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CAPITALISM IS KILLING THE EARTH

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Red Years, Black Years: Remembering Stuart Christie

By Jessica Thorne

In 2004, reflecting on a life of political struggle, which spanned several revolutions, prison, and one of the longest criminal trials in English history, Stuart commented:

“All I can say is that we couldn’t know then what we could only know today. Things that appeared possible 30 years ago – and the way to achieve those ends – would not work today. Times change, as do tactics and strategies.”

This quote encapsulates the tight-rope many revolutionaries walk when setting themselves against the existing social and political order of things. Challenge too much, and you risk confining yourself at a safe distance on the margins. Challenge too little and you risk changing nothing at all. Stuart wasn’t the sort of person who spoke of ‘heroes’. But if there was one character perhaps worthy of such status, it was the novelist, historian and poet, Victor Serge. For Serge, history’s course was both set and interrupted by “stepping off established paths”. For both revolutionaries, the deep oceanic swell of the past was located with those alienated from state power. The actions of politicians, while important, formed only the foamy crest – the refuse seen on the line of tidal change also known as ‘scum’.

Stuart was never afraid of the margins. In fact, he had what one would call ‘a nose for it’. Born in Glasgow in 1946, in the working-class district of Partick, he was well accustomed to living life on the brink. It was at the periphery where, from an early age, Stuart found signs of a different kind of society, one shorn – if not free – of the regulations imposed by state and capitalism. Stuart was a child of Glasgow’s smogged-brown-red tenements and was raised here before the white heat of post-war development culminated in mass slum clearances. Scaling the tenement entrances, described locally as ‘caves in the canyons’, Stuart recalled that there was both ‘a happy disregard for anonymity’ and ‘a dynamic community support structure with its own sense of mutual aid’. Without a textbook in hand, Stuart became intimately familiar with the anarchist concept of mutual aid, the need for which was undiminished by the recent triumph of social democracy.

The narrowing political horizons of our own time have had the effect of making the post-1945 arrangements in Britain appear Utopian. In many ways, this reflects the impoverished political surroundings of our present. Certainly, economically speaking, the British working class “never had it so good”.

Within contemporary memory, it seems that no episode of the country’s modern past deviated as far from its governmental norms as the Labourism of Attlee, Bevan, Benn and Harold Wilson. But it was a bargain reliant on complacency as much as compromise, often forcing emergent shopfloor militancy underground or outside the official unions. At 15, Stuart stumbled to the left of the new ‘consensus’, becoming a member of the Trotskyist-leaning Labour Party Young Socialists. It was a fleeting encounter. Once exposed to “the machinations and power struggles within the Glasgow Labour Party”, Stuart’s initial confusion of socialism with the British Labour Party was torn apart by its culture of “office-grabbing”, “local political power plays” and “contending sectarian power agendas”.

Reflecting the revolutionary ferment of the early 1960s, Stuart’s subsequent turn towards anarchism occurred rapidly. After becoming involved in the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, he soon favoured the direct-action approach of the Committee of 100 over routine marches to Aldermaston. In 1963, he tore up his Labour Party card and joined the Glasgow Federation of Anarchists. A year later he was making regular trips to London just as efforts were underway nationally to re-found the Anarchist Federation of Britain. Notting Hill Gate, a seedbed of libertarian and bohemian culture – and a focal point for Britain’s emergent neo-Nazi movement – would ultimately lead Stuart towards the site of anarchism’s most durable and most tragic expression: Spain.

After encountering West London’s community of Spanish migrants and exiles, Stuart became familiar with the revolution of July 1936, the brutal Francoist victory in 1939, and the Allied betrayal post-1945. In the example set by July 1936, Stuart saw an ideal model of workers’ self-management, which challenged the moral bankruptcy of both social democracy in the West and Soviet Communism in the East. It was this seemingly ‘untarnished’ ideal for which Stuart would cross the Pyrenees in 1964.

On Saturday 1 August, 1964, Stuart bought a single ticket for the morning boat train from London to Calais and from there headed to Paris. Arriving late in the afternoon at the Rue de Lancry, Stuart met with exiled members of the Iberian Federation of the Libertarian Youth. Far beyond the more customary exile activity of delivering banned publications, newspapers and leaflets, Stuart was entrusted with transporting a kilo of plastique (plastic explosives).

“As things turned out, it was fortunate I planned to be away some time and didn’t buy a return ticket”, Stuart later recalled, as he was consequently apprehended by the Brigada Político-Social (BPS, Franco’s political police) on 11 August and taken into custody. On 5 September, Christie received a note through his cell door stating the details of his sentence: ‘twenty years for military rebellion and terrorism’. As the fear of death by ‘garrote vil’ – the process of slow mechanical strangulation by an iron collar still in use in Spain until 1975 – subsided Stuart resumed political activity in prison.

The Stuart Christie Memorial Archive, currently in the stages of creation, has received a dozen smuggled letters written by Stuart during his time in Spain. In these letters, we not only found aborted escape plans, we have also discovered how he managed to bypass the prison censor. Stuart sent and received letters on the condition that the outside recipient sent monthly copies of ‘Playboy’ magazine to a certain – not so religiously upstanding – prison officer.

After Stuart’s early release in 1967, Spain would continue to hang over Stuart – not only as a spectre of revolutionary hope and defeat, nor as the inspiration for Stuart reviving the dormant Anarchist Black Cross, but with his card literally marked by the British Special Branch. In 1972, he faced conspiracy charges in the ‘Angry Brigade’ trial, Britain’s (now largely forgotten) answer to the Baader-Meinhof gang. After Stuart was acquitted by jury in 1972, he made the decision, following a ‘tip off’ from a special branch officer, to leave London and head to Orkney. Here he would co-found the anarchist ‘Cienfuegos’ Publishing House with fellow anarchist Albert Meltzer.

In ‘The Wretched of the Earth’, the psychiatrist and political philosopher Frantz Fanon remarked that ‘the presence of an obstacle accentuates the tendency towards motion’. Stuart’s life was one that insisted on motion. Against the dark fantasies of immobility of the post-war era – neo-fascism, fierce anti-communism, and the Cold War – Stuart insisted on the possibility of realising anarchism’s dream. As the final words of ‘Floodgates of Anarchy’ (1970) read: “Backward, indeed, to the free city, with its guilds of craftsmen and groups of scholars, its folk-meeting and loose federal association. But forward to the use of technology in its proper place, at the service of man... Backward to the workers’ councils of the Russian and German revolutions; the free communes of Spain, Ukraine, Mexico; the occupation of the places of work in France and Italy... Forward to the Utopia of William Morris, now well within the reach of man”.



Jessica Thorne is the curator of the Stuart Christie Memorial Archive, held at MayDay Rooms in London. maydayrooms.org/stuart_christie

The Preston Model

By Rhian E. Jones



In the current economic and political landscape, it's hard to find reasons to be cheerful. A decade of the austerity imposed after the financial crisis of 2008 has depressed and impoverished communities across the UK. But austerity itself is only one aspect of a neoliberal economic strategy that has overseen a rolling back of the welfare state, deindustrialisation, poorer wages and working conditions, and weakening of local infrastructure over the past forty years. On top of this, as movements like Occupy have shown, decisions made by increasingly remote central governments and international institutions have made people feel that they have little power to combat the effects of these policies on their own lives.

