

# The importance of workers' self organisation

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AngryWorkers, *Class Power on Zero-Hours*, AngryWorkers 2020

It has become common to juxtapose a neoliberal 'cosmopolitan' left to a traditional 'working-class' left. This captures troublesome developments within the left, but the choice of words doesn't seem ideal. After all, is there anything more cosmopolitan than today's working class?

Demonstrating this is only one of the virtues of a curious book titled *Class Power on Zero-Hours*, authored by a London-based collective calling itself the 'AngryWorkers'. Who are they? They describe themselves as part of the 'communist left', although this 'might not mean much to many, and it isn't really important, other than to say that our approach to revolutionary politics lies firmly in workers' self-organisation'.

The group formed when two of them left 'the leftist bubble' and moved to West London, more specifically to Greenford, where they rented a room for 450 quid a month and went to work in the area's warehouses and factories. Over the years, their collective was joined by other workers, who analysed the goods they pick and the parcels they deliver in the context of global supply chains and just-in-time production. Ultimately, however, the goal is to foster the 'self-organization of the working class'.

Let's return to the cosmopolitanism that, supposedly, stands in opposition to the 'dull life' of the suburbs and small country towns. The West London workmates of the AngryWorkers hail from all corners of the world: there is the Polish Rasta, the

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assembly line workers from Gujarat, the Tamils that form the hygiene teams, the feisty young woman from Hungary driving trucks, and the Afro-Caribbeans with the anti-imperialist vernacular.

My own experience of West London is perhaps relevant here. I have stayed in Hounslow a few times, with the family of a friend I met in South Africa, whose parents moved to the UK from Pakistan some forty years ago. He has since worked in Dubai and now lives in Philadelphia. West London is neither an arrival nor a departure point. Or, rather, it is both. People come and go, as they do in many places. ‘Globetrotting’ might be associated with privileged rich kids and their Instagram accounts, but think again. I have a good friend who drives buses for the Stockholm transit system. He grew up in a Punjabi family in Delhi. Before settling in Sweden, and starting a family with his Swedish-Colombian partner, he spent time in Russia, the Ukraine and the Czech Republic, off the beaten path of the average travel guide. Will the real globetrotter please stand up? And what class do they belong to?

This kind of mobility is often attributed to ‘globalisation’, a vague term if there ever was one. But, yes, it is the result of new technologies in transport and communication, young populations, forced replacement through war, oppression and poverty, and a radical reorganisation of capitalist production and distribution. The studies of the AngryWorkers capture a microcosm that encapsulates all of this, and more.

While most of the AngryWorkers’ attention focuses on the workplace, they situate the working experience in a broad social, economic and cultural framework. In their book, we learn as much about the living conditions of workers in West London as about their working conditions. In the process, the AngryWorkers don’t shy away from touchy subjects. They present an intriguing critique of ‘community’ structures (they use quotes for the term frequently), stressing the class structure and the exploitation of workers within them. They explain:

‘Communities’ in the sense of cross-class social structures of people with ‘the same background’ are not natural entities. They thrive in specific conditions. For example, in situations where there is a lack of welfare provisions due to austerity or under conditions of recent migration, which makes you depend materially and emotionally on ties with already settled members of your language, ethnic etc.

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background. We have to emphasise the double character of these community structures: they are not mainly an expression of lacking 'class consciousness', as they do help working class people survive materially; but, at the same time, they are the basis for super-exploitation of its working class members and for their political integration into the trajectory and career of the so-called 'community leaders'.

The AngryWorkers call their studies 'workers' inquiries'. They clarify that: 'this isn't a book about "journalistic impressions", where we fly in and out of crap jobs, merely describing and complaining about the "terrible" conditions. We intervene in the class struggle.' Their two main workers' inquiries follow three-year stints working in a Bakkavor food processing plant and as a delivery driver for Tesco, respectively.

If the term 'workers' inquiry' ever made sense, it does here. We get to know about the daily routines, the contact (or, due to the organisation of the workplace, lack thereof) with their colleagues, the problematic role of the unions (both become union reps for bigger unions at some point, GMB and USDAW, but also work with the rank-and-file IWW), and the possibilities and impossibilities of building 'class power'. We also learn plenty of other stuff. In a shorter workers' inquiry about working in a 3D printer manufacturing plant in the Park Royal industrial estate (which the AngryWorkers call the 'crown jewel of a workers' vanguard'), you'll learn more about the ins and outs of 3D printing than you ever cared to know.

Recently, the AngryWorkers reviewed an academic volume that claims to entail 'workers' inquiries'. They concluded the following.

