

**WORKERS' INQUIRY:  
The Politics of A  
Method**

Notes from Below  
Issue 27  
Summer 2026

#### **Editors**

Jamie Woodcock  
Callum Cant  
Lydia Hughes  
Wendy Liu  
Sai Englert  
Matthew  
Dante Philp  
George Briley  
Roberto Mozzachiodi

#### **Website**

Wendy Liu

#### **Cover design and layout**

Bella Harter  
Dante Philp

[www.notesfrombelow.org](http://www.notesfrombelow.org)  
[editors@notesfrombelow.org](mailto:editors@notesfrombelow.org)  
ISSN 2631-9284 (Online)  
Print ISBN 978-1-0683586-5-4

## About Notes from Below

Notes from Below is a socialist journal written for and by workplace militants. We believe that when workers come together to fight for their own interests they don't just improve their conditions at work, but initiate a confrontation between workers and bosses that can only be finally resolved by a revolutionary transformation of society. The journal aims to actively contribute to that struggle of the working class against capitalism: an economic system that exploits us to make the rich richer and is willing to drive us toward total ecological collapse in order to do it.

We use the tools of workers' inquiry and class composition.

Workers' Inquiry is the study of work from the workers' point of view. The goal of inquiry is to understand our work better so that we can fight against our bosses and advance the wider fight against the capitalist economic system.

Class composition is a theory that allows us to analyse how the working class is organised at this specific point in time by looking at three key factors: the technical, social and political composition of the class. Technical composition is the organisation of lots of individual workers into a working class through the network of connections and relations that make up the whole economy. It is shaped by factors like how we produce value for our bosses, the technology we work with, how we are managed, and how our work fits into the work of other people. Social composition is the organisation of workers into a class outside the workplace, in our homes and communities. This is diverse and complicated, shaped by factors ranging from the kind of housing we live in, how we get to work, migration status, relationship to the state, how we buy our food, and more. Political composition

is a bit different, because we shape it: it describes the ways in which we organise ourselves into a force that can take part in class struggle. It includes everything from the tactics we use in strikes, the kinds of unions we are part of, and the political parties we support (or don't). We think that when we analyse all three of these factors together, then we get a better understanding of how militant workers can intervene in wider social processes to try and accelerate the fight against a capitalist system that is based on our exploitation.

This journal focuses on work for two reasons. First, because it shapes our experience of daily life: the working class reproduces the system every day because we provide services and manufacture goods that society could not function without, and yet the system doesn't work in our interests. This experience of exploitation defines the working class viewpoint. Second, because work is the place where we have the greatest leverage over our enemies. The bosses and politicians don't care what we think, but they do care if we don't do the work that keeps reproducing the system. Work is the place where workers feel like we can turn to our boss and say "I am nothing, but I should be everything."

Want to read more on workers' inquiry and class composition? Scan the code below to read *The Workers' Inquiry and Social Composition*, available also in Italian, Spanish and French.



# Subscribe

## Subscribe to Notes from Below now

Notes from Below is a journal for and by workplace militants. Our publishing model is only possible because of the help of our subscribers. Our model is simple:

£5 subscribers receive three print editions of Notes From Below a year

£10 subscribers also receive free copies of all the books we publish (or international postage for the issues).

But the key part is that every single issue sent to a subscriber will also finance at least two free copies of Notes From Below for workers in struggle.

Ready to subscribe? Head to [notesfrombelow.org/subscriber](https://notesfrombelow.org/subscriber) or scan the code below



# CONTENTS

- 1 EDITORIAL: WHY DO INQUIRY TODAY?**  
*Notes From Below*
- 11 HOW TO START A WORKERS' INQUIRY**  
*Notes from Below*
- 21 WHY CLASS COMPOSITION**  
*Jamie Woodcock*
- 31 WORKERS' INQUIRY IN A DIGITAL WORLD OF LABOUR**  
*An Interview with Paulo Galo*
- 45 YARMOUTH WORKERS' PROJECT: A TERRITORIAL INQUIRY**  
*Lotte and Dan*
- 59 "LITTLE SCRAPS AND MEMORY": LINEAGES OF WORKERS' INQUIRY IN THE UNITED STATES**  
*Patrick King*
- 77 A HISTORY OF WORKERS' INQUIRY IN ENGLAND**  
*Matthew, George Briley and Dante Philp*
- 95 WORKERS' INQUIRY AND IDEOLOGY**  
*Roberto Mozzachiodi*

# Editorial: Why Do Inquiry Today?

## NOTES FROM BELOW

“For me, the ultimate core of the workers' inquiry is the conviction that whoever wants to change the world must learn with the working class and its struggles, rather than preaching to it.”

*Paulo Galo, interview in this issue*

Every single working person has a unique understanding of capitalism constantly growing inside their head. This understanding is generated by our daily experiences of work, life, and conflict. The collective knowledge of the working class is a vast subterranean intellect: billions of different perspectives on everyday processes that, taken together, tell the story of the material base of society. But this knowledge is repressed. The ruling class can't cope with the reality it reveals. They can't handle the ways it helps us understand the nature of exploitation and the possibility of liberation. And so, working-class voices are silenced, both through the direct control of media platforms, and the indirect control of ideology and narrative. We end up thinking our stories don't matter, and that nobody is interested in what we know.

When we do hear from the workplace, the stories are often not our own: we might get a press release from a union staffer, an article written by a journalist, or the outcomes of academic research. Rather than us talking to each other about how we can organise ourselves, we hear reports produced by others, directed towards other objectives. But what would happen if we used this underground knowledge for our own ends? This is the question that sparked Marx's project of workers' inquiry, and it is one we still ask today.

The task of turning this knowledge into a weapon begins with sharing worker writing, because it's only by thinking through and sharing our specific experiences that we can start to undo the repression of our perspective. The actual content of this writing is vitally important because it is the material detail of how our class is composed in capitalism right now. It gives us the kind of concrete understanding of what's going on in our workplaces and neighbourhoods that is necessary to build a mass working class movement. But it's not just about the content: the actual process of writing itself also changes us. When we take our own experiences seriously and generate ideas through the hard graft of trying to understand and change the world, we come out the other end a changed person.

The effects of inquiry on the individual are multiplied at the collective level. A movement that conducts and shares inquiries learns more, faster, and produces new forms of subjectivity in the process. *Notes From Below* tries to be an infrastructure that supports this class-wide process of circulating struggles, developing alternative leaderships, and bridging the gaps between different parts of our class. We want to be a conveyor belt that takes messages back and forth between different points of class struggle, and in the process, to help prepare the ground for a subjective political recomposition of the working class as a force for revolution.

### **Inquiry and Revolution**

Our emphasis on workers' inquiry as a political method also relates to our theory of revolution. Unlike those who push electoralist, bureaucratic, or elitist theories of revolution, we do not see communist revolution as a process that can be carried out by a small, privileged group from the top down. It is only working class mass self-organisation that can carry out the kind of revolutionary transformation that we need. No one can act on our behalf or in our name. We must be able to fight and transform society ourselves, otherwise, the prospects of any revolutionary period are doomed.

Collectively, under capitalism, workers perform vital functions at different points of production, reproduction, and circulation. Conversely, to build a communist economy, it would be necessary to find ways to collectively hold and analyse the mass of technical

knowledge currently atomised across individual workers and workplaces. Think, for example, of just one object we will likely still need in a new, communist society: a bus. Just one part of that bus, the wheel, is made up of dozens of components: spokes, bearings, ball joints, a tyre, rotors, valves and more. Each of these components must be made correctly, or the wheel as a whole will be jeopardised. Many of these components will likely be produced using machines that themselves are made up of hundreds, if not thousands, of other components. The thousands of productive processes to make these parts also depend on whole other chains of other activity: logistics work that can transport the various material and components for construction; the engineers and tradespeople that repair the various parts of these factories, trucks and ships as they are worn down; the schools that take care of these workers' children so that they can engage in these processes; the agricultural labour that keeps the masses of people involved in these processes fed and energised each day. In this vein, issues #18 and #23 of *Notes From Below* platformed workers across our food economies and infrastructural sectors, respectively, documenting how they have begun to envision and organise for the transformation of their collective labour processes in the midst of declining state provision and accelerating logistical collapse that is reshaping the basic conditions of their work.

The wealth of knowledge required to understand and undertake these activities is already held by the working class. However, it is fragmented among billions of individual workers and millions of workplaces. Bringing workers together to collectively record and share their knowledge of how the current capitalist economy works and the problems it contains will be key to constructing a new, transformed economy during a revolutionary period. Workers' inquiry is therefore the method that can begin to lay the foundations for that practice: beginning with the actual experience of capitalist exploitation in the workplace, but also with the technical knowledge needed to transform society.

### **Inquiry as a Route To Political Recomposition**

At their most effective, inquiries go beyond producing knowledge and changing participants: they can produce a whole new political subject. At the workplace level, this might mean creating a new WhatsApp group that brings together militant reps and

members within a union branch. On the level of the industry, this might mean a rank-and-file organising group trying to coordinate independent activity across the sector. And at the societal level, it might mean a new kind of party or force in class struggle. Inquiry does this by creating a shared understanding of the class composition we face, which acts as the basis for the emergence of new political forms that correspond to the prevailing material conditions. Only by making questions of organisation extremely concrete can we start to answer them. Political forms that lose their connection to inquiry or similar grounding processes tend to drift, and eventually degenerate into sectarianism.

By comparison, the dominant method for achieving recomposition in Britain tends to consist of supporting aligned candidates for election to internal positions in trade unions and political parties. There is the hope that they can achieve their goals through a combination of willpower and tactical manoeuvring. New people are then recruited to the party or group to increase the power of these internal campaigns and reproduce the organisation overall. The progress towards recomposition is measured by the number of votes or members, rather than qualitative long-term shifts. "Politics" is reconfigured into an endless cycle of internal and external elections, with the point of victory constantly suspended after the next electoral horizon. For those groups and networks embedded in parties with parliamentary representation, critical analysis of the state is increasingly abandoned to sustain hopes of a possible social democratic transition, without serious consideration of the structural limits of such a project amid profound stagnation and crisis. Even when this model of electoral method plus social democratic politics is rhetorically recognised as insufficient, the reality that wins out is one of insular factionalism over programmes and institutional structure, with militant activity disappearing to the margins.

Projects of inquiry are one means of breaking out of these repetitive cycles by building genuinely mass forms of organisation across workplaces and neighbourhoods. A considerable network of social movements exists across Britain, approaching injustices of migration and housing through varying degrees of rooted struggle, with the place of collective inquiry into the specific conditions of production and reproduction often serving as a measure for their capacity to meaningfully relate to the environment around them. In this issue, Lotte and Dan of the *Yarmouth Work-*

*ers' Project* demonstrate how this dialectic has begun to unfold on a local level, as they think through the place local political militants might have in mediating and supporting working class political activity. There, a new class composition is emerging: state welfare has retreated, replaced by both increasing voluntary sector provision and an emergent far-right movement based in the exurbs. But at the same time, the town has also become economically defined by its position as a centre for migrant labour, turning out much of the processed meat that now fills Britain's bellies, whilst also acting as a thoroughfare for global capital. A precise understanding of the class composition of workers and the political forms around them is therefore particularly necessary here for sustained political activity that moves beyond detached sloganeering or the long-term depoliticising effects of deferring political articulation to our supposed representatives.

### **Inquiry and Political Forms**

We began *Notes From Below* in 2018 because, after years of organising in different movements and struggles, we found ourselves coming up against two problems over and over again. First, we faced the reality of a disorganised working class, fractured and disconnected from both the rest of the class and the revolutionary movement that tried to coordinate its most advanced elements. Second, that revolutionary movement was itself divided into political sects and micro parties, and had adopted various methods that ranged from seeing the working class as irrelevant to treating it as a recruitment pool or an inanimate object that needed external leadership. These two problems are related, of course. While the ruling class is always engaged in an attempt to break working class power, the response of much of the organised left has exacerbated these problems. As most of us know from experience, left-wing sects and parties are extremely effective at carving up national and local trade unions, as well as social movement activity. By extension, these sects are extremely effective at carving up, and thereby disorganising, the working class.

While we could wish away either of these problems, we have to build from where we currently are. We see the project of *Notes from Below* as a way to try to answer the existing question of organisation (or disorganisation) and to find new solutions to old problems. As Hal Draper argued:

"A political center has an enormous advantage over the sect's National Committee or Central Committee which issues directives, theses, disciplinary cases, etc. to its micro-empire of mini-branches. That is: the former's relations with local clubs, socialist groups, trade-union groups, workers' groups, and individual activists can be infinitely varied and flexible. But the latter's relations are dichotomized into two types: with members, the relation rigidified by the by-laws; with non-members, a relation hampered by an organizational barrier. After a first period during which a big job of preparation will have to be accomplished, we look forward to far more involvement with local cadres, not less – but in a quite different relationship, which offers new possibilities."

One of the main criticisms levelled at revolutionary sects by Hal Draper is that the structure of their organisation inevitably leads to substitutionism (that is, the substitution of a small elite's ideas for the revolutionary agency of the working classes). This concerns the way these organisations relate organisational structure, revolutionary ideas, and political practice. Firstly, these organisations have a formal hierarchy, meaning they "democratically" allocate positions, remits, and levels of decision-making powers. The central committee is normally the centre of all decisions and directives, but also, in a more nebulous way, where the sect forms its ideologies. Generally, these organisations assume that clear and coherent ideas concerning revolutionary strategy and political principles ought to be established outside of any given workplace situation or demographic constituency. The revolutionary sect, therefore, assumes that effective and coherent revolutionary ideas:

- Must be generated, regulated and expressed from a single centre.
- Must be in a final state, purified of residual markers of uncertainty or contestation.

This means the sect then tends to think of practice as a field of application for ideas, as a site that should basically conform to the ideas developed by an elite minority. If they don't conform to the ideas, there are always other ideas which explain the anomaly.

In opposition to this approach, we want *Notes from Below* to be part of these wider debates on revolutionary tactics and strategy

today. We do not have the right "line", nor are we trying to prescribe one. Instead, we are trying to cultivate a new political culture in which workers write about their struggles, share advice, and develop political principles from their own experience of specific workplace struggles. These, of course, need to be taken back to workplaces. The contribution we hope *Notes from Below* makes to this is providing the space for concrete examples of what is happening today. Articles often focus on specific workplace relationships, technical conditions, and emerging political compositions. Through this, we can try to link the generation of a new political common sense to the real world, rather than just ideas about the real world drawn from the classics.

We start with the recognition that actual revolutions require many millions of people, many discrete centres of activity, working things out, in practice, for themselves. This is also a recognition, based on practical experience, that workplace struggles have a life and logic of their own, almost always exceeding given models. Our aim in doing inquiry today is to try to support the emergence of new centres of rank-and-file activity and link these up into a larger movement. We need many centres that draw on lessons we learn in the class struggle to produce new, broader, more effective, and autonomous modes of workplace organising, as well as points of articulation and coordination. We want to disseminate agency, inventiveness, creativity, confidence, and ownership outward, rather than concentrating these qualities within a single central node. Only a political form that achieves these goals will be a suitable vehicle for long term political recomposition.

### **Inquiry Today**

Things continue to fall apart. The period in which *Notes from Below* has operated is one in which social democracy has increasingly broken down. There was a promise that working hard, studying, or making the right choices would lead to a better future. Many unions adopted a partnership approach, hoping that negotiations from above could improve employment conditions by collaborating with capital. These promises are dead. In their place, conflict is back, with rising unemployment and plummeting quality of life. In the midst of this unravelling, a new class composition is emerging.

It is in moments like these that new theories and new political forms are developed: the general strike, the commune, and the soviet were all produced internally to the class struggle, at a moment when an ongoing destabilisation was met by a wave of working class self-organisation. No publication acting alone can bring developments like this about, of course, but a growing number of projects today place the politics of inquiry at their heart, whether as stand-alone publications or as elements within wider political formations, and expanded international correspondence on our evolving methods and revelations is an exciting prospect for mapping the uneven terrains of global capitalism. What we can do, then, is try to support the conditions where such developments would take place. We do this by publishing worker writing produced from struggles, putting it in dialogue with writing from high points elsewhere, and so creating the conditions under which a political subject in the process of recomposition can recognise itself. The pieces that follow in this issue intend to theorise this method through their own experiences and histories.

In *How to Start a Workers' Inquiry*, we share a simple guide to inquiry, covering the basics of what an inquiry is, why you would want to do one, the kind of questions you might ask, how to start it, what methods you can use, and how to share it.

In *Why Class Composition* Jamie Woodcock discusses class composition theory, introducing how the framework operates and how it can be applied in practice.

The issue then turns to examples of inquiry in the real world. *Workers' Inquiry in a Digital World of Labour* is an interview with Paulo Galo, a Brazilian labour organiser. He discusses his new project, *Jornal Correria*, and how it uses video content to renew workers' inquiry for contemporary conditions.

In *Yarmouth Workers' Project: A Territorial Inquiry*, Lotte and Dan discuss how they have used a space in Great Yarmouth as a base to conduct an inquiry in a town that is politically dominated by the far right.

The issue moves on to excavating the history of the workers' inquiry method. In "*Little Scraps and Memory*": *Lineages of Workers' Inquiry in the US*, Patrick King explores how feminist

historians and anthropologists developed their own forms of inquiry across the 1970s and 80s.

In *A History of Workers' Inquiry in England*, Matthew, George Briley and Dante Philp explore how anti-racist, women's liberation, and rank-and-file movements drew upon inquiry to make sense of capitalism in England in the second half of the 20th century.

We end with a theoretical development that expands the ideas behind inquiry. In *Workers' Inquiry and Ideology*, Roberto Mozzachiodi interrogates how an account of ideology stretches and challenges class composition theory, and how workers' inquiry can dissolve previously solid ideological elements.

# How to Start a Workers' Inquiry

This guide is for workers who want to better understand their working conditions and how to change them. It explains what a workers' inquiry is and how to conduct one.

Workers' inquiry is a practical process of reflecting on your everyday experience and discussing it with co-workers. Those insights are then written down or recorded in some way. Most importantly, you can then use these learnings to take collective action.

You don't need to be a professional writer or an academic to use this guide. Workers' inquiries are best done by people working on the job. You and your coworkers are the real experts in how your workplace functions. Whether that is on the factory floor, in the office, through apps, in hospitals, in warehouses or in schools. The process of doing a workers' inquiry is as important as whatever you produce at the end of it. Many inquiries don't result in long written pieces. However, we do think it can be useful to produce something, whether it's a written piece, a video or a podcast, so we have something to share with other workers.

Start by reading this guide step by step. You can use it to help structure your thoughts and start asking questions. From there, you can begin documenting what really happens at work. We hope this will help you and your co-workers conduct inquiries for your own struggles.

Get in touch with us at [editors@notesfrombelow.org](mailto:editors@notesfrombelow.org) for further support or advice. We are always looking to talk to workers interested in doing inquiries.

## What is a Workers' Inquiry?

Workers' inquiry mixes research with real workplace struggles. The goal is to show clearly how things at work directly impact our lives. For example, a warehouse worker might describe their daily shift, how targets are set, how breaks are controlled, and how pay is calculated. A care worker might explain the effects of understaffing, long hours, and pressure from management. A cleaner might detail commutes at anti-social hours, racist treatment, and strain on their family life. By sharing these concrete details, we build knowledge about work, exploitation, power relations, and capitalism from our own point of view as workers. This clearer understanding helps us see patterns, find common problems, and work together to change them. It starts with people describing what actually happens on the job every day.

Workers' inquiries differ from other kinds of research because they are part of the process of organising at work. Organising means building a shared understanding of our position in the world and the real causes of our problems. It also means discovering ways of working together that will allow us to effectively address these problems. Inquiry is an important step in organising for many reasons. We collectively learn more about how and why the job and industry exist as it does, which gives us a better understanding of how to fight for change. For example, this could be: the leverage we have, how the boss is holding us back from expressing our views, or which workers are in regular contact with each other.

There are two different forms of workers' inquiry. The first is inquiry "from below". Here, workers themselves lead the process. Where possible, we want to support inquiries "from below." These often build deeper connections and insight into struggles in the workplace. However, it isn't always possible to do it this way. Where we don't have strong connections with workers, an inquiry can be done "from above." People from outside the workplace can use an inquiry to try to make contact with workers. This might involve using traditional research methods, such as interviewing, to begin the process.

We also encourage workers to start inquiries collectively with their coworkers. Again, this isn't always possible, especially in the beginning. Inquiry can, however, be used as a tool to meet other workers in your sector or workplace and turn it into a collective process.

## A Useful Framework To Get You Started

We use a framework called Class Composition to make sense of what we see in our workplaces. Use the three categories outlined below to get started. They will help order your thoughts and findings.

### 1. Technical Composition

This is how the boss organises our work for their own ends. When we go to work, we, as workers, are arranged (composed) in ways we don't choose. Most of the time, the way we are arranged enables bosses to make a profit from our work, to get the most out of our time and to prevent us from resisting this set-up. Here are some questions to ask yourself and your coworkers, which will tell you about the 'technical composition' of your workplace:

- What tasks do we do at work? How are these tasks managed and by whom? What types of technology and tools do we use at work?
- How is work divided between workers and different departments? How is our time and movement managed? How are our relationships with co-workers regulated? Why does our boss organise our work in this way?