Furthermore, the organisational capacity of working people has been disrupted by decades of privatisation, attacks on trade unions, and the shift in the labour market towards casualised and precarious employment and the gig economy. Attempts at 'regeneration' of depressed areas have too often been led by the interests of private developers and multinational capital rather than the interests of local people. Most recently, the Covid-19 pandemic has exposed the extent of our reliance both on complex and overextended global supply chains and on the poorest and least valued workers in the cleaning, health, transport and care work sectors to keep the economy and society going. And intensifying all this, of course, is the urgent need to take action on the climate crisis.

But these developments, despite their devastating effects, have also meant that a new economic and political space for exploration and experiment has been opening up. Responses to lockdown – from the UK government pouring billions into the economy after decades of denying the possibility of increased state spending, to the revelation that remote working rather than costly, exhausting and environmentally damaging commuting is possible for millions, to the networks of mutual aid that developed spontaneously in many neighbourhoods – have shown that previous economic and social certainties were never set in stone. In the past decade, the small city of Preston in Lancashire has emerged as an example of what can be done with new ideas.

In 2011, Preston's situation was typical of many parts of the country: hit by deindustrialisation, austerity and government funding cuts, which had produced widespread and entrenched impoverishment and even lowered life expectancy in some parts of the city. Preston's final hopes for regeneration had been resting on a corporate-led development project, the Tithebarn, plans for which then collapsed in the fallout from the crash of 2008. Finding themselves visibly failed by conventional models of regeneration, Preston's newly elected Labour council decided to try something equally new. If developer-led business models dependent on outside investment hadn't worked, why not use internal resources instead? This idea became the basis of the 'Preston Model', a strategy that has been described as both "guerrilla localism" and "extreme common sense".

Inspired by alternative forms of economic development around the world, including Mondragón in the Basque Country and Cleveland in the US, Preston's council began to build strategic alliances with local institutions, looking to redirect the local economy away from failed and wasteful models of public-private partnerships and private finance initiatives, towards community wealth-building, collective ownership and democratic participation. The council worked with the public bodies on their doorstep – including local hospitals, colleges and housing associations – to adjust their spending, channelling more of their procurement budgets towards revitalising the local economy.

These 'anchor institutions' reorganised their supply chains and opened them to local competition, identifying where they could buy goods and services locally, then redirecting contracts towards local businesses for a whole range of services, from office supplies and construction work to the provision of school meals. These contracts also involved environmental and social considerations – targeting employment at deprived areas, stipulating the use of sustainable or ethically-sourced materials – focusing on social value rather than simply on bottom-line profit. In 2013, six of the local institutions that signed up for the effort spent around £38 million in Preston and £292 million in Lancashire as a whole. By 2017 this had skyrocketed to £111 million and £486 million respectively. Encouraging the development of local supply chains resulted in the creation of new jobs and higher wages as well as decreasing the number of precarious jobs and levels of in-work poverty.

Additionally, there were some types of procurement where local suppliers were limited. The council saw this as an opportunity to not only encourage the growth of new businesses but to enable more democratic forms of business ownership, by supporting worker-owned cooperatives that could fill the gaps where no local businesses existed to bid for public contracts. They encouraged the growth of cooperatives through support for start-ups in new sectors and employee buy-outs. Preston Labour Party have recently pledged to expand the Preston Model to support the creation of new worker cooperatives, as well as establish a regional cooperative bank.

The Preston Model has taken the city from being one of the country's most deprived and disadvantaged, to seeing significant economic improvement through shifting its own spending and investment from external suppliers to local producers and businesses. By 2020, Preston had achieved its highest employment rate and lowest levels of economic inactivity for over 15 years, and in 2018 it was voted the UK's most improved city to live and work. Notably, the material improvement delivered by Preston's strategy has brought consistent political success: in the 2019 general election, Preston was one of few constituencies to buck the national swing that saw heavy losses for Labour. In this year's local elections, Labour in Preston again defied national trends, retaining all its council seats and increasing its vote share in others.

Although Preston has become a beacon for this strategy of 'community wealth-building', other local authorities including North Ayrshire, Salford and the Wirral are also taking the decision to reject previous orthodoxies and invest in local infrastructure, institutions and services. But, outside of political parties and civic institutions, a variety of groups across the UK are also taking local matters into local hands. These projects range from community land stewardship in the Welsh Valleys to community-owned renewable energy schemes. Local Green New Deal initiatives – like that in Coventry, working with shop stewards at Rolls Royce on conversion plans for a low-carbon economy – are showing the potential for action that both addresses climate change and safeguards jobs.

Rhian E. Jones is a writer, journalist and broadcaster on history, politics and culture. She is the co-author of Paint Your Town Red (Repeater Books, 2021).

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No Going Back (Online)

By Nathan Stephens-Griffin

To paraphrase Mark Fisher, it may be easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism, but this year we haven’t had to imagine it, we’ve been watching the previews of coming attractions. Zoonotic diseases, climate catastrophe, racist violence, invasive surveillance, ecocide, repression of protest, fascism, floods, fires: the world is fucking burning.

In that context, what follows are some semi-coherent and potentially quite bleak reflections on what the online future might hold for bands committed to collectivist politics. I do so as someone who lives to make music, albeit without making a living doing it, and it’s directed at myself more than anyone else.

In amongst all the recent tragic and frequently avoidable death, disease and destitution, it seems trivial to mention the damage that the coronavirus pandemic has inflicted upon those whose happiness is tied to music. But it has been a brutal time, especially for live music spaces that were already far too thin on the ground in this landlordist hellscape.

Not being able to watch and play music with friends has devastated my mental health this year, and I know that’s been true for many others. Sure, bands still existed through the pandemic, but if all there is to do is play alone, flog merch, and tweet about the Tories, is there any fucking point?

It magnified an existing problem: the fact that many bands are now existentially reliant on streaming services. Every time someone plays a song on these platforms, an insipid silicon-valley tech billionaire quietly gets richer. Spotify made £6.7 billion in 2020; bands make around £0.002 per stream. The landscape is so exploitative that Bandcamp were universally venerated for simply not taking 10% once a month during the pandemic. It’s a sad state of affairs when we’re universally idolising a corporation for not exploiting artists 12 days a year.

At some point post-2000 there was a chance to democratise music. CDs became obsolete almost overnight, and the music industry incurred massive losses, with major labels seemingly on the verge of collapsing. We thought that new technology might usher in a bold new horizontal cultural landscape. That didn’t happen, and we’ve got a bigger problem now. Corporations consolidated their dominance and at this point opting out is like not existing.

Bands relied on corporations before the internet, from Fender guitars to Ford Transit vans filled with Shell Diesel. But there was acknowledgement and resistance – for example, converting touring vans to biodiesel. I feel like we’re more existentially tied to corporations than ever before, in much more varied and insidious ways, and with less acknowledgement.

