most of the union members, who were largely regular workers. No surprise then that they were seen as being close to management, as well as ineffectual based on the fact that in the ten years since the union had achieved formal recognition, most workers were still hovering around the minimum wage, speed of work had increased, and contractual terms were largely the statutory minimum. It seemed absurd to me that you could be a member of both the union and the SEF given the fact that management were actively trying to beef up the SEF in order to undermine the union further. For example, issues that the union raised such as bullying or doing a health and safety walk-around were quashed because the “SEF has it in hand”, never mind that they were often also the bullies that make people cut corners! After I had become a rep, I pushed the idea that union reps should have to choose whether they were a union rep or a SEF rep, but the official union advice was that they could not compel them to give one up. Never

mind that it reinforced the idea that the union was ‘in management’s pocket’ and therefore undermined the trust and credibility in the union.

Those Red Caps felt more tied to the SEF than the union because: they were paid overtime to attend SEF meetings as they were held after the regular shift times; they would get time off to attend any extra meetings if they were in work time; they would sometimes get to go to special events like company awards ceremonies and trainings, all with nice lunches and dinners; and they were made to feel as if their voices mattered.



A GMB leaflet to advertise the meeting with ex-Grunwick’s workers

They led social events like free pizza days. They were sometimes asked to speak at canteen briefings alongside management to show their supposed importance. They felt they had more of a voice and status as a SEF rep than as union reps. It was particularly galling when I’d see them trotting into the office for the SEF meetings after they’d made up some shit excuse to not attend an equivalent union one. Because of the interchangeability of the union and SEF reps, they had become management’s co-managers in rolling back terms and conditions. One example was when they agreed to stand with management at a joint briefing to announce that volumes were down so the company was forcing people to take their holiday days. Their

justification in standing with management was that they wanted to process to be fair and not impact negatively on GMB members.

Finally, the union's general lack of communication and disengagement with the membership throughout this period of the 2017 pay negotiations showed that it was a closed circle. It was common knowledge that the union official, convener, the main shop steward at my factory, PJ, and some others, were related to each other. They made decisions between themselves and backed each other up. It would be extremely difficult to challenge this power.

So as you can see, there wasn't much to attract me to the union and all of its corrupt goings-on. But as luck would have it, a newcomer arrived who wedged open some space within the union. We thought it was worth it to become a rep, perhaps rather opportunistically, if only to be able to be more public and visible in our efforts to try and shake things up.

Connolly's arrival – a new chapter?

A new union official burst onto the scene to replace the previous official who had been banned by Bakkavor (the Bully). The reason management had given for banning the Bully was his rude and bullying style in negotiation meetings, although that hadn't got us a good pay deal in the end. The new guy's arrival opened up further possibilities of pushing a more radical line within the union, not least because he was an ex-blacklisted construction worker, and he wasn't related to anyone! On the face of it though, Mr. Connolly was an odd choice for replacement. He might have had many years of experience of organising with burly builders, and with many successes along the way, but these Bakkavor workers were a world away from the confident and militant culture of construction workers. There was no culture here of militancy, absolute zero, so it would need to be built from scratch. There was also the language barrier. He would not be able to communicate in depth with the Gujarati, Tamil and Romanian workforce, meaning he would have to rely heavily on the team of reps, who, in turn, had never learned to rely on themselves. One thing this guy did have though, was some fire and class consciousness.

The first meeting he organised with workers saw him give an impassioned speech about the relationship between the worker and the boss. He talked about the natural impulse of the bosses being to exploit the

workers, and that workers have to stand together, that a union can't do anything without worker support, and that improved conditions can only come through struggle. Despite saying that workers have more in common with each other due to their work conditions than their racial or cultural differences, he pitched the banning of the Bully as an example of Bakkavor's racism, something that was unfounded and utilised simply to rile up the workers. It is easier to be outraged that you're being treated badly because you are brown, rather than the fact that you're simply on the bottom rung of the labour market with little English or confidence to fight back. He also said: he would recruit more reps to make sure all the shifts were covered and that he would personally train them; that he wanted to build a more shop floor focused union; that the GMB had fucked up in its handling of Bakkavor in the past and that he had been sent in to fix this; that the last pay increase was a joke and that he does not want to be in the same position this time next year, reintroducing the idea of fighting for the London Living Wage. He called up AngryWorkers, having seen one of our leaflets, and talked about Bakkavor as the "Fortress" of Park Royal, that a win here would open the gates for higher wages across the whole of the area. So he had big ambitions. He was also forthright in his assertion that he wouldn't have accepted the last company pay offer of a 15p increase and that they were in a mess now that the company was, in many cases, arbitrarily appointing people into certain skill grades without any consultation.

Rep election rigging

In any case, at the start of 2018, there was a whiff of hope in the air. As the leaflets had not born much fruit from the workers, we had this new militant guy, and union membership was relatively high for a private sector company (around 45%), I decided to put my name forward as a rep. Maybe the safer space of a union would encourage workers to come to a meeting rather than an anonymous call to “get in touch” from the AngryWorkers? It was also a way to see how the internal structures of the union worked, and to what extent it was possible to use their resources, as well as legitimate and visible status, to build some workers’ power on the shop floor.

The first thing Connolly did was call new rep elections. These were the first rep elections in eight years (!) and the incident unearthed some interesting and disturbing dynamics of the union that shed further light on the preceding pay ballot which got workers’ support, despite it not being in the workers’ interests. There was a big show of interest in the election at my factory (not so on the other sites) and around 22 people put their names forward for ten positions. This included some Hygiene guys and Tamil workers, historically under-represented in the union despite their numbers because it was basically controlled by members of the same Gujarati family. No notice was given of the ballot taking place, people didn’t know who they were voting for because there were just names, no photos, and candidates weren’t given the opportunity to canvas and tell people why they wanted to be reps. It was like voting in the dark. Nothing so unusual there, but after trust in the union was already so low after the botched pay negotiations, this was a crucial missed opportunity for some good people to be elected. In this information vacuum, the incumbent union rep at my factory, PJ, hand-picked the reps he wanted to win a position – all either relatives or Red Caps with a decent level of English, oh, and me! – and wrote the numbers down on a piece of paper so that people would vote for them. When the results came in, everyone on his list got a rep position. I came second. In the furore that followed, a small group of us called for a new election. Connolly agreed. This time we asked for candidates to submit a photo and a short description as to why they wanted to become a rep. This offer, however, was only taken up by a few of us. For the second election ballot, I was taken off PJ’s “special list” – of course, he had made another

one but this time wasn't stupid enough to write it down on scraps of paper. I managed to cling on with my own votes. Unfortunately, the workers continued to let him dictate the results to them, so it ended up that still no Hygiene workers or non-managers (apart from me) made it through. More about the aftermath of all this later, but for now, it's important to say that this episode showed that workers weren't used to acting autonomously in light of the dependent relationship they had with PJ.

Another important outcome of the election was that two of the women who worked on the assembly lines, and who had initially been involved in the process of getting union recognition ten years earlier did not make it onto PJ's all-important list. They were angry, although I doubt that they did much in the many years they had been reps, otherwise, surely, they would have got the support of their workmates, even if they didn't make the "list", like me. This meant that any meaningful links with the assembly line women (excluding Red Caps) was lost within the union. Their resentment led them to join the SEF, the company forum that was used to undermine the union. Their hostility towards PJ and the union became one and the same thing.

In February 2018, we published an AngryWorkers Bulletin, which focused on the union election-rigging debacle so at least the workers on the late shift and across the sites knew there had been some challenge to custom union practices.

The other reps

So I had managed to cling onto my win despite PJ re-rigging it the second time around. The price of trying to make things more “democratic” did two things: it meant everyone now knew me as a possible challenger to PJ’s corruption; and that not only had I made an enemy of PJ, but also his friends and relatives (who were also reps and variously scattered throughout the factory). This had the effect of undermining any future collaboration with the reps who immediately recognised that I wasn’t about to “join their cosy club”. It was pretty obvious that I was on a mission to disrupt the culture of apathy and hierarchy that they had helped maintain. At the main Cumberland site that had the most workers, there were only two “active” reps, playing fast and loose with the word ‘active!’ They sometimes came to pay negotiation meetings (where one would promptly fall asleep) and had been re-elected uncontested because nobody else had come forward. They thought workers were illiterate and uneducated and gave no help whatsoever other than to feel offended that I had come in and started questioning their previous union “strategy”, again, playing fast and loose with the word “strategy!” At Abbeydale there were three “active” reps, who, over time, got a bit more on-board with the idea of not bowing down to management, but again, they had no faith in the workers’ ability to fight, nor ever helped give out leaflets or organise anything.

Then there was the convenor, who had his own office in the Cumberland site. We knew him from newspaper distribution, he would always take a copy of the paper, walking stiffly in his suit. He looked like a manager. He had been in that position since the union gained recognition in 2008. A convenor’s job is to do union stuff for the company full-time. They are supposed to play a co-ordinating role for the reps, deal with management and be the first point of contact if a rep needs help or advice. He later told me that he never wanted that position, that he had been approached by the management to put himself forward for this role. He resisted, no doubt because his English was crap and he had literally no idea what he was doing. Over the last ten years, his hair had turned grey and he had become the management’s bitch. He wasn’t an evil guy, just massively incompetent. Talking to him and expecting a clear or concise answer was an exercise in futility. In the whole time I knew him he never once organised anything, nor

did he ever take any initiative. Even simple things like offering union members free English classes was fraught. He wanted to ask the management's permission to distribute a leaflet in the canteen that said "Free English Classes" on it – hardly the winner of the "Subversive Message of the Year" award. He would try every delaying tactic he could think of to not get people signed up, probably because it would entail him having to get his skinny arse out of his office and actually talk to workers. He had spent most of his working life trying to blag his way through a job he had literally no clue how to do. Every new idea I had was filibustered by meaningless or undecipherable drivel, with a few barriers to accomplishment thrown in for good measure. I could literally feel the life draining out of me when he spoke, the human equivalent of a fire blanket. From now on, we'll call him the Wetbag.

First steps

I had a million ideas to fix this broken union. We needed regular rep meetings to discuss members' concerns and what we were doing about them. We needed a strategy meeting to decide our plan of action for the next round of pay talks (the fallout from the previous round had taken so long to address, that they had quickly come round again). We needed regular notices to inform members about what the union was doing. I needed facility time (work time allocated to union activities), which PJ was hoovering up. But achieving these basic things proved to be a total nightmare. Any idea I had was not reacted to, and when I forced the issue, it was clear that nobody was interested or motivated to work with me. PJ's tactic was to maintain a monkish vow of silence in the face of any kind of conflict or disagreement that, however infuriating it was for me, proved to be pretty effective for him.

Even if PJ hadn't hated my guts and seen everything as a personal attack that was undermining him, I got the sense that the reps couldn't even imagine that we could organise things ourselves, that we didn't have to sit around and wait to be told to do something specifically.

From the start it was a battle. I tried many times in the first three or four months to have regular rep meetings, which should be the absolute basic, but no reps would show up and PJ would "see to a member" rather than sit

and talk to me. I eventually had to give up because short of dragging them there, I didn't have much choice. One victory was getting the key to the union noticeboard from PJ's clingy paws so I could put whatever I wanted up there, but there was limited viewing capacities as management had cleverly stuck the board right at the back of the canteen during one of their reorganisations. The women especially never went back there as they always sat at the front of the canteen, the men occupying the back. So I took to putting up copies of any leaflets or notices in the women's locker rooms too, things like notices for free taxis to other sites; pay negotiation updates; anything interesting that came out of the meetings with management. In the beginning I would write up notices and circulate them amongst the reps to ask for feedback or see if they wanted to add anything or translate it. All I ever got back in return was a wall of silence. So I stopped circulating them beforehand and just put them up as and when I wanted. I think it was a shock for people to see me taking matters into my own hands. I wasn't going to sit around and wait for an official GMB communique to go around as they surfaced once in a blue moon and when they did, they were written in such convoluted language that nobody could make head nor tail of them. I could never get any of the Gujarati reps to translate anything for me, but the one Tamil rep would sometimes help me if I asked him directly. I had to ask other members to help me translate into Gujarati, which wasn't a bad thing, but certainly made things harder than they needed to be.

A couple of months into my term, I circulated a strategy plan. It seemed to me that we needed a longer-term plan of how to develop the union, although as I said, it became evident that nobody else would engage in it, let alone try and participate in doing any of the things in it! By "strategy" here, I mean: thinking of ways to ask workers to push for independent space inside the union; steps to be taken by the union to encourage workers to participate with their own issue and ideas; but at same time preparing them for the inevitable limits and likelihood that things have to go beyond the union.

Workers' meetings

The first big problem I identified was workers' confidence, which was low. This was a biggie and was as much of a problem at the end of my two years as a rep than the beginning. My suggestion was to try and organise meetings

after work, advertising them as meetings where no Red Caps would be present so that people could talk freely about their concerns and demands. My idea was to have meetings geared towards certain groups of workers starting off with women and Hygiene workers – the groups that were most let down after the last pay talks. The idea was that it would give people firstly, an opportunity to tell the union what they want to change and therefore, what the union needs to focus on and secondly, a chance for the union to give different groups of workers practical tips on how to build unity and confidence amongst their co-workers, based on the information they give us. For example, to reiterate to process controllers that they should never fake the paperwork or package food over the specified temperatures (which some women had been fired for doing, no doubt under the pressure to get the job done at any cost by a manager above them). We could even have role-played acts of refusal. If the pace of work is too fast and lots of stuff is falling on the floor, we could have suggested to line workers how to use this to try and get Line Leaders to slow the line down. If team members are regularly doing duties not specified to their skill grade we could help them formulate a way to refuse. My thinking was, that without this kind of shop floor militancy being developed, without workers feeling that they had any rights and that they could assert them, that further down the line, it was unlikely that workers would feel confident enough in themselves and each other to actually wage a real struggle against the company.

I was given the green light to try and set up these meetings by Connolly. I first started with the Hygiene workers. I had become good friends with a Hygiene worker at my factory, an older Tamil guy who had previously lived in Germany but had moved to London to give his kids a better education(!) He had put himself forward as a union rep candidate and we had shared all the election rigging turmoil together, even though he hadn't won. So I had at least one ally. The Hygiene guys had been grumbling a lot, making the argument that their work entailed undergoing chemical (COSSH) training, which should have set them on the semi-skilled grade rather than the "unskilled" one. Management had even at some point started advertising Hygiene vacancies externally for the semi-skilled rate but had quickly backtracked when it was discovered. I advertised the meeting as best I could and

it was a pretty good turnout. There were around fifteen Hygiene workers who attended, mainly from the Elveden and Abbeydale sites, mainly Tamil guys. I wanted people to participate and asked them what their main problems were and how we can use the health and safety rules against the company to put pressure on them. Workers talked about bad managers, being treated with little respect, managers asking them to do unsafe things, no refresher trainings, being overworked and having to train agency people all the time. This was the first time that the union had specifically asked about Hygiene workers' needs and you could tell that people felt it was unusual that they were being asked to do most of the talking. Usually, the Bully would have done most of the talking and this workshop style, common on the left, was not normal in this kind of setting. People participated but with the language barriers, some people dominated the discussion. I suggested that they would have to use their own knowledge of how to best put pressure on the management and start standing up for themselves, which people discussed in smaller groups. At the end, for next steps, I asked them to get hold of their job descriptions and some paperwork setting out the cleaning rules they had to abide by, and to share their experiences as they arose on the WhatsApp group.

At this point, these workers knew that others had felt the necessity to come to such a meeting, so they weren't alone. They had the contact details of each other and could have started to discuss with each other on the WhatsApp group. They had a task to go away and do so we could build on something for next steps. But none of this was taken up. Nobody posted anything on the WhatsApp group, even though I did continue to post things and encouraged feedback and contribution. After a few weeks, thinking they needed a more concrete proposal to get behind, I suggested doing a Hygiene workers' protest to let management know their strength of feeling but there was a non-committal response to that too. Nobody, as far as I know, took up any of the suggestions that came out of the meeting either, for example, stopping using your personal phone at work which made it easy for managers to contact you. And nobody took up the request to supply the union with the documents we needed to move ahead. After a few months of trying to push things forward with their concerns specifically, I felt that things had fizzled out before they had even started. For probably a

whole lot of reasons (perhaps language barriers, being afraid of losing their jobs, not trusting each other, and with the expectation that the union would just sort things out on their behalf), they decided to not go forward for their own interests. Some of them did come to future union meetings though.

I tried again with a meeting for women on the assembly line where I invited two of the former Grunwick strikers (see west London history in the appendix). They were also older Gujarati women, who could perhaps better relate to the women in my factory. After a lot of promotion, in my factory at least, very few women came, the bulk of the people actually being male Hygiene workers from the previous meeting. We showed some film footage of the strike and the women spoke about their experiences. There was decent discussion up until the Bully started lecturing the workers and taking up all the space. One question I raised was why more women had not attended. The common reasons are that they don't have time, or are more scared than other groups of workers. This seems like a bit of a dead-end because unless women make time, unless they demand full participation, the union can only do so much. If women had shown any spark of interest, we could have offered free childcare, but this offer alone wouldn't have been enough to break the structural reasons behind women's lack of interest and participation.

The meetings allowed workers to come together and to start having discussions about their situation. This had never happened before and opened up the union to people who were not the usual (related) suspects. It also was a rebuttal to all the disgruntled workers who kept repeating that, "the union never does anything." It was a change of direction and we hoped people could see we were trying to do something different. But with no other help or support from the reps in promoting these kinds of meetings (although some female reps did attend the second meeting), I was already feeling overstretched.

Grievances

Other ways of increasing workers' confidence was through the grievance procedure, despite its obvious limitations. You are only usually working with individuals, and common complaints, such as bullying by a certain manager, almost never garnered a collective response from workers. I did

take up a couple of grievances by members who complained about bullying managers (where in one instance the complaint was heard but nothing came of it, and in the other, the guy got the wages he should have earned had he not been sent home by a bullying manager, but again, nothing happened to the manager). I encouraged women to take out grievances against bullies but they normally didn't want to bring things formally out into the open. One woman was suddenly being forced to stay for her whole night shift, despite having a verbal, long-standing agreement with another manager to leave early to breastfeed her baby. After I had spoken to her, written a grievance letter for her, and arranged the Wetbag to come in as a translator, she cancelled the grievance meeting at the last minute because she got scared. Well, she didn't tell me she was scared. Instead she just said, everything was fine now, her baby was sleeping fine and she didn't need the meeting. When I questioned her further, she quickly gave the phone to her husband who put the phone down on me. Turns out, she did still need to leave earlier but hadn't wanted to proceed with the meeting out of fear. I had tried my best to help her, but she had to make the decision to fight herself.

Another woman had become practically suicidal after continually being singled out for unfair treatment. Her male manager was putting her on different jobs more frequently than the other women. When the manager was choosing people for overtime, he would tell her in front of everyone else that she shouldn't bother coming. Not only did she think it was fruitless to ask for the other women's support in these moments, she was also certain that they wouldn't agree to even verify her account. In the end, she was satisfied when they allowed her to move department and didn't want to take the issue any further. I got people off their sickness absence warnings by, in some cases appealing, and sometimes pointing out that the injury was sustained at work, or that the company had failed in their duty of care by not supporting workers when issues were raised previously. I supported workers when they went to the company doctor, helping them push back against his sly ways of either getting them back to work or keeping them out. Where we won, these workers could at least see that there was some scope to win small victories. The best case was when an older Tamil woman who, in the beginning, would only meet me down the road for fear of being

seen talking to me, or had been forced to wet herself after her manager wouldn't let her go to the toilet, after a year of my support, found she was able to deal with manager aggression situations on her own. One bitch manager cornered her and tried to drag her into a meeting for an absence disciplinary. Proudly and angrily, she told me that she had said, "No! I'm not going! You have problem, see HR or talk to the union! I'm not going with you!" I felt like this was a real turning point for her, which is what I would have wanted to see on a bigger scale across the workforce, especially amongst the women.

Challenging Bakkavor management was a tall order in these theatre pieces we call "grievances" and "disciplinaries". Their vicious tactics to intimidate workers needed a robust response. I was the only rep who could provide this because good English speaking and writing skills were essential to ward off their attacks. I'm not saying that all reps have to be native speakers. But the level of written and verbal communication amongst the other reps was so low, that aside from doing mass worker actions, fighting back effectively through their own procedures would have been impossible without this language confidence. Management would walk all over you, no problem. Protecting members under whistleblowing agreements, threatening discrimination and being persistent was the only way to make them back off. None of the other reps ever did this. With Mr. Connolly backing me up, the management were now being forced to tread more carefully. It is with pride that I say that all HR staff at my factory ended up leaving after a short time. You'd have to be a real psycho to deal with the contradictions of that job.

One collective action did come out of a grievance though. After workers on the four-day late shift were complaining about the fact that, "the union doesn't do anything", I got them to sign and submit a collective grievance about their main issue: that they were paid 15 minutes less break than the equivalent workers on the five-day late shift. The late shift workers were generally bolder and younger. After getting no response from management after an initial meeting, we organised a walk on the boss to hand in a petition signed by about 30 people. We assembled half an hour before the shift and, with flags waving and Connolly on the megaphone, a group of about 25 of us we marched to the main office. The factory manager was

furious, telling us, “we’d crossed a line” by bringing the flags to the office but we made our point. Afterwards, we got another meeting with management about the issue so at least we could move to the appeal stage.

Overtime rota

When I became a union rep, I suggested that management set up a transparent overtime rota so as to undermine the system of favouritism that kept workers compliant. Management initially agreed and said they would trial it. But it ended up getting kicked into the long grass because suddenly we were in a period of mass-overtime, where everyone could get overtime if they wanted it, apparently. Then they said an overtime rota wouldn’t be useful because there was no overtime at all. Like Goldilocks, things were never “just right” for the roll-out of the rota. At this point, I stopped attending union meetings with management, as it was clear they were a farce.

Street protest

There were some bigger opportunities to galvanise the workforce. Three women were permanently moved from one department to another, without consultation or warning. It was a big deal for them because after so many years in one place, the only thing that has kept you sane was the friendships and familiarity of your co-workers. The union, well, Connolly, sprung into action. He organised a protest outside work in a lunch break, complete with megaphone. He railed against the company, who had shown zero respect for these workers. He called workers down from the canteen to support their sisters. Again, only a handful of men supported these women. They were eventually reinstated in their original departments, and these women would have to face their workmates who could have been in the same position as them, but who had not come out to support them. Fear is a big factor that cannot be underestimated, and I guess the fact that it could have been someone else next who was designated to move department, stopped women from coming out to join the protest. At least they saw some positive result from the action, and that nobody had been fired or victimised as a result. The question is whether next time, they decide to overcome their fear, and only time would tell.

English classes

This should have probably been one of the first things I did. Instead, it wasn't until the end of 2019 that I got the ball rolling. I wanted the union to organise English language classes in order that workers could build up some basic language skills to start answering back to managers. The idea was that learning language skills would be practical, based on workers' needs inside the factory, for example, insisting they had to go to the toilet or explaining their symptoms if they felt unwell. Originally, I wanted to organise the classes myself because at this point I knew better than to rely on anyone else to do anything. I lined up the teachers and venue, but was then told to refer it to the full time GMB Learning Officer. At this point I knew everything would start taking longer as the cogs of the bureaucracy start to creak. I did my bit: I got around 25 sign-ups from my factory (none of the other reps bothered at their sites) and got workers to fill out the necessary form for an assessment day. People actually turned up for the

assessment too. Finally, we were offering members something useful, practical and free. Then for weeks I heard nothing. Apparently, the company had now given permission to have the meetings in work time, although this information didn't trickle down to me, despite my having done all the donkey work so far. Members were not informed of developments either. At this point, I was so fed up of the attitude towards reps and members by union full-timers that, after sending a final email recommending that members be at least informed of the reasons for the delay, I washed my hands of it. I had done my bit. It remains to be seen whether the English classes will happen or not, but it's fair to say that no other reps on the ground will be willing to coordinate anything.

Engaging with the members

The second part of my strategy was addressing the problem of peoples' confidence in the union.

After the terrible conclusion of the 2017 pay negotiations that saw a measly 15p pay increase above the National Minimum Wage (NMW), (which was quickly superseded by the increase in the 2018 NMW), plus the outstanding pay grievances that took well over a year to resolve, in many cases unsuccessfully, trust in the union was at an all-time low. People were cancelling their membership and had no faith that things could change for the better. In light of the fact that workers were unwilling or unable to make decisive steps themselves to better their situation, helping to restore this faith in a collective pay campaign was a necessary step to get a good result in the future pay talks. If the workers' meetings had worked as I intended them to do, this would have gone a long way in building confidence amongst workers to stand up for themselves and each other. The fact that the union had facilitated this and supported them in those collective steps, would have shown the importance of the union – not as a separate entity, but more like a social relation. However, as I've already said, things didn't really work out that way.

I had better luck with communications with members. The union didn't communicate much so I filled the vacuum with regular notices about recent news and developments. It hadn't even crossed the reps' minds that they could have taken this initiative. The presence of our unofficial Bakkavor

Bulletin did also end up pushing Connolly to publish a union newsletter, which was posted out to members, sharing news from the different sites and including some victories for example, the fact that we had got some members' jobs back. This was a huge step forward, but didn't trickle down to the other reps taking any independent steps themselves.

Natural leader?

The union was synonymous with one guy in my factory, PJ. In various organising models, he would be the “natural leader”. He knew a lot of people, they knew him. He could swing any election to his chosen outcome. He capitalised on peoples' poor English to carve out a mediator role for himself. Even though everyone knew he was in management's pocket, they still went to him because he could speak their language and had management “influence”. It would have been impossible to turn him. He personally would have too much to lose. His regular job in the meat room was tedious and I don't blame him for wanting to escape this work by putting in more union hours. Management gave him a whole day per week for his union (facility) time where he could sit in the canteen pretend to be doing something important. Managers liked him because he was a convenient buffer between them and the workers, and was no threat to them.



Managers instructed to stand outside Bakkavor Abbeydale to intimidate workers

He could walk around with his big union diary stuck under his arm, with access to the management offices, and this gave him a privileged feeling in a workplace where dignity and value was in extremely short supply. He wasn't a dimwit. He saw a situation he could exploit for his advantage based on his role as spokesperson for the migrant worker, someone the higher officials of the union were forced to rely on because of the language and cultural barriers that are so often bridged by "community" middlemen. I doubt very much that he saw himself as a management lackey. He would often exploit them by getting free time off for himself for this and that, going to this and that meeting, helping with this or that social event. Even with the union, he used the situation to his advantage, charging them £500 a pop to turn up to union pay protests like the ones the GMB organised at Heathrow Airport with his dhol (Indian drum). He had carved out a nice niche for himself, and gave the union credibility that their activist base was diverse and representative of their membership. All sides were benefitting.

PJ was also backed up by the Bully, one of his relatives, and the full-time union organiser who had been in charge of the Bakkavor negotiations before he was side-lined by Bakkavor management. He still had his GMB office in the Brent Indian Association where we had our branch meetings and was always lurking around trying to undermine Connolly, his replacement whilst pretending to be on our side. He is a "community leader" of sorts – he had been organising in the area for many years and not only did he have access to the union's Gujarati's members through his familial hold on the branch, he is also a local landlord. He started as a factory worker before he got his union position, but has used his increasing power as "community middleman" to shore up his position.

In books like, "No Shortcuts", that advocate a deep organising model rather than a shallow campaigning one, part of the strategy is to recruit figures with a so-called "natural" authority like PJ and the Bully. You might get one or two workers who genuinely have an informal leader status amongst their workmates and who don't sell out, but as a general rule, it is always these people who are either picked out by management to rise above the rest, or use their experience to advance their career. Their "natural" leader status is solidified into actual leadership status conferred by management (or union) through the various perks and privileges that they

get. Why would you spend your time trying to convert these people to your side, when the chances are that they would never risk their position for the nebulous and unreliable “worker’s struggle?”

Instead, in whatever small ways I could, I tried to open up the union to more people. Whenever there was a union meeting, I did a short and simple write-up and shared it with workers. Whenever a disciplinary issue was affecting more than one member, I wrote it up to let workers know they weren’t alone. I tried to translate everything I wrote into Gujarati and Tamil. Whenever a member came to me with an individual problem, I made sure we talk openly in the canteen in front of others. I said I would write grievance letters but if it was a collective issue, they would need to get ten co-workers to sign the letter too and some of them would have to accompany me to the meeting. Generally, the response was good, especially amongst the Tamil workers who did not have the same language dependencies on PJ. One older Tamil lady whose English was limited to a few words, managed to convey that she needed free taxis when they were sent to other sites when work was slow. She got ten signatures in three days. We submitted the letter, won our demand and a notice went up in different languages telling everyone what they were entitled to. Of course, the next hurdle was the women actively asking for it in the moment that they were being sent by managers but my influence here was more limited. Still, taxis did become more frequent and workers knew that they had played an important role in bringing this about.

Building up for Round 2

In August 2018, we published our fourth AngryWorkers Bulletin. Preparation for the new round of pay negotiations would be starting soon so we used the opportunity to remind people how and why things went wrong last time and how we could change things this time around. We focused on the idea of “unity”. It’s a word most workers know, and many bemoan the lack of it in my workplace. But how exactly do we achieve “unity?” We had some practical proposals that used workers’ actions as the starting point. So we asked: does taking out individual grievances build collective force? Does calling other workers lazy and competing against them build unity? Many workers who had been at the company a long time wanted seniority pay. We questioned whether putting all our efforts into fighting to get older

staff a few pennies more than the newer people would build unity. When a worker is shouted at and bullied by a manager, we said that other workmates aren't standing together and supporting this worker openly. There were many cases where, especially women, would go on sick leave, worried and stressed. People gossiped and blamed the bullied worker. We asked, 'Does this build unity?' Big managers shout at Red Caps. Red Caps shout at workers. Workers get stressed and turn on each other. "This worker is lazy!" "This worker is too slow!" Many people have this attitude at work, or at least, say these things without thinking. We asked, "Is this building unity?"

The 2019 Pay Campaign

I knew that if things had continued as they were, that the union would never be in a strong enough position to bargain for a substantial pay increase. I prepared myself for a tough ride ahead.

Pay negotiation date changed

The first meeting we had with management about the pay was in February 2019. The pay claim negotiations always usually began at the start of the year but this time, the union proposed pushing it back to April from now on, as this would coincide with the increase in the NMW. The union's reasoning was that any agreed pay increase should always be on top of the NMW, rather than it being negotiated a few months before, only for it to be eaten up by the governmental increase. The management agreed for their own reasons, namely Brexit uncertainty. But from that point on, they always calculated their pay offers from the starting point of the wages that existed before the NMW increase. So for example, even after the NMW had increased to £8.21, they calculated that their offer of a 10p pay increase was equivalent to a 4.8% increase rather than the 1.2% increase it actually was, because they calculated the difference from the £7.93 starting point, which was the pay before the NMW increase. I guess they thought workers were stupid enough to not realise that 10p was 10p.

Anyway, we agreed to start all future pay negotiations in April. But we still had to agree on the increase from January to March. The management offered 2%. The reps rejected this offer, asking instead for a 3.5% increase, which was basically £8.21, what the NMW would be in three months' time.

If they could afford to pay £8.21 in April, why couldn't they start a few months earlier? Start as we mean to go on, right? Connolly disagreed, saying that we should get this over and done with and prepare for the big fight in April. Maybe he was right, but the thought of capitulating on this at the very beginning seemed like a bad sign to workers about the union's intentions so we ended up recommending to members that they reject this offer. We balloted with a box in the canteen with a woefully out-of-date membership list, and 97% of workers agreed with us. This negotiation was then carried forward into the pay negotiations proper which started a few months later.

Pay claim proper

In April, the union had to submit its pay claim. In order to decide what we should be asking for, we needed to ask the members. This was an opportunity to assess workers' (and reps!) level of interest and engagement. We decided to call a workers' meeting about the pay claim at the Brent Indian Association on Ealing Road. All of the union's meetings outside of work were arranged at the GMB office here, where you're liable to see 80% of Bakkavor employees walk past on a Saturday afternoon. But, like all union meetings outside of work, attendance was generally low. Not many people came to this meeting so we didn't make much headway.

I suggested we do a pay survey and ask members at work instead. It wasn't just a survey though, it was a political intervention. I didn't just want to ask workers how much money we should be asking for. I also wanted to situate this demand within a broader picture: what were comparable groups of workers earning, such as at Lidl and Amazon? How much profit is Bakkavor making? In this way, the survey provided an opportunity to bring the inequality and class dimension to the fore. Even more fundamentally, the "survey" asked workers what they would be prepared to do to get this increase. It was putting them and their actions as the pivotal element in our success. We asked them: would they come to union meetings? Would they take part in decisions made by the union? Would they talk to their co-workers? Would they take on some small tasks like leafletting? Would they go on strike? It was important to connect the pay demand to an expectation of workers' involvement, to challenge the idea that we would be able to achieve this demand without their active participation. If a worker would say they wanted £10 an hour, but then say no, they wouldn't be prepared to do any of these things, the message would be clear.

The pattern was set from the very beginning, with me putting in the work with zero feedback from the other reps. Only Connolly responded with some comments. With little rep interest in getting involved, it was only me that actually got members to fill these surveys out. None of the other reps bothered to get even one filled out. In the 70 forms I managed to get completed at my factory, a big majority said we should ask for over £9.50/hour for base rate (i.e. 'unskilled workers) and a sizeable chunk said

we should ask for the London Living Wage, which would have been a substantial 28.5% increase to the existing hourly rate.

In the end, we had to base the decision on the survey results we did get, plus the opinion of people who bothered to attend the second union meeting and that was open to all workers, not just members. Again, only relatively few people showed up, maybe twelve people out of a possible 1,000? It was disappointing, but we hoped that as time went on, and the union could prove it was serious in its intentions, that the news would spread and more workers would get involved. In this meeting on April 12th, we opted for £1 more an hour for all grades as a seemingly fair middle point. It was a unifying demand, where all grades would benefit and grade differences wouldn't widen. It wasn't as much as the LLW, but it would have still been a substantial increase – 12% compared to the industry average of around 2%. The reasoning was that workers would be more inclined to fight if a meaningful rise was on the table. We decided against going for the LLW because of the low level of workers' participation so far which we would have needed if we were going to take on such a big demand. The point was that Connolly, unlike most union officials, would have been game to go for the LLW if workers had been chomping at the bit. But so far, they weren't.

It was also important to ask the members what our pay demand should be, in order to prevent members further down the line from saying that our demand was too high or too low. In the end, this is what ended up happening. As we got bogged down in the negotiations and time dragged on, more and more people started criticising the demand as being too high. "We're never gonna get £1 more!" they said. If we would have had more surveys to base our decision on, it would have been seen as a more collective decision, and they would not have been able to just "blame the union".

The pay claim we eventually submitted then was for a two-year deal, £1 more per hour for all skill grades this year, and £1 more again in 2021.

The negotiations

At the first meeting with management after we had submitted our £1 more an hour pay claim, they banded on about how poor they were and what a tough business climate it was. What we were asking for would cost the business around £6 million. Peanuts when their profits were around £90 million a year. They did the whole sob story about declining share prices, the cost of onions and potatoes rising by over 20% and, of course, the uncertainty of Brexit. They tried to butter us up and left it until our next pay meeting a month later to unveil their opening offer: an 5p increase for the lowest grade, with the 33p differential maintained for the grades above that. I would have burst out laughing if it wasn't for the fact that their deeply insulting offer showed how little they truly gave a shit. It was clear to me that with such a vast difference in expectation, a strike was the only way to get anything even near our pay demand. Negotiations were just a performance.

Worker engagement

In May we called another union meeting. We gave out leaflets and publicised it as best we could, emails and text messages were sent out. It was billed as a mass meeting to really kickstart the campaign but again, only around 20 workers showed up. We did have a range of workers there though, from across the different sites and most importantly, it wasn't just the usual suspects. There were mainly regular workers, not even Red Caps, and we had a lively discussion about our chances and the slog of trying to get more workers interested. I remember at one point, a forklift driver at Premier Park getting up and making an impassioned speech, basically telling me how hard it was to do anything against management and that, "You don't know what it's really like to work there!" Because I was sitting at the front of the room and was half facilitating the meeting, he had thought I wasn't a Bakkavor worker. I used the opening to tell him about the forklift drivers' experiences at Elveden and how we had managed to win some concessions by discussing and making decisions together, but that it hadn't been easy. The Romanian hothead forklift driver I had brought along backed me up and it turned into a real dialogue. This was the first time since I'd been turning up to shoddy and chaotic branch meetings where the workers were actually taking the lead and talking about what they wanted to talk about. In that same week, we arranged some canteen meetings to brief workers about the pay claim campaign. They were scheduled to take place after the management had conducted their monthly staff briefings. At my factory, the canteen was packed, all the seats were taken, people were lining the room and spilling out into the corridor. This was our chance to talk to all the workers at once and build up some momentum from the inside. There was a palpable sense of anticipation. Workers knew that things were different this time around because the union was not standing shoulder-to-shoulder with management at the front, jointly delivering whatever turd of an offer they were putting to us. Instead, Connolly and the Wetbag waited outside and only came in after the management had finished their spiel.

Unfortunately, things didn't work out quite as planned. The management screwed us. We were supposed to have half an hour, which would have given us some time at least to have more of a discussion with workers about

what was going on and what they thought about things. But the management purposefully ran over their allotted time, barely giving us ten minutes before 3.30 came around and the shift was over. In ten minutes Connolly's only recourse was to bring out the big guns, bellowing loudly and trying to rouse the workers into a convincing call-and-answer: "Are you happy with this pay offer?!" Workers, unused to this show of exuberance and expected participation seemed self-conscious and responses were a mix of muted and bemused. Here was this loud Scottish guy that they barely understood, waiting for them to come to life. Language difficulties and cultural barriers were a problem, so a more understated exchange would have probably worked better, but hey. Enough noise was made so that management could hear us which I guess was the only point we could score in the short amount of time he had. The late shift response was apparently much better, they tended to be bolshier in general.

Another ballot...and a tip-off

The farce of the "negotiations" continued in the preceding months. The company went up to, wait for it...8p No, hang on, they've raised it again to...10p! The differential between the grades, which had previously been 33p, had gone up to 38p. We held another ballot. The union was recommending that members reject the offer. I was always leading the charge amongst the reps that we shouldn't cave, PJ was always ready to give in and accept the offer. So far, I'd managed to keep the reps on board to the extent that we could push on through. On the first day of the ballot at Elveden, PJ the notorious election-rigger, was manning the ballot box. Whilst I was outside driving my forklift I received an anonymous phone call from a woman informing me that PJ was telling people to accept the pay offer, even though the union position was clearly to reject it. She said she heard him say that the company could close down if they stood their ground, which was a recurrent rumour that stoked peoples' fears. She asked, "What is the point of an election if he is going to do this?" I agreed, but when I started asking her who she was, she put the phone down.

This told me a few things. Workers knew me as the rep to call in this kind of situation. But they wanted me to act for them rather than them challenging PJ in the moment. They were still afraid, not of management in this case, but PJ himself. Otherwise why did they take so much trouble to

call me from a private number? They didn't want to fall foul of PJ publicly, which told me that they still had a long way to go in feeling confident to take him on themselves as a larger group, and that PJ's tentacles of power reached far and wide. I approached him, and told him what had just happened. He denied it for about two seconds and then clammed up, doing his usual mime routine, saying I should talk to Connolly or the Wetbag if I had a problem. I let people on the GMB reps WhatsApp group know what had happened and then made a point of sitting next to him when I was on my breaks, so that I could keep an eye on him. His modus operandi was to befuddle people with figures until they went cross-eyed and then emphasise that it was their own decision. He didn't mention that the union was recommending workers reject the offer, and for good measure he said we would go on "strike" if the offer was rejected to try and scare people. To his dismay, 81% of members ended up voting to reject management's offer.

The next union branch meeting held shortly after this happened was pretty explosive. They were a script in chaos and ridiculousness at the best of times but at this one, the London regional secretary of the union was also in attendance, meaning they probably wanted to put on a good show. It was too good an opportunity to miss and I went on the attack immediately. "Why isn't PJ saying anything to these allegations?" I said. "He's taken his vow of silence again and he gets away with everything!" The Bully, who had become PJ's official spokesman, brought out his trump card: "You say you got an anonymous phone call, well I got an anonymous phone call about you cheating at the ballot that evening!" I had gone into work outside my usual hours to (wo)man the ballot box because guess what, no other fucker was gonna do it! But I had asked Duksha, another female rep at my workplace to sit with me for a few hours, so in effect, he was accusing us both. It was such an absurd claim but it showed how low the Bully was willing to sink to make his point. After that, Duksha lost all her faith in the union. She couldn't believe what the Bully had done. Even though she hadn't been an active rep, she at least knew everyone on the night shift, had quietly gotten a handful of new members without making a big song and dance of it like PJ usually did, and she had agreed to help me for some hours on that evening. After that though, she gave up entirely, her belief in some kind of integrity in the Bully shattered.

The meeting became a full-on slanging match. The regional guy couldn't believe it. He tried to put a good spin on things, saying that such passionate arguments were a sign that we all obviously really cared about the union (!) but fundamental differences were exposed. On one side you had the old guard, who only ever really wanted the reinstatement of the Bully, their all-powerful leader (and let's not forget, relative) at the helm of the union at Bakkavor. Me and Connolly were seen as the new guard, upsetting their comfy positions and so all of our new-fangled attempts to engage workers in a collective struggle were seen as an affront to everything they had done previously, which wasn't much. They also had a vested interest that we failed because this would undermine Connolly, paving the way for the Bully's return. We were upsetting their established hierarchy. They were closing ranks and stone-walling me. Rep relations were at an all-time low.

Pay protests

During this period, we organised a series of pay protests outside the factories. I organised music, placards, people and banners outside each of the factories during the shift changes to attract some workers and be a visible presence, not only to management, but each other. Workers needed to see other workers who were willing to stand together and fight for this pay increase, as until that point the level of trust in each other was low. In total, we did three rounds at both Cumberland and Elveden and two at Abbeydale. Neither the Wetbag convener, nor any of the other reps helped organise them. When we did the ones at Elveden, PJ even refused to come downstairs and join us, making up some excuse.



A crowd gathers outside Bakkavor Abbeydale

At Cumberland, one rep, Varsha came out briefly and the Wetbag convener had to be there because he couldn't hide, but it was like they were doing us a favour. They didn't mobilise the workers in the week running up to it, encouraging them and allaying their fears. They just couldn't see the point of encouraging workers' involvement as a necessary step in getting the pay rise. In spite of this, Connolly and I soldiered on. I leafletted outside the factories before my shift started, I tried to do the job of five reps. Connolly bought his megaphone, I bought the loudspeaker and playlist, and off we went! Around 25 workers joined us on our first attempt. It was mainly male workers who joined us, which wasn't too much of a surprise.

Connolly made some fiery speeches, we waved our flags, took a photo and yeah, it was a decent start. We publicised the photo across the sites and geared up for the one at my factory. I had spent a lot of time trying to talk to the women especially to let them know that they should stop, even if it was just for five minutes. And they did. Around 40-50 women stopped in the middle of the road as they hurried out of the building at 3.30pm. I was really happy when one older woman took the bull by the horns. She had worked in Heathrow in the past and so was clued up about what had happened at Gate Gourmet and the subsequent wildcat strike by Heathrow baggage handlers. She shouted into the microphone and gave it some welly. She knew what was needed in such situations. Again, making a noise is important, but there should also have been space to talk. Because of the language barrier with Connolly and the wetness of the Wetbag convener who could at least speak Gujarati, these protests always felt like a performance: the union needed to see workers were up for a fight which meant they had to perform “angry worker”. These workers didn’t know how to do this. They didn’t see the significance, or if they did, they got scared that management might be watching through the window and secretly marking down their name.

This wasn’t too paranoid either. After some of the protests, groups of workers were told their jobs were at risk if they protested outside the factory, even if this was their legal right. Some guy even told me he had received a letter from Bakkavor saying they would be fired if they protested outside. He never brought the letter in for me to verify so I can’t say if this was true. But the effect was the people felt management were watching. As more rumours about factory closures were spread, numbers after this first round of protests dwindled. But for management, who had never been in such a pressured situation before, this was uncharted territory.

For the second round of protests, I suggested we open up the protests to the wider left, asking them to come and support workers who were not confident and could do with some extra support. I had wanted to do this in August, followed immediately by an indicative strike ballot. At this point the company had responded to our actions by upping their “final offer” to 15p for the base rate and 43p for all the other grades. The pay gap was widening further. They wanted to split the vote and expected the higher

grades to vote for the deal. We put the call out at the beginning of September and got an impressive amount of support from comrades across London, as well as unionists from the RMT and Ealing and Brent Trades Council. They rocked up with their banners and gave out leaflets to workers, I tried to get some Hindi speakers along but they were thin on the ground. Despite our best efforts Cumberland was a wash-out. The security got aggro, a guy came from SWP popped up and was trying to flog the newspaper, and workers mostly ran away. Connolly was pissed off when he saw that people were not stopping, which made him more aggressive. “Bakkavor think you’re donkeys!” he cried. It wasn’t a good look for a white guy to be shouting the word “donkeys” at these Indian women, and some supporters intervened. It’s worth saying that the people that did cross the road to join us were of a specific composition: male Hygiene workers who had already built up a bit of collectivity and group of younger Eastern European women from production.

At Elveden I tried a softer approach, setting up a table and having more one-on-one discussions with workers as they entered the factory for the start of their shift. Management hired extra security and kept workers back for overtime. By the time they came out at 5pm, workers were exhausted after their 10-hour shift. Many women ran off, only a few stuck around. At Abbeydale things were a lot better. The two female reps there had actually done their job for once and managed to get a group of around 40 women to join us across the road. Again, no space was made for the women themselves to speak but the fact that they had stopped was an achievement in itself. At this point though, with the lack of workers coming forward in more vocal and visible ways, I knew we’d have to try something else.

Family Fun Day

I had wanted to do a social event for members for some time. Eight months previously, I had gotten into some big arguments at the union branch meetings, mainly with the Bully, because I had wanted us to organise a Christmas or Diwali party for the members. They would get a crappy mug or woolly hat with the GMB logo emblazoned across it once a year as a present from the union, but deserved more. First the Bully had said he would go away and research some costings. We didn't hear anything back so at the next branch meeting I pressed him. He said it was too expensive but provided no proof that he had even looked into it. He ended up making some figures up from the top of his head. Instead, they wanted to go ahead with their usual annual party only for union reps: an all-expenses paid dinner and booze-fest where you would suddenly see all these Bakkavor reps you'd never seen before in your life. So I suggested that instead of a full, open bar, that we limit it to a two drink maximum. Unsurprisingly, this was vetoed too, even by the women who didn't drink! A few months later, when I asked to look at the branch accounts, I saw that they had over £50,000 just sitting there. So I guess it was more for ideological reasons that they didn't want to organise a party for members.

In the summer of 2019, a few months into the pay campaign, Connolly and I came up with the idea of organising a family fun day. Despite the total lack of interest from the other reps in lifting a finger to help organise and mobilise for the event, it went ahead. The main group of workers it was targeted at, women with kids, are precisely the ones who came. We had a bouncy castle, games, food, drink and face painting. Jumping through Brent council's hoops had been a nightmare ("how will you clear the area from dog poo?") but we pulled it off and I got to know some women from the other shifts, one of whom I tried to help with a bullying manager a few months later. It wasn't a surprise that only women from my site turned up – the reps at the other sites had obviously done no promotion of it. But at this stage, I didn't expect the reps to do anything much apart from come on the day and steal the leftover food and drink.

Around this time, we published the fifth AngryWorkers Bulletin. We tried to encourage workers to get involved in the pay claim and make their voices heard, citing examples from Bakkavor in Spalding, where they had

balloted to work to rule and Scotland, where they were going on strike. We gave suggestions about working-to-rule and using the company's own rules to put pressure on management, rather than simply rely on the union to fix everything for us.

Finally, some self-organised action!

The pay protests outside the factories had unsettled management but the thing that really frightened them was the one incident we saw of collective action taken by workers themselves. It happened in the hounous department on the August bank holiday Monday 2019. And probably not coincidentally it happened a couple of weeks after we had distributed our AngryWorkers Bulletin urging workers to take matters into their own hands. 50 workers had discussed amongst themselves the possibility of not turning up for their day shift as a way of demanding the £1/hr more pay rise. They did everything above board: they informed their managers that they wouldn't be coming to work the following day, and as working Bank Holidays is not compulsory, there was little the management could do about it. At first, they didn't believe the workers would carry out their threat. But when only a handful turned up for work, they went into full on panic mode. Other Red Caps and even some senior management were called in to cover – one had to come back from a trip to Sheffield – and the management were left struggling to cope and get their orders completed. However, the night shift workers, who knew about the plan, did not comply with it and came into work instead. They made up some of the work and, in doing so, limited the economic impact to the company. Supermarket orders were apparently not affected, although this information came from management so we can't be sure it is true.

Still, the threat of such never-before-seen insubordination on a collective scale put a poker up management's arse. They sprung into action, questioning everyone the next day to root out "the leaders". Their heavy-handed approach caused upset and anger amongst the workers who then said they would do the same thing again the following Monday. At this point, the management totally freaked out and immediately suspended two of the workers whose names had come up during their interrogations. We were worried because even though workers should be covered by a bank holiday action, a group of 40 workers potentially doing a wildcat and

getting sacked, right in the middle of the pay campaign, wouldn't have been so good. I called one of the guys, saying the action was good and that we needed to do more things like this, but doing such an action as a proper wildcat would have only got them fired, especially as they were all just from one department. If they had bigger numbers, fine, but they didn't. I knew this management would have no problem sacking forty people in one go – they had sacked around twenty-five people at Abbeydale the previous Christmas for having an “unofficial” party in the canteen.

