

Workers on the experience of work

Review article

***Lines of work: Stories of jobs and resistance* edited by Scott Nikolas Nappalos** (Edmonton, Alberta: Black Cat Press, 2013)

What constitutes the alienation of labour? Firstly, the fact that labour is external to the worker, i.e. does not belong to his [sic] essential being; that he therefore does not confirm himself in his work, but denies himself, feels miserable and not happy, does not develop free mental and physical energy, but mortifies his flesh and ruins his mind. Hence the worker feels himself only when he is not working; when he is working he does not feel himself. He is at home when he is not working, and not at home when he is working.' (Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*)¹



INTRODUCTION

Alienation means dispossession, and the alienation of the worker in a wage relation means the dispossession of the worker's control of her activity, of the product of this activity, and even of much of her social relations. As this relationship of dispossession is lived out by the worker in the context of her social interactions with others, alienation has both an objective and a subjective dimension, which includes subjective experience.² While the subjective and experiential aspect cannot be simply be read off from a formal, objective relationship of alienation to capital³, the

subjective dimension cannot be understood in separation from the objective dimension. Thus in itself an understanding of the subjective dimension can provide only a partial explanation of the dynamics of antagonism and the tendency to communism.

Arguing with those bourgeois 'young Hegelians' who tried to reduce alienation to a spiritual 'loss of reality' experienced by a disembodied subject, Marx commented, 'so much does the realization of labour appear as loss of reality that the worker loses his reality to the point of dying of starvation'.⁴ Indeed, anyone who needs to work for a wage to live knows that the subjective aspect of alienation is not just a matter of 'feelings' but involves the whole person. Feelings are, however, an aspect of alienation, and can range from unhappiness and discomfort to mortification and misery, or simply the feeling that the time taken by our job, even a job we might feel proud of (think of nursing, fire service, care work), is ultimately time stolen from our lives and detracting from our needs.

In *Capital*, Marx tried to show how capital – an objective machinery – ended up controlling human activity, and he therefore concentrated on the relation of alienation to this objective monster. Most writers subsequently in the Marxian tradition also principally focused on the objective

¹ Penguin edn., p. 326.

² 'In order to exist as capital, as self-valourising value, capital needs to posit labour as external to itself and then subsume it. This means that the object has to pose a subject as external to it, then objectify it while becoming a subject itself. This also means that the worker is not a pure subject against a pure object, but that he is part of this contradiction. As long as the present social conditions continue, we have no choice – we have to sell our labour power, and so we rely, for our reproduction, to our identification with it – so we are objects. On the other hand this same objectification entails a *real experience of alienation and dispossession*.' ('Capital beyond class struggle', *Aufheben* 15, 2007, p. 47, emphasis added)

³ For example, a capitalist boss may be acting for the purposes of capital, but there is sufficient compensation in terms of monetary reward to take away the pain and provide comfort. 'It is true that the capitalist is a victim of the power of value as the objectification of social relations – formal alienation. Obligated to act as a personification of capital, the capitalist has to give up his will to alien powers, to capital and its laws. However, as long as this alien power

tends to enrich his own capital, the capitalist's alienation is one with his own enrichment and power.' ('Capital beyond class struggle', *Aufheben* 15, 2007, p. 38)

⁴ *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, p. 324.

relationship: the labour process and division of labour, the organization of work, the formal and real subsumption of labour under capital, and so on. Within this analysis, even where class struggle and resistance have been the focus – that is, where the antagonistic subject erupts into the text⁵ – the main interest has been in objective conditions, dynamics and effects, not the subjective experience of those involved.

And yet, as illustrated by the well-known quote from Marx reproduced at the top of this article, this is not to say that Marx and others in the Marxian tradition thought that conscious experience of work was unimportant. Thus there have been a number of attempts to document and analyse workers' experiences of work within the Marxian tradition, some more systematic than others, and with varying political purposes – the work of the Johnson-Forest tendency and operaismo's militant workers' enquiry being the most well-known.

These efforts to study workers' experience of work then raise the question of why? What is the purpose of studying, documenting and maybe analyzing workers' experience(s) – *our own* experiences – of paid work, beyond a mere recognition? What could be achieved from researching workers' subjective point of view of work in its own right and in their own words? Studying, documenting and analysing these experiences is an activity which in some respects takes a similar form to certain kinds of work (e.g., academic or journalistic work), and may take up precious spare time and energy. So therefore the question of conscious political commitment and purpose behind such an undertaking is important – it is not undertaken lightly.

But there is also a second question, which is that of method: *how* should workers' experiences of work be studied? The publication of this slim volume, *Lines of Work*, raises these interesting questions – for us and perhaps for others. So this article is in part a review of this book, but is also an opportunity for us to explore broader questions that take us beyond this specific publication. For the question of why and how might one study workers' experiences of work involves profound issues of how people in communist organizations or with a revolutionary analysis relate to work and to (other) workers at the present time.

The book is a compilation of short, first-hand accounts that were submitted to the online

publication *Recomposition*.⁶ This site/publication was started by some people in Canada and the USA involved in the anarcho-syndicalist group Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). In the book, there is little in the way of theory or formal analysis, beyond some brief remarks in the Introduction and some occasional comments, for the stated aim of this book is simply for workers (at least some workers associated with *Recomposition*) to tell their 'stories'. This is because 'Working class experiences of storytelling have not been taken seriously enough among those of us who try to organize and build a better society' (p. 1) and 'telling a story creates new thoughts and changes old ones' (p. 2).

In the first part of this review article, we will draw out three themes in the book that seemed to be significant. In the second part of the article, we will examine the issue of 'politics' in the study of the experience of work. We will compare *Recomposition's* approach with two other types of efforts to study workers' experience of work: sociology and militant workers' enquiry. We will then critically discuss the revolutionary unionist/anarcho-syndicalist framework that underlies *Lines of Work*. We shall ask finally whether this edited book (or others like it) can have the effect that *Recomposition* hope for, or whether such a project might have other, slightly different, positive (or negative) effects.

PART 1. THREE LINES OF WORK

Lines of Work is organized thematically, but the themes that seemed most interesting – the most salient issues in the book for us – are these: common features of work today; social relations among workers; and the effects of these social relations on subjectivity.

1.1 Common features of work today

Lines of Work does not pretend to be a representative survey; it is a collection of accounts from a particular group of politically-affiliated people mostly in North America. But it does serve to create an impression of the types of work that many people are doing today and hence of common experiences. Thus many of the experiences of work recounted here are from people working in 'low-end' jobs: low paid, no prospects, poor conditions, uncertain futures or short-term (or no) contracts. Examples include care, retail and restaurant work. Sometimes these service sector jobs are in small, family-run firms or are 'alternative' businesses ('a hippy-dippy grocery store', p. 76). Some of the 'nonprofits' come across as some of the worst jobs. They are low in worker organization and characterized by

⁵ In order to analyse the workings of capital, in *Capital*, Marx had to close off the class struggle, though it can be seen to break through in certain places in the text, such as the 'missing sixth chapter' in Volume 1. See Felton C. Shortall (1994) *The Incomplete Marx* (Avebury) – free to read here: <http://libcom.org/library/incomplete-marx>

⁶ <http://recomposition.info/>

attempts by employers to get workers to work beyond their normal hours (exploitation of 'goodwill').