Putting streaming aside, bands struggle to meaningfully exist today without being tangled up in surveillance capitalism, through Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, TikTok etc. Of course, *when something is free, you are the product*, and we’ve passively surrendered our means of communicating with one another to accommodate an economy that rests on parasitic access to our attention.

Worse still, within this attention economy, bands are forced into competition with one another. Just like Instagram displaying how many ‘likes’ your selfie has – to make you feel so bad you’ll finally pay for the cosmetic product/procedure it has been relentlessly advertising you – Spotify displays your streaming stats next to your songs, to ensure they are judged not just on their merits, but on how profitable they’ve been for dead-eyed fucking ghouls like Daniel Ek. It stinks.

Punk discourse often fails to acknowledge that, whilst idealism is important, bands do need money to exist. 2000s DIY mythmaking often became a justification for not paying bands because music should be free, despite most of everyone else involved getting paid. If bands have to play for fuck-all, when travel, instruments, food etc. cost money, it just restricts participation to the rich. But the alternative “rule 1: get paid” approach can go too far the other way, reproducing a hyper-individualism that we should also be resisting.

Bands could get off social media and take their music off these subscription services, but this will hurt them, unless they are already extremely popular. As it stands, if you’re not on there, people simply won’t follow or listen to you. Maybe that’s the answer, just making music no one will ever hear for its own sake, but in a world where we’re more connected than ever, that just feels like defeatist solipsism. There must be a way we can reconnect with music-making as a collective and not-entirely-commercial exercise beyond the attention economy. To somehow shift away from the myopic competitive individualism that surveillance capitalism entrenches.

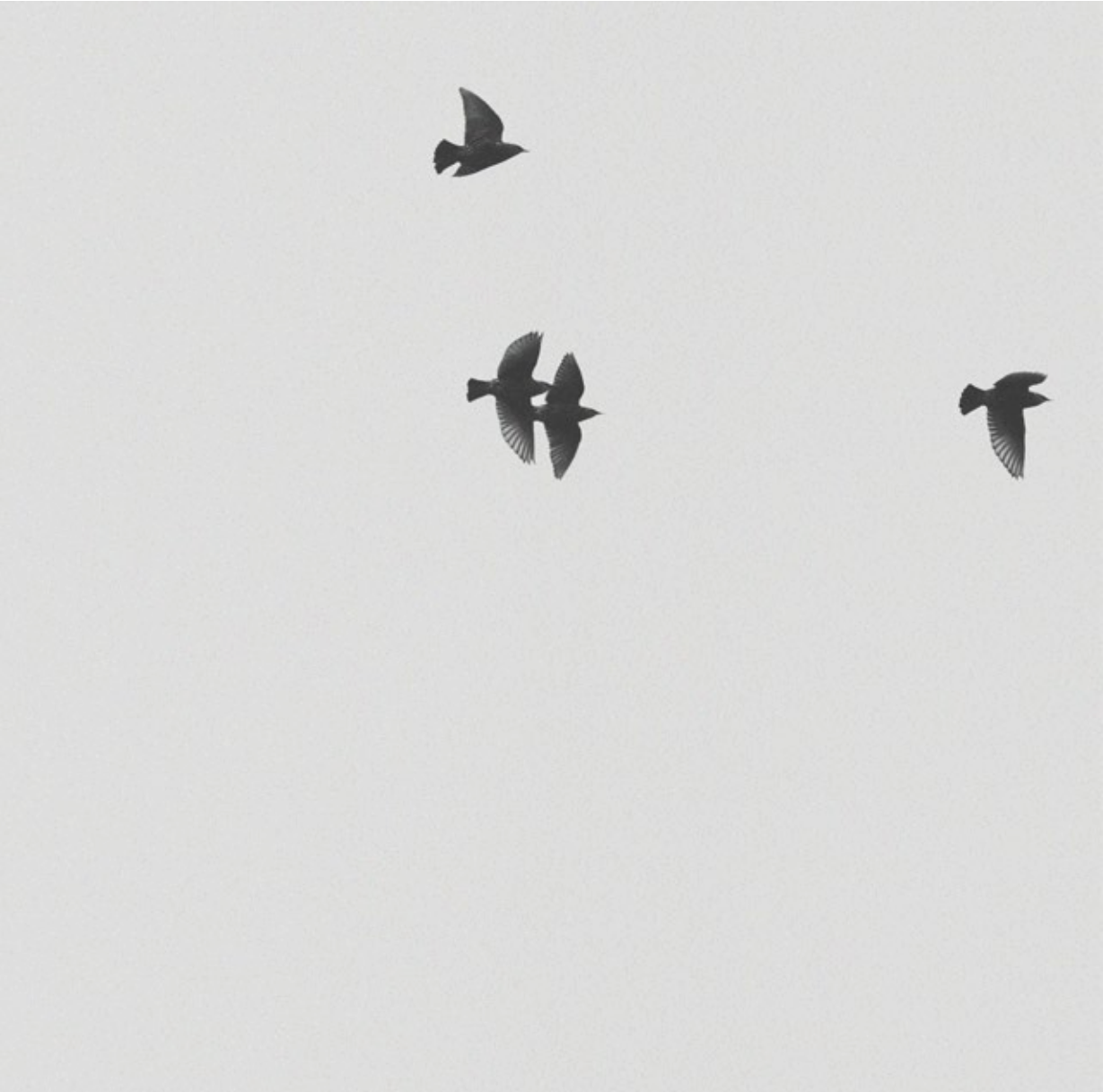
Sadly, I don’t have the answer, but looking ahead, I want to acknowledge that these platforms and technologies we use every day aren’t benign, they are a problem. When we are making political statements on them, we rarely acknowledge the innately fucked politics of the platforms themselves. Maybe bands can’t get off them without fatally damaging their ability to reach audiences, but they don’t have to be cheerleaders for these corporations, who parasitically leach off the ‘cool’ capital that artists give them.

There’s a sense of DIY punk anti-establishment idealism that’s maybe been lost or surrendered to the convenience of web 2.0. I always remember that the liner notes of Spoonboy’s 2005 album *I love you, this is a robbery* had a link to his website, followed by the statement: ‘PS. Fuck Myspace’. As antiquated and naïve as that might seem now, he was absolutely right, and more of us should have maintained that energy through what was to follow. As David Combs said more recently, *we need to find the biodiesel alternative to Spotify*.

DOPE offers a model for sustainable creativity in a radical, co-operative and non-commercial way. I’d like to learn from that in the way we approach things in future. Sharing music and playing gigs again irl still feels like a daunting prospect, but rather than reverting back to whatever shitty ‘normal’ we had before, I want to try and be prefigurative in the way we balance our online/offline existence, working towards a future that is better than the present: *building the new world in the shell of the old*.

Ultimately, if you strip away all the bullshit, music should be for, and by, everyone. I know there are ways to work collectively, making and sharing music with others outside of, and beyond, surveillance capitalism – we just have to work to make that happen. I’ve no doubt that brighter brains than mine can figure this out, but we need to have the will to try. That starts by rejecting the status quo of surveillance capitalism, and in asking the question: how could things be better?

