



MANUALLABOURS

The Complaining Body

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An organisational case study

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I

This essay examines working conditions in an organisationⁱ from the perspective of its outsourced support staff, through the prism of my own experiences as one of these outsourced workers. I specifically look at how ‘complaints’, in the sense of verbal or bodily articulations of dissatisfaction, are expressed or suppressed in this environment of routine precarity and hierarchical power relations. I then consider how under such conditions, characterised by an enforcement of intra-institutional boundaries and a blurring of manual and emotional labour, the individual complaint can be redirected towards those structures of power and repositioned as an act of collective resistance.

A formative influence on this exercise is the Marxist tradition of the workers’ inquiry.ⁱⁱ By exploring workplace relations at first hand, the workers’ inquiry seeks to reveal the inner workings of capitalist production and find ways in which workers can disrupt and overthrow those relations by metaphorically or literally throwing a spanner in the works. By way of a disclaimer, it should be emphasised that the situation described below does not remotely resemble the historic struggles and revolutionary formulations found in such accounts. In fact the opposite is the case: the worker-subjectivity here is steeped not in strikes and sabotage but in post-political passivity, and germs of resistance are extrapolated or imagined from minutiae which most radical inquirers would deem unworthy even of a footnote.

The focus of this case study is not conflict, but rather the *absence* of conflict in a given workplace. This institutionalised compliance is more often the conclusion, rather than the starting point, of radical inquiries into workplace relations; however it raises questions which are arguably as crucial as, and inextricably linked to, any material investigation of the capitalist mode of production itself. Why do workers not protest about their conditions or organise themselves? Why do they attack each other rather than their bosses? Why do some people seem to enjoy being exploited? These questions can only be answered by looking into the unconscious relational dynamics which underpin the organisation, specifically how economic power is disguised and conflict is routinely personalised and internalised.

To explore this territory, I propose a method of study which I shall call the psychodynamics of organisations from below. Focusing particularly on the hinge between the office and outsourced service environment, I hope to identify points at which conflict is currently repressed, and speculate on how these latent conflicts might be externalised and shaped into a collective weapon against the established order.

Everyday life in the post-Fordist workplace is shaped by an atmosphere of transience and atomisation, and it is this very lack of friction, this absence of resistance, which must be explored and interpreted

in terms of bringing underlying power relations into consciousness. Revolutionary speeches here are as futile as attempting to breathe in a vacuum. An understanding of how this environment is constructed - and therefore how it might be dismantled - can only be achieved by reaching into the toolkit of industrial sociology shunned by activists and stealing the very analytic instruments used by their managerial enemies.

In this regard, another useful but perhaps unlikely precedent for the present study is the organisational research conducted from the 1950s to the 1970s by psychoanalysts at the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations, and particularly the groundbreaking work of Isabel Menzies.ⁱⁱⁱ The Tavistock analysts acted as management consultants, hired by public and private sector institutions to resolve organisational problems such as low staff morale or high turnover. Rather than focusing on individuals, the analysts treated the organisation itself as a 'patient' and, by a process of observation and interpretation, uncovered unconscious institutional defences and anxieties.

In this case however the Tavistock model is turned on its head, as it were, not only to update it for a privatised, post-Fordist era of boundaryless institutions and flexible labour, but also to rid it of the hegemonic purpose of which its practitioners themselves appeared to be unconscious. Menzies has said that as a consultant improving the social life of the organisation was her priority and that for her, if not for her clients, increased profit or productivity was a mere "by-product".^{iv} Even in the context of post-war stability and public sector growth, this no doubt sincerely-held position represents a significant blind-spot in an otherwise insightful analytic framework.

The myth that productivity and wellbeing are harmonious partners has served capitalism well, and under neoliberalism this mythology has blossomed into an entire fictional worldview. The language of therapy has been used as an alibi for the installation of new institutional defence systems designed to maintain productive levels of anxiety. Occupational wellbeing programmes pushed by businesses looking to load responsibility for work-related stress onto individuals and back-to-work therapies endorsed by politicians keen to stigmatise and medicalise unemployment have made the exploitative basis of wage labour a taboo topic.^v Cognitive-behavioural therapy and 'nudge' models of psychology have largely overtaken the Tavistock's group-analytic approach, and workplace conflicts are personalised and repressed when they might once have been shared and openly discussed. The supposed social health of the organisation has given way to an individualistic culture of self-help, and a pseudo-therapeutic discourse of positive thinking and resilience percolates through organisations, by which, along with the usual economic threats and promises, a just-in-time army of obedient and permanently insecure labourers is maintained.

Just as an investigation of capitalist relations must address the pacification of workers before calling on them to revolt, any mapping of organisational psychodynamics which is not complicit in this dominant individualistic discourse of 'flexibility' must therefore encompass a critique of its reproduction

and intensification through both institutional power, or “biopower”^{vi}, and economic power, that is class and capital.