This extra exploitation is an eye-opener for one contributor, who initially took the job because he hoped it would develop 'abilities that might be ... useful for the organization [of resistance]' (p. 50). While he describes how people often took a job in this kind of 'right on' company 'so that they could find their day job satisfying and meaningful', their 'benign' purpose in fact is part of their insidiousness:

people who work for a long time in the nonprofit industry end up making their life out of making their living, not unlike people in corporate jobs (p. 52)

Conclusion: there is no escape from alienation through 'socially-aware' jobs.

This is not to say that only service sector or white collar jobs are described in the book. There are still factories in Canada (as there are in the UK), and in *Lines of Work* there are vivid descriptions of experiences in a factory producing bullets as well as in a windowless factory where suits are manufactured. In the book, both the 'new' service jobs and the 'traditional' factory laboring jobs are precarious, and the experiences are similar in many respects. One difference, however, is that only in the service jobs is emotional labour so central.

Emotional labour

We use the term 'emotional labour'⁷ here to refer not only to the capturing and exploiting of our ability to recognize others' emotional needs, to display the correct level and form of empathy or emotional response, but also and fundamentally to the sheer dispossession of our social interactions, which are replaced by alien, business interactions. Thus our capacity to smile in a fully human context is reduced to a customer-friendly smile to strangers exchanging money for our services; it is voided of its human context and is transformed into an element requested by the purposes of capital and in the form demanded by capital. This therefore is the real subsumption of 'affective practice'.⁸ Capital

⁷ The term was coined by Hochschild (A. R. Hochschild (1983). *The managed heart: Commercialization of human feeling*. University of California Press.) Her study of female flight attendants illustrated the way that customer service systematically and consciously exploited workers' emotional capacities and skills as an integral part of the labour process. Free copy of her journal article here: <http://www.csus.edu/indiv/c/chalmersk/ECON184SP09/ManagedHeart.pdf>

⁸ 'Affective practice' is a term coined by Margaret Wetherell. See M. Wetherell (2014). Trends in the turn to affect A



exploits the fact that smiles are still smiles and an empathic interaction in the context of a service transaction is still an empathic interaction. Yet any worker whose emotional capacities are exploited in this way can tell the difference. Experientially, emotional labour is draining, exhausting, wearing, and produces a sense of being robbed of one's life,⁹ for it exists on top of the hours and the legwork of the working day.¹⁰

This from a 'front desk clerk' in *Lines of Work* is a good illustration of such emotional labour:

shouting at someone over coffee is normal. More than normal, it is part of my job. But my job is not just to solve the problem, but to

social psychological critique. *Body & Society*, 1357034X14539020.

⁹ See our article on Tony Negri, who, following bourgeois theories, believes that emotion work is a new kind of production which offers the potential for valorization to the workers. There we showed that such activity is a real subsumption of affective practices. Negri and Hardt's notion of 'affective labour', as described in Hardt's article of the same name and in their book *Empire*, despite the similarity of its name to Hochschild's concept, is therefore actually a very different idea indeed. Whereas for Hochschild, our affective practices are harnessed for the purposes of capital, for Negri and Hardt, capital is forced by the struggles of the 1960s and 1970s to accept the role of affect in the production process. Whereas Hochschild describes a process that can only be negative for the worker – dispossession of one's true feelings – Negri and Hardt see the inclusion of emotion in capitalist production as subversive, as 'creeping communism', and as a cause for celebration. As we argued, while Negri and Hardt's argument has the appearance of a radical position, it doesn't see emotional labour as alienating – because it doesn't really have any place for alienation as a concept. See 'Keep on smiling: Questions on immaterial labour', *Aufheben* 14, 2006.

¹⁰ Emotional labour is formalized in the training of the flight attendants, but not factored into calculations of labour time or output: 'On a 15-hour flight from Hong Kong to New York, a young businessman puts his drink down, leans back and takes in a night attendant, who is pushing a 300-pound meal cart on its third voyage up the aisle. "Hey, honey," he calls out, "give me a smile." The night attendant stops the cart, wipes her brow and looks him in the eye. "I'll tell you what," she says. "You smile first, then I'll smile. O.K.?" The businessman smiles at her. "Good," she replies. "Now freeze and hold that for 15 hours.'" (Hochschild, 1993, p. 328, op. cit.)

provide the emotional services necessary for that person to recover composure and remember the incident as one of good service... I'm also a geisha whose smiles and compliments provide emotional release and coddling to members of the bureaucratic caste (p. 129)

There is no implication in *Lines of Work* that emotional labour signifies a 'new' kind of work. And there is no suggestion either that the role of emotional capacity in work has some new and special role in the labour process. Examples of emotional labour are common in *Lines of Work* not because they represent a positive, subversive new development, but because they are a common part of the misery, unhappiness, sense of being robbed etc. brought about through the alienation of our daily activity – and thus are part of the contradiction which makes us keep confronting capital as our enemy.

Care work

In *Lines of Work*, the importance of emotional labour is described in a personal account of care work, 'Caring: A labour of stolen time'. But here there is also a moral dilemma of meeting one's own needs (for breaks etc.) versus attending to the care home vulnerable residents' immediate bodily needs.

The story is from the United States but has many parallels with developments in care work in the UK. In recent years, there have been a number of high-profile 'scandals' at care homes in the UK, involving not only neglect of elderly and vulnerable residents but also deliberate cruelty and abuse.¹¹ Why does this happen? It is something that this edited book could perhaps help us address. In other work contexts (see below, 1.3), it seems as if treating vulnerable others badly is a way some powerless individuals restoring power to themselves. As a form of 'resistance' to alienation, however, it is worse than useless for the class.

Much less high-profile than the care home abuse scandal, but connected, is the massive erosion of pay and working conditions among care workers, affecting not just residential homes for the elderly but more particularly home visiting care work that has taken place in recent years. In the past in the UK, many homes and primary care services were directly under local authority control. With local council budgets under pressure, outsourcing of these services became the norm. Each outsource organization is able to bid lower than another, and hence save the local

¹¹ In the UK, some of this abuse and neglect made widely known in a television documentary, 'Panorama - Behind Closed Doors: Elderly Care Exposed', shown on BBC TV in April 2014.

authority money, by squeezing its own costs, and the main costs are wages and conditions – particularly in those areas where there is little organization among workers.¹²

There is informal pressure – some are afraid that if they join a unions their employer will reduce their hours and formal pressure: care workers we know have signed contracts agreeing not to join a union as a condition of their employment. Care workers' pay is very often so low that they have to have both housing benefit and working tax credits even when working virtually full time.

One specific way that these outsourced care organizations have saved money is by not paying travel time between home visits. Each care worker will have multiple home visits to make over a working day, with each being calibrated to last so many minutes (often just 15 minutes per visit). While these are all costed and paid for in the form of the wage, the travel time between jobs is not. The result of this is that care workers are actually being paid less than the minimum wage (of £6.50 an hour), though not on paper. While widely practiced,¹³ this scam has been hard to challenge.

This takes us from the nature of contemporary work to a second theme in *Lines of Work* we want to highlight: social relations among workers.

1.2 Social relations among workers

From solidarity to resistance

Contributors to *Lines of Work* don't just document the misery of contemporary work, but also share experiences of solidarity and struggle. The book begins with tales of small scale resistance and organization. Juan Conatz describes informal pace-setting in a job he had loading trucks. Phinneas Gage recounts how, as a protest, he and other postal workers called in sick every day until a worker threatened with suspension for calling in sick was reprieved. Erik Forman and co-workers at Starbucks confronted their boss about the sacking of a colleague and got the boss sacked instead.