I’m sick of feeling like any cultural future beyond capitalism has been cancelled, like sharing music is always destined to be, first and foremost, a depressing marketing endeavour, like the corporations will always get their cut. I don’t want sharing music to feel like stepping on the faces of others, competing to distract people from the burning world. Music might feel relatively unimportant right now, but every revolution needs a soundtrack. Let’s try and find a *way to make it ourselves, together*.



Nathan Stephens-Griffin plays drums in the band Martha.

marthadiy.bandcamp.com

Mutual Aid is...

By Ruth Kinna

‘Mutual aid’ has been circulating in the English language since the mid-sixteenth century. The equivalent in French, ‘l’entraide’ has a shorter history but compared to the English term, which has various connotations, has a more definite meaning. It comes from the relationship to ‘mutualism’, which P-J Proudhon, the author of What is Property? popularised in the 1840s. Mutualism was the doctrine that well-being comes from the recognition of interdependence. In the 1880s, when Peter Kropotkin, an admirer of Proudhon, began to flesh out his theory of mutual aid, this was the point he developed. Mutual aid was the practice that followed from mutualism.

Mutual aid has become a familiar term since the start of the pandemic. But it now seems that the act of giving aid, even if it stems from mutual dependence, can take contradictory forms. It can be more or less inclusive, driven by conflicting motives and directed towards competing goals. To disentangle this, we need to ask what Kropotkin meant by mutual aid.

1. A Factor of Evolution

“If we ... ask Nature ‘Who are the fittest: those who are continually at war with each other, or those who support one another?’ we at once see that those animals which acquire habits of mutual aid are undoubtedly the fittest ... we may safely say that mutual aid is as much a law of animal life as mutual struggle.” – Henry Drummond, 1894.

Kropotkin’s book *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution*, published in 1902, was originally written in the 1880s and 90s as an intervention in a dispute about Darwin’s theory of evolution. The debate hinged on the meaning of the ‘struggle for existence’ and the character of the mechanisms that explained biological ‘fitness’. Representing Darwin’s phrase as ‘the survival of the fittest’, ‘Social Darwinians’ linked struggle to aggressive individual competition and painted nature as a gladiatorial fight to the death. This interpretation was taken up by advocates of ‘might is right’, fuelling fear and hatred of the poor, vicious and spurious race science and ‘Lebensraum’ – the ‘struggle for space’.

Kropotkin presented a version of Drummond’s argument: nature was characterised by sociability. Groups ‘struggled’ collectively against adverse conditions and to protect individuals from predators.

Competition between species was a natural phenomenon but this emphasised individual interdependence and the interconnectedness of life on earth.

Individual well-being rested on co-operation or the capacity for mutual aid. Kropotkin disagreed with Drummond about the sentiments that underpinned mutual aid. Drummond said it sprang from love or sympathy; Kropotkin thought mutual aid expressed solidarity or sociability.

2. A Relationship

‘any general trends towards mutual aid in the U.S. should be understood, not simply or principally as a return to earlier giving habits, but also as an echo of ongoing giving practices among the Global majority around the world. Because “minorities” in the Americas – Black and Brown people – have always had to practice some form of mutual aid’ – Caroline Shenaz Hossein, 2020.

Shifting his attention from biological evolution to the evolution of social institutions, Kropotkin disputed Drummond’s theory because he thought that love was necessarily exclusive. However much it was practiced, it could not be generalised. ‘It is not love to my neighbour’ he said, ‘that induces me to seize a pail of water and rush towards his house when I see it on fire’. As a relationship, mutual aid could be cultivated as habitual and instinctive. Success depended on the principles of association.

Kropotkin presented three social models: tribal society, village community and city-state. As a progressive series these forms represented the extension of the practice of mutual aid from blood relations to neighbours and to strangers. Treated as sociological types, they showed how mutual aid was embedded in principles of justice, distribution and government.

Kropotkin considered the city-state to have been the most creative and sophisticated attempt to organise society for mutual aid. But he also argued that its institutions had been too weak to resist destabilisation by self-aggrandising landowners, military chiefs, and clerics. The failure marked the start of Europe’s global domination and the remodelling of social institutions by exploitative ruling elites.

Though hampered by competition and individualism, Kropotkin argued that mutual aid continued in a plethora of grass roots organisations. It thrived in communities that elites authorised, neglected or ignored – notably in the disadvantaged and marginalised communities Caroline Shenaz Hossein talks about, but also amongst the privileged: in Masonic societies, sports clubs, church groups and professional associations. But in all these instances, mutual aid was structured by inequality and exclusion and its reach was nearly always constrained. Injustice undermined trust between groups, inhibiting their interconnection and the realisation of genuine social solidarity.

3. An Ethics

‘Common Ground’s foundational premises were simple: mutual aid and solidarity, expressed through the slogan “Solidarity Not Charity”’ – Scott Crow, 2013.

The devastation wreaked by Hurricane Katrina in 2005 was one of those emergencies that melted social barriers, kindling mutual aid in a decentralised relief effort and the creation of the Common Ground Collective, a community-led, volunteer project. As Scott Crow notes, in Common Ground, practical action and ethics converged.

Kropotkin outlined the ethics of mutual aid by telling a story about a drowning child. What motivated bystanders to attempt the rescue? Three possibilities suggested themselves: redemption, self-satisfaction and recognition of need. The first two were driven by the promise of reward: being saved from sin or basking in the warm glow of benevolence. Mutual aid was impulsive and instinctual. Aid was free of debt, obligation and dependency. No credit was sought.

3. A Revolutionary Principle

“the essence of the response in the early days of the crisis was messy informality, which nevertheless resolved itself into spontaneous order through the common sense and self-organising instincts of communities. The task for official systems was to quickly catch up, to support the mutual aid effort, and to plug it into the government’s public health and welfare policies.” – Daniel Kruger MP, 2020.

Mutual aid has become one of the watchwords of the covid pandemic. Thousands of volunteer groups have sprung up to provide equipment to hospitals, feed health workers, and support neighbours and local communities.

Where politicians like Kruger see ‘messy informality’ in spontaneous order, Kropotkin saw revolutionary potential. His hope was that mutual aid organisations would find ways of withstanding incorporation by government agencies. Absorption into government-controlled systems meant changing the logic of their operation, subjecting them to regulation while also providing a convenient hanger for austerity. Kropotkin’s idea was not to facilitate the state’s apparent ‘roll-back’ through voluntarism and philanthropy. He wanted to transform social institutions by re-grounding them in mutual aid – to replace welfare with well-being.

No social institution, he argued, could ‘serve all aims indiscriminately’. Social institutions were ‘developed for a certain purpose’. Mutual aid pointed to the reconstruction of social life, the ‘re-modelling in their entirety all relations’. He continued: ‘In every street, in every hamlet, in every group ... assembled about a factory or along a railroad, we must awaken the creative, constructive, organising spirit, in order to reconstruct the whole life of the factory, on the railroad, in the village, in the stores, in taking supplies, in production, in distribution’. Mutual aid meant a shift from uniformity, individualism and personal security to multiplicity, solidarity and common protection.