In the end, one of these workers, who was a union member, got his job back with Connolly's support plus a petition submitted by his co-workers absolving him of any leadership role. The other, a non-union member, didn't get his job back. He attended his disciplinary meeting alone and subsequently, management pressed their advantage and fired him. Unfortunately, the guy who got his job back decided to quit. If he had returned to work, it would have restored confidence amongst the workers that they can act together and still remain in the job. Instead, the news of this “strike” and the “sackings” spread amongst the other factories and scared some workers who might have been thinking about going on strike for the union's pay demand. Even though a legal union-led strike would have incurred more legal protections, management's reaction and the Chinese whispers of “workers being sacked” only served to reinforce workers' fears about going on strike.

In order to protect the union and maintain a decent relationship with management (who incorrectly assumed Mr. Connolly was somehow involved in this initiative), he had to deny all union support for this “unofficial action”, even though actually, the workers were well within their rights to not come to work on a bank holiday. He went one step further though by making a public written statement to that effect that was distributed to workers. This was unnecessary and I told him so. This wasn't a good sign for the workers. So despite the potential it could have unleashed, it wasn't a great outcome in the end. Still, this group of honymous workers had taken a leap forward. We had finally seen some kind of collectively organised action inside the workplace that had ramped things up and made the management truly fearful. It showed that workers were impatient and had decided to take matters into their own hands, and that we

shouldn't give up on them yet. We made this point in our next AngryWorkers Bulletin a few months later.

More pay offers and figure fiddling

Despite the management having freaked out at the struggle spreading to the shop floor, their, as well our intransigence continued. We never came down from our original demand, nor did they give us an offer that was anywhere near decent. Their "final offer" was a deal where they would stop paying for the one existing paid break and add that money onto the hourly rate, plus the 15p increase, thus making it look like a greater offer than it actually was at £8.88. Workers' payslips at the end of the week though would be the same as if it was just a 15p increase. We (me, Connolly and by now, some of the other reps) weren't interested in figure fiddling, nor did we agree that it was a "good deal" simply because workers who did overtime would benefit from the enhanced rate, calculated as time-and-a-half of the £8.88. The differentials were 43p. Meaning that while the base rate workers would get an annual increase of around £300 a year, all the other grades would be looking at almost £900 a year extra. The management were looking to divide the workforce as a strategy to get the deal through, willing to pay more to the higher grades who made up less of a percentage of the workforce. As the majority of the workforce was on the lowest rate of pay, they were determined to keep this rate as low as possible, even if that meant paying more to the higher grades. The union rejected this offer in the negotiation meeting. We wanted to keep things simple and all this figure fiddling was doing our heads in. We weren't exactly great mathematicians! So we said we would simply take the 15p and 43p increase on their own for members to vote on. 15p had probably been their final offer all along, meanwhile they'd managed to waste six months of our time.

The never-ending story... of the ballots

The legal thresholds to win a ballot for an official strike are high, purposefully to make it as difficult as possible to strike. Over 50% of the union members have to post their ballot back. And of this number, over 50% again have to vote for industrial action. In bigger workplaces, this is extremely difficult. Not only do you need everyone's proper address so that the postal vote reaches them, they have to open the letter, tick the box and

post it back. If they don't receive the vote, they have to tell you in enough time so that you can arrange for another one to be sent out. You also need to know where exactly your members are working inside the company. In other words, there's a lot of red tape. And when you have a non-English speaking and reading workforce that rents overcrowded housing and changes dwellings often, the chances of getting the numbers you need is almost impossible. As a minimum you would need either a totally "on-it" workforce or a super organised and dedicated reps team. I didn't seem to have either, but you still need to give it a go, if only to give workers a chance to have their say. If they choose to not engage, so be it. But the union would have done its job to the best of its ability. However, the union only want to do ahead with an official ballot if it knows it will win. So the GMB make their internal thresholds even higher in an indicative ballot than the legal requirement. Instead of over 50% of members voting, they want to see a 66% turnout in an "indicative ballot" before they agree to do an official strike ballot. Our ballots had always come back with a healthy majority who voted to reject the company's offers. They had voted 97% to reject the 2% pay offer back in February. They had voted 81% to reject the 10p pay offer. This was despite PJ doing his utmost to undermine the union's decided voting position, which was always to reject the offer. While they wouldn't come out in great numbers in the pay protests outside the factory, they at least knew where to put their cross on the ballot paper. There were always some members who said they wanted you to mark their vote for them, without engaging in the process themselves, but many workers saw the union's lead as an opportunity to vote no. But the numbers of people voting and rejecting the company's offer were slowly decreasing – which is common when you have a series of ballots. Things drag on, and workers get demoralised.

In a parallel movement, despite the fact that we were the most active we had ever been, 200 members had left the union over the last couple of years. While many people had left after the 2017 pay campaign and the shambolic aftermath of the individual skill-grade grievances, some workers did leave during the current pay campaign – a time where you would expect a surge in membership. Why? The possibility of strike action had upped the stakes and people perhaps feared they would be drawn into something that risked

their jobs. There were lots of rumours at this time about the factory closing down if they had to pay us the £1 increase. There were other reasons for fear too. I remember speaking to one older woman on the late shift who was talking about the Gate Gourmet dispute in 2005 and the inherent risks of going on strike. “They were all sacked!” she said, “So the same will happen to us if we go on strike”. I thought it was really interesting that this strike still had resonance in the area but the lesson that “strike equals losing the job” was a popular one and held many workers back. I tried to explain that our strike would be legal and that those Gate Gourmet workers were sacked because they acted unofficially. But it fell on deaf ears. Around the same time, I also heard was one of the women who had not been re-elected as a union rep in 2018 and had now become a SEF rep was ringing people up and telling them to cancel their GMB membership. I asked her directly, but she denied everything so I left it alone but clearly, things were going on behind the scenes that I couldn’t fully understand. I had a feeling that the Bully was behind it but had no proof.

At this stage, the union was in a precarious position. We weren’t gaining any momentum. Time was what we didn’t have. People were leaving the union, due in part to the fact that the union subscription fee had now tipped over the £14 mark with no visibly increased strength to show for it. There was minimal support from workers on the street outside the factory when we did the pay protests. Rumours were being propagated by the company and spread by the SEF. There was no enthusiasm or work put in by the other reps. We were fighting against the tide. The few opportunities we had to act quickly were not taken up. I wanted to do the indicative ballot the week after the round of pay protests in September. This didn’t happen. Despite assurances that the ballot would take place following these mobilisations, Connolly went on holiday for a week instead. And because the union was not recommending that members accept the 15p/43p offer, the company decided to withdraw it, which caused another long delay while we had to agree another “final offer”.

October rolled around. “When is our pay rise coming?” disgruntled workers would ask. If we wanted to have a strike before Christmas, which we’d need to do to have an economic impact on the company, I knew we’d have to get things moving. Time was ticking. While I’d normally been able

to push things forward, even if it meant doing things alone, holding ballots was the one thing I would have to depend totally on the union official to organise. So I had to wait. There were more comments like, “We’re never going to get £1 more!”, as if the union had misled them about what was possible. I was annoyed that the union’s schedule was basically being determined by management, who were going slowly not only to demoralise workers but to avoid a strike before Christmas. The union wasn’t organised enough to stick to their own schedule which caused arguments between me and Connolly.

In the meantime, the company had done their own pay survey asking all workers whether they would accept the company offer of the money for the paid break being added onto the hourly rate, even though the union had already said no to this. 60% of workers rejected it. So the company decided to put the simple 15p/43p offer back on the table, which is what the union had originally suggested. They not only wanted us to ballot *all* workers, not just the union members, they also wanted to have a presence at the ballot box. The union refused.

Connolly was like a dog with a bone. Without asking if anyone agreed or would help him, he decided to do a third round of pay protests in October in preparation for the impending ballot. The fact that things had dragged on this long and his inability to see that a change of tack was needed, meant he did these alone. I was the only one who had really helped him anyway, so without my support, I had the image of him just standing there on his own, shouting into the megaphone as the wind carried his cries to arms down the road...At Abbeydale, he had worse luck. Management had stationed three managers by the gates to intimidate people into not stopping, one of whom was a monster who had made me once cry on the assembly line. It worked. Connolly was raging, he sent an angry letter to the management, telling them to ‘call their dogs off’. This set the stage for the fall out which was to follow.

“Final offer” and indicative ballot intimidation

The ballot finally went ahead, around six weeks after I had originally wanted to schedule it in for. All hope wasn’t totally lost. If members would reject the offer in enough numbers and if we immediately gave the company a week’s notice to begin our official ballot, there was still the slim chance

we could get a strike in before Christmas. But we couldn't afford any fuck-ups. The ballot paper was packed with information and was about as clear as Labour's Brexit position. On it were three things to vote for:

1. The original 15p (and 43p) increase;
2. The offer of the paid break being taken away and the money put onto the hourly rate;
3. The indicative ballot, asking people if they would be prepared to take industrial action to get £1 more.

This was the necessary step to go for the real strike ballot, and so it was the most important ballot so far. Management knew this and planned accordingly. They refused to let the reps be released to conduct the ballot, saying they hadn't had enough notice. They specifically denied me access to the ballot, saying that there was no way they could release me because they didn't have the relevant forklift cover, which was baloney. They hassled me at the ballot box when I attended regardless. The bigger problem was that because none of the reps had been allowed the release time to get the necessary coverage for all the factory sites and shifts, Connolly said that, instead of wasting any more time, that he and the Wetbag would cover it all themselves. This was a mistake. There was no way they were organised enough (or motivated enough in the case of the Wetbag) to get the number of votes we needed in one week. At the time, Connolly assured me that he wouldn't stop until he got the numbers we needed. (I think at this point even he wasn't aware of the two thirds turnout required by GMB's internal rules). The threat of an official strike ballot was the only thing that could have moved the management to offer something better. But for reasons I can only describe as disorganisation and incompetence, not enough votes were collected.

What made it even worse, was that of the votes that were collected – just over 40% of the membership – a good 83% voted to reject the 15p/43p and support strike action. This was in spite of the management's sneaky tactics: hovering around the ballot box; spreading misinformation about strike pay; getting people to do a company survey in a ballot box on the same day as our ballot which led people to think they'd already voted when they hadn't. It was a crying shame that because the union didn't get their act together to

collect the required number of votes, that we had blown our last and only chance to get a better deal for workers. I was fuming.

“Why did you stop the ballot before you got the number of votes you needed?!” I yelled down the phone to Connolly when I found out.

“We’d be waiting until Christmas if we did that!”, he yelled back. *“No, it just would have been another week!”* I yelled again.

“The workers knew about the ballot, it’s their fault they didn’t vote, not ours!”

“Did you know the number of votes you had before you counted them?!”
“...Er. No. But Paresh (crap rep) said that people were on holiday for Diwali so there was no point.”

“Why the hell did you listen to him?! I just can’t believe you didn’t get enough votes!”

“If workers didn’t want to vote, there’s nothing we could do.”

“Why are you blaming the workers when they didn’t know a ballot was happening that day and if they were on holiday or didn’t come to the canteen that day, they would have missed their chance! And there were so many mitigating circumstances with the management’s dirty tricks!”

“Workers are scared, a hundred members have left in total since we started this campaign, what does that tell you?”

“Whether workers want to fight or not is up to them, all I want to know is that we did the best we could.”

“We did the best we could.”

“No, you didn’t, you sabotaged it!”

“Are you accusing me of being in the management’s pocket?!”

“No, of course you’re not, I meant you sabotaged it with your incompetence!” *“We’ve still got another chance, we can have another ballot.”*

“Another ballot?! That’s the last thing people want! How are you going to get enough this time when you’ve been saying workers didn’t want to vote last time??”

“We’d have been there until Christmas!”

And round and round we went...

I was bitterly disappointed, especially after all the groundwork I had put in over the last year. But it got worse. Around this time, the management

also banned Connolly from the sites because of some incident at the ballot box where he lost his rag at the fact that management were hovering around. The announcement had gone out to members already that 83% had voted for strike action. But the news that we hadn't got enough votes to go to an official ballot was not made public. Connolly wanted to string the management along a bit with the threat of strike action, which he'd only be able to do if the workers didn't know we'd blown it. So workers were left hanging. With Connolly out of the picture, things stalled. Despite our disagreements, now he wasn't there to support me, I felt alone. Unless workers themselves miraculously found some inner fight, there was less than zero chance that any momentum would be found again. We were left in a mess.

The consolidation of reactionary forces!

With Connolly having to take a step back, a vacuum opened up that both the old guard of the union and the management took advantage of. A new union official was drafted in who had no doubt been told to get this pay deal done and dusted by someone above him. No rep meeting was called to discuss further steps. In fact, no news was heard from the union for about four weeks when suddenly a pay briefing was called in the canteen. I saw the Wetbag and the sly old fox PJ up at the front with management and they talked about holding another ballot, this time with a 1p increase on top of the 15p/43p. By offering 1p more, the union and management could justify another ballot. They stated that the "union negotiating committee" (which was just the Wetbag and a union official they drafted in to temporarily replace Connolly) and management had agreed that this was the final offer that could be reached through negotiations. No information was given about what would happen if it was rejected again, nor about the union's position, although it was now clear that union and management were speaking with one voice. The window for fighting on banged shut.

The day before the ballot was announced, management banned me from taking any union time until further notice. I had regularly been doing my union time for the last eight months on a Monday afternoon for three to four hours, despite the fact that PJ hadn't given up any of his union time. He would have needed to do this to share out our allotted time but always refused. The union did nothing to force him. So I had just been taking my

time regardless. Now, the management saw a chance to side-line me. This was a deliberate attempt to stop me from attending to the final ballot which they had scheduled for the following Monday. There was a brief showdown outside the factory as the Factory Manager denied my participation on the grounds that it was “too busy” (even though it was totally dead) and the Wetbag who was present, buried his head in some paperwork and didn’t speak up to support me. After firing off some emails to the union’s head honchos about this, it became clear to me that they were not going to do anything to help me.

Union membership continues to fall amid workers’ (correct) notion that ultimately, you can’t trust them. In many cases, individual shop stewards and some groups of workers may want to fight but the biggest hurdle to overcome is the union apparatus itself. In Bakkavor, we didn’t even get that far, but we’d already seen how the bureaucracy would react if we got anywhere close to a real strike. The only thing left to do was distribute our final AngryWorkers Bulletin, which questioned why the union wasn’t going forward with a proper strike ballot and for workers to react in their own ways to signal their discontent. But by now, the whole thing had gone on so long that, along with the union telling workers that there was no alternative but to accept the deal, that’s what 87% of workers ended up voting for.

Conclusions

So with this inauspicious but predictable ending, what did I learn after my three and a half years on the job, two of which were as a union rep? I will split up my thoughts into three categories: lessons from the perspective of the workers, the union and finally, us as the AngryWorkers collective, and our approach to, and intervention in Bakkavor.

Workers

Any organising endeavour would have had to face and overcome the challenges presented by the composition of the class. In the case of Bakkavor, this included: an ageing, “unskilled” workforce worried about losing their jobs; a pretty unsophisticated product that doesn’t require an extensive and intensive co-operation of workers which they could easily identify as a source of counter-power – “We work together, we can fight together”; a small-minded and docile attitude based on having come from the “countryside”; the language barrier that immediately put workers at a disadvantage on the labour market by reducing their workplace options; a workforce with no experience of collective struggle; clientelist, intra-community relationships and dependencies. This was compounded by a union that was historically weak and untrustworthy and a company that cleverly managed the union and SEF reps and divided and bought off large minorities of the workers. Having a clear idea of what we were up against informed our approach. If we had managed to break through these barriers, a potentially huge structural power would have been unleashed, causing ripple effects across the whole area.

Workers are stuck between a difficult economic and political climate, the union and management. But sometimes there are small windows of opportunity where a rupture can happen. An opportunity arose when me and Connolly were around, but workers *en masse* didn’t take this up. The fact that workers were unwilling to join the pay protests outside the factories in large numbers, nor engage in collective independent efforts like overtime strikes, points to a lack of unity and trust amongst the workforce. While we don’t hold too much store in these “symbolic protests”, a show of strength at these points and for these workers would have been good building-blocks to bolster optimism. Workers have to take some responsibility for refusing to take up this opportunity. Hopefully they will reflect on the fact that the ball was in their court and they didn’t lob it back. This is the work the class needs to do for itself.

The anomaly was with the hounous workers who didn’t go in on the bank holiday Monday. Their experience wasn’t replicated though, and was used instead as an instrument to spread more fear. As the class conflict

becomes sharper, and the law or union has little to offer, workers will have to increasingly start taking matters into their own hands.

It was interesting that of all the groups of workers at Bakkavor, it was the Hygiene workers (younger, middle-aged men of more mixed backgrounds) and younger Eastern European women from the assembly line who came together, visibly, and publicly, outside Cumberland in support of the pay campaign. This was perhaps because of three reasons. Firstly, they had stronger ties with each other on a personal level due to the fact that they were set apart from the other “Indian” or “Gujarati” workers and shared a language and friendship outside of work. Secondly, their “outsider” status (both in terms of ethnic/cultural background and the fact that Hygiene workers were looked down upon the most) meant that they were not so intertwined with the social and material dependencies of the Gujarati majority. This gave them more space to fight openly. Thirdly, the nature of their jobs, especially the Hygiene guys, contributed to their sense of themselves as a group with a level of trust amongst themselves.

They had come together in the previous months at Cumberland because of a contract change issue, plus they had more time on the job to talk to each other openly, away from the eyes of managers. Unfortunately, this “separateness” from the Gujarati majority meant that these groups were unable to bring other workers along with them.

Increasing the confidence of workers is rarely a top-down exercise. This is why we weren’t too optimistic about the Labour Party’s manifesto policies, such as introducing sectoral pay agreements and repealing the Tory trade union laws. These formal changes would not have done much to change the dynamics and power relations on the shop floor. It wouldn’t have fostered the collective sense of power and autonomy necessary to build a real and substantive workers’ movement. This will only happen if workers themselves fight for something.

What would have to objectively change for workers to start being proactive and less fearful in this workplace?

- We may have to wait for a newer generation of workers from India who would perhaps not be so accommodating to the conditions inside the factory. The older generation who came from fishing villages in Diu, and who might have been more content to “put up

and shut up”, are fading away. Newer migrant workers would have had different experiences as workers in a rapidly-developing India, and higher expectations.

- The union stranglehold by these Diu relatives would also need to be challenged – either by a progressive, non-Red Cap caucus of union rep candidates, or large amounts of workers leaving the union and setting up their own structures.
- Struggles in the vicinity would need to be made more public to give confidence to workers. Even the cleaners’ struggles in central London were too far away so didn’t make it into local knowledge in the far west.

At the same time, the situation is tense. Women might not come to a union meeting but once hell breaks loose, a lot of pent up anger will surely come out.

Union

Union recognition agreements with companies haven't allowed them to effectively fight against the downward pressure on wages, terms and conditions. They come with a hefty price tag, namely that the union loses its teeth and gives its balls away for a seat at the table and check-off (where membership dues are taken directly from payslips, therefore making it more difficult to leave). The culture of working class struggle (as well as the infrastructure), is not there anymore and needs to be rebuilt from the bottom-up. If my experience was anything to go by, the mainstream unions are not up to the job in any substantive sense.

A large group of Bakkavor workers came together to fight for union recognition back in 2008. Since then, however, the realities of the union's ineffectiveness has caused a deep-seated mistrust and aversion to it. The incumbent reps' and officials' vice-like grip on the union branch is a visible symbol of this degeneration. Not only were these men members of the same extended family who always protected each other in order to preserve their positions and privileges, but they also had the backing of the London regional secretary, himself the son of the ex-General Secretary of the GMB. He did not intervene in the blatant incompetence of the branch because he depends on their support in his career fights with the union's general secretary. With all these guys backing each other up and all the political machinations going on behind the scenes, it is only a matter of time before a workers' struggle is instrumentalised, taken over or quashed. Political groups practicing entryism might disagree, but it seems that the further entrenched you get into these structures, the more difficult it becomes to maintain some integrity. You can't escape the politics, no matter how much of a supposed militant you are. The fact that the union managed to side-line both me and Connolly relatively easily when we got dangerously close to a strike ballot shows that some higher power can always pull the rug out from under us. We saw this happen with the previous UCU strikes, and the CWU strike ballot before Christmas 2019.

In early 2019, the Bakkavor site in Bo'ness in Scotland, which is also GMB, did manage to go on strike, albeit in a much smaller factory. They did not win, nevertheless, their experiences would have been invaluable to us in London. However, there is no forum for GMB reps across the UK

Bakkavor sites to regularly come together and discuss these failings and learnings. You would assume that the “strength” of the big unions lies in their numbers and geographical spread – to join forces and share information across different sites of the same company where they have recognition. This is what UNITE union does in the Midlands – they have a regular “combine” meeting where UNITE reps from different sites pool their knowledge and try and work together. But GMB’s structure has always valued regional “autonomy” at the expense of these kinds of meetings, so up until recently, their policy apparently was to actively not have these cross-regional meetings. The tide seemed to be turning though and in 2018, we had the first ever meeting that brought some Bakkavor GMB reps together from different sites across the country. We haven’t had one since though. This seems to be a general pattern in that big unions are not using their combined strength to exert pressure on companies. So, for example, why wasn’t GMB in the Bakkavor London sites working with Bakkavor Pizza in Harrow up the road? Harrow workers were on higher pay grades, so it suited the company to keep the bargaining units separate, but why would the union go along with this division? It seemed to be another case of the union shooting themselves in the foot.

As a sign of modern unions’ lack of mettle and their integration into the bosses’ system, GMB’s own policies make it even harder to strike than the law allows. Instead of the 50% turnout threshold to strike that the law stipulates, GMB require a two thirds majority turnout for an indicative ballot. This pretty much denies the possibility for a strike ballot, especially in larger workplaces. This is despite the fact that, short of actually going on strike, winning a strike ballot is the main stick to get better offers from management. This limitation to workers’ options is typical because maintaining recognition agreements is seen as more important. In this sense, the big unions are truly rotten, entrenched as they are in nexus of state/boss power. If dealing with them is like dealing with your employer, you know there’s no hope.

Workers are impatient. Workers on the lower rungs of the labour market in particular don’t have time to wait around for the union to get into gear. They either want to go on strike immediately or do nothing at all. This is why the smaller base unions like IWGB and UVW have been so successful.

They go into certain workplaces where they know their strategy will work, say, “Right, we’re gonna build for a strike, it might take some time, but that is the definite aim”, and boom. In this regard, the bigger unions would be better off not having recognition agreements with companies as this ties you to jump through the hoops of all the formal negotiation process before you can even consider a strike. This can take months. In my case, it took almost a whole year. How can you expect workers earning peanuts to wait so long for their pay rise? You can’t. This is what happened with hospital cleaners and porters at St. Mary’s hospital. Connolly had been organising there as GMB for the best part of a year, doing protest picnics and the like to build up a pay campaign and ultimately get recognition. This requires getting a majority of the workforce signed up to the union. This is a tall order, as you have no victory as yet to attract workers to join. After many months of waiting, a group of workers defected to the UMW. Within a month or two they were engaged in one of the longest strikes in NHS history, workers had been sacked and reinstated with marches on the Sodexo offices, they won the London Living Wage immediately (it had been due to come into effect some months later), and brought over 1000 workers back in-house, to be employed directly by the NHS Trust. There is no way GMB, with all its bureaucratic procedures and targets to get members and company recognition can compete.

When workers do self-organise (when they did their bank holiday no-show), the union has no choice but to publicly denounce it. They need to distance themselves from “unofficial” action, even if workers are well within their legal rights to do so because it threatens their role as mediators.

Big unions are set to become even more irrelevant as NMW increases make leaps and bounds over the pay deals that unions are able or willing to negotiate. In a situation like at Bakkavor, when you have the union settling for a 16p increase over the NMW and a few weeks later, the Johnson government announcing a 51p increase over the NMW, the lie that the company “doesn’t have the money” is exposed for all to see. As a member you think, “the Tory government gives me a better pay increase than the union, so what’s the point of being in the union?” On the other hand, maybe workers won’t be so quick to temper their own pay demands with the idea that the company “can’t afford it”. So saying all that, was it even worth it to

become a rep? If space hadn't opened up inside the union with the arrival of Mr. Connolly, then no. After Connolly had been side-lined by the union, my abilities to struggle became too constrained. Without any union official, good reps or visible and vocal rank and file support, I could no longer exert any influence on the pay developments. I quickly became isolated within the union, although I was still able to help individual workers. Under those conditions, and with my own lack of faith in the union at that point, I decided that there was no point in continuing. Up until that point though, it had been worth it for the following reasons: I got to know more workers and had more reasons to speak with them and find out what their issues were; I built up a better picture of what was going on inside the factory from all the grievances and disciplinaries I attended; I got to know the management and the sneaky ways they operate; I felt more protected because I had the backing of the union official and a more protected status as a rep, which I used to piss off management wherever I could; I could write my own "official" union notices and distribute them more freely; I met some decent reps at the manufacturing conference and at union trainings, making links with workers at Heathrow Airport and Noons; I had access to the resources needed to organise and publicise events; and most importantly, I was able to push the pay negotiation situation as far as it was possible.

Angry Workers as a collective

We pushed things at Bakkavor as far as they could go. No previous pay negotiation had tried to involve workers, nor had they ever threatened the management with the merest hint of a strike. The possibility of going on strike had never been openly discussed by workers. We'd never had an actual pay campaign before, least of all with a bold pay demand, nor had we ever reached the indicative ballot stage. The management often found themselves on the back foot. Workers met each other from different sites and had opportunities to discuss and get involved. One group of workers managed to take self-organised, coordinated action together for increased pay, which had never happened before. Both within and outside the union, we encouraged workers to hope for something better and showed them that there were people willing to fight against management. It was their choice, no matter how constrained, to take this and make sense of it, to decide whether to actively participate. Our role as militants was to put the situation clearly in front of workers, which we did.

Having a role inside the union, pushing them to do things or go in a certain direction, as well as having an independent voice and action outside of it, was important to manage the contradictions of being a trade union rep.

Given the debasement of the union what could have been an alternative strategy? One possibility could have been to focus on the forklift drivers. They are a small and more confident bunch who perhaps could have all joined the IWW and gone on strike at the same time, across the different sites, asking for pay parity with Harrow forklift drivers up the road. This would have been a positive signal to other workers that hey, these workers are doing something, they're also in the union, why can they do that and we can't? The problem would have been that a potential strike amongst forklift drivers, which would have a major impact on the running of the factory, could have been easily undermined by the management bringing in agency workers. The job is not so complicated, so the job could have been done by them, mitigating the worst effects. At the same time, having inexperienced drivers would have been a hassle for management as deliveries and pallets can easily get backed up. A joint strike with the outsourced internal drivers would have packed more of a punch, and there were many grumbings from them over the last few years as a new company took the contract over and

drivers were shifted over to some new terms and conditions. So perhaps it would have been worth a try, especially if we had gone on strike for only half a day, thereby limiting the chances that agency workers would have come in just for those few hours. A defeat here though would have spread disillusion amongst an already disillusioned workforce so the stakes would have been high. Still, maybe worth the risk, especially as we're able to rally quite a few local activists to support any action.

While six of us worked at one of the Bakkavor factories at some point over these years, I was the only one who stuck it out. In such a workplace comprising three factories and a warehouse, and with the workforce being as weak as it was, we needed at least one comrade at each site – not only to ensure a consistency of communication and member involvement, but to alleviate the emotional and mental stress of it all! This isn't about substituting worker militants for workers' own self-organisation. Rather, it's about having the skeleton of a network across the different sites and with different groups of workers to take on different tasks. There were so many issues at Bakkavor that it often felt overwhelming. Being the lone voice amongst the union took its toll.

It's impossible to know exactly what kind of influence the leaflets and bulletins had on a micro-level with individual workers and perhaps, more long-term. After some individual responses, a few face-to-face meetings, some phone calls and text message conversations that petered out, things dried up. While we had to stay anonymous for our own job protection, anonymity in general is problematic because it doesn't increase confidence in workers to get in touch. They don't know who you are, if you have some hidden agenda. We also lacked capacity to have a more regular presence. There didn't seem to be any way around this. But what we can say that it forced workers to at least see that what they did or didn't do was important. Important enough for people to be writing about it, translating it into different languages, and distributing it at the crack of dawn. They also incited a lot of discussions inside the factory. I could use it to start talking to people I came into contact with about what they thought about the contents. You could make assessments of how people responded, like the freezer guy who immediately went into the main office, photocopied the leaflet with the company's own photocopier and started distributing them himself! I think

we can also credit the AngryWorkers Bulletin for playing a part in the bank holiday strike in the hounous department at Cumberland – the first time such a thing has happened there. On their own, publications like this cannot do much, unless they are part of a broader workplace strategy, like building worker committees or planning some kind of larger coordinated actions. But their role – as transmitters of information, offering examples of workers who have taken power into their own hands, that people are willing to support them from the outside, that there are like-minded people who work there and want to change things – cannot be underestimated.

Any kind of dispute in big workplaces like Bakkavor potentially creates wider repercussions. This is why we have chosen to focus on Bakkavor as one of the main industrial companies in the area. At the same time, we are aware of the fact that you cannot “kick-start” disputes and strikes if the conditions and workers’ confidence are not ripe. Even under these conditions it was the right decision to get rooted in a place where we can hear from and communicate with thousands of other working class people – both about concrete day-to-day struggles and social alternatives. A real problem was that we didn’t have the capacity to translate our WorkersWildWest newspaper into more languages.

Some final thoughts

If workers had managed to behave more independently and bravely, if a critical mass had developed and we'd have followed through with a strike ballot, and then won it and eventually have gone on strike, the message it would have sent to all the low-paid migrant workers in the area would have been extremely important. Across Park Royal, and across the supermarket chains, news of the strike would have sent a strong signal that workers were no longer prepared to rely on the benevolence of such multinational companies and that they were commanding some self-respect. It would have shone a light on this neglected bit of west London, home to tens of thousands of low paid workers that keep London running. Workers could have linked up with migrant workers struggles on the other side of London, challenging the idea that foreigners are accepting any old poverty wages and in big enough numbers to actually affect food supply. Their potential power inside the supply-chain would have been made visible. On the flip-side, we're not naive enough to think everything would have gone swimmingly if strike action would have been taken. The usual reactionary forces within the union and workforce would have tried to settle the dispute at the earliest opportunity; the drive to make strike decisions collectively with the members would have been difficult; attempts to widen the scope of the strike to the larger area would have been resisted by the top levels of the union; management would have done everything in their power to get scabs from other sites, divert production to other sites, and undermine the strike however they could.

Things didn't work out this time, but that's the class struggle folks! Better luck next time!

Workers' Inquiry 2

Chapter 9: Food distribution in capitalism

“I took her to a supermarket. I don’t know why but I had to start it somewhere. So it started there.”

(Common People, Pulp)

So far we have seen how food is grown and processed. The following part deals with the work of distributing and selling food, which was my job essentially as a Tesco delivery driver at the Greenford Customer Fulfilment Centre (CFC), and where I worked for three and a half years.

The retail sector, which includes grocery/food retail, but excludes workers in the supply-chain (vegetable farms, food factories), employs around three million people in the UK, which is around 10% of the UK’s total employment (roughly 5% of the national GDP). Nearly 60% of all retail employees are part-time, and 64% are female. During the 2000s the four main supermarkets expanded rapidly (Tesco, Sainsbury’s, Asda and Morrison) – each of them employing around 300,000 people. Their market share in grocery sales grew from around two thirds in 2000 to over three quarters in 2011 as they gobbled up smaller businesses. The entrance of Aldi and Lidl has defused the national concentration of grocery retail, but furthered international concentration. In 2008, the combined market share of Lidl and Aldi in the UK groceries market was 5%. In 2018 it was 13%.

The supermarkets and distribution centres

In the UK in 2018 there were around 6,000 supermarkets, over 42,000 convenience stores and around 4,600 discount stores (Aldi, Lidl etc.) In terms of workers' power, it makes a difference whether you work in a Tesco Express store with 20 fellow workers, a superstore with 400 employees or a distribution centre (DC) with 800, which supplies to dozens of stores. It is difficult to find concrete data, for example, about how many workers are employed in stores versus distribution and how many stores are supplied by each depot. Many supermarket chains have outsourced their DCs and transport parks to logistics companies, such as Wincanton or DHL. The following figures are an approximation, but they show that each of the big supermarket chains have between ten to twenty regional DCs, each employing around 1,000 people, supplying somewhere between 100 and over 1,000 stores.

In 2017 Tesco operated around 3,700 stores, supplied by 25 DCs. Some of these centres have more central positions, for example, the DC in Bristol is supplying 3,000 stores with mainly chilled goods. During the 2018 strike at Dagenham DC around 80% of London's Tesco Express stores were said to have been affected. In 2018 Sainsbury's had 21 food DCs supplying over 2,200 supermarkets and convenience stores. Aldi's Atherstone DC employed 800 workers directly, supplying 100 stores, visited daily by around 220 trucks, Aldi's Bristol DC supplies 700 stores.

Most of the UK's retail warehouse space is used for food storage. And it's not cheap – a large and well-equipped warehouse with chiller and freezer departments costs around £30-£40 million. Most of these are in the Midlands and London from where you can deliver to most places by road within a day. The lack of food storage space though is a problem and was revealed during the Brexit negotiations when large food import and export companies complained that due to stockpiling there was no warehouse space available and imports had to be turned away.

Given the largely 'un-skilled' nature of the warehouse and DC jobs, these workers were seen as the prime victims of automation. Writer Kim Moody makes some good points regarding this issue:

“Even more off-base was a 1990 prediction from the US Department of Labor cited by Rifkin that automation of various sorts could reduce

warehouse ‘labour requirements’ by 25%. Instead, warehouse production and non-supervisory jobs grew by 27% from 1990 to 2000 and by another 83% from 2000 to mid-2017, despite recession and technological advances.” [...] Thus, despite some increases in automation, labour still accounts for 65% of average operating costs even though warehouse wages are relatively low, while the number of warehouse production and non-supervisory employees has grown from 356,800 in June 1990 to 830,700 or by two-and-a-third-times by June 2017.”

We can assume similar tendencies in the UK and Western Europe.

The company

Tesco, the company I worked for, is the biggest supermarket chain in the UK and is the biggest private employer in terms of the number of employees. In 2018 Tesco sold ten million tons of food. Tesco takes around £1 out of every £8 spent by consumers on any consumer goods in the UK, having a market share of around 27% in grocery retail. Groceries are its' main money-making segment. To get a scale of the operation, Tesco moves around enough groceries per week to fill 350 Olympic-sized swimming pools, using Tesco trucks which drive 68 million miles in the UK a year. Tesco sells 23 million bananas every week, that need unloading, storing, picking, putting on shelves, and selling. Tesco employs 340,000 in the UK, 50,000 in Eastern Europe and 60,000 in East Asia. In the UK 56% of Tesco workers are women. In 2017 Tesco had around 9,000 direct suppliers, out of which over 7,000 were based in the UK, including around 700 dairy farmers. Tesco's UK suppliers employed around 450,000 people, one of which is Bakkavor, where our comrades worked.

Tesco has to sell loads of stuff to generate an income big enough to finance the expensive distribution system and supermarkets. The figures below give us an idea of the ratio between sales and profits. According to a KPMG analysis from 2017 £1 spent at Tesco would diversify like this: 73p to suppliers within the UK; 8p to suppliers outside of the UK; 11p on employees' wages (including £5 million for the CEO); 3p taxes; 5p operating profit, depreciation, amortisation. Tesco share ownership is widespread and not concentrated in a few hands. Tesco, like all other big retailers, makes profit by owning land and properties. Retailers own over half of the value of real estate property held by all institutions and companies in the UK. Most of these retail properties are shops and supermarkets, but many are intertwined with housing or other commercial property. Between 2015 and 2018 Tesco sold property worth £1.7 billion. In total Tesco owns property worth around £21 billion and earned £400 million in rental income in 2018 – the company owned 53% of its 3,700 stores outright. Another way that Tesco attaches its capital to the real estate bubble is via Tesco Bank. Tesco Bank was formed in 1997 as a joint venture between Tesco and Royal Bank of Scotland. RBS went bust big time during the financial crash in 2008 and had to be bailed out with £20

billion of ‘tax payers money’, Tesco paid £950 million for its 50% share. Today Tesco Bank sells credits, financial services, insurances to around 5.6 million customers, making around £112 million pre-tax profits in 2017, which is nearly 10% of their total profit.

Tesco has a lot of political influence given its financial clout in terms of taxes, local employment etc., but also through the fact that the company feeds millions of people in the UK – it is a social infrastructure. Tesco makes efforts to create “community links” – bigger stores and warehouses give full-time positions to employees to act as “community champions” to organise community events (clearing rubbish in a public park, handing out food to the poor) and in 2018 they donated the equivalent of 62.7 million meals to local charities and community groups. In some poorer working class areas Tesco even runs CCTV vans to “combat anti-social behaviour!” All this is done partly to get free advertising, but primarily in order to increase the influence on the political class. In certain moments Tesco’s material infrastructure became an intrinsic part of social crisis management, for example, during the time of the foot-and-mouth epidemic in the food supply-chain or during the Wincanton petrol truck drivers’ strike in 2000. At the time the UK government had the army on standby to supply petrol stations with fuel and largely relied on Tesco to use their own fleet and refinery connections to keep the nation supplied.

Under New Labour, Tesco hired people from the political class and high- ranking civil servants like Lucy Neville-Rolfe who were able to negotiate between UK ministers, EU regulators, community leaders and the media. The way she described Tesco’s local development programs reflects the spirit of the time:

“We changed the way we did site location to keep pace with planning changes to try to encourage town-centre development – we called it going with the grain: Express, Metro and Regeneration stores. We sat down with the map of England of the most deprived areas that the government had published: they were called social-exclusion areas. We could build stores which would be the anchor for social-regeneration schemes. We added a partnership with the local employment agency, the local authority and the staff union USDAW to bring the long-term unemployed back into work. The idea was that these would all go through planning swimmingly and

incredibly quickly, but of course it wasn't like that because planning is slow. However, we did get most of them through, creating thousands of jobs."

In short, Tesco cannot be described as trading capital, but is a much more complex structure. Profit margins in retail are slim so the running of the company increasingly depends on other forms of income, for example, rent or interest. Unlike "tech" retail companies such as Amazon or Ocado, Tesco can't bet on a steady and significant increase of share value. Tesco is also not really reducible to being part of the 'service economy' as many of its functions are productive – transporting goods to the place of consumption and thereby adding value to them. Even taking grocery items off pallets and putting them on display could be seen as a necessary and therefore productive act for turning them into a commodity.

Restructuring

In order to increase profits supermarket chains are forced to increase productivity, and the impact of economic downturns compels them to reduce costs. Tesco's restructuring programme targeted certain unprofitable sections, for example, by closing stores or reducing opening times. While overall employment figures at Tesco weren't reduced, they introduced more "flexi-contracts" (people are only paid when they're needed), increased work intensity by adding tasks to people's jobs (lower paid staff taking over administrative or supervisory tasks) and a concentration process in the distribution system (fewer, but bigger centres).

In 2015 Tesco made a £6.4 billion loss, the biggest ever recorded in the UK retail sector, due to a mix of high operating costs, losses from the failed expansion into the US market, a minor fine for the involvement in a fraud scandal in 2014 and the devaluation of their property assets. Management announced an intensification of restructuring. They closed two smaller distribution centres and centralised them in a new DC in Dagenham, replacing many permanent workers with agency staff. In the same year Tesco closed 43 stores and sold 49 sites where they had planned to build shops. While there was no response to this from the unions in the UK, trade unions in Czech Republic did at least announce a strike against two store closures. (Thirteen store closures in Hungary went through uncontested; at the time Tesco was Hungary's third biggest private employer.) In 2016 Tesco ended 24-hour shopping at 76 out of 400 of its 24-hour stores, trying to reduce staff numbers. Management outsourced call centre services for Tesco's mobile telecommunication branch to Capita, shifting 550 Tesco workers to the sub-contractor. A pay deal agreed by the union USDAW cut bonus payments for overtime, weekend work and night shifts. The cuts continued in 2017 when Tesco closed two more distribution centres, reducing their numbers from 25 to 23, cutting 500 jobs. In addition, they closed the customer call centre in Cardiff, cutting 1,150 jobs, and centralised call centre work in Scotland. In 2018 Tesco closed the Tesco Direct website (where people could buy non-grocery items) and integrated it within the general distribution system, cutting 500 jobs. This meant the closure of the Tesco Direct DC in Fenny Lock, with another 700 jobs gone. In 2019 Tesco closed staff canteens, as well as fresh meat and fish counters

in bigger stores, cutting 9,000 jobs. These job cuts were announced in the middle of the pay negotiations. Another 3,500 jobs were cut in small Tesco Express stores, in stock-control and quality departments and amongst yard workers in online grocery customer fulfilment centres. As a result of all this hard work, pre-tax profits increased by 22% to £1.6 billion, with Tesco boss Dave Lewis earning the princely sum of £5 million.

The union and struggles

“It was fashionable in some places to think of USDAW as a soft union, but that wasn’t true. It was a far-sighted union that could see we were all in this together.” (Tesco ex-CEO)

The trade union USDAW played a significant role in Tesco’s restructuring process. One of the features of the union and company’s relationship is the formal partnership agreement. This agreement has established a so-called staff forum structure, composed of elected forum reps, union reps and company management representatives. This forum structure runs parallel to the union rep structure, but overlaps personally. On the store level these forums discuss day- to-day questions, from faulty water dispensers in the staff canteen to proposals for the national forum. Local forum reps can become delegates for regional and national forums. Pay deals are made in a pay commission of the same composition. This pay commission, comprised of 50 people, can agree on a deal for the majority of the 350,000 Tesco workers, who are themselves not given the chance to accept or reject the pay agreement through a ballot. Consequently, they also cannot ballot for industrial action if they’re not happy with the deal. This structure includes all store and supermarket workers and workers in the online delivery CFCs. In the DCs, however, the union can make independent pay agreements and union members can ballot for the deal or against it because they are not included in the partnership agreement. They have retained the right to strike.

Why did USDAW agree to the partnership agreement? USDAW officials justify it by saying that in the past, only a small percentage of supermarket workers ever returned their ballot papers, which made the union look weak and put the recognition agreement with Tesco at risk. The partnership agreement gives USDAW the opportunity to recruit new members easily, as union reps have the right to attend – and often run – new workers’ inductions and while new starters have to sign dozens of papers anyway the union can easily slip a membership form into the pile. Tesco workers account for nearly a half of USDAW’s 407,000 members. The partnership agreement created various areas within the company where the union can appear to co-manage the show, for example, there are so-called “union learning reps”, who can enrol Tesco workers on IT or English courses and

the company grants a small amount of paid time off for workers to attend them. The partnership gives the union the opportunity to put reps on “stand down”, meaning, to relieve them from work and to send them on recruiting and organising missions. For each Tesco workplace, reps can be on stand-down of up to twelve weeks a year – their wages being paid by the union during that period. This means USDAW gets union organisers for retail minimum wages. While the partnership agreement makes it relatively easy for USDAW to recruit members, it unsurprisingly limits the scope for the union and union reps to act independently. While collusion between management and unions is a more general phenomena, the partnership agreement makes this collusion more formal. Practically anything that displeases management can be shut down because it is deemed to be, “not in the spirit of the partnership agreement”, as we will explain in more detail later on.

The partnership agreement was signed in 1997, the peak time of New Labour. The first pay deal settled under the partnership a year later gave workers a 2.7% increase – just above the rate of inflation at the time – but cut the Sunday double-pay for new starters. In 2004 USDAW agreed to Tesco not paying wages for the first three days of sickness. In a letter to Tesco union reps Pauline Foulkes, Usdaw National Officer, said at the time: *“Usdaw are supporting this trial because we want to have an input and share the learnings, and have a say in shaping and influencing the outcomes. Staff in the 10 existing stores chosen for the trial are being asked to co-operate and support the trials by volunteering temporary change of contracts for a 12-month period.”* The agreement also made it easier for Tesco to discipline workers for sickness, for example, by giving them written warnings.

The pay deal in 2016 then cut the Sunday pay for all workers to time and a half and night shift bonuses now only applied from midnight instead of 10pm. Overtime previously paid at time-and-a-half or double time was from then on paid at the normal single rate. The next pay deal in 2017 cut Sunday pay to one- and-a-quarter. In the CFC where I work workmates initially reacted by refusing to work Sunday overtime and by using their rights to opt out of Sunday work. But as soon as new starters took the available overtime on Sundays the informal “boycott” dwindled. Still, this informal

resistance must have been a common reaction, for example, the newspapers reported that Tesco shops in Bristol had to close down on Sundays due to lack of staff. These cuts to Sunday pay and other bonuses are not exclusive to Tesco and USDAW – the other supermarket chains did the same in a parallel and concerted action.

Rank and file? Rank for sure!

What about a rank and file structure within this apparatus? The only visible effort towards this is organised by the Socialist Party, in the form of a blog and newsletter called USDAW Activist. The problem is that the strategy of the Socialist Party is to get into the high places of the union apparatus. In 2018 Socialist Party member Amy Murphy was voted president of USDAW and the ‘Broad Left’ candidate, Dave McCrossen, was voted in as deputy general secretary. The Socialist Party also expressed hope in the election of Paddy Lillis who became the new general secretary in the same year, blaming the previous union boss for the bad deals. Have things changed under the new leadership?

In 2018 and 2019 Tesco sacked 14,000 workers – no word from USDAW and no word about these mass redundancies at the annual delegates’ meeting in May 2019. All the union did was send out condolence messages and engage in national “consultations”, haggling over whether the latest 2% pay rise should be included in the redundancy payments or not. The pay deal for 2019 was done and dusted before the annual delegates’ meeting – did the union leadership tell the 600 delegates what the deal looked like and open it up for discussion? No, they didn’t, and they didn’t for a reason, as it contained the usual “give and take” element of all previous deals: it kept the wage increase just above the legal minimum and in exchange cut the annual bonus which Tesco paid voluntarily, but regularly. In a personal message Amy Murphy endorsed the fact that in 2019 a large majority of delegates voted in favour of a “one member, one vote” motion, which would give Tesco workers more of a say in the pay negotiations. But like her other leadership colleagues, she insisted that the “one member, one vote” rule would have to be negotiated through the Tesco forum process – the very same forum process which has been put in place to get rid of a general ballot process! In order to acknowledge the majority

vote of union delegates they would have had to cancel the partnership agreement with Tesco, but they were not willing to do this.

The Socialist Party newsletter found big words in 2017:

“Why didn’t Usdaw utter one word in solidarity with a sister union in Ireland taking action in defence of shop workers? Is it because Usdaw, who are involved in a rotten partnership with Tesco, didn’t want to upset the retailer? Is this the same reason the annual Tesco party is still going ahead on the eve of the ADM, with the support of Usdaw, despite all these attacks and the Mandate strike?”

But still, under the presidency of a Socialist Party member, the Tesco party still took place uncontested during the USDAW national meeting in 2019, inviting all union reps to free meals and drinks just weeks after announcing another round of job cuts. The Socialist Party sent their union reps onto the union stage, but not to question the union leadership and their role in pushing through these redundancies, nor to reflect on the potentials and shortcomings of recent disputes. Instead they made political statements asking workers to back the Labour Party under Jeremy Corbyn.

Informal organising?

Apart from this phoney effort to build a rank and file structure there are only tiny examples of informal organisation. There is an online forum which has been running a long time and has nearly 9,000 members. The forum organises exchange of relevant information, but doesn’t try to discuss and coordinate any form of collective action, though there are exceptions:

“What we need is a coordinated action across Tesco as a whole (distribution, stores, transport) if every department worked-to-rule Tesco would be brought to its knees, for example at my old depot the drivers and goods-out staff worked to rule (trailers were loaded to the exact SSOW, and drivers carried out full pre- departure checks, taking units in management to the garage for the slightest fault, the DCM and the DLT so sat up at took notice of their demands. Unfortunately, we now have a union that likes to say YES to Lewis and co.”

*“Cost of living is going up and up and God knows how it’s going to be within next year or so. Stacking shelves for minimum rate???! no way . So f*** it!! as from 1st April 2018 I will match my performance to the slowest workers in our store. I take pride in what I do but what is enough is enough.*

*The whole Pay Negotiations between USDAW and Tesco it's just a really f*****ng joke."*

In addition to this forum workers created particular means of exchange, sometimes on a personal level, sometimes in response to a particular attack, for example, the threat of closure of DCs. We intervened in the forum and tried to suggest specific steps or shared information about local conditions, but this didn't go very far. <http://www.verylittlehelps.com>

Struggles in distribution centres

Most industrial actions in grocery retail happen in the DCs. There have been only a very few strikes or official collective actions by UK supermarket workers. Before we look at reasons for this, we will summarise the disputes in distribution. Here we have to keep in mind that in Tesco's case the distribution centres don't fall under the forum process, they've managed to retain their individual right to collective bargaining for each site.

A central question when it comes to struggles in DCs is whether warehouse workers and truck drivers are united. Unity is difficult to achieve, because of the separation at work and the tendency of truck drivers to organise as a profession. The bosses widen this separation by introducing separate contracts, for example, through outsourcing. In the case of strikes the company can use the truck drivers to divert goods to other sites or use other truck companies to counteract a drivers' strike.