¹² Katie Graham (2014) 'Recognising the value of people who are paid to care' <http://blogs.kcl.ac.uk/socialcareworkforce/2014/05/12/reco gnising-the-value-of-people-who-are-paid-to-care/> Denise Kingsmill (2013) *The Kingsmill Review: Taking Care. An independent report into working conditions in the care sector* http://www.yourbritain.org.uk/uploads/editor/files/The_King smill_Review_-_Taking_Care_-_Final_2.pdf

¹³ King's College London's social care workforce research unit estimated between 150,000 and 220,000 care workers are being ripped off in this way. See 'Council funding cuts force care firms to pay less than the minimum wage', *Guardian* 22nd October 2014. <http://www.theguardian.com/society/2013/oct/22/council-funding-cuts-care-homes-minimum-wage> The Resolution Foundation calculates that these care workers are each losing out on about £800 a year.

In these and other examples, the organization is often ad hoc and the workers are not even unionized; they are making it up as they go along. The struggles described are typically local disputes rather than issues defined as sector-wide, national or international, though it is clear that the harsh conditions and so on are not particular to their workplace.

Lack of solidarity

In contrast to these examples of solidarity and success, however, are many more examples of lack of solidarity. If the precarious, unidentified, casualized, low paid, deskilled work is the 'new work', the new work relations are often divided, fragmented.

Abbey Volcano describes working in a 'non-profit' health food shop with liberal-minded co-workers, where there was a division of labour through which the others benefited from the fact that she had almost no conditions in her contract. She was general factotum, which allowed others time to take it easy. When Abbey wasn't available, they had to do more work – such as taking calls, faxing memos and so on – and they resented it. While they had health insurance, Abbey did not. The effect was that she struggled into work when very ill, and they had no understanding of why she left it so long to go to a doctor.

Restaurants¹⁴ are one type of workplace where there is a division that undermines solidarity in practice, as in the account by Lou Rinaldi:

Despite the fact that we're a 'team' there isn't really anything unifying about the different sections of a restaurant, or even the co-workers in one part of the house. The servers bitterly compete for shifts and tables. A long-term clique gets the best shifts (p. 205).

Here, lack of organization is both cause and the effect of increased exploitation.

A recurring subtheme in the book is that a 'structural' division in the class is created by racism. It was sometimes the most recent immigrants who took the low-level jobs. The ethnically structured nature of workplace relations meant that some identified with their ethnic group against other groups, even though 'subconscious and unwilling' (p. 107).

In the context of such divisions within the workforce, the interpersonal was political in the following sense:

¹⁴ See 'Abolish restaurants' <http://www.prole.info/ar.html>
There is also something specific about restaurants in the USA (compared to Europe) that is worth mentioning, which is that in the USA restaurant wages are so low tips are expected, not an add-on; they are in effect an essential part of the wage.

How are you on the shopfloor? Were you able to put aside personal drama to help out another co-worker? Are you the type that talks smack about other co-workers? Are you the type that sucks up to the boss, or are you the type that tries to handle things outside, to talk things out with your co-workers? Do you think about other people when you do your work? Do you take out your stress on your co-workers? (p. 160)

There is therefore a moral aspect to these accounts of division and lack of solidarity, but this collection to stories do not ultimately reduce the political to the moral.

This takes us to the effects of the nature of current work and organization on workers' subjectivity.

1.3 Effects of work relations on subjectivity

In *Lines of Work*, the effect of work on workers' subjectivity varies with the power of workers trying to be human (empowerment) versus the power of work over them (crushing of one's own mental space). Work shapes our emotions, invades our dreams, colonizes our thoughts. The fact that you can't switch off means that the 40 hours you are paid for doesn't cover it:

The worst part of the job is when it is so bad, when you work 14 hours in one day, and you come home so full of adrenaline that you can barely sleep. In the shower I hear IV pumps beeping still, and my ears pick up a dull buzzing for hours after I'm off work. You toss and turn, chewing on all the things you could have missed in the day ... When you fall asleep, the days can haunt you. I've had weeks where every dream was about work. That is the problem with capitalism: not just the harm it does to workers and patients, but that its hell lingers and penetrates our dreams, degrading them' (p. 198)

Divisions in social relations in work and the failure of solidarity produce subjective effects in workers that are depressing to the reader. One effect that came up several times was the way that some workers could feel better about themselves through being superior to other workers: 'I hated almost all my co-workers because they were smug and on power trips' (p. 72),

Scott Nappalos got a job in a bullet factory:

I thought my friends would be happy for me, getting a steady job with excellent benefits, in place of the usual minimum wage crap ... But no one shook my hand, no one congratulated me ... It seemed they'd liked to see me poor

and starving because it made them feel better about themselves. (p. 94).

Powerlessness is surely an aversive state, and in the absence of forms of existence that allow people to change the relations underlying the feeling of powerlessness, feeling a sense of power over others in the same boat might make some people feel better, at least in the short term:

the lead hand – a sniveling, weak man who enjoyed a power trip’ – seemed to get pleasure in telling Sanjay he was being made redundant. (p. 214).

Some of the stories in *Lines of Work* also describe the effects on subjectivity of small scale resistance and organization. The effect is one of empowerment:

We had blocked a firing. The boss has threatened us with her biggest weapon, and we had disarmed her. For a moment, we were invincible (p. 30).

These stories are good to read, but it seems to be significant that there aren’t a lot of them in the book.

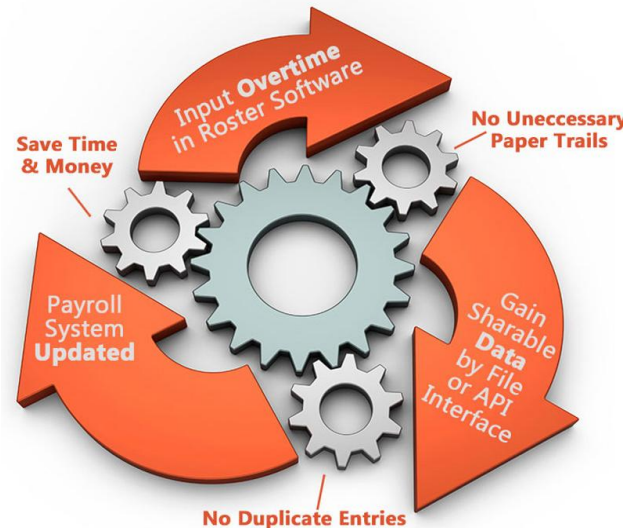
This issue of the effects of subjectivity raises the question of the purpose of the book. Why spend the time documenting these experiences, most of which are not analyses of effective struggles but instead are descriptions of negative experiences? A compilation of ‘stories’ about work may be engaging, and absorbing, and may be a self-education for those who write the accounts - but why should others want to read them?

PART 2. HOW AND WHY SHOULD WE STUDY WORKERS’ EXPERIENCE OF WORK?

In a sense, *Lines of Work* is kind of phenomenological study; it is a collection of accounts of subjective experiences where the writer’s own thoughts, feelings etc. are the focus, rather than a theoretically driven analysis or even a selecting of material to make some point. Yet perceptions - and accounts of experiences - are never theory-free. More obviously, they were written, compiled and edited for a (political or other) purpose. As such, *Lines of Work* is in some ways comparable to other ‘research studies of workers’ experience of work. By way of a contrast, we now consider two approaches to the study of work: academic sociology and workers’ inquiry before critically analyzing the intellectual inspiration for *Lines of Work*.