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SHELBY x Studios MANIFESTO:

ART x ACTIVISM

ARTIVISM

Art is a tool for the Revolution

EDUCATE TO LIBERATE

Use art to
raise Political Consciousness

FUCK YOU! PAY US!

Artists are cultural workers

ACCESSIBILITY FOR ALL

If it's not accessible,
it's NOT revolutionary

CREATE TO LIBERATE

Creative expression is the
foundation of our freedom

COMM/UNITY

The practice of creating together
is part of revolutionary work

AUTHENTICITY IS POWER

Counter mainstream
narratives and celebrate
individuality

REVOLUTION IS LOVE

Create Communities of care.
Radical art for the mind, body
and soul

HOPE IS ON THE HORIZON

Art and culture help us to imagine + create futures of freedom + joy

Slacking Off

By Amelia Horgan

The most common practices for resistance at work are probably the small acts of slacking off that allow for an assertion, however limited, of our autonomy. Or at least, our autonomy when we're in the toilet, hiding from our managers and co-workers. Stolen moments where we push back against the managerial proclamations that we find the most outrageous. Tiny skirmishes on a longer-term war over a frontier of control. The first group of these assert a temporary reclamation of our time. Elongating lunch breaks, hanging out with the smokers on their breaks, or even taking up smoking ourselves, spending time on social media and quickly opening a spreadsheet or Word document when a colleague passes behind us, and applying for other jobs on company time.

These minor acts of time theft can be thrilling or just a tool for getting through the workday. Just as shops expect and plan for lost profits through shoplifting, employers expect a margin of slacking off. These margins are different in different sectors and the extent to which they are permitted depends on the relative power of the workers in that sector, the prestige or expertise that their job is assumed to have, and the technological possibilities for monitoring that work.

In industrialising Britain, factory-owners routinely concealed the time from workers. By turning clocks back and forward, they secretly shortened breaks to maximise profits. Workers knew about this but were able to do little, and those with their own watches could even end up fired. In the contemporary workplace, the battle over time is different. Bosses might not turn back clocks, but in many workplaces, management attempts to cultivate a sense of responsibility and loyalty to the company – one that goes beyond working to contract, encouraging employees to constantly improve their performance. It is not merely enough to be doing the job you were hired to do: you must be improving and developing all the time. Of course, being stuck in the same role forever can be boring, and being denied opportunities for promotion and higher pay can be harmful. But these demands to always be doing better don't usually involve doing better for the sake of promotion down the line but as routine expectation. This means an intensification of work during work hours, with more time taken from employees by a demand for constant improvement which represents an unmeetable, always moving horizon. While workers try to carve out time away from work at work, management intensifies the process of work.

One strategy is regular working from home. The scope for the monitoring of work by managers is vastly reduced if you're not actually at work. Sometimes, working from home also involves time-grabbing slacking off: one person I know told me that they log in to their remote desktop from bed first thing in the morning, and then go back to sleep for a few hours. Working from home can mean taking longer to do tasks or doing them at different times. While remote monitoring remains largely taboo in the UK, the Covid-19 lockdown saw a rise in interest by companies in the use of software to check workers' activity. This kind of technology often promises a focus on improving team dynamics or employee wellbeing and it is through this softer narrative that it could become normalised.

Another common tactic is to find some way of making yourself indispensable. If you're the only one who knows how something works and that thing is of some importance to the place where you work, there are a couple of ways you can gain a little more control over your daily activity. Sometimes this is minor. If you're a spreadsheet whizz while everyone else at your workplace struggles with working out how to copy and paste text, you can disguise how long it takes to do certain tasks. If nobody else can understand what you do, you can't be monitored and managed as well as someone whose daily tasks are more obvious. If you're a sales assistant in, say, H&M, and that day you're assigned to the denim section, it will quickly become obvious if you have not kept on top of folding each pair of jeans: the jeans will be in chaos, customers won't be able to find the sizes they need, the clothes will start spilling onto the floor. If, by contrast, you're the only person who knows how to batch edit image files, then you can pretend that the task is longer and more strenuous than it really is, asking not to be disturbed in this busy and stressful time. Plus, if the expertise you have is rare and business-essential, the cost of firing you and losing that expertise, with all the possibilities of computer systems crashing, is pretty high. This can give people relative freedom and the ability to say 'no' or delay infuriating demands from their bosses.



Perhaps the most basic and common forms of resistance in the workplace are those that take place just within the mind of an individual worker. That workplaces make demands on sociability is nothing new. Seventy years ago, American sociologist, C. Wright Mills, identified a phenomenon that he termed the 'personality market': office workers were increasingly expected to use and develop elements of their personality for and within their careers. These demands are now commonplace – even, and often especially, in poorly paid work. Refusing to understand your personality as grist for the mill, as something to be developed in the service of your employer, or complying only outwardly with the demands placed on you is common. Refusing to love your job, refusing to see it as the most important thing in your life can become a form of resistance when your employers demand that you emotionally bind yourself to your work.

You can, of course, leave your job. In some ways, this can be leveraged as a threat: if you make me do something I don't want to do, I'll just leave. Such threats only work well when you're hard or expensive to replace. This isn't the case for most workers, particularly in times of high unemployment and low unionisation. For most workers, you need your job much more than your job needs you.

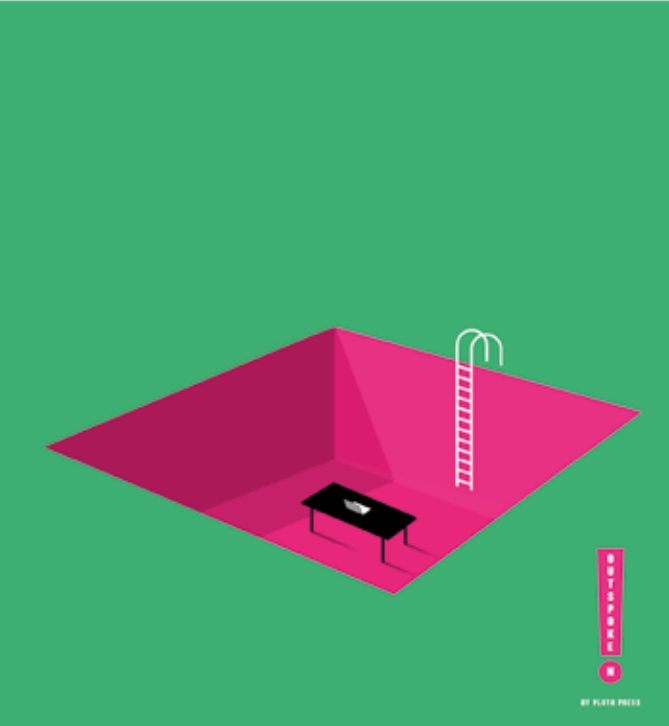
What should we make of the widespread practices of slacking off? The response from managers and management theorists is normally that people should use their time more efficiently, and that this slacking off happens because diligent workers aren't given enough to excite them, and lazy workers, are, well, lazy. I don't find this to be a very satisfying explanation for a widespread disenchantment in workplaces. Work is unable to hold people's attention; it does not provide them with the meaning that they had been promised it would have. It's easy to see why some have taken the generalised boredom and minor acts of corporate sabotage outlined above as proof of a widely felt resistance to work. There is a great amount of informal resistance that happens within workplaces. But there is, to my mind, a question remaining. What exactly do these practices of resistance resist? In many cases, people still hold out hope (wrongly or rightly) that their next job will be better, will finally offer them meaning and recognition, a nice boss, a better salary and so on. Anger, routine humiliation, feelings of exploitation, and the practices of resistance that function as their pressure valves often have as their targets elements of their current job (an annoying task or a crap manager) rather than the whole edifice of work.