### 2. Social Composition

This is who we are and how we exist in society, beyond the workplace. In society, we are also rarely arranged in a way we have chosen. Legal frameworks, societal norms, and national and local policies (among other things) divide us in different ways before we enter the workplace. To understand the 'social composition' of your workplace, you can start by asking:

- Where do we live and in what conditions?
- What are our migration statuses? How does this shape our lives?
- Do we have caring responsibilities or dependents? What do we do at home to prepare ourselves, or our family, for work again the next day (e.g. clean our uniform, feed and wash ourselves)?
- Are we part of community, social or religious groupings?
- By what means of transport do we get to work, and how long does it take?
- How does our gender define how and with whom we work?
- Can you access welfare if you lose your job, and health care if you become ill?

### 3. Political Composition

This is how we organise ourselves, as workers. Sometimes, there might already be a structure in our workplace that allows us to communicate our grievances and demands to our bosses. But even if we think that there are no forms of resistance or organising, that is also important to understand. To understand how your workplace is 'politically composed', you could ask:

- Do we have a union? Are people members of it? Are workers active or passive members of the union?
- How are workers collectively organised in more informal ways - are you in group chats? Do you meet up on lunch breaks or after work and end up talking about things you want to change or transform at work?
- Are there even small acts of resistance which happen at work? Are there tasks people say no to, or ways we refuse what the boss is telling us to do? Are there ways we can steal back time for ourselves? How do we express our discontent?
- Are workers involved in other forms of political organisation, such as political parties or community groups?

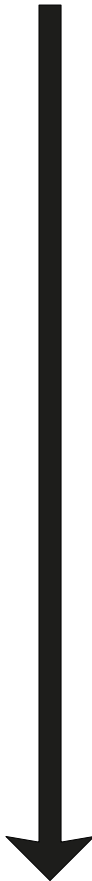
We call this *class* composition because we understand that workers are part of a class in society. The common feature of this class is that workers must sell their time, energy and creativity to another class in society to survive. This other class, the capitalist class, owns enough of society's wealth and prop-

erty that it can control how workers gain access to the goods and services they need to live and flourish. For this reason, workers have no other option than to work for the benefit of a small, powerful group in society, rather than for themselves. But since this situation is forced on the working class, and the wealth of capitalists is produced by workers, these classes are always locked into a struggle, which we call: class struggle.

From the perspective of class composition, we can better understand how the working class really exists at any given moment. Class composition shows that the working class is complex and always shifting, and that workers differ in how they experience being part of that class. It also reveals that capitalists not only control workers' access to the wealth they produce, but also shape how workers are arranged and divided, both in the workplace and across society.

At the same time, class composition shows that workers can and do resist in new ways. By bringing to light how the working class is composed in work and society, a class composition perspective can help workers 're-compose' themselves. This means workers arranging themselves in ways that break from the existing rules and expectations they are constrained by. For example, this might mean coming to work at a different time to meet workers who do a night shift, going to different areas of your workplace during your lunch break, speaking to workers who are not part of your team or department, or meeting workers outside of work and in their community.

This type of reorganisation can then have political effects on the class struggle. When workers organise themselves against the grain of what is expected of them, they take a front foot in the class struggle. This changes the balance of power of the struggle and the different levels of class composition. This can be seen with the example of workers at Uber:



Uber started operating in London in 2012. Drivers were hired on bogus self-employed contracts, and managed through an app.	A new technical composition
Uber would pay drivers bonuses to recruit other drivers	Technical composition
Drivers recruited from their own communities. This created a workforce that had connections and contacts with each other	Social composition
Drivers who recruited people felt responsible when Uber lowered wages. Workers formed associations and unions to support each other and fight back.	Political Composition
Workers went on strike often. They were able to strike easily and without notice (unlike typical workers). This was because of the technical composition of their work - they were on self-employed contracts.	Political composition
Workers fought Uber in court about their contracts and won.	Political composition
Uber was forced to employ drivers directly	A new technical composition

A workers' inquiry might not be tidy, and might not obviously reveal the state of class composition in the way we've outlined above. It might be that aspects of 'technical' and 'social' are difficult to separate out. In reality, these things are rarely separate in people's lives. But class composition should be understood as a framework which helps to analyse the results of a workers' inquiry. It can help to separate out and sort findings from an inquiry using the different categories (technical, social, political). This can make the information you collect from an inquiry easier to manage. It can also help you see relationships which are not so obvious when things are taken all together, and help structure the presentation of your inquiry.

## How To Start An Inquiry

Starting a workers' inquiry project can often feel daunting. Our everyday work lives are complex and chaotic, so where should we begin? Getting your thoughts down on the page is what matters most. Worrying about the final form your inquiry will take can wait. The right time to start is right now!

Remember: your experiences and insights are important! Often, people starting an inquiry think that the most important details of everyday life and work are 'boring' and leave them out. That's usually a mistake.

Here are some ideas that can get you started:

Start a **daily diary**. Each day, note down what you observe about the technical, social and political composition of your workplace

- You could: record the tasks you've done, the tools and equipment you use, who manages your work and any conflicts you have with your boss
- Compare these notes with your official description or the public perception of your job - what is your everyday experience of work really like?
- Every week, choose a new topic to investigate and focus on in your diary

Start an **Inquiry Group** amongst your co-workers, in your union branch or across your sector.

- Meet up to start reflecting on the current state of your workplace, the major problems, and how you could start transforming things. If you record your discussions, you'll quickly have the basis for an inquiry.
- Interview your coworkers to involve them. Or have a friendin-terview you about your work and compare it with theirs. What do they have control over that you don't?
- What changes are underway in their job or profession that are similar to yours?

**Think about change.** Workers' inquiry is a tool to help us organise together to transform our workplaces, so you should not limit your thinking to what is currently the case!

- What did your work used to be like? Who implemented the changes, and why? Do you have the power to make future changes?

- If you could change anything at work, what would it be? What is stopping this from happening?
- How could you change your relationship with co-workers? How could you get together to make change happen?

**See what else is out there.** Search online to see if anyone has written about a job similar to your own, and compare your experience with theirs.

- Could you tell a story about work that is different? What do these accounts get wrong about your job? Are they success stories at organising that you can use to think about organising in your own workplace?
- Think about jobs and roles close to your own. How is the work of others outside your workplace reliant on yours, and who do you need to be working in order to complete your shift?
- Read about jobs other than your own, and consider the key things that make them different, and what similarities might actually exist between them.

**Write little and often.** Regular reflection is more important than getting everything down in one go. If you do just a paragraph a day, you'll soon have pages of thoughts to work with. Soon, you can start comparing your daily experiences and notice both patterns and unique moments of conflict or tension.

### What Forms Can Inquiry Take?

Once your inquiry is underway, consider how you want to share it with others. Inquiry is a creative process as much as it is a political practice. It aims to open new ways of thinking about how to transform your work, exert power over your bosses, and unite with your co-workers. It is there to be experimented with. The outcome can be guided by how you want it used by others, or by the conversations you want it to help open up in your workplace or sector.

**A single, one-off document.** Edit your notes into a single text to share with others. This could be printed for your staff room or a union meeting (or published on *Notes from Below!*). You can publish it anonymously.

**A regular series of writing.** Share a series of shorter reflections about your work, like a blog.

**A digital inquiry.** Record videos or audio recordings about your experiences. It could be a podcast series or documentary.

**Photographs.** Share photographs of your work or those that represent your work. Write descriptions alongside them to explain why you chose each image. (We published a whole *Notes from Below* issue on photograph inquiries).

Inquiry doesn't have a start and end date, it is a continuous process. As time goes on, the conflict between us and our bosses always creates new questions. You will never have a complete set of final conclusions. That said, there will come a point at which your inquiry shifts from gathering information to generating answers. When this change takes place, it makes sense to start thinking about how to do two things with the information you've uncovered:

1. How to share it with other people
2. How to use it in your organising

It's very difficult to give generic recommendations about the best way to share and use the results of an inquiry, because it can be very different across workplaces and industries. A printed leaflet advertising a meeting might work brilliantly to share the results with workers in a specific hospital, but a podcast or email newsletter might be better for people teaching and working in different schools across a multi-academy trust. Fortunately, the inquiry process should have helped you understand the connections among the different parts of the workforce and how ideas can spread. It might also have started to suggest the next steps for your organising.

You might be surprised at how broad the interest in your results are. There are three potential audiences for an inquiry:

- Your immediate workplace colleagues
- Other workers across the sector
- The wider national and international movement

You are in the best position to reach your coworkers - after all, you work alongside them. But reaching those bigger audiences can be more complicated. You might find routes through your trade union, trade union federation, political groups, or rank-and-file networks. But we can also help. Get in touch with *Notes From Below*, and we can discuss publishing your inquiry on our website and publicising it to our audience.

# Why Class Composition

**JAMIE WOODCOCK**

*Jamie Woodcock is an editor of Notes From Below*

Work is organised by capital in many different ways. We may work in a large or small workplace, with lots of people or just a few. Some work involves a lot of expensive equipment, while in other cases, we might rely mostly on our own abilities. What we do in our work, where we work, what tools we use, who we work with, and how we are managed all affect our experiences of work. These differences can change the kind of power we have as workers, as well as the way capital has power over us. We know that teachers, factory workers, nurses, and delivery drivers all have different experiences at work, and that these shape how they can organise and struggle.

If workers' inquiry is a method to try to understand what is specific about our experience of work, "class composition" is a framework to try to make sense of what this can mean for struggle. Class composition might sound technical (particularly given that one part of it is called "technical composition"), but it is about the connection between our experiences of work and class struggle. In *Notes from Below*, we understand class composition in terms of technical, social, and political composition. This piece will address each of these in part, explaining how and why we use these ideas.

*Notes from Below* first published a piece on "workers' inquiry and social composition" in the first issue.<sup>1</sup> It was developed in response to inquiries we had been part of, particularly during the food delivery platform worker strikes. We were trying to make sense of the specific technical composition of platform workers, as well as their conditions outside of work, for understanding the widespread wildcat strikes. In the eight years since publishing that piece, we have used and developed our understanding of class

Notes from Below, "The Workers' Inquiry and Social Composition",  
*Notes from Below*, 2018, [notesfrombelow.org/article/workers-inquiry-and-social-composition](https://notesfrombelow.org/article/workers-inquiry-and-social-composition)

1

composition. However, we have not written anything more about it so far. Given the increasing popularity of inquiry and ideas about composition, it is useful to return to these concepts and the ideas that inspired them.

For us at *Notes from Below*, class composition is an important framework for understanding changes in work and workers' struggles. It is one of the contributions of Italian workerism, despite never being clearly explained or detailed in this tradition. This has meant it can be difficult to find an entry point into the debates about class composition. The aim here is to provide a clear account of what class composition is, as well as why you might find it useful for making sense of your own workplace or workers' struggles more widely.

### Technical Composition and the Details of Our Work

Technical composition is about the way our work is organised. It involves the details of the work itself, the subject of the work, and the tools and equipment we might use in the process. Whenever an employer pays us to work, they usually also pay for other things we need to do our work. Sometimes this can be costly or a routine part of the process. For example, there are no factory workers without a factory, its machinery, and the raw materials. Similarly, a transportation worker needs a vehicle and the infrastructure that goes with it, just as a teacher needs a classroom and teaching materials. These features differ across workplaces, leading to quite different work experiences.

So, how can we understand which difference might be important? We start with the process of capitalist production. Whether in a factory or an office, this involves a simple formula. The capitalist has money to invest (M), which they use to produce commodities (C), which are then sold for profit (M'). Marx called this the general formula of capital: M-C-M'.<sup>2</sup> This formula explains the cycle of investment and production in which money is turned into capital. Capital is invested to make commodities, which are any products or services produced for sale. There are two ways that investment is spent. First, on the things used in production. Depending on the type of work, this could include buildings, infrastructure, equipment, tools, and raw materials. This investment is also known as constant capital. Second, it is spent on wages, also known as variable capital.

2 See Marx's discussion of this in *Capital Vol. 1*, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch03.htm>  
3 See Marx's discussion of surplus value in *Capital Vol. 1*, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch07.htm>

We can use this distinction between “constant” and “variable” capital to think about how the workplace is created by capital. The “constant” part can only be recouped by the capitalist by selling the products or services that workers make. There is no point investing huge amounts in this if the capitalist will make little money at the end of the process. On the other hand, “variable” capital differs because it creates new value. Workers, unlike machinery, can create more value than we are paid in wages. This exploitation is what increases M to M' through the process of production. However, achieving this in practice is often more complicated than the formula might imply. It requires the capitalist managing the labour process (the way we do the work) to ensure workers work efficiently.

Technical composition is a way of understanding the relationship between constant and variable capital in the workplace. Both the relationship and the ratio are important because they shape our experience of the workplace. Fixed capital can be used in many different ways. Some of the tools we use are intended to speed up our work or make it more intense. For example, a new machine in a factory might increase the pace of the work. Similarly, digital tools can greatly increase the speed and volume of communication we are expected to handle. Many kinds of fixed capital are used to increase control over our work. For example, the assembly line not only increases the pace of work but also takes control of the pace away from workers, centralising it. This is another part of what we mean by the “relationship” between fixed and variable capital: how do we experience the use of this technology, equipment, tools, or whatever it might be? How do they change our work? How are they used against us? What opportunities or challenges do these features of the work introduce?

On the other side, the “ratio” (or, as Marx called it, the “organic composition of capital”) can tell us something about the dynamics of the workplace. Over time, there is a tendency for the proportion of constant capital to increase. Capitalists want to invest in new equipment to increase workers' productivity. They also want to squeeze the wages they pay us. It is therefore important to understand how and why constant capital is spent and used in the workplace. In a context of very high fixed or variable capital, this can change workplace relationships. For example, a very high rate of fixed capital can mean there is a lot of expensive machinery that needs to be put to use by workers to make

a profit. While this could push workers out of the workplace, it could also increase their relative power. On the other hand, a workplace with a very high rate of variable capital could mean there are quite different pressures. In both contexts, this could present new challenges or opportunities for us to organise around.

It is also worth noting here that constant capital doesn't appear out of thin air. We can think of variable capital as "living labour", as it comes in the form of our labour-power attached to real, living workers. Constant capital is therefore also a kind of "dead labour." It is the result of the past labour of other workers, often employed by another capitalist. For example, the buildings and equipment were made by other workers, most likely employed by another capitalist. Through these relationships, we are connected to workers in other sectors and industries – and potentially across the world.

In brief, then, technical composition is about all of these elements in the workplace. As we have argued in *Notes from Below*, it is 'the specific material organisation of labour-power into a working class through the relations of work.' In practice, this means examining different aspects that are common across work:

#### **The role of fixed capital**

- What is the workplace like, and where is it?
- What kind of equipment or machinery is there?
- What is the role of different kinds of technology in the workplace?
- What connections are there to other parts of the supply chain?

#### **The organisation of variable capital**

- What is the labour process and how is it organised?
- What interaction is there between workers?
- What is the output of the work?
- What forms of management and supervision are there?
- What is the wage or pay structure for workers?

Each of these aspects can tell us something important about the workplace. It isn't a schematic that we can read off different types of workplaces, but it suggests factors that might be important to focus on in making sense of an inquiry.

Thinking about technical composition means focusing on our workplaces as a site of capitalist production. Rather than understanding it just from the capitalist side, we want to analyse it from our perspective. It is a way of mapping the terrain of class struggle in the workplace: what is the balance of power between workers and capital?

#### **Social Composition and Our Lives Outside Of Work**

While it is crucial to understand the organisation of our work, it is not the only part of our lives in which we confront capitalism. The way we live outside of work deeply shapes our experience of work. If we only focus on work, we miss what happens between the end of work and when we have to come back. This is about how we feed, clothe, and house ourselves. It is about the care we give and receive, as well as our relationship with others. It is also about the way capital confronts us in society: the relationships that try to control us both inside and outside of work. If the details of our work matter for understanding struggle, so do the ways we live outside of work.

If work is about the production of commodities, then we also need to consider how we are reproduced as workers each day. At the end of the workday, we need to recover and prepare for work for the next day. To understand this, we can expand the formula from before to consider how we reproduce ourselves and others as workers. Instead of  $M-C-M'$ , this involves  $C-M-C$ . In *Notes from Below*, we explain this "general formula of working class reproduction" as follows. As workers, we have the commodity of labour power (C, the ability to sell our time for a wage). By going to work, we earn money (M) in the form of wages. After work, we reproduce our labour-power through the consumption of commodities (C), such as food, drink, and housing. These are sometimes called the "means of subsistence", the basic things we need to survive. Without access to these, we can't come back to work and sell our labour-power as an effective commodity.

Social composition is a way to identify the factors in our lives outside of work that shape how we struggle. It can include factors such as where we live and the kind of housing we live in, the gendered division of labour, oppression, patterns of migration, access to community infrastructure, and so on. For example, if we have access to stable housing and places to meet, this might open opportunities for us to organise together. However, if we are in insecure housing spread over the city, this might present additional challenges.

We first began considering including social composition after inquiries with Deliveroo riders. While technical composition provided a powerful way to unpick the roles of digital platforms and algorithms, as well as the workplace spread across the city, it didn't cover all the important dynamics emerging in these struggles. The patterns of migration and existing relationships within migrant communities were proving to be a powerful factor in understanding the forms of organising workers were developing. While capital more broadly shapes routes of migration, as well as much of our lives, this happens at a different level to the managers in our workplace. The reason for including social composition is that we need to take the experiences outside of the workplace seriously. We are not only workers when we are at work, but also in our communities afterwards. How we reproduce ourselves and care for others also forms the material basis for our collective ability to struggle. We confront capital in the workplace in very specific forms: the constant capital we use, and that is used against us. Our experiences outside of work might differ, but we can find common factors that shape our struggles.

### **The Leap To Political Composition**

So far, we have focused on the factors to think about in our workplace (technical) and outside of work (social). However, this is only one half of class composition, considering how we are organised by capital at work and in society. We are not passive in the face of capital. Political composition is about how we self-organise as workers into a force for class struggle. It involves factors such as the tactics we use in our struggles, the forms of organisation we have, and the expression of class struggle in politics. It is the collective experiences of how workers have struggled before, what has worked and what hasn't, and how that informs how we struggle in the future.

Our understanding of class composition is that technical and social composition lay the material basis from which struggles develop. It matters how work is organised by capital and how we reproduce ourselves outside of work. From these features, there are opportunities and challenges. However, the existence of opportunities does not mean we can take advantage of them, particularly if we are unaware of them. Similarly, just because challenges exist, that does not mean we cannot overcome or circumvent them. The technical and social composition lays out the terrain of struggle for particular groups of workers. It can also define who that group of workers are, as well as what their relationship to other workers might be. We are also fighting to change both that technical and social composition, while capital tries to do the same.

Composition changes, as it is both the terrain and the target of class struggle. Clearly, there is a relationship between the conditions and struggles of work. The reasons we choose to organise are often direct responses to those conditions. Workers don't organise against abstract forms of exploitation, but rather against the concrete expression in their workplace. Similarly, successful forms of struggle respond to the way our work is organised. For example, some kinds of strikes can be very successful in one work context, while they might have little effect in another. What works in a hospital is different from what works in a factory. What works in one kind of school might not work in another. However, what is common across both is that shared experiences of exploitation can lead to shared collective responses. The features of technical and social composition provide us a way to interrogate the how and why.

It is never as simple as one technical/social composition leads directly to a political composition. Instead, we argue that there is a leap between technical/social and a political composition. These factors lay the material basis for struggles to develop. How workers address challenges and take advantage of opportunities is part of the development of struggles. The movement from one to the other is neither mechanical nor predictable. It is a result of how our struggles develop. This 'leap', as we have argued at *Notes from Below*, 'ultimately defines the working class political viewpoint.'

If we want to change the world, we need to start with what happens in the workplace. If we can't improve our own conditions, even on a small scale, how can we even talk about revolutionary

change? If we believe that workers, because of our exploitation by capitalism, can become the force to overthrow it, how can this actually happen? This means taking seriously Marx's argument that "the emancipation of the working class must be the act of the working classes themselves." But this is no small undertaking. In our current moment of disorganisation, it can feel vanishingly distant. Class composition analysis provides a way to understand the potential in struggles as they emerge and unfold. By understanding concrete struggles in one workplace or sector, we can start to understand how that broader movement can come into being. It is about finding the first steps that workers are taking towards that longer goal. For those who want to participate in that collective movement, it can also help to identify where we put our time and energies.

In the leap from technical/social to political, it is also important to understand that the former does not happen in isolation from the latter. Successful struggles and new political compositions shape capitalist development. For example, individual capitalists reorganise the workplace in response to workers' struggles. The struggles of the past have shaped the workplaces we work in today and the communities we live in. Therefore, analysing class composition is always an ongoing task. There is no single answer. But we do have questions that we can, and should, be asking.

Capitalism continuously changes through class struggle. This changes both the terrain on which class struggle happens and the forms of that struggle. We believe that class composition is an effective analytical framework for understanding the concrete forms of work, community, and struggle. We don't use this framework just to document these, but because we want to find new ways to develop our struggles together.