In applying such a critique to the specific workplace discussed below, it can be reasonably argued that my perspective is a limited one. Being employed as an outsourced cleaner/porter, the duties and conditions of the directly employed office workers remain mostly mysterious, and are mainly inferred through passing observations. However, I would suggest that in terms of analysing its internal power structures, disposing of an organisation’s waste is at least as good a starting point as sitting in on its board meetings. Indeed a detachment from professional aspirations allows for an engagement with precisely those human and material aspects of the organisation which might otherwise be conveniently overlooked.

There are also contextual differences: I was hired by the organisation not as a consultant to investigate its work culture, but as a manual worker to empty its bins. No official permission has been sought for this study, which is entirely unasked for by its ‘client’ and would be received as most unwelcome. This report is not written for the benefit of the managers of the organisation, but rather for its workers and others in similar positions. I am grateful to my co-workers for their support and friendship, and I have been open with some of them about my motives, but towards the organisation itself (in its various guises: agency, outsourced company, host company) I adopt a position of antagonism, rather than collaboration. Nevertheless, despite our differences in status - one might even say class - the positions occupied by myself and the expert consultant are materially similar: we are both hired hands, selling our labour to a corporate ‘client’ until we are no longer needed or the next job comes along.

Each of these two seemingly opposed methods of workplace inquiry - the Marxist and the psychoanalytic - therefore highlights what the other represses (class, the unconscious), and both draw attention to important areas which have been systematically forgotten in contemporary discussions of work. In this they also share a common understanding that dissatisfaction with superficial or ephemeral matters of employment is a cover for deeper concerns which cannot be properly expressed.^{vii} This might apply to a particularly mind-numbing task or vindictive manager, but it also refers to more sustained concerns such as low wages or mental illness, which while undoubtedly real and far-reaching in their effects, are nevertheless still symptoms of the wider unspoken malaise of work itself.

In the contemporary de-unionised and precariously pacified workplace, this displaced dissatisfaction is not typically formulated as a *demand*, whether for revolution, higher pay or some minor improvement, an assertive act which already contains within itself a positive consciousness in its implicit threat of industrial action - ‘Give us this, or else...’ Rather, dissatisfaction is communicated in the form of the *complaint*; a defensive, sometimes involuntary verbal or bodily gesture, prompted by a localised symptom - the tedious task, the obnoxious customer, the sadistic manager - more often spontaneous than planned and usually emanating from individuals rather than a group.^{viii}

The complaint may or may not be valid on its own terms, but at the same time it represents or stands in for both refusal of work itself and the inability to refuse that work. The complaint is the verbalisation or embodiment of that contradiction. It is inherently negative, offering no alternative other than that things should not be as they are; it is defined by what cannot be said, by labour that cannot be withheld, and consequently it is less a threat than an appeal to humanity. 'Please don't make me do this...' Verbal complaints circulated among workers about an absent authority are often shaped as rhetorical questions pointing in their very futility towards that relation that cannot be changed or articulated. 'Why do they make us do this...?' Because power, because class, because capital.

In workplaces such as the one discussed below, demands are unheard of, but complaints are everywhere. They are, however, almost always directed away from their objects and recounted to co-workers as stories of personal frustration. These complaints are undemanding and emptied of conflict (when demands are formulated, conflict has already been activated and become conscious). When it comes to performing their assigned duties, workers are typically uncomplaining, because their livelihoods depend on not challenging the authority of the organisation. Consequently the likely result if one dares to raise an issue directly is: 'Well, no-one else has complained...'

The task then is to *depersonalise* these surface complaints, connect them to the underlying repressive structure and redirect them so that they might re-emerge, re-charged, as demands or actions which, cumulatively and collectively, threaten the security of the institution. The distant goal is to identify ways to bring conflict into consciousness to such an extent that the organisation is unable to function as a capitalist enterprise. Ultimately, such a study is looking for ways not to improve the organisation, but to destroy it.

II

I am working as a cleaner/porter at the office of a large financial services company; a well-established and asset-rich firm specialising in life insurance and pensions, with three administrative bases and a head office in the UK. This particular building functions primarily as a contact centre, where staff deal with customers by phone and digitally, process documentation and perform various other technological functions.

The support staff at this location is outsourced to three separate companies; one for cleaning, portering, reception and maintenance duties, collectively known as 'facilities'; another for catering, and another for security. These companies are also large operations for which this site is just one of many contracts. Workers employed by these companies deal with the daily running of the premises - arrivals, deliveries, waste disposal etc. - in service areas which might be thought of as peripheral or transitory by the administrative staff, but they also work in the same physical space as the office workers, emptying their bins, delivering printer paper and cleaning vending areas, as well as serving

them in the dedicated restaurant and café. This alternation between task-spaces gives the organisation a kind of on/off-stage or upstairs-downstairs quality.