2.1 Sociology

Probably the largest body of research work on workers’ experience of work is that carried out by sociologists and is worth briefly mentioning for two reasons. First, sociologists have sometimes covered the same ground as, and have made similar points to, revolutionary/communist studies so are worth comparing. Second, some of these studies have borrowed concepts from Marx and from Marxists. We summarize here some of the main trends.



Critical sociological perspectives on work emerged in the 1960s, in response to developments in the class struggle. A number of sociologists took the concept of alienation from Marx, and reworked it as purely psychological concept, shorn of its objective aspects of dispossession. In these accounts, negative subjective experiences (frustration, dissatisfaction) increased with automation, because of the reduction in control.¹⁵ Later ‘interactionists’ argued that this account of workers’ experience of work focused too much on the effects of the form of work on the worker and neglected the active power of workers to respond to control and alienation by ‘getting by’ in petty forms of day-to-day resistance.¹⁶ The study of collective class resistance became more of a focus developed in the 1970s, through a series of studies of workers’ strikes¹⁷ and sabotage. In some of these research studies, there are fascinating stories of workers’ changes in consciousness/empowerment in and through their participation in strikes.

For example, Lane and Roberts (1971)¹⁸ describe how Pilkington’s glass workers’ strike over a wage miscalculation soon developed into a

¹⁵ E.g., Robert Blauner

¹⁶ E.g., Jason Ditton

¹⁷ E.g., Huw Beynon

¹⁸ T. Lane & K. Roberts (1971). *Strike at Pilkingtons*. Fontana.

struggle about basic wage rates. Participation produced in the strikers a new critical perspective towards both the authorities and the police, particularly after bus-loads of police were drafted to the factory to enforce the 'right to work' of those not on strike. The study also describes a broadening of the issues, beyond those that led to the dispute at Pilkington's, in the consciousness of those involved:

To some the strike was an education; it opened their minds; it broadened their horizons; it gave them new insights into themselves and into the society in which they lived. During the dispute some individuals began to think and argue about issues that they had never previously attempted to understand... For these people the experience of the strike could rightly be described as a revolutionary experience (p. 104)

The workers felt elated and liberated at going on strike; they remarked upon their unexpected enjoyment at the solidarity it brought them. Lane and Roberts explain these new feelings in terms of the strike's function of denying existing power relations. This denial, they argue, reveals to the striker 'a new dimension of living' which makes the striker look at ordinary life differently: 'what was "normal" can no longer be regarded as "natural"' (p. 105).

This illustrates that, as well as producing some profoundly ideological theories,¹⁹ sociological studies of work have also produced many examples paralleling those in *Lines of Work*.²⁰ They tell us about the subjective experience of work and they document how workers resist and fail to resist. There are insights. But why then is it not enough – or even the wrong sort of thing – for our purposes? It is not simply that workers' accounts are here filtered through the texts of academics whose own work is not the subject of enquiry (and not alienated?), it is also (and obviously) that the purpose of sociological studies is analysis for the sake of it (not necessarily a bad thing, however). These are different from 'political' studies of workers' experiences of work which are carried out for the ultimate purpose of changing the world.

But how do 'political' types imagine that researching workers' experience of work can contribute to revolution?

2.2 Militant workers' enquiry

From a communist perspective, the most well-known and well-developed approach to studying

workers' experience of work is that of militant workers' enquiry. The term 'workers' enquiry' is most associated with the practices developed by Operaismo – the Italian 'workerists' – (specifically Quaderni Rossi) in the 1950s and 60s. Part of the inspiration for Quaderni Rossi's research project was in fact bourgeois sociology, which they sought to utilize as weapons for workers just as the factory owners had done for capital.²¹ Other sources of influence included the work of Danilo Dolci, a social reformer who interviewed the poor to gather their life stories, as well as the activities of Socialisme ou Barbarie and the Johnson-Forest Tendency, which we refer to in more detail below. The 'co-research' carried out at FIAT motors was partly to document workers' subjective relation and behavioural response to certain work practices. But it also sought to examine objective factors, such as wages, which they showed had fallen behind those of other firms, despite the public image of FIAT as providing a good wage.²²

Yet, since that time, 'workers' enquiry' is a term that has referred to somewhat different things in different times and places.²³ Today, a version of workers' enquiry is practiced and advocated today by the group Angry Workers of the World. This group have recently carried out in-depth research into logistics (warehouse work)²⁴ and into the job of being a council caretaker.²⁵ They have achieved this by going out

²¹ Steve Wright (2002) *Storming heaven: Class composition and struggle in Autonomist Marxism* (Pluto press), p. 21. This book provides an excellent history of workers' enquiry in Italy in the 1950s and 60s.

²² Steve Wright (op. cit.), p. 47.

²³ There is a very useful issue of *Viewpoint* (issue 3) devoted entirely to workers' enquiry that provides both history and contemporary examples as well as debates:

<https://viewpointmag.com/2013/09/30/issue-3-workers-inquiry/> For some, the original workers' enquiry was Marx's use of a questionnaire to investigate workers' working conditions and political activities. This is discussed in 'Workers' Inquiry: A Genealogy' (*Viewpoint* 3) by Asad Haider and Salar Mohandesi: 'Called "A Workers' Inquiry," it was a list of exactly 101 detailed questions, inquiring about everything from meal times to wages to lodging. On a closer look, there seems to be a progression in the line of questioning. The first quarter or so ask seemingly disinterested questions about the trade, the composition of the work-force employed at the firm, and the general conditions of the shop, while the final quarter generally shifts to more explicitly political questions about oppression, "resistance associations," and strikes.'

<https://viewpointmag.com/2013/09/27/workers-inquiry-a-genealogy/> Marx's questionnaire can be found here: <http://constantresearcher.wordpress.com/2010/03/15/marx-worker-inquiry/>

²⁴ On Logistics Workers' Inquiry in West-London – November 2014 <https://angryworkersworld.wordpress.com/on-logistics-workers-inquiry-in-west-london-november-2014/>

²⁵ Community champions and other crack – Report after working as a caretaker on an East London housing estate <https://angryworkersworld.wordpress.com/2014/04/28/community-champions-and-other-crack-report-after-working-as-a-caretaker-on-an-east-london-housing-estate/>

¹⁹ E.g., Daniel Bell

²⁰ In fact, Tony Lane, author of the Pilkingtons study wasn't a disinterested academic but a 'socialist' whose perspective shaped his choice of topic, methods and conclusions.

their way to take jobs in these settings, in very small numbers (one person at a time in some cases).