*Paulo Galo.* Credit: Julia Thompson & Renato Maretti

## Workers' Inquiry in a Digital World of Labour: An Interview with Paulo Galo

### PAULO GALO AND MATEUS MENDONÇA

*Paulo Galo is a labour militant from Brazil and one of the most prominent figures in the country's couriers' movement. In the past six years, Galo has become one of the loudest voices on the radical left, calling for the left to return to its popular grassroots. His political formation began in his adolescence in the favelas of São Paulo, where hip-hop introduced him to Black radical thought. From 2012 onwards, Galo worked as a delivery rider, where his racial awareness transformed into class consciousness on the streets. When the pandemic hit in 2020, and platform companies tightened their grip on riders' conditions, Galo became a central figure in the national strikes in the delivery sector, Breque dos Apps, and founded the movement Entregadores Antifascistas (Antifascist Couriers). In the following year, Galo led the action that burned down the statue of Borba Gato — a colonial explorer and symbol of Brazilian slavery and colonial violence — giving birth to the Revolução Periférica (Peripheric Revolution) movement. The action led to his arrest and imprisonment, making him a reference point for a generation of militants committed to direct action from the periphery.*

*Mateus Mendonça is also a member of Jornal Correria and is currently doing a PhD in Sociology at Johns Hopkins University, USA. Previously, he was an organiser in the Couriers & Logistics Branch (CLB) and the Cleaners and Facilities Branch (CFB) of the IWGB Union in the UK, and a socialist militant in Brazil. He is affiliated with the Arrighi Centre for Global Studies.*

## Introduction

This conversation seeks to present, in a not-too-systematic way, some reflections on the workers' inquiry we have accumulated from incorporating these ideas in our militancy. Over the past few years, we have been experimenting and trying to understand how to adapt it to the struggles of today's world. Far from presenting a new or improved 'model', these are simply adaptations born out of our own experiences. Or, as we like to joke, from our new ways of creating new mistakes.

We can summarise these reflections around four main issues. First, in the current "gasified" world of labour, the workers' inquiry has been politically more effective for us as a "radar" for workers' struggles than as systematic research about a particular workplace. While the latter proved quite challenging, the former allowed us to build many processes of struggle and deep relationships with independent grassroots movements around us.

One could argue this would put us closer to an inquiry "from above", more focused on mapping (or "sniffing out"), building initial relations, and still looking to get access to particular workplaces. However, at the same time, our inquiries have been fully led and carried out by workers for workers, focused on producing knowledge about these different scenarios and connected to real processes of struggles and direct actions — aspects usually associated with inquiries "from below". In Brazil, where the labour market is marked by informality, multiple jobs, high turnover, and a strong tradition of territorial organising by workers, this flexibility has its benefits.

Second, historically, the workers' inquiry has been centred around written texts — pamphlets, magazines, journals, blogs, etc. We have consciously moved away from written outputs and focused on audiovisual media productions by workers, about workers, and for workers. In tune with the digital world we live in, our inquiry has produced mostly short videos for social media and has trained workers in camera operation, video editing, graphic design, social media posting, etc. This has opened many opportunities to connect with workers, professionally benefit the members of *Jornal Correria*, and significantly support the struggles we took up.

Third, for us, a workers' inquiry must primarily be carried out through the lived experiences of workers with one another, in their everyday lives, workplaces, and struggles. We understand that the political success of the workers' inquiry depends on this premise. Finally, more than a systematic tool or method, the workers' inquiry became for us a political compass, an attitude. It is a political project related to the goal of creating new forms of workers' political organisation, focused on a two-way exchange of learning and the patient building of relationships of trust among movements, rather than the eagerness to recruit.

## Conversation

**Mateus:** When did you first come across workers' inquiry in your journey? And why did it make sense to you at that moment?

**Paulo Galo:** After I got out of prison, I felt the need for something like that. I started appearing on podcasts. The left got more and more eager to pull me in, and once again, I felt that it wasn't the crowd I wanted to be with. I didn't think they were doing anything I found interesting. I thought it was time to return to thinking about delivery riders' struggles. Back during the *Antifascist Riders* movement period, we had a lot of conflicts with the group *Treta no Trampo*. They were very influenced by this idea of the workers' inquiry. They constantly brought it up in our conversations. Despite my many criticisms of them at that time, I thought they were one of the groups actually trying to do something interesting. And my interest in workers' inquiry was later confirmed with my trip with you to London in 2024.

What interested me was its obsession with getting workers to fight, in direct action, a belief in the popular revolt. And that was always my goal too — getting the riders out on the streets. And *Treta* had been very effective at that, you know? Both in the *Breque dos Apps* and in the "June 2013 protests".<sup>4</sup> So I started studying them, becoming a sort of spy among them. Something like, let me listen to these people, let me try and learn from them. So I started asking my questions, doing my own inquiry with them, got it? They had a good nose for interesting struggles, and I wanted to learn that. I wanted to develop a good nose for this too.

*Breque dos Apps* — literally "Braking the Apps" — is the name under which the platform delivery riders' movement became known in Brazil. Not a formal organisation, but a broad umbrella term for the general mobilisation and direct actions of these 4 workers.

**Mateus:** Was it in this context that *Jornal Correria* emerged? As a project to put a workers' inquiry into practice?

**Paulo Galo:** *Jornal Correria* started out as an attempt to make funny social media content for delivery riders.<sup>5</sup> To try to grab their attention and, from there, bring them into conversations in WhatsApp groups. But we failed at being funny, you know? It just didn't work as good media content. At the same time, in May 2024, the opportunity came up to go with you to London. There, we exchanged more ideas about the workers' inquiries. The *Treta no Trampo* already looked to European groups as a reference. There, we had many conversations with the IWGB. And we both came back to Brazil aligned and eager to do our own inquiries. We transformed *Jornal Correria* into something that would go out and ask workers on the street what they were feeling. It was a format that was already emerging on social media. The idea was to take political issues and labour news of the moment and put them to workers to comment. It was our first attempt at an inquiry. Also, letting ourselves be confronted by those workers, unfiltered. Above all, we wanted to open a dialogue with them.

I don't know if we were effective at "understanding the worker", but it ended up transforming into something interesting. More than an inquiry, it became a radar. A radar for finding where struggles were happening, or their latency. Over time, it also became a lightning rod for struggles and a tool to catalyse them. That was quite powerful. First, every week we kept an eye on the news, researching stories from the world of work — what are the stories of struggle? And we'd take those to workers on the street. Stories that the mainstream media wouldn't let reach the workers. So *Jornal Correria* was every week uncovering a different strike or struggle happening somewhere — in a weapons factory in Brazil, among public servants somewhere, at Samsung in Korea. This stuff the media would never let get to us. So we were very much chasing that. Strikes, stoppages, individual revolts against bosses, crazy stories, demonstrations, and so on.

Then, giving visibility to what people were saying, and we heard very interesting things. Some quite distant from the progressive bubbles. That's when we started running into news of various struggles happening close to us, in São Paulo. We started mak-

5  
For more about the *Jornal Correria*, see our YouTube channel at <https://www.youtube.com/@JornalCorreria>

ing content about them, always centred on the workers. This aesthetic of workers for workers is very important. So, for us, it was much more about the development of a radar, or even a lightning rod, than a survey or a particular workplace research. That was a stage we never quite reached. It just didn't really work for us in that sense. If something blips on the radar and we think, "there's something here", we would go hard, fighting like hell. And it worked. It connected us to people on different frontlines, and we brought more people in. The first time, we thought nothing would come out of it. Then, there were a thousand people on Avenida Paulista fighting against the criminal wildfires.<sup>6</sup> One protest unfolded into three, and that led to a strong connection with another active struggle group in São Paulo, the Guarani indigenous people of Pico do Jaraguá. And from that, we got closer to many other struggles and built many relationships. Other struggles started coming to us. People send us messages, tell us what's happening in their neighbourhoods, in occupations, in workplaces.

**Mateus:** Traditionally, and even today, the workers' inquiry has been conceived in the form of written texts. In the case of *Jornal Correria*, we chose videos for social media, which circulate, sometimes go viral. Why do you think this update was important?

**Paulo Galo:** Because I think the internet is our historical place. The *Breque dos Apps* started on the internet, through WhatsApp groups. And later, when *Revolução Periférica* carried out the Barba Gato direct action, it was also built around the image of Barba Gato going up in flames to circulate on the internet, on television, everywhere, among people. What we wanted with that was to grab attention and say, "look bro, we want to have a conversation with you about this." Our historical place is not that of the printed newspaper. My generation didn't have much intimacy with the printed press. The information that reaches us comes through the internet. In my own journey, for example, hip-hop, information, political consciousness, all arrived through audiovisual media, a CD, an MP3, a music video. And then that unfolded into maybe getting a book. The rappers talked about Malcolm X in a song, and then I could go and read Malcolm X's books. But what grabs your attention first is audiovisual media. So I think our historical place on this is audiovisual media, digital media.

6  
In September 2024, large masses of soot spread across the skies of several Brazilian states due to a wave of fires set by agribusiness in the country's interior.

The two national delivery riders' strikes in Brazil were very effective. The first *Breque dos Apps*, in 2020, pushed the minimum rate up from R\$5.00 to R\$6.50, and last year's from R\$6.50 to R\$7.50. But neither of them significantly stopped production. Both were an image. A load of riders in the streets causing a ruckus, and that moves society. Even to connect with more riders. It pushed the strikes further, too. It works as pressure on companies that don't want to lose customers or damage their image, their marketing. Because the people who are moved by that are also customers. The image is very powerful for moving people. That's the world we live in today.

**Mateus:** How do you understand the role of digital communications and social media in the struggles today?

**Paulo Galo:** I think it helps, and it undermines it. At first, it helps things gain traction and go further. But then it starts to get in the way, because it draws attention to things that aren't necessarily the workers' movement itself. It creates characters, like "Galos", "JRs", "Gringos", that the movement itself doesn't necessarily identify with.<sup>7</sup> So, for building initial traction, it's very interesting. But then it seems like things start going in another direction, influencers, competition. In that sense, it seems to get in the way. The first step helps a lot. Second step, it seems like it gets in the way, you know?

**Mateus:** What do you think the workers' inquiry brought that was most powerful to *Jornal Correia*?

**Paulo Galo:** Even though we focused on identifying workplace struggles, we found far more territorial ones. So it was much more effective there. Or maybe it was we who lost focus, since the territorial struggles came first. Recently, I heard that *UP*, up in Pará, put a sound car in front of a factory and started a strike from there.<sup>8</sup> Even against the local union. They found out something was going wrong inside the factory and had the nerve to park a sound car there. The workers came out of the factory and started a strike. In that sense, a "workers' inquiry" led them to a good inquiry, and they went hard, right? Maybe we got distracted and drifted away from the workplace focus. Or maybe not. Maybe that was always the point, to take the struggle into the territory.

7 movement.  
8 *Unidade Popular* (UP) is a Leninist revolutionary party in Brazil.

Some of the prominent figures in the Brazilian delivery riders'

Decree No.12.600/2025 was a Brazilian federal executive order that incorporated stretches of the Tapajós, Madeira, and Tocantins rivers into the National Privatisation Programme, without prior consultation with the affected indigenous communities. After 33 days of occupation of a Cargill terminal in Santarém, Pará, and many protests across the country, the order was revoked in February 2026.

The *movimento contra a escala 6x1* is a national movement demanding an end to the practice of six consecutive working days with only one day of rest. Popularised on social media by Rick Azevedo, a drugstore worker who gathered nearly three million petition signatures and took workers onto the streets across the country. One of the largest spontaneous labour mobilisations in recent Brazilian history

The times we did that, it was effective. It worked. My conclusion is that a good workers' inquiry serves to well position you at a place to go hard. Because you can't just go hard out of nowhere. With the transformations in the world of labour in the 21st century, it's very hard to know in advance where that place is. What's the specific postcode of this "factory"? I'm not speaking in abstract terms. Not every workplace is ripe or at the right moment for struggle. Sometimes, it turns out to be very different places from what we imagined initially, which is a good sign that we learned something with inquiry. The delivery riders' struggle is a good example that nobody expected it until it exploded. The indigenous struggle wasn't on our radar when we started either. Who would have thought that today, one of *Jornal Correia*'s main partners, a bunch of working-class people from the favela, would be the indigenous movement? They became brothers to us. Another example, *Jornal Correia* crossed paths with the "movement against the 6-on-1 labour regime" long before everyone else.<sup>9</sup> We had a meeting with Rick Azevedo way before anyone knew who he was. That's quite something. And that struggle ended up slipping out of *Jornal Correia*'s hands because there was no way it wouldn't, you know? It took an electoral turn, and *Jornal Correia* has a strong aversion to that electoral trap. So when the movement started showing it was heading that way, *Jornal Correia* stepped back. But even so, we still keep a very close relationship with some of the leaders who also stepped back due to the direction the movement took. The relationships remain.

**Mateus:** After all these experiences, how do you understand your relationship today with the workers' inquiry?

**Paulo Galo:** I think this tool has become automated within me. My antenna is naturally switched on. Collectively, we had various struggles that hit the crossbar of the goal, and that we can't put down to the workers' inquiry. It was our own lack of organisation, situations that made it hard for *Jornal Correia* to hold steady. We're still in the process of adapting this thing, of understanding what this inquiry is for us. But I use it almost every day. Recently, a left militant came to my place for a conversation, and I was doing an "inquiry" with him. These days, together with the indigenous movement, we called a struggle against the executive order nº 12.600/2025 in São Paulo.<sup>10</sup> And in the middle of the action, I was doing that inquiry too, exchanging ideas with people there, picking up on what they were feeling.

When I'm in the indigenous village, that inquiry is happening too. For me, the ultimate core of the workers' inquiry is the conviction that whoever wants to change the world must learn with the working class and its struggles, rather than preaching to it. Whatever we have to teach must be done through relationships, through the collective experiences of struggle, not through a discourse or a ready-made programme.

The inquiry that seems most effective to me is a silent one, you know? It's an inquiry through lived experiences, not a questionnaire. It's an inquiry that you're living. You're observing. You're exchanging ideas. You're not asking questions or doing the work of a journalist or researcher. When it feels like you're questioning, it feels like it's coming from the outside. But when you're living in the village, in the favela, helping people build houses, helping people with the everyday stuff, that's also an inquiry. That seems more effective to me than, I don't know, sitting down with people and firing a load of questions at them to write them up. For example, when we travelled together again to Europe last year, think about how it was when we were in Quarticciolo, in Rome. *Jornal Correria* was in a group of four people there - me, you, Priscila and Lucas. Think about how we discovered the relevance of organised crime to the dynamics of that place and their struggle. That only came out after days of living with those people. If we'd done a questionnaire and walked into Quarticciolo, we wouldn't have got that. We had to live those experiences with them, play football, eat together at the bar, earn trust, be there day to day to be able to understand that information. It came naturally from trust, you know? A questionnaire would have made people feel like snitches. They'd have said, "Are you mad? Me snitching on the crime to these sort-of journalist types? I'm out!" Got it? What are these people going to do with this document? So, in other words, it's not about producing a document. And that document could become incriminating evidence against someone. So it's much more about lived experience, about earning trust.

**Mateus:** It's very interesting to think of the workers' inquiry as more than a tool or method to be applied, but as a broader political compass, an attitude embodied by workers towards other workers and life. Is this ethnographic understanding of the workers' inquiry, more concerned with building relationships, also connected to your critique of the issue of the aesthetic of the left?

**Paulo Galo:** Yes, the first issue is that the left itself has become an aesthetic, a colour, a symbol, and above all, a discourse, a vocabulary (and a very limited one). And the working class is more than that. Wherever the left arrives, it arrives imposing, steamrolling with that aesthetic. In this issue, I even think the anarchists are doing better than the communists. And beyond that, which is more directly related to the workers' inquiry, the aesthetic affects this relationship and the communication. A left-wing academic or a traditional militant will often get stuck in their aesthetic, which sometimes arrives even before they do. The aesthetic is also part of the communication in the inquiry, or noise in the communication. For example, in our experience in Quarticciolo, would you agree that the information we got was because we had an aesthetic that worked in our favour? And that aesthetic built trust, you know? It was worker to worker. Young workers from a ghetto in Italy to other young workers from a favela in Brazil. And in that, we understood each other. "Oh, these are some Black kids from Brazil", "No man, these guys are sound", we started exchanging ideas. A football, some boxing, funk, rap, and boom — "Look, this is what is actually happening here, and this here, and so on." You know? Maybe with the aesthetic of an academic or a journalist, who could sometimes even be mistaken for a police officer, right? Government? That becomes something quite alien, you know?

So I think there's an aesthetic block there too. For this ethnography to work well... See, if you put an "old academic" in a delivery riders' hub, people would say, "Bro, what is this old man doing here? Something's off." Got it? And it would go cold anyway, same as if it were a questionnaire. That also needs to be taken into account for this workers' inquiry as lived experience to work well. You wouldn't put a Swiss person to do fieldwork in Angola and expect that experience to be complete. It's possible that, with a lot of persistence, patience, time, and skills, it could happen. I can even think of some examples of that, but it's hard. It's interesting to think that here social media can help. In the *Breque dos Apps*, *Treta no Trampo* used WhatsApp groups a lot to overcome this aesthetic barrier. In a message text box, you can just be another rider hyping things up.

So who better than the riders themselves to do an inquiry with other riders, got it? They're there watching, observing, living, working, understanding, listening, you know? But then another is-

sue comes up, the material problem. Who has the time and material conditions for doing that? So what do you do to solve it? "Professionalise" their militancy? Then other contradictions emerge: clientelism, bureaucratisation, and so on. No easy solutions.

**Mateus:** Beyond understanding that there is a way to approach struggles, there is another fundamental dimension: the timing. For that, having a sharp radar, a good workers' inquiry is key.

**Paulo Galo:** Exactly. We also learned that there's a right time to arrive at a struggle. You can't only show up when the "beans are already cooked", when the struggle is already set up and exploding. You have to arrive when it's time to "soak the beans". Or even better, you have to arrive when it's time to "harvest the beans" with people, so you don't come across as an opportunist. That's why a good workers' inquiry can sniff out the workers' disposition to make the beans, not just sniff out when the beans are ready.

That is too easy. Many times, by positioning ourselves in this place on social media, the radar also becomes a lightning rod. Whoever is ready to fight can call on us. They know we'll take up the fight without asking for anything in return, without imposing a flag or demanding membership or a card. Without wanting to push for growing our movement. But rather to spread the struggle. And what we gain are the relationships being built. It's very easy to come across as an opportunist, you know? Whether by arriving late, or by imposing an aesthetic, a flag, a badge, a vocabulary. So it is not just the way you arrive, but also when you arrive. If you end up arriving late, then you need a whole different strategy. And every single time we arrived late, we got burned.

**Mateus:** The question of building trust relationships, as a fruit of the workers' inquiry, became central to *Jornal Correria*. How does your understanding of today's labour world and this approach to the workers' inquiry help us think about the problem of workers' organisation?

**Paulo Galo:** We've been discussing how work that was "solid" in Marx's time, then it became "liquid" in the era of outsourcing, globalisation, services. And that was already a huge challenge for the workers' organisations. Today, in the platform economy, in

the hyper-volatile and precarious world of labour, work has become "gaseous". And how do you organise gas? Large and heavy structures won't do it. We concluded that what organises gas is compression. The *Breque dos Apps* needed compression, coming from various sides, until it generated an explosion that nobody controls. And if you try to control it, you'll get burned, or you'll kill its diffusion. Another conclusion we reached was that it was much more about finding micro-explosions than finding the great explosion, and building pipelines that would connect the gas accumulating in one place with the gas accumulating in another, and then another, and then back again, gradually increasing the overall pressure. That's our utopia, so to speak. Being able to have some handle on that and send the gas here, send it there, or perhaps gradually organising that gas towards a place and building a shared understanding that it could explode as, I don't know, popular revolt. You need an organisation that is light and agile to capture where the gas is accumulating.

And from that came the need to think about the problem of the party, of organisation. And what is today conventionally called "parties" has not been on our horizon as an organisational solution — it seems to create more obstacles than support for direct struggle. We felt that this model couldn't handle organising this gaseous work. So what would this party be like? This party wouldn't be a single thing. Perhaps with the situation as fragmented as it is, with micro accumulations of gas scattered everywhere, it's very hard to create a singular programme X, a manifesto X, an identity X, a colour and flag X, to work with so much diversity all around, you know? So the party would need to be what we are calling a "patchwork-quilt". So, for example, the movement against the 6-on-1 labour regime would be one patch, the indigenous movement another patch, the LGBT people doing something interesting another patch, the peasant people another patch. Stitching this patchwork quilt together is what we were thinking as the role of the party for this, got it? This understanding doesn't come directly from the idea of the inquiry, but the inquiry can help. It comes as a necessity of what we are living. With these struggles and relationships around us. What do we do with that on our hands? What we do is where this patchwork-quilt idea began to take shape.

**Mateus:** If you were to say something to someone who is getting interested in the idea of the workers' inquiry, what would you tell them?

**Paulo Galo:** There's nothing ready-made, develop your own. Make your own mistakes. We're making ours. If you make your own mistakes, they will also serve as a foundation for the future. And making consistently different mistakes will help us get it right faster. Because, generally speaking, nobody on the left is getting it particularly right. And worse, the left always makes the same mistakes. Because if someone were getting it right, we'd already have the model. So if nobody's getting it right, you can't start using a model — or using "*Jornal Correria's* model". You can study it and say, "look, these people were effective at this." "The people in London, from the IWGB Union, from *Notes From Below*, were effective at this." "The people from Into the Black Box were effective at this." "The people from Treta no Trampo were effective at this." The people from wherever were effective at this. But it's about developing your own experience.

What is mostly holding the left back today is people who keep denying other people's experiences, you know? You deny other people's experiences as if you had solved the problem. As if your party's program, your group, your trajectory, were the great solution. Something new needs to emerge. So really, make mistakes. Getting it right means making a different mistake, which isn't easy. Easy is making the same mistake. So, find a different mistake and bring your experience to the table so we can all keep putting it together.

And making mistakes is a dangerous task. Because mistakes generate frustration, and frustration is the fuel of the reformist sellout. The frustrated militant, with low revolutionary energy, accepts what's already there. Accepts the same old mistakes being sold as victories. Thus, you gotta be careful. You have to know how to manage that frustration because it feeds on your revolutionary energy. For me, it's about always staying close to younger folks. It's these young people with fire in their eyes that will reignite that fire in mine. And at the same time, having older folks to go back to. There are moments when you need to choose some older people as your teachers and, sometimes, the younger crowd as your teachers too.