While interactions between outsourced workers, numbering perhaps fifty or so in total, are usually relatively routine and informal, interactions with office staff, of whom there are around five hundred, are much briefer and more deferential. The relation between support staff and office staff is more reminiscent of employees and customers in a hotel or coffee chain than of colleagues in the same workplace. This relation is of course mirrored in the customer service roles performed by many of the office workers.

The outsourcing of the facilities staff occurred in the 1990s. The main change in conditions, ironically for a pensions company, was the removal of these workers from the occupational pension scheme. The host company has for many years been 'in partnership' with a union, which has a visible presence in the building. Membership extends to supervisory grades of the facilities staff, but not, as far as I know, any further down. Some long-serving co-workers used to be members of the union but are now sceptical about it, partly as a result of its lack of support during the outsourcing process.

While some older workers maintain social connections with administrative colleagues, for most employees (of both host and outsourced companies) the distinction between the two tiers of the institution is entirely taken for granted. This naturalising process was no doubt greatly advanced by the company's move to its current premises in 2006, soon after the building's construction as a state-of-the-art open-plan office space. Here all the office workers' needs are catered for: as well as the restaurant and cafe there are automated vending areas instead of kitchens, and teams are clustered around 'pods' which are regularly serviced. The meeting rooms have glass walls. There are no hiding places. While they are plugged into their workstations the office staff's entire physical environment is maintained by the support staff, so that no manual task might interrupt their communicative and IT duties. In addition, facilities workers are issued with red or blue shirts to distinguish them from the casually dressed office staff (and from our own managers). The separation between directly employed and outsourced, skilled and unskilled, immaterial and material labour is therefore literally built into the space and embodied by its inhabitants.

The office space is dominated by motivational posters and team-building murals which, alongside its rows of workstations and vending machines, make the place resemble a kind of Starship Enterprise powered by caffeine and positive thinking^{ix} (although complaints can be heard if one listens hard enough). It may be that many office workers feel oppressed and depressed by this atmosphere of infantilisation and happification, but the lack of opportunities for social interaction means there is no opportunity to verify this.^x While outwardly civilised, the office workers have been known to vent their frustrations by smearing excrement across toilet cubicles; suitably infantile 'complaints' which are left to be discovered and cleared up by the cleaning staff. Such acts, which might be interpreted as

obscene inversions of the motivational wall-charts, are entirely consistent with the privatised abjection of the institution and its downward delegation of misery.

There is a third layer in this organisational hierarchy. An employment agency supplies the facilities company with workers to fill gaps in its schedule caused by holidays or sickness or take shifts for which a permanent post is seen as unnecessary. There are usually three or four workers in these roles, including myself, in addition to the regular ten cleaners/porters, including two supervisors, plus a handful of engineers and at least two managers.

I am employed through the agency for various duties and shifts of between three and eight hours, at various times between 8am and 8pm. My work is not subject to a contract or notice periods. I am usually offered a few days of work at a time, but sometimes given just one day's work or no work at all for a week or more, when I have to decide whether to sign on as unemployed. Sometimes I am contacted at home by the recruitment agency before 9am and asked if I can get in as soon as possible, because of staff sickness or another agency worker not turning up.

The host company brands itself as a 'living wage employer'; but this does not apply to all its outsourced support staff. Some facilities workers earn just above the living wage, however the cleaners have been paid £7.65 per hour since at least mid-2014 (making them nearly two years behind the recognised living wage rate), and agency workers are paid £7 per hour for the first twelve weeks, with no guaranteed hours.^{xi} The agency takes an undisclosed amount on top of this in fees from the facilities company for every hour worked.

III

The barrier between directly-employed and outsourced employees is therefore maintained not only through the allocation of tasks, but through various spatial, cultural and economic distinctions, and countless verbal and non-verbal interactions. The result is a pervasive but intangible atmosphere of inclusion and exclusion, enforced by a range of too-big or too-small issues too fundamental or too trivial to be challenged.

One symbol of this naturalised barrier is the 'free fruit' which the host company provides to its employees as part of its programme to look after their 'wellbeing' (i.e. productivity).^{xii} Boxes of fruit are regularly received by the facilities staff in the loading bay and distributed by the porters among the pods of the open-plan offices. Then, when all the fruit has been taken, it is the duty of the cleaners to dispose of the empty boxes. The fruit itself is for the consumption of the host company's employees only; the outsourced workers who unload it, distribute it and clear up after it are excluded from the scheme, even though they wheel their trolleys through the offices and pass the boxes every day. Nothing in the delivery is allocated to them. While the office workers, who earn upwards of £10 per hour,

can help themselves to an apple or banana for lunch or to eat at their desks, the cleaners on less than the living wage have to bring in their own.