Tesco Livingston, 2007

One of the drivers' disputes that demonstrates the significance of this separation was the strike at the Tesco Livingston depot in 2007. Tesco wanted to shift drivers to a new depot and used this as an opportunity to try and cut workers' bonus payments and other terms and conditions. The drivers were organised with the union UNITE. In response 150 drivers were balloted for industrial action and a large majority voted in favour. In preparation for the three-day strike Tesco built seven-foot high fences around the Livingston depot, drafted in extra security, and attempted to use Eddie Stobart drivers to scab on the strike. The latter refused to do so, despite offers of £500 bonus payments. Tesco found drivers from a different logistics company to scab – the company had already provided scab drivers

during the 1984/85 miners' strike. Only 25% of the usual number of groceries were shipped out of Livingston during the three-day dispute. This meant that depot workers inside continued working, though picking volume was down by around 70%. The union leadership initially announced it was balloting for a national strike in all six distribution centres, but this didn't get anywhere, partly because it would have been unlikely that USDAW would have called on their members to support the dispute. What happened instead was that Tesco could attack drivers of each depot separately.

Tesco Doncaster, 2012

In 2012 180 Tesco drivers in Doncaster were transferred to a logistics company, Eddie Stobart Logistics. They were told that they could keep their terms and conditions, but were all given the sack after a month. In response they went on a 15-day "strike". The drivers managed to blockade up to 120 lorries during their pickets and drove a replica tank to the distribution centre gates – but apart from a 50% increase in redundancy payments the action came too late and remained too isolated to stop the bosses' attack. There was written evidence that Tesco and Stobart colluded in sacking them, to be replaced by new drivers on worse terms and conditions. Unfortunately, the warehouse workers did not come out in support of the drivers. But this defeat wasn't the end. Three years later DC workers and drivers from Unite in Doncaster and Belfast threatened industrial action after Tesco announced a wage freeze. The strike threat resulted in a slightly improved offer, which USDAW, which represented 8,000 drivers and warehouse workers at the time, recommended to accept. This undermined the efforts of Tesco warehouse workers organised by Unite, which organised around 2,000 workers in 2015. In the end workers accepted an improved offer.

Dagenham Tesco, 2018

The most recent strike at Tesco took place at the DC in Dagenham, east London. The DC appeared in the headlines before it had even opened in 2013. Tesco had closed the DC in Essex and moved it to Dagenham where they hired new workers on lower wages. The Labour Party Shadow Minister for Immigration criticised Tesco for "importing migrant workers" to replace British workers in Essex. And now, five years later, the Dagenham Tesco workers had gone on a one-day strike for higher wages.

The workers, organised in USDAW, demanded a 15% pay increase against the company's offer of 3%. While the other 20 DCs had accepted the meagre pay offer, Dagenham workers argued that workers at the DC five miles away in Thurrock were being paid £1.39 more per hour for doing the same work. The strike threatened the supply to 80% of Tesco's Express stores in London. A comrade who visited the picket line wrote:

“This workforce is overwhelmingly composed of men under 35, striking for the first time in their lives. While about half of the 80 or so workers standing on the picket at the time of our visit were Londoners, the rest were from Eastern Europe, especially Romania. The latter are less represented among the union reps, but they are younger and more vocal, shaming picket crossers in their own language. Agency staff make up about a third of the workforce but make minimum wage as opposed to the £9.75 of direct employees, with an overtime rate kicking in only after 48 hours of work instead of after 37.5 hours.” The threat of strike was enough to severely disrupt Tesco's distribution system. “In the past two weeks since the strike was announced, Tesco moved 1.5 million boxes of food to other distribution centres in Snodland, Sidcup, Peterborough, and Southampton. These in turn had to move their work to other warehouses, creating a domino effect with a material impact on the working day of thousands of Tesco staff as well as those who work for supplier companies.”

The strike only lasted one day before Tesco and USDAW negotiators came to an agreement. During the dispute, I attended USDAW union branch meetings in west London – the strike was not mentioned by any of the USDAW officials present. I asked the area organiser whether he had more information about the deal, but he denied it. I asked USDAW employees in the central USDAW office whether they could provide any information, but they couldn't. The union didn't inform union members about the strike. We decided to distribute our own leaflet about it to workers in my warehouse. A year later one of the union reps from Dagenham went onto the stage at the USDAW 2019 annual delegate meeting and thanked the union general secretary for the support during the strike. When I spoke to him after the meeting though, a more insightful picture emerged: he said that they'd had trouble continuing the strike because USDAW had only paid a shonky £30 a week in strike pay. He said that the union negotiators advised workers to

accept an offer by Tesco just above what they had offered before the dispute.

Struggles in stores

The fact that there are relatively few disputes in stores and supermarkets cannot be explained by lower union density compared to distribution centres, neither can lower wages in stores be explained by sexism towards the predominantly female workforce. Work in supermarkets is more dispersed, workers have less structural power.

Ireland, 2017

In 2017 workers organised by the union Mandate went on strike at Tesco in Ireland over contract changes for workers hired before 1996. The union left it too late to take action. Only 22 supermarkets voted for strike action, this is just over one in seven Tesco stores in Ireland. The relatively small number of strikers, 2,000 workers in total, picketed the 22 stores across the country. Tesco reacted by threatening 100 workers with disciplinary action “up to and including dismissal” for joining pickets at shops where they didn’t work. Workers from non-striking shops who – in their free time – stood alongside colleagues in stores impacted by the dispute have also received warning letters in which they were accused of misconduct while on the picket lines. Still, the union maintained that the strike was effective. *“The strike of over 2,000 workers saw Tesco sales drop by 80% in striking stores and 30% in stores that weren’t on strike, clearly hitting the company in the pocket and forcing them back to the negotiating table.”* Unsurprisingly USDAW didn’t inform their members about the strike in Ireland, so we distributed an independent leaflet at the Tesco warehouse in Greenford, where I worked.

Belgium, 2018

Probably the most promising strike of supermarket workers in Europe took place at Lidl in Belgium in 2018. An unfair sacking and increasing workloads led to a wildcat strike. Two weeks later, after unsuccessful negotiations, workers went on strike again. This time it spread from one Lidl store to the next. In some places the union was present but, in many places, the strike started spontaneously from the bottom up, without the

union delegation having much control over it. The main issue for all workers was the workload. At the peak of the dispute 147 out of 302 stores were reported as closed by the company. The strike continued for a further two days until management agreed to the demand for a full-time, permanent, additional employee in each store. According to local strikers, the key in winning this was the picketing of the five distribution depots in the country.

Grocery home deliveries

“You shop, we drop”

Tesco

I worked for three years as a delivery driver for Tesco, bringing grocery shopping to people and businesses after they had ordered it online. The groceries are picked in a warehouse (CFC), solely dedicated to online shopping. The CFC employed around 1,400 people, including 600 delivery drivers. In 2017 Tesco had a market share of 40% in the grocery delivery segment, Asda 10%, Sainsbury's 10–20% and Ocado 10–20%. We can see that the online segment is even more concentrated in the hands of the big retailers than the general grocery sector. In 2019 Tesco had 12,000 delivery drivers and online grocery sales figures had increased to £3.3 billion.

When I put plastic bags full of shopping onto a customers' kitchen table – products from dozens of countries and hundreds of fields and factories – I think, “Damn, we've come a long way since we were hunter gatherers or even peasants, who had to grind their own barley for a meagre gruel...”

Grocery home deliveries did not emerge because of customer demand

If you'd have asked anyone at any point in modern history if they'd like their food, mouth wash and loo roll to be delivered straight into their kitchen they would most likely have said, “Yes, please!” Rich suckers in Rome had their water carriers and slaves, Victorian toffs had their domestic servants to go to the messy markets for them, so why not a little convenience for you?

The fact that home deliveries only became more widespread during the last decade can't be explained by a previous lack of demand, or to use so-called expert language, by weak “pull-factors”. It was not “demand” that helped online grocery retail to emerge, it was only made possible by a combination of various factors on the “push-side” and a specific social constellation. Only this made it feasible for companies to offer home deliveries to a greater audience, including working class people, given that it promised profits in return:

- The proliferation of home computers and the internet cheapened the ordering side of things; modern warehouse technology, such as sensor- controlled conveyor belts and scanners raised productivity

in distribution; and GPS navigation and hand-held devices made deliveries easier.

- A growing low-wage sector and income gap between low-waged workers and professionals/middle class people built the financial backbone of a structure that could then be extended to and partially subsidised for lower income households.
- The dot.com and tech-bubble on the share market supplies the additional financial means for an otherwise barely profitable activity.
- The real estate boom made inner city supermarkets a very expensive retail outlet, while ‘peak car’ made it difficult for many people to drive longer distances to bigger superstores on the outskirts; grocery online deliveries are most widespread in highly urbanised and technologically developed regions, the sector has the biggest share in South Korea, followed by the UK and Japan.

We can see that only a combination of social and material factors made home deliveries seem to be a viable business venture – and only then could “consumer demand” be taken into account.

Why do supermarkets invest in such a risky segment?

It seems hard to turn online grocery into a profitable business – even Amazon, who bought Whole Foods for over £10 billion in 2017 to enter the home delivery sector has problems in translating its model for general merchandise to the specific conditions for groceries (heavier investments into cold-chain systems, tighter time schedules for perishable goods etc.). Amazon had to halt deliveries in several US states as management didn’t see how they could provide the service without incurring losses.

The share of groceries sold online and delivered to peoples’ homes is small: something like £11 billion out of £185 billion of groceries sold in the UK in 2018. The market share is increasing, though much slower than online retail in general, which in terms of value accounted for 5% in 2008 and 18% a decade later. For grocery deliveries companies cannot easily use self-employed delivery drivers with their own vans, as you need a fridge and freezer unit. Chilled warehouse space is three times more expensive than ambient temperature warehouses.

In 2015 a study claimed that supermarkets lose around £300m every year by running their online businesses unprofitably. According to the study, the total cost of fulfilling an average £100 online order when the groceries are picked from store is between £28 and £30, once costs including distribution, wages, marketing, fuel and vehicle leasing or maintenance are taken into account. At the time supermarkets were making an average gross margin of £25 for every £100 order, meaning each home delivery is costing them between £3 and £5.

One of the incentives to invest into home delivery services is the fact that people tend to do their big weekly shop online (partly because of minimum basket charges), spending around £70, whereas people only spend an average of £8 when visiting a convenience store. The online grocery shop becomes the playing field on which the supermarket chains compete for the “big weekly shop”. Once the customer basis has a certain size you can deliver shopping for 20,000 customers a week from central CFCs and at least theoretically save rent payments for five to ten medium-sized inner-city supermarkets. Last, but not least supermarkets want to be seen to be part of the online technological evolution, which boosts their share price.

Different forms of organising home deliveries – various degrees of centralisation and mechanisation

Home delivery only: the most basic level is to let customers do their normal shopping, pay at the till and if they spend more than x amount the supermarket delivers the shopping to their home address. At the back of the supermarket they have space for two, three vans – drivers load them themselves. This doesn't cost the supermarket too much, but they'll neither compete within the online segment, nor potentially save rent by reducing store numbers through this model. *Click and collect:* people shop online, supermarket workers pick the shopping either in the supermarket or in a separate CFC (the shopping would then have to be delivered to the collection point), customers collect the shopping at the local supermarket. Companies have no hassle with individual deliveries and save money on the expensive “last mile” of the delivery. But then this model will not grow with an ageing population or beyond “peak car”, when people will prefer home deliveries. There are all kind of variations possible, some of them perhaps more a product of the bosses' wishful thinking, for example,

Walmart suggested that store workers could deliver shopping in their private cars on their way back home from work!

In-store picking and individual deliveries: this works for bigger stores where pickers pick online shopping before the store opens. The problem is that pickers and other workers, for example, those who stack the shelves, might get in each other's way. Management also cannot arrange products according to the most effective picking patterns, as they also want to arrange the display of products in a way that lures customers to buy more stuff. The pick-rate is around 120 to 150 items per hour (152 Tesco Twickenham). The van loading process is basic and in general there is not much space for more than ten to twenty vans. During the Christmas period Tesco management has to reduce the pick-rate in all stores, due to the general seasonal workload and extra staff who get in the way of the online pickers.

CFC picking with trolleys: these are bigger warehouses solely dedicated to online deliveries. Tesco runs six CFCs in total in the UK, whereas Sainsbury's has only one, relying more on store-picking. Tesco runs four of these CFCs for London, plus additional deliveries from a dozen superstores. The advantage of CFC picking is that you can arrange the items in the most effective way for picking. In the most basic form pickers run through aisles with shelves and load orders for multiple customers into six separate trays and onto trolleys. Items for the same customer are picked by different pickers to optimise the pick-rate. The pick-rate is at around 200 to 220 items per hour, which is much higher than for store picking. Trays with picked items are then put on a conveyor system that sorts the trays (re-joins the different trays for same customer) and delivers them straight to a loading bay. CFCs tend to have between 100 and 200 vans for 10,000 to 20,000 orders a week. This is the highest concentration of workers: a CFC of this type employs around 1,000 to 1,400 workers including drivers – a bigger supermarket would employ half this amount. From here on in capital expenditure within the CFCs increases. This picking system was applied at Tesco Greenford.

CFC with pick station: instead of pickers walking around with trolleys, trays are transported on conveyor systems passing pick-stations where pickers take items off shelves with a limited product range around them.

This cuts the time spent on them walking around and loading finished trays from trolleys onto the conveyor system. The pick-rate is around 250 to 270 items per hour (some sources said that Tesco Enfield picks up to 300 on conveyor belt pick stations). At Tesco CFC Greenford around 700 pickers are employed with trolleys, at Tesco CFC Erith around 550 at pick stations. Obviously, the system is more prone to down-times, for example, Tesco Erith operates with 2.4 miles of conveyor belts – once these belts break down, as they do frequently, the whole operation stops.

Hub and spoke system/pick stations and grid: Ocado runs three centralised and more mechanised distribution hubs. In two hubs pickers work on pick stations to which trays with items to be picked are delivered and humans transfer the right amount of items into trays for customers. Instead of picking from shelves in their surrounding pickers pick straight from trays transported to their pick station. The conveyor-system is much larger, at about 20 miles (Ocado Hatfield). In the most automated hub 700 robots drive back and forth on a grid structure and deliver the trays straight to pick stations, avoiding a large conveyor system. Ocado's most mechanised warehouse hub can process 65,000 orders a week, compared to around 18,000 at Tesco Greenford, employing a similar amount of pickers and loaders, around 800. The robot-assisted hourly pick-rate is said to be above 500 items, compared to 240 with trolley picking: the processing of an order (receiving, picking, loading) takes 15min, compared to over 1h in the case of in-store picking. This is clearly the most productive picking operation – although it is also the most expensive. There is another stage in the delivery process too: orders have to then be loaded onto trucks, which transport them from the hub to smaller “spokes” (local DCs). There the orders are unloaded and put into vans for delivery – instead of loading orders straight into vans after picking.

One question which comes to mind when looking at the various degrees of centralisation is which model wastes more labour time, fuel etc. during the transportation process. The online grocers' lobby obviously want to paint a rosy picture, so they use figures that demonstrate optimal capacity usage: their examples always have the vans full to the brim, when in reality we often drive one and a half hours just to deliver a bottle of champagne to some suits in an office. According to their calculation, 40% of all fuel

consumed in a food supply-chain (this includes shipping, flying, trucking from fields to consumer) is consumed by individual passenger cars that drive to the supermarket. They calculate that once you fit deliveries for 20 to 25 customers on a 30-mile van journey, you will cause less pollution than individual shopping trips, which travel two miles on average. However, we only tend to deliver to ten to fifteen customers per 30 miles.

Ocado – highest point of development

“We are better than a supermarket. We have no stores. We have no limits.”

(Slogan on Ocado warehouse wall)

“I don’t think my 15-year-old daughter has ever been to a supermarket.”

(Ocado Boss)

Ocado is the biggest “only online” grocery retail company in the UK. They don’t have their own supermarkets. Instead they deliver their own and other supermarket chains’ products from their warehouses. Why would we look in detail at how Ocado as an individual grocery delivery company operates?

One reason is that Ocado somehow defies the pretty common view amongst the new socialist leftist, who want to make a neat distinction between “creative entrepreneurs and start-ups”, “old-school capitalists”, and the new “financialised corporations”. According to some of their strategists, “entrepreneurs” are potential allies against big finance capital. While they don’t endorse “old school capitalists” they tend to emphasise that at least the clear ownership structure means that these capitalists have an interest in long-term investments and stable relationships with employees and unions. For the democratic socialist intelligentsia the fact that investment and productivity levels are low is not primarily tied to general profit levels, but to long-term versus short-term investment behaviour. Their bogeymen are shareholder companies who, according to their view, don’t have an interest in investment and development, but just want to cash in quick. Like Amazon, Ocado is defying this theory. The company largely relies on investors and share price developments, but they operate on a longer-term expansion plan, which means relatively high levels of investments at low to zero levels of profits. To those ends, Ocado publishes regular press releases about new inventions, which are duly copied by the chattering social media classes.

Another reason is that Ocado runs the most centralised and mechanised warehouses in the sector. It's always good to understand the highest form of capitalist development and its contradictions. In Ocado's case the contradiction is that they develop the most advanced logistics technologies, but don't actually manage to make profits using them as part of their own business. Instead they rely on deals with other retail companies they sell these (so far unprofitable) technologies to. As a company they rely on the income from the stock market. This is a high-risk model, as recent history demonstrates. One of the biggest economic crashes during the dot.com crisis in the early 2000s was the bankruptcy of the online grocery retail companies Webvan and grocers.com – and there are parallels between them and Ocado. We therefore want to take a short look at Ocado in order to understand their seemingly advanced technological and organisational model and the clay feet the business rests on.

In 2019 Ocado employed 25,500 workers, out of which 14,000 were male and 11,500 female – which is interesting only in so far as it bucks the trend of grocery retail companies (supermarkets), which in general employ more women than men. The Ocado figures reflect that most delivery drivers are male. The founders of Ocado were Goldman Sachs investment bankers who had no clue about fruit and veg, but admired modern platform and logistics technologies. Ocado's launch in 2000 was helped by the supermarket chain Waitrose, which injected £46m to help Ocado build the first distribution base. Waitrose supplied Ocado with groceries and took a 40% stake in the business. By 2008 Ocado had invested £300 million into distribution centres and research units, thanks to further investments from bigger retailers such as John Lewis Partnership and the multi-billion packaging company Tetra Pak. In 2010 when Ocado listed its shares on the London stock market the company had still made no profits, but had expanded its market share considerably. Studies from 2010 claim that Ocado had a 11% cost advantage compared to other supermarkets by only owning warehouses instead of stores, but this didn't seem to materialise into profits. By 2019 Ocado ran four hubs and sixteen “spokes” and reached over 74% of UK households – but still made no profit, just £44.9 million loss, out of £1.5 billion in sales.

The company's survival relies on investors and the stock market. Between 2014 and 2019 the company's share price increased by 444%. The big leaps in price development happened when Ocado signed deals with large retailers to build automatised warehouses for them, such as with Carrefour in France or Kroger in the US. A single warehouse in the US costs around \$55 million. The bosses of this loss-making company cashed in nicely on the share boom: in 2018 the big boss Steiner sold £51 million worth of shares on top of a £110 million bonus, and Ocado executives made £150 million by selling shares.

Many of Ocado's technical experiments are gimmicks, regularly announced to bolster the company's share price, for example, automation in "vertical farming" or a "miniature vacuum underground train" from Milton Keynes to London. Other stuff is more relevant. Ocado experiments with robot hands that can pick cans of chickpeas and ripe papayas with the same soft touch as humans and that manage to detect the little space left in the tray to put them – which seems the biggest problem for our mechanical friends (and it might take them a while to get that you shouldn't put eggs on the bottom of the tray). But then Ocado is the most productive and technically developed food home delivery company in the world. Their "hubs" are the most automated. Instead of ferrying crates along a long line of conveyor belts, as many CFCs do, the new hub uses a three-dimensional grid system, pretentiously called the "hive", to assemble customers' orders. The vast grid the size of three football fields has five stacks of containers underneath, each with a different product — more than 50,000 different products in total. The container with the right product is automatically transported to the surface of the grid. Their washing machine-sized robots whizz around at 13 feet per second, pausing only for a second to pick up containers with identical products and bring them to pick stations. Ocado's robots are supposed to be three times faster than the ones used by Amazon. At the pick stations workers take the quantity needed for the customer order. The robot returns the container back to the same position or elsewhere, if an upcoming order might need the same item. Ocado appreciates the fact that robots cut jobs and that poor unemployed workers are more prone to get into trouble with the law. Their 2019 annual report states: "*Building on our existing relationship with HMP [Her Majesty's*

Prison] Northumberland recycling Ocado uniforms, we supported an education project to upskill offenders and enable them to earn a formal qualification.”

The high productivity hubs require full utilisation. Overall, UK online grocery market growth slowed from 13% in 2015 to just 7% in 2016. This means that Ocado ran into over-capacities quickly: with the new ‘robot warehouse’ Ocado’s total installed capacity doubled to 615,000 orders per week. To hit a 90% utilisation rate Ocado would have to grow weekly orders by 13% a year. In 2018 Ocado made £44.4 million loss, despite an increase in sales revenue by 12% to £1.6 billion and an increase in the customer base. Profits are eaten up by the technical apparatus and the growing wage costs. In 2018 Ocado had to increase drivers’ wages by 10% just to find enough! The financial markets warned that the expensive warehouses that Ocado sold to the chain Kroger would turn out to be a huge drain on the US company, as the highly centralised hubs don’t solve the problem of the most expensive part of the delivery chain, the “last mile”. Ocado themselves have to open smaller additional warehouses in congested metropolitan areas, which are very expensive in terms of rent, and use bike couriers to get the goods delivered through the bottleneck.

The dependency on a highly mechanised apparatus is not only risky in terms of over-capacities. In February 2019 Ocado’s flagship warehouse burned down. One of the little robots in Ocado’s showcase warehouse had a bad night shift and decided to catch fire whilst recharging its tired batteries. Over 200 fire fighters couldn’t prevent the £45 million warehouse from burning to the ground. In the 2019 annual report Ocado states hopefully: *“One area where we have seen significant progress is in our ability to predict deviations in the behaviour of bots.”* It seems the devious robots’ behaviour could not be reined in, as another warehouse in Andover (30,000 orders a week, 10% of Ocado total) burnt down in November 2019! The combination of moving electronics and batteries, plastic packaging and gas cylinders for chilling are real time- bombs! Ocado shares took another 6% dip. A similar hot topic for Ocado was Brexit. In July 2019 the Ocado boss intervened in the Brexit debate, announcing that in case of a no-deal Brexit the company might move the production of its robots, currently manufactured in the north of England, outside of the UK.

In March 2019 the grocery retailer M&S bought 50% of Ocado's retail business for £750 million – Ocado will keep its name in the joint-venture and deliver M&S products. Immediately after the deal was done, M&S wrote to their suppliers asking for lower prices for ready-meals, sausages and loo roll in order “to make the deal a success”. Shortly after, M&S reported a 17% decline in annual profits. While profits fall at M&S, Ocado's share price collapsed by 20% in November 2019. Ocado's total share value stood at four times its revenue – compared to other grocery companies, such as Tesco, whose share value is only 0.4 times its revenue. The whole structure is shaky.

Companies like Amazon and Ocado are a specific type of capitalist enterprise. On one hand Ocado relies heavily on “borrowed time” through investments and inflated share prices and has not been able to generate profits within two decades of its existence. On the other hand, it has managed to build one of the most productive – not profitable! – distribution systems and to sell itself as a tech developer to other retail companies. For the owners of Ocado it was not a bad game, they got filthy rich on share income and through the joint venture with bigger grocery chains minimised the risk in case of a similar share bust like WebVan in the 2000s. But is this sustainable for the system? It would mean firstly, a dependency on pretty unpredictable developments in terms of investment climate and share prices and secondly, a pretty expensive infrastructure that will force the company to squeeze more and more out of the productive workers (from field and food processing workers to pickers and drivers).

Chapter 10: Working and organising at a Tesco customer fulfilment centre

“Serve the people”

Mao

While it is impressive to see how a relatively small number of workers can distribute such large quantities of food, once you look inside the box you wonder how these companies can function at all.

Everyone, from shop floor workers to middle management seems cynical about their work and instead of incentives we see the stick. Management only seems interested in numbers. Their rules, which are meant to cover their arses and to give them an excuse to discipline workers, make it even more difficult to “just to get on with things”. The flexible shift-systems and the feeling of insecurity stresses people out, which causes a lot of personal tension at work. Lack of investment into maintenance of machinery put further hurdles in our way. The union in turn has nothing to offer to workers apart from playing the role of lawyers in the company’s show trials – the investigations and disciplinaries. Both union and management have a mutual interest in the disciplinaries: management can use them to keep the union busy and the union can use them as an argument when recruiting new members, (“Management is tough here, you will need good representation”).

This chaos and disengagement causes enormous amounts of unproductive friction and conflicts. We get entangled in thousands of micro-arguments and problems, which costs time to solve. At the same time, it is these small conflicts in particular that keep the system running. These micro-conflicts prevent us from asking the big questions: why is the whole thing organised the way it is, why are we not “in control”, and who or what is “in control?” In order to be able to just get on with our job we fix little issues here and there. At the same time any serious effort in organising workers’ power will have to go through the jungle of daily micro-conflicts. We have to widen the scope in each one of them to unearth the underlying general discontent with a stunted life under capital’s command. We have to

point out the collective and systemic nature in what seems individual and accidental. The following part describes the difficulties of doing this.

The work site

The Tesco customer fulfilment centre (CFC) in Greenford employs 1,400 people to supply customers with the shopping they have ordered online. It opened in 2010. You can imagine the CFC like a huge supermarket where instead of customers, warehouse workers walk around with trolleys picking items from shelves. There are around 500 pickers, 100 people who replenish shelves, 70 loaders, 600 drivers and the rest are office staff and management. The site operates 24 hours, seven days a week. The 150 vans come and go from the site between five in the morning and twelve at night – vans carry shopping for on average ten customers for a five-hour run. The site is situated one mile from the A40, which is the main arterial road into London from the west. We drive fifteen miles into the centre of London and fifteen miles further out into the suburbs and smaller villages – a 30-mile radius. When for whatever reasons the A40 is blocked – be it due to floods or deaths – nothing goes in and out and undelivered shopping piles up in the warehouse.

The CFC is part of a smaller industrial area. It is situated at a canal that was used to transport goods into London in the late nineteenth century, a geology of overlapping ancient and contemporary supply-chains. Next door is the Sainsbury's distribution centre (where we worked before and were kicked out for a slowdown) and a new Royal Mail sorting depot. Opposite is a pallet distribution warehouse, which is supplied from Heathrow airport – we tried to organise with the truck drivers as part of the IWW organising drive. Then there is the Wealmoor warehouse, a major supplier of “exotic” fruit and veg, which arrives in passenger machines from Heathrow airport. Furthermore, there is a Noon Kerry Foods factory, where women make samosas and other ready-meals on piece-rate. Next door 300 men and women weld and assemble expensive Brompton folding bikes. There are a dozen more industrial and warehouse units in this park, owned and secured by Segro, a major developer. In total we're talking about 7,000 to 8,000 workers, who all exit the park from two roads, most of them arriving by local buses.

The CFC in Greenford processes around 18,000 orders per week, that's around 880,000 picked items and over £1.5 million in weekly sales. Workers at Amazon's biggest warehouse in Poznan in Poland pick the same amount of items in a day. Before Christmas the CFC processed 7,000 orders in one day, which required heavy use of overtime. You would think that one advantage of a warehouse in comparison to a supermarket would be less losses, for example, due to shoplifting. This is not the case. Management complains about £220,000 annual losses due to shrinkage – items that have mysteriously disappeared. The CFC also had a chronic problem with late deliveries, as driving into areas around Oxford Street or Victoria is a killer and you spend a lot of time sitting in fumes. Local management therefore asked the Tesco big cheese for a cap on orders to have time to sort themselves out. Allegedly the CFC made around £200,000 loss per week in 2017, due to operational costs being too high. These figures are not confirmed, as management is very secretive with most figures.

The work process

Let's look at the co-operation between workers necessary in order to get the shopping onto people's kitchen table.

Trucks arrive from various Tesco distribution centres (Reading, Middlesbrough) and guys unload big pallets full of basically everything, from loo rolls to cat food to home appliances and intimate lubricants. These items are then put on shelves in the ambient zone, chiller or freezer. This happens mainly at night.

Pickers come from 3am in the morning. They take a trolley and a so-called "pick-stick", which tells them what to pick and where. They put the items into plastic trays on their trolleys, six trays per trolley. Once they finish their pick the ambient trays are taken off the trolley by guys with big biceps and put onto a conveyor belt. This belt takes the trays up into the roof of the warehouse, where orders are sorted and sent to one of the 26 loading bays.

Loaders get a loading sheet with the van number, loading bay number, trip number etc. and take trolleys with trays from the freezer and chiller to the loading bay. There the ambient trays come down a chute and can be loaded into the van parked next to it. A van can carry up to 80 trays, around 800 kg maximum. A loader will do around ten to twelve vans per shift.

The van is then taken over by the driver, who has a SDS hand-held device, which has customer information stored on it as well as a GPS navigation system. If all goes well, the driver will knock on your door.

Most people are employed in these basic manual operations. But there is more work necessary to do the job.

Workers in stock control go around and check that there is enough stuff in the warehouse. Admin workers rearrange the locations where things are shelved, depending on changes in orders, to make the distance between picks the shortest possible. Loader admin guys hand out loading sheets and make sure that the right vans are parked in the right loading bays. Driver admin guys hand out customer receipts and SDS's to drivers and answer the phone if they have questions on the road. Every now and then a guy with a laptop comes in and works on the algorithm that figures out the best route for the vans.

The guys at the gate-house check the vans when they come back and tell drivers in which loading bay to park it. Then there is the call centre, which is situated in Scotland. Workers there deal with irate customers, pass on requests and information to the drivers on the road, for example, when customers cancel shopping or miss their frozen items. The call centre workers also communicate with office guys in the local CFC – these in turn also talk to drivers on deliveries, for example, to inform them whether a shop has finally been paid for and can be delivered. Then there are cleaners, tray washers, yard workers, maintenance engineers.

Co-operation, management and machinery

So do you co-operate with anyone? In manufacturing hundreds of workers see their co-operation materialised in the form of an end product. We don't. If manufacturing workers don't work together, the product doesn't work. If a group of workers work slower or sloppier, it might impact on other workers further down the line. In our case the co-operation is less intimate. Yes, a picker might make a mistake and pick Coke Light instead of Coke Zero – too bad. More annoyingly, the loader might load in the wrong order and you mess up your delivery. At least you will know who loaded your van, so you can have a go at them if you chose to. These things don't really matter that much – the real trouble starts if large numbers of vans are

delayed or large numbers of deliveries are returned to the depot. What are the reasons?

Worker shortages cause frequent, but generally small delays. You will hear: “Oh, today we’re short ten loaders”, and you go out 45 minutes late. Another reason can be lack of trays – Tesco loses hundreds of trays each month, as drivers leave them with customers to save time and hassle. Things are worse when the supply of trays from the main depot are delayed, or the washing machine for the trays might be broken, but that doesn’t happen often.

The main reason for frequent and significant delays is the breakdown of the computer system that deals with orders, or a breakdown of the conveyor system. While mechanical errors can be dealt with quickly, a problem with the software which coordinates scanners, sensors, diverters etc. can be more difficult to resolve. Tesco has outsourced the whole system to “van der Lande”. They have two, three engineers on site, 24-hours, but struggle with the maintenance. The sorting function of the system is supposed to make the picking operation more productive – one order can be picked by various pickers, trays are reunited by the sorting mechanism. It is also meant to make loading faster, by transporting trays straight to the van. Given the maintenance costs and costs in case of breakdown it is questionable how much money it saves. Days when the system break down are fun. Managers try to push people to take holidays or unpaid leave. They call you at 6am to ask you to consider their offer. Most workers come in and spend hours doing nothing but chatting. We demand a karaoke system and party food, but management don’t find it funny.

What are the main management functions in the CFC? A “productive” management function is to match the amount of orders with the available workforce. They get the figures a day in advance (though often with more notice) and have to see if the work can be done with the workforce at hand. If not, they have to release more overtime, ask pickers to stay longer, order more agency drivers, put a cap on holiday requests. Any worker could do that, once they get a few hours to figure out the computer mask. The work could easily be done without the computers – you could theoretically sit down with maps and coordinate deliveries like that. This would take longer and would be less effective, but it would work. In this sense we cannot

really speak about “productive knowledge” of management. In manufacturing workers might look up to managers because they are also good engineers. That’s not the case in logistics, where management’s authority is mainly based on their ability to punish.

Other management tasks revolve around basic coordination, for example, communicating with the van mechanics crew or the depots that send the plastic trays. Then there is a fair amount of formal work, for example, complying with health and safety checks, driving licence checks, new legal regulations. The main work will be supervision though, checking sickness or lateness levels, following up complaints about drivers, dealing with grievances.

To conclude, you need dozens of other people to be able to do your job. If one department has issues, the departments downstream will notice. But our co-operation doesn’t really materialise into something new. Loaders and pickers don’t see the extreme joy in the drivers and customers’ eyes when they have completed a satisfactory service transaction!

The workers

You can imagine the CFC as a distribution centre of the local working class itself. There are 1,400 people employed and with the high turnover you see 700 people passing through each year. When I entered through the staff gate on my first day of training I met some old workmates from previous jobs. Another old acquaintance was now working as a delivery driver, she had worked with one of us at the neighbouring Jack Wills warehouse a few years before. After Jack Wills relocated the warehouse to Sheffield, we had organised an action at the temp agency together to get outstanding holiday pay. She is from Hungary and pretty tough. She was well informed about the recent strike at Audi in Hungary which threatened to ground production in the German plants to a halt. Many of the drivers and pickers have family members working in bigger local workplaces like Bakkavor and Heathrow airport. One of the loaders was a union rep and manager at Gate Gourmet during the dispute in 2005 but I don’t think he played a particularly heroic role.

In a big workplace like that you can rekindle some relationships and you can spread your contacts with workmates who leave the job. Three guys I

worked with later got jobs as truck drivers on the runway, working directly for British Airways. When strikes were in the air I could ask them what was going on. The same exchange happens between Ocado delivery drivers and us, though many more guys shift over from Ocado than the other way around. Although Ocado pays better, work there is much more stressful and they sack people easily.

What can we say about the composition of the workforce? Unsurprisingly all loaders are male and there are only a dozen women amongst 600 drivers. Yes, loading is hard physical work, but not so much harder than picking, where women lift 6x2 litre packs of water into their trolleys. The common explanation for why there are so few women drivers is less physical, more social: we have to work in the dark, deliver to dodgy estates, you're alone in customers' flats, so this can be seen as too risky for a lone woman. The most tiring job is done by the pickers and women account for around two-thirds of picking workers. Management seems to think that walking around a supermarket with a trolley comes quasi naturally to females. In terms of workers' backgrounds, the drivers are 40% South Asian, 20% Afro-Caribbean, 20% Eastern European, 10% African, and 10% white British. Many of the workers from a South Asian and Afro-Caribbean background though were either born in the UK or have been here for a longer time. Their English is pretty good.

It's a certain type of worker who goes for van driving jobs. There are the young guys who just can't stand having a boss around. People with their issues and histories. You meet former law students from the Czech Republic, who read the Financial Times in the canteen and use arguments from Wittgenstein and Hayek. Or geezers who tried to build a wind-park in Guayana and went bust and then formed a Christian salsa band. Or fellow workers who were kidnapped and tortured by the Sri Lankan army. Or guys who used to interview stars like Iggy Pop and hang out with the Stones. There is a gang of workers who have been in the job for a considerable time, between five to ten years. They make up 30% of the driving workforce. Then there are 30% of drivers who come and go – out of a group of ten people who do the initial training, only four will be left after six months. The rest of the workers stay for a year or two, most of them find a better driving job somewhere else.

The composition is similar amongst the loaders and pickers, perhaps slightly more women from South Asia in the warehouse – but their English tends to be worse and many of the workers have migrated more recently. Lower management reflects the composition of workers – though less Afro-Caribbean than South Asian and Eastern European -, as it is the case in most local factories and warehouses. Tesco is seen as a working class career ladder; in 2018 over 17,000 Tesco workers were given management training. While it is within reach to become a manager, their wages and conditions are not that great. A lower manager earns roughly 20% more than a driver. The turnover amongst managers is pretty high. Top management is mainly white British and unlike the Tesco myth of “we worked our way up”, most of them went through higher education.

Being a driver means you only meet people before shift, during the one-hour break in the canteen and briefly at the end of your shift. It’s really hard to get to know people, despite most people being friendly and open. After half a year of working there I knew perhaps 50 drivers better, in order to say more than the usual, “How you doing, brother”. Given the complex shift system you might crossover with the same driver only once a week. If you play ping-pong in the canteen or smoke you have a better chance of talking to people. This was one of the reasons why I later decided to go for the union rep thing – as getting to know pickers was even harder, due to their shift times and them being busy. Many colleagues get disciplined for “lateness” and in the disciplinaries their domestic situation becomes visible. I found out about one workmate, a single mother of an autistic child. When she started at Tesco as a picker, Tesco only gave people 17.5-hour contracts, but there was plenty of overtime opportunity. She could survive with the Tesco job, even if starting work at 3am was difficult. When Tesco dropped the overtime she had to take on first one, then two, additional jobs. When the kid has a bad night she only gets two hours sleep before having to come to work. Tesco only gives two hours’ notice to cancel overtime, whereas workers have to give 48-hours to cancel a shift. She often arranged childcare for overtime days, which she still had to pay for after the short notice cancellation. The exhaustion and worries contributed to her bad sleep and lateness, which Tesco punished her for. Other workmates describe similar situations when joint family set-ups fail and two working parents

have to arrange childcare or care for elderly parents around the “flexi-shift times” of their company. Still, most of these workers are not on their knees – during the “disciplinaries” they clearly voice how Tesco contributes to the trouble they are in.

There are no organised political currents amongst the workmates. In conversations some of the younger Afro-Caribbean and South Asian guys criticise “imperialism” and US foreign policies. Many workers from Gujarat defend Modi, India’s Hindu nationalist Prime Minister. Several colleagues from Eastern Europe compare Tesco with “socialism”, by which they mean the power and red tape of a privileged bureaucratic class vis-a-vis the workers. There is one guy who is influenced by the intellectual wing of the alt-right, very well-versed when defending bullshit like the “white man’s burden”, but seeing as most of his fellow workers are South Asian and Afro-Caribbean, he is not taken too seriously. He says that the willingness to strike has declined now that most workers are migrant.

Many workers, migrants themselves, voted for Brexit, but more to show that, “things can’t go on like this”. There was only one moment when a single event forced most people to say something, that was the Grenfell fire. Most workers clearly saw the class character of the disaster, some emphasising that it was mainly black people who lived in the tower block. Some workers started to collect food aid for the residents of Grenfell, but the paid “Tesco community champion” quickly grasped the opportunity and turned the whole thing into a Tesco charity event.

Pay and working hours

Tesco’s wages are located on the lower end of the retail sector. At the end of 2019, pickers and loaders are paid £9.00/hour and delivery drivers £9.68. Workers employed in the London area get £0.68p per hour location pay on top of this. Most of the other bigger retailers pay around £1 more per hour. You get 10% off if you shop at Tesco. Another bonus for workers in CFCs is the staff shop, where everything is reduced by 50%, stuff that is slightly damaged or just before sell-by-date, which therefore can’t be delivered to customers.

Most workers are on flexi-contracts. Pickers get 17.5 hours per week and either get overtime (or are asked to stay longer) or not. Some work

occasional double-shifts from 3am to 5pm. Many older drivers and loaders are on full-time contracts with regular shifts, but every driver hired after 2017/18 now gets flexi-contracts. This means you have a contracted amount of weekly hours, but shift times and days you work change. They give you a four-week rota. Basically, all drivers are required to work either Saturday or Sunday, which sucks. Many workers work pretty mad overtime, many up to 60 hours a week – because the wages are so low. The rent for a three-bedroom flat in Greenford including bills will cost you £1,700 a month at the very cheapest, whereas a 40-hour, full-time job as a Tesco driver only pays you around £1,400. Tesco management takes advantage of this situation, with the support of USDAW: In early 2020 management in Greenford took part in a national trial, asking drivers if they were willing to work 12-hour shifts, on a four days on, four days off rota. Other proposed shift patterns included 13-hour shifts! This trial was signed off by the union, despite their own rule that they strive to “obtain a maximum working week of 40 hours or less”. How on earth can a union agree to a return to thirteen-hour shifts?! This was the response from the union’s National Officer: *“This has been designed and developed in consultation with Usdaw and the Dotcom Drivers working party. It is hoped that providing more options and choice for drivers and Tesco, will see a significant reduction in attrition rates. (...) The trial is going really well, and as expected the 44 hours contract rolling rota has proved highly popular with drivers.”*

Similar crap is happening in Tesco warehouses, where the union has agreed to new shift-rota systems that let people work seven days in a row, followed by four days off.

At Ocado, drivers can go home paid as soon as they have finished their round. Many workmates find that good, but it is obviously shit: people rushing to get paid a little extra, Ocado can then see how much quicker work can be done and is able to crack the whip and put more work on people.

There are no agency workers amongst pickers and loaders in the CFC – and Tesco unlike Sainsbury’s hasn’t outsourced any warehouse operations to logistics companies. There are agency drivers though – up to sixty workers. Tesco has difficulties recruiting enough drivers – and then there are seasonal ups and downs which are covered with agency work. If you are

not messing up badly Tesco will offer you a permanent job after twelve weeks. Many agency workers don't want a permanent position: the pay is no higher, the agency pays weekly, not every four weeks, and you can choose your shifts more flexibly. Many drivers have second jobs, so agency work fits better. While turnover is high amongst pickers (many students) and drivers, loaders tend to stay – they have stronger personal relationships.

Training

The training is comprehensive, agency and permanent drivers go through it together. Apart from the usual brainwashing about how great your new employer is, they teach you something about the three aspects of the job: manual handling, as you have to use trolleys, carry trays up and down stairs etc.; the driving, as driving a van through London traffic can be a challenge; and the customer service, as you deal with all sorts of people.

The training is straightforward, but the “emotional labour” element was funny. Imagine a room full of blokes who just want to get on with driving and lifting heavy boxes of shopping. How do you teach them some emotional intelligence? The Tesco trainers presented us with half a dozen domestic situations and we were supposed to guess which type of customer service would be most appropriate. There was the busy middle class professional, who is not the least bit interested in small talk, but just wants things done quickly. The elderly working class lady, who needs extra help and might invite you in for a cup of tea and a chat – that’s fine, but no longer than three minutes. There is the chaotic large family, where you cannot expect clear orders, but you have to use your intuition where to put things and who to address. At the end of each scenario the questionnaire asked us, “How can you show that you care?”

Despite all the emotional gloss, this training is basically meant to disguise the fact that you have one of the oldest professions in human class history: being a water carrier (often literally) for the better off. This is what it boils down to, despite being pimped up by GPS satellites and fossil fuel consuming vehicles.

At the end of the theoretical training you go out on three runs as a “buddy” – where a more experienced driver shows you the ropes. This is good if your buddy is good – as they explain to you what really matters: how long can you park up and have an extra break before they catch you out? What to do if the GPS navigation system doesn’t take you to the right address? How can you deliver a hundred six-packs of water with the least physical and mental effort?

Work Experience

Driving

Driving is a strange form of mental and physical exhaustion. Monday morning rush hour: You join the other 65,000 cars and 7,300 vans that enter London every hour to get to work or deliver goods. You manoeuvre a four-ton heavy metal bullet at life-threatening speed through tight spaces, surrounded by, but insulated from, other drivers of bullets, flesh-and-bone pedestrians, bloody cyclists and Deliveroo scooterists who overtake you from the inside. Your eyes have to be everywhere at the same time – fuck that London cab driver! arsehole! – and simultaneously compare the address on the paper manifest with the display of your Sat Nav – while noticing that the recommended left-turn on the display is leading you the wrong way up the one-way street. And let's not talk about trying to find parking in central London! You feel like crying or killing. At the end of the day, after ten hours of this, you are completely exhausted and unable to rest. You haven't moved much, but your muscles ache like hell.

There are various studies about what the brain does while driving – different parts overactive all the time: double-hand double-foot coordination, 3D-spacial orientation, permanent alertness, sudden decision-making, trying to retrieve information from memory, where was the loading bay again? You move at a speed which is five, ten times the speed humans usually move and reactions have to adjust. Things move around us in an unpredictable fashion. Whilst driving, you hardly notice time or tiredness – the scene is drawing you in and sucking you out. Once you stop, it hits you. The combination of having loads of (horse) power, but being static in traffic jams causes frustration. Then the clock's ticking in the background, you're running late for the next delivery. The whole show takes its toll. The life expectancy of professional drivers is six to ten years lower than average. High blood-pressure, gastro-intestinal problems, fucked-up elbow joints and frozen shoulders, fatigue, clear evidence of post-traumatic stress. But then let's be honest, driving can be the most wicked thing ever. On a good day, bass booming, freedom breezes through the window, you glide along and watch the scenery, be it a White City housing estate or a cow field in Bushey. I laugh about my street-sweeping ex-workmates as I roll past them

and make them eat dust. You feel young and you get paid for it. This is probably a commonality for most of the workmates: we all love driving.

But then it fucks you up. Toxic masculinity and toxic air ain't a good combination. While environmental activists are right to point out that corporate transport is a killer – the workers who have to drive these vehicles are the first victims. During a normal shift in central London you are stuck in slow traffic most of the time. That's when the nano particles come in. It's particularly bad in the summer. The vans have no AC, if you don't open the windows you die of heat stroke – if you open the windows you die of lung cancer. Every year more than 1,700 people in the UK die of “occupational lung cancer”. Compared with the future health impact of fine-dust pollution from high-compressing fuel engines the asbestos crisis will be like a breath of fresh air. Marylebone Road, one of our main roads into London, is the most polluted road in the UK and the other main artery, the A406 from Hangar Lane to Chiswick Roundabout is the most congested. Professional drivers spend on average a week a year stuck in traffic. The average speed in central London hovers at around eight miles per hour. This is obviously bad for anyone's lungs, but it also questions the whole business model. Often it takes one and a half hours between leaving the yard in Greenford and arriving at the first point of delivery. In inner city London you manage two deliveries per hour and square mile, in the suburbs four or five. I twice spent several hours being blocked by Extinction Rebellion climate activists on Piccadilly Circus and Trafalgar Square. I didn't mind too much – although standing in traffic and watching hippies doing yoga from afar, separated by a line of police, can get boring. It was good to see “returned deliveries” piling up back in the depot though. Workmates have varying opinions, some say we should shoot the crusties, but then they agree that the issue is serious and that we don't really give a shit if some suits in a central London office block get their guacamole dips delivered or not.

Driving not only makes you sick, it makes you stupid, as well – at least if you use GPS navigation and believe the scientists. While London cab drivers, who have to memorise all the London streets, have a physically enlarged hippocampus, us Mickey Mouse drivers who depend on 32 satellites and dozens of US military installations to find our way around town don't even achieve what maze-confined lab rats do for their treats any

time, any day: build cognitive maps. But then, who gives a shit? Do I want to stuff my brain with every pissy back-street in Soho?! It's true, if there wouldn't have been Sputnik, the Cold War and some Korean airliner being lost and shot down over Kamchatka, we wouldn't have GPS. It would be much costlier to have thousands of van drivers, motor couriers and Deliveroo cyclists blocking the roads while handling A-to-Zs and unwieldy street maps in order to find their way. Alternatively, the bosses would have to pay more to those workers who learnt the maps by heart. Here we can see how modern technology has helped expand the number of personal service jobs, by lowering wages significantly. There was one day when the O2 network was messed up. The Sat Nav's GPS and my mobile phone reception had a 30 second delay. It was fun to watch other drivers who used O2 stopping at the most unsuitable street corners in order to let their system catch up. I had another surreal situation when I was expecting a delivery from DHL and I could "live track" on my mobile phone and see how many more deliveries the DHL driver had to make before reaching my place, while I used my SDS to see if the amount of remaining deliveries that I still had to make would allow me to be home before him.

GPS helps, but it isn't perfect – it didn't need the rubble of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade to prove the point. Our Sat Nav has not been updated for a while and it's not very precise. Parallel streets in close proximity get mixed up. More importantly, it doesn't know names of estates, which is a real bugger in a town like London. My worst driving experience was on a Saturday night in Soho, it was raining loads and the GPS led me into small streets which ended in a dead-end through temporary bollards. I had to reverse around three corners, all I could see in the rear mirror was dark rain and puking drunk teenagers stumbling around. So even if automated driving could deal with all eventualities of inner city driving – and it can't – the mere task of finding the right address in a 1970s concrete jungle-type of housing complex or newly build office park is a challenge. We have to improvise. We use our own phones with Google Maps, we phone the customer and ask for directions, we might even ask a stranger for the way. In inner city London every fifth address requires such type of improvisations. Using your own phone is a tricky one. A workmate got robbed while delivering and the guys damaged his mobile phone. Tesco

insisted that he shouldn't have had his private phone with him. Other workers then spread the word that we should fuck up management by not using our private phones and instead call management each time we can't find an address. This is extremely tiresome though.

Tesco knows that the GPS is not exact and that they rely on drivers' knowledge. They acknowledge this in two ways. At the bottom of each printed manifest you find a box ("CDA notes"), where drivers who have delivered to the address previously can leave comments, for example, "second Blue door on right" or "frail elderly lady, needs help" or "approach address from Barnsley Road, park in Sutton Close". They've integrated this box electronically into the SDS device. This information is vital and can save you ten, twenty minutes of stupidly searching around. But then it also saves Tesco time. Tesco managers encourage drivers to tell them where we "need more time for deliveries", so that they can give us more time for specific addresses by adding it to the database. Often they don't enter driver's comments into the database, because they cannot be bothered to go through all the paper manifests. In logistics, management depends less on the creative participation of workers than, for example, manufacturing, where they depend on workers making suggestions of how to improve this or that process. They have to make us work, they don't have to make too much of an effort to win over our minds and hearts.