Amelia Horgan is a writer, researcher and activist. She is currently writing a PhD on work in the feminist political imaginary at the University of Essex, and is the author of *Lost in Work* (Pluto Press, 2021).



LOST IN
WORK

Amelia Horgan
Escaping
Capitalism



Shadow Workers

By **Veronica Deutsch**

In ‘Shadow Mothers’, Cameron Lynne Macdonald describes the work performed by domestic workers – a predominantly migrant and female workforce – as ‘shadow work’. She states that “[t]he nanny not only acts as a mother-extension but also fades into invisibility when she is not needed”. In my eight years as a nanny, I’ve realised that this invisibility can be most succinctly explained by looking at the mantelpieces of my employers.

If you look at any nanny or au pair’s phone, I can almost guarantee you that their background will be a picture of one of the children they look after. I have framed photographs in my house of my ‘charges’ – all seven of them – alongside me at my wedding. I have their drawings attached to my fridge and pictures of us together in my photo albums. Yet in employers’ homes these same pictures (which we will often share with them throughout the day) have been stripped of their context and placed on their own mantelpieces, with the pictures often cropped at odd angles so that a nanny’s hand or an au pair’s face cannot be seen. These pictures of children with babycino froth on their faces or on rocking horses in the park are quite literally framed as someone else’s experience. Though we may care deeply about the children we look after, if they are still young when we leave they will inevitably forget us. I’ve ran into children I looked after for years in toddlerhood who do not remember me – and why would they? I haven’t left a trace. I wasn’t allowed to. We do not exist in these houses.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing inequalities and nannies & au pairs, as a predominantly low-income and migrant workforce, have been among those hardest hit. Domestic workers – a group that encompasses live-in and live-out nannies, au pairs, babysitters, and housekeepers – often work cash-in-hand and without formal contracts. 92% of childcare workers are women and the majority of workers are under the age of 30; job platforms such as Au Pair World even allow parents to set age ranges for applicants as low 17-18. Those who live-in are not entitled to ‘worker’ status (though this is currently being reviewed by the Low Pay Commission), meaning that we are exempted from minimum wage regulations and unable to take paid holiday or regular breaks.

As a direct result, many during the pandemic have been ineligible for government support schemes such as the Job Retention Scheme or the Self-employed Income Support Scheme (SEISS), while migrants – even those with Right to Work, such as myself – have fallen through social security nets as a result of ‘No Recourse to Public Funds’.

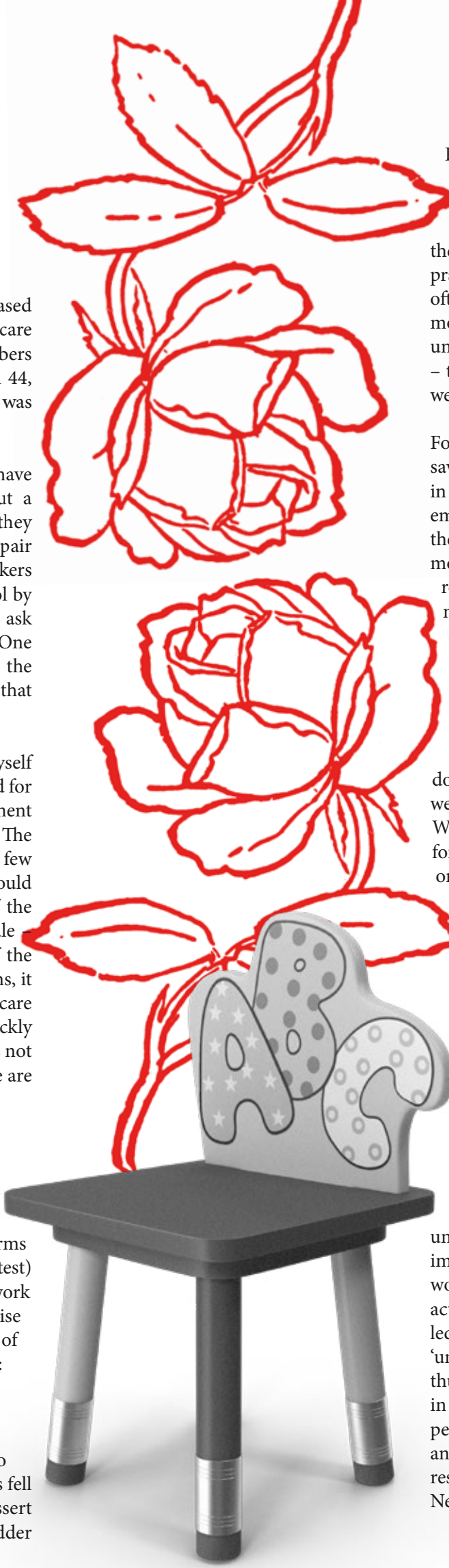
Those working in the grey economy have faced additional barriers to safe working. Despite the high contraction risk among childcare workers, the NHS’ data-sharing with the Home Office has left many afraid to book vaccines, leaving them exposed in workplaces where they are unable to wear PPE or socially distance.

During the pandemic, unions that support settings-based childcare workers (such as the newly formed United Childcare Workers branch of UUVW) were able to help their members claim protection when refusing to work under Section 44, but for domestic workers this kind of individual action was not an option.

Additionally, the majority of nannies & au pairs have continued to work throughout the pandemic without a formal risk assessment. Many more face deportation if they dare to speak up about unsafe working conditions: au pair employers will often knowingly hire undocumented workers because their vulnerability makes them easier to control by threatening to report them for illegal working if they ask to be paid on time or refuse to work certain hours. One undocumented au pair, for instance, was reported to the Home Office by her own employer after she requested that her bosses self-isolate following a positive COVID test.

In response to these gaps in provision, in May 2020, myself and a fellow South London nanny began a hardship fund for childcare workers who were currently facing, or at imminent risk of, destitution due to the first COVID-19 lockdown. The response was rapid: we raised over £10,000 in the first few months and were contacted by more workers than we could afford to support. Listening on the phone to some of the experiences of our fellow workers felt like a huge exhale while many were sharing with us harrowing stories of the abuse and poverty they were facing due to the lockdowns, it was a relief for many to be able to speak to another childcare worker, and to hear that they weren’t alone. We quickly realised that the biggest issue facing domestic workers is not that our struggles are invisible to the public, but that we are invisible to one another.