# THE GREAT YARMOUTH INQUIRY

**Maybe your pay is too low, your boss is a bully, your landlord doesn't do repairs, or the council is useless.**

**Maybe the jobcentre isn't listening, or bailiffs are giving you hassle.**

**Maybe you love where you work and live, and you think the town is great.**

**Nothing is too small or too dull, everything matters!**

**Scan the QR to take part in our survey**



*Flyer for Yarmouth Workers Project's Inquiry. 2025.*

## Yarmouth Workers' Project: A Territorial Inquiry

LOTTE AND DAN

*Lotte and Dan set up the Yarmouth Workers' Project in 2025.*

The story of Great Yarmouth is not unlike that of other British seaside towns. Geographically out on a limb, the town sits at the edges of East Anglia, closer to Holland than London. It was once a major hub and fishing port for herring and trading, which fell on its fortunes in the 1960s once new vessels led to overfishing. The town's economy quickly pivoted to the oil and gas industry, and as a popular holiday destination for the working classes. These days the town has high levels of unemployment, high rates of crime, boarded up shops, and multiple neighbourhoods are ranked as some of the most 'deprived' in the country. In this sense it's far from unique against the backdrop of disintegrating towns across Britain. It's been a Tory safe seat since 2010, owing to the more affluent villages and rural exurbs that surround the town and make up the majority of the borough's population (70,000 vs. the town's 30,000). It was this same electorate that catapulted Reform to win one of their first seats in the 2024 General Election, in Great Yarmouth.<sup>11</sup>

For nearly a decade we have seen the town go through its cycle of changes: businesses shuttering their doors, successive waves of migrants arriving to work in the wider region's fields and factories, public services substituted with heritage "regeneration" grants and "business parks," HMOs ballooning to accommodate low-wage workers, the relocation of shops and supermarkets to retail parks on the town's outskirts, a newly-operational port, the seafront heaving in summer and deserted each winter, the British flags lining neighbourhood perimeters—like a modern day reanimation of the town's crumbling medieval walls.

For more info on these electoral dynamics in Yarmouth, see: /  
redherringpress.bigcartel.com/product/an-economy-of-startings-  
by-lotte-ls  
11

## Why Workers' Inquiry?

One of us began working in Yarmouth in 2017 doing community work out of a hub in the centre of town, which closed when covid hit, and then moved into a community engagement role in the health sector. The other lives and runs a space in the centre, which is where our inquiry is based out of. The space hosts a range of activities, including creative writing sessions, printing and publishing local writing, and a weekly self-organised homework club for kids in the local neighbourhood. The space is unfunded and unwaged: rent/bills are paid via memberships, whereby people in and beyond Yarmouth contribute a few quid a month, and in return receive a copy of every publication of local writing, and can use the space for free. Over the years the space has developed into a place where people in the neighbourhood come to socialise, and sometimes to ask for help with something specific (e.g. topping up a mobile phone, calling about a bill, etc). This pragmatic help has always been done on a personal basis, individually rather than collectivised; but through this, strong networks have been built around the space itself. This is significant in the absence (and closures of) community spaces in town over the years, and in that it tries to work against the very visible segregation in the town along nationality and language lines. Previously one of us had worked at a drop-in run by a local migrant support organisation, now teaches at the local college, and was involved for several years in a DIY space down the road that put on punk gigs, film screenings and other events before it was evicted. In a town you can be hyper-visible, constantly bumping into people, and naturally you get to know a lot of people.

We began the inquiry around a year ago. Inspired by the practice of workers' inquiry, we wanted to conduct in-depth investigation into class composition and working class experience in the town. We wanted to turn the process of reflection into activity in its own right, using inquiry as a tool to orientate our political organising rather than as an endpoint in itself; and to root our practice within (and as an expression of) this class experience. We felt that it was important to understand and recognise the material reality we find ourselves within, not only as we would like it to be. Over time we've found this has helped give our activity a sense of structure and purpose, and break us out of pure polemic or disconnected 'activism,' often based on romanticised or misinterpreted analysis that bears no real relationship to the conditions

we find ourselves in. Yarmouth has no shortage of academics who flock to study another 'left behind' coastal town, armed with their predetermined conclusions and no real understanding of the place. Enthusiasm or interest is not a substitute for time simply spent in a place, and our desire was also to formalise the knowledge, understanding and experience we had already developed over the past years of living and working in Yarmouth, and as a possible means from which a practical and conscious class politics can develop.

Long before Reform's win locally, we have continually returned to the question of how to orientate political organising in Yarmouth, attempting and experimenting with various approaches over the years. In these approaches we have always sought to be specific to place, and the town's particular material conditions—refusing to simply transpose strategies or priorities wielded in the completely differing context of cities. Yarmouth has lacked any notable leftwing presence (be that population, spaces, projects, or unions) since the 19th century, when William Morris and the Socialist League once agitated among the town's streets, attracting large crowds in support.<sup>12</sup> From the beginning of the inquiry we've felt it important that the process is experimental and open to flexibility—to learn from doing and to adapt accordingly, while at the same time continuing to articulate what we're doing and why. It is largely this tension between theory and action that has sustained our inquiry so far, as well as explicitly opened up possibilities we hadn't first imagined or planned for.

Prior to the inquiry we were already familiar with working conditions in the region's poultry factories, whose workers are housed in Yarmouth, often in HMOs via recruitment agencies. The residential base for factory work across the region, workers commute for day and nightshifts via long coach journeys organised by the factories. These workers (mostly EU migrants) operate in treacherous conditions: long hours, low pay, accident-prone equipment and unsafe clothing, freezing cold temperatures, bullying and harassment, deliberate manipulation of workers along national/racial lines to encourage division, and no regulation or oversight from labour inspectors. These conditions, and the relationships with people working in them, contributed to our initial thoughts on a workers' inquiry: this was partly because it felt like—despite workers being all too aware these

conditions are 'bad' and exploitative—they have in many ways been completely normalised, with a general acceptance of being 'just the ways things are' under capitalism, and can't be any other way (it's important to note that this comes on the heels of over two decades of factories firing anyone who so much as complains about their working conditions. We have heard from multiple workers of physical intimidation and "accidents" after complaining). As well as this, most 'solutions' when workers are inevitably fired (or simply not called into work, as most are on zero-hour contracts via agencies) are individualised: they simply look for another job—a strategy compounded by the widespread scepticism and bad experiences of mainstream unions. Before beginning our inquiry, we recognised within the factories the potential to help to create the conditions for self-organisation and self-reflection that encourages all of us to reassess our experiences—not to organise others, but alongside those we have initiated dialogue and developed relationships with through the inquiry.

### Workers' Inquiry meets Territorial Inquiry

We think of our inquiry as a territorial one, in the sense that it is deliberately rooted within a set geography, and while heavily focused on workplaces we have also attempted to explore aspects of life outside of work.<sup>13</sup> We chose this place-based approach, instead of an inquiry into one specific workplace or industry, partly due to the composition of the town itself. Yarmouth has high levels of unemployment, with large numbers of residents long-term out of work (many surviving solely on disability benefits), and a surplus population continually switching jobs while swinging rapidly between no work and working overtime. In a town this size, we also saw the potential to be able to map out the relations between industries: for example, the industrial laundrette that services the town's holiday parks and hotels.

We also wanted to get a better sense of demographics within certain industries. We were already familiar with the fact that the majority of jobs in the poultry factories were overwhelmingly worked by EU migrants (predominantly Portuguese, Polish, Romanian, and most recently Roma). But other workplaces were less clear: what about the supermarkets that line the outskirts of the town? What about the holiday parks—their cleaners, bar staff, receptionists, caretakers, security? Yarmouth is pretty geo-

graphically segregated along lines of nationality and language, and given this, we were curious to what extent workplaces mirrored this segregation (or not). In otherwise fragmented communities, larger workplaces can act as nodes, where people are pulled into a single location and a shared set of experiences. This line of inquiry could also serve a second, important purpose: to understand what shared material conditions might exist at the point of production, whether self-organisation and class-based affinities and solidarities already exist in certain workplaces (or could), and how they sit against affinities based on nationality or language lines. We also didn't want to reduce people to just their work. We set out wanting to have a more formalised understanding of people's housing conditions, their political beliefs, how they view the place they live, and what does, or could, make life good.

We recognised that organising around issues in workplaces like the poultry factories may actually be more readily approached in the neighbourhood first, than the workplace (in factories spread across the region). With high densities of workers from factories living in the same areas in the centre of town, there's an opportunity to begin building a base of organised workers away from the prying eyes and repressive practices experienced within the workplaces. With the rise of far-right support in the area—and the future potential this has for becoming a collectively organised force—we wanted to see whether shared material concerns at the point of production (the workplace), and to some extent the point of reproduction (the community), could be a way to simultaneously:

1. draw people toward a new political imaginary;
2. build class based affinities, as opposed to national ones;
3. to expand people's sense of what is possible;
4. offer space, resources and collectivised support to develop skills and structures for working class self-organisation (all while hopefully making small gains in people's immediate standard of living/subsistence struggles).

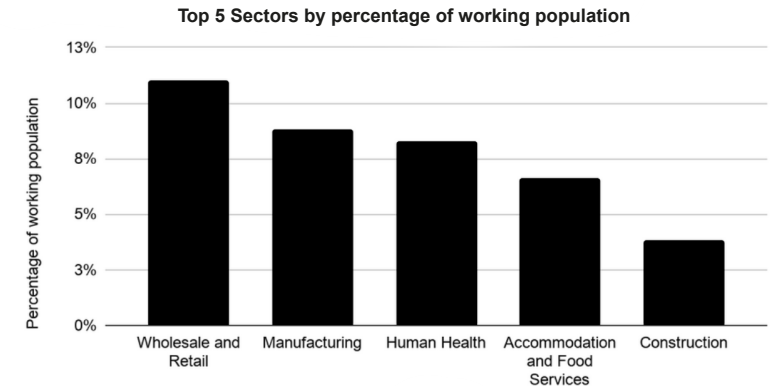
## Industry Focus

We began with sector mapping using the website Nomis, which provides an easy way to access census and labour market statistics. We reviewed the top 5 industries in each of the 3 electoral wards in town, looking at the percentage of people employed by industry, and then combined the data from all 3 to give us a picture of the main industrial composition of the town. Our original intention was to engage with workers from across all 5 of these sectors to try and gauge the composition of each. While we have managed to gain insights into some of these, especially Manufacturing, and Human Health, it quickly became apparent that trying to cover all 5 simultaneously was an undertaking too big. The plan was to spend a year data gathering, and then produce some sort of written account of what we had learned, to share with workers across the town and in similar places across the UK. However a year wasn't anywhere near long enough to do everything we wanted to, and in our commitment to experimenting and being present to what we found, we wanted to follow tangents and deviations that made sense as they came along.

We are currently preparing to shift a large part of our focus to the town's holiday parks (Accommodation and Food Service). This is for a few reasons. Within the poultry factories (Manufacturing) we have good connections and a good understanding of it, and we are now developing possible ways to support workers in organising (see below). Our focus with Human Health has been care work, and as with the factories, we are providing resources for organising among care workers. The challenge with this sector is that it is very dispersed across small care homes or individual houses, and the workers can be difficult to reach.

This narrowed our focus to Wholesale and Retail and Accommodation and Food Services. These both provide convergences of large numbers of workers. We have settled on the holiday parks because they are particularly representative of Yarmouth and similar seaside resorts, as well as playing a big (and potentially powerful) role in the town's economy—largely dependent on tourism—and are a prominent part of working class experience here. It's also good timing because the season is approaching and the parks are taking on large amounts of new and rehired staff. The people we have had less opportunities to engage with

are British workers, the same demographic that Reform and now Restore Britain are vying for the attention and support of. Workplaces with a more balanced composition of British and migrant workers, here the holiday parks, will hopefully provide more opportunities for using workplace struggle to build class solidarities, and challenge the narrative of surging far right parties.



## Methodologies

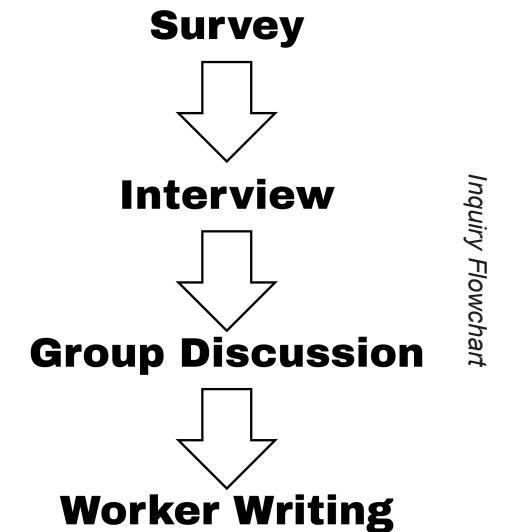
We have been using a range of methods to gather our data that run along a scale of involvement. So far we have conducted surveys, interviews, group discussions and Know Your Rights workshops, and are about to begin working with workers to produce their own writing. What we hoped would happen was that one method would lead to involvement with another, creating a natural progression through the inquiry for the people involved. We were also successful in applying for some grant funding from the Barry Amiel & Norman Melburn Trust to support this work. Our intention was always to conduct the inquiry regardless of whether our application was accepted, but the grant has made it easier to cover things such as printing leaflets, translation and interpretation, providing compensation (see workers writing section below), and producing a publication later on.

## Survey

The least involved methodology in terms of time commitment or buy-in, we planned for this to reach the largest number of people. It doesn't require any pre-existing relationship and can be distributed widely. We expected this would help us identify people who could become involved in other aspects of the inquiry (an interview, attending a group discussion, etc), and build up a wider network. This method of engagement was very time-consuming for us, and less impactful than utilising existing relationships we had with workers for more in-depth discussions. For the most part the survey did not produce the natural journey into other parts of the inquiry as we had expected it might, but in the instances that it did we were able to use this to prepare for extended conversations.

## Interviews

Using interviews has been good for a number of reasons. It has allowed us to tailor our questions to a specific industry and workplace, and explore points in depth as they emerge during the conversation. Where people being interviewed had previously completed the survey we have also asked them to elaborate on certain points. There have been times where people we've done the survey with have been confused or surprised that we would find any aspect of it interesting, and having these longer form conversations can make it clearer, and give more time for self-reflection as well as space to think about what is interesting about their perspectives on work. While we have engaged with some complete strangers in the inquiry so far (and want to further), everyone that we have interviewed up to this point has agreed to do so in part due to a direct, or indirect, personal connection, and we have found utilising these existing relationships and their wider social/work circles crucial for the inquiry. Despite the interviews being informative and useful for drilling down into specifics, they can still feel quite limited. The conversations feel isolated and only go so far in terms of politicising work.



## Group Discussions

Group discussion has been the most fruitful form of information-gathering for the inquiry, and knowledge/experience/skill sharing among workers. So far we have tried to bring people together from the same sector (e.g. care work) so that people have a shared frame of reference. These have produced much livelier discussion than interviews, with people bouncing off each other and sharing the things that they struggle with at work, or approaches they take to mitigate these at an individual level. We have seen impassioned debates about whether people should be involved in trade unions. These seem to have a lot of potential for developing a collective approach to workplace struggles. It can be difficult finding a time that works for everyone, especially with shift work and caring responsibilities. As with the interviews, it has been helpful to have existing relationships with people in the area: they have often joined as a favour, or with sceptical curiosity, but left telling us it was an interesting and useful experience, and have since attended follow-on activities (e.g. Know Your Rights sessions, union rep training).

## Workers' Writing

We are now at a stage where we've been able to identify people who may be interested in producing their own writing about their experiences of work. This has been challenging because it requires more time and attention than our other methods, despite being able to pay people for their contributions. We don't want it to be purely transactional, but we also want to acknowledge the time and effort put in given that we have the resources via the grant. To help give a bit of direction we're creating a guide, but we want the process to be as free and open as possible for contributors. We hope that the act of writing will be a clarifying experience, not just for the writer but also for other workers through sharing this.

## Know Your Rights Workshops / Rep Training

Not part of our original plan, we had the opportunity to host a Know Your Rights session for workers in Yarmouth last year, and felt that it could complement the inquiry. Our first attempt at a KYR session turned into an impromptu group discussion instead, but this was incredibly valuable. Although attendance was relatively low, we were informed that it had generated a lot of interest among workers in the poultry factories (flyers had been handed out at coach stops across town). Some workers came by the session to scope it out, and we were told that there had been suspicions discussed in the factories that the session was some kind of "trick" organised by their employers. As a result, we are developing these sessions to be a consistent part of the inquiry, so that people begin to recognise and trust them across town. These have also been a good way of building connections with other workplace organisers and union activists.

Alongside this we have organised some workplace rep training through IWW, which some people who have engaged with the inquiry so far will be attending. We know that there are already workers—for example in the poultry factories—who are doing casework for fellow workers, and we have invited them, hoping it will be an opportunity to build confidence, capacity and skills, including our own.

## Additional Challenges

Yarmouth is dominated by voluntary and public sector organisations (many of whom do good work if the goal is to mitigate immediate crisis situations). The problem with this for us is twofold. First, it's a constant battle not to get drawn into the ecology. There is a steady barrage of emails and requests for collaboration with a deliberately de-politicised sector based on service provision. Second, this sets a level of expectation among people living in the town. People can't initially distinguish between your project and any other charity-based project. This, in combination with a myriad of other factors, has led to an atmosphere and dynamic powerlessness, and a sense that if you want your problems fixed then the only way is for someone else (usually wearing a lanyard) to do it for you. While we recognise that a possible meaningful next step to expand a sense of possibility is to begin doing individual casework, which would likely gain some easy wins, this could very quickly spiral into permanent firefighting without ever having time to collectivise and politicise responses to these issues. In a town where you see the same faces on the street day in, day out, you could quickly become overwhelmed by people approaching you with endless problems, a very real occurrence for anyone working in the voluntary sector here.

## Reflections and Next Steps

We didn't really know what to expect when we began with this project, other than that we would likely have to make constant adjustments in response to the ongoing developments of the inquiry. We had possibly thought that it would be a succession of compartmentalised stages—with the inquiry first, and then there would be an end point at which stage the organising proper would begin. Instead we have come to understand that our inquiry would be tentatively forever, and that there's not always a clear moment where inquiry ends and organising begins, instead occurring all at once. A year in, there's a lot of positive developments for us to reflect on, but there's even more that we have yet to do. We have some short, medium and long term goals for what comes next.

A crucial missing element is reflecting and returning our findings back to the class. Up to this point the experiences we have gathered have flowed into the inquiry, but not back out again. It's

easy to get caught up in this side of things and lose sight of the need for these experiences to be amplified and returned back to workers to be used in class struggle. We will soon be creating a mailing list and WhatsApp channel to keep more consistent dialogue with people showing an interest. One good thing about a town is you're often bumping into people, but it can be just as easy for people to fall off the radar. We also want to begin producing a printed multilingual bulletin that can be distributed across town, with short writings on our findings so far, providing space for workers to share their thoughts and experiences directly, and promoting workshops and meetings. If we can get others involved in producing this with us, even better!

A natural outcome of our efforts so far is an evolving calendar of events, workshops and training. Upcoming events include workplace rep training, a Notes from Below Issue launch (on care work), and a collaborative Know Your Rights session with the Pan African Workers' Association (PAWA). Over the next year we will make this a consistent and reliable feature of the project.

To create a sense of familiarity and continuity across the various strands of the inquiry it also feels like the right time to formalise things with an outward facing identity, under the umbrella of 'Yarmouth Workers' Project'. Hopefully this can help contribute to producing a clearer narrative of who we are, what we're about, and importantly what we're not (e.g. charitable service provision). Long-term we hope that this can develop into a longstanding working class institution for Yarmouth in the form of a Workers' Centre, but we need to be in a position where there is involvement from other workers in making this a reality.



*Know Your Rights Training and Issue Launch in Great Yarmouth, March 2026.*

# “Little Scraps and Memory”: Lineages of Workers’ Inquiry in the United States

**PATRICK KING**

*Patrick King is a member of the Long-Haul editorial collective. He lives in Seattle with his family and works at a grocery warehouse.*

In the summer of 1977, Laurie Coyle, Gail Hershatter, and Emily Honig made the trek from the California Bay Area to El Paso, Texas. Coyle taught at a Head Start programme in San Francisco at the time and later became a documentary filmmaker; Hershatter and Honig were graduate students at Stanford University, specialising in 20th-century Chinese history. Coyle was the main Spanish speaker in the group. The trio would travel across the Southwest. The sand dunes and the endless expanse of border-country landscape stood in sharp contrast to the varied topography of coastal California. They packed typewriters, tape recorders, and their belongings in Hershatter’s Volkswagen Squareback and rented an apartment in the Five Points neighbourhood. Once settled, the women quickly set about on their itinerary in Texas: interviewing textile workers who had been involved in the 1972 Farah strike and documenting the ongoing effects of the action on the strikers “who initiated and sustained it.” The result was the 1979 pamphlet *Women at Farah: An Unfinished Story* – a remarkable combination of oral history, chronicle of worker resistance, and social geography of a border city.<sup>14</sup>

Also that summer, across the country, Louise Lamphere and several social anthropologists and historians who had conducted ‘shop-floor studies’ held a retreat in Connecticut. Lamphere was spearheading a research project in Central Falls, Rhode Island, interviewing and working side by side with Colombian and

Portuguese immigrant women in the apparel industry, as well as other migrant ethnic groups that had been living in New England for some time.<sup>15</sup> A loose network of feminist scholars had formed, dedicated to studying the informal work cultures and methods of contestation that women workers had developed in specific job sites, across several economic sectors. Crucially, many of these researchers were veterans of the political breakthroughs of the 1960s and 70s. The Chicano movement, the student movement, the feminist movement, and the rank-and-file rebellion that rippled through multiple industries served as resonators. The industrial relations literature, new social history, labour-process theory, radical print networks, and dissident workers' circles provided points of departure for their view of shop-floor antagonisms, acquiescence, and pushback.