Drawing attention to this blatant form of discrimination in a way which could be excused as playful and not jeopardise any future hours, I framed my complaint to my supervisor in the form of a light-hearted hypothetical question. What would happen if I took one of these forbidden fruit? He didn't know. Could he ask his managers? They wouldn't know either. Could he ask them to confirm that they didn't know? You can ask them yourself, he said, already fed up with discussing the issue and ordering me to follow him into the facilities office. An amicable but tense conversation ensued in which the manager rationalised the ruling as just a matter of common sense and personal conduct. "If you asked the team nicely, please may I have a piece of fruit, I'm sure they'd let you take one." However, if a report was received that I had taken a piece of fruit without permission, especially after having been told not to, another manager confirmed, "We would have to take action."

To their credit, the managers appeared to understand that my question wasn't just about fruit; however it also became clear that the issue had never been raised before. After a few minutes, at the first sign of managerial condescension turning into exasperation, I ended the conversation on a joke and made a quick exit. As I closed the office door I imagined the looks being exchanged behind me, as if to say: He's an odd one isn't he? Sad really isn't it. Never mind, he's only a temp...

I then deliberately ignored the empty fruit boxes as they were left on the bins by the satisfied office staff. I kept this up for a week or so, until my supervisor reminded me that I was supposed to be removing them.

IV

Some degree of splitting between permanent facilities staff and agency temps is inevitable, but in my experience this gap is not unbridgeable if the temp can stay around for long enough. As a result of our tenuous circumstances and reinforced by stereotypical expectations, agency workers are often thought of as unreliable or not knowing how to do jobs properly. This of course also makes it easier for us to be seen as disposable, and so the cycle continues. Most workers, temporary or permanent, understandably tend to see their jobs as just filling in time, and while they don't have any loyalty towards the organisation, neither can they afford to risk being laid off by causing trouble. The threat of being moved to a worse position as a punishment for bolshiness is also an effective deterrent for established staff. Meanwhile, individual managers are quickly characterised as strict, easy-going, psychopathic etc. The office workers are generally despised as being helpless and thoughtless.

Complaints are typically personalised in this way and circulate as a sort of mental ventilation system - again practically built into the geography - before dissipating into the ether. This private circulation of complaints in fact serves the interests of the institution, as it allows a safe decompression and dump-

ing of anger and despair which then enables workers to continue to passively perform those roles which might otherwise be intolerable; and it allows bosses to claim that everything is fine and that any 'problem' resides in the aberrant individual.

Another crucial factor is the restricted time and privacy available to workers, meaning that interactions are often limited to fleeting exchanges and issues cannot usually be talked through in depth without the risk of disciplinary repercussions (not due to being overheard, necessarily, but just because being seen talking, equals, being seen not working). This withholding of conversational time again encourages the articulation of complaints in immediate and personal, rather than ongoing and structural terms. The constant weighing up of personalities, combined with the transitory culture, encourages a passive, short-term orientation towards the workplace and society as a whole. The fantasy is that either somehow finding the right combination of people would solve all the problems, or that the dissatisfied individual will leave and find somewhere better, while the actual organisation remains unchanged.^{xiii}

Beyond the personal hostilities and escapist aspirations, the awareness of how individuals are shaped by the organisation has retreated into the unconscious. As the episode with the free fruit had shown, complaints about apparently superficial issues can express coded objections to ideological factors. The bosses, however, are programmed to respond to such complaints as personal problems, whether of discipline or wellbeing, thereby using the complaint as an opportunity to consolidate their power. Any attempt to criticise the structure bounces back onto the individual.

It is no wonder that people do not press for change, as we are constantly told that our drudgery is self-inflicted and of no interest, that we are lucky to have jobs at all. We have all at some time or other come up against the copy-and-paste response to some complaint: 'If you don't like it, get another job.' The worker - who clearly has nowhere else to go, or s/he wouldn't be here - is taunted with the illusion of choice, like a prisoner whose jailer tosses him a bunch of keys to identical cells, and the humiliation is complete. This is palpable in any order-giving context, and generally does not even have to be verbalised. In this sense the bodily expression of institutional disinterest, of 'go somewhere else', mirrors the individual's hopelessness; both remain unspoken.

Whereas in the past high turnover was generally regarded by organisations as a threat to productivity, nowadays the constant churn of staff works in the employer's favour, reducing labour costs and engineering an atmosphere of transient compliance. It is therefore in the interests of the 'healthy' institution to maintain this precarious set-up. Institutionalised insecurity is not limited to outsourced and agency workers: the host company here recently made seventy office staff redundant and hired fifty-five workers on temporary contracts almost immediately afterwards. Similarly, anxiety, depression, boredom and prejudice are not necessarily problems for today's high-performing organisations, but rather parts of a functioning ideological framework, suppressing rebellion and converting resentment towards the team leader into rivalry between workers.