Domestic workers have historically struggled to mobilise effectively or advocate for ourselves as a workforce for a variety of reasons. In-home childcare workers are often undocumented or on limited-term visas, which makes the visibility that comes with traditional forms of collective organising (such as strike action or protest) incredibly dangerous. Likewise, nannies & au pairs work without a shared employer, making it difficult to organise a collective response to poor working conditions. Lack of workforce representation has had huge repercussions: while pressure from the National Education Union (NEU) in January was the driving force behind school closures, the lack of similar union representation for Early Years meant that childcare workers were forced to keep working. During this time, 1 in 10 nursery workers fell ill with the virus, leading academic Christine Berry to assert that childcare workers “are being treated like cannon fodder so that ‘higher-value’ work can go on”.



But our workforce faces precarity beyond the pandemic: the UK’s flawed au pair system is putting countless young workers at risk. While once au pairing was viewed as a ‘cultural exchange’ where a young migrant could live in the UK for free in exchange for some hours of childcare, in practice the high rate of informality means that au pairs are often working upwards of 50 hours a week with weekly ‘pocket money’ as low as £70 as their only income. Members of our union branch have described cancelling their English classes – the original premise for their au pairing trip – because they were facing too many childcare hours.

For the many who want to escape these conditions, even saving for a flight home is impossible, leaving them stranded in countries where they may not know anyone beyond their employers. These abhorrent conditions are state-sanctioned: the government’s formal recommendation for au pairs’ pocket money equates to £3 per hour for a 30 hour week, leaving little room for manoeuvre. The line between what comes under modern slavery and what the government views as simply a ‘family-like’ relationship between au pair and employer is blurred, leaving many in desperate need.

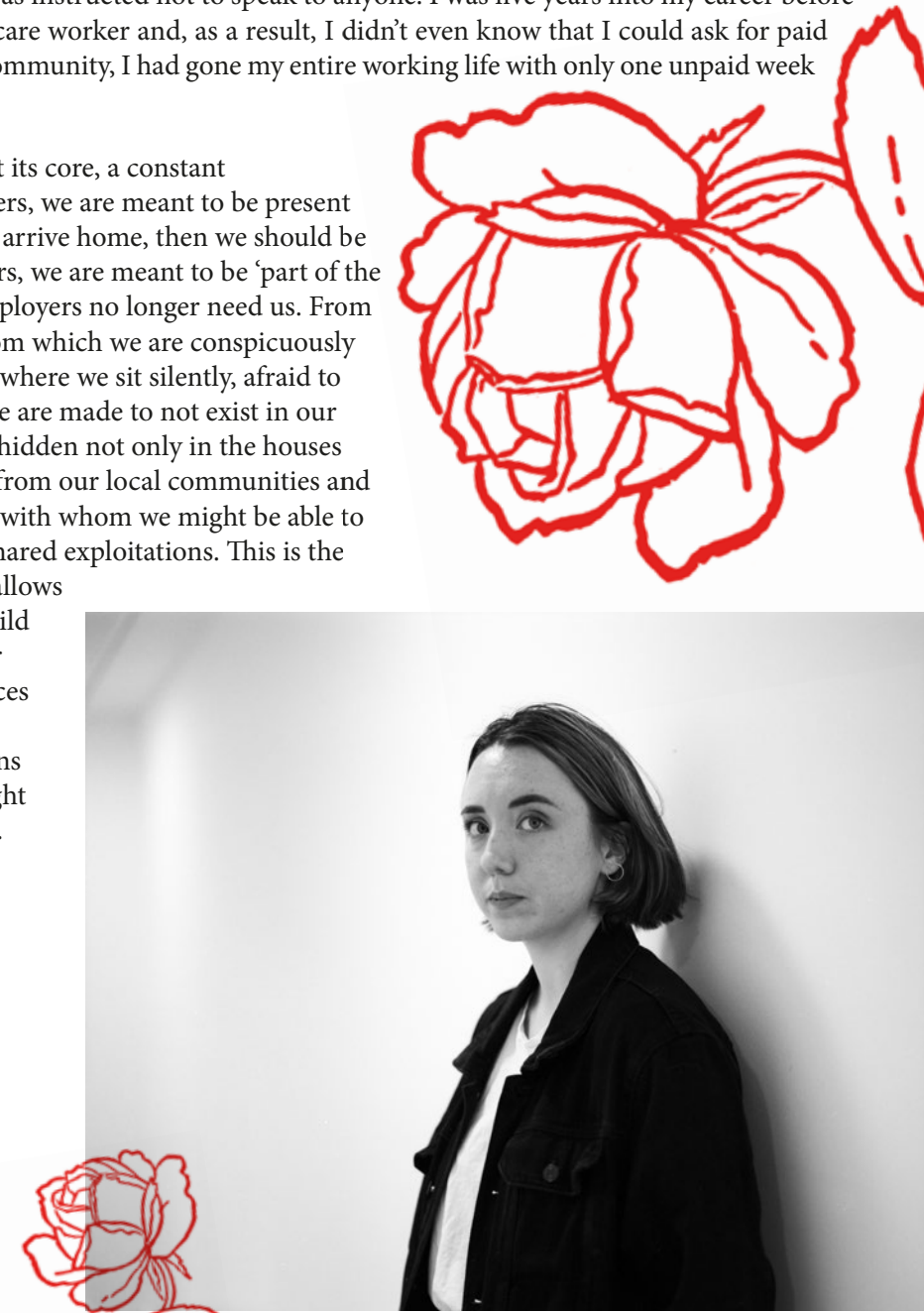
Through the hardship fund we formed the Nanny Solidarity Network, a grassroots community that provides emergency aid and resources to nannies & au pairs across the UK. In doing so, we realised that the structural inequalities that we were facing went far deeper than the current pandemic. While the hardship fund had provided an essential lifeline for members in desperate need, instead of fire-fighting with one-off crisis response for individuals, we began to prioritise building structures that would make us more connected and more powerful in the longer term; tackling the conditions that produce individual hardship. From here, members from our community began working with Independent Workers of Great Britain to form IWGB Nannies & Au Pairs: the first trade union branch led by and for domestic workers.

Our branch was formed with the view to provide space for collective action to in-home childcare workers across the UK and to think laterally about what it means to organise a feminist workforce that operates largely outside of the realms of employment law. We realised that though traditional organising strategies employed by larger trade unions such as strategic litigation and tribunal claims are impossible to map onto a workforce that is classed neither as workers nor employees, alternative strategies such as direct action can be equally as powerful. The IWGB, as a migrant-led direct-action union with a track record of supporting ‘unorganisable’ workers through these grassroots methods, has thus provided the perfect home for our workforce. We are now in the planning stages of our first campaign and run regular in-person meet-ups, stay & play sessions so that we can meet one another during working hours, and are co-producing written resources for workers in tandem with the Nanny Solidarity Network.

It is no coincidence that feminised workforces such as aged care and childcare have suffered so much during the pandemic – caring labour is not seen as ‘productive’, and therefore it is not valued. With individual wins largely out of reach for the majority of our workforce, our union must extend beyond the workplace. Working in isolated settings in separate houses across the UK can make it hard for domestic workers to meet one another and share experiences and, while unions have typically provided the space for workforces to advocate for themselves and to bargain collectively for improved conditions and pay, they can also provide rich sources of community for their members.