Despite the physical distance separating these developments, they are parallel tracks in a longer story. With overlaps in personnel and interests while retaining distinct styles and projects, groups of feminist historians and anthropologists injected a dose of workers' inquiry into their respective disciplines. The upshot was a proliferation of vantage points and research angles. Over the course of the 1970s and 1980s, a time of tremendous change in the worldwide dynamics of capitalist accumulation, the groups launched a cluster of projects – some involving oral history, some participant observation, some industrial ethnography or workers' anthropology – that questioned what it meant to be working-class even as the prior coordinates of that concept were disintegrating.<sup>16</sup> While depictions of the labour process were front and centre in their conversations with workers across disparate settings, the investigators asked questions about what it means to understand oneself as part of the working class, and how that understanding changed over time.

During this period, the inexorable push of deindustrialisation decimated communities, relocated plants, and spurred explosive growth in light manufacturing and service-sector jobs. This process marked a profound transformation in the division of intellectual and manual labour, as well as in the relations of authority between employers and employees. It also sapped the strength of previous formations of working-class autonomy, above all, the enduring strength of small shop-floor groups that held sway over the labour process and the emotional atmosphere in factories or heavy-industry sites. Whatever material reality of

the family-wage ideology that existed had been undercut, and women were entering the unorganised workforce in increasing numbers. These feminist historians and researchers connected with workers who powered the recomposition of the labour movement into the 1990s. Workers like these remain at the forefront, but attempts to broadcast and promote their collective intelligence have been forgotten.

If today we accept that inquiry is always tied to microsystems of struggle and different layers of organisation, it is crucial to acknowledge the innovations of these feminist historians and ethnographers that made it so.<sup>17</sup> The relationships that workers built up on the job, which extended into other sites of social reproduction, were novel and fruitful starting points. Their work was a collaborative effort to uncover how unforeseen solidarities form, solidify, or dissipate. Class was not a premade constituency or a set of stratifications; it was a precarious coming-together of people's minds and bodies in cafeterias, break rooms, cramped apartments or living rooms, city parks, bars, on picket lines, or other spaces to effect change and take a protagonistic role in that struggle. More to the point: results of these studies have often shown that the process of class formation is fragile, specific, contradictory, and above all, temporary.

This work might appear outdated – nearly 50 years have passed, and new techniques and perspectives have been adopted and popularised. Yet it retains significance for us at Long-Haul, a small editorial collective that publishes grounded accounts of worker writing and whose members largely came out of the graduate student worker struggles of the past two decades at the University of California and elsewhere.<sup>18</sup> For our part, this work confronted the kinds of questions and tendencies that we regularly attempt to archive and circulate. Reevaluating it has affected our orientation toward inquiry in three ways. First, it has allowed us to understand how experiences are turned into narrative: how the daily, often underdocumented parts of working-class life (the social interactions, ethnic networks, personalities, and informal work groups) get turned into stories and memories that shape how workers organise in the future. Second, it's given us a way of thinking about the complexities of class relations as they actually exist in messy reality. Third, it's encouraged us to embrace a process of experimentation, trying out new things with the goal of producing a new class politics.

## “We Didn’t Let Our Chain Break”: Women at Farah and Cannery Culture

In El Paso, Coyle, Hershatter, and Honig turned a handful of contacts – parents of a classmate at Stanford, and a West Coast colleague who had participated in strike support – into 70 hours of interviews with approximately 30 workers, a weaving-together of follow-ups, friends of friends, and various other types of connections. This immersion produced a far-reaching inquiry into difficult questions about the intensity, complexity, and trajectory of struggle.<sup>19</sup> The Farah strike was a highly symbolic flashpoint for the US labour movement in the early 1970s, though it ultimately led to ambivalent outcomes. 4,000 Chicano and Chicana garment workers – sewists, cutters, machinists, and shippers walked off the job in May 1972 for union recognition. For several years, workers from several departments had assembled an organising committee and sustained a card-signing drive to join the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America. The company, a paragon of industrial patronage-style management in the region led by the buffoonish Willie Farah, responded with its own multi-wave attack of intimidation, reprisals, and dismissals. The strike lasted for two years, with a national boycott of Farah jeans that would seize the imagination of the US labour movement. While the workers won their union, disagreements with Amalgamated staff and the financial distress of the company would sap their capacity to sustain their culture of struggle.<sup>20</sup>

Hershatter underscores the simplicity of the principles of inquiry they adhered to: “following your nose, detecting what’s important, keeping your ears open, mouth closed, and approaching people with respect and curiosity.”<sup>21</sup> Similar to contemporaneous attempts at fusing oral history and labour history, the key was to pinpoint the “crystallizations of meaning” that endured after the immediate circumstances had long passed.<sup>22</sup> What were the moments, events, impressions, and roles that helped people realise their own power, and how did they hold onto them after the fact?<sup>23</sup> At Farah, for instance, the courageous attempts at organising, which resulted in rounds of firings, stuck with women who were not vocal sympathisers with the union yet nevertheless took part in the wildcat walkout.<sup>24</sup> Any inquiry that hit upon these questions required accurate reconstruction and painstaking elaboration. There were few examples to follow in balancing the demand for accuracy with a patient analysis of a strike’s

afterlives, what remained of this period of unflagging militancy. It is notable that their fieldwork contains elements of the “activist-researcher” figure prominent in the development of oral history in Italy, which in turn influenced the development of Italian *operaismo*.<sup>25</sup> In the perspective of anthropologists like Danilo Monaldi and Gianni Bosio, the interview was simultaneously an information-gathering process and a politically significant encounter: a learning situation.

The group’s emphasis was on social relations – not only in workplaces, but in neighborhoods, like the Second Ward barrio of El Paso where many of the strikers had grown up. There were convergences between the sense of community that close-quarters living arrangements and extended family bonds generated and the comradeship that strike duties fostered among workers at Farah.<sup>26</sup> The interviewers leave ample space for women to examine the relays between family backgrounds, earlier hardships, and the strike. They elicit vivid descriptions of how the complexity of border lives mirrors the interwoven trajectories these women embarked on before and after the Farah event. These reminiscences paint an in-depth portrait of the prehistory of the strike and boycott.<sup>27</sup>

Their framework advances the distinction between the “hot” and the “lukewarm” or “tepid” character of inquiry, as Gigi Roggero puts it.<sup>28</sup> These temperature-related metaphors designate the contrast between the sorts of investigations that occur in the midst of an unfolding struggle, when identities inflate and blur alongside an expanding agency, and those “cooler” conversations that seem to identify tendencies or possible lines of collective action that exist but are not always recognised. Multiple timelines intersected in the interviews that the group recorded on tape. First, there was the persistence on display during the early phases of the campaign. Hershatter, Honig, and Coyle candidly describe the underground tactics that worker-organisers resorted to in order to reach their coworkers: “Women hid union cards in their purses, met hurriedly in the bathrooms and whispered in the halls to persuade the indifferent.” The strategic approaches adopted in the lead-up to the strike foreshadowed the sociability and outreach that were so critical to the strike’s success: “The cafeteria was the heart of the organising schemes. During lunch time, workers circulated among the tables to sound out each other’s sentiments about the union.”<sup>29</sup>

At times it was evident where the Farah workers had undergone revolutions, deep-seated transformations in their day-to-day lives; other times, the answers would come back in fragments, to be pieced together or intuited from clues or omissions.<sup>30</sup> Their motivating questions were: where could the turning points in the strikers' connection to this struggle be located? How are they integrated within daily life? This focus discouraged and displaced the prominence of visible events and actions. It prompted a many-sided view that encompassed the diverse scales and arenas where the strike and the longer arc of organising could be discerned.

The findings by Hershatter's group, published in *Women at Farah*, are extremely sobering. By the time the three authors arrived in Texas, the power wielded by strike veterans at Farah had been seriously curtailed. Plant closures, layoffs, transfers, on-the-job harassment of shop stewards, grueling contract negotiations, and frustrated reform efforts within union channels, notably by the rank-and-file group *Unidad Para Siempre*, illustrate the obstacles that the committed unionised workers faced. By the end, the strikers "felt outmaneuvered" by a prevailing climate "in which the company set the terms and the union lawyers made most of the decisions."<sup>31</sup> Moreover, beyond Farah, the survey of the border economy encompassing El Paso and the nearby city on the Mexican side, Ciudad Juárez, revealed future patterns in labour market segmentation between Chicanos and undocumented workers born in Mexico that could be exploited.<sup>32</sup> Even auspicious pockets of working-class power, armed with trade union backing, faced hard limits in an era of runaway shops, sectoral reorganisation, and an industry built around curbing workers' influence.

The qualifications at the end of the piece are worth dwelling on: "While the Farah strike did not produce a strong, mature rank-and-file movement, it did help to create the conditions in which one can develop. The workers who made the strike were irreversibly changed by it."<sup>33</sup> This interplay between movement and conditions is an ongoing question for organisers. In a closing section, Hershatter, Honig, and Coyle consider the long-term politicisation of the women involved. A number of the Farah workers went on to become dedicated militants, branching out to show solidarity with local strikes or joining farmworkers' support committees. Some who left the textile industry resolved to

organise the nonunion shops they found themselves working in. Still others who remained working in the main plant were adamant that the aftermath of the strike only bolstered their resolve: "We were closer. We didn't let our chain break. They tried to break it."<sup>34</sup> Two timelines are in tension here. The expansive lens indicates how some women caught the organising bug and committed themselves to struggle in the workers' movement for the rest of their lives. The short-term lens shows that while the practices and social ties that came out of the strike and workplace organising certainly reflected a burst of common action, even an antagonistic working-class viewpoint, the concentrated effects were provisional and short-lived.

The life stories collected by the coauthors facilitated enduring connections, which served as the basis for continued reevaluation. Honig returned to El Paso in the early 1990s to conduct another round of interviews with some of the strike participants she had talked to over a decade earlier. What stands out when the women recall their years of pickets, solidarity tours, and crowded meetings together is the stress they laid on the fortitude found in discussion and chitchat: "During the two years that we were on strike it was pure talking, to communicate with each other, to chat with each other about what was happening to one another."<sup>35</sup> While this point leads Honig to reassess the function and place of narrative in struggles, which we will briefly return to below, it says a lot about the imperative of listening attentively no matter how punctuated the rhythms of collective action might appear, and finding potential reflections on that activity between the lines.<sup>36</sup>

Other historians would pick up the thread Hershatter and her co-inquirers laid down. In her 1987 classic, *Cannery Women, Cannery Lives*, Vicki Ruiz (a fellow Stanford graduate student) applies a comparable oral history framework to a past episode of labour struggle: the fight for unionisation and dignity by predominantly women California cannery workers in the late 1930s to the early 1950s, affiliated with the United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing, and Allied Workers of America (UCAPAWA).<sup>37</sup> Ruiz tracks the "cannery culture" that coalesced from everyday interactions and extended family ties, giving rise to peculiar lingos, lattice-like webs of acquaintances and familiar associations, and subversions of divisions of labour within plants. "Enough women transcended the barriers of mutual

distrust and wage disparities,” Ruiz writes, “that at certain junctures, the parallel networks met and collective strategies...could be created and channeled across ethnic boundaries.” The bonds underneath workplace cultures on the assembly line could likewise be forged through affinities with youth culture, gossip magazines, and Clark Gable.

Canning operations were so integrated into the timing of the agricultural seasons that the vegetables the employees processed were rearranged into new codes: a couple who “met in spinach, fell in love in peaches, and married in tomatoes,” for instance, referred to specific months when the produce was canned and packed.<sup>38</sup> At California Sanitary Canning Company (Cal San) in Southern California, streetcar stops became congregation hubs in the morning – and “in the course of commuting or on the assembly line, interethnic friendships developed.”<sup>39</sup> The peach fuzz that accumulated on the workers’ clothes was a reminder of this cannery work environment and the relationships bound up with it, a signal of solidarity in difference.

Ruiz goes further in demonstrating how labour organisers recognised and reinforced the durability and affective strength of these networks. Luisa Moreno, a seasoned activist who was union rep for Cal San, had already organised alongside garment workers, cigar rollers, and pecan shellers in other parts of the country. With cannery workers, she took a deliberate approach of learning the insider shop-floor language of cannery operatives, cultivating their capacity to think and act, and finding ways for women workers to invent their own strategies or trade union politics.<sup>40</sup> Cannery culture was an entry point for Moreno – it went beyond the small, informal groups that resisted speedups or imposed output restrictions in heavy industry. It was a veritable counter-institution, a force field of solidarity that connected not just work teams but the whole sector. It imparted a lexicon, a sense of collectivity, a set of fighting instincts, and means of self-organisation that directly challenged management’s authority and morals, imparting deeper associations to the meaning of workers’ control.<sup>41</sup>

## “In-Between Ground”

In 1978, Nina Shapiro-Perl was a PhD student in anthropology at the University of Connecticut, completing fieldwork in the United States on power relations in contemporary labour processes.<sup>42</sup> Shapiro-Perl was part of a cohort of feminist anthropologists who were undertaking “shop-floor studies” and grappling with the possibilities and limits of engaged research alongside working-class women, who had become leaders in labor and community struggles happening in the US.<sup>43</sup> She needed to find a workplace to conduct an industrial ethnography – and did, in a costume jewellery assembly shop in Providence, Rhode Island. There, she showed that participant observation in and of the work process was just as crucial to inquiries into the lives of workers as oral history and archival excavation.<sup>44</sup>

Rhode Island, the smallest US state crammed in the lower half of New England, was an unlikely hub of labour struggle in the late 1970s and early 1980s.<sup>45</sup> Lamphere taught at Brown University and worked at an apparel plant in Central Falls as part of the project which would become Working Daughters; and Susan Porter Benson finished her book on the historical formation of department salesworker culture while also teaching at Brown. The Community Labor Coalition provided logistical and financial support for labour actions big and small, the most prominent of which was the prolonged, hard-fought Brown and Sharpe Manufacturing Co. strike.

Shapiro-Perl signed on as a solderer in the setup and charge department. There, she encountered the seemingly infinite mechanisms companies have at their disposal to exploit workers, utilising the persistence of the piece-rate system to stave off attempts to improve their conditions. In an under-researched industry like costume jewellery, the very description of the work structure and labour process had significant stakes. Just as important, Shapiro-Perl outlined the methods and takeaways of the unlikely or unseen modes of shop-floor resistance displayed by the low-wage women workers in her time at the plant.

Shapiro-Perl followed a specific schedule for registering and recording the gestures, patterns, and declarations that stood out among her coworkers. She would observe what was going on

during a particular shift, survey the floor while completing her tasks, and, from those insights, figure out what the social relationships and attitudes among coworkers were like – who hung with whom, who protected whom, who didn't care for whom. When she went to the bathroom on break, she would take quick notes on scraps of paper in shorthand – often just a name of a colleague and one or two keywords for recollection. She would then shove these in her back pockets upon exiting. Later in the evening, she would sit up in bed and write longer, more detailed fieldnotes, on the basis of those little scraps and her memory. Eventually, she would collapse and fall asleep, to start the regimen over again the next day.

Shapiro-Perl observed that the “fight-back strategies” we find in the struggle for control over the “daily work routine” are a source of both leverage and accommodation, of discontent as well as loyalty. On the one hand, the activity that unfolds in this arena “does not conform to traditional patterns of worker militance,” yet nonetheless involves creativity, edification, and steadfast commitment. This “conduct is no less than a calculated defense of class interests based on an experiential understanding of class struggle,” an index of the antagonism at the core of the capitalist labour process.<sup>46</sup> On the other hand, the shared strategies that jewellery workers exercised within that labour process – pacing production time, manipulating the conditions around them through jokes and antics, tactfully refusing tasks – were still absorbed by management's grip on the production process as a whole. Supervisors could anticipate certain behaviours of resistance and redirect them. Slowdowns could be foreseen and offset. Because higher-ups commanded the overall “speed of the line” and work structure, they could focus in on particular areas of contention, like the piece-rate or cleaning duties, and chip away at complaints.<sup>47</sup> In the give-and-take between the broader conditions that forced most people to work for a living, the “open constraint and repression” which often caused the women to accept management prerogatives, and the informal habits, rules, and strategies workers deployed to negotiate, counter, or deal with these conditions, the former often won out.<sup>48</sup>

Other authors like Lamphere, Porter Benson, Karen Brodtkin Sacks, Barbara Melosh, Patricia Zavella, Susan Reverby, and the Work Relations Group, add nuance to this picture of work

culture across a number of occupations and job sites.<sup>49</sup> Porter Benson provides the clearest definition: “the ideology and practice by which workers stake out a relatively autonomous sphere of action on the job.” It is “created as workers confront limitations and exploit possibilities of their jobs; transmitted by oral traditions and social sanctions.” It is “very much an in-between ground; it is neither a rubber-stamp version of management policy nor is it an outcome of the personal... characteristics of the workers.”<sup>50</sup> Work culture exists in the social interactions and the connective tissues – personal, habitual, instinctual – holding workers together.

The knottiness of work culture creates snags in attempts to capture it. Brodtkin Sacks carried out what is described as a “co-analysis” with Duke University medical workers for nearly a decade (through two union drives). When she submitted drafts of a chapter on job tasks and daily interactions of data terminal operators to the workers she'd interviewed for comments, there was significant pushback. Specifically, her informants argued that she had overstated how terrible the working conditions were, and gave her a list of more than a dozen other coworkers to talk to. Brodtkin Sacks remarks that this opposition to her account “sharpened my recognition of the complexity of presenting something as seemingly simple as ‘a workers’ perspective.’”<sup>51</sup> It is not difficult to imagine that stumbling blocks could arise down the line in the always-indirect translation of work culture into organizing.

Decoding a shop's work culture can indicate the difference in scope and power between strategies that target the labour process in piecemeal ways and those that challenge the “larger social relations that govern production.” Workers are often caught in a grey area, between individual acts of defiance and careful, concerted, and inoculated plans of action. As Shapiro-Perl states:

“The greatest importance of the fightback over piece rates probably lies in the summing up of the struggle itself that has yet to be done... The fightback that the workers wage daily over piecework is not recognized as the struggle against management that it is... The fightback appears as an individual war to win a fair wage or an unsystematic group strategy that rarely gets off the ground. Summing up the struggle can educate the

less conscious participants to their existing power as workers, not to mention their potential power. It fortifies and propels the more advanced jewelry workers in their fight for a better quality of life."<sup>52</sup>

The costume jewelry industry in Providence would be decimated over the next two decades, a casualty of globalization, free trade agreements, and the availability of cheap imports.<sup>53</sup> But what Shapiro-Perl terms "summing up" among this small crew of women workers is where the significance of inquiry lies. It is conceived as a learning process accentuated by different tempos, incomplete understandings, unavoidable specificities, and pitched at workers whose own reflections generally go unnoticed and unrecorded.

The inquiry concept developed by the feminist historians and anthropologists analysed above is highly relevant to the kinds of writing and analysis *Long-Haul* aims to publish. We see our work as scanning three areas: the US strand of inquiry, scrambled class relations, and experimentation or coming up with new approaches alongside workers. The US strand of inquiry, in which the Johnson-Forest Tendency played a catalytic role, revolved around a circuit between experience, narrative, and collective action.<sup>54</sup> A worker recounts confronting conditions of exploitation; that recollection leads to an awareness of the stakes of workplace antagonisms; this awareness can be shared with wider layers of workers through publication, distribution, and discussion. Hershatter, Honig, and Coyle also interrogate the link between experience and narrative. First, it matters *when and how* a particular experience happens in a person's life. Second, a lesson or point cannot be simply extracted from an account – it will be full of contradictions, gaps, and impasses. Such pitfalls and problems predictably continue to trouble those who take the concept of "consciousness" as paradigmatic today.<sup>55</sup>

A recasting of class politics requires acknowledging that "class" is not a panacea or a solution to everything. It is something that has to be investigated and reconstructed from the elements of work culture and the neighborhood or family situation, which seep into the immediate job setting that workers experience individually and collectively. Patricia Zavella, in her account of San Joaquin Valley cannery operatives, cites one woman on her

ambivalent relationship to her coworkers: "You have this abnormal intimacy. You make friends with people who are totally different than you, just because you work together."<sup>56</sup> Sometimes segregation is maintained, sometimes it is torn down, and these can occur in a single workplace. Particular job posts can unlock lines of communication with various areas of a store or facility.<sup>57</sup> Where do "crosscuts," or opportunities, exist for overturning the routine despotism of management and glimpsing genuine alternatives?<sup>58</sup>

Though still a relatively new project, *Long-Haul*, across its first issues, has carried work that reflects this tradition of inquiry in several ways. The magazine has sought to operate in multiple historical registers and streams of bottom-up communication networks. It has attempted to revive and retool an oral history approach with an emphasis on "fieldwork." Archival projects are adjusted and tweaked, not for their own sake, but in light of present struggles. This piece on the innovations of militant inquiry in the 1970s and 1980s is one small contribution among the many required for an adequate understanding of the tasks ahead.