The GPS knows that you could park right in front of the house, but doesn't take into account that you have to walk through the English garden for half a mile to get to the back door or servants' entrance of the mansion house. The thing is that the time given for one address is the time taken from another. The system is obviously geared towards a maximisation of deliveries. So do you share your information? It can be so frustrating to look for an address, much more stress than getting another straightforward delivery. But then an extra delivery per van can be 800kg more weight on your bones per week. Given the large amount of addresses and drivers it's pretty much impossible to share this knowledge informally without it entering the database – though people do. Once you've found the address the other part of your job starts.

Heavy lifting

Then there's the more physical and less exciting part of the work. Opening the shutter, taking out the trolley (heavy!), piling up trays, pushing up to 70kg through gravelled driveways or along badly maintained pavements. Carrying stuff to the third, fourth floor, no lift. On a bad day you move 1.5 tons of shopping. The job is hard on the back, because you either sit slumped behind the wheel or you carry stuff, there is little movement in between. We have a big sign at the entrance to the warehouse: "008 days since the last accident". The sign hardly ever reaches double-digit figures. A lot of guys hurt themselves on badly lit staircases or when unloading twenty pints of milk from overhead height. We don't move around as much stuff as warehouse workers, but conditions are much less predictable.

Tesco pretends to give workers enough training to show to the authorities that they do their best to prevent accidents. The rules say that you should never pull the trolley up more than one step, that you should never carry trays sideways etc. In many cases if you would applied all these rules you wouldn't be able to do your job on time – and you would look like a jerk. Take the following example. You've parked the van 500 metres from the address because you don't want to park where you're not supposed to park. You walk a further 200 metres detour because the surface on the other pavement isn't even. You come to a block of flats that has three steps at the entrance of the premises to get onto a walkway. You have a problem here, because officially you're not supposed to put trays on the ground. You carry each of the six trays up the three stairs, then pull the trolley up. You do the same at the entrance, as you are not supposed to leave the trolley outside. The whole thing would take twenty instead of five minutes and you would have more work. And look like an idiot. There are only two reasons to do this. Either because you want to stick it to the boss, work to rule, and reduce the numbers of deliveries. Or because you want to make sure that in case of an accident the company doesn't blame and punish you. But if you want to engage in a slowdown you would just have to make up a story why a particular delivery took so long, because no one can see anyway.

Customers

Then you meet the customers, which can be interesting. Given the vast catchment area you rarely meet the same people twice. The job is a

sociological study about how London eats and lives. You have poor people who order starchy products from Tesco and very rich people, who go for the Finest food range but use Tesco own-brand for their loo roll and cleaning products. You see how their diets differ and you notice that some people's kitchens are bigger than other people's flats. In some houses you are greeted by three servants in others by malnourished cats and their run-down owner. After three years and approximately 7,200 "Hello, Tesco delivery, where do you want your shopping?", some customers stick in your mind.

There was the guy on the White City estate who loaded the 99 iceberg salads and dozens of courgettes straight into his market van. I later on read that there was a cold-spell in Spain and that the prices had hiked. We deliver to many corner-shops, restaurants, export units in dingy Park Royal warehouses, too. I delivered to Grenfell two weeks before the fire. An office on the 29th floor of the Millbank Tower, the former Tory headquarters, where they ordered a lot of ginger biscuits. Through the windows the shadow of the student riot. There is an old man in an estate in Acton who only orders vodka and soup, the flat is filled knee-deep with rubbish, much of it Tesco receipts. We deliver to many elderly care homes. The old man in nappies sits in front of a fan, you have to put the chilled and frozen in the fridge for him. The carers haven't got time. A relative orders ready-meals from outer London. From the lift you step into the middle of the hundred square metre sitting room of a penthouse in Maida Vale. The ambassador of Malaysia has servants and a 24-hour UK police post with a machine-gun cop, who lets you in. Many times you hear: "It's cold out there, isn't it. But where you are from, you must be used to it. You're from Poland, aren't you?" The daughter ordered the food for her father in a small room in the White Bear Hostel in Hounslow, which he shares with nine others in triple bunkbeds. There's no space to put the shopping. Many new-borns and tired post-natal women. I delivered to the Royal Stables, to the family above the horses, a security guard walked with me. Outskirts of Watford, a row of pensioners' pavilions. "Love, could you change this light bulb for us?" A small cabin for London cab drivers early in the morning by the river bank. The cook of the hotel near Paddington, who orders mountains of cereals and rivers of milk, treats you to an egg sandwich. It's foggy, it's sleepy London at 6am, you feel like a Cockney market stall

pusher from the 1930s, but the cook is from Albania and you work for Tesco. Hundreds of creative open-plan offices with pale young people in front of screens, very hard to tell what they are doing, but they order a lot of fruit. Lord's Cricket Ground the day before the final. You help people kill themselves with food and booze, literally. If you think Tracey Emin's bed is art, you are on a permanent exhibition trip into people's private sphere. The Black Island Studios in Acton, they order the cheapest no name products to fill a supermarket scene, the carpenters are still working on it. A Hasidic teenage girl in Golders Green with too much lipstick practices flirting, using an American accent. Kids come running excitedly: "The Tesco- Man, the Tesco-Man!!!". You feel like a second-rate Father Christmas during the wrong season. I talk to a single mum, she works for Tesco, and her mum, who also works for Tesco, about the recent wave of redundancies. Art galleries near Leicester Square. And then my favourite day: a cleaners' picket line at the Foreign Office. I can refuse to cross the picket line and the managers carry their own shopping through the rain.

Customers have skewed ideas about how the operation works, how their mouse-click delivers the goods. You sometimes get accused of having brought bananas that are too green. Some customers ask if we still have some milk in the van that they can buy on the spot. Some tell us that we should only bring certain sell-by-dates next time. Otherwise there is not too much emotional labour involved when dealing with customers. Around 40% of them are some form of middle-waged class, often with small kids, 20% elderly retired folks, plus the odd student. Around 30% are businesses, many schools and nurseries, many offices in the centre. You feel okay helping some frail people, you feel annoyed to have to shop for the professionals, whose time is "too valuable" to do the shopping themselves.

When you deal with businesses the relationship changes slightly, as you now deal with fellow workers, like porters, security guards, receptionists, employees in general. Normally that's cool, but Tesco changed their policy recently: in order to save time in central London, you can now only deliver to ground floor reception areas of businesses (although schools, nurseries and care homes are exempt). Try explaining to the receptionist that you don't deliver to the third floor kitchen anymore. Here Tesco doesn't seem to mind if they lose customers, as these seem to be loss-making ones. In terms

of an efficient work process it's much easier to roll the trolley into a lift, go to the ninth floor and drop the stuff straight into the office kitchen. The alternative is to argue with the receptionist or office worker, and then wait until they've told some porters to come and put one item after the other into the lift or onto a trolley. This takes ages and causes stress for everyone. Tesco calculates that they either lose the customer or discipline them to a point where they themselves have arranged an efficient system. What do you do? Tesco is quick to discipline drivers when they disregard rules. And many drivers think: if Tesco want to fuck themselves, if some high up manager thinks they have a clever idea, which is pretty impracticable, so be it. I'll just wait here and waste mine and everyone else's time. But then arguing with other low-paid workers is also crap.

Because in the end we are all "brothers" (and "sisters", though less often). This "brother" thing is funny, as it has spread from the Afro-Caribbean and South Asian ("bhai") folks to nearly everyone else. Eastern Europeans do the "brother" thing, many white British people have swapped "mate" for "brother". It has become a certain class code. You say "brother" to a porter or security guard, pretty much disregarding their background otherwise, but you wouldn't call a manager or most office people "brother", whatever their skin tone or background.

Once you have "negotiated" [sic] the relationship with your customer and either helped them to unload the trays or not – which is another point of contention – you finish the transaction. There is technical knowledge of the SDS involved, but this is not too challenging for someone who can operate an Iphone5. Before people sign for their delivery, they might reject certain products – something you have to do electronically. Tesco has added certain functions which makes more work for us and gives them more information, for example, if customers reject a product we now have to choose a reason from a list of options ("quality", "packaging damaged" etc.). Something like this would be hyped up by fetishists of platform technology ("information as value" etc.), but it's not that significant. Perhaps slightly more significant is the possibility of reimbursing customers, for example, you can give them a pack of eggs for free if one is damaged. Tesco encourages this, if the value is below £3, because, as they say, a complaint call to the call centre costs Tesco more.

In the end the work of a driver is not rocket science. It's based on skills that are seen as common: navigating a city in a car, finding your way around loading bay entrances and through 1980s estates, having basic conversations with all sorts of people, using an electronic device – the SDS is pretty universal, used by Royal Mail, Hermes and many other courier companies. The good thing about the job is that it hardly ever gets boring. Time flies by quickly. You sometimes have breathing space, you can call friends, you can read and write (for example this sentence here). This is why people chose this job and they accept the flip-side: stress, arguments with customers, back aches, a certain degree of loneliness. Given the pretty independent character of the job, management has to build a framework of supervision around it. This happens in all sorts of ways.

Supervision and disciplinaries

One of the sources of discontent amongst drivers is the feeling of being constantly under remote scrutiny. Due to the nature of the job you can get fucked over for all kind of things. There are company turnstiles, clock-in cards, CCTV, which is just normal. They can give you a first warning (they can sack you after three), for being off sick three times within 26 weeks or more than 3% of your contracted hours. They do random drug and alcohol checks (there is an “amnesty” of two months where you would get away with it if you told them you have “problems”). There are van checks when you leave and when you come back, for example, to check if you've lost your trolley or brought shopping back. Then there are complaints from other “road users” (van drivers get photographed or filmed, especially when they drive like boy racers). There are street cameras to catch you driving in bus lanes, taking wrong left-turns, speeding. There are customer complaints or praises. There are cameras filming the front of the van. At Ocado they also have internal cameras, which can be used as evidence to sack drivers for smoking or swearing. Apparently 99% of all UK van video footage is saved on servers in India. Then there is the GPS system and a van monitoring system. They can see where you're parked and for how long. They emphasise that they can see how fast you go around the corner and how heavily you brake. Then Tesco says they check your social media to see you're not giving the company a bad name – people have been sacked for comments on Facebook. And then there is the public eye. How many

headlines in the media: “Tesco driver runs over cat and smirks” or, “WEE DROP – Ocado driver sacked for peeing into bottles in his van while delivering fresh food” or, “Mum praises “wonderful” Tesco delivery driver who bonded with her autistic toddler”.

So yes, they have all sorts of eyes on you, but whether they use all this information against you or not is not a technical question. Let’s not be afraid of supervision as a technology – in the end it’s a question of power, however refined their technology might be. Tesco cannot dish out too many carrots, so they have to use the stick, in the form of disciplinaries. But then the turnover of drivers is enormously high, so they cannot use the stick too much. They need a file on you, so you feel slightly insecure and don’t take the piss too much. But they know that they can’t annoy us too much, because drivers don’t stand for it and just end up leaving the job.

Recently management announced the introduction of three additional forms of monitoring. Firstly, chosen customers would act as “mystery shoppers”, meaning, they would wear hidden cameras to film the interaction with the delivery driver. It was sold to us as training. We questioned some of its legalities, but the main reason why they never implemented this scheme was them knowing they would piss us all off. Secondly, they wanted to introduce private car searches on the company parking lot. In the end they didn’t because given the demographic of the drivers, meaning, people who probably had to stomach random car searches by the cops once or twice, this wouldn’t have gone down well. Thirdly, they asked drivers to clock in and out for their one-hour break. People just ignored this and the sign telling us to follow this order came down within a week. There was no planned collective response – just an informal behaviour, where one, two, three workmates might consult each other whether they break the rule or don’t.

In three years they called me on the SDS only once, when I was in the van, parked up for longer than 30 minutes. I had to wait, as the next delivery was not yet due. Ring!

“Hey, man, how are you doing?”

“What do you mean?”

“How are you doing, we can see you have been parked up for a while, we just want to check you’re okay.”

“Okay, my arse. You don’t want to check I’m okay. Stop hassling me.”

“Okay, mate, no worries.”

The thing which really pisses people off is being investigated or even disciplined for “preventable accidents” – here we don’t talk about car accidents, but accidents which led to driver injuries for example, pulling a muscle or spraining an ankle. Managers argue that Tesco gives training and that therefore most accidents are “preventable”. If you step outside the van in a dark street and step into a pothole and sprain your ankle, you could have prevented this by looking down. If you pull a muscle while unloading a heavy tray, you should have done it in the right way. Forget about the stressful routine of the job, which eats away at your ability to focus. Let’s forget that you’ve already been punished by pain and wage loss. On top of all that, you will be questioned and disciplined, because Tesco wants to make sure that you can’t turn around and blame them.

Tesco doesn’t only discipline drivers after injuries, but also for general sickness levels. They got the green light for that from the union as well as the fact that they don’t have to pay the first three days of sickness. Tesco pays sick pay at the basic rate of pay, but only for three, four weeks. After that you are on £70 a week. Sickness levels are pretty high, in 2018 the average in the UK was a record low of 3.5% or so, while drivers at the CFC were above 10%. This reflects the difficulties of the job, but also that people are not killing themselves for it. Tesco tell us that if 80 out of 600 drivers are off sick they would lose 710 van trips a week, totalling £340,000 loss in sales. That’s 6390 sad customers. The drivers are not too impressed with that statistic, so managers end up dishing out warnings instead. The work in the warehouse grinds peoples’ bodies down – at the same time Tesco cuts all the jobs that older unskilled workers could do, such as stock control. People with back pain are told: “We cannot offer you amended duties”.

Tesco can’t retain and motivate drivers by paying more – or at least they try to avoid having to pay more at all costs. They use the stick, but the stick itself becomes very expensive to wield. Take the example of management disciplining a driver for a £65 penalty notice for having taken an extra twenty-minute break. You have the first investigation meeting with the driver, a union rep, a note taker and a manager. These meetings last around

an hour. This means that often the driver and the union rep are too late to go out for their five-hour run, they might sit around for another three hours. Then there is the disciplinary meeting, same people, same amount of time. Then an appeal meeting. That's over twelve (wo)men-hours, plus paper work, costing easily £150 in total. On average there are a dozen such meetings happening every week for the drivers alone. It pisses people off and they leave the job sooner rather than later. Tesco pays loads for the one-week training and for uniforms for new starters, who on average leave again after two months. But then Tesco cannot afford to take the boot off our throats, as we would take advantage of this and work less.

Work intensification and restructuring

Supervision and disciplining itself just costs money – management has to try to combine this with steps to squeeze us more, or at least cut costs. Like in all workplaces, this is a constant tug of war. Sometimes there are small individual attacks, sometimes big changes that affect everyone. This is the starting point of any collective workers' response.

Management encourages us to phone customers to see if we can deliver earlier – instead of waiting for the actual delivery time. This doesn't really do much, as either customers are not in or drivers don't call – which is not followed up. So they try to make us work more in case we have to wait in the depot. Drivers might be waiting in the drivers' area for various reasons – no runs, back too early etc. Managers might ask us to do “put backs”, meaning, putting returned delivery items back on the shelves either because the customer wasn't in or has cancelled the order. You then go to the warehouse and put all the stuff back on the shelves. It is dead boring and surreal. A lot of drivers refuse it. There are many occasions where managers tell a group of guys to do “put backs”, but no one moves. And then they don't monitor us too much, so we put stuff back real slow, have a chat here and there. This annoys the pickers, who have to hurry to meet their targets.

Then there are some cheap tricks which don't really appear as targeting productivity, such as the abolition of plastic bags. This sounds really green, and perhaps it is, Tesco says that by going bagless 250 million fewer plastic bags will end up in customers' houses. While it might take a little longer to

deliver the stuff, it saves time when picking, as pickers don't have to stuff it all into bags. Tesco increased the pick-rate from 192 to 240 as a result. Pickers organised a collective petition in response.

Then there are more significant changes in technology and work organisation. For the drivers they introduced a new algorithm called Bumblebee, which basically takes into account more variables which impact on delivery times. Not only the mileage from door to door or traffic during certain times, but average time to find parking, average distance which has to be walked on foot and so on. During the first weeks after its introduction they gave us a shock treatment, asking us to deliver four or five deliveries per hour in central London during rush-hour. Some guys might even have tried to achieve this, most just brought deliveries back to the depot, refusing to work overtime. This went back and forth and then settled down again. Another consequence of Bumblebee was a change of the shift times – they tried to get vans into central parts of town earlier, to avoid traffic.

Then there are more severe attacks on terms on conditions, which are meant to firstly reduce hours and only use workers when they were needed and secondly, to cut jobs and make the remaining workforce work harder.

On an informal level, workers have various ways to fight back – or rather, to find ways to create more breathing space for themselves. One of the ways is to come back late from the first run, so you are less likely to get a second run after your break – as runs are calculated on a four to five-hour basis and they cannot force you to work overtime. Given the large amounts of rules and eventualities in a town like London, it's not difficult to stretch things and come home late. While workmates talk openly about this, it's not a collective practice. Management tries to clamp down in various ways and to portray this behaviour in “anti-social” terms by saying, for example, that other workers have to take up your slack or that the elderly lady will go hungry because of you. Drivers can bring shopping back to vent their anger: “If you guys piss me off, I fuck you up, I don't stay half an hour longer to finish my round, but I bring shopping back”.

In the end this is a defensive attitude. Under the given circumstances it is not easy to go onto the offensive and to demand more than what they give us. This first part roughly described the conditions, and now, in the second

part, I look at the experiences and efforts to organise more collective and offensive forms of workers' fightback – outside and inside the union.

Organising

There you are in this big fridge with 1,400 strangers, how do you start? We had been distributing WorkersWildWest to Tesco workers for two years before I started, so I had a rough idea of the set up from previous conversations. The initial training was done in a big group – we had good fun and got on. Everyone was happy to stick together, also to organise shift swaps, so we started the obligatory WhatsApp group. A first act of organising! Ten out of twenty people from our group were gone after a month, all of them had found something else. You witness the first moments of people resisting, for example when management wanted us to clock in and out for breaks. You recognise your people, the ones that don't take any shit. I got to know another one of the union reps when management called me in for a disciplinary meeting after they found a bottle of alcohol-free beer in the van that I drove the night before, which could bring the company “into disrepute”. I was not too impressed by the rep, as he was the full-time Tesco Community Champion and you could smell that he used all these positions to just have an easy life.

A few months after I had started the loaders issued a collective grievance about tray weights. Nearly thirty loaders took part in this, but it was mainly driven by two guys. Initially this dispute had some collective element, there were meetings with bigger groups. Management reacted by withdrawing certain items from the product range (6x2 litre water packs) and limiting the amount of water people can order. The problem was that the dispute quickly turned into a personal back and forth between individuals and management. One loader used the health and safety rules and the fact that he had an injury to pressure management into allowing him to sit in his car during his shift and get paid. The other loader implicated management in so many grievances and official complaints that he got a pay-out. The other loaders saw these guys with a mixture of respect (“they are clever”) and contempt (“they are just out for themselves”). At least they also experienced that a collective position can have results.

As a closer group, the loaders find ways to react to management pressure. One of them told me that they worked to rule when management wanted to give them extra work tasks. One of their official tasks is to remove any remains of stickers that are put on customers' shopping trays

from the inside of the van, where careless drivers stick the stickers after delivery. If you do it thoroughly this will take you twenty minutes per van – and that’s what they did as a group. Management dropped the extra tasks fairly quickly.

We also tried to push things from the outside. During the first year I was working there, Tesco workers in Ireland went on strike – the union did not inform anyone about this. Friends distributed a leaflet about the strike and we tried to link it to the fact that in the UK the recent pay deal between management and union didn’t go down well. The problem is that none of the workmates expects much else from the union, which is partly a rational conclusion from experience, partly an attitude to justify one’s own passive acceptance of the status quo. Another thing we tried was a “drivers’ blog”. We had leaflets that could be distributed to van delivery drivers in general and a blog with relevant news. I handed out a few hundred to fellow drivers while on inner city runs. In a town as big as London this is too random an approach and we stopped this after a while as there was little response.

After half a year working on the job, I hardly knew more than sixty or seventy drivers and only a handful of the pickers. I decided to join the Tesco Social Club, which was as sad as it sounds! The Social Club organises the Christmas party and an annual one-day summer trip to the seaside. The main man of the social club was a driver and union rep, let’s call him Farukh. The other four, five people were women from the wages office, lowest paid admin workers. I guess some of them worked in the Social Club because you get two hours per month paid leave and you can talk to management about your plans – the HR manager occasionally comes to meetings. Others probably believed more genuinely in doing “good social work” (in particular given that most of them were from an Indian background, where “seva”, or charitable work, is highly regarded). The seaside trip was fun. Half of the bus were women with kids, the rear-half of the bus was filled with extremely drunk folks from the night shift. Almost all from a South Asian background, we arrived in Bournemouth, where not only the beach is pretty white. They had a seafood festival there, which was good, and I got to know a few more people from other departments. The Christmas party in turn was shit, mainly lower management came and I left the Social Club after that.

To rep or not to rep...

At this point we discussed whether or not to become a union rep. What are the reasons against becoming a rep?

As a union rep you reproduce the passive attitude that is put into workers' heads: there are experts who solve things for you and there is a process to do things in an orderly fashion. As a rep you have to obey the rules laid out in the recognition agreement. You are also seen as a representative of the union apparatus, so even if you do "good work", you end up putting gloss on a union institution that essentially cannot be turned into a weapon for workers. Here we would have to look at the deeper historical and material reasons why unions in modern capitalism have become what they are, machines of co-management of exploitation.

We were aware of all these reasons, so why did we, nevertheless, decide to become union reps?

Perhaps the most obvious, but not most decisive reason was the fact that our own efforts to create independent structures didn't go too far. It is easy to build good relationships with your immediate fellow workers, but efforts to establish independent meetings with workers from different departments and factories through newsletters were not very fruitful. At Tesco I was on the road for 90% of the time, which makes it hard to build contacts with other workers. We wanted to see if the union structure would allow us to meet more workers, both within the company, but also beyond the company. In this sense the decision was part of the inquiry, which can be seen as politically opportunistic: apart from seeing if a union role could be used to widen the scope of workers' involvement with each other, we wanted to find out how the modern union apparatus works.

At Tesco you have to be employed for over a year before you can become a rep. The partnership agreement allows management to object to you becoming a rep. When election time rolled around I put my name forward – there were no elections, as not many people wanted to become a rep. You just got the post. At this point I had seen nothing of the union on the shop floor. After nearly a year I knew only four of the sixteen reps: two I met during the induction when they signed us on; one represented me in my case, but didn't do much else; one was the main man in the social club.

There was a union noticeboard and an announcement of the most recent pay deal.

What does the union do?

When I started working two union reps came into the training session and introduced the union. They sold it as the usual insurance scheme and emphasised the need to have a rep, in particular as a driver. About half of the people signed on. This matches the general union density in the CFC, which is around 50%. This compares to a regional union density within Tesco of 34%, meaning, the rate of union membership is higher in our CFC compared to supermarkets.

The main work is representing members in investigations and disciplinaries – more about that later. Then there are health and safety reps who do audits and general checks of the premises together with managers. In general the relationship between management and union is as follows: management calls representatives to a meeting to announce certain changes, for example, in policies or of new measures. They emphasise that the “national union” has already been consulted about this. Management basically wants to get an okay from the reps, so they can tick that box and tell workers that the union has been involved. This means reps have the opportunity to spend time with managers, although they have little to say. Then there are the “learning reps” who organise certain training schemes (IT, English, Maths etc.) for interested colleagues. People from management are involved in this, too. The union promotes “learnings reps” and their work by explicitly pointing out that due to restructuring Tesco will require more flexibility from employees and having more skills will be an advantage.

As described earlier on, the union has entered into a partnership agreement with Tesco, which basically signed away the collective bargaining rights and transferred this to a “forum/pay commission”. The general structure of the union and its practical relationship with Tesco sets the tone and attracts certain people to become union reps. This is the determining factor in the conundrum of “the union attracts the reps it deserves” or “the union can only be as good as its reps”.

Who are the reps?

Twelve out of sixteen reps were reps because they want a position that allows them to progress in their careers or have extra time off. Most of the reps managed to get out of the menial manual jobs (driving, loading, picking) into admin and trainer positions. There are two dynamics at play here. Firstly, you are more likely to become a union rep if you are in the job for longer, which in turn means that you have a bigger chance to get into these positions through seniority. Secondly, and this is more determining, the way the relationship between union and company is arranged in general, from the top down, encourages reps to become a type of co-manager (and many become managers as a result). Most of the workers despise Tesco and management and the whole set-up, whereas most reps don't. A young woman from Somalian background, who was initially interested in becoming a "learning rep" dropped this position once she was promoted to manager. Two of the union reps both tried to get into the same lower management position and grassed each other up, accusing each other of having stolen things from their respective handbags.

Shortly after I became a rep we had an informal pub meeting with some of the reps, who at the time defined themselves as "rebels", Farukh was one of them. They complained about two, three leading reps who they accused of being management's boot-lickers – one of them was the Community Champion, the other one the branch secretary. Both "boot-licking" reps were also in the "staff forum", one of them even in the regional forum. We set up our own WhatsApp group and agreed to produce a union newsletter, which at the time I found pretty promising. The first blow was how some of the "rebels" handled a serious health and safety breach.

Health and safety incident

One morning around 2am the gas alarm in the chiller warehouse went off, which indicated an ammonia leak. Ammonia leaks have caused fatal accidents. There was no engineer on site who could have checked whether there was a leak – management relied on the information of a “remote engineer” who stated that one of the gas sensors was faulty due to condensation. Management relied on this remote diagnostic and sent workers back to work while the alarm was still ringing. Workers worked till 6am and then stopped, as the noise level became unbearable. A proper engineer only arrived at 7am and confirmed that the alarm was due to a faulty sensor. Two union health and safety reps did their own investigation. They didn’t push management to prove it was sufficient to rely on remote diagnostics, despite the fact that signs inside the warehouse clearly state that a qualified engineer has to be on site. Initially the two reps also didn’t want to share the health and safety report, saying that it was “private” and just for health and safety, not general union reps. After some back-and-forth they shared the report that they had written for management, which said, amongst other things:

“Usdaw has had approx 20 verbal requests for grievances, complaints and even a collective grievance from many upset colleagues, however we have diffused the situation and calmed down staff by asking them to put the details onto near-miss cards instead. We also advised that if they have headaches or have been upset by the situation, to speak to their manager for a break or medication as appropriate. Thankfully nobody was hurt and business could continue promptly.”

I suggested that we should still force management to show that no on-site engineer was required. The manager who decided to send pickers back to work is only interested in fulfilling her quota. The main “rebel” reps said that our interest was not to cause managers trouble but, “to make colleagues lives safer”, so the whole thing was buried. The notion that the union has to be “sensible” in order to be “taken seriously” is deeply ingrained, whereas the idea that the pickers themselves should decide how they want to proceed and that only this type of pressure can change things is discarded. But then it is exactly this role of “diffusion” (see quote above) which grants the union its position.

The first union newsletter

At Bakkavor we had already started an independent bulletin, which was distributed in front of the factories. I thought it would be good to have a union newsletter at Tesco that could be distributed internally at the CFC – knowing that it would have to be more docile. I drafted a newsletter, which we then discussed in a rep meeting. Everyone agreed that it was good, at the same time, the senior reps insisted that, according to the partnership agreement, it would have to be approved by management first. Instead of distributing it I put a copy of the newsletter on the union noticeboard and accepted the fact that management would have to see it first before general distribution. Management immediately took the newsletter down from the noticeboard and called for a meeting. Initially most reps thought that one of the two “boot-licker” reps took it from the noticeboard, and they were all offended about it, but as soon as they knew that it was management they kept stumm. Management started the meeting by saying that they felt “betrayed” and “personally disappointed”. Some of the union reps said that they had never seen the newsletter before, although they had been present in the rep meeting. Another rep apologised for the newsletter and the general conclusion of the meeting was that the newsletter did not “express the sentiment of the partnership agreement” and that the issues that were raised in the newsletter should have first been raised with management – even though most of the issues had actually been raised before, but without satisfactory conclusion for the workmates.

This meeting set the framework within which management is able to isolate any initiative of the reps from the rest of the workers. They refer to the partnership agreement and if that is not enough they get the area organiser of the union involved – who generally confirms that management has to be consulted and give their approval before the union can distribute anything.

I made a second attempt at a shorter version of the newsletter, taking out some of the wording that management had objected to, for example, replacing “defend the interest of our members and colleagues” with “look after the interests”. But the telling off by management seemed to have done the job and the leading “rebel” reps demanded further changes. I left the newsletter idea at this point, not willing to censor the whole thing further.

There were two conclusions from this. During the meeting I found out who out of the reps was okay (the one, two guys who didn't say much) and who wasn't (the loud "rebels"). More importantly, I messed up any chance for an independent newsletter, as it would immediately fall back on me. Instead of having a more secure position this debacle seriously limited my scope for independent activities.

After a lot of back and forth with management about what the union can put on their noticeboard or not, I asked the area organiser whether USDAW official press statements would be okay to put on the board. He agreed that this should be covered by the partnership agreement. I chose a few USDAW statements that seemed relevant to me, for example, USDAW supporting Royal Mail workers against the high court ruling that their strike would be unlawful or USDAW supporting industrial action at a Sainsbury's distribution centre. The USDAW press releases didn't last more than three hours on the board before they were taken down by management. I complained to the area organiser, but I think he was stressed out by all the issues I'd been raising, because he never replied.

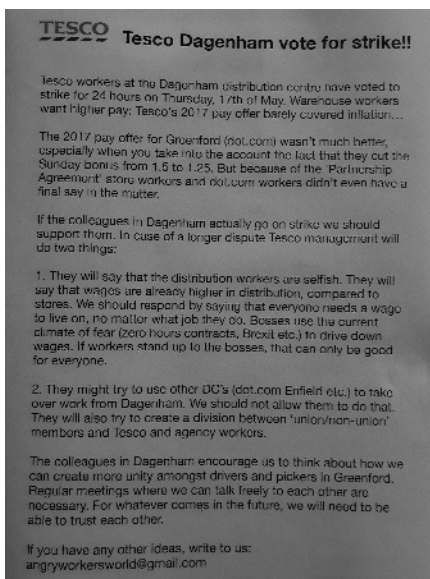
The branch meeting and the USDAW area organiser

One of the reasons I joined the union in the first place and to become a rep in the second, was the idea that I could get to know workers from other sites in union meetings. I tried to get to know other Tesco or retail workers within the IWW, but without much success. The union branch meetings themselves might be boring and formal, but workers can always talk sense face to face. The most basic and regular occasion is the USDAW branch meetings, which take place once a month. Theoretically every member in the branch area is invited to attend – that would be around 3,000 people, with a branch fund of around £40,000. On average around a dozen people attend, all of them reps, plus the USDAW area organiser.

The area organiser is a full-time official. He attends branch meetings and most rep meetings in the CFC. He makes sure that new reps get their rep training – see below. He explains USDAW campaigns and gets the necessary material to the reps, for example, about petitions to the government to grant better legal rights to carers. He makes sure that there are delegates for the various USDAW divisional and national meetings. He takes part in wage negotiations in case there are any. Finally, he is the point

of contact for Tesco management in case things cannot be solved with local reps.

The area organiser and the reps who have official positions, for example, who are members of the divisional council, try to trickle down the message from the top of the union. In 2019 the general secretary of the union proposed getting rid of the part-time membership fees and to make all newly recruited part-time members pay full fees. He argued that the union has lost 31,000 members during the first half of 2019 and that the loss in income has to be compensated for. The reps with official functions, who receive a fair amount of perks and financial (over-) compensation for attending union meetings, argued in favour of this, and put a fair bit of pressure on the others to vote in favour.



In general, the union branch meetings are pretty much only about formal internal stuff. But they are at least an opportunity to meet some reps informally, who either come from other Tesco stores or other companies. This exchange can be limited too though. One USDAW rep, who is a

manager on the Wincanton Waitrose site where some of us used to work, also attends the meetings. We regularly distribute WorkersWildWest to workers of the site, so I was interested how the recent pay negotiations for the permanent workers was going – but neither him nor the area organiser were willing to discuss the issue in the meeting.

Given that the union didn't mention the Dagenham dispute at all and any effort to mention the dispute through the union newsletter was blocked by management we decided to distribute a leaflet independently. It was interesting to see how individual reps on the WhatsApp reacted to people distributing leaflets outside their site. Most reps got it wrong and thought that the distributing friends were workers from Dagenham. Some said "Strike! Strike!", in a trivialising manner, other asked more honestly, "Oh no, what should we do now?" Workmates were more interested, some took the leaflets up to the canteen, one put it on the company noticeboard.

The USDAW rep training

Another chance to meet other workers is during the rep training. As a rep you go on 3x2 days training on the other side of London. You can attend the training and get paid your normal wage. If you live further than 25 miles from the union training site the union pays for a hotel room. Out of the twenty new union reps attending the training seven were managers. Still, there were some good folks and at least one worker from the Tesco CFC in east London, who I thought could be a valuable contact.

The training itself is very focused on Tesco's disciplinary and grievance procedures. This makes sense, as the task of a rep is not to organise collective steps, but to represent individual members. There are very short introductions to the history of the labour movement and some information about the challenges of modern life, for example, how to treat people equally, no matter what gender, ethnic background or disabilities. The questions of 'industrial action', strike laws, balloting or similar basic trade union issues were not dealt with at all.

After two years I encouraged more militant workers to put themselves forward to become reps, hoping to shift the balance of power a bit. Around twenty workers put their name forward during the rep election – usually there are not even enough candidates to make an election necessary. After four months, these workers still haven't even received a message of acknowledgement or any information from the union.

The surgeries

Apart from my idea of publishing a regular union newsletter for the site, the “rebel” reps suggested we hold regular union surgeries. Once a month we would set up some tables in the warehouse and give workers a chance to talk to their reps and inform themselves about the union. This type of structure didn’t exist before. I thought that organising the surgery would at least give me a chance to talk more to pickers, so I pushed the idea. Management tried to keep the pickers away from the union table, saying that it would delay the picking operation. Doing the surgery was a painful and embarrassing experience, as you have to stand behind a desk with a lot of pretty useless union merchandise and listen to and agree with workmates who tell you that the union is shit. Some of the loaders told me in private that we should try to get a different union in, they had better experiences with the CWU when they worked for Royal Mail. Or could we not get the RMT to replace USDAW?

Instead of just standing there like an idiot, I started to raise certain specific concerns at the surgery, for example, the fact that drivers were disciplined for “preventable accidents” or disciplined for leaving the shop floor to use the toilets upstairs. I asked people to sign petitions about these issues – around sixty to seventy people would sign at each session – and handed them to management. They obviously didn’t like that and tried to use the partnership agreement to argue against the possibility of even organising such petitions. Their argument was: as a rep you have the obligation to communicate with management as soon as an issue arises and to try to solve it instead of talking to other employees about it. They then tried to tie our surgeries into their own structure by asking us to help announce certain changes, for example, the change of shift times for drivers. Or they wanted us to hand out water bottles during the summer heatwave. A manager who was also a union rep was supposed to sit with us. I refused to hold surgeries under these conditions, but other reps agreed.

Probably one reason for why management wanted to co-opt the surgeries was the problems with their own ‘Team 5’ meetings. These were meetings where managers would announce stuff to drivers. In the three years I was working at the CFC they had only two of these meetings and both times managers were shouted down by some rather angry drivers. Drivers used

these situations where a bigger group of them were together to vent their anger. So no wonder they tried to use the reps as mouthpieces instead.

The repping and grievances

Representing workers in investigations and disciplinaries and raising grievances in case there are any issues that cannot be resolved informally are the main tasks of USDAW union reps. While it is not surprising that a union like USDAW sees this as its main activity, more radical unions, such as the anarcho-syndicalist Solfed and the IWW, also emphasise this role of a rep and provide in-depth training. The first thing I did as a rep was to write a pay claim for some loaders who had worked overtime as delivery drivers, but weren't paid the drivers' rate. Another rep had told them that nothing could be done about it. With some insistence and the right quotes, the guys got their money. A few months later I put forward a collective grievance getting signatures from all loaders about a broken automatic mechanism on the freezer door. The broken mechanism resulted in either people leaving the door open, which caused ice to build up on the floor, or wrecking their shoulders by opening and shutting the door manually. The loaders were pissed off. Management initially said the repair was too expensive, but with a bit of pressure it finally got repaired. It's flattering to get respected as a result of your work and to be seen on the right side of the loading bay, but in the end it is a skewed relationship.

Why does Tesco implement procedures like investigations, disciplinaries, grievances, appeals etc? These are lengthy and therefore costly procedures, but in the end they guarantee the orderly functioning of modern enterprises. This is why the state proposes them as forms of conflict resolution. These procedures mimic the "fair trials" of the democratic justice system, though in the relation between employer and worker the farcical character of these trials are even more apparent. But then even bourgeois law is more than just pure theatre. There are many cases where the law decides against the powerful and "gives justice" to the victims. It is these cases which give the whole structure legitimacy. To bring it down to the shop floor. As a good rep you know your shit, you have your files, you prepare your case – you might even have an important looking little briefcase.

Prosecutor: "Mr So-and-so, you are accused of "misuse of company time" because you left the warehouse during working hours. There is CCTV and turnstile-recorded evidence. Why did you leave the workplace?"

Lawyer: “My client didn’t leave the workplace, he had to use the bathroom.”

Prosecutor: “Why did your client not use the toilets on the shop floor?”

Lawyer: “Because the ratio between the number of employees and available cubicles in the male toilets doesn’t correspond to the legal minimum required by the Employers’ Duty of Care Act 1978.”

Prosecutor: “Oh, I see. I guess we have to get this sorted. Case dismissed.”

So yes, you can get minor “successes” by finding little chinks in their armour and loop-holes in their rules. These “successes” grease the system. Your colleagues respect you for ‘standing up for them’, but what this respect boils down to is the acceptance of the company rules and the rule of the company. How did I deal with the obvious contradictions in playing such a role? In a way opportunistically. I told every workmate before each case that the whole thing is theatre and that in the end the only thing that puts pressure on management is the fear that the issue goes beyond the small air-conditioned room with their files and note-takers. How can we make the issue a collective one?

In most cases this was a pretty rhetorical question. In one case a transport desk admin worker was disciplined for using a visitor’s card to get through the turnstiles for cigarette breaks. With the visitor’s card his own name would not come up. I advised him to speak to all the other admin guys and get them to sign a letter saying that they had all used the visitor’s card and that they would all have to be disciplined. He decisively did not want the others to know what had happened to him – so we went in alone and he got a final written warning. Fuck it, serves him right. Still, the experience of being in these meetings together was a way to get to know people from other departments, to get their contacts and to keep in touch. The word goes around that you are “a good guy”. In a few cases this trust then translated into more collective, small-scale steps, such as a pickers’ petition against the pick-rate increase.

Grievances are not so different, even collective ones. Sure, management is not happy if you present them with sixty workmates’ signatures all asking for an end to disciplinaries for so-called “preventable accidents”. But in the end the grievance is manageable – and this is what managers want. In the case of the “preventable accidents” the grievance argued that if workers are

investigated for causing their own injuries and potentially disciplined, they will stop reporting accidents, which in turn poses a health and safety risk. I suggested that all reps should sign a letter supporting this position, but Farukh spoke against this, “as this is not our job as reps, this is a case by case issue”. I ended up reporting Tesco to the Health and Safety Executive (a government institution) and the local council about this issue – but without clear results.

Grievances and petitions are a way to go around and talk to people about issues and make them see that others feel similarly. That’s a start, but it quickly can become an empty activity. Still, after having done four, five of these grievances some workers started doing their own petitions, for example, one guy was particularly upset about the fact that the opening times of the staff shop were reduced, so he walked around with his own petition. That was good to see.

The pay deal 2018

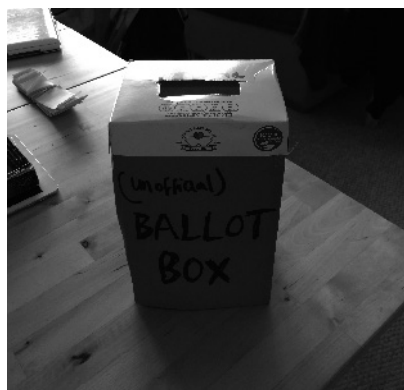
Older workers still had the experience of the 2015/16 pay deal in the back of their minds, when a slight increase in basic pay was combined with a reduction of the location pay (for workers in London area) from £1.04 per hour to £0.68. This time around, Tesco and USDAW played a similar game of increasing the basic rate by 16p in the first half a year and then by a further 3% from the end of the year, but at the same time as cutting the Sunday bonus by 25% from time- and-a-half to time-and-a quarter. Even the drivers who don’t work Sundays were pissed off because everyone feels tricked.

The first reaction of many workers when they heard about the cut was to opt out of Sunday work (which is a legal right for shop staff), and to refuse Sunday overtime. This reaction must have been widespread across Tesco, as Tesco management and USDAW made the following joint statement:

“ ‘Following the recent pay review communications, we are receiving a high number of Sunday Opt Out requests from colleagues in our Centre. We require further time to consider each case on an individual basis to balance the needs of the individual and the business. We will therefore be responding to request within 12 weeks in line with our flexible working policy and exploring any critical requests through our People Partner on site’.”

They needed to buy more time because so many drivers were opting out. At our CFC, individual managers were told not to hand out opt-out forms. There were reports from Bristol that Express supermarkets had to close down on Sundays due to lack of staff. The problem with this “spontaneous” reaction is that new starters are likely to pick up the work. For them 25% instead of 50% extra pay on Sundays might not be a big deal. After two months the overtime book filled up again.

I suggested giving the Tesco and USDAW head honchos feedback about how people felt about the deal with a petition. It said that we were not happy with the deal and we wanted a say when it comes to future deals. A petition would also be a chance to talk about the deal, the union and what could be done to change things in future, for example, to make the Sunday overtime boycott something more collectively organised. Most reps said that no one would sign petitions because workers are afraid or couldn't be bothered. When pressed, nearly all the reps refused to go around with the petition. Only one other rep and me managed to get 300 signatures in a few days. We sent the thing to both headquarters.



If the union won't ballot its members on the pay deal, we will have to do it ourselves (with the help of PG Tips)

The area organiser called me two days later. He was annoyed that the petition bypassed him and he said that Tesco CFC Management had asked him if I had ‘instigated’ the petition. He insisted that reps should always encourage workers to use the existing channels for grievances, instead of

creating their own ones. Reps should not encourage them, nor should they sign things like petitions. Shortly after, Farukh asked me to show him a copy of the petition, as he had been told that his signature appeared although he had not signed it. He was nervous and relieved to see that his name was not on the list – by that time he had applied to become a manager (but hadn't told us yet) and he didn't want to spoil his chances.

Farukh had initially applied to become a full-time organiser with the union while at the same time applying for a management position. He didn't get the organiser role, but made it into management. He said that the union was "racist", whereas Tesco wasn't – superficially speaking, looking at the composition of union delegates and officials vs lower Tesco management he might have a point. Having been a rep for a year at that point I asked the other reps in a meeting whether we should adopt a group position that people who want to join management should tell the other reps straight away and step down from their rep position. This was supported by only two other reps. The others talked about the necessity for "union and management to work together" and about the importance of the union promoting the chance for workers to progress. Still, I don't think that 'careerism' of the reps is the main explanation for why the union is a fig-leaf for Tesco's despotism.

Another consequence of the pay deal was the plan to put a motion forward at the next annual USDAW delegate meeting (ADM) to return to 'one member, one vote'. The motion asked USDAW to turn the online shopping "Tesco dot com" and the CFCs into separate bargaining units like DCs, so that workers can vote on a deal and ballot for industrial action if necessary. Nearly all reps initially said that the motion should not mention the "right to ballot", as this would be seen as too radical. In the end it made it onto the official motion form. The problem was that unfortunately the area organiser forgot about the deadline, meaning, our application was refused. This was most likely due to his inefficiency, although it obviously looked like bad scheming to keep things as they were.

The market supplement strategy

How do you fight for higher wages in a situation where the company/union forum sits on top of the process and decides deals for 300,000 people? Attempts at reforming the process would be pretty long-term and arduous. The chance of wildcat actions is always there, but given the presence of a well-established union, pretty slim. The strategy I came up with was to use the fact that Tesco pays a so-called market supplement to drivers in some stores. Local Tesco management can apply to Tesco headquarters to pay above the existing rate if they can show that they have difficulties recruiting and retaining drivers. The market supplement in some London area stores was around £0.60 to £0.80 per hour above what we got.

Older reps said that they had already tried to organise a grievance around the issue “but no one signed”. I didn’t believe this for a second. The first challenge was to get hold of payslips of drivers who were paid the market supplement. We knew that guys in Watford were paid extra, so I tried to get a contact through the area organiser. He said that this was not part of his area and that he didn’t know who the responsible organiser was. The second attempt was to use a contact from our rep training, who worked in the Watford superstore office. We exchanged many text messages, but she said that none of the drivers were willing to give her a copy of their payslip. Another rep and me thought about going to visit the guys and talk to them directly.

Sometime after this we had a lucky coincidence. Some workers came to us who had been transferred from other stores to Greenford CFC when it opened in 2010. These workers were still paid their market supplement and now Tesco was trying to make them sign agreements that the payment was only meant to continue for four years. In total around 20 workmates were affected, some had signed the agreement, some were more clued up. I organised a collective grievance, having found some formal mistakes that Tesco management made during the whole procedure. In the end management was forced to concede that workers would keep the payment. This was £2,000 a month that Tesco had to pay extra in wages. I was chuffed, prematurely as it would later turn out – as they only had to pay for six months.

More important than defending the supplement for these old-timers was the fact that now we had proof that some drivers in the same CFC were paid considerably more than what everyone else got. With this we could work out a strategy. I got three more workmates on board who I trusted, one of them a union rep. The planned steps were as follows:

- we would use the documents that we had about the market supplement to draft a collective grievance;
- we would go around and tell as many workmates as possible about the fact that some guys get paid more and that we should all get more; signing the grievance would be a formal act;
- we would hand in the grievance, knowing that Tesco would never pay anything extra just because of a piece of paper; legally they were not obliged to pay equal wages for equal work;
- still, a written rejection from management of a grievance from dozens of workers would be a good thing at hand to mobilise workmates to take further steps;
- each of us four would talk to ten workers to explain that given management's reaction to our fair claim we would now have to work in an extra safe manner, even if this would mean that, due to slower work, workers would have to work roughly two hours overtime per week to finish the deliveries – or bring deliveries back to the yard; two hours overtime times a few hundred drivers would make an impact on management and was the safest way to exert pressure without major risk; basically a work to rule, which was not too difficult to arrange; each worker should then talk to another five workers and so on;
- I had planned an article in WorkersWildWest, which could be distributed to Tesco people around that time, which would also lay out what could be done and how.

To be honest, it was not the most cunning plan, but under the given circumstances it was the closest you would get to unofficial collective action. A work to rule is difficult to maintain, as it strongly relies on individual initiative, in particular when we speak about fairly isolated drivers. Still, the other three friends were up for it. We collected a fair amount of signatures for the grievance, which we then handed in, which

pissed management right off: we asked for backdated equal pay for 600 drivers. We waited. But then the new pay deal fucked things up for us. More about that in a bit. But in the meantime we had an interesting, if surreal experience while participating in the union's annual general delegate meeting in Blackpool, which involved masses of crying working poor and Jeremy Corbyn.

The ADM, May 2019

The ADM is the annual delegate meeting, where around 500 delegates and the executive council decide about various motions proposed by branches. Shortly before the USDAW ADM, Tesco had announced 9,000 job cuts. This is relevant in so far as USDAW didn't do anything in terms of resistance or even symbolic protest, but limited itself to "consultations", where their only demand was that the upcoming pay increase should be taken into account when calculating colleagues' redundancy payments. Tesco announced the round of job cuts while the pay negotiation process was still ongoing, probably also in order to further dampen the already very modest aspirations of the forum reps. First of all, the job cuts and the question of what USDAW can and cannot do about them was not mentioned at all during the ADM. Furthermore, Tesco had the cheek to invite all reps to free drinks and food in a hotel on the first night of the union ADM. This happens every year and USDAW officials endorse it. It must have been seen as a "thank you" from Tesco to USDAW for the fact that they have collaborated nicely during the redundancies.

There were two of us going as delegates from our site and a further eight reps as "visitors". There were five delegates from our branch representing 3,000 members. My motion to ask the USDAW leadership to recommend boycotting the Tesco party the following year was unanimously rejected – surprise, surprise. The travel to Blackpool is a gravy train. Visiting reps get £100 a day for hotels and food, there are free drinks at parties, no strings attached. If you think that all this is an expression of pretty low levels of morality, it gets worse. Amongst the local reps arguments started after two reps made extra cash from cramming more people into an Airbnb that they had booked for everyone. Most people thought it was okay to make extra money from your fellow unionists, as the rep "had put in the effort to book the house".

My reason for going was to see who would turn up as delegates. Perhaps there would be chances to get to know workers from other sites and to see if the Socialist Party and other left currents play any positive role. Another reason was the fact that a motion would be voted on that asked the union to implement ‘one member one vote’ in future pay negotiations – a motion similar to ours, which didn’t make it through. Most of the delegates were over 50, mainly white, British, working class women. We were all sitting in a big hall, where one motion was followed by the next speech by an official. In general, there was little space to talk in smaller groups about particular issues concerning the workplace.