Other contemporary examples include the Czech group Kolektivně proti kapitálu (KPK, Collectively Against Capital),²⁶ who have carried out different research projects including interviews with participants in the anti-Roma demonstrations, and the Swedish group Kämpa Tillsammans,²⁷ who carried out research on the bakery where they worked and ‘use ... the “workplace story” as an organizing tool’.²⁸

We described the Italian workerists’ use of workers’ enquiry in some detail in a (quite critical) review article in issue 12.²⁹ Our article was prompted by the publication in 2002 by the group Kolinko of a book on their experiences working in call centres, *Hotlines*,³⁰ in which they claimed that such workers’ enquiry was a political intervention and was necessary. As we argued at the time, the context and the aims of this recent form of workers’ enquiry seemed to differ in important ways from that of the Italian workerists:

The emergence of the Johnson-Forest Tendency, Socialisme ou Barbarie³¹ and Quaderni Rossi was inextricably linked to new forms of production, the formation of a new working-class, new forms of struggle. In each of these cases, the enquiry (using this term loosely) was predicated on and prompted by a

²⁶ Kolektivně proti kapitálu <http://protikapitalu.org/>

²⁷ Self-activity, strategy and class power

<https://kapatillsammans.wordpress.com/tag/work/>

²⁸ Class struggle and storytelling (2010)

<https://kimmuller.wordpress.com/tag/kampa-tillsammans/>

²⁹ ‘We have ways of making you talk: Review article:

Hotlines by Kolinko’, *Aufheben* 12, 2004.

³⁰ *Hotlines: Call Centre, Inquiry, Communism* (Duisburg: Kolinko, 2002)

³¹ ‘Socialism or Barbarism (S or B), whose principle theorist was Castoriadis (aka Cardan or Chaliou), was a small French group that broke from orthodox Trotskyism. It had a considerable influence on later revolutionaries. In Britain the Solidarity group popularised its ideas through pamphlets that still circulate as the most accessible sophisticated critique of Leninism.’ (*Aufheben* 3, 1993, ‘Decadence: The Theory of Decline or the Decline of Theory? Part 2’, p. 24). From S ou B’s most well-known statement on the need for workers’ enquiry: ‘Rather than examining the situation of the proletariat from the outside, this approach [being advocated] seeks to reconstruct the proletariat’s relations to its work and to society from the inside and show how its capacities for invention and power of organization manifest in everyday life.... The concrete approach that we see as required by the very nature of the proletariat entails that we collect and interpret testimonies written by workers. By testimonies we mean especially narratives that recount individual lives, or better, experiences in contemporary industry...’ Claude Lefort (1952) Proletarian experience. *Socialisme ou Barbarie* 11. Henri Simon’s article ‘Workers’ Inquiry in Socialisme ou Barbarie’, published in *Viewpoint* 3 (2013) provides some context for S ou B’s call for workers’ enquiry. <https://viewpointmag.com/2013/09/26/workers-inquiry-in-socialisme-ou-barbarie/>

general situation of struggles of workers in the workplace (although it is true that Alquati hoped to stir up antagonism with his enquiry at Fiat at a time of relative quiescence there).

In contrast, it is an interesting irony that Kolinko, in deciding to resurrect the practice of workers’ enquiry, have inverted the situation (put the cart before the horse perhaps) – it seems they are now attempting to use the enquiry as a radical tool, even perhaps as a voluntaristic attempt to prompt struggle, at a time of low class mobilization. It has been argued that workers’ enquiry only made sense in the time of the ‘mass-worker’, when the working class was reaching the height of its empowerment and homogeneity within capitalism... (p. 55)

Kolinko argued, against Leninism, that ‘consciousness cannot be brought to the workers from outside’ (cited in *Aufheben*, 12 p. 57), and that it can come only from workers’ self-activity. Yet this position seemed to be contradicted by what they were trying to achieve with workers’ enquiry:

...we would argue that they fall into the trap of attempting to bring ‘consciousness’ to the class through the veiled form of the enquiry. The questionnaire, with its didactic, at time even patronizing questioning seems intended as a spark of consciousness. Sometimes there is a sense that the questionnaire is almost manipulative; or that the ‘right’ answers are being elicited, as when a teacher tries to guide pupils to give the correct response by prompt-feeding... Both management and revolutionaries in a sense are trying to get the workers to do what they want them to do. So there is a sense in which Kolinko, while criticizing Leninist vanguardism ... are almost attempting to ‘get in through the back door’, anti-Leninist alibi at the ready, with a more subtle or disguised form of consciousness raising by questionnaire... Revealingly, we are told: ‘All in all, the questionnaire did not produce a ‘representative’ result. We don’t know if the questionnaire opened up the consciousness or the eyes of the comrades in other call centres’ (p. 16, *Hotlines*)³²

Alienation and paradox

But, when compared with *Lines of Work*, further points can be made about (this version of) workers’ enquiry, which is pursued today by Angry Workers of the World (AWW). Our reading of the AWW article ‘Profession and movement’³³

³² ‘We have ways of making you talk’ (p. 57, op. cit.)

³³ ‘Profession and Movement (Angry Workers World, 2014) <http://libcom.org/blog/profession-movement-19052014>

only reinforces our critical view, when it advocates 'to work for a low-wage because it is politically interesting; to stir up a workplace collectively'.

The first point in this critique is that, as a form of politics, of intervention, workers' enquiry – at least in terms of these recent versions – itself seems alienated. The purpose of the activity (working) is on the one hand one's own – to enquire – but on the other hand is that of capital. It will feel this way too. Jobs as janitors, warehousemen, call centre workers, pen factory workers: all these feel monotonous, pointless, soul-destroying.

A second point is that workers' enquiry of the form advocated by Kolinko would appear very odd to those who have no choice but to take these jobs. The militant workers' enquirer tries to experience the same thing as the worker by choosing to be in a job that workers would seek to escape from if they had the choice. For most workers, the dream is to get away from such jobs, not to take them voluntarily. The paradox lies in the fact that the politico /revolutionary identifies as such and for that reason sacrifices her own needs for that of militant workers' enquiry, while the 'real worker' whose experiences the enquirer hopes to document and understand would do no such thing.

The best way surely to find out 'what it is really like' to be a worker today is to document work (and resistance) 'where you are', in the job you would be doing anyway. This is the approach that seems to have been taken by the contributors to *Lines of Work*. But the idea of work as a necessity does not seem to figure for the modern-day enquirer (at least in the version proposed by Kolinko/Angry Workers of the World), who instead lives out a separation between own needs and needs of the revolutionary project.

As we stated in 2004:

as one of the motivations for workers' enquiry is to 'join the working class' and 'get in touch with the workers', enquiry proceeds from the standpoint of separation (p. 59)

Our own experience

The critical points above are not a sneer from the outside, as it were. First, the effort and the commitment shown by workers' enquirers are to be admired. And second we strongly agree with the need to understand, to research, and to document the contemporary world of work. 'Going and looking' has always been central to the Marxian tradition; his detailed empirical endeavours, following the pioneering documentary work of Engels, was one of the things that differentiated Marx from his young Hegelian contemporaries. And for the record, we found the

documentary aspect of *Hotlines* valuable in the same way as *Lines of Work*.

Second, we also partly empathize with the impulse to carry out workers' enquiry because some of us came close to it ourselves. Back in 2000, some of us involved with *Aufheben* were friends with people in Kolinko and were drawn to their call centre enquiry project. At this time, we (or at least some of us) were fed up hanging around ultra left circles where there was a lot of theory and talk and not enough practice. We simply wanted to do something practical.

However, this beguilement didn't last long (or convince the rest of those around *Aufheben* to join in), when the dole and/or other jobs were less painful). We didn't apply for jobs in call centres.