Employees who openly complain about these devices are usually easily dealt with; they are disciplined or ‘supported’ out of existence, their working life is made intolerable, they are forced to quit or simply not re-hired. It is the individual who brings these causes and symptoms of institutional disease into collective awareness but then *cannot be got rid of* who is the problem.

V

As the end of another round of bin-emptying approached, the facilities manager apologetically asked if I could do the 5-8pm cleaning shifts the following week. She knew I found these hours infuriating, however she also knew, because I had pointedly told her more than once, that I was not in a position to turn them down. Yes, I said, in the manner of a puppet whose mouth was being moved by strings.

On Monday a co-worker greeted me as she passed me the mop and bucket. “How are you?” “Alright, apart from being here,” I replied. The manager, a few steps ahead of us, turned and smiled as if to say ‘I heard that!’ (Of course you did; you were meant to.) Then, as if in retaliation, she checked that I was available for the rest of the week. Sure, I said, mock-enthusiastically, why not.

The next day I was again allocated the duty of cleaning the toilet floors. I didn’t mind the work; unlike some other tasks it was at least useful, although my muscles still ached from repeatedly twisting the mop in its plastic sieve the day before. However, I noticed that the rota listed this task as taking one hour. Yesterday (the first time I’d done it) it took me an hour and 45 minutes. I could reduce this by carrying the disinfectant with me rather than going back and forth to the cleaning cupboard and not mopping right up to the wall under the sinks, but to do it in an hour would involve wringing and swishing relentlessly, slapping cold water onto floors, leaving areas dirty and knackered myself in the process.

I’d heard about these optimistic timings of cleaning tasks and pressure being put on staff to match them. I paused on my way out of the office and suggested that an hour was unrealistic, as the task took at least 75 minutes. Fine, the manager said, take as long as you need. The time is just a guide. But it’s inaccurate, I said. How long would you say it took to clean one unit - five minutes? The manager looked blank. She obviously hadn’t given the matter much thought (or done the task herself).

At this point the tone of the exchange became less congenial. She had given me a chance to go on my way, generously allowing me to exceed the hour, but I had made it not about me, but about the job, and had crossed an invisible line from the personal to the general, from grumpiness to dissent. I was not refusing to do the task, but I was refusing to respect the authority behind it. She shrugged. “Some people do it quicker.”

Yes, I thought, probably some people don't stop for breath, don't change the water and leave areas unmopped in order to finish within the hour. Still, off I went.

The following morning I received an email from the agency headed 'No work at [facilities company] tonight'. The company had decided not to use me for any further cleaning work, the recruitment agent later explained over the phone, because, "they don't think you're happy doing it." The agent reassured me, however, that I'd continue to be offered occasional portering duties in the same building, for the same facilities company, as I was apparently "happy" in that role. I had obviously been dismissed from cleaning duty on the basis of my complaint, but this had been translated, presumably in the course of a conversation between the manager and the agent, into an apparently objective verdict of unhappiness.

Positivity is the recruitment agent's stock in trade. Her emails routinely end with a smiley face. The obvious reality, that work (especially the sort of work the agency sent people to do) is more likely to be a cause of misery rather than of fun, is strictly taboo. Rejections are also wrapped in an upbeat, better-luck-next-time language, as if looking for work was a party game and sometimes you just happened to be in the wrong place when the music stopped.

It barely even occurred to me until after speaking to the agent that exploring external reasons for my perceived unhappiness at work might have been part of the remit of a traditional 'human resources' department. The possibility had simply been deleted from both our hard drives.

This policy of compulsory cheerfulness can be usefully connected with the walls of smiling memos surrounding the office workers. Whether at the professional level of self-censoring positivity, or in low-paid casual work as a euphemism for unquestioning obedience, happiness has been recast as a disciplinary issue. An appearance of unhappiness indicates a failure of employability, a glitch to be corrected by an improvement in the individual's mindset rather than in the working conditions.

VI

A week after I had been told I was no longer required for cleaning duty, I was phoned by the agency and offered exactly the same shift again. As if she had fallen victim to some form of recruitment-related amnesia, the agent made no reference to our earlier conversation or the cutting of my hours. This time I was a "star" for accepting the work at short notice - the very same work which had been taken away from me at short notice a week earlier. Similarly when I reported for duty there was no comment from the manager who had previously shrugged off my complaint. I did not draw their attention to this absurdity, again for fear of jeopardising future hours, but took it as a sign that my labour was not as disposable as they had made out.

I was not assigned the same task as last time. This was presumably passed onto another worker - another way in which complaints are institutionally repressed in such 'flexible' workplaces. The complaining worker risks being portrayed as a snob, and hostility is thereby redirected once again away from the conditions and onto the individual who is portrayed as rejecting work which is 'beneath them'. It is also likely that workers with limited English language skills and no welfare safety net are less confident in challenging bad conditions, and for this reason tend to be given the most unpleasant jobs. It is the responsibility of the complaining worker to resist this misdirection and support less assertive workers towards formulating their own complaints.