## Endnotes for “Little Scraps and Memory”: Lineages of Workers’ Inquiry in the US

14. Notably published by the El Paso chapter of REFORMA, an autonomous group within the American Library Association that seeks to circulate and promote Spanish-language materials.
15. Louise Lamphere, *From Working Daughters to Working Mothers: Immigrant Women in an Industrial New England Community* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 4. Lamphere gives a succinct overview of this literature and research stream in “Bringing the Family to Work: Women’s Culture on the Shop Floor,” *Feminist Studies* 11, no. 3 (Autumn 1985): 519-540.
16. Louise Lamphere, “Bringing the Family to Work: Women’s Culture on the Shop Floor,” *Feminist Studies* 11, no. 3 (1985).
17. Sergio Bologna and Patrick Cuninghame, “For an Analysis of Autonomia: An Interview with Sergio Bologna,” *Left History* 7, no. 2 (2000): 89-102.
18. See [www.longhaulmag.com](http://www.longhaulmag.com)
19. Much of this account stems from conversations with Gail Hershatter over the course of fall 2025.
20. See Gabriel Solis, “Farah’s Fifty Years Later: A History of Class Struggle in the Borderlands,” *Spectre*, June 16, 2022.
21. Interview with Gail Hershatter.
22. See Peter Friedlander, *The Emergence of a UAW Local, 1936-1939* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1975), xxv. See also Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, James Leloudis, Robert Korstad, Mart Murphy, Lu Annn Jones, Christopher R. Daly, *Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987).
23. See Bruno Cartosio, “Note e documenti sugli Industrial Workers of the World,” *Primo Maggio* no. 1 (1973): 43-56.
24. Hershatter et al., 126-7. The walkout itself was inspired by reprisals that had occurred at the SAn Antonio Farah plant, and word had trickled back to El Paso
25. See Alessandro Portelli, “Oral History in Italy,” in *Oral History: An Interdisciplinary Anthology*.
26. For a dissection of a historical example that has rich resonances, see Ardis Cameron, “Bread and Roses Revisited: Women’s Culture and Working-Class Activism in the Lawrence Strike of 1912,” in *Women, Work & Protest: A Century of U.S. Women’s Labor History* (London: Routledge, 1987), 42-61.
27. See Hershatter et al, 121-125.

28. Gigi Roggero, “Notes on Framing and Re-inventing Co-research,” *Ephemera* 14, no. 3 (August 2014): 515-523. Available at <https://ephemerajournal.org/contribution/notes-framing-and-re-inventing-co-resseemearch>.
29. Hershatter et al., “Women at Farah,” 126.
30. Hershatter notably encountered similar patterns in her oral histories of women in post-revolutionary China. See Gail Hershatter, *The Gender of Memory: Rural Women and China’s Collective Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), and Hershatter and Honig’s first books: Gail Hershatter, *The Workers of Tianjin, 1900-1949* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1986); and Emily Honig, *Sisters and Strangers: Women in the Shanghai Cotton Mills, 1919-1949* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1986).
31. Hershatter et al., “Women at Farah,” 137.
32. For an analysis of the maquiladoras in Juárez, see Maria Patricia Fernandez-Kelly, *For We Are Sold, I and My People: Women and Industry in Mexico’s Frontier* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1983). Lourdes Arguelles conducted an explicitly militant inquiry among undocumented women workers in Arizona, California, and New Mexico in the late 1970s: see Lourdes Arguello, “Undocumented Female Labor in the United States Southwest: An Essay on Migration, Consciousness, Oppression and Struggle,” in *Between Borders: Essays on Mexicana/Chicana History*, ed. Adelaida R. Del Castillo (Encino: Floricante Press, 1990), 299-312.
33. Hershatter et al., “Women at Farah,” 143.
34. Hershatter et al., “Women at Farah,” 139.
35. Emily Honig, “Striking Lives: Oral History and the Politics of Memory,” *Journal of Women’s History* 9.1 (Spring 1997): 139-57. See also Honig, “Women at Farah Revisited: Political Mobilization and Its Aftermath among Chicana Workers in El Paso, Texas, 1972-1992,” *Feminist Studies* 22, no. 2 (Summer 1996): 425-452.
36. See Michel Pialoux, *Le temps d’écouter: Enquêtes sur les métamorphoses de la classe ouvrière* (Paris: Éditions Raisons d’Agir, 2019).
37. Vicki Ruiz, *Cannery Women, Cannery Lives: Mexican Women, Unionization, and The California Food Processing Industry, 1930-1950* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1987). Other studies could be cited here, like Thomas Dublin’s *Women at Work*, an influentimeaningal account of the 19th century Lowell Mill workers.
38. Ruiz, *Cannery Women, Cannery Lives*, 35-39.
39. Ruiz, *Cannery Women, Cannery Lives*, 71.
40. Interview with Vicki Ruiz in November 2025; see also *Cannery Women, Cannery Lives*, 78-84. *Out of the Shadows*, 81-82.
41. See David Montgomery on earlier instances where the impact of informal work groups could be felt, in *Workers’ Control in America: Studies in the History of Work*,

Technology, and Labor Struggles (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 102, 104. See also *Cannery Women, Cannery Lives*, 21-39.

42. The contextual information on Shapiro-Perl's participant observation study comes from a personal interview with her in November 2025. Shapiro-Perl later went on to work in the communications department for SEIU, producing documentaries such as *Si Se Puede*, an account of the Justice for Janitors campaign in Los Angeles with a focus on the Battle of Century City. She later co-directed the Community Voice Project, a digital storytelling effort of neighborhood-level organic leaders in Washington, DC. Shapiro-Perl previously met with Ann Bookman who had recently completed fieldwork in an electronics factory, to discuss the upshots of these embedded inquiries into working-class life and the concept of workplace culture. Ann Bookman, personal email, April 2026.

43. I thank Ann Bookman for locating key moments in the work of these feminist anthropologists: the symposium "US Women and Resistance in the Workplace and the Community," organized by Sandra Morgen for the 1984 American Anthropological Association Annual meeting; the Spring 1985 meeting held at the Bunting Institute of Radcliffe College, convened by Morgen and Bookman, which brought together the participants from the 1984 symposium for further discussion; and the subsequent release of the collection *Women and the Politics of Empowerment*, ed. Ann Bookman and Sandra Morgen (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988). Bookman's doctoral dissertation, "The Process of Political Socialization Among Women and Immigrant Workers: A Case Study of Unionization in the Electronics Industry," Harvard University, 197, was a highly influential reference point for many writers in this milieu. A condensed version can be found in Ann Bookman, "Unionization in an Electronics Factory: The Interplay of Gender, Ethnicity, and Class," *Women and the Politics of Empowerment*, 159-179.

44. I owe the phrase "inquiry into the lives of workers" to Gail Hershatter.

45. Paul Buhle has been a tireless chronicler of this radical orientation of the Rhode Island labour movement. See Paul Buhle, "The End of the Craftsmen's Era: The Brown & Sharpe Strike, A Journalist's Report from 1982," in *From the Knights of Labor to the New World Order: Essays on Labor of Culture* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1997), 127-31, and his *Working Lives: An Oral History of Rhode Island Labor* (Providence: Rhode Island Historical Society, 1987); *A History of Rhode Island Working People*, eds. Paul Buhle, Scott Molloy, and Gail Sansbury (Providence: Regine Printing Co., 1983). The Spring 1978 issue of *Radical History Review* contains invaluable articles and oral histories on important strikes and labour movement culture in Rhode Island's history, across the 19th and 20th centuries.

46. Nina Shapiro-Perl, "Resistance Strategies: The Routine Struggle for Bread and Roses," in *My Troubles Are Going to Have Trouble with Me: Everyday Trials and Triumphs of Women Workers*, ed. Karen Brodtkin Sacks and Dorothy Remy (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1984), 193-208; and "The Piece Rate: Class Struggle on the Shop Floor. Evidence from the Costume Jewelry Industry in Providence,

Rhode Island," in *Case Studies on the Labor Process*, ed. Andrew Zimbalist (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1979), 277-298.

47. I take the phrase "speed of the line" as an index of workers' control from an interview with Susan Reverby, January 2026.

48. Heide Gerstenberger, "The Political Economy of Capitalist Labor," *Viewpoint Magazine* 3 (2014). Available at <https://viewpointmag.com/2014/09/02/the-political-economy-of-capitalist-labor/>.

49. Susan Porter Benson, *Counter Cultures: Saleswomen, Managers, and Customers in American Department Stores, 1890-1940* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986); Barbara Melosh, "The Physician's Hand": *Work Culture and Conflict in American Nursing* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982); Patricia Zavella, *Women's Work and Chicano Families: Cannery Workers of the Santa Clara Valley* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987); Susan Reverby, *Ordered to Care: The Dilemma of American Nursing, 1850-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Karen Brodtkin Sacks, *Caring By the Hour: Women Work, and Organizing at Duke Medical Center* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988); *The Work Relations Group*, prepared by Jeremy Brecher, "Uncovering the Hidden History of the American Workplace," *Review of Radical Political Economics* 10, no. 4 (December 1978): 1-20. We hope to cover the history of the Work Relations Group in a future article.

50. Porter Benson, *Counter Cultures*, 228.

51. Brodtkin Sacks, *Caring by the Hour*, vii-xi. Interestingly, the data workers stated that the Brodtkin Sacks's first draft would be "appropriate **for a leaflet if, and only if, they were in the middle of a union battle.**"

52. Shapiro-Perl, "The Piece Rate: Class Struggle on the Shop Floor" 298.

53. See Joseph Nocera, "The Cufflinks that Went to China," *New York Times*, January 21, 2006. From a peak of 40-50,000 employees across the sector, by the mid-2000s that number had dwindled to less than 1,000.

54. See for example, Asad Haider and Salar Mohandesi, "Workers' Inquiry: A Genealogy," *Viewpoint Magazine* 3 (2013). For more on the Correspondence group, see Kent Worcester, C.L.R. James: *A Political Biography*, and Stephen M. Ward's "Introduction to Part 1" in James Boggs, *Pages from a Black Radical's Notebook: A James Boggs Reader*, ed. Stephen M. Ward (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2011), 37-41.

55. David Stark, "Class Struggle and the Transformation of the Labor Process: A Relational Approach," *Theory and Society* 9, No. 1 (January 1980): 89-130.

56. Patricia Zavella, "'Abnormal Intimacy': The Varying Work Networks of Chicana Cannery Workers," *Feminist Studies* 11, no. 3 (Autumn 1985): 552.

57. See the organising done by Home Depot and Lowe's workers in the United States, where merchandising service associates have been crucial to getting organising committees off the ground.

58. Lamphere, "Bringing the Family to Work," 526.



the textile mills of Bradford, the shops and offices of Lancaster, and the car factories of the Thames estuary. This is a story of some of our own local history of workers' inquiry, and how it flourished in the radical and revolutionary movements of England in the 1970s and 80s.

## Race Today

*Race Today* was a monthly magazine founded by the *Institute of Race Relations* in 1969. The institute positioned itself as a scholarly and impartial voice on matters of race, and its major tactic was to make appeals to the good will and rationality of the British ruling class. Unsurprisingly, this approach generated internal dissent from younger participants, many of whom demanded a more militant approach. In 1973, that dissent took an organisational form: the Brixton-based *Race Today Collective* broke away from the IRR and began to take the magazine in a new direction.<sup>60</sup>

Led by Darcus Howe, they were deeply influenced by their close proximity to C.L.R. James, the broader political current around the Johnson-Forest Tendency and , and their emphasis on autonomous black working class self-activity. In a 1978 interview, Howe described the task that the new editorial group set themselves: "We felt what had to be done was a clarification process based on what the working class, the black working class, was thinking and doing."<sup>61</sup> In one of their first editorials, the collective lay out the basics of their approach to this task: they would achieve a 'theoretical clarification' of the 'newly-emerging social forces of black revolt' they saw around them without relying on any 'liberal mediation'.<sup>62</sup> The new editorial group wasted no time in launching themselves into the rapidly proliferating struggles of the black working class to conduct that clarification from within.

The April 1974 issue of the magazine made clear just how central the method of workers' inquiry was to their approach. Titled *Asian Workers in Struggle*, it began with a reference to "a short document called 'A Workers' Enquiry' by Karl Marx." The issue applied Marx's own search for an "exact and positive knowledge of the class to whom the future belongs" to the rolling wave of strikes being undertaken by Asian workers across Britain. The issue interviewed six male Indian and Pakistani workers about their migration journeys, their everyday experi-

ences of work, and their involvements in strikes and lockouts. The July issue carried a detailed account of the strike at Imperial typewriters in Leicester alongside reportage from Ford Dagenham. The August issue updated on the situation in both workplaces and added an extended account of the experiences of black women nurses (discussed further below). These experiments with reportage would continue through other seismic disputes like the 1976 Grunwick Strike, a two yearlong, intensely policed dispute led by South Asian women against the dire conditions in the North London photo-processing labs where they worked, gradually accumulating to create a broader analysis of racial divisions of labour in a British economy reshaped by post-war migration and the reactionary role of trade union bureaucracies in solidifying its hierarchies. The grassroots structures built in the course of these struggles were recurrent themes in these articles, as avenues for solidarity and co-ordination were forged by workers between segments of the working-class often practically divided by divisions of race & gender.<sup>63</sup>

Detailed investigation into forms of self-organisation also bolstered *Race Today* in its contestation of the 'vast propaganda machine' of state narratives and mainstream newspaper coverage.<sup>64</sup> Ridiculing racist, patronising media condemnations, premised on legitimising state and police violence, for example, *Race Today* read in the dynamics of 1970s unemployment within the Black working class an 'overwhelming refusal of shitwork', a reality which posed profound questions for how revolutionaries were to orient themselves toward to capitalist social crisis and the state's attempt to navigate its effects.<sup>65</sup> Having continually surveyed the terrain of strikes, riots and conflicts across the country's cities and towns, and the diverging institutional attempts to quell and capture their energies, the *Race Today Collective's* relation to the sequence of events across 1981 also clarify how they mobilised around the political knowledge generated through their participation in localised activity. Following the New Cross Massacre on January 18th, the *Race Today Collective* helped to co-ordinate the 20,000-strong march on the Black People's Day of Action, purposefully scheduled on a weekday in response to a call for a mass strike by a Black Ford worker.<sup>66</sup> The subsequent intensification of police harassment in their local Brixton area, orchestrated in 'Operation Swamp '81', and the nation-wide youth uprising demonstrated

the collective's perspicacity regarding the complex, shifting relations on the ground.<sup>67</sup> As the 'official' representation of the events emerged, *Race Today's* rejection of Lord Scarman's Inquiry report ('as lame as it is tame') echoed in concert with the activity of groups like the *Brixton Defence Campaign*, as they asserted on-the-ground perspectives of the events against pacifying institutional narratives.<sup>68</sup> Their politics of inquiry consisted not simply in circulating the experience of workers and activists on the ground, but in contesting the state's attempt to demobilise the formations in which they actively participated and were working to cohere.

The relay between struggles on the shopfloor and those on the streets also served as a related point of emphasis for the magazine. This was achieved, most obviously, in the composition of each magazine issue: strike reports sat alongside news of migrant housing struggles, resistance to school closures, international book fairs in community halls and street parties across the country, as they traced the transmission of political energy between sites of everyday life, leisure and labour. The close relationship between problems of work and housing were articulated, for example, through the continued presence of the *Bengali Housing Action Group* in *Race Today's* pages in the mid-late 1970s, mapping how Bengali garment and hospitality workers and their families undertook mass organised squatting and self-defence campaigns in the urban areas they'd migrated to as sources of low paid labour.<sup>69</sup> That confidence gained through anti-racist street confrontations would seep into workplace self-activity was also self-evident to the workers documenting their activity in Britain's major industries. 'Was this to be the year that Ford workers would take into industry the momentum of the uprisings on the streets of Brixton, Southall, Toxteth and Moss Side during the spring and summer?' asked a worker at Fords Langley, in their 1982 issue, 'Black Workers at Fords'. Noting that the 'tremendous working class resistance' across the car plants in recent years had been poorly understood, he clarifies how myriad forms of sabotage and refusal that had cleaved open opportunities for collective transformation had failed to be defended or seized by the union apparatus.

For the collective, inquiry served as one means of attuning themselves to newly surfacing tendencies, in younger generations' inventive practices of resistance or in the state's

evolving structures of racialised governance. The space of the magazine's wider coverage put these reports in the context of the longer arc of Black and Asian communities' cycles of struggle against colonial domination. This dynamic fuelled their ambitious international analysis, as calls for lessons to be gleaned from struggles overseas, from Guyana to Canada and South Africa, could be positioned immediately alongside the latest developments in the area surrounding the magazine's offices. Rooted in Brixton's 'frontline' area of Railton Road, amongst other squatted buildings, social centres and activist spaces, *Race Today* conducted its work, often in productive tension and dispute, with a wider milieu of journals and organisations 'thinking black' on the upheavals of their era, and for whom, the process of writing was understood not solely as a means of documentary, but as a 'process of coming into history' that could forge a collective, critical political consciousness.<sup>70</sup>

### Women's Liberation Movement

*Race Today's* editors and politics often intersected closely, as well as clashed with, those of the women's liberation movement. Writing in "Black Women and Nursing: A Job Like Any Other" for the August 1974 issue of *Race Today*, *The Brixton Black Women's Group* used workers' inquiry to describe these divisions within the women workforce, and even the women's liberation movement that existed inside it.<sup>71</sup> Framed as a discussion of how the class composition of nursing had changed over the previous 20 years, the article brought together insights from interviews with various black, immigrant nurses in Britain, using their perspectives to analyse how a contemporary increase in overseas student nurses was altering balance of power between workers and managers in the hospitals. They paid particular attention to the role of stricter border controls, and how this greater risk of state violence, should they lose their jobs, changed the nature of their struggles.

The *Brixton Black Women's Group* described how labour in hospitals was divided according to sex, race and age. These created divisions between those workers who were "professionals" and those who weren't, weakening workers' organisation in the hospitals, much like how the traditional divisions between "skilled" and "unskilled" workers expressed through organisational forms such as craft unionism had for a century weakened

the labour movement. Despite their precarious position, these workers had been repeatedly attacked by the nurses union *COSHE*, rank-and-file workers' groups, and other supposedly revolutionary organisations. This included the International Socialist's group "Women's Voice", which argued for a ban on both working and organising with agency nurses, who were mostly migrants. Their inquiry then was key for raising these black, women workers' own voices to intervene in spaces they were otherwise barred from, comparing this situation to that of the early labour movement, in which many unions were often formed to keep women out of the workforce.

As well as *Race Today's* interventions into the women's liberation and labour movements through workers' inquiry, there were a variety of other grassroots projects informed by the theory and practice of workers' inquiry. In her 1973 book *Woman's Consciousness, Man's World*, Sheila Rowbotham, a veteran of the women's liberation movement, discusses the role of women in capitalist society, their relation to commodity production, and the emergence of the women's liberation movement.<sup>72</sup> Refusing to leave the women as a subject within capitalism within the home, she recognises the role of women workers both within commodity production and the formation of the working-class. Whilst insisting that women have always worked in "workplaces", and in particular acted as a reserve army of labour, Rowbotham also posits that as commodity production increasingly penetrates the life of women, so do women increasingly penetrate commodity production. As well as recognising the unpaid labour women do in reproduction of labour-power, and in that their connection yet separation from commodity production, she also argued that it is both contemporarily and historically inaccurate to see women as uninvolved in and unshaped by wage labour directly. Rowbotham's contemporary theoretical analysis was grounded not on pure abstraction, but a significant thread within the women's liberation movement, that aimed to understand how the work of women was changing, at home and in the workplace, and wanted to use that to intervene within it, in doing so directly challenging misogyny within the labour movement itself.

*Shrew*, a magazine produced by *London Women's Liberation Workshop*, released multiple inquiries by workers, most often in interview format. 'Conditions in a Northern Factory as Described

to Me by My Mother' in the June 1971 issue interviews an anonymous woman working in a factory. 'Barbara Talking' in its October 1970 issue interviews a woman, who describes her experience as a migrant worker. Having worked in a range of jobs over a decade living in England - as a machinist, a finisher, a cleaner, and working on electrical wiring for telephones and neon signs - she explains how despite discrimination, she has found elements of solidarity between black and white women, based in the fact they are both worked harder for less than their male coworkers.<sup>73</sup>

As well as sporadic interviews with workers that give a snapshot of the working-class in one location, more prolonged inquiry projects were used to supplement feminist labour organising, most significantly night cleaners campaigns. Both *Shrew* and *Socialist Woman*, the publication of the International Marxist Group's women's section, published special issues dedicated to night cleaners campaigns in London and Lancaster respectively, that were on the cutting edge of the women's liberation movement's intersection with working-class struggles.<sup>74</sup>

Women's liberation activists within *East London Big Flame*, a local group that separated from the *Big Flame* group proper that we will discuss later, also formed the "Lesneys Women's Group". Seeing the political movements built through the night cleaners campaign and the Ford Dagenham equal pay strike, four of these activists gained jobs in the Lesney's toy car factory in Hackney, which had 2,800 workers, most of whom were women. They began to conduct workers' inquiries with the workers here, as part of their attempts to organise within the factory, directly citing the "politics of autonomous class struggle' being developed in Italy".

Through this work, they began to produce a bulletin titled *Lesneys Newsletter*. Distributed at the factory gates, within its pages were discussions on the issues women workers in particular faced, including that of the male-dominated trade union. Eventually, a full pamphlet titled "Working at Lesneys" was produced, which detailed the various ways in which women workers were exploited, from the viewpoint of the shopfloor.<sup>75</sup> Linking this work to that which *Big Flame* was doing at various Ford factories, this included contesting how, despite the similarity of the work itself, male colleagues were far better remunerated.