But have these contemporary forms of workers' enquiry been successful in their own terms? If so, perhaps that would justify the self-sacrifice. As the *Hotlines* book admits, the questionnaires etc. did not trigger resistance in the workers. And the strategy did not generalize; it did not inspire many more people to join in and develop their own workers' enquiry. Some of those involved in *Hotlines* have since then formed Angry Workers of the World and ploughed a lonely furrow and endured all sorts of tedious and probably low paid work for the ideals of enquiry, to relatively little ends. So it would be surprising if they were not now a bit disappointed and bitter that no one else joined in with them.³⁴



2.3 Recomposition's political purpose

It is interesting that militant workers' enquiry was not the stated inspiration for *Lines of Work*, though each comes from similar roots. Scott Nappalos describes the intellectual heritage of Recomposition and hence of *Lines of Work* as follows: Gramsci's notion of organic intellectuals; the Johnson-Forest tendency; and Stan Weir/Singlejack. We consider each of these.

³⁴ Angry Workers of the World refer to a 'small group of us' working in logistics and call for more people to support them. Could it be that this 'intervention' fails to inspire others not only because it has had little effect on workers' in the workplace but also because it is perceived as too self-sacrificial?

2.3.1 Gramsci's 'organic intellectuals'

As Scott Nappalos points out in his Introduction to *Lines of Work*, none of the contributions to the book were written by people who are employed to write as a living. He draws upon certain ideas from Gramsci to explain the significance of this. Gramsci distinguished between 'traditional' and 'organic' intellectuals, arguing that 'all men [sic] are intellectuals, one could therefore say: but not all men [sic] have in society the function of intellectuals. (p. 115).³⁵ This is because all forms of human activity have an intellectual element. Traditional intellectuals are those that have an official role in society as intellectuals – Gramsci gives the example of the clergy. Organic intellectuals become intellectual more informally, and are created by all social groups as they develop:

the 'organic' intellectuals which every new class creates alongside itself and elaborates in the course of its development, are for the most part 'specializations' of partial aspects of the primitive activity of the new social type which the new class has brought into prominence. (op. cit., p. 113)

Organic intellectuals are said to be important in helping to create a 'counter-hegemony' and therefore in revolution. Thus the concept was important in a scheme in which capitalist social relations continued not simply out of force but because of ideology. In short, the working class needed to create its own organic intellectuals to win the battle of ideas and help create a socialist consciousness.

The strategy of engaging in a 'battle of ideas' (re)introduces a dualism into Marxism, whereby changing consciousness is the precondition for successful material social change. It is a different position from one in which struggles are understood to change consciousness. And it is no coincidence that Gramsci is perhaps best known today in cultural studies and other critical disciplines concerned with ideas.

These points about the status of ideas in the development of struggles are not wholly irrelevant to what we think are some of the limitations of anarcho-syndicalism, which we discuss later.

2.3.2 Johnson-Forest Tendency

'The most important influence on Recomposition and this book has been from working class traditions in the United States' (p. 4), in particular the Johnson-Forest Tendency and Stan Weir/Singlejack.

³⁵ A. Gramsci (1926). *Prison Notebooks*. A free copy can be found here: <http://www.csun.edu/~snk1966/Gramsci%20-%20Prison%20Notebooks%20-%20Intellectuals.pdf>

The Johnson-Forest Tendency's were an influence on Italian militant workers' enquiry, and we have described their contributions previously in these pages.³⁶ The group are associated most with the names of C. L. R. James, Raya Dunayevskaya and Martin Glaberman. They published a newspaper, *Correspondence*, and they carried out interviews with workers to document the experiences of industrial workers – including their working conditions, division of labour and their attitudes to work and to strikes and other activity. They went into factories themselves 'to develop organic ties with the working class'. They said they went in 'to learn not to teach', but they also saw themselves as active participants since they were part of a revolutionary group who could prompt the working class to do things they wouldn't otherwise have done. As we argued in the *Hotlines* review:

There is a tension here, which resurfaces in Kolinko's project, between privileging workers' self-activity and the pretension of the revolutionary group that it can speak to the working class as a whole, and perhaps make decisive interventions to alter the course of struggles. (p. 51)³⁷

2.3.3 Stan Weir and Singlejack

Stan Weir (1921-2001) was a merchant sailor during the war, where he encountered the ideas of the IWW and was involved in workplace organizing. Then he became an assembly-line car worker, getting involved in the 1946 Oakland general strike in 1946.³⁸ He began but did not finish a book on the culture of West Coast dock workers.

An article in *Viewpoint* magazine describes an interesting personal process for Stan in his relation to work, which mirrors the contrasting approaches to studying work between workers enquiry and the approach embodied in *Lines of Work*:

Stan Weir describes how he ceased to be an 'organizer' and became a worker, and at the same time, more himself. Under pressure from McCarthyism his Left political group 'disintegrated... considerably.' Stan got a job at General Motors not as a political assignment but because he needed a job.

'A whole new world opened up to me. I began to see that to approach any situation

³⁶ 'We have ways of making you talk!' op. cit.

³⁷ In fact, these are two separate points. The idea of speaking to the working class as a whole is different from the point that minorities have indeed sometimes made 'decisive interventions'.

³⁸ 1946: The Oakland general strike - Stan Weir <https://libcom.org/library/oakland-general-strike-stan-weir>

like this with a whole set of preconceived slogans was way off the beam.’ Stan was working swing shift, and when his shift punched out at midnight they would go to the home of one of his friends from work for food. ‘And the politics that I injected into that group? I didn’t even have to try. It came in the natural course of life.’³⁹

A key idea in the life and work of Stan Weir is the informal work group as a basis of organizing and resisting, and his own life contained a number of successes of this method. This idea pervades *Lines of Work*. The idea is also expressed in the concept of ‘singlejack’, a term which originated among US rock miners to refer to the need for trust between two people involved in dangerous drilling – one holding the drill, the other working with him with a sledgehammer, but is used by Weir and Wobbly types to described close interpersonal relationships of trust in a workplace and the need to develop them slowly.

Later, Weir gained a PhD in sociology⁴⁰ and started a publishing house, Singlejack books, specializing in books on the subject of work. He carried out research on the effects of containerization (automatic ship loading and unloading) on the culture, consciousness and health of dockers (longshoremen). One effect of containerization, he suggested, was to isolate the worker, who no longer worked in a small group, and this in turn deprived the worker of any pride – or any need for pride – in the work, as well as making people simply unhappy from the lack of company. The development also affected relationships outside of the work itself:

And then there are the men who lose their identities in this change and drift into alcohol, divorce, self-destruction. As one wife told me, ‘he doesn’t know who he is. Before, he had all you guys every day to reassure him who he was. Now I have to stick pretty close to keep him going to AA.’⁴¹

³⁹ ‘Voices from the rank and file: Remembering Marty Glaberman and Stan Weir.’ Staughton Lynd, *Viewpoint* magazine, January 23, 2012. <http://viewpointmag.com/2012/01/23/voices-from-the-rank-and-file-remembering-marty-glaberman-and-stan-weir/>

⁴⁰ This biographical detail has practical as well as intellectual significance. As we mentioned earlier, none of the contributors to *Lines of Work* write for a living. This means that their stories had to be written in their spare time, of which they had little. By contrast, getting an ‘intellectual’ job provides the time to write and develop ideas through the written word.

⁴¹ See Stan Weir (2004) *Singlejack Solidarity*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press pp. 73-74. Available at <https://libcom.org/files/Weir%20-%20Singlejack%20Solidarity.pdf>

PART 3. ‘REVOLUTIONARY UNIONISM’ AND ANARCHO-SYNDICALISM

The main political framework underlying *Lines of Work* and influencing contributors’ interpretations of their experiences is revolutionary unionism. A number of accounts were written by members of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). In order to understand the strengths and limitations of revolutionary unionism and the anarcho-syndicalism with which it is sometimes equated,⁴² we provide some brief historical context.