Soon after returning to work, I overheard the same manager who had fired me for not being happy telling a senior colleague: "Stuart's [senior official at the host company] not happy. The client's not happy with [the contractor]." With this information, the picture became clear. The host company (the 'client') was putting pressure on the facilities company regarding the standard of its service, and its representative was not 'happy', i.e. had complained. Rather than addressing the possible structural reasons for this complaint (inadequate staffing, sickness, low pay, the monotonous drudgery of the work itself, an institutional fixation with superficial issues of appearance), it was being personalised and passed down to ourselves as repositories of the organisation's 'unhappiness'.

Like the temporary worker, the outsourced service is itself subject to the whims of its executive clients, who in this case are subject in turn to the vagaries of financial markets - particularly in this case pension reform. These contractual fault-lines give rise to periodic quakes of institutional insecurity which are delegated downwards. While complaints from below are silenced, complaints from above resonate through the organisation, and are absorbed by individuals and processed through the discourses of performance and wellbeing or discipline and surveillance.

Organisations built on precarious work are by definition susceptible to these structural tensions, which are then defensively personalised. When such fractures are occasionally glimpsed in the otherwise impermeable institutional shell, the task of the dutiful workplace anti-consultant is to consider how these cracks can be widened.

VII

There have been a number of recent campaigns for better pay and conditions by unionised facilities workers.^{xiv} These have mostly been located in London, in university or arts venues or institutions serving the ultra-wealthy which offer an easily contrastable backdrop to the workers' circumstances. In addition to union backing, these workers have also gained media and student support. I am not aware of many comparable examples outside London (the high-profile but ultimately unsuccessful campaign to stop the outsourcing of support services at the University of Sussex was an exception^{xv}), or in other outsourced private workplaces.

In our case, as well as our relative lack of numbers and isolation from wider social movements, the high staff turnover, separation of temporary and permanent employees and corporate bootlicking of the in-house union are all formidable obstacles to action (my own union's interest in precarious workers is similarly non-existent; the struggle to get mainstream unions to acknowledge precarious workers could be the subject of another whole case study). I can think of no better way to alienate myself from my co-workers than to preach the virtues of union membership under such conditions. The bureaucratic ramifications and prohibitive subscription rates would be more divisive than uniting and it would amount to nothing more than a cynical sales drive.

The prospect of any sort of industrial action is therefore remote, but not inconceivable. An interesting precedent is offered by an ongoing campaign against poor pay and conditions by the outsourced cleaners and porters employed by facilities company MITIE at the office of the Prudential life assurance company. These workers organised through a small London-based union specialising in support for low-paid and migrant workers. It is notable that disrespectful treatment of staff by managers is a key factor in this dispute.^{xvi} Our host company trades in similarly huge financial assets marinated in a language of corporate social responsibility, and would, I imagine, be similarly averse to threats of negative publicity.

It is tempting to view our situation as less dire than those cited above - the examples from my own experience are typically mundane - but then looking at anecdotal evidence from co-workers, there is a cumulative misery here, compounded by an oppressive and disempowering institutional culture, which surely justifies if not a public protest then at least some sort of collective complaint.

The ground for such a complaint would need to be prepared in two ways. Firstly, the barrier between the directly employed and outsourced workers, as documented earlier, must somehow be broken down. While relations between host and contractor at a managerial level must be antagonised, alliances must be forged at shopfloor level between the contact centre workers and those who serve them. It is also important to strengthen links between agency workers at the sharp end of precarity and outsourced workers in relatively secure positions.

Secondly, the institutionalised precarity imposed by these organisations must somehow be matched by a fluid network of resistance. It might be necessary to set a provisional limit for such a network, however, as connecting everywhere to everywhere else could potentially reach a point where coherent action becomes impossible. Such a project would therefore require a balance of geographical concentration and virtual communication. A preliminary counter-structure might consist of an online network involving staff on the site employed by the host company, contractors and agencies, drawing on external resources as needed.

A crucial lesson from all the above cases is that any effective demand or complaint must bypass the managerial stooges of the contractor and aim pressure directly at the host company. It is clear that, along with the company's public image, this contractual relation is a key institutional weak point

which must be targeted. There are obvious risks to be considered here. Although a complaint which appeals politely to the immediate level of management is almost by definition ineffective, involving wider/higher authorities in what are arbitrarily designated as ‘internal’ matters will endanger jobs and intensify disciplinary powers by inflaming those managers. It is however also likely that in order to provoke change some sort of inflammation, and concurrent risk, is unavoidable. The most important thing is that the complaint transcends the personalised language and bureaucratic compartments of the institution and becomes collective and structural.