Firstly, their largely academic approach means that we don't really get to read 'workers' inquiries', but academic texts based on fairly conventional methods of research. They get around this by using linguistic acrobatics ('workers inquiries from above' etc). Whilst there is a lot of useful information in the book, by shrouding the perspective in a bit of a fraud, it is far less useful than it could be. The writers' external position means that they depend primarily on trade union organisations and officials as representatives of 'the workers'. This, in turn, results in a partial view (the focus of most texts is the question of unionisation), and also a skewed perspective, as certain events are

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either misunderstood or misrepresented.

Cocky? No. If you set the standard for workers' inquiries, you have the right to call out those who think they can take the academic shortcut and end up in a cul-de-sac. The lack of academic pretence in *Class Power on Zero-Hours*, while dishing up state-of-the-art investigations, is a real delight. It puts the book in a proud tradition of militant working-class studies such as James Boggs's *The American Revolution: Pages from a Negro Worker's Notebook* (1963) and J. Sakai's *Settlers: The Mythology of the White Proletariat* (1983).

No qualms at all? Some, if few. There is something about the collective's portrayal of the global working class that seems to downplay the ongoing divides caused by imperialism. The AngryWorkers stress the structural similarities that workers across the globe are facing, and how they are tied together by supply chains. They also seem to suggest that migration makes strict national divisions between working classes obsolete. Granted, there is truth in this, and it is of importance for the resistance against capital. There lies much power in the potential to bring the supply chains to a halt, and it is crucial to point to the political (rather than just ethical) dimension of migrant justice activism. Yet, the enormous global gaps in wages, the imbalance between producer and consumer societies, and significant divisions between productive and reproductive labour are huge obstacles to working-class unity. Labour migration patterns (who moves where to do what kind of jobs) are an expression of this, as is the fact that millions of people risk their lives to get the kinds of jobs that the AngryWorkers describe as underpaid, precarious and unhealthy.

There is a strong operaist overtone to the book, which, in many ways, is great (the focus on the working class, its power, and its autonomy). However, while the critique of supposedly 'deindustrialised' societies in the global North is important, the overall focus on the industrial proletariat as the revolutionary subject can strike one as a little too - old-school? One could certainly say that you can't expect people in a 400-page book dedicated to workers' inquiries to spend too much time on the climate crisis, peasant uprisings or indigenous resistance. Yet, the AngryWorkers make it clear that their inquiries are tied to the revolutionary cause, and they close the book with four chapters on 'Revolutionary strategy'. A few important ingredients might be missing there.

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The AngryWorkers explicitly want ‘to build an organisation’. True to the operaist credo, they write:

The primary role of organisations is not to ‘organise people’ or to ‘teach them about the right line’. The primary task of an organisation is to understand the material context of a situation or struggle.

The organisation should rest on collectives like their own. To get started, they suggest six steps:

Make a commitment to a ‘six-month or year-long plan’.

Find the biggest workplaces in your area.

Be active in and around at least one strategical workplace - strategical in the sense that ‘they represent a wider condition for working class people in the area, or have links to other local, national or international workplaces’).

Get to know the workers and write leaflets.

Set up a solidarity network.

Publish a local worker’s newspaper or newsletter.

Admittedly, I find this proposal somewhat fascinating. It is, essentially, what the AngryWorkers did in West London for six years. They themselves say that they didn’t have ‘major “organising successes”’. And despite stressing that they managed to ‘root’ themselves, it can look from the outside that they have little to show for all their efforts.

I know European anti-imperialists who, in the 1970s, got engaged in robberies to help support national liberation movements in the global South. To them, the revolution could only come from these movements. How did they know? They had taken on jobs in European factories for six months, after which they concluded that there was no revolutionary potential within the European working class. The AngryWorkers seem unperturbed by their lack of major organising successes. They stick to their programme. Does this make them naive, stubborn, perhaps even dogmatic, or, for once, a group within the contemporary radical left that has a long-term plan? I am unsure, but will not deny that I find there is something

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admirable in their steadfastness. The same is true for their bold discussion of taking over 'the grain baskets, manufacturing centres, ports, power plants'. Yes, let's cut the sideshows, and move on to the big things!

Here is what the AngryWorkers have to say:

Yes, it's ambitious. But with a clear set of proposals and aims, at least in the short to medium-term, we've got a good basis to get cracking ... It can sometimes be frustrating and depressing when you're on the front line of the class war, but on the whole, it's exhilarating and purposeful and it gives us the means to live how we want.

You should really read this book.

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