During the whole three-day conference there was not a single contribution that would ask how we as supermarket workers could develop our power vis-a- vis the company. The whole concept of “workers have power because the bosses depend on our labour” did not find any expression. USDAW portrays and brands itself as “the campaigning union”. The idea of “collective force” presented by the union leadership was that we as union activists and campaigners can influence politics and public opinion. Consequently, around two-thirds of the motions tackled “social issues” outside of the workplace and basically asked the union to promote a certain position vis-a-vis the government. The other third of the motions dealt with the union’s internal procedures.

As it turned out later on, Tesco and the union/forum negotiating team had already settled the new pay deal during the time of the ADM. The presence of over 500 delegates didn’t move the union leadership to discuss the pay deal – they consciously kept the deal in the dark, stating formal reasons as to why the outcome could not have been presented at the delegate meeting.

So people discussed and voted on topics like “Mobile phone use whilst driving”, “Cash withdrawal fees”, “Ban on fox hunting”, “Male menopause” and “Ban on fireworks sales”. It would be easy to dismiss all this as bourgeois forms of politics and as side-lining issues that are meant to disguise the main problem: the fact that USDAW does not fulfil the most basic function of a trade union, to be an association of workers that uses the threat of withdrawing labour as a bargaining force. But then there was a different aspect to it all. A lot of the motions dealt with day-to-day working

class problems, such as mental health, domestic abuse, debt, addiction, foster parenting – largely issues that affect you in your so-called “private life”. These issues were presented by working class men and women who felt directly affected, for example, there was a guy from a bacon factory in Yorkshire who talked about the lack of health support after his suicide attempt. A cashier in a Tesco petrol station talked about the consequences of austerity for victims of domestic abuse like herself. I have never seen so many people crying, both on stage and in the audience – a moment of mass emotions. On one hand, the stories and the empathy of other working class people were very moving. On the other hand, the whole show was disgusting: here is a union which is supposed to create the only antidote that working class people have to depression and social deprivation: solidarity and collective power. This union did nothing to create a collective force and thereby contributed to the despair. It talks about campaigning for mental health provisions, but signs a deal with Tesco that allows the company to not pay us for the first three days of sickness and to discipline us if we’re sick more than 3%. It magnifies this despair in a collective echo chamber in order to justify this or that new campaign. And then, at the height of mass emotion the special guest entered the stage: Jeremy Corbyn. Here he was, the messiah, the last beacon of hope. The moment when hundreds of people jumped off their seats was enlightening. He didn’t have to say much – once in government he will introduce a sectoral collective contract for the retail sector like in Germany, because “it works” – it works in favour of the union headquarters and helps the management of dominating corporations to out-plan their competitors.

After Jeremy Corbyn’s speech eighty of us joined a call by the local “Hope not Hate” to demonstrate against a march by the right-winger Tommy Robinson, although it was just a photo shoot at the seafront and the demo was never meant to go close to UKIP’s rallying ground. I looked out for people from USDAW Activist, which is part of the Socialist Party – but they were not very visible. I later on saw that they had a small fringe meeting. Otherwise the Socialist Party sent many of their delegates onto the stage – always pretty predictable and boring speeches for a “workers charter”, calls to kick out the Tories and to vote for Labour.



A red sky dawn at Tesco CFC

Then came the “one member, one vote” motion. Many people spoke in favour of it. I embarrassed myself by going on stage and speaking in favour of a ballot system, while questioning the fact that no one was talking about the lack of resistance to mass redundancies. The last person who spoke said that the “forum people” do a splendid job and that it should be up to the “democratically elected forum reps” to decide on the pay deals. About a quarter of the people in the hall applauded – probably all forum reps. In the end 87% of the delegates voted in favour of the motion, which was good. The disconcerting thing was that a similar motion had been passed three years before, without any consequence. The reason lies, as always with these types of organisations, in the procedures. The official line of the USDAW leadership, including the Socialist Party president, is that the Tesco employees have to decide whether they want to implement this change (never mind that the majority of the 87% of union delegates who voted for a change were Tesco employees) and the official representation of the Tesco employees is the forum. And here things get twisted. This forum they refer to has been set up to replace a “democratic balloting process” of all members and to concentrate the power to decide a deal for 300,000 people within a committee of fifty. These fifty people are now asked to abolish their own special power and give it back to the common members. As if!

Two months after the majority vote the National Officer replied to the question of the future of “one member, one vote”:

“The Union has been doing an extensive consultation as part of the current partnership review, and there has only been feedback from two SD Groups to request a change to the pay bargaining arrangements in Tesco.”

The Socialist Party member Amy Murphy repeated the same thing:

“Usdaw’s executive committee has decided to refer the terms of the proposition to the national officer with responsibility for Tesco for action as appropriate. To help deliver the sentiment behind this proposition, if individual members of Tesco wish to gain the right to vote on their pay it is imperative that they raise it on their staff forums for escalation to the Store Director Forum (SD Forum). I encourage all Usdaw members in Tesco, submit this issue to be discussed in your store forum to go the SD Forums and make sure your voices are heard!” Amy Murphy, Usdaw President (personal capacity)

This is all bullshit. In order to accept the majority will of its members, USDAW leadership would have to tell Tesco that the partnership agreement is over and the forum not recognised anymore. For obvious reasons they don’t want to do this and hypocritically refer to the forum as the “democratic voice” of the Tesco workers. So much for the Socialist Party’s strategy of reforming bureaucracies from within.

The pay deal 2019

Back on the shop floor. A few weeks after the ADM, Tesco and USDAW announced the new pay deal – strategically announced a few days after everyone had received their annual bonus. The official Tesco and USDAW leaflet that was put on the noticeboard proclaimed a 12% pay increase for drivers. As with all deals, the devil is in the detail.

The deal meant a 10.45% increase on the basic rate over two years, BUT the abolition of the voluntary annual bonus, which had varied between 2.6% and 3% during the last two years. This meant that the actual annual increase was more like 2.5%. The following question is whether the next minimum wage increase would not have brought everyone to around £9 in 2020 anyway. Instead of just fulfilling the minimum legal requirement Tesco uses USDAW to look as if they are benevolent. To agree to a two-year deal in times of a possible no-deal Brexit with a high likelihood of significant hikes in inflation was another issue. Drivers were paid an additional 26p per hour increase on their skill payment, which meant that the pay gap between

pickers/loaders and drivers increased by 50% to £0.68. For the drivers it didn't look that bad, our pay would go up from £9.53 to £10.36 in 2019 and to £10.66 in October 2020. Again, there was another catch, which messed things up for us: the abolition of the market supplement. Around 25% of all Tesco drivers were paid this supplement. The fact that USDAW agreed to scrap this extra payment meant that for these drivers the actual increase was only around 2% per year.

It also meant that our strategy to use the market supplement for the equal pay grievance and as an excuse to ask for a pay hike was now messed up. Drivers felt that they had less to complain about, given that they got an extra increase compared to everyone else. Still, people at large felt conned again. I made an unofficial ballot box out of an old PG Tips carton and asked people to cast their vote, whether they would accept the deal or not.

Total votes: 101

Yes (in favour of the pay deal):

15 (4 non-drivers, 11 drivers) No (rejecting the pay deal)

86 (56 non-drivers, 30 drivers)

Most workmates were not surprised about the results. As a formality I sent the results to the USDAW big cheese and received the usual, "thanks for your feedback" reply. At Morrisons, another major supermarket chain, USDAW members had rejected a similar deal in May 2019. 18,792 members voted against the deal, 8,410 voted in favour.

WorkersWildWest newspaper

By that time we had distributed the WorkersWildWest newspaper once or twice. One issue had a page dedicated to Tesco workers, with reports from the pickers, loaders and drivers that I wrote. The article mentioned that WorkersWildWest has been distributed in the area for a while and that we also distribute to Ocado drivers in Park Royal. Some drivers found the article online and shared it via WhatsApp – in addition to the paper version around 250 people looked up the article on the website. Some guys read the newspaper in the canteen and fell asleep after the system-series article on the crisis.

The problem now was I was double burnt. Because I had tried to get a union newsletter going and it was rejected by management and not defended by the other reps, it would have been difficult to start an independent newsletter – it would have been very high risk. WorkersWildWest seemed “from outside” enough to carry some articles about Tesco. This had the disadvantage though that management was keen on pinning it on someone, which made it difficult to discuss the paper as a “political workers’ paper” with fellow workers. I gave copies only to a few selected people.

Once you are marked like that and management is on your case, the best defence is calculated attack. I provoked them with a few things that were legally sound, for example, I informed the Health and Safety authorities about management’s practice of penalising workers after accidents and put grievances in against some high-ranking managers for not letting me conduct union surveys. I also called for a break-time protest against redundancies. For the latter I was called in for a meeting with the main CFC manager, a regional Tesco “industrial relations” manager and the USDAW area organiser. There was the usual back-and-forth with the union area organiser finishing up by saying: “We can’t physically stop him [me], but I have seen cases where union reps not only lost their role as reps, but also their job”. If management would have tried to kick me out for involvement with WorkersWildWest – which would have been difficult for them to prove – I now had some material to accuse them of victimising me for having arguments with them about legitimate surveys and symbolic protests.

The next issue of WorkersWildWest had an update from Tesco, friends distributed around 400 copies. We mentioned that pickers had a hard time on the flexi-contracts and told the drivers that given the fact that the union is tied to Tesco the only way to build up pressure is to work to rule. Without the concrete aim of getting the supplement payment for everyone this call for work to rule was an empty slogan. The CFC manager and the regional “industrial relations” mediator turned up to our next union rep meeting, which was also attended by the USDAW area organiser. The managers made a big speech about the newspaper: “This is gross misconduct. We take it very seriously. It is also an attack on the union. We know who the printer of this newspaper is. If anyone knows who is behind this or who gives information to outsiders you have to let us know.” Once the managers had left the room the area organiser asked me if I knew anything about the paper, but I just said that I think the Socialist Party is behind it – which might have thrown him.

The redundancies 2019

The round of redundancies didn’t affect the CFC too much. Some people from stock control were to go and they cut the hours for yard work (pushing trays around, checking vans, tidying up) from 420 to 120 hours a week, which meant that instead of 11 workers there would only now be five, and all of them on part- time contracts. When the redundancies were announced I asked management who exactly would be affected – but they refused to tell us. They said that we as reps would only have to deal with individual consultations. The area organiser said that we cannot stop redundancies and that 9,000 would be better than 90,000. Instead of focusing on Tesco in general we should see our responsibility in supporting the few affected members in the CFC.

The way management organised the redundancies in the yard were particularly fucked up. They basically called all yardies in one by one, asked if they are happy to work weekends, part-time and accept a pay cut. The lowest bidder was then given the job – obviously they call it “best match in terms of availability”. There were two reps working in the yard, but they didn’t do anything to get people to resist collectively. The fact that two of the yard managers are Polish and that the two Polish yard workers kept the job didn’t help. Rumours went round: “They had been told what to

say to keep the job and promised overtime on top of the part-time”. I suggested organising at least a symbolic protest about the job cuts, but none of the reps were up for it. Managers said that this would mean I would “protest against your own union, as the union had agreed to the consultation process”. I got an immediate call from the area organiser that, “we don’t call for protests”. I had also contacted the USDAW National Officer, whether it was in my right as a rep to call for a protest outside of working hours, she replied:

“In relation to staging a protest rally, this is not a suggestion that I have heard from any impacted members. I do not believe that this would have any impact on Tesco or change their decision. Negotiation through the collective consultation process is the best way to represent our members and to support them into alternative roles if they choose to do so, or leave with an enhanced redundancy package.”

Affected colleagues were not up for protesting – they said that none of the fellow workers who were not affected would support them. A woman who worked in stock control was angry, but she thought about going to the media: she had worked full-time for Tesco for over a decade and had to reduce her hours to part-time during the last months – in accordance with the law Tesco now calculated her redundancy payment on a part-time basis, around £8,800 in total, losing her over £7,000.

After the redundancies in the yard Tesco management started to put some of the yard work onto drivers, for example, we were supposed to push trolleys with trays from the loading bay into the chiller. During the first weeks there was a lot of chaos, as drivers consciously disobeyed the new order. Many said: “They sack people, so let there be chaos”. Then management called individual people to disciplinaries, they had been grassed up by one of the yard workers who now obviously felt overworked. In addition, they asked union reps who would be relieved from their usual duties to stand outside and explain to people where to put the trays. They are just suckers. Anyway, the war of attrition continues and always has results. A month after the redundancies management of the Enfield CFC increased the number of yard people from five to eight again because the level of disorganisation was too high. The same is true for stock control in stores: workers reported that full-time stock-controllers were made

redundant, but the work could not be achieved with the remaining staff, so Tesco started to rehire stock controllers – but on part-time flexible positions.

The picker survey and the new pick-rate

Another small-scale dispute I want to mention concerned the pickers. After Tesco stopped delivering shopping in plastic bags the pick-rate for the pickers was increased. Management said that pickers could achieve the higher target because they wouldn't lose time putting items into bags. The rate went up from 192 to 242 and the new CFC manager wanted to put it up to 250. I put in a grievance given the fact that the union reps were not consulted about the change. I also texted two reps in the CFC in Enfield to ask whether they had been consulted. At first, they did not reply, but the HR manager, who is also HR manager for Enfield let me know that she was told that I had contacted the reps – as if this was like crossing a line. In the end one of them told me that they had not been consulted and that therefore no picker should be disciplined for not meeting the target. Management refused my request to conduct a survey amongst pickers, saying that this was 'targeting' the pickers and if pickers had any problems they could come to me. Fortunately, the driver manager sent me to do "put-back" (putting returned stuff back on the shelves), so I had time to talk to some people.



There is a good gang amongst the women workers, mainly Afro-Caribbean and Eastern European pickers. They said that the new target is a killer and started their own petition. They will need to convince everyone to refuse to pick more than the old rate – the pick-sticks show the pick-rate, so there is a degree of control. To insist that the union should be consulted might put an additional little grain of sand into the cogs of their machine. The pickers gathered a few dozen signatures and handed the petition to management. A few days later one of the pickers was called in and told that “we don’t do petitions and I rip this up right here in front of you”. The picker kept her cool. A few days later the union area organiser called me to remind me that “we don’t do petitions and we should not encourage them”, we should put in grievances instead. Pickers formed some closer bonds in the process and up to now management refrains from disciplining people for the new pick-rate.

The reintroduction of 6x2 litres water-packs

As a result of a collective grievance amongst loaders in 2018 management decided to remove heavy 6x2 litres water packs from the product range. In their own statement it read that “they pose a health and safety risk to our colleagues”. For about a year, pickers were told to put five 2 litre bottles in one tray and the remaining bottle in a different tray, in order to avoid excess weight. In late-summer 2019 the 6x2 litre water packs returned. A few workers, both drivers and loaders, were pissed off about it, but there was no collective response. I printed the management statement from May 2018 about the “health and safety risk” and distributed it amongst some loaders and drivers, telling them that they should show it to their managers once they are asked to handle the 6x2 bottles. They should ask the manager for a written statement that it is safe to handle them. This created trouble, but not enough. When they put me on loading I refused to load the 6x2 and tried to make a fuss about it, so that other loaders would notice. A few loaders were on board, but in the end management found one older loader to do the job. On one hand this contributed to the general lamentation that “they will

always find someone to do it”, but at the same time it felt cruel to have a go at this particular scab worker – so he got away with mild teasing. A collective grievance signed by 60 loaders and drivers finally moved management to at least give an official statement about the re- introduction, saying that the 6x2 pose a risk, but that the risk was assessed and deemed as minor. Farukh, the main “rebel” union rep, who by this point had become a manager, called individual drivers who had signed the grievance into his office, telling them that if they feel that the job is too heavy he could get them a job in picking.

The daily tightening of the screw

Within a few months we were able to see how the company increased the overall workload by small steps, which the union was not able and willing to oppose:

The redundancies in the yard meant that the work of four to five full-time staff has been redistributed amongst 600 drivers, for example, by asking us to do extra-tasks. The redundancies were co-managed by the union.

Two workers on full-time contracts were shifted from the staff store to picking, the remaining staff store workers had to pick up their work. In the picking department this will mean that there will be less overtime for workers on flexi-contracts. As this is not a “redundancy”, just shift of departments and cut of overtime, the union cannot formally oppose it.

The pick-rate increase will lead to fewer hours for pickers, too. Reps hardly fought to be at least “consulted” about this change.

Finally, the reversion of the 6x2 litres ban meant that pickers don’t spend extra-time on breaking up the packs of water and that they load the vans with more trays. The official health and safety reps did nothing about this, as “the removal of the 6x2 pack was only done in Greenford, therefore it was not an overall policy”.

Conclusions

In the end you feel like a caricature of a union rep – you hand in one grievance after the other, but management just isolates the issues. You cannot threaten to use the usual union tools (newsletters, meetings etc.) against them, because the union itself doesn't back you up.

So in many ways it was a strategic mistake to become a rep under these conditions. While I could not have known the degree of moral decomposition of the union apparatus – Farukh had become a manager in the mean-time, disciplined his former workmates and still went as a delegate to the BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) union rep congress to get two days of free food and accommodation – I could have guessed it. The other main “rebel” went on a three months “organiser course” with the union, but then decided to become a manager, as well.

The alternative would have been to stay under the radar, have informal discussions and propose smaller steps – which would have allowed us to distribute an independent newsletter at our CFC. This might have been more fruitful.

On the other hand, being a rep made it easier to get to know people. I made dozens of contacts who I can update about this and that, for example, I sent most of my Tesco contacts news about the pay dispute at Bakkavor and other stuff. You get respected for being openly on the workers side and against management rule. People know that you have supported many workmates and they are more likely to listen to you about other stuff, as well. If you talk about a different society or revolution it links up with what you have practically done. Emphasising the impact of what workers are already doing on an individual level is important: if management annoys them or pressurises them, they slow down work. Sometimes this is visible, for example, when tons of deliveries are brought back. Often it is not. We have to point this out and to propose concrete steps how this can become a more collective strategy.

At Tesco more than 300,000 workers are pissed off with the union. If we had the capacity and comrades all over the country it would be possible to build an alternative network of militant Tesco workers. We could produce alternative leaflets and newsletters and propose small coordinated actions in response to national Tesco management strategies. The informal Tesco

workers' website "Verylittlehelps" has several thousand users, but no practical results. It might take a couple of years and only attract two, three hundred workers at first, but this would be a start!

Power and revolution

Do we have power as workers at our CFC? There are different angles to this question. A walkout of 1,400 people and complaints by thousands of customers that they cannot order their shopping will have a short-term impact, even if the main damage will be on the public relations level. A strike would radiate into the local working class, given the multiple connections workers have, from friends and family members working in other Tesco stores, food factories, the airport or other logistics companies. Would it hurt Tesco in the pocket though, as profits from the CFC are pretty low? Although employing a similar amount of workers, CFCs don't have the strategic clout of DCs. A strike would have less of a directly material impact, but would pose a general risk for Tesco. A strike would potentially crack the national stronghold of the union and management. Does the work in the CFC teach us something about a different way to organise society under our own control? Having some people carrying food and water for other people – with equal physical abilities – is the opposite of communism. While the drivers at least sometimes see that they deliver not just to some nouveau riche twat, but to elderly people or a nursery or the Christmas party of the local Donkey Sanctuary Society, pickers and loaders cannot feel much else other than being used as bodies to do someone else's mundane work. What can be liberating about this? They also know that at the Ocado warehouse around the corner, 70% of their job is done by robots. Still, having an efficient system that can calculate how bulk amounts of food items can be transported to bigger domestic units with the least human effort and impact on the environment will be a necessity in any form of developed human society. Currently the drivers and pickers only see the guys running around with laptops and they see the occasional announcement from management: "Please tell us about particular difficulties to reach certain addresses and we adjust the times given per delivery". Currently calculation and planning equals work intensification. There is a clear divide between the knowledge of workers concerning "the real world" (access road to a particular housing estate etc.) and the mathematical work of the planners (looking for the best algorithm based on general data). No one can really be satisfied or proud of what they are doing.

It is difficult to see how this CFC could be anything other than a pretty miserable money-making enterprise. The initial effort of colleagues to get donated food from the CFC to the residents of Grenfell was a moment, but it was eclipsed quickly by Tesco's community re-appropriation. Still, for future moments of rupture we sit on a good asset. We have food for ten thousand people for a few days under our command, we have ample chilled and frozen storage space, a big enough fuel tank on site and a fleet of over 150 vehicles, all trackable and traceable centrally and all connected to a central call centre, which is responsible for another five bigger CFCs able to coordinate 800 or so vans in London alone. This is a nice little armada during an urban upheaval. And above all, we have a large amount of people speaking dozens of languages, knowing the local area and the local class. We have people who are in a conflicted position: here are people who might object to spontaneous looting, both because they might feel some sort of ownership over the stuff, which is problematic, but also because they feel that they know what they are doing in order to get stuff to where it belongs. Point taken, this is not a strategic power plant and it is not comparable to the metal workshops of the CNT which turned trucks into tanks in 1936. Still, a distribution and coordination point under experienced workers' command can always come in handy.

Workers' Inquiry 3

Chapter 11: 3D printer manufacturing plant

The bright new economists of “democratic socialism” in the UK and the US propose a government in alliance with small enterprises against big capital. The new “radical” economists value the creative potential of start-ups and entrepreneurial companies and reach out to them, for example, by trying to split the financial sector through governmental reforms. A nationalised ‘commercial’ credit sector could offer cheaper credit to these middle class “friends of the people”. Another centre-piece of democratic socialist strategy is the ‘green new deal’. The state is supposed to provide the structural and financial encouragement for the creation of environmentally-friendly jobs. Last but not least, and this might perhaps concern more of a fringe of the democratic socialist intelligentsia, there is the fascination with new technologies that are supposed to have intrinsically ‘democratising’ features. The proponents of “fully automated luxury communism” see technologies such as 3D printing as a potential to undermine the power of large corporations and to provide means of production “for the many, not the few”.

The company I worked for in 2016 matches pretty much all of the criteria that the young democratic socialists define for their cross-class alliance. It was set up by a young and creative entrepreneur. Its main economic activity consists of re-filling empty printer cartridges, which is a relatively environmentally- friendly thing to do. And the managers set up a production unit to assemble the holy-grail of accelerationism, 3D printers. To sum up the experience of working in this place from a worker’s perspective: it is an absolute shit-hole and whoever proposes to form an alliance with these bosses should be knee-capped or at least publicly denounced by the red guards. The report engages with informal efforts to organise on the shop-floor during the time of the Brexit referendum and a brief summary of an attempt to introduce the IWW as a union.

The current public debate about automation is a highly politicised one. The prospect of having your takeaway sushi dropped onto your roof terrace by a drone or to 3D print a custom made hip-bone is celebrated by the

metropolitan professional class. At the same time, they see a looming apocalyptic side of automation: the uneducated working class feels increasingly threatened by their robotic competitors and will therefore lose all liberal attitudes that ties them to the progressive world. Workers voted for Trump and other populists because of their fear that they can't keep up with an ever faster, changing world.

The radical left is not very helpful when it comes to critically assessing the current discourse around automation from a working class perspective. Many comrades don't question the hype. They believe that automation will kill off most manual jobs within the next decade or so. Based on this rather unfounded assumption, they are then forced to instinctively choose between two different camps: an affirmative camp (accelerationism, full communism: the robots will free us from work and we can live in luxury on universal basic income) or a nihilistic one (surplus population, external insurrection: everyone will be unemployed, angry and smash everything). But in order to be able to demystify the seemingly "automatic" power of capital, working class analysis of current changes in technology will have to start from the bottom up. We hope that this article can contribute to this effort.

3D printing and "desktop manufacturing" is portrayed as a symbol of revitalisation of the entrepreneurial spirit and of a utopia of small, independent producers who engage freely on the market. The realities of working in a 3D printer manufacturing plant in west London contrast sharply with this optimism, as well as the general hype of "factory-less" production and full- automation attached to this technology. In the first part of this chapter, we raise more general questions regarding the role of manufacturing or industrial production in capitalism and how the current debate about new technologies like 3D printing is ideologically charged: with the capitalist zeal to cover up the contradictions of mass production and, with it, the essential core of capitalist exploitation. In the second part we describe the production process and working conditions in the manufacturing plant that puts the utopian visions to the test.

Be your own factory – Artisan dreams and capitalist production in the era of 3D printing

Before we engage with the hype and reality of current production technology, we want to take a step back and look at the relationship between industrial or mass production and capitalism, and the contradictions within. This is because we want to challenge the leftist hype, most prominently in Negri's ideas about "immaterial labour" and neoliberal ideologists, that want to make us believe that, thanks to small-scale technologies such as computers, we can all be our own independent producers. In their understanding, capitalism started as a small market-place of free entrepreneurs and that thanks to new technologies we could go back to that idyll. This is historically incorrect. Large-scale industries are a political necessity for capitalism, as they are the main form in which the producers are dispossessed and class relations are maintained. Why is that?

Historically the power of capital was based on a double-whammy. The revolts of 1789 and 1848 were largely carried by artisans, who questioned being treated like serfs in the countryside and being exploited by urban merchants. The urban character of these revolts made them more dangerous than the isolated rural uprisings before. Repression alone would not have been enough to secure the privilege of the ruling class – "development" became the main weapon. The big industrial captains were able to confront the artisans and small producers with a global supply-chain of new raw materials (cotton from US plantations etc.) founded on slave labour. You needed big money to access the global market, which artisans didn't have. Secondly, they could undermine the artisans with an industrial system that transferred individual skills onto an apparatus (machinery) and that allowed productivity to increase through combining the labour of many workers (division of labour in factories). Artisans couldn't compete and lost their skill-power once they were forced to work in factories. Capital therefore appeared as the precondition of production in two ways: as the force that connects plantations in the south with factories and markets in the north, and as the force that brings individuals of various social backgrounds together to co-operate under its supervision and material apparatus. If a capitalist would take away the product that a worker has been able to produce individually there would be outrage. If the same worker works as part of a large co-operation with others, dependent on a large and expensive apparatus the product will not appear as something he or she has ownership

over. Raw materials, big factories and machinery are all products of former labour, but they just appear as “property” of the capitalist.

The foundation of capitalist domination is the expansion of machinery and co-operation in order to a) impress individual workers with their own dependency on capital in order to set the production process in motion and b) to contain the discontent of the emerging working class by expanding not only machinery and state repressive apparatus, but also working class consumption. You build bigger and bigger bakeries in order to give a few more crumbs to the poor. Working together with others brings about leaps in creativity and knowledge – this living force is appropriated by capital. We can see that “economies of scale” and “mass production” is neither just a “technical requirement” (some people claim that steam engines “technically” required large scale factory organisation, in order to make efficient use of them) nor just a “more rational way of doing things”. “Economies of scale” are the surface apparition of the contradiction of the capitalist mode of production: the necessity to dominate the working class by surrounding – and replacing – them with machines on one side, and on the other, capital’s dependence on living labour and workers’ co-operation for valorisation (invest money to make more money).

The contradictions of mass production are obvious. A relatively larger share of investment is tied up in machinery, which forces capital to utilise it permanently and churn out products even though markets are saturated, creating regular situations of over-production. Although capitalism’s main legitimacy is that it is supposed to promote “free wage labour”, “free markets for producers and consumers” and “democratic citizenship”, the industrial system is intrinsically based on brutal domination and oppression of individual freedom and it leads to monopolies, which undermine the ideology of equality on the market.

Unsurprisingly, one of the earliest criticisms of capitalism and its blatant contradictions was raised from an artisan point of view, reclaiming the original promises of “bourgeois freedom”: instead of big industry we should have a network of small artisan producers and instead of big finance we should establish new forms of money for direct exchange (Proudhon etc.). Although conservative at its core, this criticism retained its appeal because it took capitalism’s ideals at face value. Time and again the representatives

of capital have to make use of it themselves: to encourage entrepreneurial spirit and individual skills.

The reaction to the working class struggles in the 1960s and 70s, which criticised the factory and assembly line-based work both from within (slow-downs, sabotage, coordinated department strikes etc.) and without (criticism of consumer society), was not only repressive, for example, in the form of factory closures and mass redundancies. Capital had to develop a “new promise”, the promise to overcome the bad sides of mass production: the monotony of industrial labour and the awkward realities of environmentally harmful over-production. In the 1980s we see two intertwined and mutually dependent phenomena: the over-represented reality of robotic or automated production and the announced return of small-scale production networks. Robots were supposed to take over the monotonous mass work, whereas small-scale production would make jobs more interesting and capitalist production more in tune with markets, consumer needs and nature.

We can find a lot of representatives of these post-Fordist ideologies: the so-called “flexible specialisation” of Piore and Sabel promised to solve many of capital’s problems; representatives of capital announced that the textile industry in northern Italy was finally based on egalitarian production networks and had overcome the uneasy constraints of the “economy of scale” (Benetton model); and even the global car industry competed in promotions of “team-work” and “job enrichment” (Toyotism). We have to bear in mind that these “libertarian” ideologies circulated at a time when capital launched its full-blown attack on the remaining industrial strongholds of workers’ power in the global north.

Unfortunately, large parts of the left allowed themselves to be blinded by both phenomena: either staring into the headlights of a robotic dystopia or believing the hype of a future post-Fordist network of free producers. This was partly because of their lack of historical and theoretical understanding of capitalist value production and its contradictions, and partly because of a lack of empirical experiences and research into the actual day-to-day application of technology within the production process.

The development of micro-electronics and logistical infrastructure since the 1980s has changed the production process, but hasn’t led either to a massive increase in automation, nor the establishment of networks of small-

scale enterprises. Relocation of production and increased unemployment depressed wages in the global North, which hampered the investment in armies of robots. The internet didn't lead to decentralised networks of production and distribution, but created the pyramids of Amazon and Uber. Although desktop computers and telephones could have meant that people work from home, we saw the massive proliferation of large-scale call centres instead. Direct control over workers and direct co-operation by workers seems to outweigh the higher investment costs. Similarly, clothes are rarely produced within a "productive network" of small producers in the Veneto, but in mass factories in Bangladesh. The automobile industry and mobile phone industry depends heavily on the supply of a handful of major global suppliers and the 8,000 DHL workers who operate within UK car factories doing former "manufacturing workers jobs" (moving parts within the plant) are statistically categorised as industrial service workers. While everyone stares at the automatic GPS-controlled cranes of modern ports, bidding a melancholic farewell to the old dock workers and "manual labour", there are 300,000 UK warehouse workers unloading the containers in the invisible hinterland – warehouse work is labour intensive and brutal.

Currently we are facing a similar situation to the first "automation" hype of the early 1980s. The crash in 2008 revealed the extent to which over-production was a driving force to capitalist crises. These over-capacities couldn't just be smoothly switched off once the market demanded less. At the same time, factory struggles in China and workers' struggles in new concentrations such as Amazon warehouses showed that the internal antagonism to mass production has not been overcome, namely that if you bring workers together in bigger numbers, there'll be trouble. Given these objective and subjective constraints on capital it is not surprising that, despite historically low rates of productive investment, the media is full of news about the "robot wars" and the threat of automation. Having been cornered by the crisis and seen their legitimacy going down the drain, the representatives of capital need a both enticing and menacing scenario. The labour-replacing robot or drone is contrasted by another prevalent idea: that of the artisanal utopia that the "internet of things" and "open source" technology can lead us towards a "sharing economy".

Contemporary “free market anarchists” (Carson, P2P-Foundation, Commons Transition etc.) affirm capitalist ideology of the libertarian qualities of market relations. They assume that “big industry” was only more productive due to “state suppression” of free competition (subsidies of patents and monopolies). Their nostalgia for the “artisan mode of small-scale production” idealises its origin: the heavy legal and patriarchal intervention when it came to the question of who was allowed to become a “free artisan” and who not. Their utopia is inward-looking, afraid of the global dimension of capitalist society – and of the productive force of (global) industrial co-operation of workers, which they don’t understand.

In order to find our bearings in the current moment what we need now more than ever is to: a) to analyse how the current ratio between wages, profits and cost of machinery (value side) determines the investment into machinery and where and how new machinery is applied or not; and b) to actually observe the material process and impact of technology once it is operated by workers: how does the division of labour and relationships amongst workers change? How does the knowledge of individual workers and the wider workforce change? How does the new technology effect the ability of the bosses to control the production process? And what is the potential for workers to subvert the new technology and appropriate their potentially “revolutionary” characteristics?

The hype

In the mainstream, 3D printing is presented as the end of mass production:

“Who would have thought that modern manufacturing could be done without a factory? Since the Industrial Revolution, manufacturing has been synonymous with factories, machine tools, production lines and economies of scale. So it is startling to think about manufacturing without tooling, assembly lines or supply chains. However, this is exactly what is happening as 3D printing reaches individuals, small businesses and corporate departments.” (Dr. Shankar Kalva, Professor, Department of Mechanical Engineering)

“3-D Printing: The Democratization of Manufacturing – Will “3-D printing” technology come to the aid of the West and destroy plutocratic capitalism’s plans to deindustrialize western nations? The real meaning of this technology lies in the fact that it grants individuals the ability to

manufacture consumer goods at home. This in turn might spell the end of the “outsourcing” mania which has destroyed most western industry.”
(*The New Observer* – April 6, 2013)

The left and not so radical left takes part in this hype for example, in *Capital & Class* we can read:

“The technical division of labour in capitalist enterprises constitutes the geometry of the labour process. It situates each moment of the labour process in a particular place. In 3D printing, this geometry is replaced with successive algorithmically guided movements of the printer’s nozzle. Hence, 3D printing holds the potential to abolish the factory regime altogether. Generalised 3D printing also abolishes the market. The social division of labour, which is the sum of different branches of production producing different goods, is also transcended.”

What is 3D printing?

The following paragraphs might appear dry and technical and perhaps they are. But they are necessary to show the stark divide between the “utopian thinking” of the left, which has a very mystical view on certain technologies but no deeper material understanding on one side, and on the other, a separate section of “technical experts” who are out of touch with the social dynamics in which their technologies and science are situated in. Or to put it in simpler terms: there are a lot of lefties amongst the philosophy and art students and not so many in physics and engineering departments. A revolutionary movement worth its name would have to re-ignite the interaction between the social and the natural.

So what is 3D printing? Various different processes are lumped together under the term 3D printing. What they all have in common is that a picture is created with the help of a computer and CAD software, which is then transformed into a three-dimensional object. This is done by adding material, rather than by subtracting it (like CNC milling etc.) or by injecting it into a mould (traditional plastic manufacturing). The differences in how this transformation takes place are fundamental.

The most basic way is to heat up (plastic, glue-based) material and extrude it through a nozzle. The nozzle is attached to an apparatus similar to a normal 2D ink-jet printer, just that it moves up and down, as well. The

material is put on layer over layer. The technology is not substantially different from ink-jet printing, it only requires slightly more powerful computing electronics and a material with the right melting and extrusion qualities. This is the cheapest way to print 3D objects. Printers can be bought for £200 and less. The two other main methods of 3D printing are fundamentally different.

The second method (SLA) uses UV light/laser to project the picture of a single layer onto a resin liquid (photopolymers). Because photopolymers are photosensitive under ultraviolet light, the resin is solidified and forms a single layer of the desired 3D object. This process is repeated for each layer of the design until the 3D object is complete. This process is faster than the “extrusion method” and the layers stick together more solidly. The disadvantage though is that the liquid nature of the raw material makes printing certain shapes more difficult. The printers tend to be more expensive, too.

The third method is almost exclusively used in commercial and industrial set-ups. Selective laser sintering (SLS) uses a laser as the power source to “sinter” or melt powdered material (typically metal, ceramics), aiming the laser automatically at points in space defined by a 3D model, binding the material together to create a solid structure. Decent industrial printers cost £100,000 plus.

Current application and industry

Currently 3D printing represents only 0.04% of the global manufacturing market – meaning that only few parts or items that are manufactured are 3D printed. (Industrial) prototyping of new products is the largest commercial application for 3D printing today, estimated to be 70% of the 3D printing market. In this sense 3D printers are used more as a (designing) tool, rather than as machines. But then there are specific sectors – usually requiring items that have to be custom-made or are not manufactured in large quantities – where 3D printing plays a bigger role. This includes the more expensive art/fashion sector and medical industries, for example, 98% of hearing aids worldwide are manufactured using 3D printing, so are many dental replacements.

The following quote is a great example of the stark contrast between the potential of the technology and the reality of its application under the

current system. Anyone who knows about the anti-working class racist politics of the US state after Hurricane Katerina will understand what we mean:

“A different military application of 3D printing is the creation of topographical models to provide better intelligence. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers used this technique when responding to Hurricane Katrina. The Corps generated and regenerated models of New Orleans as the situation evolved. The models, which could be created in about two hours, showed changing floodwater levels, buildings and other features of the area. This aided in situational understanding and helped guide the relief effort as soldiers and civil authorities worked to save people and property [sic!].”

(3D Printing and the Future of Manufacturing – CSC Leading Edge Forum)

We will discuss the current technical and financial reasons for the limited use of 3D- printers as a means of production later. The market for 3D printers as means of consumption, for use as a non-commercial home appliance, might develop faster. Of the roughly 240,000 3D printers sold in 2015 over 90% were cheaper “non-industrial” extrusion printers. The market is still dominated by a variety of small companies selling around 20,000 per year and less. This compares to annual sales figures of, for example, HP inkjet/laser 2D printers of 42 million or 22 million by Canon. These companies have not seriously invested in 3D printer manufacturing yet, partly given the current small sales volumes, partly because of immature technology.



Inside the ink refilling department

Current technical limits to mass application

Leaving aside questions of profitability for the moment, there are some technical problems which, up until now, have prevented the mass application of 3D printing beyond prototyping (meaning the printing of models, jigs, tools or moulds for later use in traditional production methods, such as plastic injection moulding). Some of the advantages of 3D printing compared to CNC milling or plastic injection moulding are obvious: it is easier to change and adjust objects when using computerised 3D designs; you can print more complex structures compared to the objects you would get from moulding or die casting; you have less wastage printing than from shaping the object through milling. But there are less obvious disadvantages:

Precision is a problem: Standard tolerances for CNC machined parts are $\pm 0.005''$ or $0.001''/''$. 3D printed tolerances vary but are generally in the $\pm 0.009-0.020''$ range.

CNC (metal) milling and (plastic) injection moulding have a smoother surface finish, which is not just an aesthetic issue, but of functional importance if the part is used in a bigger mechanical system. Most 3D printed parts would require extra labour to achieve a similarly smooth surface, using acetone and other nasty chemicals.

3D printed parts are weaker, they usually have only a third of the strength of milled or moulded products. In something like injection moulding or CNC milling, you have a very even strength across the part, as

the material is of a relatively consistent material structure. 3D printed parts are build-in layers – this results in laminate weaknesses. This also means that 3D printed prototypes can often not be used for physical tests, just for optical ones. The stronger-type plastics (G-10/FR4 (45,000 PSI) and FRP (30,000 PSI) cannot be used for 3D printing.

Inconsistency of material structure within the part: for example, a thin-walled section created by laser sintering cools much slower than a thick section. This has an impact on the microstructure and therefore the mechanical properties of the material.

The fact that a relatively low heat (around 90 Celsius) or UV light is used to form the plastics or resin liquid means that a finished part can't be exposed to either heat or strong light if its quality is not supposed to be compromised.

Bigger contamination with ultra-fine particles (UFPs), which is not necessarily a problem for capitalists. Thermal extrusion of plastics by 3D printers emit a large amount of very small particles, mostly less than 100 nano metres in diameter, that can cause damage to lungs and other organs. Similarly, the “powdering” of metals for the laser-sintering process is pretty energy consuming and environmentally-unfriendly.

Current financial limits to mass application

The other main obstacle to using 3D printers for general manufacturing is production costs. While the process from design to creation of prototypes and small-scale models can be sped-up using 3D printers, their application in larger-scale manufacturing is too expensive.

The machinery itself is too expensive: a decent SLS 3D printer capable of processing metal still costs £100,000 plus, whereas a comparable CNC machine costs less than half the price.

The raw materials tend to be more expensive, too: metals or ceramics have to be pulverised before being processed. At the current rate, the cost of plastic feed material used in 3D printing ranges from £40 to £80 per kilogram, while the equivalent amount of material used in traditional injection moulding is only around £2.

3D printers are significantly slower than traditional manufacturing methods: plastic injection moulding can produce around 1,400 parts per hour, more expensive SLA/CLIP printers (UV-Laser) print perhaps 8 to 10

parts per hour, while with an extruder printer it often takes several hours to print a small- sized (15cm X 15cm) object.

The labour time to manually operate 3D printers (setting-up time, changing parts / feeding material, retracting finished products etc.) won't be much different from operating traditional machines, apart from maybe tooling time (swapping tools for different sized objects or materials) – see experience below from our manufacturing plant in London.

Based on this, industrialists claim that for production series bigger than 1,000 pieces, traditional manufacturing methods will be more cost effective. 3D printed, most goods that we buy or consume would become too expensive for us to afford them. The question remains whether 3D printing can change the production process qualitatively, so that overall less labour input is required.

The operation of computer software to create designs won't differ too much, whether you create designs for 3D printing or CNC milling. What is likely to happen with the expansion of 3D printers as a means of consumption is the proliferation of knowledge about these programs. People would learn about basic CAD programs at home, in their free time. The application might be limited: to design a simple spoon with a simple program from scratch still takes a day or two – while you can buy a perfectly fine plastic spoon for 1p in your nearest pound shop.

3D printing would have the biggest impact on production if it could minimise assembly work by printing mechanical systems composed of separate parts or by replacing moving parts with different types of structures. Some companies boast of 3D printed full-plastic adjustable spanners, which would have had to be assembled using traditional methods. Problem here is that most assembled objects in our daily life are made up of different materials and given that 3D printing operates with heat and that different materials are processed at very different temperatures, it seems unlikely that 3D printing will replace assembly operations in the near future.

In this sense what looks most likely for the near future is that you might 3D print a custom-made mobile phone cover for your mass-produced iPhone or a hand-scanned gear-knob for your second-hand Audi A4...

What about communism? – looking at the Open Source reality

We don't want to be party-poopers and just talk about mundane things like per-unit costs and advantages of injection-moulding. There is something potentially "communist" about 3D printing: people all over the globe could throw their ideas together, share problems and solutions and transform their collaboration locally into useful or playful objects. This is not an artisanal mode of production based on individual skills, which can only be shared personally with a limited number of people and only over a long period of time. Potentially this is not industrial production with its huge gap between the engineers and the manual labourers and a clear separation between producers and passive consumers of indifferent mass products. We don't have to get our hands (too) dirty, instead we can use our collective brain – whose products can be copied and shared without much effort. There is a potentially new quality in this technology, which could be appropriated by new social relations. Will this happen gradually – in the form of a proliferation of open-source and communal tech labs? Or will it require a deeper rupture with property and power relations?

We see the proliferation of "open-source networks" around 3D printing as an expression of two conflicting tendencies. The first is the fact that there is a new "grassroots" quality about the technology; we've never seen a similar emergence of networks of "excited" techno-enthusiasts who think together and share knowledge about their experimentations around, for example, CNC machines or power presses ("printing presses" might have had a similarly politicised working class "tech community"). The second is the fact that big businesses are not in there yet; it's not that there is not a necessarily "democratic" quality behind the appeals for "crowdfunding" of innovative initiatives of 3D-print projects, but simply a lack of venture capital. As we can see, the "entrepreneurial spirit" that is attached to these creative networks quickly commercialises, last but not least, under state pressure.

Non-commercial initiatives attached to academia and the NGO sector such as RepRap (Replicating Rapid Prototyper) and FabLabs (Fabrication Laboratories, set up by MIT professors) are the official faces of the otherwise more diffuse 3D open-source "community". They produce open-source hardware (printers) and software for the public or make them

available. They harness collective innovative spirit (business analysts CSC note that the “rate of innovation of the RepRap and its derivatives is accelerating faster than equivalent commercial 3D printers.”) in an official framework, encouraging small entrepreneurship, for example, the small-scale manufacturing of the printers themselves or “community businesses” (“Habibi.works will be one of the newest FabLab to the list, and is expected to launch in November 2016. This remarkable lab will be set up in Northern Greece, and is giving refugees from around the world a chance to learn and share their skills alongside a local Greek community, in order to collaborate and improve the environment around them.”). The line between these types of “grassroots enterprises” and “start-up companies” becomes blurry. An old friend of mine works in a FabLab in Germany and he told me that one of the current positions within the FabLab community is that people are encouraged to commercialise their inventions under the conditions that they keep things “open-source”, meaning, making the technical documentation accessible to others. He used to work as a technician for a major German automobile company and according to his opinion the FabLab community – despite their “general intellect” and horizontal networking – are years behind the research and development departments of major car manufacturers. This is due to the fact that even very bright minds need material and instruments to transform ideas into things – and these things cost money.

A financial bridge between “collective innovation” and small-scale entrepreneurship is crowdfunding. “Although low-cost 3D printers and accessible CAD software lower barriers to entry for bringing new products to market, some capital is still required. This is where pioneering initiatives like Kickstarter come in. Kickstarter, a crowdfunding website for creative projects, allows anyone with a good idea to advertise for seed funding, usually provided by large numbers of small investors. The rewards for the investor are set by the entrepreneur and typically range from thank-you certificates for small donations to free copies of the product being sponsored.” As we have seen with micro-credit schemes for artisan and peasant projects in Asia, there is no such thing as “democratic money”: money changes social relations and ties us into the global ups-and-downs of commerce and finance.

Many of the initial 3D printer manufacturers might have started as small garage projects, still materially and ideologically attached to their open source roots, but market relations sooner or later overstretch these ties. One example is the company Makerbot – one of the main manufacturers of consumer 3D printers. They developed their first printer as part of an open source “crowd” initiative, but closed the files during the development of the second generation as soon as business took off. Similarly, their online software platform for 3D printer designs, “Thingiverse”, still appeals to the open-source spirit, but is open only for people who have bought Makerbot hardware. They are dependent on more than just “crowdfunding”: *“Last year MakerBot raised \$10 million from investors, including Amazon founder Jeff Bezos, to fund its expansion. It will need all that and more to compete with a host of other emerging low- cost 3D printers, including Chinese devices and emerging copycat clones.”* Unsurprisingly, they accept the tightening grip of the (patent and copyright) law when it comes to their “crowd software platform”: having been threatened with the Digital Millennium Copyright Act 1998 (US) they removed the files of 3D printable electronic designs (crafted by individuals) modelled on existing (commercial and patented) objects. We can currently observe how commercial interests get in the way of social productivity and creativity, for example, due to the fact that different companies promote different types of 3D design file formats or software hoping for competitive advantages, which hinders co-operation and communication in general.

Unsurprisingly 3D printing is now at the heart of the legal dispute around copyrights, patents and intellectual property, though the conflict is still largely a proxy war. Recently Google and the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) got involved in lawsuits concerning the supposedly illegal importation of 3D printable files, categorised as “articles”, rather than just data. While usually, objects were patented, now the army of corporate lawyers and pundits have to find ways to patent “methods of designing” and find it increasingly difficult to pinpoint the original source of human creative expression. The contradictions that emerge once social creativity and social needs are subjected to the framework of “private property” or company profits become apparent in legal disputes around patents, trademarks and copyrights. The critique of

anti- copyright activists has to go deeper than just focusing on the obvious “betrayal” by companies such as Makerbot or anti-piracy attacks by the law, but rather question the “entrepreneurial” spirits and commercialised relationships which have roots in the open source movement itself.

Last but not least, the other obvious point is that 3D printing technology, like all technology, has an extreme sex-imbalance when it comes to active participation in the field. Just 13% of women are involved in the 3D printing industry, which is around less than half the overall figure for technology as a whole. The communist potential for 3D printing would not overcome these imbalances without a wholesale change in women’s social relations to facilitate it – from schooling, socialisation, to their role in social reproduction.

Manufacturing reality

The factory was right in the heart of Park Royal industrial estate. From the outside the company I worked at looks like yet another nondescript 80s warehouse space with office attachment. In the statistics the company will most likely appear as a “recycling service provider”, rather than a manufacturing company. Its story is a good example of a modern start-up company, but instead of university drop-outs making business decisions by consensus on beanbags – probably the more common fantasy of start-ups – it is based on low-waged, female, migrant labour, relying on a combination of working class inventiveness and low capital investment.

The founder of the company used to work as a manager for a major desktop- printer manufacturer. His entrepreneurial “genius” consisted of combining three economic sources of major significance in the UK: the charity sector; the big retail chains; and migrant labour – and to give his enterprise an ecologically- friendly sheen. The company contacted major UK charities, asking them to pass on envelopes to their members and donors, who in turn were requested to send their empty ink cartridges to the company. The company would re-fill the cartridges, sell them to major retailers, such as WHSmith, and donate a small share of the profit back to the charities. The company hired mainly female workers, most of them originally from Gujarat, who, initially with primitive tools, re-filled the ink cartridges on minimum wages. Free raw material and a charitable, ecological reputation – who wouldn’t think that this a great start- up idea,

but the Queen herself, who gave the company founder the “Queen’s Award for Enterprise” in 2004. The company expanded, employing up to 250 people. Colleagues said that in their heyday they re-filled 15,000 cartridges a day. This is a good productivity rate: the UK consumes around 45 million ink cartridges a year and with 250 people and basic machinery you can recycle around 4 million of them. While the company clocked £2 million profit per month, workers’ wages did not increase. During the late 2000s the competition from re-filling factories in China grew considerably, thanks to internet retail and logistics chains. By that time the upper-management had diverted a fair amount of business profits into real estate and kept the business “ticking over” – the rounds of redundancies and spells of short-time work became more frequent. By the mid-2010s there were only 150 people left in the ink department. With the ink-cartridge department in slow decline, a new project was needed, last but not least in order to guarantee future bank credit. Making use of the “tech-bubble” and the venture capital around it, management decided to branch out into 3D printer manufacturing.