Syndicalism in the USA: IWW

The IWW was a North American working class movement that arose in the early part of the 20th century. It favoured direct action and opposed political representation. IWW actions included daring assaults on capitalist production and circulation in the form of sit-in strikes, mass pickets and sabotage. 8,000 IWW strikers at McKees Rocks drove the Pennsylvania Cossacks off the streets in bloody gun battles. The outstanding incident in the early IWW history, the textile strike at Lawrence in 1912, started as a wildcat strike. Women workers in the Massachusetts textile centre walked out spontaneously, smashing the machinery of anyone who tried to scab. Even when the union was in decline, IWW members were instrumental in the success of the Seattle general strike in 1919. As a mass movement, the IWW itself was crushed by a combination of vigilantism, infiltration and outright state repression.⁴³

While European and British anarcho-syndicalists typically look to Spain 1936 as their inspiration and yardstick, North American anarcho-syndicalists look to their local heritage, in the form of the continued existence of the IWW, albeit now reduced to a small network.

Standard (communist) critique

The standard (communist) critique of syndicalism is that the syndicalist ‘revolution’ too often means simply taking over existing means of production (rather than abolishing wage labour). Workers’ self-management is not communism; it is managing these alienated and alienating systems in the interests of workers rather than capital. (Something similar is also evident in Stan Weir’s

⁴² We are aware that the IWW doesn’t define itself as anarcho-syndicalist, though many of the Recomposition group would see themselves that way, and that ‘revolutionary unionism’ is their preferred term. We have grouped the two together here, however, as the arguments fit both.

⁴³ ‘State of the unions: Recent US labour struggles in perspective’ In *Aufheben* 7 (1998) <http://libcom.org/library/us-labour-aufheben-7>

writings, where an aim is to 'humanize' the workplace and could be compatible with a vision of a 'humanized' capital - unless accompanied by a thoroughgoing critique of the nature of work and value.)

In practice, anarcho-syndicalism and revolutionary unionism more generally have been a somewhat pluralist movement containing both communist and self-management tendencies. On the one hand, for example, CNT communes abolished money in Aragon in the Spanish revolution; and in Germany the councilist and anarcho-syndicalist unions fought together and boycotted the councils together when they were legalized as co-management.⁴⁴ On the other hand, influential anarcho-syndicalist theorists like Diego Abad de Santillán propose co-ops and CNT members today advocate 'participatory economics' (Parecon).

Workers' self-management kinds of assumptions are expressed by a few of the contributors in *Lines of Work*. For example 'The question is how to build our struggle so that we can contribute to run the economy, but now for our benefit rather than theirs' (p. 128). But what is 'the economy'? It is the totality of alienated labours and commodity fetishism.

It might be argued that, while at a theoretical level the communist critique of anarcho-syndicalism still holds true, politically it might be less relevant. Since anarcho-syndicalism didn't succeed either in the USA in the early 20th century or in Spain in the 1930s and does not look likely to do so at the current time, when the class struggle in the West remains at a low ebb, it seems redundant to warn against the dangers of an anarcho-syndicalist movement diverting revolution into mere workers' self-management. There are other criticisms that can be made, however.

Ideological anarchists

In the first place - and it is only a slight caricature to put it this way - there is the tendency of what might be called ideological anarchists to see social transformation as a matter of converting more people to anarchism and therefore the strategy of getting people to see anarchism as a good idea. This is evident in the 'lessons' that some of the contributors present that they would like readers to take from their stories - such as that becoming

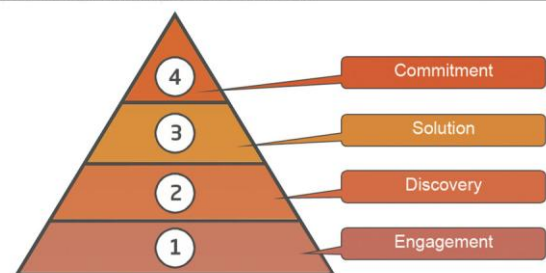
⁴⁴ In 1921, members of the syndicalist Free Workers' Union of Germany 'together with left communists again took part in an armed revolt' (p. 50, *Anarcho-syndicalism in the 20th century*

by Vadim V. Damier). Gilles Dauvé and Denis Authier refer to 'The united front of the anarchosyndicalists and the communists [in Germany] (November 1918 to May 1919)' in *The Confrontations: November 1918 to May 1919* Chapter 7. <https://www.marxists.org/subject/germany-1918-23/dauve-authier/ch07.htm>

a member of the IWW is the answer (e.g. 'I am now a proud and committed wobbly and am organizing in my current industry', p. 67).

The problem with this view of social change as 'having the right ideas' is that it is idealist in a similar way to Gramsci's 'battle of ideas'. Against this, we argue that ideas change in struggle; and ideas about the abolition of wage labour and the negation of capital make more sense to people when social relations change - especially when they bring about these changes themselves. If anything, the kinds of beliefs and ideas people need to have are not about ideal societies, but about the possibility and appropriateness of action for themselves collectively - and these ideas change through practice.⁴⁵

Sales Coaching For Supervisors



Groups

Conversion, for anarcho-syndicalists (as for many other self-defined revolutionaries), means becoming a member of a group. Not only that, but there is usually the expectation that one should try to convert others to the group and to maintain that group's membership in various ways. While all groups require maintenance, for political groups there can be the risk that the group's needs becomes a significant part of the form of politics.

This risk is most clearly seen in the Leninist party. Here the maintenance of the group is based on a strict mental/manual division of labour, where foot-soldiers are recruited to sell papers but have little say in the organization (and often burn out quite quickly). While anarcho groups are less hierarchical, both types of group risk ossifying into a political sect where they become detached from the struggles that give rise to them. It is at this point that the needs of the group for reproduction are placed above the class struggle that the group was supposedly formed for.

One of the contributors to *Lines of Work* makes the interesting (self-)critical point that, though he was at the time a member of Solfed⁴⁶ what he needed was not a political group but a

⁴⁵ See 'Theoretical criticism and practical overthrow fifteen years on: A reflection' in *Aufheben* 15, 2007.

⁴⁶ The Solidarity Federation, the UK section of the anarcho-syndicalist International Workers Association.

workplace group able to support his actual needs. The tension between needs brought on by the stress of work and a 'political' approach was so acute that he felt a sense of disconnection from the latter, which discouraged him from day to day 'political' activity:

'Political activity' was completely separated from my everyday life. At precisely the time when libertarian communist politics should have been most relevant, the opposite was true. And to be honest, the last thing I wanted to do with my scarce free time was go to meetings disconnected from my life' (pp. 41-42)

Practice

Perhaps what is more interesting and important than either the theoretical lacunae of anarcho-syndicalism and the risks of the dynamic to maintain a political group are some of the practices of people in anarcho-syndicalist groups, which may be beyond their consciously expressed ideas. In *Lines of Work* and in numerous examples we have witnessed and been involved in ourselves, we see how small groups of people (whether in the workplace or outside it) can have relatively big effects. We have detailed in these pages before how small pickets outside workfare-collaborating shops have been able to disrupt their business and ultimately drive them out of the scheme.⁴⁷ For example, Brighton Benefits Campaign and Brighton Solfed were one of those who were part of pickets of no more than five or six at a time that so intimidated branches of the multinational 'health food' shop Holland and Barrett that the shop pulled out of the government's workfare 'Employment Programme', whining that customers were upset by the group's presence.⁴⁸ Anarcho-syndicalist activists from Brighton Solfed were part of this campaign.