A collective complaint might take the form of a letter addressed to a figure of authority in the host company - in this case perhaps the senior executive who made known his ‘unhappiness’ with the contractor, who works on the premises and is known to take an interest in the everyday running of the building. This message could be written by all workers who wished to participate, credited to a group rather than individuals, and sent from a specially set up email account.

A complaint articulated in this way begins to resemble a demand in its collective force and implications, even if its threats are not spelt out: if we can address you with one voice, we can also do or not do other things, the boss’s unhappiness could be made a lot worse by un-cooperative workers or bad publicity, and so on. The message might for instance request (i.e. demand) the host company’s support in bringing an end to the management’s bullying of facilities workers and a wage of at least £8 per hour for everyone, including agency staff, from day one.

The host company might connect its own dissatisfactions with those of the outsourced workers, and raise the matter with the facilities managers who, after all, are terrified of losing the contract. Or it might take this message as a threat to the contractual integrity of the institution as a whole, join with the facilities management to quickly eliminate the suspected troublemakers, and increase the bullying and surveillance of the rest of the staff to the point where they regret their involvement in such a scheme and vow never to organise or complain about their working conditions again.

Either way, held up against the passive workplace culture and the restrictive forces which define it, the realisation of such collective action seems extremely unlikely, especially without a central issue or strong organisational base. This pacification pre-emptively disarms precarious workers and silences complaints before they can be formulated. Things are seen as being not that bad, people can’t risk losing their jobs, don’t want to be involved in anything ‘political’, are just passing through... And anyway, complaining won’t make any difference. Undoing this institutional suppression will take much patience and unspectacular effort, and will probably be largely reliant on external factors.

Looking to more informal and as it were interstitial expressions of complaint, it is worth considering how the micro-regulation of behaviour within the organisation^{xvii} - the surveillance and happification, the engineered passivity and positivity - inadvertently creates a parallel language of “counter-conduct”.^{xviii} Just as the very silencing of complaints creates a breeding ground for them, so by recategorising all behaviours outside a narrow band as counter-productive, the organisation casts every worker

as a potential transgressor. Even the slightest involuntary gesture can communicate insolence; a sigh or a way of walking can be read as insubordination. Although barely registering in the organisation's consciousness, these bodily complaints, by their very inarticulacy, are in a way more radical than a list of demands; in their negations, they do not propose alternatives or improvements; they reject the work-relation itself. They are forms of refusal where refusal is impossible. It is then a question of how such instances of being-as-complaining can be amplified and used to disrupt the institutional discourse.

The grip of capital's invisible hand on the throat of the proletariat remains brutally tight, as the continued security of its institutions relies upon the continued insecurity of its labourers. Today we are expected to smile and adopt a positive attitude to our asphyxiation, and even, as obedient, uncomplaining subjects, to replace that hand with our own. It is only by refusing to internalise this relation and by collecting our negativity and disgust into an active oppositional force that we will be able to breathe and speak again as one body.

Ivor Southwood, October 2015

The Uncomplaining Body, developed and written by Ivor Southwood, is commissioned by *Manual Labours : The Complaining Body* - an 18 month investigation into the world of workplace. *Manual Labours : The Complaining Body* is developed with the artist Sarah Browne, the choreographer Hamish MacPherson and the writer Ivor Southwood alongside workers within a call centre in a London Borough Council, commuters on a trains station platform in Worcester and staff dealing with student complaints in a UK University. The project is made in partnership with In Certain Places, Preston, Movement, Worcester, and The Showroom, London. *Manual Labours* is a research project exploring physical and emotional relationships to work, initiated and led by Sophie Hope and Jenny Richards. This report was informed from a week long residency at the artist-run space Movement in Worcester. Over the course of a week Ivor, Sophie and Jenny discussed experiences of complaining, receiving complaints and not being able to complain with commuters at Worcester Foregate Station. This report is also informed by Ivor's own experience working in the South East of England as an agency worker. The report therefore follows the process of a worker's enquiry and this report serves as an important response and contribution to the *Manual Labours: The Complaining Body* investigation.

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References

ⁱ In the era of precarious work and global corporations, the ‘organisation’ as a self-contained entity is an increasingly problematic definition. As a way of uniting artificially separated groups of workers under one roof, however, it has its uses. Here the word indicates the geographical workplace, rather than an entire company, and includes outsourced and agency workers as well as directly employed staff.