They started collaborating with a 3D printer manufacturer in the Czech Republic, basically taking over their printer design and supply chain. By that time there were many different basic 3D printer kits available on the market, starting from £300 for unassembled kits. In order to distinguish themselves from other small-scale manufacturers, the company entered an agreement with another capitalist zombie we’ll call “Paranoid”. Paranoid came to great fame as an instant-photo-camera manufacturer in the 1980s, but went bust in the 1990s. Nowadays Paranoid basically makes money by selling their brand name to second-rate manufacturers of radios, video projectors and other electronic devices. Production in London could take off...

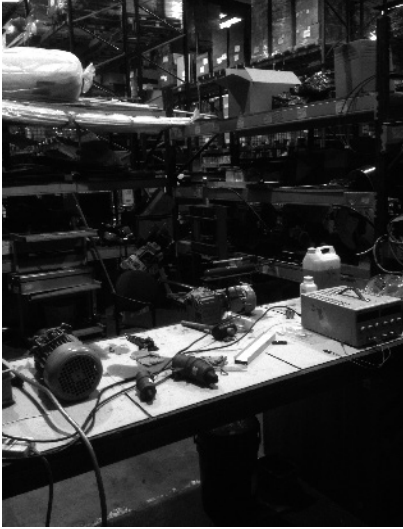
The 3D printer department workforce

The job as an assembly operative was advertised on the usual job sites. At the time I was working as a road sweeper and I thought it would be interesting to leap 10,000 years ahead in technological history and assemble 3D printers instead – modern minimum wage existence can be your personal Back to the Future trip. I had done assembly work before and had some soldering experience, which came in handy, but was no precondition

as such. The company manager responsible for recruiting said that only “a dozen people applied and only five were suitable” – this low number of applicants is due to the low wage the company was offering for soldering and wiring work. When I started working, the department was just about to shift from the Czech Republic model to the new Paranoid outlook, which meant minor technical changes to the existing model, the addition of a web-cam and change to the colour scheme. Perhaps I should introduce some of my colleagues first:

I. grew up in Ireland, worked in the Netherlands as an agricultural labourer, then went to a technical college for two years, learning how to design circuit boards. At the time there were still a lot of international companies manufacturing computer hardware in Ireland. He got a job in the production department, often working 12-hour shifts. After 2008 the industry went into decline and he shifted to a German circuit board manufacturer. They sent him to their factory in South Africa, where he was given a managerial position in one of the departments. He came to the UK in the mid-2010s and got the job in the 3D printer department – partly (planning, work allocation, training), quality control, but also direct assembly work, helping with the development, partly with supervisory work.

V. grew up in Kenya and Gujarat. His family got the money together to send him to the UK in his early 20s, to study engineering in Manchester – paying £28,000 study fees upfront. He had internships at Honda and an aerospace company, while working low-paid jobs in fast-food and retail. He got the job in the 3D printer company after he graduated. They used his CAD knowledge and engineering skills while paying him the minimum wage. To prop up his income he has a second job as a shop-floor worker in retail. He works seven days a week. When I joined, they employed another post-graduate of Indian background, who had worked internships in oil and gas companies. He left shortly after to try and set up an App development business with his university mates.



S. grew up in Lebanon, where he had studied and migrated to the UK in the early 1990s. He had various jobs before becoming a supply-chain manager for an American apparel company based in London. He then moved to here to help develop the ink cartridge filling machines. In the 3D department he is mainly involved in development and maintaining relationships with the suppliers.

T. was born in the UK, his father came from Greece. He was an apprentice for an alarm-system installation company, then shifted to a company engaged in testing and certifying electrical appliances. He started to assemble and experiment with 3D printers “as a hobby”. He was hired as the main developer for the 3D printer project. A proper self-taught technerd. The company got into major difficulties when he left the job, being the most experienced (and interested) in 3D printing. He left the company in order to start a business with a friend: producing large-scale 3D printers to print mannequins using the measurements of clients. Tailors can use the mannequins to fabricate custom- made garments, without having to bother their rich customers.

M. was born in Argentina. He went to a technical college, learning basic mechanical skills. He then worked in a tobacco mill, maintaining the huge cutting, mixing and drying machinery. Early on he experimented building his own machines. When he came to the UK he started building and selling machines that can digitalise video 8 films. He started at the company in order to have a more stable income.

Every single one of these workers who had the right to vote opted for Brexit during the referendum. All of them are first- or second-generation migrants. They said that they wanted to stick two fingers up to the elite. The elite includes the factory boss who whinged about the fact that Brexit would mean that the parts imported from abroad will get more expensive.

These colleagues were the intellectual backbone of the department. In addition, there was a small software team, which dealt with the touch-screen program and the web-cam appliance. In the ink department the company employed workers of similar background for the development of the machinery: workers mainly from Northern Africa and Bangladesh who experimented with centrifugal machines (to empty the cartridges from old ink), washing machines, de-capping machines and re-filling pumps. These workers were in a constant battle with the main cartridge manufacturers who try to prevent re-filling by all means necessary: from electronic chips, which have to be re-programmed to internal valve-systems, which destroy the cartridge if the wrong re-filling pressure is used. Most of these invented machines looked ramshackle, some of them had serious health and safety issues, but they were unique – developed by low-paid workers gathering experiences directly from the shop-floor and using them in experiments in under-funded and under-equipped workshops.

The 3D printer supply chain

Most of the printer parts arrived in basic form, others as pre-fabricated modules. It is worth noting that those parts whose production involves the most expensive machinery came from Eastern Europe or China, while most of the labour-intensive work was actually done by us in London (and ironically, the first sold Paranoid printer was delivered to a company in Hong Kong). To give some examples:

Cables

Cables arrived on reels, manufactured mainly in the UK. Heat shrink arrived from Germany; connectors and switches came from East Asia and capacitors from El Salvador. We have to cut cables to size, attach connectors by crimping or soldering. A single printer needs around a dozen different internal cables. It takes about 1.5 hours to produce a whole cable set, done in batches of 20.

Bearing blocks, rods, extruder plates, inner metal frame, outer plastic parts

Most precision metal parts came from a UK company's plant based in Slovakia, while the inner metal frame and outer plastic parts came from China. The manufacturing of these parts requires precision CNC machines and larger plastic injection moulding machinery. We had to glue the bearings into the bearing blocks, the inner frame had to be riveted together, the outer case connected with screws, nuts and bolts.

Electronic boards, LCD and webcam

All these parts came ready-made from China. We had to solder single capacitors onto circuit boards for adjustment, assemble a frame for the LCD and re-work a plastic hinge in order to accommodate the cables for the webcam – which had been added as an extra-feature to the original model. To re-work a single hinge (drilling, cutting inner plastic ribs, preparing cable, gluing) alone takes 20 minutes.

It is surprisingly easy to order standard electronic/electrical components such as motors, fans, connectors and cables online from around the globe. Internet commerce and global logistics make it possible for even small manufacturers to have a global supply chain. SAP or other stock-taking software makes it fairly easy to get an overview of current stock and requirements for re-ordering. The flip-side is that these are standard parts, meaning, extra work has to be done to them in order to fit them in properly.

The printers' main parts were custom-made. The big plastic parts (door, hinges etc.) were ordered in bulk from China in order to lower costs. The mechanical metal parts came from Slovakia. When changes were required it was not enough to just send technical drawings to Eastern Europe or to speak on Skype. Guys from the development department had to travel to Slovakia twice in half a year to discuss production and quality details with the supplier. When the supplier in Slovakia increased the price for metal coating a local company had to be found: we drove metal parts from Park Royal to a small backyard workshop in Surbiton, south London, where guys spray-painted and coated stuff under third-world-ish conditions. Similar problems of global co-operation occurred with the web-cam. A cheap supplier was found in China, but the mobile phone app, which had been

developed by the software team of the 3D printer company, had difficulties communicating with the camera. A fair amount of emails were sent back and forth, seemingly with the help of Google Translate. Talking about translation, the translations of the 3D printer manuals into French, Spanish, German and Dutch were done by a guy in Switzerland, who also cooperated with the software department. They were bad and needed re-working. While it seems easy to establish a supply-chain of standard parts, things look different for elaborate manufacturing.

Three times in nine months crucial parts ran out and production stopped. In one case it was due to under-capacities of a metal parts supplier, in another case a combination of wrong stock-taking of motors and the fact that a delivery of an extra order from China can take up to two, three weeks. This also happened with the Chinese heat-element – a fairly standard £3 electronic part. Although other heat-elements are on the market, according to a colleague in the development team it wouldn't have been possible to use them without making major changes due to both material dimensions (length of wires etc.) and heat dynamics which impact on the printing process. Another case of stock depletion was due to the London company not having paid their last order on time. This problem of not paying suppliers on time seemed to have been fairly common in the ink cartridge department, too.

So why not just 3D print your 3D printer parts?!

According to the utopian vision, the easiest solution would be to let the 3D printer print their offspring themselves – the supply-chain problem and problem of technical changes would be solved, wouldn't it? As we have already mentioned, both technical and financial aspects limit the use of 3D printed parts. We actually used seven different 3D printed plastic parts for the production of the printers. Largely, these were parts that were added on during technical changes, for example, a small plastic frame for an electronic fan whose position had to be changed slightly. These parts were small (4cm x 4cm maximum) in order to be able to print several pieces at the same time on a single printer platform (25cm x 25 cm). While these 3D printed parts could be used for “lighter duties”, an attempt to use 3D printed parts to replace the metal bearing houses (whose quality/imprecision caused frequent problems and extra-work) failed: being situated too close to the

motors and heat element of the extruder nozzle, the 3D printed plastic became too soft and the whole structure started to wobble. But apart from size and technical limitations, the main obstacle to using 3D printers as machines was time and costs.

A single production printer can print roughly six pieces of the same part in three hours. At a production volume of three manufactured 3D printers per day and seven different parts required per printer, around 20 printed parts are needed. A single printer would need to run around eight hours a day – this doesn't count the time it needs to change the filament, take out the printed parts, put a new Z-sheet on, check the quality of the printed parts, switch software over to different type of part etc. When two printers were running for production it was pretty much a part-time job to monitor them, re-set them, check the parts etc. Even when calculated at two hours of human input to produce the 20 parts needed, this would still amount to a labour cost of roughly £1 for a mediocre small plastic part, not taking into account machine costs (£2000 for the two printers), material costs (£20 to £30 for 750g of filament) and the time needed to create the initial computer design (roughly eight hours per part). And as a side-note referring to the question of the potential of 3D printing to abolish the division of labour: the person who runs between printers and operates them doesn't have to know anything about how to create a CAD image. There was no different quality required to operate the 3D printers from other "part producing" machines.

The 3D printer cost calculation

Perhaps because of the small production volume of twenty printers a week and therefore small order volumes for parts, material costs are high. So are the hidden labour/production costs apart from the direct labour costs for assembly work. Management was just happy to be able to break even on the sales of the 3D printers and instead to make money with the sale of Paranoid print filaments. The filament was bought from a company in Czech Republic for £20, then labelled with a Paranoid label and put on the market for £70.

The 3D printer production process

Initially a smaller team of four workers each assembled a complete printer themselves. In order to make it easier to quantify and measure each work-

step and to train newly hired people quickly, the work was divided up. The assembly process involving six workers looked like this:

- Worker 1: Cutting and assembling cables, fans, motors in batches of 20, soldering capacitors on electronic parts, assembling LCD frames etc.
- Worker 2: Assembling sub-assemblies of the X and Z axis
- Worker 3: Assembling the extruder sub-assembly, maximum five extruders a day
- Worker 4: Complete wiring and assembly of inner-core of printer (axis, extruder), calibration
- Worker 5: Riveting of the frame, packaging
- Worker 6: Assembly of the outer chassis, door etc.

The whole sub-assembly/preparation of the printer components (cable-set, extruder and axis, inner-frame etc.) takes about eight hours. The printer modules have to be assembled (axis put into frame, internal wiring, outer shell), which takes about five hours. There are additional work steps (calibration, testing and packaging) required. The total production/assembly time per printer from single screws, connectors etc. to a completely packaged product is about sixteen hours, which was nowhere near efficient enough. In addition to the six workers directly involved in assembly work there were three workers employed for quality control, team leading and “research and development”. There was one assembly department manager and one 3D project general manager. In the office and warehouse there were three people employed in the software/ media department, two for ordering of parts and in the warehouse and two accountants (who also worked for the ink department).

The main problems the departments had in terms of profitable production of 3D printers were as follows:

- low productivity/too high production costs in the assembly department
- unexpected amount of re-work and “research” work due to technical problems
- frustration of core workers due to low wages, hierarchies and general “unviability” of the project
- increasing market pressure

Given the relatively small series of three to four printers produced per day there was also only limited scope to invest in “time-saving” machines for the assembly process. For example, we measured and cut all cables manually, while it is fairly common in manufacturing to have machines doing this. Similarly, when it comes to screwing operations – I worked at a Nokia mobile phone factory, where they had “screwing stations”. You only had to insert the part and press a button. Here we had to select the right screws and use a traditional screwdriver. The guys from development looked into outsourcing the most simple operations, such as cable assembly. According to them a 200cm 26-ribbon cable, cut at the right length, with two connectors attached and tested would cost £2.60, including transport. It would take us around six minutes to fabricate a single cable – which was still comparably cheaper.

Production from a worker’s point of view

I started working in the department during the “developmental” phase, meaning, I was trained to do a complete assembly of the printer initially, then mainly doing the sub-assembly. The team being relatively small, us “assembly operatives” were still in close contact with the guys in development, so we heard a lot about the various technical difficulties and were more included in the problem-solving. That in itself was enjoyable work, even if you are not majorly interested in 3D printers.

At this point the development largely depended on two, three workers who knew more about the whole issue, while the department manager was mainly engaged with coordination (ordering of material, stock taking, production requirements) and planning the layout of the production process. He had no major technical knowledge. Once they deemed the converted Paranoid printer fit for purpose, two new workers were hired for the assembly operation. From then on, the division of labour between different assembly operations and between assembly and development department became more formal and rigid. The two new guys were only trained to do either cable manufacturing and soldering or assembly of the extruder. The manager asked us to put up a big whiteboard and write down all the individual assembly steps, the skills required, the names of workers with their skills, the time it takes to perform each individual work-step. The calculation of the time needed per work-step was made by a colleague who

had worked in assembly and was now employed as team leader and quality controller. Because we all got on we kept some margins of breathing space in the calculated times. The manager tried to detect this breathing space either by standing behind a worker and actually timing them – though he didn't have much time to do this frequently. The other way was to let different workers perform the same assembly process and see if there were differences in outcome. Finally, he gave one worker the order to for example, produce five extruders in a day, which meant staying for overtime. The manager probably thought that workers would speed up, in order to not get home too late. We talked amongst each other about this and largely managed not to stress ourselves out.

Once regular production started there was less scope for the assembly operatives to take part in the “development” aspect. When the manager called the three guys responsible for development together, we called it the “magic circle”. The technical problems emerging were substantial and being less involved in the development aspect meant that having to re-work printers and parts became more frustrating. The printers had problems with electro-magnetic fields: having electrical wires and metal parts moving back and forth in a metal frame created these fields, which then impacted on the electronics and software program. We had to dis-assemble many printers and re-wire most of the parts. At this point the main “tech nerd” left the company to become self-employed, which gave something like a final blow to the project. The “tech nerd” leaving was expression of a wider frustration.

It was clear that the company would try and make us assemble these printers on minimum wages. The only “official” chance to get a wage increase would be to become a team leader – out of four assembly workers only one could become team leader. You would then be paid £17,000 a year, which was only a 10% increase. Our income contrasted starkly with what we perceived as the income of the upper managers and the owner's income. While we were told that the company was “running badly”, the upper managers parked new Maseratis, Bentleys and BMWs in front of the factory. The 3D project manager only appeared once in a while, she was busy presenting the 3D printer at industrial fairs in Las Vegas or other places. The owner of the factory turned up every second week, a dandy type

with a whippet dog, driving vintage Jaguars and new Bentley SUVs. Workers resented this display of wealth, at the same time, being mainly unskilled (female – in the case of the ink department) migrant workers, they bowed to the English ex-entrepreneur, who was now mainly busy with his real estate business, his private jet and ranch in the US.

We all sensed that due to under-investment, mismanagement and general market pressures, “our” product would never be competitive. On one hand we didn’t have to bother about this too much, as long as we were paid. But it is somehow frustrating to know that other teams in other small enterprises around the globe had probably faced the same technical difficulties and found solutions, so in a way most of our development and re-work work was a waste of time. To us, the printer looked like an overweight fax-machine, technologically about to be obsolete. Compared to products from HP, Epson or others, their productivity would probably be thirty times higher and the quality way better.

Disputes, lunch meetings and wage demand

The first open dispute happened in the ink department. All workers on old contracts (signed two years ago or earlier) were called to sign a new contract allowing the company to announce short-time work without wage compensation with 24-hours prior notice. We heard that a bigger group of twenty to thirty workers refused to sign the new contracts. They were called into the canteen and told that even if they wouldn’t sign this wouldn’t make a difference. There was not much communication possibility with ink department workers, you see each other briefly in the canteen or at the clock-in machine, so it was difficult to know more about it all. There was also a rumour that a handful of male workers from the ink department, mainly team-leaders, had joined a union. This was after the minimum wage increase (from £6.70 to £7.20), which left them earning as much as “an unskilled woman who just walked in off the street”. Six months previously, the main manager had promised that after the minimum wage increase “the pay difference would be retained”, which would have meant a pay increase for the “senior workers” – he had now gone back on his word and announced the prospect of short-time work, plus redundancies for five workers in the goods-in department. Although it was difficult to verify all

this at the time, it was good to know that there were some rumblings of discontent.

Us five assembly workers without “supervisory positions” then decided to meet for lunch and discuss how to raise a demand for a wage increase. This happened just after a woman worker they wanted to hire for assembly (she had worked at Bosch in Hungary and at a local ready-meal factory, where some comrades of our collective work) had quit after just one day because she felt the work was “too complex”. Two other candidates didn’t even turn up for the final interview. We discussed that our main argument would be that only a higher wage would guarantee “staff and knowledge retention and stability in the team”. We decided to draft a letter and sign it, asking for an increase of £2,000 p.a., and hand it over as soon as the 3-months contracts of two of us were renewed ten days later. The problem was that the week after our lunch meeting management announced short-time work for all workers, including our department. We were on four hours a day. The short-time work lasted for four weeks, interrupted by one full-time day each week. Management tried to avoid sending people home for a longer period, because people might become eligible for redundancy payment. At least three younger male workers from Goa employed in the ink department left around that time. Two found jobs at Honda in Swindon, one a better paid retail job.

We said that we would put forward the letter as soon as production was running properly again. Unfortunately, it turned out that management had decided to fold the 3D production. Some of us were sent to work in the ink department, one worker from the development department was fired and the rest were told to turn the remaining stock into sellable printers, now being sold at a loss for £600. We were somehow left feeling that the whole show was either extremely badly calculated in the first place or the whole enterprise was mainly a way to keep a semi-bankrupt company ticking over for tax and financial reasons, while the profits that had been siphoned off earlier on were now invested elsewhere. It became known that the company had a major dispute with the tax office (HMRC) and had to pay back several million pounds. At the same time the company lost a contract with a major distributor (Cartridge Save) and announced the redundancies of a

further fourteen people, “to eliminate certain methods and tasks that are now deemed non-vital to the business’s trading” (management letter).

The IWW organising attempt

A year later we returned to the factory gates as IWW union members, proposing that workers set up their own union. To sum up the main concerns of workers at that point: the low wages and the fact that during periods of low work volume during summer months workers are put on reduced-hours and suffer wage losses. In our first leaflet we addressed the main issues and the fact that workers could do with a collective response next time management introduces contract changes.

One of our friends who was still employed in the factory replied:

“So I have been trying to ask a few guys amongst the staff of how they feel about it [the leaflet] but surprising enough most of them are very sceptical about it. A few of them are already a member of another union and because they haven’t had a particularly good experience with that one therefore they don’t see IWW being any different. But the majority of the staff have worked for the company for well over a decade and many of them are relatively close to retirement as well so they just want to see their time out without any trouble. On the top of that the management got hold of one of your flyers which didn’t go down well with A. [CEO] to say the least. Today he issued a letter to the staff to encourage everyone to approach the management with confidence if you have any problems, concerns etc. instead of joining any Union.”

The letter said:

“... I am sure that any of you who were interested in what you read will have found out more information about the IWW organisation from the web. The IWW has been in existence since 1905 but has always had a small following (just 3,742 members in 2016) As stated on their website, “the IWW is a revolutionary global union” and prides itself on “autonomy, common militancy and solidarity”. This is far cry from the values of the company and what we do together as a working team. Instead of taking a

militant stance, we have always encouraged open conversation and resolution, not revolution.”

(Response from A. [name of CEO] regarding International Workers of the World (IWW) leaflet)

In our second leaflet we addressed the fact that some workers had had bad experiences with mainstream unions and emphasised that with the IWW decisions are made by workers themselves, supported by other workers. We also made clear that management often just presents workers with their decisions and that their talk about “conversation and resolution” is hypocritical. A union would be a vehicle to first discuss things amongst ourselves and then present management with a common stance. We offered to meet workers after work. During the second distribution we had a short conversation with a young Goan warehouse worker, he is unhappy about the wages, which are still below £8. Another warehouse worker promised to get in touch. The big manager came out after five minutes and started filming us. Workers didn’t get in touch, but management reacted internally. From our friend:

“With the festive period right upon us I thought I’d give you a little update of what’s going on at the company. You may not have had a huge amount of interest from the guys here at the company with regards to the union, yet by the looks of things your “antics” had a good impact on the management which resulted in some positive news for us. Just a few days ago we had a meeting held by A. [CEO] (a staff update of how the business is doing) where he explained that the company has come a long way since 2015 when the business was on the verge of bankruptcy. So he thanked everyone for our hard work and he backed up his appreciation by giving £100 bonus for each member of staff. This is the first time in eight years that we have received any sort of bonus. Furthermore, he promised that the salaries and performances would be reviewed individually and the ones that have more responsibilities and the overachievers are going to be rewarded in terms of pay rise. Moreover, every quarter of the year there will be meeting where representatives from each department (from the staff) can take part and raise their issues, concerns, ideas for improvement etc. directly to him.”

So workers received an extra bonus, but still have no union.

Revolutionary strategy

Chapter 12: The current moment and criticism of democratic socialism

Welcome to the final part of this book. In this part we want to situate our limited local experiences and efforts within the context of a wider future organisation and the perspective of social transformation. We want a society without classes and oppression, where people decide together how to produce and how to live. We want to invite you to get organised with us.

This part begins with a snap-shot of “The current moment” of class struggle. The complexity of the situation raises the issue of strategy. By strategy we mean an understanding how day-to-day struggles of our class relate to a longer-term social transformation. Unfortunately, the only real “strategy” on the left is tied to the re-emergence of the idea that socialism can be obtained through winning governmental power. This is the dominating discourse within the (young) left intelligentsia and we think we have to take their ideas seriously, even if we disagree with them. We present a few general thoughts explaining our political doubts regarding this strategy, as “Criticism of democratic socialism”. Before we’re able to present our own ideas on strategy we have to take a step back and formulate some basic thoughts on “Class, power and revolutionary contradiction”. This will reveal that the main challenge of any strategy is that the experience of social productivity (the ability to materially transform the world) and poverty (the anger facing social inequality) is distributed unevenly within the working class. Some workers experience large-scale co-operation with other workers, other segments of the working class are socially more atomised. In order to be able to think about the role of an organisation we need to understand the “Impact of uneven development within the working class”. We will have a brief look at how revolutionary theories traditionally understood the interaction of struggles in advanced and underdeveloped regions and formulate some ideas about how to discuss this issue under the current conditions. Based on the thoughts about what constitutes class power and what challenges uneven development pose, we will outline our ideas on the “First steps during a revolutionary transition”.

We think that this is important as “revolution” is usually discussed as a quite mystical moment. We try to understand the relationship between insurrection and productive re-organisation of society. In order to make this even more debatable we provide some statistical material about the industrial composition of the UK region and sketch out how this composition would form the “Material conditions for an uprising in the UK region”. Based on this we can discuss more clearly the challenges of a temporarily isolated moment of regional revolutionary rupture. After having assessed the main transformative potentials and divisions of the working class and the main steps during a social takeover of the means of production we can finally draw some “Conclusions: What does it mean for organisation?” We keep this short as general statements about the tasks of revolutionary organisations tend to be fairly stale. Nevertheless, we try to outline the main steps to take, both in periods of low levels of class struggle and in a pre-revolutionary situation. More importantly though we should look at the actual potentials and limitations of current struggles and debate the tasks of organisation in that regard. We therefore ask: “What are the advanced sectors of class struggle at the moment?” We’ve picked a rather eclectic mix of struggles which exemplify the difficulties in creating a social cohesion between struggles in different segments, regions and levels of development. This sounds abstract, but it’ll become clearer in the examples! Last, but not least, this is about changing things, about moving our arses. We therefore encourage you to not only read, but act upon our “Proposals: Let’s build an organisation!”

The Current Moment

To say that the global situation in 2020 is complex would be an understatement. Those political parties and representatives who have stood for the last decades of neoliberal ideology and policies have collapsed. “Populist” and protectionist political forces have increased their influence, but clash with the interests of global industrial and financial corporations. The urban working class has become the majority of the global population, but its conditions vary enormously. Parts of the class are globally linked through industrial supply-chains, other parts are surviving on the fringes, many are on the move in order to find a better life or escape from war and the fallout of failed states. The impact of the 2008 crisis was global, but not

synchronous. It hit the new industrial centres of the Global South later than the working class in the developed countries of the north; in some regions the impact was mediated through state-imposed austerity measures, in others through price inflation of daily goods, in others through general signs of economic slowdown. We see the same unevenness and regionally diverse impact when it comes to the systemic climate crisis.

Since 2008 we've seen two major waves of "global protests" emerging. The first wave formed during the so-called "Arab Spring" and the square occupations and street clashes in Brazil, Turkey, Spain and Greece in 2011. The second wave formed in 2019 and reached from the Yellow Vests in France, to anti-corruption movements in Sudan and Iraq, and protests against "inflation" and cuts to subsidies in Chile and Ecuador. These protests mirror the different conditions the working class exists in globally. While there has been a parallel increase in global strike activity, these strikes happen largely outside of the political spotlight. In terms of their actual impact on the regime, the strikes of Suez port workers during the anti-Mubarak protests were of major significance, but they remained in the background. The same can be said for the copper mining workers' strike in Chile during the most recent protests. From a revolutionary perspective – in terms of a being a threat to state power and appropriation of the means of production – the uprisings had two main limitations, which informed and determined each other.

The first limitation was the fact that the primary "political" focus of the movements is the governmental structure. People gathered in the public sphere, experienced mass participation and confronted the state forces. At a certain point it became difficult to sustain the occupations and clashes, both in terms of repressive violence and material reproduction (how long can you survive on an occupied roundabout or square?). The squares might have learnt how to make decisions without leaders, but they had no resources to put decisions into practice. The second limitation was that while some strikes became social rallying points for the movement, for example textile workers in Mahalla in Egypt or teachers in Sudan, strikes in general remained confined to the "economic" sphere. They did not develop an alternative of social appropriation and reorganisation of production, thereby leaving the street protests in a political vacuum.

The situation contains the ingredients for a revolutionary crisis: those in power are pretty clueless about how to continue, and the exploited have had enough of the status quo. We see embryonic attempts within some of the uprisings to formulate unifying demands, which try to address the problem of a segmented working class existence. The Yellow Vests produced a list of demands, partly addressing the working class issues of the movement, partly focusing on questions of “citizenship”. The revolutionary left has very little to offer in terms of strategic analysis and proposals. We can basically summarise the reaction as crudely insurrectionist, for example, celebrating the violent character of the protests, or pretty abstract, for example, calling for the formation of councils. The discussion about strategy, about what to propose in the short-, medium- and long-term, has been monopolised by the newly emerged “democratic socialist” or social democratic intelligentsia. Here we mainly refer to debates around Sanders, DSA and Jacobin in the US or Corbyn, Syriza, Podemos etc. in Europe.

Criticism of Democratic Socialism

“Democratic socialism” is currently the main alternative vision to transforming capitalism, and as such we need to take it seriously, despite our deep disagreement with it. By democratic socialism we mean the idea that by using the two legs of the organised labour movement – the trade unions and a socialist party in government – we can walk step-by-step towards socialism. Socialism is defined as a society dominated by either nationalised or cooperative ownership of the means of production and workers’ representation when it comes to management of these economic units. The general strategy of democratic socialism can be summarised briefly.

The idea is to campaign for an electoral victory of a socialist party based on an economic program of partial renationalisation of a limited number of key industries and the creation of a wider sector of “solidarity economy” formed by cooperative or municipal companies that can guarantee more decentralised workers’ participation. In tandem with electoral activities, democratic socialists encourage the support of working class or “social movement” organisations outside of parliament, in order to have an economic power-base to put pressure on both capital and government. Once the party is in power the strategy needs to create a dynamic between a)

structural institutional changes decreed by the government which creates more space for the participation of working class organisations (so-called non-reformist reforms) and b) pressure from below to defend and extend these spaces. A prime example would be a legal change that gives trade unions more rights, which would have to be put into practice from below.

There are two hearts beating in this project. We see many comrades, fed up with the social isolation of so-called “revolutionary politics”, becoming attracted to the practical and strategical debates of the democratic socialist project. They can be intellectually invigorating. These comrades might have come from classic anarchist or otherwise “revolutionary” organisations or they might have been politicised during the horizontal, but ineffectual and often self-referential “social movements” of the anti-globalisation or Occupy era. Many have been active on university campuses, but have found no other “bridge” to the working class apart from the Labour Party. We understand the urge of these comrades to “make a difference” and to think about short, medium and long-term steps towards social change. We can see many fellow working class people who feel the limitation of trade union activity and who hope that Labour in government can turn trade unions into powerful workers’ organisations again. We want to fight for the hearts and minds of these comrades. Then there exists the usual careerist swamp within these organisations, from DSA, Podemos to Corbyn’s Labour. The in-fights and power games.

The direction of the democratic socialist project is not primarily determined by its political outlook, but by its class composition. The new Labour left in the UK is composed of three main forces: a segment of ambitious and perhaps precarious professionals who feel that according to their educated status they should have more say in society. They also want a good life for “the working class”, but their approach is technocratic: learned people and progressive experts are supposed to decide how things are run, not the bankers and the parasitic elite. They form an alliance with the second main force, the union bureaucracy. The union apparatus allows the new professionals to speak in the name of the workers and the union bosses can extend their power into the political class. The third element are the most marginalised parts of the working class who’ve had to suffer from

years of benefit cuts and sanctions. Labour under Corbyn gave them hope, but the party machine will end up instrumentalising their victim status.

During winter 2019/20 it turned out that the only thing that Corbynism was able to renationalise was the fringe left. As we witness one of the biggest waves of working class protests – from Ecuador, Chile, Sudan to Iran – the left in the UK was completely focused on whatever Corbyn or Johnson were saying on TV. The national narrow-mindedness would have become worse if Labour had entered government: would any democratic socialist have supported unruly working class mobilisations, such as the Yellow Vests or the protests in Iran, under a new and fragile Labour government? We can try to adorn “Corbynism” with all kinds of radical looking paraphernalia and woke memes, from Acid Corbynism to “luxury or literal communism” – but in the end it’s a Party that promises us a minimal minimum wage increase and slightly less austerity. But then our focus here is not to argue about utopian visions, but to point out the internal shortcomings of this political strategy.

1) This is not a historic phase for social democracy

Historically, social democracy developed during phases of economic upturns, based on a relatively strong national industrial production capacity. What we face now is an economic crisis and an internationalised production system. This limits both the scope for material concessions and for national economic policies. Secondly, social democracy primarily became hegemonic in post-revolutionary situations. Social democracy was based on large organisations within the working class and a ruling class that allowed workers’ political representation in order to avoid revolutionary tensions. Left communists never get tired of repeating that the establishment of the NHS was not a result of Labour party reformism, but of Tory Cold War counter-insurgency – to avoid large-scale social discontent after the war. Again, this is not a situation we find ourselves in today. The main point for us to stress is: we face harsher conditions of struggle than democratic socialism prepares us for. Democratic socialism tends to overemphasise the autonomy of government politics. In the UK the Labour left portrays the Thatcher government and their “wicked policies” as the source of evil neoliberalism, whereas it was the global crisis in the mid-1970s which

forced all governments to attack the working class. You cannot vote your way out of this.

2) Current democratic socialism ignores the capitalist character of the state

Democratic socialist strategies are based on the assumption that the state stands above “capitalism” and could intervene in it as a politically neutral form. Historically the state emerged as the violent arm to impose and secure class relations, for example, through enclosures, vagrancy laws and the military expansion of markets. The state *appears* as a neutral force that is only there to look after law and order and the wider organisation of society. But law and order means primarily that the property relations which are the material basis for the exploitation of the working class are maintained. By making us citizens the state disarms us as a collective class force. State politics separate the sphere of social production from the sphere of social decision-making – we are supposed to produce the world, but apart from casting a vote every four years have no say in how the world is run. Materially the state apparatus depends on continuous exploitation, both through taxation and as an employer.

3) Current democratic socialism misreads the relationship between the market and capitalism

Democratic socialists think switching from private to public (state) ownership will be the antidote to capitalism. They see no contradiction therefore between a “big state” and socialism, despite the fact that state intervention – regardless of where it is on the political spectrum – has always played the fundamental role in expanding, enforcing and defending the market. The process of industrialisation itself required state ownership and central economic planning, last but not least in order to enforce order against the emerging industrial working class. During this phase it didn't matter if the left or the right was in government – large- scale state planning was required by the social situation and was not a political choice. We can see the superficial character of “market economies” when class relations are in crisis – when workers organise mass strikes and hit the streets. The state, no matter if it is left or right, has no problems suspending the “free market” in these situations to repress and maintain class society. For example, after

the oil shock in the 1970s it was no contradiction that the Indira Gandhi government nationalised the mining and banking sector in order to prevent economic collapse, inscribed “socialism” into the Indian constitution, obtained the support of the Communist Party and launched the most brutal attack against striking railway workers and other working class insurgents during the State of Emergency.

4) Democratic socialism in practice avoids the structural weakness of the working class and focuses on professionals

The current proponents of democratic socialism know that class struggle is at a low ebb – but instead of focusing on building organised cores within the class they largely focus on the recruitment of professionals and “activists”. While previous revolutionary upheavals like 1968 questioned the role of the “intellectual expert”, the current generation celebrates it. This is very obvious for parties like Podemos or Syriza, but also valid for the so-called Labour surge – most of the new party members have a higher education and are living in metropolitan areas. Materially the new left intelligentsia reproduces itself as the “neoliberal self” that they pretend to criticise: hardly any of them are “organic intellectuals” forged in working class existence and struggle, most of them survive by creating a social media and academic persona whose opinion is valued on the marketplace. Whether you read the “Alternative Models of Ownership” by the Labour party advisers, Bastani’s “luxury communism” or Srnicek’s “Inventing the Future”, the prime agent is always the figure of the well-educated and networked activist. Unfortunately, this forces our intellectual democratic socialist comrades to chase their own tails. There is a big blank space when it comes to the question of how their well-meaning ideas will be enforced and implemented. Who will enforce workers’ participation if workers are seen as people who are only able to engage in political discourse during election times? The absence of a strategy rooted in the working class then leads to the creation of a trite and kitsch icon of “the people” – a mass of honest victims who need cultural belonging and political leadership.

5) Democratic socialism’s understanding of “workers’ participation” is formal and therefore flawed

We criticise socialist thinkers for seeing state planning as essentially opposed to capitalism, though confronted with history most of them would hasten to add that nationalisation and planning have to go hand-in-hand with the “democratisation of the economy”. The problem is that their understanding of “workers’ participation” is largely formal, for example, proposed in the form of workers’ shares in enterprises, union delegates on company boards or voting rights when it comes to management decisions. The aforementioned class background of many of the new socialist intelligentsia also contributes to their limited understanding – or actual trajectory – of what workers’ control would require. Their understanding of class is largely economistic – defined by the fact that workers all depend on wages. This understanding of class doesn’t focus on the actual form of the production process and its hierarchical division of labour (intellectual and manual workers, productive and reproductive work etc.). In their policies, their understanding of “ownership” of the means of production and “democratic participation” of workers is formal. Just because workers or trade unions hold 50% or 100% of shares doesn’t mean much. If workers are still forced to do the drudge work the whole day, performing only a limited amount of tasks, this won’t allow them to have an understanding of, and therefore say in, how a company or sector is actually run. You might give them a vote on a company board, but it will be those who have a greater overview and more time due to their professional status as intellectuals (engineers, scientists etc.) – who will make the decisions. The “vote” will be reduced to a fetishised process to confirm the experts’ monopoly of knowledge. A mere change in government or a shift from private to state property would not touch the core of what defines “working class”, its power and disempowerment.

6) The trade unions and the workers party are not the working class

The democratic socialist perspective relies on the idea of a transmission between the working class and the state through the interaction of the two main “workers’ organisations” – the parliamentary party and the trade unions. This perspective relies on an idealistic or prehistoric view on trade unions as the “democratic representation” of the class. Plenty of historical examples (Labour/TUC in the UK in 1926 or the 1970s, CC.OO in Spain

after Franco, Solidarność in Poland after 1981, PT/CUT in Brazil recently etc.) demonstrate that during the heat of struggle waves, the trade union/government connection becomes the heaviest blanket on working class initiative. During the last few years that we've been shop stewards, we've gotten quite a bit of insight into the internal mechanisms of two major trade unions – both loyal to the Labour party. Democratic socialism's idea that these organisations will be the main force in “keeping the government and its enemies under pressure” is totally illusory. More often than not we can see how the party and the union leadership instrumentalise workers' struggles for their own ends, for example, the recent symbolic “strikes” at McDonald's in London were called by the union leadership at a time where it suited the Labour campaign circus, but actually undermined the organising work of the union's own organisers. Many of the proposed reforms that Labour wanted to bring in, for example, sectoral collective bargaining and contracts, would facilitate economic planning for the bigger capitalists and strengthen the central trade union leadership's grip than actually boost workers' independent power. The regional and sectoral contracts in Germany are the best example.

7) Focus on the “political arena” saps energy

The leadership of democratic socialism tends to try and bypass the mundane and laborious problems of power relations between workers and capital and instead focuses on the electoral leap. But these tend to be leaps forwards and backwards. The governmental politics of 21st century socialism in Latin America (Chavez, Morales, Lula etc.) and their structural weaknesses have created widespread disillusionment. The subjugation of the Syriza government in Greece to the system and its representatives has closed down, rather than opened up spaces for the class movement against austerity. The internal power-fights within Podemos or Momentum has created cynicism and burn-out. By adopting a “lesser evil” voting strategy and calling for people to vote for Macron to avoid Le Pen, the left undermined its own position in the anti-government rebellion of the Yellow Vests. The media hype of Corbynism, the engagement with electoral tactics etc. diverts focus from daily struggles for working class self-defence.

There is also a misunderstanding of parliamentarianism: just because a political party is composed by workers doesn't make party politics and the

parliament a form of working class politics. Parliamentarianism – nationally or on the level of “municipalities” – is the exact opposite of working class politics, as it is based on individual citizenship, not on collective and practical relations. The best example for the limits of local electoral politics can be found in the US. The election of militants of the black liberation movement after its decline in the late 1970s meant that in towns like Chicago and Baltimore, black mayors had to enforce austerity and anti-poor policing measures in the 1980s, which further weakened and divided the movement while stabilising the system: who better to enforce cuts against black urban poor, but a black mayor?

8) Parliamentary power and state power are two different things

Let's assume a socialist party manages to get into government. The idea of a parliamentarian road towards socialism neglects the fact that “taking over government” and “having state power” are two different kettles of fish. There is little analysis of the actual material and social class structure of the state (administration, public servants, army) and its independence from parliamentary democracy. For example, despite changes to its outer form the material core and trajectory of the Russian state apparatus (i.e. social strata of people employed in carrying out state functions) has reproduced itself from the time of the Tsarist regime, through the Bolshevik revolution, Stalinist terror, Glasnost to Putin. If we want to look closer to home, even the revered Tony Benn had to understand as Secretary of State for Industries in the mid-1970s that the struggle with the right-wing of the Labour party was child's play compared to the struggle with his “own” civil servants.

9) By focusing on the national arena and the state, democratic socialism tends to misjudge the global relation of capital

Let's assume that a socialist party not only manages to get into government, but also manages to dominate the state apparatus. Due to the fact that the nation state is the core element of the strategy for democratic socialism the project is immediately confronted with the global nature of capital. Higher levels of taxation and other impositions will result in capital flight amongst global companies. Democratic socialism accounts for this, by, for example, proposing alliances with smaller enterprises, as a kind of national productive united front against global corporations and finance. We've seen

time and again how this necessary alliance shifts the ideological viewpoint towards “progressive patriotism” and other bullshit. If a Labour government would actually try to increase taxation and redistribute assets, the most likely outcome is a devaluation of the pound and an increase in inflation due to a trade deficit, which cannot be counteracted easily – given the composition of agriculture, energy sector, general manufactured goods. The new Labour left leadership – trained in political activism and speech and aided by their influence amongst the union leadership – will be the best vehicle to tell workers to “give our Labour government some time”, to explain that “international corporations have allied against us” and that despite inflation workers should keep calm and carry on; wage struggles will be declared to be excessive or divisive or of narrow-minded economic consciousness. We have seen how, for example, the Chavez government in Venezuela organised the “urban poor” against strikes of teachers who demanded higher wages, denouncing them as greedy and therefore responsible for other workers’ poverty.

10) Class struggle doesn’t develop gradually

Democratic socialism’s focus on electoral campaigning and official union organising results in a misjudgement of how class struggle develops. Historically class struggles developed in leaps and bounds – in a much more complex dynamic between “organising” and external forces and factors. The belief that class struggle is based on “step-by-step” organising and mobilising often results in leftists putting stumbling blocks in the way of future waves of struggle. In the short-term getting “community leaders” or your local MP involved, or relying on the trade union or party apparatus in order to mobilise or encourage fellow workers, might seem beneficial. What initially seemed a stepping stone turns out to be a stumbling block: for example, middlemen who get in the way of things or illusions in symbolic forms of struggle. The challenge is to find “step-by-step” forms of struggle that help in the moment, but don’t pose problems long-term. In their need to create a transformation of workers’ action (controlled strikes etc.) on the ground into “economic pressure” to support state policies, socialist organisers tend to become scared of the often chaotic and seemingly spontaneous character of struggles. They risk misunderstanding that these situations of breakdown of normality are precisely the situations

where workers have to face up to their responsibility to reorganise social reproduction. These moments are the necessary learning curves and laboratories where we actually change things and ourselves. To stifle this means killing workers' participation.

11) Democratic socialism and its fear of uncontrolled class struggle becomes its own gravedigger as it weakens the working class activity necessary to defend it

The fact that the biggest socialist party in history – the German SPD – first agreed to support the German government in the 1914 war efforts and oppressed workers' revolutionary upheavals after the war was not a betrayal. It was part and parcel of a long-term strategy to gain governmental power and to re-shape the national economy – to which workers' revolutionary "adventures" posed a risk. After having weakened workers' self-activity, the SPD was then confronted with a global crisis in 1929, which limited a national economic strategy. The combination of these two factors – a working class weakened by government tactics and powerlessness vis-à-vis global capital – resulted in the SPD opening the door for the most brutal reactionary turn in 1933.

Another example is the social democratic government under Allende in Chile in 1973. It shows us that the relationship between working class movements and left governments is more complicated than the often mechanistic picture of force (movement) and container/stabiliser (government). We can see that the initial social reforms were introduced by a right-wing government, which failed to contain class struggle. When Allende took over he had a hard time keeping workers' and poor peoples' struggles under control – struggles which felt encouraged by the incoming left government. Allende feared that the local upper class and international imperialist forces would use the social turmoil as an excuse for intervention. Industrial unrest also created shortages which threatened to destabilise the government further. International price developments, in particular of mining products, curbed the scope for material concessions towards striking workers. Allende's policies towards the working class unrest – which ranged from concessions to military repression – undermined and literally disarmed the working class. When the local

military, backed by the CIA, went in for the kill, the resistance was already weakened.

12) Strategy starts from actual struggles and actual potentials and difficulties imposed by the social production process

We need strategies and we need organisation. We have to start by analysing the real conditions and relationships of our class: how is production organised today, how is it organised beyond company or national boundaries, how are we as workers divided from intellectual labour and knowledge and how can these divisions be overcome? How can we make use of the fact that workers co-operate along supply-chains, often using modern communication technologies in order to develop new forms of transnational organisations of struggle? How do the struggles in the bigger workplaces and industrial sectors relate to areas or regions where workers are more atomised? We have to create a dynamic between industrial and workplace power and the inventiveness of working class people to organise their survival, be it in the form of workers' cooperatives, hack-labs, squats or self-run community projects. Within these struggles we have to develop the organisation and strategy to imagine a coordinated takeover of the central means of production, their defence and their socialisation beyond national boundaries. This will not happen on Day X of our choosing – this will happen with the increasing dysfunctionality of this system to which our own struggles for survival contribute. Democratic socialism and its strategies will not be adequate for the vastness, harshness and joy of what lies ahead for the working class.

We have seen that the strategy of democratic socialism clashes with the two main historical forces in capitalism. Firstly, by focusing on the national arena it clashes with the global character of capital. And secondly, by reducing the question of exploitation to the question of whether workers work under private or public command, their strategy clashes with the substantive discontent of the working class. A socialist government would be forced to weaken its own power base in order to deal with the continuing discontent (“Keep calm and give your workers’ government a bit more time”). In the long run this creates disillusionment and the material basis for a reactionary turn. These are the historical lessons.

Chapter 13: Class power and uneven development

In order to develop alternative strategies to overcome capitalism we have to take a few steps back. A revolutionary strategy would have to explain why workers are not only angry, but why their struggles have the potential to transform society. As we pointed out earlier, movements clash with, and get rid of, governments frequently, but this does not seem to touch upon society's real power structures. We therefore look at what constitutes the power of capital and its internal contradictions before we look at strategies. We can say that any society that is built on classes has a revolutionary contradiction, as humans in general don't like to be exploited or oppressed. What is specific about the form of exploitation in capitalism? We see two main "revolutionary contradictions".

Exploitation is surely built on violence. If you question the boundaries of how this society is structured, for example, if you disobey your bosses' command or don't accept that the product of your labour is theirs, you will get whacked over the head. In general, though, the current system doesn't dominate us so much by the use of direct violence, but rather through making us think that we cannot produce this world ourselves. We depend on the co-operation of people on a global scale in our daily lives: food, care, clothes, electronic gadgets are produced within a global division of labour. The connections between us are not created by people directly, but through capital in various forms: the money and commodity form, but more importantly, through company and state management. Only through capital do we get in touch not only with other people, but also with the necessary means to produce, with our past labour in the form of infrastructure, machines, work material, energy. We can conclude that the main power of capital is that it makes millions work together – and that it seems that the working class couldn't achieve this by itself. This is the material barrier of most movements – not repression or wrong political ideologies.

Here we come to the second element of the power of capital. It not only brings millions around the globe to work together, it does it in a way that hides the global co-operation and divides the people who work together.

The co-operation under capital is necessarily hierarchical. Some people are subjected to assembly lines and machines, other people develop machines, some people plan. Our position within the social division of labour also determines our position within the social hierarchy: do we work alone at home, do we work in low paid manual jobs, do we help control or manage other peoples' labour, do we have access to the labour market? We can see that class struggle is not a hippy-ish event where millions of people, under the influence of enhanced class consciousness, suddenly discover their co-operation and find their love for each other. Class struggle is full of tension between confronting both the material barriers and hierarchies within the working class and, at the same time, a common enemy.

These two aspects of power in capitalism – the hidden co-operation of millions and the divide-and-rule amongst those who co-operate – mean that strikes, which take place in the heart of exploitation, are crucial. They are not only crucial in terms of counter-power. A strike is not just a mechanical act of “stopping the wheels” in order to enforce our demands. Only once workers stop working does the social co-operation become visible and with it the underlying hierarchies: the engineers realise that they depend on the work of the cleaners, the “Polish” and “Indian” workers have to overcome their barriers in order to make a strike successful. In this sense the significance of strikes is that in the confrontation with capital, people can and have to question their social position within society. A strike is not just an act of refusing to work, but once workers organise strikes themselves it produces new social relations: on a small scale the experience emerges that if we can organise stopping work together, we can also organise work differently, potentially without the mediation and control of capital. Self-organisation of workers is not just an ideal, but day-to-day work is largely only possible because workers improvise and co-operate beyond management work- rules every day and we can build on that experience. This is the revolutionary core of strikes, which is different from demonstrations, riots or occupations – where the means of producing something new are necessarily limited.

Here we see that not every strike necessarily develops this potential: many strikes remain limited to a specific profession, or company. Other workers or people might feel the impact, but are not included, which often

results in the strike not being effective: capital can use other workers to undermine the strike. This forces workers to think and act beyond their immediate surrounding, increasingly on an international level. Here it also becomes clear that the limitations of “trade union strikes” are not merely based on the fact that a bureaucracy curbs the activity of the rank and file. Legal and formal boundaries set by the labour law limit the ability of workers to reach out to other workers who are linked to their work materially, but separated formally through different contracts, sectorial boundaries etc. In this way workers cannot discover the full extent of their co-operation and therefore cannot question the power of capital. Having defined what the power of capital is and class struggle’s power to undermine it we can return to the question of strategies. We can see more clearly that the two main political strategies of the “radical” left – the violent attack on the state and its armed forces, and the peaceful electoral taking over of government, which seem to be the two extreme ends of the political spectrum – are both misjudging where the actual power of the system lies. Violent insurrection or electoral politics don’t help to undo the power of capital, as they don’t actually question its power to determine how we produce and therefore how we live our lives. The second conclusion is that the traditional forms of class politics, which see the commonality of workers primarily in the fact that we are all somehow exploited, is too crude. This view tends to propose that workers “unite” in big organisations and fight through these organisations. They presuppose a (formal) unity as a precondition to struggle. We think that workers’ struggles have to expand by undoing the barriers and hierarchies that are dividing us. We cannot bypass this by all becoming members of this or that organisation.