This feminist workers' inquiry was informed by the fact that the male workers, despite making up less than a third of the workforce, still dominated the union presence at Lesneys. Within the literature produced by the *Lesneys Women's Group*, they relay the details of how the shop steward structure, even with five women shop stewards, reinforced a patriarchal and racist organisational structure within the union. However, at higher points of struggle, these structures could be subverted and used to build the confidence of a mass rank-and-file of workers, beginning to break down some of the divisions between the workers on the shopfloor.

Nonetheless, racism remained a decisive factor on the shopfloor. Black women were separated onto different production lines, and some white workers expressed overt racism towards their black colleagues. Trying to find new subjectivities who could be organised to bridge these divides, the activists describe how a more militant alliance emerged between black women and younger, more radical white women, whereas the older white women were more likely to fall in behind those shop stewards who sided with management.

This project of workers' inquiry not only changed the politics of those who already worked in the factory, but also those of its instigators. In the "Working at Lesneys" pamphlet, one participant describes how disorientated they had felt attending *Big Flame* meetings whilst working at Lesneys, with the discussion at the meetings feeling disconnected from the reality they faced at the shopfloor. Inquiry was a process through which they could truly understand only how the world worked, beyond just the theoretical reasoning that may have brought them into left activism, as well as the political tasks in which they faced as militants. Reflecting many years later, another expressed:

"Working in that factory for a year profoundly changed my world view. I think for the first time I understood what 'class' was really about, and for the first time felt personally angry about it. I also learnt about what we are up against with racism and sexism."<sup>76</sup>

## **Big Flame at Fords: Organising Within and Against the Union**

*Big Flame* itself was a libertarian Marxist revolutionary organisation founded in Liverpool in 1970. The organisation co-ordinated 'base groups' in major workplaces, most noticeably the Ford plants in Halewood in Merseyside and Dagenham in East London, as well as within wider working-class communities.<sup>77</sup> The aim of these base groups was to root external revolutionaries in direct dialogue with workers on the factory floor. As *Big Flame* militant Marcello Dall'Aglio describes in *Big Flame: Building the Movements, New Politics*, this method allowed them to listen to workers and gather the elements needed to form a 'forceful analysis' of factory conditions directly from the base.<sup>78</sup> Rather than focusing on recruiting Ford workers to their organisation, *Big Flame* prioritised building the self-activity of the class, producing popular leaflets and bulletins that exposed management tactics and circulated knowledge from the factory back into struggle. These bulletins went beyond declarative political statements or lines, and were responsive to the everyday and granular details of factory life.

The Ford base groups treated workers' inquiry not as a separate intellectual or sociological exercise, but as an organising method offering the useful action of increasing the circulation of information amongst workers. Inquiry was practical, partisan and immediately tied to intervention. The point was not simply to describe the labour process, but to generate a situated analysis that could sharpen collective antagonism, identify points of leverage, and support forms of action that official union structures would often contain or block. In this respect, *Big Flame's* practice differed from other workers' inquiry traditions in Europe and the United States. It was less textual than the American traditions associated with workers' narratives, and less theoretically codified than Italian *operaismo*. Instead, it took the form of a live circuit between listening, analysis, agitation and organisation. Militants embedded themselves in the workplace, gathered knowledge through sustained presence, and rapidly returned that knowledge to workers through bulletins, meetings and interventions. The bulletins we find from the Halewood campaigns, written with Ford workers, makes this especially clear. A 1971 leaflet insisted that workers must organise themselves rather than be manipulated by trade union bureaucrats or professional

politicians, while also stating that *Big Flame* brought 'ideas and skills' but not 'yet another political leadership', because leadership had to be generated by workers 'inside the factories and the community'.<sup>79</sup> This is not to say that the group didn't agitate through their publications though. Another bulletin from 1975 (held in the archives at the MayDay Rooms) makes a strong argument for workers' control of the factories, against the Bennite forms being proposed at the time.

The practical form of this politics was highly structured. The Ford Halewood report to the 1976 *Big Flame* conference noted that base group meetings involving workers and external militants took place roughly every three days. These meetings discussed disputes in the plant, agreed demands and a political line, drafted leaflets, and then got them duplicated in a member's house and distributed to the night shift that same day and again the following morning. Sometimes they also widened the frame of discussion, linking workplace disputes to broader issues such as fascist activity in Liverpool. This gives a much sharper sense of how workers' inquiry functioned in practice: not as observation from outside, but as a rapid cycle of collective discussion, clarification and agitation.

Their relationship with the official union was fiercely "within and against". *Big Flame* argued that shop stewards had become integrated into the official union hierarchy, receiving perks from management in exchange for procedurally managing the workforce.<sup>80</sup> Consequently, the base groups supported wildcat walk-outs that the official stewards would not. For example, they supported Monday morning absences, which often occurred because workers were recovering from weekend parties, framing them as protests of workers trying to regain their own lives. This stance reflected a broader strategic judgement: that workers' autonomy could not be reduced to representation within existing union channels, because the institutions of negotiation were themselves increasingly implicated in the regulation of labour. At Ford, then, the base group was intended as a political form able to operate close to everyday grievances and forms of refusal that interfaced with the institutional labour movement, without subordinating them to official procedure.

At the same time, this approach was shaped by the specificities of the British context. Unlike in Italy, where workerism developed

against a weaker mediating role for unions at the point where mass worker struggles erupted, *Big Flame* operated within a labour movement already heavily institutionalised through shop stewards, national bargaining machinery and Labourist political traditions. That gave their anti-bureaucratic politics a particular sharpness, but it also produced strategic limits. Paul Thompson later noted that their hostility towards building a presence on the shop stewards' committee meant they recruited few experienced union militants, which ultimately contributed to the collapse of the industrial base group model as external militants moved on. The strength of the Ford project lay in its refusal to confuse class activity with union procedure; its weakness lay in sometimes treating existing workplace mediations as obstacles to be bypassed rather than terrains to be contested.

*Big Flame's* stance on trade unions was heavily influenced by the Italian *operaismo* tradition as well as more movementist groups coming out of Italy, such as *Lotta Continua*. *Big Flame* viewed unions as institutions that merely bargained 'inside capital' over the commodity of labour power, while structurally ignoring the autonomous, revolutionary needs of the working class. This strategy could be characterised as "practical ultra-leftism", of working within institutions whilst also holding strong political lines. This meant focusing on rank and file mass action on the factory floor to fight everyday exploitation such as speed-ups and Measured Day Work, rather than attempting to capture union leadership. The Ford leaflets made this argument in concrete terms. One 1971 leaflet detailed how foremen sought to keep production going at all costs by rewarding compliant workers, keeping files on militants and penalising troublemakers, before arguing that mass collective action on the shop floor was the only way to fight speed-up and managerial control.

They did not shy away from the gritty realities of industrial sabotage when procedural negotiations failed; for instance, when management docked pay at the Ford Langley plant after workers took extra breaks to cope with extreme heat, workers used a crane to drop a rogue cab onto the line, destroying around 30 cabs as 'retribution'. Yet the significance of this politics at Ford lies not only in its militancy, but in the way it fused inquiry and action: the base group sought to identify the concrete forms through which workers were already resisting, and to amplify them rather than replace them with a pre-given

line. This also meant engaging with the trade union structures that workers' were faced with, encouraging rank-and-file engagement with the union and circulating information and worker's perspectives to agitate from within.

The organising at Ford also vividly demonstrated their internationalist tendency too. They understood Ford not as a local employer, but as a multinational empire using the global supply chain to discipline its workforce across borders. The bulletins and newspapers circulated around the Ford factories included explicit support for the Irish Republican struggle. Alan Hayling, a *Big Flame* militant at the Ford Langley plant, mapped this supply chain directly from the factory floor. Using a redundant foreman's desk during breaks, he would telephone Ford plants in Valencia. Having built networks through conferences with car workers in Spain, Denmark and Germany, *Big Flame* militants discovered that Ford management was using identical talking points across different countries to divide the workforce and force concessions. This is most clearly seen in the Counter Information Services "anti-report" on Ford that gives a fascinating cross-national picture of macro trends and local management practices across the company.<sup>81</sup> This internationalism extended beyond Europe into direct, material solidarity. Exploiting the empty space in crates of partially built Ford trucks destined for South Africa, Langley workers smuggled thousands of African National Congress leaflets into the country, directly linking car worker politics to the global struggle against apartheid.

*Big Flame's* political effect at Ford did not simply disappear with the breakdown of the original base group model either. During the 1978 Ford pay dispute, ex-members and contacts helped to create the Ford Combine, which distributed strike bulletins each week, later produced Fraud News, and tried to build a rank and file organisation that was separate from any one political party so workers from different political backgrounds could act together. From the beginning, wives and girlfriends of Ford workers were involved, including through a counter-demonstration in Southampton against a 'wives back to work' campaign. This politics suggests not just militantancy and internationalism, but also an attempt to recompose broader forms of rank and file organisation that linked workplace struggle to wider social relations.

## Conclusion

Inquiry should be understood as an open and interpretative tradition, committed to the refusal of those silences through which the everyday experiences of working class exploitation, frustration, compromise and defeat so often disappear from view. This also means resisting the temptation to treat inquiry *only* as a method for locating exemplary struggles. There is always a danger, especially in periods of weakness, to ambulance chase moments of militancy, or of circulating a narrow repertoire of positive and "lighthouse" struggles, whose very brightness can obscure the more difficult dynamics of fragmentation, exhaustion and defeat. Inquiry, in this sense, cannot simply be a means of affirming what we already hope to find. It must also remain attentive to what is blocked, partial, contradictory or unresolved.

This is one reason why the archival function of inquiry matters. The point is not only to produce interventions which are immediately useful, although that remains important. A piece of writing, a conversation, a report or a collective reflection might intervene directly in a dispute, clarify a set of shared grievances, or help workers name the conditions they are already confronting. But inquiry also produces a living archive whose value may only become visible later, or in unexpected ways. A text that appears minor in the present may later help reconstruct the texture of a workplace, the emergence of a particular form of organisation, or the reasons why a struggle failed to generalise. Both functions are important: inquiry as immediate intervention, and inquiry as the slower accumulation of collective memory.

Looking back at our traditions also allows us to see the infrastructures that made different forms of workers' writing possible. Such writing did not emerge simply from individual expression. It was often sustained by political organisations, workplace groups, magazines, reading circles, publishing projects, friendship networks, editorial labour and practical forms of support. These infrastructures provided spaces for experience to be narrated, tested, revised and collectively interpreted. They also made possible different types of writing.<sup>82</sup> In this respect, the history of inquiry is also a history of the material and organisational conditions through which workers' knowledge has been produced and circulated.

This is worth stressing because the contemporary media environment can give the impression that the problem of circulation has been solved. Social media allows many workers, often as individuals, to document their working conditions instantly, to publicise disputes, and to connect experiences across workplaces and sectors. This is not insignificant. But this is no substitute for sustained relationships, editorial infrastructures, or collective platforms that build the resources for slower reflection. The capacity to post about work is not the same as the capacity to produce shared analysis of work. Nor does visibility itself resolve the harder questions of organisational form, ideological confrontation, and continuity.

The projects discussed above circulated at different scales and through different structures: political organisations, base groups, magazines, pamphlet series and publishing initiatives. Their forms of inquiry were shaped by these infrastructures, but also limited by them. They emerged within particular conjunctures and, in many cases, faded or entered crisis as those conditions changed. This is itself part of the history that needs to be registered. For example, the rapid disappearance of the base group model within *Big Flame* should not simply be treated as an organisational footnote, but as an indication of how fragile the infrastructures of inquiry can be when the forms of direct activity in the workplace, political coordination and collective reproduction on which they depended began to break down.

To return to these histories, then, is not to recover a single model to be repeated. It is to recognise inquiry as a contested and uneven tradition of documentation, interpretation and political organisation. Its value lies not only in its capacity to discover struggle, but in its willingness to record the conditions under which struggle becomes thinkable, difficult, defeated, displaced or renewed. This might well be one of the most important resources it offers for our present.



## Endnotes for A History of Workers' Inquiry in England

59. For a major example of this wider cultural experimentation with worker writing, see Ronald Fraser's two-volume *Work*. Co-published by Penguin Books and New Left Review from 1968-9, Fraser gathered reports from miners, bus drivers, clerks, atomic energy researchers, and unemployed workers alongside essays from cultural theorists like Raymond Williams. Tom Woodin's *Working-class writing and publishing in the late twentieth century* (Manchester University Press, 2019) carefully contextualises the mass revival of writing 'from below' in the period.
60. *Here To Stay, Here to Fight: A Race Today Anthology* (Pluto Press, 2019) narrates the emergence of *Race Today* from the *Institute Of Race Relations* following A. Sivanandan's transformative appointment as the institute's director, and gathers together many of the central inquiry pieces the magazine published.
61. 'The Black Scholar Interviews: Darcus Howe: Part Two'. *The Black Scholar*, 1 July 1978.
62. Editorial, *Race Today*, Vol 6 No.1, January 1974.
63. See Anitha, S. and Pearson, R., 2018. *Striking Women:: Struggles & Strategies of South Asian Women Workers from Grunwick to Gate Gourmet*. Lawrence & Wishart.
64. *Race Today*. The Police and the Black Wageless: A *Race Today* Statement on Mugging. January 1975.
65. See Chapter 10, The Politics of Mugging, in *Policing the crisis: Mugging, the state and law and order* (1978), for a useful contemporary primer on the debates around 'wagelessness' at the time between *Race Today* and other publications like *The Black Liberator*.
66. As narrated by Leila Hassan Howe in the online seminar, 'The Black Radical Press in 1970s', hosted by *The People's Papers* and *The George Padmore Institute* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=of9E5E-hpqs>)
67. Adam Elliott-Cooper's *Black Resistance to British Policing* (Manchester University Press, 2021)
68. *Race Today* Editorial, August/September 1982.
69. Shabna Begum explores the relationship, both in its successes and tensions, between the *Bengali Housing Action Group* and *Race Today* in *From Sylhet to Spitalfields: Bengali Squatters in 1970s East London* (Lawrence & Wishart, 2023).
70. A phrase coined by Dick Gregory. See Rob Waters' *Thinking Black: Britain, 1964-1985*. (University of California Press, 2018) for a survey of how *Race Today*

sat alongside other projects of the era in their promotion of writing from below.

71. *Brixton Black Women's Group*, 'Black Women and Nursing: A Job Like Any Other', *Race Today*, August 1974.
72. Rowbotham, S. (1973) *Woman's Consciousness, Man's World*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
73. In her recent *Wages for Housework: The Story of a Movement, an Idea, a Promise* (Penguin 2026), Emily Callaci notes the influence of Selma James in a number of these *Shrew* issues, and in particular the workers' inquiry methodology forged through her years in the Johnson-Forest Tendency.
74. *Shrew* Nightcleaners Special, December 1971 and *Socialist Woman Special: Lancaster Cleaners Campaign*, undated.
75. *East London Big Flame* (Undated) Working at Lesneys.
76. 'Working in a women's factory', [eastlondonbigflame.org](http://eastlondonbigflame.org). <https://www.eastlondonbigflame.org.uk/working-womens-factory>
77. These base groups would later spread out of just factory walls into working-class neighbourhoods, such as in Kirkby in Merseyside, where Big Flame members set up an Unemployed Workers Centre and helped organise a widespread rent strike across 3,000 council tenants in direct response to factory closures.
78. Farrar, M. and McDonnell, K (2024) *Big Flame: Building the Movements, New Politics*. London: Merlin Press.
79. Ibid.
80. Contemporary militants have made similar analyses of the increasing role of facility time (scheduled release from work given to recognised union reps - in many cases full-time release - to conduct union activities) within the post-Thatcher trade union reforms, that have increasingly circumscribed union reps, integrating many into the managerial layer of workplaces, separating militant workers from the shopfloor and increasingly rewarding them for their isolation through ensuring their continued release from work.
81. *Counter Information Service* Report. Ford. ([https://ia800107.us.archive.org/1/items/fordbycispdf/Ford%20by%20CISpdf\\_text.pdf](https://ia800107.us.archive.org/1/items/fordbycispdf/Ford%20by%20CISpdf_text.pdf))
82. See Guglielmo Rossi's 'You Must Live Your Politics: Publishing Practices and Libertarianism in MayDay Rooms Archives' in *Agitprop Notes (MayDay Rooms Pamphlets: 02, 2022)* for a thorough reconstruction of *Big Flames* use of radical publishing across its different political formations, and the types of co-operative activity and experimentation it facilitated.

# Workers' Inquiry and Ideology

**ROBERTO MOZZACHIODI**

*Roberto Mozzachiodi is an editor of Notes From Below.*

Over nearly ten years, *Notes from Below* has consolidated a political practice organised around the method of workers' inquiry and the framework of class composition. Through inquiries across care, education, hospitality, platform work, art and culture, and beyond, it has sought to generate situated accounts of class struggle grounded in workers' own experience of contemporary conditions of work. These accounts are not conceived as neutral reportage, academic sociology or organising conversations, but as forms of political knowledge rooted in the antagonistic relation between labour and capital.

In our recent collective discussions, one question has reoccurred more than others: namely, what role does ideology play in this practice? The contemporary resurgence of reactionary politics in Britain (nationalism, racialised border regimes, authoritarian populism, revanchist patriarchy) has made this question politically unavoidable. The cohering of fascist ideology, as has been the case historically, is not external to the world of work, the economy or class experience. Nor can it be explained solely by reference to 'culture' detached from material conditions. Such ideological formations circulate in workplaces, shape how workers interpret their own conditions, and mediate the possibilities of collective political action. They also, in our experience, shape how workers approach inquiry. The workplace may not be the ultimate source from which reactionary ideologies originate, but it is a crucial site in which pre-existing and revived values and narratives are lived, reinforced, contested, and reconfigured in everyday social relations.

Within the framework of class composition used by *Notes From Below*, ideology has not been systematically interrogated as a constitutive dimension of how classes are composed. The purpose of this text is to address that absence. It proceeds in three sections: first, a reflection on the absence of ideology within the theory of class composition; second, an interpretation of workers' inquiry and the role ideology plays within it; third, a reconstruction of Louis Althusser's conception of class struggle as integral to the composition of production and the political role of workers' inquiry in disrupting the reproductive function of ideology; for both the worker and the militant.

### **Ideology in Class Composition**

*Notes From Below* uses the schema of class composition to help analyse workers' inquiry (which Jamie Woodcock's essay in this issue also elaborates upon). Technical composition refers to the specific configuration of workers in a given workplace (what workers do, under what physical and temporal regimes, with which technologies, under what forms of supervision and discipline, and in relation to whom). Social composition maps how workers' lives are organised beyond the immediate workplace (migration status, housing conditions, familial responsibilities, access to welfare, community ties etc.). Political composition refers to the organisational forms through which workers attempt to transform their situation collectively.

Under capitalist domination, these dimensions converge in the reproduction of class relations: i.e. a social division between those who own the means of production, and those who only have their labour-power to sell. Broadly, capitalist production is technically organised to maintain a command structure that guarantees the extraction of surplus labour from workers. Social policy and legal frameworks sustain a differentiated labour force, often stratified by race, gender, nationality, living standards and immigration status. While political institutions additionally constrain collective action through bureaucratisation or legal regulation. In this sense, technical, social, and political composition operate as mutually reinforcing mechanisms of decomposition, fragmenting workers and limiting their collective capacity.

However, in order to maintain capital accumulation and neutralise its integral class antagonism, capitalist production must constantly update its configurations of workers, technology, policy, management practices, physical infrastructures, labour processes and social and cultural norms. This process of recomposition internal to capitalist development, generates new conditions for class composition and political opposition from within.

This schema does not explicitly articulate the role of ideology in binding these levels together, neither for capital's ability to ensure its smooth reproduction nor workers' ability to disrupt that circuit. Ideology appears, if at all, as an external factor - something that is perhaps implied in social and political composition, but which is not given a clear status. What remains insufficiently theorised is the way ideological formations are woven into the organisation of production itself, into the lived experience of work, and into class struggle itself.

Consider sectors shaped by restrictive migration policies. Immigration law is not merely an external legal constraint; it structures the labour supply, determines who is recruitable and who must accept informal employment, and produces differentiated vulnerabilities within the workforce. But these legal mechanisms operate in tandem with ideological narratives: migrants as threats, competitors, temporary guests, or as ungrateful beneficiaries of national generosity. Without these myths, workers might simply see technical and social changes as arbitrary and unfair attacks, counterproductive to getting the job done. Therefore, these narratives mediate how technical arrangements used to support a command structure (shift allocation, task assignment, wage differentials, status hierarchies) are perceived, and ultimately shape the collective imaginary of a workforce.

Similarly, managerial discourses of "teamwork" "professionalism" "entrepreneurialism" or "work ethic" are not superficial. They shape how workers understand their own labour, whether as collective cooperation or individual performance, as imposed necessity or chosen opportunity. These are systems of meaning which derive their appeal from existing attachments to more 'fundamental' values such as community, morality, competition, paternalism, individualism, creativity etc. The ideals and principles through which individuals understand themselves and

measure the value of their own lives are themselves part of the arsenal employers use to wage their struggle against workers. They are mobilised in workplaces to secure consent from workers to willingly submit to their own exploitation. And so, the fragmentation and domination of the working-class is often accompanied by ideological rationalisations that present them as natural, beneficial or even fulfilling.

Ideologies might be able to account for technical or social transformations of the class, thereby minimising the politicising effects of capital's offensives. Or they might become overburdened by the realities they are supposed to explain or compensate for: for example, when our living conditions become unsustainable. In the case of the former, we can think of the way ideas of responsibility and entrepreneurship have been used to rationalise the effects of austerity on social welfare. In the case of the latter, we can think of the way Covid-era populist patriotism ('In It Together') fell apart in the face of a cost-of-living crisis and state-backed wage suppression. It is here, today, that elements of fascist ideology are taking root, providing explanations for the ways work is changing under the current crises of capitalism.