ⁱⁱ A particular influence on the structure of the present study is the essay ‘The American Worker’ by Paul Romano and Ria Stone (1947), which may or may not be considered a form of workers’ inquiry. <http://libcom.org/history/american-worker-paul-romano-ria-stone> For historical perspectives on Workers’ Inquiries, see Asad Haider and Salar Mohandesi ‘Workers’ Inquiry: A Genealogy’ *Viewpoint*, 27 September 2013 <https://viewpointmag.com/2013/09/27/workers-inquiry-a-genealogy/>; Jamie Woodcock ‘The workers’ inquiry from Trotskyism to Operaismo: A political methodology for investigating the workplace’ *Ephemera* 14 (3) August 2014, pp493-513. <http://www.ephemerajournal.org/contribution/workers%E2%80%99-inquiry-trotskyism-operaismo-political-methodology-investigating-workplace>

ⁱⁱⁱ See in particular the essays ‘The functioning of social systems as a defence against anxiety: a report on the nursing service of a general hospital’ [1959] and ‘Some methodological notes on a hospital study’ [1969] in Isabel Menzies Lyth *Containing Anxiety in Institutions: Selected Essays Vol. 1* (Free Association, 1988) pp43-85, 115-129. The Tavistock Institute of Human Relations is a non-profit organisation which was hived off from the NHS Tavistock psychotherapy clinic in 1946. There is no direct connection between the Institute and the US ‘human relations’ movement, although many of the same criticisms of corporate backing and emotional manipulation can be levelled at it, for instance its need to satisfy private clients and the initial financial support it received from the Rockefeller Foundation. This is discussed in an interview with Menzies, ‘Reflections on my work’ in *Containing Anxiety in Institutions* p15.

^{iv} See Menzies Lyth *The Dynamics of the Social: Selected Essays Vol.2* (Free Association, 1989) p43; *Containing Anxiety in Institutions* (1988) p15.

^v See Carl Cederstrom and Andre Spicer *The Wellness Syndrome* (Polity, 2015); Lynne Friedli and Robert Stearn ‘Positive affect as coercive strategy: conditionality, activation and the role of psychology in UK government workfare programmes’ *Journal of Medical Humanities* 41(1) June 2015, pp40-47. <http://mh.bmj.com/content/41/1/40.full>

vi This term is from Michel Foucault and is outlined in *The History of Sexuality Vol. 1* (Penguin, 1979) pp139-145.

vii See for example Menzies Lyth *The Dynamics of the Social* (1989) pp29-30; Kolinko *Hotlines: Call Centre Inquiry Communism* (Prol Position, 2002) p98. <https://libcom.org/library/6-confrontations-pulse-collective-struggle>

viii I am grateful to Gabriel Bristow and Constance Laisné for drawing my attention, via Manual Labours, to the connection between complaints and demands.

ix I have written elsewhere about this form of ‘visual control’ used by the organisation: see ‘Every Day Matters’ in *Lo Squaderno* No.31 March 2014, pp38-43. <http://www.losquaderno.professional-dreamers.net/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/losquaderno31.pdf>

x Transitions from outsourced support jobs to directly employed office positions are rare but not unheard of. Meaningful interactions are possible with a small number of directly-employed office workers whose roles take them outside the open-plan space.

xi Under the Agency Workers Regulations of October 2011, after 12 weeks of work (not counting gaps, i.e. weeks when no work is offered), agency workers are legally entitled to the same pay and conditions as a permanent worker doing the same job. The basic pay rate for directly employed facilities workers was increased from £7.65 to £7.85 (i.e. the previous year’s living wage) in mid-2015; however I was told that this increase did not apply to myself as an agency worker, regardless of the 12 week rule. Since raising this issue I have not been offered any further work.

xii The use of wellbeing as an instrument of corporate control is documented by Cederstrom and Spicer in *The Wellness Syndrome* (2015). The operation of this discourse not only as a means of compulsory inclusion but also as an exclusionary device i.e. a way of stratifying institutions, distinguishing between permanent and temporary, directly-employed and outsourced, skilled and unskilled, valued and non-valued forms of labour, is a topic for further research.

xiii This personalisation of complaints and of employment relations recalls Kathi Weeks’ description of the “privatisation”, and subsequent depoliticisation, of work: “we are better at attending to the problems with this or that boss than to the system that grants them such power.” Kathi Weeks *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics and Postwork Imaginaries* (Duke University, 2011) p3.

xiv These have included the ‘3 Cosas’ campaign by cleaners at the University of London and protests by cleaners at The Barbican arts venue and Sotheby’s auction house.

xv For an account of this campaign, see Brighton Solfed ‘The Pop-Up Union: a postmortem’, 10 November 2014. <http://www.solfed.org.uk/brighton/the-pop-up-union-a-postmortem>

xvi See statement by the United Voices of the World Union, 12 April 2015. <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=809514779116763>

xvii The company has an official grid of ‘behaviours’ to which its staff are expected to adhere, and which link personal identity into corporate productivity. The outsourced manual workers are technically exempt from this behavioural regime. I discuss this in ‘Every Day Matters’ (2014), p43.

xviii “Counter-conduct” is a term Foucault proposes to describe the “struggle against the processes implemented for conducting others” through political or power relations. See Michel Foucault *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the College de France 1977-1978* (Picador 2007), pp201-216.