We can also see that the potential of struggles to not only beat their bosses, but to reach out to other parts of the class locally and globally is unevenly distributed within the class. This is not mainly dependent on the subjective will of the workers involved, but on where they are located within social production. So, for example, a strike in a huge hospital has a different social impact than a strike in a small marketing office. And a struggle in a platinum mine has potentially a wider global impact than a struggle in a local newspaper.

From this understanding of what makes workers' struggle potentially powerful or even revolutionary we can also draw preliminary conclusions about our own role and the role of organisations. The primary role of organisations is not to "organise people" or to "teach them about the right line". The primary task of an organisation is to understand the material context of a situation or struggle: How is the specific work of people already connected to others? How is this fact ideologically and materially disguised? What are workers already doing to use their co-operation as a weapon against the bosses? What do they fail to do and why? Our proposals of how to organise and advance the struggle have to be based on this analysis. No class politics without workers' inquiry. We think that this understanding of class and of the most basic tasks sets us apart from most of the usual leftist and syndicalist politics.

So far, we have looked at the most essential character of class struggle in capitalism – that class movements can reveal that we work together globally. This struggle is not a static back and forth where sometimes this side wins and sometimes the other. If we look at class struggle historically then we can discover certain dynamics, developments and tendencies. Struggles force capital to expand and develop and thereby sharpen social contradictions. These contradictions make a revolutionary change possible. This sounds abstract, let's break it down.

The first contradiction lies within production itself. Capital has to increase productivity, last but not least to appease workers by giving them a few more crumbs of a growing cake. The main way to increase productivity is a concentration of labour and machinery (big industry) based on a close co-operation of workers involved. Historically this leads to working class collectivity and unrest, not only about the crumbs on offer, but about control of the entire bakery. The closer workers co-operate, the less capital (and its representatives in the form of management) is able to appear as a precondition and necessary organiser of social production. For example, during the revolutionary upheaval of 1917 to 1923 workers in industrial towns and very integrated industries, such as mining and steel, could easily propose to take both economic and political power in the form of factory and neighbourhood councils. Capital is therefore forced to divide the production process "politically" (through outsourcing or relocation of

companies, through separation of intellectual labour from the production process, through the reproduction of the division between production and the domestic sphere etc.), which then ends up undermining social productivity. This is its internal political contradiction. To workers, this segmentation appears at first as an illogical act of “bad management practice” or bureaucracy: “they want us to co-operate, but they don’t let us”, or as a neutral market operation (“small economic units are more efficient” etc.). The political character of the division of labour reveals itself primarily during moments of collective struggle. To summarise: capital has to increase social productivity to meet both its needs for profits and workers’ demands; an increase of social productivity requires the close co-operation of workers on a global scale; this is politically dangerous, which is why the production process is segmented; this imposes barriers and limits to social productivity.

The second contradiction is that an increase in social productivity goes hand in hand with an increase in relative poverty. By relative poverty we mean that workers’ general living standards in a broad sense (how well we eat; how much we work; how much influence we have over how we live) become more impoverished in relation to the growing potential to create a better life thanks to new technologies, knowledge and productive infrastructure. Poverty in capitalism does not exist because there is a lack of something. Poverty in capitalism exists because under the bosses’ command and in their interest the application of new technology or knowledge tends to result in job cuts and an increase in unemployment. Unemployment in turn puts pressure on wages. Workers are either overworked or under-employed. In some industries workers have to sweat because investment into new machines is not seen as profitable, while in other sectors new machines replace workers. This contradiction becomes visible mainly as an objective fact, as a result of the production process: over-production and over-capacities (closing factories etc.) on one side, the development of a “surplus population” or “working poor” population on the other. From a universal and total viewpoint, we can see the revolutionary potential of this contradiction: we don’t have to be poor, we are poor because the machines we built are used against us. The problem in terms of class strategy is that the experience of social productivity and marginalisation, of development

and under-development is unevenly distributed within the global class. Under-development is not seen as an outcome of a global class system, but as a “regional or national issue” or outcome of political decisions.

A further and related contradiction is the fact that an increase in social productivity is primarily achieved through an increase in expenditure on machinery, which puts a strain on the rate of profit companies can expect. We see more frequent and worsening situations of crisis. Again, from a universal, historical viewpoint the fact that the system creates its own crisis and destroys its own productive assets can be seen as a revolutionary potential. We can point out that the system is absurd, as it leaves apartment blocks empty or half-built while homelessness increases or factories idle, while unemployment soars. The problem in terms of class strategy is that the economic up and down imposes itself on class struggle. You cannot build your strategy on gradually building organisations and reformist gains, as the system plunges into crisis and movements erupt in response. Strategy has to account for the unaccountable development of the system. The crisis deepens the general division between developed and underdeveloped regions and adds the problem of non-synchronicity (not everything happens at the same time everywhere) to the problem of geographical unevenness.

So rather than dealing with a static and even social production process that spans the globe and can easily be discovered by workers as their own tool against capital, we deal with a dynamic and uneven situation. The global production process is concentrated in some regions and patchy in others, it jumps and bolts under the stress of boom and crisis. This impacts on the ability of workers to find common cause. And while for some workers their power is palpable in their collective existence on assembly lines or in large-scale workplaces, for other workers it is their power in numbers vis-a-vis the security forces or border police. Our social productivity and social impoverishment is relative. The global revolutionary tension between social productivity based on workers co-operation on one side and the mass experience of impoverishment on the other is diffused by the way nation states manage and channel both uneven development and workers’ discontent. Workers themselves undermine this constantly, for example, even militarised high-tech border regimes don’t stop workers from

underdeveloped regions crossing national boundaries into more developed regions. This is a mass movement that expresses workers' discontent and the creation of a global working class. We have to discuss the tendencies within class struggle that are able to bridge the gaps and distortions in time and place and we have to discuss the role of ourselves and our organisations in relation to these tendencies.

Impact of uneven development within the working class

Capitalist development is uneven and class struggle develops unevenly, which results in differences in regional conditions for the working class. Factions of the political class and their nationalist, regionalist, ethnic, religious or otherwise divisive middlemen explain the unevenness as a result of the nasty politics of their enemies and try to rally the regional working class behind them. To oppose this by shouting, "Workers of the world, unite!" won't go very far.

We cannot draw on many historical debates when it comes to understanding the relation between developed and underdeveloped regions or segments of the working class in a revolutionary period. Marx wrote in the late nineteenth century that when the remaining collective structures of the Russian countryside, the so-called *Mir* or *Obshchina*, interact with the revolutions in the advanced industrial regions in western Europe, the best of two worlds could come together and the Russian countryside could avoid having to go through the quagmire of capitalist development. The idea that different experiences or stages that exist within the class, such as advanced industrial development and forms of simple horizontal collectivity, can fuse and that something new could come out of it, is important – but structures such as the Russian rural commons have been swallowed by market relations now for a long time.

After Marx, the focus of the debate was on the question of how different stages of development create different forms of political domination. Trotsky's theory of the permanent revolution in the early twentieth century tried to understand how revolutions in the advanced industrial countries of the western democracies relate to uprisings against feudal or colonial rule in less developed, and often agrarian, regions. He pointed out that the "underdevelopment" in backward regions is reproduced and fortified in exchange with the developed capitalist nations for example, the "backward"

despotism in Poland/Russia was strengthened through agrarian trade or industrial investment from the west. The same should be valid for struggles: there is a specific interplay between struggles in the centres and in the “backward” regions. While necessarily schematic, the concept of permanent revolution was not static: not every country has to go through the stage of bourgeois democracy in order to reach socialism, as proposed by social democracy. The rapid nature of industrial development in Russia, sponsored by the “west”, created a relatively minuscule, but militant working class, while at the same time the (parliamentary) state and trade union structure that managed to integrate workers in the more developed industrial nations remained relatively weak in Russia. This explained why the revolution first broke out in a “backward” country – they were not held back by the unions and bourgeois institutions. General underdevelopment though meant that the revolution could not survive long in isolation. The hope was that in interaction with the movement in the advanced countries, the minoritarian working class cores in the less developed regions could turn the struggle against political despotism into a struggle for socialism.

The revolutionary character of the concept of permanent revolution was that it was not “pluralistic”, meaning, instead of merely describing the existence of different conditions it asked: how is uneven development reproduced, for example, how does modern capitalism and the world market strengthen “archaic modes of production?” How can an industrial working class provide a revolutionary attraction and program beyond its reach? And how can struggles under “pre-capitalist” conditions (against the rule of landlords, against police state conditions etc.) inform struggles in the centre?

The problem is that with the downturn of the revolutionary cycle of 1918- 21 the class content of the concept of permanent revolution became side-lined. The focus was no longer on global production and trade and how they link the working class in regions of different stages of economic and political development. The theory turned into a schematic blueprint for the anti-colonial struggles of the 60s and 70s: first support the alliance with progressive segments of the local middle and upper class against the despotic or colonial rule, then push for a working class independent program. During the last global uprising in 1968, only a few revolutionary

organisations were somewhat critical of the official representatives of the “national liberation movements” in the Global South (Vietcong, Cuban revolutionary leadership). While being critical of the leadership, the degeneration of the theory of permanent revolution meant that these organisations were not able to develop an independent practical strategy. This strategy would have had to shift the focus from the political expressions of the uprisings to their material underbelly: how to connect the working class militancy in the industrial democracies, the industrial “socialist block” and the small working class elements of the upheaval in the largely agrarian Global South in a phase where the Global South was still largely a supplier of raw materials for manufacturing in the North?

The only concept that developed during these times that tried to understand different stages of development within the class from a strategic point of view was the concept of class composition. Comrades in Italy in the 1960s understood how the underdevelopment in the south of the country related to the rapid industrialisation in the north and how this was not just an economic outcome of accumulation, but part of modern planned economic policies. They tried to understand how the experience of agrarian workers in the south with the landowners and their mafia informed their struggles once they had migrated to the north. They saw the assembly line as a weapon of exploitation that disciplined recently migrated workers from agricultural backgrounds and split them from the skilled workers of the old traditional socialist movement. They saw that the assembly line would turn into a means of communication of a new cycle of struggle, by generalising working class experiences from Turin to Liverpool and Detroit. The struggles in the core could develop a pulling effect right into the backwaters of the underdeveloped south, be it Sicily or Alabama. Unlike the traditional Communist Party line – or current democratic socialist strategies – they saw the relation between a new generation of technicians (intellectual workers) and so-called unskilled (manual) workers not as one of an alliance between “workers of the head and workers of the hand” which basically enshrined the hierarchy imposed by the division of labour. In the case of intellectual and manual workers, development and underdevelopment existed side by side within the working class and could be pacified as long as these two segments would not merge: the “intellectual workers” would look for

technical solutions to social problems and the manual workers would collectively reject, but not supersede the system of production. So instead of proposing alliances, the new comrades related to the working class background of a new generation of technical students, their feeling of alienation as intellectual workers, their double-existence as engineers with limited scope for creativity and as a managerial and supervisory force of the bosses. In turn they questioned whether modern industrial work was indeed “unskilled” and purely “manual” and discovered its social and creative dimensions, for example, by pointing out how much modern factory production still relied on improvisation. Based on this they could propose forms of struggles beyond alliances between “intellectuals” and workers.

Their aim was to find forms which would undermine the knowledge hierarchy, like in common assemblies and political collectives. These comrades went beyond merely describing the differences and connections between various segments of the class, but they were looking for locations where struggles could lead to generalisation and organic class unity. Their hope was that the most advanced sectors, both in terms of social productivity and intensity of struggle, would be able to express the potential for a new society and radiate into the backward sectors of society. The uprising of 1968 touched all spheres of working class life, from welding departments to the bedroom, but given the complex and dispersed nature of social production, the movement didn't develop a clear vision of what a takeover of the means of production could look like. The shortcoming of the comrades who developed the concept of class composition was that they either theorised this as a strength of the movement, for example, by glorifying the “against work” attitude of the struggles, or avoided the problem by focusing on the attack on the state, which led to subjectivist armed adventures.

There is still a fair bit to learn from the theoretical and practical work of the comrades back then, but times have changed. While it might have been a cultural challenge for workers in the north of Italy to deal with newcomers from the south, today migration is a much more global phenomenon. While assembly line workers and technicians might have gone to the same schools together, today we see a global division of intellectual and manual labour that puts half the globe between the Silicon Valley and the Foxconn plants

in China. These differences are obvious. But then, other historical developments since the 1960s that have led to a global unification of the conditions of our class are equally obvious. Since the 1970s the majority of the global population now lives in urban areas, and the traditional intermediate classes, which created major problems for previous revolutions, such as the peasantry or petty bourgeoisie (small business owners, traders), have died a social death. We can see a paradox: while working class existence has become the most common existence, the working class as a political category has been made invisible. Large parts of the intellectual left have helped this process by avoiding a deeper analysis of the complexity of the global working class in favour of inventing fashionable new categories, such as the “multitude” or the “precariat”. Decades of neoliberalism has led to postmodern thinking within the left intelligentsia, which can only focus on difference: the patchwork of unwaged and unfree labour; the sphere of reproduction; the precarious professionals; the talk about “service” or post- industrial society; privilege discourse. The Left has lost its brains and guts for universal and strategical thinking.

Maybe because the “working class condition” of being wage dependent and its political expression in the form of “parliamentary democracy” has become the norm across the globe it now seems obsolete to talk about the impact of uneven development. Everything appears so similar (global village) and so different at the same time, once we look into the details. The problem is that we clearly see the effect of regional differences on global class struggle, but we tend to explain these differences geopolitically or out of “national economies” or even ethnically, for example, by referring to the BRIC states or the “Arab Spring”. In our quest to understand the global working class we can’t rely on mainstream definitions of development and under-development. The GDP growth or decline of income per head doesn’t tell us much about what kind of challenges the region would face in a situation of global turmoil and uprising. We cannot tell how the contradiction of social productivity and collectivity on one side and impoverishment and atomisation on the other would play out in specific regional class movements. Here we have to create our own understanding of development.

We first of all would have to determine how cohesive the social production process is within a region, for example, what share of poor people are wage workers, workers in bigger workplaces, workers in integrated industries. We have to see how integrated the region is into the global economy, for example, through trade, but more importantly, by being part of a global division of labour or exchange through labour migration. Consciously or not, any regional class movement is limited by the degree of dependency of the region on imports of essential goods, such as food, energy, raw materials. If the region's economy depends heavily on mining products, the state will most likely be able to pacify the workers of the mining sector through material concessions. If the region depends heavily on food or fuel imports and hasn't got a strong industrial base the regionally isolated class movement will most likely be limited to demanding fairer redistribution and price policies from the state. A further indicator for development which would impact on any regional class movement is the position of the region when it comes to access to "means of production to produce the means of production", for example, whether there is a local machine or electronics manufacturing industry and the extent to which the region produces or depends on global productive knowledge. A region where a substantial share of the working class is in touch with these industries will more likely be able to go beyond demands for redistribution and develop visions for an actual social transformation. There is finally the question of how the developed or underdeveloped status of the region is mediated politically, for example, whether underdevelopment is seen as a result of local corruption or autocratic rulers. Most significantly, we have to see how developed the experience of struggles is within the regional working class.

The challenge is to not shy away from the complexity of the situation, where parts of the global class are confronted with war economies of failed states, others with the volatile situation of economies and industries largely dependent on raw material prices (mining, plantations, oil), others with the stress of being the global workbench for manufactured goods, others with the austerity of deindustrialisation. Hardly any of these situations are neatly demarcated by national borders. Different levels of development divide nations and national borders, such as the US-Mexican border, cutting whole

industrial areas in half. In order to be able to debate and imagine how class movements can overcome the barriers set by uneven development we have to find certain categories or regional types. This seemed easier to do when the two main categories were agrarian colonial or despotic regions on one side and industrialised democratic regions on the other. Today the question of the peasantry or struggle for parliamentary democracy has largely been side-lined and replaced by complex regional differences in development of the means and forces of production. For example, we could distinguish between regions dominated by:

- industrially combined labour under a democratic state/access to national welfare (Sweden)
- a situation where workers' struggle and struggle "for democracy" are still more intertwined (Egypt)
- "extraction economies", with a small share of (other) industrial labour and more coercive political forms where state redistribution is central (Venezuela)
- semi-proletarianisation (households half depending on wages, half on subsistence production), crisis of peasantry and strong internal migration (India)
- a higher level of urban unemployment, informal labour relations, mafia economy and violent forms of political mediation (Columbia)
- military (national, religious) disputes and/or "failing states" (Iraq)

The next step would be to understand how struggles of different regional categories correspond, such as in war-torn regions and regions dominated by extraction industries, and how they would be able to influence each other. In each one of these "regions" the role of, and relationship between, workers in industrial centres, urban and rural poor, students and other segments of the class will be different. Struggles in each region will relate differently to the question of capitalist wealth and its distribution or the question of state power. We would have to analyse the current global protest waves, from Sudan to Chile, against the background of this categorisation. An analysis from the point of view of different developmental stages, instead of nation states or "north vs. south", will hopefully allow us to understand things like how far-reaching the attraction of workers' struggles in the new industrial centres (Pearl River Delta in China etc.) both

regionally and globally actually is, and to what extent their experiences will have to be politically mediated by class organisation in order to reach the more marginalised segments.

To be able to do this, we would have to situate the regions within the global dynamic of capital. We have to see which material links exist between the regions, links that facilitate communication and coordination of struggles. What do we mean by that, what are these links? The global development of the economic crisis is uneven and the impact varies in its form, but it sets a global context for all struggles. Becoming wage workers by being expelled from or losing the means of subsistence is a global phenomenon, creating a similar social experience for peasants in India or Bolivia. This creates a common condition, but this itself does not create material links as such. More concrete links can be seen through the experiences of migrant labour and how it connects workers' struggles and undermines the typically nationally- corralled "labour movement". (Although migrant labour can also reinforce "national/protectionist sentiments" amongst the local working classes). Global supply-chains connect individual workplaces and regions, but there is a limit as to what extent "productive co-operation" can actually be experienced in terms of creating direct bonds between workers, for example, if a whole ocean lies between them. Class movements themselves create their own forms of global communication, though often this communication is random, for example, protestors around the globe use these lame Guy Fawkes masks and square occupations become a widespread phenomenon.

While we can visualise these links as something like a "material backbone" for international working class movements, we can also easily see that apart from obvious things like language issues, there are various tendencies and material forces which, in their immediacy, override more common experiences. Workers around the globe may all be experiencing a deterioration of conditions, similar management and state austerity strategies, they may even be exploited by the same corporations or within the same supply-chain. But these experiences are often overlaid by more immediate concerns: primarily, national conflicts and war. At the height of the anti-government protests in the Middle East in early 2020, US air strikes have put global war back on the agenda.

In order to make these various conditions more debatable for the development of some kind of global strategy, perhaps we have to be more schematic. We would need to categorise six or seven main “working class conditions”/stages of development under which the working class currently exists, and to analyse what specific kind of material power and political limitations struggles under these respective conditions develop. We have to see how these regions are criss-crossed by the material backbone that connects workers beyond regional boundaries, for example, through the process of global industries and migration. We finally have to contrast our theoretical vocabulary with the actual struggles that are happening in the different regions and be open-minded enough to see them challenging our abstractions. All this is a huge effort, which can only be undertaken by an organised debate of comrades across the globe – which brings us to the question of organisation. Based on this we can discuss what a “revolutionary program” would look like today. Here we don’t mean a party manifesto or the program of a political organisation, but a program that lays out some basic ideas about what an uprising in developed regions has to “offer” struggles in less developed areas and the other way around. An immediate halt in the production and transport of weapons to despotic regimes would be an obvious first step. The program would include anticipations of the main economic, political, geographical dividing lines which would make a simultaneous uprising unlikely and suggest counteracting measures.

A summary

Before we look at what a revolutionary transition would actually mean today let’s recap the main thoughts above. We’ve put forward the idea that the main power of capital is the fact that at least of the surface level it coordinates global production. Following from this we explained the significance of strike movements as a process that question this power of capital, and to discover the social dimension of our labour and undo the material divisions between different segments of the class. Dividing lines between the class are called into question, the most significant being: the separation of manual and intellectual labour; the separation between production and domestic reproduction; and the separation of productive centres (large industry and workplaces) and marginalisation (ghetto

economy, prison complex). We established that the main revolutionary contradiction of capitalism is the fact that an increase in social productivity leads to more relative poverty by increasing the mass of unemployed or underemployed workers which in turn depresses wages. We finally looked at the fact that the experience of social productivity and impoverishment is distributed unevenly within the global class.

We saw that different regions are now more or less integrated into the global production process. While most of us share the experience of urban waged labour, the fact of uneven development means that struggles in different regions will differ in terms of their scope and immediate social visions. These regional differences cannot be overcome by a simple unifying program or list of demands. If we assume that it will need a global class movement to tackle capitalism as a global system, we have to ask how struggles in different regions communicate, influence each other and even out their differences. When looking at the current protest movements we see a separation between “the street protests and square occupations”, which primarily focus on the state, and the strikes, which might put significant economic pressure on the state, but don’t develop a clear social alternative, such as by proposing to take over the means of production and create workers’ delegate institutions to organise social production and life. It is the inability to take over the means of production and reorganise social production that sets the material limit for any protest movement. Only rarely will this inability appear clearly as the determining reason for the movement’s limitations, it might not even enter the consciousness of the people involved in the movement. We have to go beyond seeing the obvious limitations, such as the focus of the movements on governmental reforms, on this or that political leader, on corruption, as the determining ones. The inability to take over the means of production is rarely due to limited consciousness, but mainly due to the global complexity of production and regional dependency, which make regional solutions impossible.

If the movements themselves haven’t found answers to these questions, how can we seriously think that we are able to discuss revolutionary strategy? What can we base our discussion on? We don’t know what will trigger a global revolutionary upheaval and what the movements will look like in detail. But we know certain preconditions. We know that revolutions

tend to happen in response to situations of severe crisis, if not war. We also know that revolutions are preceded by intense wave of struggles which created organisational links and experiences within the class. We know what the current production system and its global unevenness looks like. This will be a determining factor. We know that the revolution will not happen everywhere at the same time, but we also know that a regionally isolated revolution can only survive for a certain period of time, before it is either starved out, militarily beaten or degenerates. We know that under modern conditions the revolution will not spread militarily, through conquest of territory and populations. There will be violence in order to defend taken productive assets and infrastructure, but the revolution will primarily be spread by strikes and occupations. The main weapons of the revolution won't be tanks. The main weapon will be the promise to not only help topple local despots and to cut the supply of cruise missiles to military governments, but to share and transfer the means to work less and have a better life from the centres to the periphery. This transfer process will depend on working class productive, logistical and insurrectional knowledge. The revolution will require mass consciousness and concerted efforts by sizeable sections of the working class, but it will only come to pass in a situation of social emergency, when the current system is increasingly incapable of securing survival. Working class struggles will have contributed to this emergency, they will have to make the leap from obstructing the system through strikes to taking over the responsibility for reorganisation.

Chapter 14: Revolutionary transition and its conditions in the UK

As we have outlined above, the revolutionaries of today seem to shy away from regional complexities and the challenges they pose for a global social transformation and instead go hiding in new categories, such as the “multitude” or the “surplus population”. It is therefore only logical that their vision of what a revolutionary transition would entail is equally vague, ranging between nihilistic scenarios of insurrection and communisation to dusty ideas of general strikes and councils. We therefore want to outline some basic steps a regional working class uprising would have to undertake in order to defend itself and expand to other regions.

You might think that this is all rather abstract or hypothetical, but during the last few years we’ve seen people willing to risk their lives to defend a square or storm parliament. There is no lack of revolutionary anger. What we haven’t seen is a section of the working class that focuses on the real centres of power – the grain baskets, manufacturing centres, ports, power plants – with the aim and a plan to take them over. It might take a few more waves of struggle for such an organised force to emerge. So what are the bare necessities during a revolutionary transition?

Regional challenge

An uprising will depend on the ability to sustain itself regionally. Although we speak of global revolution, the process won’t necessarily be synchronous; we’ll have to deal with situations of regional insurrections which have to reproduce themselves over a certain period of time, temporarily and partially being cut off from world market supply. While “failing states” might create a potential or necessity for working class insurgency, it will be primarily those regions with fairly integrated industries and agrarian sectors that will take the step first.

Emancipation and hardship

We will have to improve overall conditions, and fast: a communist revolution has to be able to improve living conditions for the majority over a short time span, guaranteeing material reproduction of the population at a high level, making time for the reorganisation of society, at the same time as dismantling hierarchies while still battling the battle. Its main attraction will be the more equal and liberating relationships created in struggle, but over a short period of time, material hardship would undermine these relationships, no matter how willing people are to bear the impact of scarcity.

Takeover of essential industries as productive insurrection

Large sections of the working class have to be prepared for an organised response to a spontaneous situation of crisis: this will largely depend on the collaboration of workers employed in the essential industries with the organised violence of the wider working class to takeover, defend and transform the essential industries. By essential industries we mean agriculture, food processing, energy production, water treatment, transport, communication etc. This takeover will not happen gradually. It cannot, as industries are integrated and any isolated takeover will not be able to sustain itself. This takeover will not be a democratic act of the majority. It will be led by an “active minority/vanguard” of 30 to 40% of the working class, formed in previous struggles. This takeover is the productive and material core of insurrection, the action that can swing the rest of the population, in particular if “populist measures” (redistribution of living space, health provisions etc.) are offered to the poor and they are included in practical refurbishment.

Drastic reduction in working hours

We need a drastic increase of free time for people to learn about the major workings of society and to be able to take part in discussions about its reorganisation. The initial phase will see an elimination of unproductive work tied to the money economy and an equal redistribution of work (“we all work, but we all work less”). We can empirically demonstrate that less than 20% of the adult population (though children can engage in socially

useful activity, too) in the UK works in socially useful jobs. By focusing on these activities and engage everyone in them we can reduce the daily working time to three hours immediately – this compares to the “radical” Labour manifesto that promises to introduce a 4-day week of 8-hour days in 10 years. The second phase will see an implementation of given technology and knowledge in areas where capitalist profit interests prohibited its use. This phase might not be immediately environmentally sustainable, but society will need a window of reduced working hours to create a social consciousness which is able to make decisions on a global scale.

Formation of larger domestic units

The uprising and takeover of essential industries has to go hand in hand with the formation of domestic units comprising around 200 to 300 people: communal spaces (former hotels, schools, office blocks etc.) as central points for distribution, domestic and care work and local decision-making. The quick formation of such domestic units is as important as the takeover of the essential industries. Mainly in order to break the isolation of domestic work and hierarchies between men and women, but also to create a counter-dynamic to the centralisation in the essential industries: a decentralisation of certain social tasks and decision-making. The domestic units and their experience will shift the focus from “production for production’s sake” towards a situation where living together and creating the means of subsistence will be a less segregated process. 250 is a pretty random number, but it seems small enough to facilitate familiarity with people who we organise daily stuff with (childcare, cooking, washing clothes etc.) and big enough to make distribution of goods feasible. It will also create enough proximity in order to guarantee a certain revolutionary respect and commitment between individual members in case of disputes.

Collectivising the control over agricultural production

Larger numbers of the urban working class will have to go and convince the “owner-run” farms of the agricultural sector to share their burden and trouble with working the soil and create direct, non-market related links between town and countryside. While urban workers move towards the rural agriculture areas, supporting their seasonal agricultural workers, some of the agriculture and equipment can be brought closer to town – here we

might actually be able to learn something from Cuba and the significant experience with urban gardening and rapid conversion from an oil-based agriculture to a less fossil fuel based one after the collapse of the Soviet Union. These two movements, from town to countryside and vice versa, will be a first organic step towards a dissolution of the capitalist geographic division of labour. We can take the first steps in undermining the erosive nature of industrial farming by getting permaculture folks involved, while equally learning from industrial greenhouse production elsewhere.

Participation of the marginalised sections of the working class

The essential industries have to be taken over both from within and from without. This will depend on the ability of workers in less central sectors to make sure that workers in the essential industries don't treat their former companies and products as their own property. This would mainly be done by participating in production and organising its military defence. Initially the specific knowledge of the original workers is crucial, it has to be shared quickly. Only the mass participation of poorer or more marginalised sections of the working class will make visible the entire scope of social needs. Their previous experiences with state violence and their knowledge about urban improvisation (from self-defence to economic networks) will be required. An immediate "populist" program has to be launched addressing those segments of the working class who are at the margins of essential production – this segment might be called the "urban poor". This segment is not so significant in the UK, but definitely is in other countries. In order to drive a wedge between them and the middle-strata which has the financial clout to "buy them over" there has to be a coordinated action of appropriation of living space. In this sense "construction" might be essential even in an uprising: if construction workers and the "urban poor" takeover useless office space, empty hotels etc. and convert them together, this would create a bond in order to win people over to defend the rest of the essential industries under attack.

Participation of workers in the advanced industries

As outlined before, parts of the most advanced industries in terms of concentration, knowledge and machinery are not necessarily essential in terms of material survival. Apart from being potential centres of collective struggles and emerging workers' organisations, the role of workers employed in the most advanced industries (automobile, machine engineering) is to make technology and knowledge available for an improvement of the essential industries and domestic units. The robots or artificial intelligence won't liberate us from drudgery, but the collaboration between workers in the advanced and essential industries and domestic units will demonstrate how we can drastically reduce necessary labour time.

Breaking the collusion of intellectual workers

A swift and coordinated appropriation will only be possible with the backing of a significant minority of "technical staff" and intellectual workers (engineers, doctors etc.) employed in the centres of social production. It will depend on the collectively organised measures of the three main working class segments (essential industries, advanced sectors, marginalised) to break the collusion of "intellectual workers" (engineers, certain segments of science) with capitalist management and the state apparatus and win a considerable section over on communist terms and conditions. This would mean breaking down the division between intellectual and manual labour. In order to break the collusion, the struggling working class has to impress with organisational knowledge of production, with liberated human relationships and social responsibility towards the environment. The revolution and its potential to overcome alienation between humans and between humans and nature will appeal to heart and minds.

Establishing a communist internet and productive database

The takeover needs social communication and elaborate decision-making processes, facilitated by a parallel (IT) communication structure to the internet, which is able to link domestic units, essential industries, remaining workplaces and "working class militias". In terms of "production" necessary during the insurrection, this will be a major one. It has to be a structure which guarantees communication between production and

consumption, sturdy enough to fight off attacks. We have to connect this communication network to taken-over printing and film/TV media (neighbourhood/industry TV) and set up a parallel physical delegate structure in case of communication breakdown.

Curbing the influence of the middle class

In the UK the “middle class” block is still a considerable force – there are four million business owners with no employees (self-employed), most of which can be seen as disguised working class people; there are at least 1.2 million “bosses” (if we assume a single boss) employing between 1 and 50 people, which can be categorised as an exploiting middle class; 1.75 million people make money as landlords – a lot of them might as well belong to the former category; 1.1 million people still get good money through being employed in the financial services sector (some of them might be data-entry typists and cleaners). There are 120,000 lawyers/solicitors in the UK, representing a professional section of the middle class not tied into the social process of production. There are still around 50,000 local shops, the majority of which are run by individual owners, representing a lower section of the middle class. These people have a political weight and a repressive apparatus. We are not talking about the mysterious 1%, but rather about a backbone of 15% of people who have not just money to lose, but social influence and prestige. The best way to minimise their influence is to cut them off from essential production and circulation and force them to realise that their privileged social position was largely unproductive – and that they are welcome to participate productively as equals.

Splitting the workers from the bureaucrats within the state

Within the state apparatus we find socially productive functions, for example, administration of certain social services, although much of this work is basically poverty management and therefore superfluous in a revolutionary transition. Generally, these socially productive functions are fused with socially useless bureaucratic activity (for example, tax office, legal departments) and the repressive arm. Working class struggle will have to win over the workers within the state apparatus by demonstrating that the socially useful activity can be organised in a more effective and

emancipated way once cut off from budget constraints and bureaucratic office command and once it is not someone's particular job, but a collective responsibility. This also means fighting the mentality of "being social administrators" that often goes hand in hand with working in public sector jobs.

Splitting the armed forces along class lines

Historically no revolution has been successful without a split within the army, in most cases as a result of previous war or civil war situations. The main chance for a communist revolution to split the army along class lines is therefore determined by objective conditions (soldiers not wanting to die for "their masters war") and its subjective capacity to attract working class soldiers: the organised working class movement can free us from hierarchical relationships and knows how to feed, clothe, care for everyone. Nevertheless, a revolution has to create its own material threat by weakening the military apparatus (non-co-operation, meaning, stopping the supply of essential goods and services for the army) and by armed defence of essential productive units. This includes curbing of sabotage by the middle class and lumpen elements (for example, in Chile during the social turmoil in 1973 the owners of truck and bus fleets organised a "strike" or rather boycott in order to create economic chaos).

Overcoming the regional isolation by using taken-over productive capacity

We have no illusions: no regional uprising will be able to sustain itself materially and "militarily" over a prolonged period. We have seen the pitfalls of "Bolshevik foreign policies" and of anarchist regionalism. The challenge for any local working class is to discover its global dependencies and to engage in extra efforts not only to sustain itself, but to use the appeal of their experiences and appropriated means of production strategically in order to break through their geographic isolation. It will mean observing the global situation, creating contacts along the existing supply-chains and sending working class militias with productive knowledge and means of production to support workers' uprisings elsewhere – using the global logistics facilities that capitalism was forced to develop. In 1917 the

Bolsheviks spread the slogan “Peace, land, bread”. A century later in many regions it will still be about ending the rule of warlords and army occupations, but we have more to offer than just bread and land.

The essential industries and domestic units will be the main centres of decision making. We won’t speculate about whether there will be additional regional councils or neighbourhood assemblies etc. We think that the main decisions should be taken not as “citizens” or “members of assemblies”, but as members of a new social (re-)production process. Debates and decisions concerning issues beyond the immediate reach of the essential industries and domestic units (global situation, movements of the class enemy, questions of larger infrastructure etc.) should evolve from the new relationships created through day-to-day co-operation – not in a separate sphere of representation.

Example: Material conditions for an uprising in the UK region

In the following we want to make the whole thing a bit less abstract by discussing the regional character of uprisings against the background of statistics about industries in the UK. By limiting our examples to the UK region we don’t want to say that this region will necessarily form a cohesive unit during the time of uprising. Unfortunately, we depend on statistics that focus on national regions – we gathered these figures in 2016, but they will be up-to-date enough to give us a general idea. Looking at such a broad range of statistical material felt pretty geeky in 2016, but it became a common thing with Brexit! Everyone wants to know how dependent this island is on foreign trade...

What is the political aim of such a sociological exercise? It can act as a myth-buster amongst the largely middle class left, whose ideology of revolutionary transition is based on assumptions that production is largely immaterial nowadays, or that the economy is largely based on “services”, or that everything is going to be automated or that work or workplaces in general don’t play a major role in working class socialisation. On the other hand, the material also questions the idea of “social democracy in one country”, which thinks that the UK’s productive base is self-contained enough to sustain a national solution. Thanks to this empirical exercise we

can get a rough idea of numbers: how many people are engaged in securing our material survival? In contrast and more importantly, these figures can also serve as a basis for rough propaganda amongst the working class: how much can we reduce the social necessary labour time for everyone if everyone engages in socially necessary work?

The empirical summary below outlines the material framework within which a regional insurrection and takeover of means of production would take place. It also points to some of the basic challenges the insurgent working class would have to encounter, things like: How much food is there to redistribute before the shit hits the fan and shortage-related carnage begins? What would be immediately lacking if our region is cut off from wider trade or an external energy supply? How many workers are employed in the essential industries and what is their composition? Where are the essential industries concentrated geographically? How big is the local middle class? What is the class composition of local farming? How does the army and police force reproduce itself materially? Around 64 million people live in the UK, 32 million of which are employed, of which less than half work in what we can call essential industries – hospitals, transport, energy, food, construction, water treatment and other activities necessary for survival. Although 13 to 16 million people in essential industries are a minority, we are a far cry away from a “post-industrial” society – in one of the most “deindustrialised” country of Europe, if not in the world!

Agriculture, although so fundamental for society, actually employs a small number of people, only around 500,000. Around 53% of food consumed in the UK is produced locally, the rest is imported. We would be able to survive, but for a healthy lifestyle (five a day!) we would need to recreate bonds with insurgent farm workers on the mainland, while waiting for new apple trees to grow – only 23% of fruit and vegetables are produced in the UK. We will be okay when it comes to meat though – if we ignore that a lot of fodder is imported from countries like Brazil. But for a country that is said to be so “food insecure” in comparison, it does not look too harsh in terms of global dependency – at least not as bad as Egypt, where 60% of the consumed wheat has to be imported. The EU as a whole has a food production to supply ratio of around 90%. What about the concentration of the agro-industry? First of all, it is interesting that of the

two million tonnes of wheat stocks 38% of stocks were held on-farm and 62% at ports, co-ops and merchants – meaning it is stored away from the individual owners. Not only is the storage of wheat stocks concentrated, the flour mills are also quite monopolised: In 2011, five million tons of wheat were milled into flour in only 56 flour mills in the UK. The two largest companies account for approximately 40% of UK flour production. We better get our hands on those quickly, otherwise no pesto pasta!

What about the composition of the farms? These are arranged on almost 235,000 holdings whose average cultivable area is around 54 hectares (130 acres). About 70% of farms are owner-occupied and the remainder are rented to tenant farmers. Some 41,000 farms (around 14% of the total) are larger than 100 hectares and account for over 65% of the agricultural area. While “cereal farms” tend to be more “family-run”, the meat industry is more corporate. Companies like Lower Farm produce over 1.3 million chicken a year. Despite the capitalist nature of agriculture in the UK (the peasant question is obviously not relevant anymore), we can see that we have to deal with 200,000 “owner- run” enterprises, depending on seasonal labour, situated outside of the urban areas – meaning that this won’t be a mere “workers’ takeover” but a more complex social dynamic.

Apart from agriculture we depend on food processing, where 2.2 million people in the UK are employed. Here the capitalist dynamic is blatant: of 2.2 million workers in the sector, only 0.5 million work in food manufacturing, whereas 1.6 million work in “non-residential catering”, meaning canteens and restaurants. While not all restaurant work is socially superfluous, it is nevertheless largely catering to individual consumption patterns – but then the food has to be cooked and prepared and the production process in a restaurant will not be much more or less productive than a collective kitchen for a domestic unit of 200 to 250 people. You can read more about all this in our reports on working in food production and distribution at Bakkavor and Tesco. For our insurrectionist, “blocking the economy” and looting friends: out of personal experiences of working in the retail warehouse chain and in the food processing industry we can say that the average supermarket stock of groceries in London lasts for about 24 to 48 hours. The main warehouses are located outside of the city margins and might hold a maximum of two to five days of stock. Supply for the

main food processing plants often comes from the agricultural hinterland (chicken farms, flour mills, potato farms) or from abroad (fresh fruits). The communication-fun might last three days max before you start getting hungry! Another essential industry is water supply and treatment and waste management and general cleaning, these sectors employ 166,500 and 145,000 and 480,000 people respectively. The waste management numbers are not specified, so we don't know exactly how much of this is related to big industry and how much to individual consumption. Similarly, it is not clear how many of the 400,000 cleaners are employed in domestic set-ups, but one source stated that currently six million people in the UK employ a domestic cleaner!

Apart from food and water we definitely need energy! In the UK around 680,000 workers are supplying the region with electricity. The sector is very diverse in terms of industrial concentrations. In the UK there are 10 nuclear power stations, 16 major coal power plants, 33 gas plants and 7 oil plants. The state will apply its military and ideological stronghold over these workers and they are, to state the obvious, also not easily replaced. The "strike-waves" in France in June 2016 showed the centrality of the sector. In the UK, as well, the number of refineries and larger oil and petrol depots has come down drastically: there are only six main oil refineries at the coast, connected by main pipelines, the United Kingdom Oil Pipeline (UKOP) – patrolled by helicopters. Attached to the energy sector is a large maintenance sector, which depends on global part supply – though UK's large arms industry will produce similar type of equipment.

Food and essential goods need to be moved around – around 1.4 million people work in the transport sector. Some of this work will be of much less relevance (airports and ground services account for 433,000 jobs and airlines for 200,000 jobs). Some means of production/transport are not so difficult to run (285,000 truck drivers), but a good chunk still depends on very specialised co-operation and knowledge, for example, in the railways, which employ around 200,000 – not including local trains and tube. Equally, port operations require sophisticated skills. The UK ports sector is estimated to directly employ around 118,200 people. Over 95% of imports and exports by volume and 75% by value still pass through sea ports. Port traffic is highly concentrated. There are 51 major ports, which handle 98%

of the overall traffic, the biggest ten ports handled 340 million out of 500 million tonnes. A fair share of cargo traffic is pretty useless, for example, nearly a quarter (23%) of international unitised (containers and other “single units”) traffic was by import and export of passenger cars. Goods not only need transport, but storage – so a substantial share of the work of 2.7 million retail and 1.8 million logistics workers will still be necessary, even if the check-out can be closed. Chill houses, central distribution centres and local storage will still be useful, with less specialised knowledge required by workers to run them. In 2019 the Royal Mail alone still employed 162,000 people, in addition there are tens of thousands more postal and parcel workers. It is difficult to find figures of private parcel delivery companies, couriers etc. DHL employs 18,000. Again, this is not about individualised letter delivery, but revolutionary logistics.

No revolution without communication: there are 1.2 million people employed in IT and communication. This is certainly a very unspecified figure. Other sources state that 280,000 people work in communications, from maintaining of communication hardware (internet cables) to admin work. Other sources say that there are 350,000 “software professionals”, working in the UK, but that obviously includes programmers of train signal systems as much as programmers for online brokering. The main challenge will be to establish an intranet-communication system between domestic units and workplaces within the short-term, which cannot be easily shut down by the internet empire.

Social care is a big one, too, employing over three million people. Although a lot of this work could be taken out of social isolation, back into bigger domestic units, the knowledge of the workers employed in the sector are essential and it will need time to transfer/socialise them. The 1.2 million workers in the National Health Service deal with one million patients every 36 hours! Buildings and infrastructure will have to be changed to satisfy new needs – million people work in construction. Again, the figures are unreliable, ranging from self-employed builders for kitchen extensions to engineering companies engaged in airport constructions. While the extent of our construction needs will be questionable during a revolutionary period, we can envisage that short- term conversion of former office space into social housing or conversion of space for the domestic units will

engage a significant number of skilled workers. In addition, there are over three million people working in manufacturing. This includes all types of socially unnecessary labour, first of all the arms industry or passenger car manufacturing. Unfortunately, it is often this type of industry that has the highest levels of productive collective knowledge and highest standards of technology, while, for example, food processing, harvest work, garment industry etc. is characterised by cruel labour intensity. A technology and knowledge transfer can be started, also as a political measure to show that “communism” is to come and that we can expect much less work once we get through the upheaval. Other manufacturing will be of more immediate necessity, from packaging material, machine tool production for spare parts, construction material, pharmaceuticals etc. Perhaps less relevant is print media, which employs around 167,000 people; around 22,000 in radio; around 30,000 in television; and around 70,000 in the film industry.

We didn't include the 5.1 million people employed in the public sector in the total figure for essential industry, though amongst local government employees there are certainly workers with important social knowledge, for example, the 27,000 librarians or 45,000 fire fighters. Also, not all of the knowledge taught by 1.5 million people employed in public education is mere ruling-class ideology, a lot of it might turn out to be useful.

Last, but not least we will have to deal with the fact that 180,000 people are employed by the army. We haven't had much time (and sources) to look deeper into the composition of the army: what are the main class divisions within the armed forces and how does the apparatus reproduce itself materially? At this point we can only provide two snapshots:

Firstly, while nearly half of all officers were educated in private schools (only 10% of the total population is educated in elite schools), in 2009 of the 14,000 newly recruited soldiers 31% were under 18, which indicates that they come from working class conditions. The army largely recruits from “disadvantaged schools”. Secondly, the army apparatus is largely maintained by “private companies”, meaning by workers who haven't got the conditions and job security like public sector employees. Companies like Sodexo or ESS (Compass) organise catering, retail and “leisure activities” for army personnel, employing between 6,000 and 9,000 staff.

Amey/Carillion organises the maintenance of 280 army bases and 49,000 army flats.

How does the UK region differ from and relate to the wider global situation, referring back to the question of uneven development?

It would be necessary to analyse similar empirical material for other regions of the globe, but it is fairly clear that within the UK/Western European region, an insurrection would not face problems as challenging as in many other regions of the globe, like those that have an extended rural hinterland with only fragile ties to industrial or urban centres; or more desperate poverty levels on a mass scale which leaves less scope and time between appropriation of resources and takeover of means of production. We don't have warlord or mafia structures that are more integrated in the lives and reproduction of the impoverished segments of the working class, nor do we have significant numbers of medium peasantry or a small trader class that are less likely to identify with a working class revolution. Neither do we lack essential energy resources. At the same time, it is pretty clear that no insurrection in the UK region would take place if the entire globe wasn't in turmoil. In this sense the basic connection between regional and worldwide revolution is obvious. At this point we can only envisage some general connections.

Firstly, through the connections of migrants. Struggles around the globe are taking place in more and more similar industrial and social situations – meaning that the major influence of the working class' global character will be through exchange of experience and inspirations, in particular through the channels of labour migration. Migrant workers in the UK are in touch with their regions of origin and will be able to communicate experiences, in particular in the major cities. We have seen the influence of the so-called Arab Spring on migrant workers in the logistics sector in Italy or the impact of struggles in South America on the class confidence of Hispanic workers in the US. These are only glimpses of how the class will be able to communicate and learn from their global struggles.

Secondly, connections need to be made with emerging workers' organisations around the globe to re-establish supply-chains that may be

broken during the upheaval. From a regional point of view, the lack of some basic goods in case of isolation is apparent, in particular when it comes to food supply, but probably also for certain raw materials such as for electronics manufacturing. Here the workers in the essential industries will have to restructure their supply-chains “politically”, analysing the global struggles and emerging workers’ organisations around the globe, which could help re-establish supply. Again, migrant workers will play a significant role in assessing the situation and establishing direct links. The latter point is not a one-way street: the UK and large parts of Western Europe are said to be “de-industrialised”, but as capitalist centres they still hold significant manufacturing capacities compared to many regions in the Global South. The transfer of production capacities will be part of the expansion of the uprising: support of workers’ struggles and organisations in other regions through supply with excess means of production, which in turn means relying on support of global transport workers.

Chapter 15: Organisation and advanced struggles

This perspective on revolution tomorrow does not leave us untouched today. It asks for certain political positions and organisational efforts in the here and now. We can understand anyone who now raises doubts: “But how does this imaginary insurrection relate to the current situation in any way?! Will you go around the streets, stopping random people, telling them where the next strategic power plant, army barracks or flour mill is located?!” We agree, at the current stage, this text will mainly – hopefully! – contribute to a discussion within the milieu about what a revolutionary moment might look like, or rather, what general material framework for a social transformation we are confronted with. We think that the basic propositions sketched out in this text inform our political focus today: do we perceive “workers” or “work” as yet another identity category? Can participation in parliamentary politics be a gradual step towards transformation or does it potentially distract workers from the real challenges they are facing? Is there a role for political workers’ organisations, now and in the process of revolution, and if so, what does it consist of? During the last six years in west London we have tried to prefigure some of the following tasks of a revolutionary organisation on a modest scale.

Historical clarity

We have to reflect on previous moments of insurrection, from the general strike in Seattle in 1919, to the Spanish Civil War in 1936, to Chile and Portugal in the mid-1970s, to Oaxaca in 2006 to Hong Kong in 2019. We have to understand how workers’ independent struggle relates to institutions such as parliamentary parties and trade unions. We have to understand the historical material roots of class divisions such as women’s oppression and racism. In the end any organisation will depend on comrades who derive their commitment from both a sense of historical purpose and critical thinking.

Understanding of current class composition

We need more precise analyses of, amongst many other things, the current division and hierarchy of intellectual and manual labour in the essential industries (“what does the common worker know?”), as well as analyses of actual forms of global supply-chains, agro-industry etc., taking into account the question of potential working class control.

Roots amongst the workers in the essential industries, the “engineering sector” and amongst the “poor”

We have to build bridges between the industrial cores and the urban poor, for example, the Revolutionary Black Workers in the US or the autonomous workers’ assemblies in Porto Maghera in Italy in the late 1960s/early 1970s managed to have roots in the poor areas (anti-police violence, racist school policies, sexual health), amongst students, within the major car and chemical factories, in the “community” (hospitals, housing) – and tried to relate these to experiences of “Third World” migrants in their area (“Arabs in Detroit”). We tried to build this bridge by having one foot in the essential food industry and the other in the solidarity network.

Creating networks of struggle-experienced workers

While supporting strikes and struggles actively we should also look out for workers who have developed the desire and capacity to engage in political activities beyond the individual conflict – not as recruiting material, but as rooted comrades. Together we could already experiment with hinting at the necessity of a social takeover of the means of production in a more concrete way during day-to-day struggles.

Critical engagement with alternative forms of production and science

We have to keep up-to-date with other forms of “co-operative” efforts or experiences of self-management from “workers’ control” to “urban gardening” to “transition towns” to “alternative medicine gatherings” to “critique of science” and encourage those involved to engage with the wider class struggle. We need to combine the knowledge of economic self-activity with the knowledge of the advanced industries. A workers’ organisation would have to attract the alienated brothers and sisters of the science sector.