This community is vital: the informal advice networks that proliferate in worker communities can provide scaffolding to workers whose rights are unsupported by the law. In one of my first nanny jobs, for instance, I was not allowed to take the children out of the house for over two years. We spent every day from 7:30am-7:30pm either inside or in their garden, barring the odd trip to their local park where I was instructed not to speak to anyone. I was five years into my career before I met another childcare worker and, as a result, I didn’t even know that I could ask for paid holiday – without community, I had gone my entire working life with only one unpaid week off each Christmas.

Domestic work is, at its core, a constant invisibilising; as carers, we are meant to be present until our employers arrive home, then we should be forgotten. As workers, we are meant to be ‘part of the family’ until our employers no longer need us. From the mantelpieces from which we are conspicuously absent, to the parks where we sit silently, afraid to approach anyone, we are made to not exist in our workplaces. We are hidden not only in the houses where we work but from our local communities and from other workers with whom we might be able to catalyse action on shared exploitations. This is the value of a union: it allows us somewhere to build something from our individual experiences that is bigger than just ourselves. Unions provide us with a light among the shadows.



Veronica Deutsch is a founding member of the Nanny Solidarity Network, and a member of IWGB Nannies & Au Pairs branch.

iwgb.org.uk/page/nannies-and-au-pairs

Doing the Time

By Warren King

My name is Warren King. I am an ex-drug dealer and an ex-prisoner. I now present workshops nationally on the unintended consequences of drugs and crime to young, at-risk students. I am also a personal trainer and about to begin my degree in Sociology. My view has always been that drug abuse or related crime should be treated as a health concern rather than a criminal matter, with support being the requirement for rehabilitation instead of punishment.

Before I really get into it, I want to talk about the actual meaning of the word crime. What is crime? Is crime a social construct? Why are some laws different here (England) to those of America, or Holland, or Spain? Some are universal yes, like murder – unless you are, for example, at war. Why is it okay to kill when you’re a soldier in a war but not on the street? Émile Durkheim defined crime as an act that shocks the well-defined states of morality, and where the reaction is punishment. Whilst Howard Becker suggested that social groups create deviance and crime by applying rules to particular people, and labelling them as outsiders to the main group. Becker asserts that the labelling is in consequence to a group’s response to a person’s action, rather than the action itself.

Let’s be straight about this, except for those falsely accused, people are generally in prison for a reason. Whether that reason is drug-dealing, violent crimes or theft, or the hardest-to-forgive crimes, such as those of a sexual nature. The punishment for those convicted is to be imprisoned, away from the public and therefore unable to cause more harm (but it is not to be further punished with emotional, verbal or physical abuse once you are there). That all seems fair enough to me, but without any realistic, attainable, and appropriate support for rehabilitation, does prison essentially just become a sweeping under the carpet mechanism for those labelled as offenders? There is a well-known revolving door, with recidivism rates soaring to 77% amongst young people. What is the sense in that?

I believe that the way we communicate with each other, including how we describe others, lays the foundations of how we treat one another and, in-turn, how we act. Something that was immediately evident for me upon entering the prison system was the stripping of one’s name, replaced with a prison ID number.

This is supported by the terminology used by staff: I was always referred to as the “offender” rather than by my name. I can see this giving weight to the internalisation of the term offender, which would include the social role that the “offender” plays, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy. You call someone the offender, they will believe it to be true, and act accordingly.

This leads me to the focus of this article, which I have experienced as: the dehumanisation of people within the criminal justice system, the minimisation of trauma, and the culture of bullying from staff to those imprisoned. I am interested in knowing why there is this type of social fissure. Is it the type of person that’s attracted to the job? Or is it because people conform to what they perceive to be their allocated social roles? (See Zimbardo’s prison experiment). I did find there to be some helpful staff but burn-out was frequent. There is a huge turnover of staff and therefore a high percentage of staff have little-to-no experience. Those that were helpful ended up exhausted from the workload as people would repeatedly ask them for help because they had given up on the other staff members that do nothing.

Pentonville is a Victorian prison; I don’t think it was exactly planned with human rights in mind. Now that prisons are becoming overcrowded, there may be two or three people in a cell that was originally built for one, stacked like sardines. Staff are generally rude or dismissive. My first couple of days in prison were a shock. I was left in a cell on the top landing of the induction wing. There was an overwhelming heat in the cells despite it being January. This cell became a dungeon that doubled as a sauna. The toilet made from metal, with stains built up over the years. Dirty water would leak and cover the floor, the stench of which was unavoidable. Living in those cells for 23 hours a day was traumatic and surely raises human rights concerns.

It had got too much for someone on the landing below where I was being held and he had tried to take his life by cutting his throat with a razor. Officers were made aware, stormed into his cell, and got him to the hospital. The following day, I overheard the same staff talking with other men imprisoned, describing the man as pathetic, using that age-old saying “If you can’t do the time..” It’s apt at this point to remember that everyone makes mistakes and that’s a part of what makes us human, but within this discussion emerged that “us and them” mentality that pervades the system.

So how does someone in prison move past these behaviours and attitudes demonstrated by staff so freely and without consequence? Can we consider that those same staff ought to be modelling behaviour? How does one improve the relationships between staff and those imprisoned? Surely, this would lead to an improved likelihood of successful rehabilitation.

This brings me on to the minimisation of trauma throughout the prison system. Prison is a dark place, and you need thick skin to survive. Those imprisoned tend not to talk about their emotions with others, due to the pressures of residing in prison, in addition to the potential internal difficulties with recognising and articulating emotions that many people in prison experience.

There is a listener service, for those imprisoned to use as a support network. A “listener” is the term for another person (also in custody), that has been given some training in counselling on the listener’s course. They volunteer their time to help support other people suffering in the system. In my experience staff were often too lazy to make the call or do the paperwork that followed allowing two people out of the cells to talk – you could easily be in your cell all night waiting for someone that didn’t know you’d asked for them. It was not unheard of for staff to say they’ve called for a listener, so that you keep quiet until their shift ends. You could easily call for a listener five times across as many hours, with no response whilst you are stewing in your thoughts in your cell.

Attesting to the typical minimisation and neglect of those imprisoned is something that happened at HMP Bristol recently. Some prisoners have not been able to see their families for the last 18 months due to the pandemic. Staff and officers organised a “family day” for themselves, as those imprisoned watched staff play with their families and kids on bouncy castles and had a barbecue. It’s okay though, it was all justified by the comment “they should have thought of that before coming to prison”, which an officer tweeted in response to the post online. This to me cements that prevalent us-and-them mentality. I’m not even surprised that staff would do something so inconsiderate: it essentially reminds those imprisoned that they believe themselves to be superior in a way that is excessive and past the point of rudeness.

I managed to make a success of myself after prison, but I had a lot of outside support which most don’t. There is a lot to change in prison, and I think it starts with attitudes and relationships.



Warren King is a former prisoner who now presents workshops nationally to students and professionals on drugs and crime.

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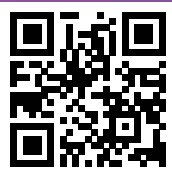
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