Some of Brighton Solfed's more recent activity has brought concrete successes for paid workers. In 2013, Brighton Solfed launched Brighton Hospitality Workers.⁴⁹ This campaign group aims to practically support workers through picketing and other actions. Some examples will illustrate their nature and effectiveness.

Last year a woman working in a café in Hove found that she was being paid just £5 per hour instead of the contracted £6 (both below the minimum wage) as well as being denied holiday pay. She contacted Brighton Hospitality Workers, who first wrote to the café owner demanding the

missing pay. When he failed to respond, a group picketed his café a number of times over a two month period, discouraging people from going into the café, and letting passers by and neighbours know what the café boss had done. The café owner tried intimidation and calling the cops, but even other local businesses turned against him (probably themselves nervous at an ongoing picket near their premises), and eventually he admitted defeat and reluctantly coughed up all the missing pay.⁵⁰

In a similar case, a grocery shop was refusing to pay a worker wages owed on leaving. This time, the mere threat of picketing was enough to make the boss pay up. There are a number of other examples of success from this group, and some campaigns are ongoing at the time of writing.⁵¹

In an account of two of their recent successes with Brighton Hospitality Workers, Brighton Solfed made this statement:

We are really happy with these two victories – both cases involved migrant workers, and we hope this money will help these two comrades during these days in a city where life is not easy for migrant workers. For us, the most important thing is the experience of solidarity and direct action that we have shared. This convinces us that we can improve our lives by staying together⁵²

Such small group struggles create not only solidarity within the class but fear in bosses and can deliver the goods for workers. And they were not used as recruiting exercises beyond the particular campaign. In Brighton, the group was so successful that they now have Leftist imitators.

This effectiveness of small groups in resistance then is both the best thing about anarcho-syndicalist organization in practice. Likewise perhaps, like these examples then, the main positive political effect of *Lines of Work* is not simply documentation but possible practical inspiration.

CONCLUSIONS

Lines of Work presents snapshot examples of workers' experiences of work and resistance in a

⁵⁰ Brighton Hospitality Workers: Carry on Picketing! <http://www.solfed.org.uk/brighton/brighton-hospitality-workers-carry-on-picketing>

⁵¹ Brighton Hospitality Workers: Dispute with Caffè Bar Italia enters second week

<http://www.solfed.org.uk/brighton/brighton-hospitality-workers-dispute-with-caffe-bar-italia-enters-second-week>

⁵² Brighton Solfed finish 2014 with two new victories <http://www.solfed.org.uk/brighton/brighton-solfed-finish-2014-with-two-new-victories>

⁴⁷ See 'The "new" workfare schemes in historical and class context' in *Aufheben* 21, 2012

⁴⁸ This was Solfed's national campaign

⁴⁹ Brighton Hospitality Workers launched <http://www.solfed.org.uk/brighton/brighton-hospitality-workers-launched>

number of sectors in North America (and to some extent the UK). It is not representative of the range of experiences of work, as it doesn't cover those where people find the work and their relations with colleagues rewarding. This would include many professional jobs (e.g., academia), as well perhaps as some of the types of work that give people pride (like jobs in the fire service).

Yet the emphasis in *Lines of Work* on the misery of work, division and the feeling of having one's life stolen reflects in important ways certain trends both in work and in the wider class struggle - or, to be more precise, it reflects the lack of such struggle. This makes for often relentless and depressing reading, and it may be wondered why the editors put the uplifting material at the start when they could have ended the book on a high note.

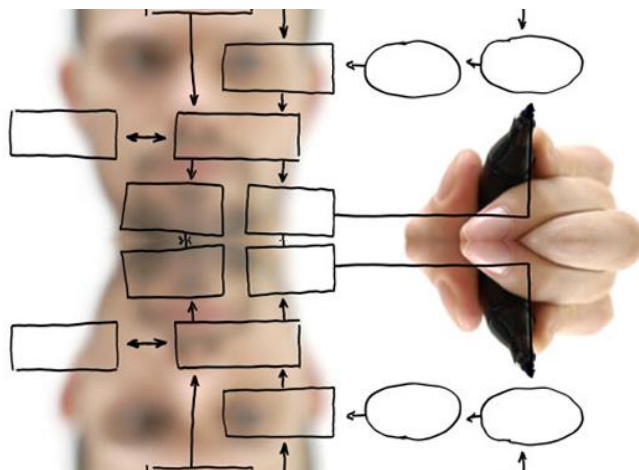
The examples of solidarity and successful resistance in the book can operate as a source of practical inspiration, both or political types and for those who do not see themselves as political or have little experience of struggle. However, it is obvious that people in the latter categories are unlikely to come across let alone read this book, which raises the question of the purpose of this exercise.

The book is of interest politically and methodologically. In common with militant workers' enquiry, it foregrounds the subjective aspect of alienation in the form of workers' experiences of work in their own words as something that should be documented. Unlike some recent examples of supposed workers' enquiry, however, here workers are talking about experiences and struggles in workplaces they were in anyway (out of necessity) - they did not go to these places to study workers' attitudes to work (and nor is there any formal research as such, such as interviews and questionnaires). Recomposition are not alone in this, of course, and there are numerous example of workers documenting their (and sometimes their colleagues') experiences of work and organizing at workplaces where they were working anyway (rather than going out of their way to get jobs in these places to study, agitate and organize), though not usually employing formal research methods. These cases come out of a need of those workers in these particular jobs.⁵³

However, one feature arguably that *Lines of Work* does share with recent examples of militant workers' enquiry is an emphasis on the workplace

as a site of struggle. As such, both might be guilty of a form of workerism, whereby they neglect other sites of struggle (for example reproduction) that perhaps today can be more important. Recomposition (and recent workers' enquiry) make the point that the nature of work has changed, and this is why we need to study it. But if work has changed, does 'politics' need to change too, from its fascination with the methods of the past (anarcho-syndicalism from the 1930s, workers' enquiry from the 1950s and 1960s)? If this is the case, do some of the micro victories in some of these workplaces matter? Some simply get reversed over time by the bosses in the absence of a developing workers' movement. Of course empowerment and developing confidence is a vital experience, but this too fades in time.

Even with these caveats, research from a proletarian perspective which serves to document at least some of the state of work and current experience can be a useful resource. Therefore we agree with JF when s/he states that the stories in this book tell us of the development of 'subjectivities ... [that] will populate struggles to come'.⁵⁴ It is a reminder of the roots of struggle - the reasons why people organize in and against work, and the relationships among people that constitute that organization. So, as a study of the subjective aspects of alienated labour, it might help contribute in a small way to the end of such alienation.



⁵³ Some examples: The call centre diaries, part 1 (2014) <https://libcom.org/blog/call-centre-diaries-part-one-11072014> Worker sabotage in a financial services call centre (2013) <https://libcom.org/library/worker-sabotage-financial-services-call-centre> Maid in London (April 2015) <http://maidinlondonnow.blogspot.co.uk>

⁵⁴ J. Frey (2014) Book review: *Lines of Work*. Unity & Struggle <http://unityandstruggle.org/2014/03/23/lines-of-work/>