Understanding the ebbs and flows of class struggle

Class struggle is not a gradual process, we have to avoid the traps of step-by-step syndicalism. At the same time, we have to understand the role of a revolutionary organisation when revolution retreats. For example, after the defeat of the international revolutionary upheaval in 1923 the revolutionary movement was split down the middle. One block ignored the times and called for minoritarian insurrections, which were defeated. The other block misunderstood what working class politics in a defensive phase means. They encouraged engagement in the mainstream parliamentary parties and alliances with progressive parts of the middle classes. At this point a revolutionary organisation has to understand the need for an organised retreat – not into middle class politics, but into a combination of strengthening the economic self-defence of the class, theoretical reflections and self-education.

Developing a strategy of insurrection

Any revolutionary organisation worth its name would have to develop within a network of workers – formed through various cycles of struggles and their common reflection – a clear program for the advanced moment of uprising: what are the central facilities? How to coordinate a “populist” process of appropriation? How to address working class segments within the army? This has to be formulated in realistic terms, convincing more through knowledge of industrial organisation and concrete contacts across sectors, rather than through rousing political statements. An organisation of workers will also have to play a role in putting forward a “class perspective” against the tendency of “workers’ control” after takeover of individual companies. The workforce of bigger industries might try to use their position for their own privilege; experienced workers militias might use their collective strength against a more common interest. An organisation of workers should be prepared to undermine possible regionalism (of naturally richer regions, more fertile soil, nicer beaches etc.)

Proposing working class internationalism as a material force

In the moment of uprising a workers' organisation should encourage the use of access machinery/production and patents/company-specific knowledge for support of workers struggle "abroad". This might mean encouraging extra labour above the locally required levels if necessary. It would mean defending this position against "localist" tendencies within the working class. This internationalist perspective cannot be enforced through a political program or as an armed force (workers' state), but through being rooted amongst and winning over of workers in the global supply-chains and through facilitating direct exchange – pointing out the global interdependence.

What are the advanced sectors of class struggle at the moment?

The points on organisation above seem abstract once they are detached from the real struggles. Strategy only makes sense once discussed in relation to real struggles. We don't deny the importance of general protest movements like the Yellow Vests in France or recent revolts in Chile, Hong Kong and other regions. These are important laboratories and we should try to understand their deeper tendencies underneath the eruptive moments. What we want to do here is to briefly highlight some specific struggles which we think have, or had, the potential to undermine those significant structural divisions within the class which we mentioned above, for example, manual and intellectual labour or different stages of development. We do this to exemplify what we mean by strategic focus. The struggles not only managed to question some of the structural changes imposed during the attacks in the 1980s and 1990s, but they also managed to use the development of capital, for example, in terms of technology and expansion of the social scope of labour, in their favour. These are the actual movements that could lead to a reunification, we should focus our organisational practice on them, rather than on the creation of well-meaning common demands and policies.

Migrant logistics workers' strikes in Italy

The strategic importance of these recent struggles is obvious. The workers managed to transfer the spirit of the "Arab Spring" into a local working class offensive. Their struggle took place in the central logistical nervous

system and spread from there. Their strikes question the popular myth of “migrants as the reason for the downward spiral of local wages”. The point where logistics meet production is a crucial focus.

US prison strikes, protests against police violence and fast-food/minimum wage mobilisations

These struggles not only happened in a common time frame. They happened at the heart of the regime’s management of industrial under-employment. Strikes in prisons and protests against police violence are desperate and involve direct confrontation with state power. The experiences made and the courage gained in these confrontations were transferred to various disputes in the low-wage sector. This sector is vast and could potentially create the economic clout that workers of similar backgrounds who deal with anti-poor policing are lacking vis-a-vis the state.

Strikes in the automobile supply-chain in Mexico and GM strikes in the US

These strikes, although not consciously coordinated, not only took place across what is probably the most significant global wage barrier – the wall between Mexico and the US – but they threatened this barrier. The wildcat strikes in the “Mexican” automobile industry in Matamoros in January 2019, largely led by female workers, questioned the relocation strategy of global capital. They will have helped to encourage GM workers in the US to go on strike for the first time in ages a few months later. The walkouts targeted the two-tier wage system that was introduced with the help of the UAW union.

Chicago teachers strikes and the local working class

We mention this rank and file led strike as it managed to raise the political issue of austerity and how austerity impacts on the local working class. The teachers not only struck for themselves, but were motivated by the daily contact with kids from the local “working poor”. Strikes that manage to become a focal point for wider local working class issues are significant.

Struggles in outsourced segments of the public sector in the UK

Under New Labour in particular, hundreds of “service contracts” were outsourced from the public sector and given to large private enterprises, such as Serco, ISS, Capita. Working conditions and wages deteriorated. It took workers a few years to digest this attack, but since 2016/17 we’ve seen a series of strikes in these outsourced companies, led in particularly by female workers. Many of the strikes highlight the wider social impact of austerity, for example, when it comes to care work. These strikes happened during the end phase of a public sector wage freeze, which the mainstream unions were not able or willing to question. In this sense the struggles had a chance to function as sparks within the wider public sector workforce. Many of the strikes were located in or around university campuses, which created organic bonds between workers and students.

Tech-workers’ “discomfort”

We have seen various small and largely symbolic collective protests of workers in the software industry, mainly about the social impact of their work, for example, the use of modern internet technology for military or surveillance purposes (Google), against the climate impact of the company (Amazon), but also about their own conditions, for example, the wage gap between men and women and sexual harassment. In June 2019, workers at the online furnishings retailer Wayfair in the US walked off the job to oppose the company’s contracts with detention centres for immigrants. This is a start, although there is still a large gap between these murmurs and a conscious link between, for example, Silicon Valley research-and-development workers and Foxconn manual workers in China.

Yellow Vests and local strikes

The Yellow Vest movement is, to a certain degree, an expression of the powerlessness that workers feel at their workplace. The Yellow Vest blockade of an Amazon depot in support of Amazon drivers or the solidarity actions for strikes of cleaners in Marseille were small, but important examples of a re-politicisation of the question of power at work. We see this as a continuation of positive tendencies during the square

occupations in 2011 in Barcelona, where the working class sphere created was used to support striking nurses and to build anti-eviction networks. This is the working class line, which is initially not always neatly distinguished from its degeneration into electoral politics.

Strikes at Amazon and Deliveroo

Workers here are using modern networks, and in the case of Amazon, their concentrated power, to find new grounds of struggle. On one side, it seems fairly easy to spread organisational links across borders, but on the other side it is difficult to gather a critical mass of workers big enough to interrupt the network-based system of work effectively.

Nodal points for a wider class movement: Tapeh sugar factory in Iran, Mahalla textile factory in Egypt, Zanon ceramics factory in Argentina

These are older examples, but they are important to mention. These workers in large local enterprises didn't use the power of their own numbers just for themselves. They fought for their own survival against closures, job cuts or for outstanding wages, but they also took on the responsibility to turn their struggle into a coordinating focal point for the wider class movement, in particular the local unemployed.

ILVA steel works struggle, Taranto

This is a minoritarian example of workers and local population finding common grounds to struggle against the environmentally damaging impact of their workplace. Workers and the local population demanded the closure and refurbishment of the plant, including things like installing modern filters, and paying wages for workers in the meantime. It is one of the few examples where, at least initially, workers felt strong enough to question the death trap "jobs vs. health", imposed by the bosses. This can be an inspiration for future links, between urban street blockades against pollution and professional drivers for example.

Proposals: Let's build an organisation

Having seen efforts of UK comrades in recent years to build new organisations we know the pitfalls. A lot of time and energy is used

discussing programs, internal structures and outward appearances.

We therefore appreciate the “base building” tendency in the US. It is an acknowledgement of the fact that the revolutionary left has to get re-rooted in the class. At the same time, the Maoist influence and student origin of the debate results in treating “the class” pretty much as a mass of poor people, as a “base” that needs support through food kitchens or tenants’ unions. There is nothing wrong with supporting impoverished sections of the class like that, but this alone will not help create revolutionary class power. We have to primarily relate to the class as a collective force whose labour and creativity reproduces the system and that is therefore able to discover its power to transform society. Our task is to foster this process of discovery and discuss the process of transformation. This is the second blank spot of the current debate around “base building”, as the question, “a base for what?” remains largely unanswered. So far, the debate limits itself to seeing “a base” as the necessity for “dual power”, without a clearer definition of the political content and trajectory of that power. Perhaps this is not a shortcoming, but a tactical decision to enable a milieu with various political goals to work together. In the medium-term though it will lead to either “base building” reducing itself to grassroots charitable work or, and this might be due to the frustration of the depoliticised nature of “base building”, to building an electoral base for municipal or wider parliamentary politics.

We want to build an organisation based on the theoretical and practical positions laid out above. To that end, here are our proposed first steps:

1. If there are at least two of you in the same town, make a commitment to a six-month or year-long plan.
2. Check out the surrounding areas to find the biggest workplaces or clusters where larger numbers of workers live and work. These workplaces should be in some sense “strategic”, meaning they represent a wider condition for working class people in the area, or have links to other local, national or international workplaces. A question to ask would be: if things kicked off here, what would the implications be for other people in the area, and the wider economy?
3. A local group should do some activity in and around at least one strategical workplace, whether that means getting a job there yourself or

being a regular presence there with some printed material. For example, if there is an Amazon warehouse near you, make some leaflets about what Amazon workers are doing in Poznan in Poland, all the information is online and we can help too.

4. You may not know anything about that workplace at first, but with a regular presence you may be able to talk to workers and find out what their main issues are. This becomes the basis for further leaflets and a suggestion to meet up outside work hours. Remember to leave contact details on the leaflets and get a cheap phone to use for the purpose.

5. Setting up a solidarity network in strategic proximity to precarious workplaces or housing estates can facilitate further contacts. We have posters and small leaflets already designed that we can send you. You just need to find free and convenient places for workers to drop by where you won't get much hassle, for example, McDonald's, a supermarket cafe, a pub.

6. It would be good to publish a local workers' newspaper or regular newsletter to share your experiences, with collectively written editorials and articles.

Without this minimum of anchorage, the discussion about organisation will make little sense. We can support each other in the process. Once you've got two, three, four comrades together to start the group, we can centralise the production of certain material, such as posters or leaflets. We can share and reflect on experiences together. We will see this as an open experiment and should have the confidence to both propagate and document these steps within the wider milieu. Part of this rooting process is a process of self-education, consisting of reading groups and discussion meetings. The ultimate aim would be to build workers' assemblies, bringing together militant workers from across a number of different workplaces and areas who share basic ideas of self- emancipation. The aim is to be able to take coordinated action.

The second focus is on the research and debate of the wider class struggle around us. Each local group should be willing to write up regular reports about their own activity, but also about the activity of the local political class, working class and the wider milieu. We propose meetings to discuss what the main regional developments are that we want to

understand. We could split up the necessary wider research work, such as charting technological developments, the process of economic crisis or changes in state policies. This would also involve the willingness to visit strikes and struggles in the region to get a first-hand impression of the situation and establish contacts. Our research should be closely tied to the necessities of the local practice and the requirements of struggles, but also take on the responsibility of providing regional reports for the international debate. To give this effort a focus we propose to publish a magazine that documents both the local rooting efforts and the debate about the general state of class struggle in the region. As one of the results of this work we hope to be able to establish an annual conference for “independent workers’ struggle”, where we can discuss experiences outside of the influence of the union apparatus and party machines.

We don’t expect this to happen overnight. But the rooting process is the necessary first step to develop a grassroots, independent, working class organisation. Only once insights and understanding of the current class struggles come together with actual numbers of rooted comrades involved in the organisation can we talk about wider strategical interventions – from direct solidarity actions to support locally isolated strikes, to producing publications that make practical proposals to ongoing movements. Yes, it’s ambitious. But with a clear set of proposals and aims, at least in the short to medium-term, we’ve got a good basis to get cracking.

A critical self-reflection after six years

At the end of our six years, and due to changes outside our control, some of us will be leaving our base of operations in Greenford HQ for pastures new. A few comrades will continue with the solidarity network. We would have stayed if we could, especially after all the hard work we’ve ploughed into this effort: we came with nothing and now we have individual contacts in dozens of workplaces; we have a network of people locally who we’ve built up friendships with; we found some fellow travellers who help and support us when they can; we’ve been involved in local campaigns against cuts and closures; we still work with people we have met through the solidarity network and we have won around £25,000 back for workers; we’ve pushed things as far as we could in our current workplaces, both within the unions and without. While we didn’t have major “organising successes”, we

managed to root ourselves. We know the area, we have the contacts, we are prepared for the things to come. The book is a good opportunity to take a small break, recharge our batteries, take stock and think about next steps.

Next year, we hope to focus more on building an organisation and providing more intensive support to other groups who want to do something similar to us and get rooted in a working class area. Given the loftiness of large parts of the so-called revolutionary left, their distance from working class lives, their focus on formal structures, symbols or dried-out programmes around which to gather, we think we need such an organisation now, more than ever! Up until now though, we've shied away from focusing on trying to build a more formal type of organisation. Doing our local stuff took up 80% of our time and energies anyway. But I guess we also thought that the process of building an organisation would happen more naturally, arising out of our own efforts. We hoped that by creating a small exemplary cell of an organisation we could inspire copycats and then fuse the organisation organically. This did not happen and we have to ask ourselves why.

We are not voluntaristic. The general level of class struggle is low, so to build a revolutionary organisation that propagates, "that the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves", has got as much mass appeal as tasty lamb shish-kebabs at a party of vegans. The younger generation slipped from the anti-student-fee movement straight into the arms of Labour. The UK left is traditionally polarised between Trotskyism and "organised anarchism" – leaving little space for small flowers like Marx-inspired believers in working class political autonomy. Due to the town's general character the left in London is particularly transient and "professional" – many people come here to study or for career reasons. We met lots of good people, but us living far out from the centre also didn't help create strong enough bonds. It also seems that "neoliberalism" has undermined the ability and will to take on collective commitments beyond "concrete projects".

It was clear that we needed more people to join us. To that end, we tried various things to reach out to people. Apart from publishing reports about what we were doing in west London and writing programmatic statements and articles about various political issues, we organised film screenings,

reading groups and collective Skype meetings with comrades from the US in central London. These meetings tended to attract the same dozen or so comrades. We took part in debates within the national structure of the IWW and prepared workshops at national gatherings, such as the anarchist bookfair or Plan C's annual festival. People tend to appreciate what we have to say, but it doesn't seem to have major results in the sense of creating an exchange about strategic and day-to-day activities in the local class. In 2015 we organised our own tour of discussion meetings in various towns, with the aim of inviting people to a "national" gathering about the current crisis and class struggle in the UK. The meetings were interesting, but didn't lead to a swelling of our ranks.

We find ourselves in a situation where we get a lot of positive feedback from comrades around the globe – a comrade literally cycled from India to Greenford in order to be with us – but were not able to create a stable collective of at least ten comrades. The comrades we've worked most closely with had to go back to Poland and Spain. We have had various (international) visitors who came to join our work in west London. They are partly politically motivated, partly they needed a job. We could see that being "politically motivated" tended to dissipate after a certain time: people were beaten by the daily grind and organisational practice in a culturally bleak working class suburb, especially if they were single – and left again. Nowadays our small network mainly consists of local folks who have few other opportunities other than staying where they are. We share a general anger towards bosses and the state, but most of our worker-comrades don't have much of a wider political perspective or background. We very haphazardly organise "educational" meetings, for example watching documentaries or discussing the "system series" in our newspaper, but we don't have a proper "schooling system" in place. Do we need it? We hope "self-education" just happens organically, but maybe we need to be more didactic? We ourselves know through experience that having a historical view of what this system is can be very liberating for working class people – and is often a necessary precondition to remain hopeful and active. For the time being though we rely on a small group of very committed comrades, a friendly network of people who drift in and out, and an

expanding group of local working class friends who have little political background, but enough experiences and will to question the status quo.

If we cannot make inroads or galvanise things within the so-called “political milieu”, what about the rank and file of the trade unions? Some of us took part in the Labornotes conference in the US, where you find the usual political suspects and union officials, but where you also find many politicised worker militants who actually share and debate experiences. In the UK the closest thing to Labornotes would be the National Shop Stewards Network. We went to their annual national meeting twice, but it was disappointing. Rather than a meeting of shop stewards it is a meeting dominated by the Socialist Party, with their usual campaign-style politics. We tried to meet other workers employed in logistics in order to talk about concrete issues, but there was no space for this. The focus was on the latest “young workers minimum wage” campaign and one call after the other to petition the TUC to support a one-day general strike.

So we kept on focusing on our local work and direct (international) relationships with comrades, for example at Amazon in Poznan, friends in Germany, folks in Spain, France, Greece, Brazil and the US. We are involved in organising an annual internationalist summer camp. We need some patience and try to encourage others by being a practical example and having a clear political line. We see the appeal of formal structures, the appeal to join an organisation and be part of something bigger. We don't discard this, at the same time we see that currently the formal structures of many organisations (and we might include the IWW) also contribute to a general passiveness or at least they can be a cover for lack of actual organisational activities. We have seen with newer organisations like Plan C that it takes a huge amount of time and energy to build an organisation on a “pluralistic basis” that under the pressure of rapidly changing times (Corbyn-mania, Brexit, identity politics) threatens to disintegrate or get paralysed quickly due to inner incoherence and therefore, a lack of practical direction. Other new efforts like Unity and Struggle in the US seem to spend most of their energy on “internal debate and clarification”, while there doesn't seem to be a common practical strategy.

So after six years, the question arises whether we have to “formalise” the process of organisation building. What would that mean? To say clearly

that we are an organisation with a political platform and want others to join and build chapters in their area. To lay down that this is not about “joining” but about establishing roots within the class on similar lines (solidarity network, strategic workplace groups, newspapers). To develop a clear structure of “self-education” with worker-comrades who are interested in joining. To formulate expectations clearly, instead of hoping that participation will somehow happen ad hoc and organically. This sounds traditional and tedious and so far we have been reluctant to push it – maybe also because we realise that it’s a pretty big commitment for people to undertake. But then once we do things collectively and support each other at work and beyond, learn new things together and rock the boat – what better way to live? Without the alienation of a boring white-collar job with no creative prospects, no way to fuse your political vision with your daily existence? People are worried about “not having enough money” – but with the cheaper rent we pay on the outskirts and cheap food we get from our workplaces, we usually have more money than our comrades in central London. It can sometimes be frustrating and depressing when you’re on the front line of the class war, but on the whole, it’s exhilarating and purposeful and it gives us the means to live how we want.

We hope that this book, at this juncture, can be a good jumping off point to start having these kinds of deeper discussions about reorienting ourselves. The time is ripe to capitalise on peoples’ sense of inadequacy of the left’s current strategies, or lack thereof. We finish up by a great quote from Noel Ignatiev, one of the Sojourner Truth Organisation’s founding members who died at the end of 2019. “Politics,” Noel would often say, “is not arguing with people you disagree with, but finding people you agree with, getting together, and doing things.”

On that note, we look forward to hearing from you!
angryworkersworld@gmail.com

Appendix: West London workers' history

The following overview of class history in west London is not primarily meant to satisfy geeky interest in local events. It is supposed to exemplify a method: by looking at the relation between changing material conditions, the re-composition of the working class and the shifts in its political representation, we can discover potentials and limits of political action. It can show us, for example, that Labour in government had to act according to the structural constraints determined by crisis and class struggle. Based on this, they implemented migration and employment policies that re-divided the class and undermined shop floor militancy.

Early years

Apart from rural industries and agriculture, the first developmental leap was made with the opening of the Great Western Railway in the late nineteenth century, of which Southall became a major shunting and maintenance hub. Connected to the railways were the first major factories, the Maypole Margarine Factory, the largest of its kind in Europe, and AEC which made London buses and employed around 5,000 workers.

The wider area around Ealing was primarily middle class, people who wanted to get away from London's inner-city plebs. Up until today this mixture of fairly well-off people on the eastern side of the borough and poor in the western parts is nasty. In many ways work in the suburbs was connected to middle class consumption and businesses such as hotels in the centre. In 1911 there were over 200 laundries in Ealing employing 3,000 women.

Women's employment in other industries increased with the war effort. The gramophone factory HMV in Hayes obtained ammunition orders from the government and employed thousands of local women. Although 600,000 women in the UK lost their job again after 1918, the number of women workers overall increased considerably. In electrical engineering the

number of women employed rose from 69,000 in 1931 to 204,000 in 1951 – though over three quarters of them were unmarried.

Between the wars

Light manufacturing industries grew after World War I. In Park Royal alone the number of factories grew from 38 to 250 in the two decades between 1919 and 1939. Some new industries, such as motor manufacturing were located there, but also traditional ones, like food production. In peacetime, the Guinness brewery was the largest factory, benefitting from the close proximity of rail, arterial roads and canal facilities. These new factories employed semi-skilled labour, most workers were recruited from outside London. Most factories were not unionised and workers were laid off frequently during downturns. At EMI record factory in Hayes, only a small proportion of tool-makers and electricians from a total of 12,000 workers had been members of a union. This did not begin to change until a “Stay in Strike” in 1935.

“Live in Ruislip - the air is like wine, it is less than half an hour on the Piccadilly line.”

During the same decades London became suburbanised. In the years 1921- 1935 the population of inner London (the London county area) fell by 339,000, but outer London grew by 1,278,000. West London areas like Ruislip grew from 16,000 to 47,000 between 1930 and 1939. Many of the new suburban inhabitants were working class people from poorer parts of the UK. In Wales, unemployment in the 1910s had been around 3%, its average between 1919 and 1936 was 30%. Migration became the main coping mechanism. 430,000 Welsh people moved to London between 1921 and 1941. In west London slogans like “Welsh go home” were painted on walls – in the following decades “Welsh” would only have to be replaced by “Irish”, “Black”, “Asians” and “Poles”. Many of the young workers from Wales who came to London had never been miners and they had never been members of a trade union. They had left south Wales after the defeat of the 1926 General Strike, after which the membership of the Miners’ Federation of Great Britain fell dramatically. Still, they will have learnt their bit during these years.

Most workers were private tenants in overcrowded terraces. This is still the case today. Organising “as tenants” is more difficult in a situation where

you don't live on big estates, but in a row of small houses, all with different landlords. Still, a higher skilled worker in the 1920s could buy a house with the equivalent of two years wages. These workers became the backbone of the rapidly growing Labour Party, in particular in Greenford and Northolt, which established various social clubs, reading groups and dance festivities. During the 1926 General Strike around 50,000 people gathered on Ealing Common, to listen to Party speakers. Not only the Party tried to organise workers' lives, they competed with the American-style corporate paternalism of companies like Hoover, which offered similar activities and corporate housing schemes.

The Golden Years didn't last long and by the end of the 1920s unemployment became a major problem. In Ealing over 2,000 unemployed gathered to demand jobs. The National Unemployed Workers Movement (NUWM) organised raids on factories where excessive overtime was being worked. One of the factories to be raided was the AEC factory in Southall. The Labour Party, by then running the council in Southall, tried to create jobs schemes for the extensions of the Piccadilly tube line and the A40 motorway. The Labour Party could do little to change the structural causes of unemployment, so instead Labour tried to manage it in favour of their voters and thereby deepened certain divisions: Acton Labour Councillors supported Acton Council's plan to dismiss married women public employees in 1934 (if their husbands were on good wages). Some members of the Labour Party thought that the right-wing turn of the party did not go far enough and created their own "labour party": Ealing Labour Party member Oswald Mosley had been the Labour Club president in Hanwell in 1926 and later on became the founder of British fascism. In 1933 the British Union of Fascists intervened in the Communist Party-led strike at the Firestone tyre factory in west London.

The sell-out of the Labour Party after the general strike in 1926 had also increased the membership of the Communist Party. The Young Communist League was active in Southall and organised various antifascist/popular front actions during the 1930s. An older activist, "recalls taking action against the Blackshirts in Southall. The idea was to surround them completely with sellers of left-wing newspapers so that they could not escape."

West London was to become a major centre for the UK aircraft engineering industry, particularly with rearmament after 1938. By the end of World War II, Napier's was employing over 20,000 and it was to become a trade union and Communist Party stronghold. The party could build on militants who had already participated in the shop stewards movement after World War I. Napier's became known as the "Red Putilov" with a reported 200 Communist Party members and six factory groups by 1945. The war effort had not only translated into jobs, but also into further political integration of the trade unions into the state. Former General Secretary of the Transport and General Workers Union, Ernest Bevin was Minister for Labour in the wartime coalition and had invited the trade unions into government.

The post-war years

In the 1950s west London had one of the biggest concentrations of manufacturing industry in Britain: double-decker buses were built at AEC chassis works in Southall and in Park Royal, Rolls Royce parts were manufactured at Mulliner's in Chiswick, alternators and dynamos at CAV in Acton. In 1958 there were 20 airframe companies and six aero-engine firms based in, and around, Park Royal. The aircraft industry was dominated by Lucas Aerospace. One new important employer opened in 1946 with initially 1,000 employees. This was Heathrow, London's first airport. By 1958 it was employing 26,000 workers. The post-war years were also the heyday of the Communist Party. In west London the CP had 34 factory branches with 700 members working in 230 different factories in 1950/51.

Between 1951 and 1961 around 500,000 people from Ireland arrived in the UK, representing the biggest group of migrants at the time. In west London they would form around 10% of the working class population. Their impoverishment was directly linked to British economic policies after Irish independence and they were used as political pawns during the dispute about the future of Northern Ireland. Irish migrants in west London writing to the Irish Times claimed that the area was festooned with NINA (No Irish Need Apply) signs in windows, making it very difficult to find accommodation. Unlike the Welsh, Irish workers, mainly from the south of Ireland, had not come from an area with strong labour movement traditions. Coming from rural backgrounds, many had never seen a factory before. A

small number of workers arrived from Punjab, although most workers from South Asia would arrive in the 1960s. Southall in west London would become one of the main centres of the Punjabi diaspora.

In many industries in west London workers were paid by result (piecework), a system which offered shop stewards and shop floor workers the chance to bargain under the threat of sudden strikes. There was a ten-year national “strike wave” in Britain from 1952 to 1962, most strikes were unofficial. The union hierarchy and the Labour Party dealt with this militancy by first expelling “communists” from union positions in the 1950s – based on the Transport and General Workers’ Union (T&G) ban voted for in 1949 – and by promoting more centralised collective bargaining in the 1960s. The Donovan Royal Commission, set up by the Labour government in 1965 reported that the “informal” system of local bargaining should be regulated as this would reduce unofficial or “lightning” strikes. The Labour government of the late 1970s would further centralise collective bargaining and take the right to strike away from the shop floor.

The peak of working class militancy in the 1960s and 1970s

Industries continued to grow during the 1960s. In Park Royal for example, industrial employment increased from 14,000 in 1930 to around 45,000 in the late 1960s. The automobile boom of the 1960s was dependent on many smaller supplier factories situated in areas like Park Royal or in Brentford. In one of these factories, some young working class kids had had enough of the daily grind and followed the dream of their generation: fuck work, long live rock and roll! They met up with Ealing art students, formed “The Who” and had their first gig with Keith Moon in Greenford up the road.

While the official institutions of the labour movement mainly focused on the higher skilled workers within the engineering industry, unrest fermented in the rapidly developing mass industries. These were characterised by “unskilled work” and the employment of migrant and female workers. A company like United Biscuits required a local workforce with women in low-paid packaging jobs and men as semi-skilled machine-minders. Some 80% of workers at its Harlesden factory were migrants from Commonwealth countries.

After the Second World War, England had to adjust general migration from the former colonies to the requirements of the labour market. The British state forged agreements with the new post-colonial governments in Jamaica, Barbados and Trinidad, offering credits to young workers for the journey to Britain once they had signed up to work on construction of the underground railways or the postal services. In contrast, most of the migration from the subcontinent (India, Pakistan, Nepal) was initially based on more general relationships, such as the service of family members in the British Army. Workers from the subcontinent mainly found employment in the private sector light and heavy industries. According to the Home Office, estimate net migration from the Commonwealth from January 1955 to June 1962 was about 472,000. The new migrant workers went where they could find jobs: 71% of Caribbean and Asian immigrant workers were located in just four major urban areas, compared with 28% of all economically active persons. During the 1960s labour migration from Europe became insignificant, as wages in the UK declined: “as a percentage of EEC earnings, earnings in the UK fell from 160% in 1960 to around 100% in 1972, when they were substantially below those in Germany.” Most of the workers coming from Punjab to Southall came from a small peasant background. They came mainly from two districts – Hoshiapur and Jalandhar – where a handful of large agents organised the transfer to the UK. The transfer cost around 4,000 Indian rupees at the time, an acre of land in Punjab sold for around 6,000.

The new migrant workers fought back early on. One example was the strike at Woolf’s rubber factory in Southall. In the 1930s Woolf had employed workers from Wales. After the war, thanks to old army connections, the owner started recruiting mainly workers from Punjab. These workers formed 90% of the workforce in 1962 at the time of the dispute. The factory produced rubber parts for the car industry. Workers initially went on a wildcat strike, later on around 450 workers at Woolf’s joined the T&G trade union and in 1964 the union was recognised. Management sought to sow divisions within the Asian workforce, by trying to bring in replacement workers of Pakistani origin from Bradford, to take the place of local Sikhs and Hindus. This didn’t work out. There were several unofficial walkouts during the early 1965, during which workers

demanded higher wages and less overtime. The union officials tried to get workers back to work, promising future negotiations. The last strike broke out after the victimisation of a shop steward, it lasted six weeks. Initially the T&G gave formal support, but refused to hand out strike pay, claiming that workers hadn't paid their membership fees. The T&G also made no effort to call T&G members at Ford or Vauxhall to boycott the Woolf Rubber products – which was common practice during industrial disputes at the time. A return to work was negotiated in January by the Ministry of Labour, together with the Joint Industrial Council for the Rubber Industry. 100 workers did not return. The best jobs were kept by scabs. Woolfs closed in 1967. Around that time a young local lad from Hounslow, Farrokh Bulsara, got a job as a baggage handler at Heathrow airport. The job sucked and Farrokh decided to become Freddy and to sing in a band called “Queen”.

Another strike happened at Rockware Glass in Greenford in 1962, resulting in 165 workers being sacked. It was led by Vishnu Dutt Sharma, who was later to become President of the Southall Indian Workers' Association (IWA). He is a good example of the fact that many migrant workers contribute with previous experiences to local class struggle:

“Born in the Punjab in 1921, Vishnu Sharma was active in the peasant movement and later in trade unions, becoming Assistant General Secretary of the Punjab Provincial TUC at a time of the British Raj. Because of his militancy, he was arrested six times and imprisoned for a total of three-and-a-half years. He was forced to stay in his village for 21 months and visit the police at 11am every Sunday. Sharma joined the Communist Party of India in 1937. He left for Britain in 1957, speaking no English and with just three pounds in his pocket. He immediately joined the British Communist Party. He worked in a rubber factory in Southall, taught himself English and immersed himself in trades unionism; Sharma became a member of the British Communist Party's Executive Committee from 1971. Long active in the Indian Workers Association, he was elected President of the Southall Indian Workers Association (IWA) established on 3rd March 1957, by some of the younger more radical elements of the Punjabi community in 1957.”

The IWA fulfilled two main functions: it provided a political platform for the so-called “community leaders” and material support and advice for its working class members. Founded in 1956, with 120 members,

membership increased to 9,600 by 1971 and over 20,000 in 1979. Most of the advice work was focused on immigration issues – in fact between 1975 and 1977 the association gave 2,000 people advice about migration issues but to only 20 people about industrial appeals. The IWA became an official branch of the India High Commission for visa issues. While the national organisation was close to the Communist Party of India, the local Southall branch was more “integrationist”, inviting socialists and conservatives, businessmen and workers to join. They had close links to Indian Congress politicians. In general, the IWA Southall promoted integration into British society and a large section supported the Labour Party. Piara Khabra, who was a shop steward at Woolf’s, later on became a Labour MP for Southall.

The Communist Party in India, like all Soviet Union-oriented CPs at the time, supported “democratic reconstruction” after World War II and Independence. The CPI disarmed peasant uprisings that promoted land occupations and deeper social change in Telangana district in 1947. In 1962 the CPI demonstrated its patriotism by supporting the mother country in the Indo-China war against the socialist aggressor. This, amongst other things, led to a split in 1964 – this faction fight was also exported into the IWA in the UK. In 1967 the Maoist uprising in Naxalbari (Naxalites), West Bengal would inspire a new generation of militants within the IWA, who would finally form the Asian Youth Movement in Southall and other industrial centres in the UK in the mid-1970s.

The formation of more radical political groups amongst young migrant proletarians was not only a reflection of global politics, but also a reaction towards a more severe political climate locally, to which the old IWA didn’t find a sufficient answer. The economic crisis in the 1960s led to anti-migrant propaganda and reforms of the migration regime by the state. The introduction of the Commonwealth Immigrants Act in 1962 was to limit immigration by introducing quotas and vouchers. This Act was opposed by the Labour Party in opposition but not repealed when in government after 1964. The Commonwealth Immigration Act of 1968, introduced by the Labour government under Wilson, limited the general right to reside in Britain to people who could prove that their parents or grandparents were born in Britain. This allowed Australians to migrate, but excluded non-white migrants from poorer countries. The Labour Party also passed the

“Kenyan Asian Act” in 1968, in order to curb migration of Indians expelled from Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda. Wilson’s government acted against a background, and with the help of, an increase of racist violence towards migrants. In 1967 the National Front was formed and helped aggravate an anti-migrant sentiment. By 1970 around 1.5 million migrant workers resided in the UK, out of which the Irish remained the largest immigrant community. The migration policies of the Labour government were enacted in conjuncture with policies dealing with industrial unrest. In 1969, Labour came up with “In Place of Strife”, the white paper that set the precedent for later laws that would curtail the right to strike. In 1974, still under Wilson, Labour introduced the Social Contract, a voluntary wage restraint by the unions.

These wider trends also played out in west London. Census figures show that the numbers of immigrants from the Indian subcontinent in Southall increased from 1,678 in 1961 to 14,630 in 1971. The Southall Resident’s Association (SRA) in cahoots with local House Agents tried to restrict the sale of houses to Asian buyers to a few streets in the old centre of Southall. Some Labour councillors supported a measure, which meant that workers from South Asia had to reside in Southall for at least 15 years before being able to apply for council housing. For all other residents it was five years. Ealing council continued with a controversial policy of “bussing” children from Southall into schools in other districts. This policy was to ensure that Southall schools had no more than 30% of children from Asian immigrant families. There was collective resistance against this racist policy.

In 1979, three years after the racist murder of Gurdip Singh Chaggar, the National Front tried to hold a meeting in Southall town hall. Thousands came to stop the fascists, but they were attacked by nearly 3,000 police and the cops killed one demonstrator. The Asian Youth Movement was formed in this turmoil, breaking with the old social-democratic leadership of the IWA. When writing about the Southall Riots in 1979 people often forget to mention that on that day around 20,000 local workers went on an unofficial strike to support the protest. From the Notting Hill Riots in 1958 to the Southall Riots in 1979, migrant working class people had to organise self-defence against violent racism. They knew that the battle has to be fought both on the streets and at work: at the AEC British Leyland plant in

Southall, unions and management had agreed on quotas, limiting job prospects of Asian workers in the 1960s, basically imposing a “colour bar”. The NF managed to mobilise 200 AEC workers to a “Send them back” march in 1969. From the 1960s onwards a series of wildcat strikes led by mainly Afro-Caribbean and Asian workers shook factories in the UK, confronting not only management, but in most cases also trade union leadership, and leading in some cases to open conflict with white colleagues. Apart from Greater Manchester (Redscar Mill strike in Preston, 1965) and the Midlands (Tipton Coneygre Foundry, Midland Motor Cylinder Co., Newby Foundry West Bromwich in 1968 and Leicester Imperial Typewriter strike in 1974), west London was a hotspot of migrant/female/unskilled workers’ discontent: Rockware Glass, Woolfs Rubber (Southall) in 1965, Gutterman (Perivale), Chibnalls Bakery, Futers (Harlesden), Quaker Oats (Southall) and Chix (Slough) in 1979.

“Solidarity” in west London – The comrades who came before us

As a result of the 1968 revolt, decent revolutionary organisations sprung up in west London’s working class areas, such as Big Flame and Solidarity. At the time, the more general political scene was dominated by dogmatic and opportunistic political dinosaurs like the Communist Party or the Labour Party. We were thrilled when we found some copies of Solidarity’s west London newspaper from 1969 and 1970. We share some basic ideas with Solidarity: the need for both workers’ self-organisation and political organisation for revolution. “Solidarity” comrades were involved in two local strikes in 1968 and 1969: at Injection Moulders Ltd. and Punfield and Barstow Ltd. These were strikes fought by mainly Asian and Caribbean migrant workers. There were solidarity actions by local “British” workers and rank and file unionists, years before the Grunwick’s strike up the road, which is usually seen as the first struggle where “migrants” and the “local working class” came together. The comrades reported from the picket lines: *“It was a bizarre situation: black and white students and workers were inside the factory scabbing; black and white workers and students were outside – manning the picket line! (...) This is an answer to those dockers (and other workers) misguided enough to swallow the racist nonsense of Enoch Powell. It should help explode the myth that immigrant workers are prepared to accept wages and conditions that British workers wouldn’t*

touch. The dispute also showed how a relatively “new” labour force, unfamiliar with the tortuous and time-consuming channels of ‘official procedure’ (and lacking cynicism bred of repeated ‘betrayals’) can immediately resort to radical methods of action and – through sustained solidarity – achieve worthwhile results.”

The Trico strike in 1976

This strike was of local and national significance, as it took place in the heart of the automotive supply-chain, fought by women for equal pay. The Trico factory opened in 1962 in an industrial area (“The Golden Triangle”) on Great West Road, manufacturing windscreen wipers and motors for the automobile industry, mainly for Ford, Vauxhall and Leyland. Other automobile suppliers, like Firestone, were located nearby. A quarter of the Trico factory’s output was exported. The company had a 90% market share for wind-screen wipers in the UK. During the mid-1970s recession the total workforce in Brentford came down from 2,100 to around 1,400. By the mid-1970s the wages at Trico were below the industrial average. Unemployment had reached 1.5 million and inflation levels were high. The workforce was predominantly white-British, Welsh and Irish, although workers from twelve different nationalities were employed, including workers of Afro-Caribbean and South Asian background. Women worked mainly on assembly lines on day shift, being paid piece- rate. Male workers did the same job for more money on the night shift. In September 1975 management announced it was phasing out the night shift: 100 male workers took redundancy and 5 started working on the day shift assembly lines, together with the women workers. They kept their night shift premium and earned 36.3 pence per hour compared to the 29.2 pence that was paid to the women. Despite management’s attempt to keep the male workers isolated, the pay difference “in broad daylight” sparked off the discontent. In February 1976 short wildcat strikes happened on the washer line. Shop stewards tried to restore order. The union called for meetings about equal pay, but male workers were not invited – which only partly explains why men later on didn’t support the strike. During a meeting in the park, women workers decided to go on strike. Only 15 men joined the women at the gates. All 400 line workers were out, but around 1,000 people remained at work (including office, warehouse, tool makers, maintenance

etc.). Despite the strikers being in the minority, the plant came to a progressive standstill. Inside the factory the union held a meeting with the male workers, 40% voted to support the women by going on an all-out strike, 60% opposed this. National Front members inside the factory were mobilising against the strike – we don't know whether this was because of the equal pay claim or because the strike was seen as supported by "communists". The strike would last for 21 weeks. The company used mafia style transport companies to get trucks through the picket line, with the help of the police of course. There were constant pickets in the hot summer of 1976, supported by various political and feminist groups, the area's nickname became "Costa del Trico". The union tried to convince Heathrow workers not to handle Trico parts flown in from other factories and car workers to refuse to use Trico parts. This was only partly successful. Women workers visited many other factories locally and nationally, as well as shipyards in Yorkshire. After 21 weeks they won equal pay.

The Grunwick strike in 1977

This strike in a photo processing plant in west London is probably the most known and best documented struggle of (female) migrant workers in the UK in the 1970s. On Friday 20 August 1976, a group of workers led by the now famous Jayaben Desai, walked out in protest against their treatment by the managers. Desai was a recent migrant of Indian background from East Africa. Unlike migrants from Punjab these female workers came not from a peasant background, but often had previous employment experience in white-collar jobs. They joined a trade union, APEX (Association of Professional, Executive, Clerical and Computer Staff). They began to demand that Grunwick should recognise workers' right to join trade unions. Initially the strikers remained isolated and could not prevent scabs from entering the factory.

In June 1977 the trade unions mobilised for a bigger demonstration at the factory, including the mining workers' union. One quarter of the Metropolitan police force was used to defeat the pickets. In this sense the strike marked a turning point: white Yorkshire mining workers protesting in solidarity with Asian women workers. More effective than the demonstrations was the support of postal workers in nearby Cricklewood

sorting office, which processed all mail-orders for Grunwick, a vital service for the mail-order photo factory. The workers decided to boycott Grunwick mail in November 1977. This direct practical solidarity was effective, but the trade union hierarchy quickly put an end to it: they put pressure on the local union branch to end the boycott, threatening with fines and union exclusion. These acts of solidarity were also outlawed not long after. Similarly, the trade union hierarchy had mobilised demonstrators away from the factory gate and possible confrontations with the police. Finally, after a two-year dispute, the APEX hierarchy and TUC slowly withdrew their “support” and the remaining strikers were forced to stage a hunger strike in front of the TUC office in central London. In this sense the strike was defeated, but it had broken barriers between workers from South Asia and the local working class.

The struggles of migrant and female workers during this period changed the face of the working class and undermined racist and sexist divisions within – more than any Racial Relations Bills or equal opportunity officers. While London dockers demonstrated for openly anti-migrant and racist politics in 1968, the struggles of migrant workers over the following decade forced local workers to accept them as part of the class. Dockers and miners marched in solidarity with Grunwick workers. Most of the strikes took place under Labour governments (1964 to 1970 and 1974 to 1979), which actively imposed curbs on strike actions, not due to “wrong leadership”, but as managers of a crisis regime, in particular after the Sterling crisis in 1976 and the “adjustment programs” after the IMF bail-out. The strikes questioned the legalistic reflex of many UK trade unionists today that only after the legal ban of secondary picketing and “solidarity strikes” by Thatcher in the 1980s did the trade union leadership become toothless. During this period the union leadership itself interpreted and referred to the law in a way that controlled and contained unofficial unrest.

Counter-revolution 1980s to 1990s

From then on the English Disease ruled Britain, culminating in the mass strikes of the Winter of Discontent in 1979. Already in 1976, during the Sterling crisis, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) was forced to dish out the biggest credit scheme in its history to prevent the British Pound from collapsing. In co-operation with the trade unions, the Labour

government at the time introduced various measures to limit leap-frogging wage demands and inflation: wage caps on the public sector and the implementation of branch and sector-wide collective contracts were introduced to undermine workers' and shop stewards' activities and wage strikes on the department and shop floor level. These concerted policies of government and union headquarters became the prelude to a wider process of restructuring which resulted in an increase of unemployment from 2.4 per cent in 1973 to 6.2 per cent in 1977 to 13 per cent in 1982. With their rose-tinted view of the Labour Party large parts of the current left in the UK like to forget this prelude and instead lament Thatcher's taking of office as being the start of the neoliberal attack against the working class.

West London lost 22,000 engineering jobs in 1979–81, representing a 17% reduction in just two years. The giant Hoover factory in Perivale (built in 1929–30) was converted from one of the most important manufacturing plants into a supermarket, the factory closed in 1982. The entertainment industry grew in order to cover up the social scars: during the 1980s Park Royal became a prime location for shooting dystopian films, such as "Alien" (1986) and "Batman" (1989). Later on, the derelict factories and warehouses were taken over by the rave culture and its collective trance.

Workers tried to fight back against restructuring, amongst others at Lucas Aerospace. During the late 1970s around 50% of the production of Lucas Industries was dedicated to the military sector. When management announced mass redundancies some of the higher skilled engineers developed plans for a takeover of the plant and to produce "socially useful goods" instead of arms. Their efforts remained marginal – partly because they spent more time talking to Labour government officials than with other workers in struggle. At Lucas engineering plant on Chandos Road in Willesden, west London, staff organised a six-week occupation until the company tore off the roof when it was unoccupied.

The structural attack against the class militancy in the 1960s and 1970s was severe and multi-layered: increase of unemployment to soften the core sectors; full-on attack on old bastions like mining, dockers or printing; legal changes to labour laws; integration of certain layers of the class through home ownership; political integration of the "community leaders" through race relation commissions, the NGO sector and party political careers. The

latter was most prominent in areas like Southall. In the mid-1980s the IWA started to take money from the state, for the so-called Manpower Service Commission (MSC) Programme, which was meant to promote the return to work for the local unemployed. The old guard of the IWA and other so-called representatives became the backbone of the Labour Party. Again, these trends were neither local, nor national – they were part of a global counter-revolution. In Punjab the social turmoil of the 1970s, which expressed itself in land occupations and a proliferation of “Maoist” groups was turned against itself by the Indian state. Sikh fundamentalism and Sikh nationalism were sponsored in order to repress both the local poor people’s anger and the more moderate electoral opponents of the governing Congress party. This pushed the region into civil war, which had its repercussions in areas like Southall, where Sikh identity politics took over from the socialist Asian Youth Movement. In 1986 an IWA activist, Tarsem Singh Toor, was killed by a Sikh religious fundamentalist in Southall. Similarly in Gujurat, where anti-Muslim politics played the same anti-insurgency role as the Khalistan movement in Punjab. After the attack on Babri mosque in Ayodhya in 1992, Hindu temples in west London were attacked in revenge. The influence of Hindu-nationalism amongst workers of Gujarati background was not primarily ideological, the temples started to play a bigger role in meeting the material needs of the community. During the 1980s and 1990s Southall and Wembley witnessed the ascent and establishment of a bourgeois layer of the “South Asian community” and a lumpenisation, as drugs and crime started to impact local lives.

Gate Gourmet, Southall, 2005

The lockout at the airline caterer Gate Gourmet was one of the major local disputes in recent times. Its ghost still haunts our co-workers at assembly lines and warehouse aisles. It was significant given that the bosses were able to use the new wave of Eastern European migration to undermine conditions for local workers – of largely South Asian origin.

In the 1997 British Airways (BA) outsourced the catering work to Gate Gourmet, which became one of the world’s largest airline caterers. In August 2005 management wanted to enforce worse conditions: there was less time to warm up from the chilled environment; they had increasing trouble getting toilet breaks; management asked them to take off gloves,

shoes, aprons etc. during the break time, which meant a substantial cut in the time to eat and relax. Management went on to attack not only the breathing space at work, but the contractual conditions themselves, for example, by cutting holiday pay or by reducing the sick pay for new starters. Workers expressed their discontent with the union which didn't organise resistance against these attacks. Most of the workers had been working at Gate Gourmet for a while and a few of them had taken part in the LSG dispute. They organised informal resistance:

“It [work to rule] happened three times in six months. First time was when they said they did not want to give us fifteen minutes to change and report for work – they said we would have to do all that in our own time. So our women, they carried on working according to the rules, you know what I mean? But those who had put down their names for overtime withdrew saying they could not do it anymore and it went on like this for three days. The floor manager, he had been on his holiday at that time, he flew back straight on a Sunday and landed on the shop floor! He backtracked and said: “If you need the fifteen minutes to change, That’s OK by me. Please don’t delay the Concorde, if the Concorde gets delayed, I will lose thousands of pounds.””

Shortly before the actual dispute broke out management provoked workers by sacking a young colleague. Workers reacted by informing everyone through an informal phone chain and by gathering a large group of workers in the canteen. While the union didn't want to do anything about the dismissal and the shop steward was “pretty shaken up”, management bowed to the workers and reinstated the colleague on the spot. The company then prepared for a systematic counter-attack: On the 10th of August 2005 workers on the early-shift found fifty, mainly Polish, agency workers at their workplace (lines and wash-up department). They also found that more security guards than usual were present and that the personnel office was already open at 5am. The permanent workers asked the temp workers to move, but, backed by management, they stayed.

In reaction 200 workers assembled in the canteen. Management called for workers to return to work, threatening dismissal if they continued their “wildcat” action. They didn't return to work, nor did the union at the time tell them to, which resulted in over 800 workers being sacked. In reaction to

this, airport baggage handlers undertook solidarity strikes and ground BA flights for two days. The T&G union pressured them to return to work, given that the walkouts were unlawful. Gate Gourmet workers gathered on a hill close to the plant and received “community support” (from temples etc.) The workers’ assembly in the canteen was construed as unballoted action, which the T&G union denounced in order to save itself a fine. As a result, workers didn’t get any strike pay.

On 26th of August the T&G District Officer announced a deal: the return of selected workers from those who had been sacked (on new terms and conditions); some voluntary redundancies; compulsory redundancy for 144 workers (“kitchen ladies” and “trouble makers”). Union officials tried to push through the deal by asking for a show of hands, not providing the full details and not translating anything for workers. The press discovered an internal briefing that showed that Gate Gourmet had actually wanted to provoke unofficial action and sack staff. 56 of the workers ended up refusing the redundancy deal. Gate Gourmet had skilfully managed to cut 541 jobs with only 411 getting a redundancy entitlement. In the aftermath of the dispute the number of trolleys packed per employee per shift increased by 56%, hours lost to sickness reduced by 58%, paid overtime reduced by 76%. A resounding management success!

We think one of the main cruxes of the dispute, and one that is relevant when thinking about any dispute, is the relationship between the self-activity of workers prior to the lockout (work to rule and spontaneous gatherings) and their behaviour on the day of the 10th of August. How can workers resist restructuring at a point where management wants to provoke a dispute “on their own terms” that they are prepared for and instigate?

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