Without an explicit theorisation of ideology, class composition risks treating these mediations as secondary. It may describe the fragmentation of the workforce due to compositional changes without fully analysing how that fragmentation is legitimated and internalised through semi-coherent systems of meaning, or how ideologies are reconfigured or break-down in moments of political rupture. Class composition may identify structural divisions without tracing how they are reproduced through everyday meanings and practices, which offer workers a spontaneous justification for continuing to submit to exploitation. At the same time, it might be unable to properly capture the deeply personal experiences of self-transformation (when ideologies crumble) that characterise militant confrontation with authority.

To address this absence, it is useful to turn to the question of subjectivity: how workers process their experience of work, and how ideology structures that processing.

## Subjectivity and Experiences of Work

For *Notes From Below*, workers' inquiry is understood as a practice grounded in self-activity. The worker, as living labour and as the material support for the accumulation of capital, has a direct practical link to the world described in an inquiry. This proximity confers a distinctive political position and relation to knowledge production. The worker can produce knowledge of the organisation of their workplace and their experience of their work not as an external observer but as a participant whose daily activity, and material need, sustains the system under investigation. This is important for two reasons. First, the knowledge produced in a workers' inquiry is not inserted into the head of the worker from the outside, it is the result of a process of analysis, description, reflection and essayistic composition. In the best cases, this involves a process of self-teaching - as opposed to the instrumental application of knowledge developed from elsewhere. Second, the worker is in a unique position to embody the transformative perspective which an inquiry carries, in a way that any outsider reading a given inquiry does not. The knowledge generated through inquiry therefore carries a political charge: it emerges from within the antagonism it seeks to illuminate.

At the same time, workers' inquiry presupposes a distinction between how we directly experience work and the way that experience is mentally processed and understood. By and large, our direct experiences of work are organised by capital. Managers determine tasks, allocate shifts, structure communication, delimit access to information, and regulate movement within the workplace. What workers see, hear, and know about the total plan of production is shaped by this organisation. The labour process is thus the practical arrangement of our direct experience of work. But while workers experience this arrangement with their bodies, they are simultaneously invited to understand this experience according to a workplace ideology and the wider ideas which are dominant in society.

Ultimately, however, what workers carry in their heads about their work is neither a direct reflection of their embodied experience nor the version promoted by powers over them. It is an active, selective, partial, and mediated processing of all these elements. When someone is asked, "What's your job like?", the answer is rarely a comprehensive and objective account of the

labour process they inhabit. Nor is it a direct reflection of the prerogatives of managers. It is a condensation: a narrative shaped by values, emotions, grievances, aspirations, frustrations and other categories available for interpretation. Routine features may recede into the background; extraordinary incidents may be foregrounded. Patterns of control may be naturalised; moments of conflict may be personalised.

This subjective processing is not neutral. It is shaped by a negotiated relation to ideologies. As we have already seen, ideology does not merely consist of explicit opinions about politics. It includes the implicit frameworks through which experience is rendered meaningful, which often pre-determines thoughts and feelings about politics. These frameworks filter perception, organise attention and shape relationships. They provide ready-made explanations for success and failure, for fairness and injustice, for shame and pride etc.

Workers' inquiry operates within this terrain. It does not access raw, unmediated experience; it engages workers whose understanding of their own labour is already structured by subjective processing and negotiated engagements with ideologies. The task of inquiry is not to extract a pure description of the labour process untouched by ideology and to present to the world an objective (in the scientific sense) version of what goes on in the hidden abode of production. Rather, it is to create a space in which workers can recompose their experience, mentally rearranging its elements, identifying patterns, relating subjective impressions to objective conditions - so that they can understand and feel this experience differently, and ultimately *change the way they act!*

On this point, it is useful to think of the analogy between literary and political composition. Just as a writer selects, orders, and emphasises elements to produce a meaningful narrative, the worker engaged in inquiry selects and orders aspects of their experience. This recomposition can be transformative. It can reveal connections that were previously obscured, bring routine mechanisms of control into focus, and relate personal frustrations to structural features of the labour process.

To take ideology seriously within inquiry, therefore, it is important to recognise that workers' (already active) subjective processing

of experience is both the starting point and a terrain of struggle. Inquiry should neither romanticise spontaneous consciousness nor dismiss it. Its function is to create conditions in which workers can encounter the limits of what they think they know, without having those limits pre-defined by an external script. In this light, it is just as important to theorise the role of the external militant in workers' inquiry, and in particular, the ideological presuppositions that they themselves bring to co-research.

### **Althusser: Class Struggle, Technical Composition, and Ideological Reproduction**

So far, I've argued that the question of ideology cannot be separated from the structure of the capitalist mode of production itself. In this respect, the work of Louis Althusser is instructive. In the Marxist tradition, Althusser's name is most commonly associated with the term ideology, primarily due to his essay on ideological state apparatuses. Less well known is his theorisations of class composition and writings on workers' inquiry. In 1971, Marta Harnecker, the Chilean revolutionary, asked Althusser to write a preface for the second edition of her textbook on the principles of historical materialism. This had been one of the most widely circulated introductions to Marxism in Allende's Chile. The text which Althusser produced for the preface, 'Marxism-Leninism and the Class Struggle', would be his first articulation of certain theoretical shifts that would come to characterise his writings of the mid-seventies. In particular, the preface was the first occasion Althusser described class struggle as an antagonism immanent to the technical makeup and reproduction of the capitalist mode production – a conception that he often distilled with the phrases: 'the primacy of the contradiction over the contraries' or 'the primacy of the class struggle over the classes'.

For Althusser, there are no purely technical forms of production within capitalism. The organisation of the labour process does not simply reflect the most efficient arrangement of productive forces at a given level of development. Rather, the organisation of production is permeated by class struggle at every moment. The division of labour, the hierarchy of supervision, the introduction of machinery, the pacing of work, these are not neutral scientific or technical decisions concerning the most rational way of producing things. The organisation of production is

always shaped by the capitalist class's obligation to maintain domination over the working class, to enhance exploitation, and to secure the reproduction of the wage relation.

This leads to a crucial thesis: the productive forces are not separable from the relations of production (i.e. the social division between the classes). The 'technical base' of production is simultaneously the material support and the *historical form of existence of relations of exploitation*. To separate productive forces from relations of production is, in Althusser's terms, an economic and technocratic illusion. We can't think of a steam engine or a digital labour platform as an objective application of science to production. All technologies, their design, and implementation within a workplace, already have class struggle embedded within them. From this perspective, the technical composition of the working class (the concrete organisation of labour in a given workplace) is itself a historical form of class struggle. Managerial authority, surveillance systems, workflow design, employment conditions, wage hierarchies: these are material crystallisations of the antagonism between capital and labour. They are strategies aimed at subordinating workers, rationalising production to maximise surplus extraction, and preventing disruptions to accumulation.

At the same time, workers' resistance is not an external addition to this process. It is immanent to it. Workers may comply, subvert, slow down, refuse, or reinterpret managerial instructions. They may recognise authority as legitimate or as serving particular interests. In this sense, the classes are always already enveloped in class struggle within production itself, prior to any explicit political self-identification or 'conscious subjectivity'.

Althusser's emphasis on the question of reproduction - i.e. the concrete mechanisms by which capital's exploitation of workers continues and expands - is central to his thinking here. The capital-labour relation does not reproduce itself automatically. It must be achieved under specific technical, legal, political, economic, and, most importantly for the purposes of this essay, ideological circumstances. Given that capitalism maintains itself by constantly aggravating its underlying class antagonism, the reproduction of the social relations of production requires ongoing adaptation.

So then the question of composition becomes central: what are the historical forms of existence of the class struggle, in other words, how are the classes composed in the process of the reproduction of social relations, and consequently, what does the composition of classes through the class antagonism in production, mean for revolutionary political strategy? The centrality of this question means that inquiry into the historical forms of existence of class struggle is crucial for understanding the concrete mechanisms of capitalist reproduction - and by extension, the disruption of capitalist reproduction.

The similarities with the Italian Workerist tradition are obviously quite clear; the political necessity to carry out research into the changing technical and social modalities of class struggle as they play out concretely within production. Where Althusser might depart from *operaismo* is in the scope of his understanding of the capitalist mode production, and the importance of tracking the mediation of the class antagonism through levels that exceed the site of production per se. And this is where Althusser would deploy the Leninist methodological dictum: 'concrete analysis of the concrete situation'. What Althusser had in mind with this phrase was a program of research that tracks the historical forms of existence of the class struggle through its various degrees of mediations. Such an analysis would move from the technical composition of the class struggle in the workplace, to a study of the complexion of inter-firm competition, monopolies and trusts. It would track national and international movements of capital, the specific forms of imperialist conflicts between national powers and fractions of capital, and the forms of anti-imperialist resistance which meet these. And ultimately would seek to understand how these degrees of mediation impact upon the concrete aspects of the antagonism itself (ideologically, technically, politically, legally and so on). It is therefore aimed at building a conception of the historical existence of the class antagonism, through a synthesis of multiple determinations.

This research project, which Althusser promoted throughout the seventies, was conceived as a corrective to the manner in which the French Communist Party formed its understanding of specific historical conjunctures and, on that basis, determined its political actions and strategies. In short, the Party relied on a superficial grasp of the conditions of the working-class, often depending on

fixed and abstract notions of social relations. At the same time, its organisational structure stifled genuine democratic debate about strategy among its members and remained disconnected from its base, particularly from working-class militants who directly experienced the historical forms of class antagonism. Althusser's call for 'concrete analysis' was an attempt to confront and remedy these shortcomings.

On this latter aspect - the Party's direct link with the experience of the working-class - Althusser offered his criticism on two separate occasions, and these were given as methodological prescriptions for militant workers' inquiry. In his letter exchanges with Maria Antonietta Macciocchi in 1968, while she was canvassing for the Italian Communist Party (PCI) in Naples, Althusser outlined an approach to eliciting the knowledge and experience of workers which he would later reformulate in his posthumously published *What is to Be Done?* In the latter case, Althusser frames his methodological prescriptions precisely in terms of the role of workers' inquiry within a concrete analysis of a concrete situation, and pitches this against the passive reporting of worker voices that appeared in *l'Humanité*, the Party's daily newspaper. Of the vanguard Fiat workers who demonstrated an exceptionally high level of 'consciousness' about the class struggle in the automotive industry, and talked confidently about what they knew on a television documentary, he says that their words represent material for a concrete analysis, but they are not, in themselves, a concrete analysis.

Across both his advisory letters to Macciocchi and his appraisal of worker representation in the public sphere and Party media, Althusser offers a common set of instructions for how one should approach a workers' inquiry. Althusser's correspondence with Macciocchi came at a moment when she was becoming increasingly disillusioned by the instrumental electoral strategy of the PCI. Parachuted into Naples, with no real links to the region, Macciocchi eventually abandoned her immediate electoral responsibilities in order to focus on building direct connections with the Neapolitan working-classes. In one of her early letters she asks for advice on how to draw insights from the underclass of women and children who form the largely invisible informal economy of Naples. By this point, it had become clear to Macciocchi that this fraction was structurally integral to the reproduction of the regional economy. Engaging this strata, however, remained an issue.

To this prompt, Althusser suggests the following:

"You have to listen to them. But in order to be able to listen, you also have to make them speak, and you yourself must therefore *also speak*, not, of course, at any random moment or in whatever form strikes your fancy. To make others speak by *letting them speak* (letting them say everything they have in their heads and in their hearts) is the *passive* approach. There is also an *active* approach, making people speak in the sense of knowing how to listen politically (in the most general sense), of having a politico-sociological 'hearing' which helps you discover which are the points you yourself have to discuss. When people speak, they say certain things on their own. But there are also things that they hide or disguise, things they often *consciously*, but most often unconsciously, avoid."<sup>83</sup>

Here, Althusser draws a distinction between a passive/active approach to inquiry. An active approach, the one advocated here, entails a particular approach to listening, a political listening, or 'politico-sociological' hearing, which determines when the militant should and should not intervene in the interaction; and determines the nature of that intervention, the precise formulation of questions, and the questions to avoid. Althusser cautions against an open-ended interview form, in which the worker is encouraged to say everything they know about their situation. This he considers to be a passive approach to inquiry, and one which does not generate political knowledge. Here it is a question of moving beyond the workers' spontaneous knowledge of their own situation in order for the militant and worker to learn what the worker does not know (spontaneously) about what they do know about the effects of their conditions. And this movement beyond spontaneous knowledge production, is precisely the outcome of this particular type of political listening and intervention in the inquiry exchange.

Althusser goes on to further elaborate on this notion of spontaneous knowledge in *What is to be Done?*:

"Assuming they say *everything* they know, one thing is certain: they always know much more (or much less) about things than they think they do. They do not say this 'much more', because they do not know that they know it. As for this 'much less', it is masked by what they think they do know... The fact that workers

know more about things than they know, or less about things than they know, brings out a reality with which Marxist theory is well acquainted and which it has revealed to us: *the effects of ideology*. The conditions of life, work, exploitation, struggle, and the reproduction of labour-power are not things in plain sight that we can observe the way we observe what goes on in a train station. Even if, as Marx remarks, the machinery of big industry reduces workers to the state of appendages to itself, human beings are not 'machine animals'. They are, rather, 'ideological animals'. They have what we call 'ideas' about themselves, their work and the world."<sup>84</sup>

And then goes onto specify how the militant might relate to this spontaneous knowledge in his exchange with Macciocchi:

"The thing that permits you to discover these 'silent areas', and which permits you to overcome them, is your political experience based on Marxist-Leninist theory. In this scheme of things, the militant is somewhat analogous to a psychoanalyst: he 'knows' more than the person he listens to, but what he 'knows' is on a different level than that which the speaker 'knows', which is the specific contradiction. The militant does not 'know', a priori and in specific detail, just what the lives of the persons he listens to are made up of and what the major contradictions are; he learns this by listening to them and discovering a great many things he previously did not know... [Marxist-Leninist theory] is what permits the militant to 'comprehend' beyond what he is told. It permits him, in particular, to 'diagnose' the sensitive spots, which are generally those 'silent areas'. It is at this stage of the 'analysis' that he can and must raise pertinent questions of his own in order to break down these silences and make the speaker discover things that he knows, *but that he is not aware of knowing because they are disguised*, - clouded over, repressed - covered over by causes that go to the very heart of the conditions in which these people live and to the heart of the pitiful means by which they try, in spite of everything, to get by. In this type of sociological-political 'hearing', a 'non-directed' interview is a trap."<sup>85</sup>

The spontaneous knowledge of workers, which either appears as totalising (the worker seems certain that what they know is all there is to say) or provisional (the worker seems certain that there is more to say, but they do not have access to that knowledge) takes the place of deeper levels of knowledge which are not imme-

84 Althusser, L. (1978) *What is to be Done?* pp. 14/15  
 Althusser, L. (1968) *Letters from Inside the Italian Communist Party to Louis Althusser* p. 51

diately accessible but which can be accessed through the contradictory encounter between the militant and the worker.

But Althusser is explicit in insisting that the structure of the relation between the militant and the worker is not that of pedagogical inequality. His claim is not that the militant would have more knowledge, or more accurate knowledge than the worker about the true determinations of their situation. Rather the militant inquiry forms a contradiction in the encounter of two distinct types of knowledge: first, the militant's knowledge drawn from a 'concrete analysis of the concrete situation' and second the workers' knowledge drawn from direct experience of the historical conditions of existence of the class antagonism. These are two distinct levels of knowledge, which offer different insight into the same antagonism. Neither of them however is immune from ideology. Both knowledge drawn from concrete analysis and from direct experience can present themselves as totalising. As such, they are conditioned by non-knowledge (something beyond what is thought to be known) which manifests in silences appearing alongside what is in fact said by the worker or what operates as the interpretative framework applied by the militant. Aspects of questions or issues which are passed over in silence tell us just as much about a worker's situation as what they actually say about it. It is the militant's task to remain attuned to what these silences signify in relation to what is actually said, and to discern how best to bring forth what remains unspoken but has nevertheless left a clear imprint on the workers' subjective experience.

So, for Althusser, the best case scenario is one in which the worker and the militant are forced, through the contradictions of their respective knowledge bases, to interrogate the unspoken/repressed knowledge which condition their apparent understanding of the situation. This is usually the site where ideological explanation takes the place of new understandings. This necessitates, as Althusser argues, a reciprocal openness to learning. On the part of the worker: they learn of what they know about their own situation at a higher degree of critical understanding – the limits of what they thought they knew become apparent through the exchange. On the part of the militant: they learn about what their concrete analysis could never ascertain without going into the field. That is, the worker's direct experience of the class antagonism – including its ideological character – which constitutes the antagonism's immediate historical form of existence.

The knowledge generated by the militant workers' inquiry is thus, in Althusser's words: political knowledge. That is, knowledge which exceeds the spontaneous understandings that both the worker and the militant begin from – which is the seat of ideology, (which is for Althusser, as we have seen, a crucial site through which social relations of production are reproduced).

Althusser therefore outlines methodological pre-requisites for a militant workers' inquiry aimed at producing political knowledge. First, it must involve an active dialogue that probes the contradictions arising from the encounter between two distinct forms of knowledge: that of the worker and the militant. The aim is to encourage reflection on the spontaneous understandings each party brings to the situation, exposing the limitations inherent in both perspectives. Such an inquiry should not only describe the experiences and historical conditions of class antagonism but also foster a critical awareness of the role of ideas in politically shaping how these experiences and realities are understood and explained. In this way, the workers' inquiry becomes a political intervention, disrupting the spontaneous ideologies that shape how both workers and militants understand class struggle and which form the ideological basis for the reproduction of the social relations of production.

By way of conclusion, I leave a scene which dramatises the necessary *reciprocal* political effects of the encounter between the worker and the militant. The scene comes from one of Macciocchi's letters depicting her efforts to connect with the working-class women of a proletarian district of Naples:

"At this moment I go back inside and take out the microphone and begin to invite them to the meeting - all the while trying as hard as I can not to seem like a circus barker. 'We have come here to let you speak up. So come on down and give us your point of view, tell us about your problems.' Even as I pronounce it, I realize that the word 'problems' - constantly on my lips - is meaningless here in Naples. You have to say 'your situation' or 'your affairs' and so I belatedly switch terminology. I ask, I insist, I invite, trying every kind of cajolery my fantasy can bring up... I get out the van clutching the microphone in my fist like a holy-water sprinkler and, advancing towards a woman, I ask her if she wants to speak. I ask her name. It is the simplest possible question you can ask anyone.

'Filomena Niola,' she answers. Her voice, her first and last names, spread out like a sonorous wave first over her, then over the entire street. This is the new fact: 'You, Filomena Niola....,' as they say in solemn declarations. She is speechless at this magic, at her familiar name which now echoes around her as if she were a celebrity. I keep it up, though I am positive that I am more panicky than she and, having decided to push things further, I ask her what she does. 'I'm a domestic. I get 40,000 lire a month, I have seven children, and I have to lay out 8,000 lire for our place...' I suddenly see that the simplest most direct questions are the ones which find an instinctive response, an echo; they work, while the more complex questions just float out into the air. 'What about your husband?' I ask. 'He is out of work,' she says, already in a flowing tone as if she were speaking to herself, 'he is looking for a job, anything. I have to look after our seven children, and they are in the streets the whole time I am gone, from morning to night...No, I have no insurance stamps, nor a pension, nor any sickness benefits...they treat us *like dogs*.' Like dogs! Her voice echoes from step to step in the street, it reverberates off the walls and plunges into the heart of Naples. Now everyone is starting to come out in the street, wanting to know what is going on. What is happening is that, 'Filomena, she's giving the speech!' In terms of time, it is not a long experience, for her; yet it is highly effective, because it represents a new form of struggle, her against society, and she is aligned against society as a single individual more deeply than she ever could have realized before now. Her courage, or her strength, comes to her 'contesting' life in the quarter, from the painful burden of all her children. In fact, what she says is, 'I am like the Madonna of the Seven Pains'. I tell her to go on, asking whether it has always been like this, or whether she has ever been happy. 'No, *it has always been like this; we are all in the same boat*.' With this, she wheels on the others, as if enraged, and says, 'Hey, come on, speak up for yourselves, or maybe you are better off, eh? Maybe you're all princesses... what's the matter with you?'....

In this reverse speech, letting simple folk speak for themselves, you realize three things: (1) that the women are by far the most courageous speakers; (2) that they denounce working conditions that the men do not even mention, and they are actually the ones who discuss their husband's work; (3) that while what they are doing as they speak is a fleeting experience, it is one which already contains with it, *in kernel form*, a break with existing society."<sup>86</sup>





**Get involved**

**Organise  
Now!**

Built by workers for workers, Organise Now! is a peer to peer organising network responding to the crises in work, pay and living standards. Skilled and experienced workers from across sectors are available now to help you and your co-workers organise to defend and improve your working lives and build power.

**Visit [organisnow.org.uk](https://organisnow.org.uk) to sign-up and get involved!**

If you're a worker looking for support to secure better pay, working conditions and power at work, then visit our website and fill in the form - we will contact you within 72 hours and put you in touch with an experienced organiser who will listen to you and help you build a plan for changing your workplace.

**How can I support others to get organised at work?**

If you have experience in the trade union movement and in fighting to change your workplace for the better, then join our team of coaches to support workers getting started in organising. We are also always looking for volunteers to help run the project and keep growing our network across unions and workplaces, so get in touch if you would like to contribute to our project.

We offer trainings, resources and support to all involved, so it's a great opportunity to learn more and build your confidence - visit our website to find out more!