# Trade union representatives in distribution:

# experiences of work and representing workers during Covid-19

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# Abstract

This thesis seeks to investigate how union representatives (reps) in distribution workplaces navigated the Covid-19 pandemic. Specifically, it seeks to explore the changing experience of work in the essential workplace of distribution centres during the pandemic, but also explore how organised labour navigated the changing terrain that followed the events of March 2020. Having collected data which predominantly consists of interviews with 17 reps and a small group of other officials, primarily relating to 7 workplaces, valuable knowledge and insight was uncovered in respect of the changing character of work during the pandemic as well as the effects on reps' activities. The insights emerging from the study point to a general inability to capitalise on the pandemic as a means of advancing members' pay and conditions, or advancing the position of the union in the workplace more generally. The researcher has sought to explain the inability to take advantage of the conditions in terms of *constraints, restraint and participation*: namely that reps were constrained from action by various factors, exercised restraint in their negotiations/approach with employers, or participated in decision making, but in a limited and narrow way – mostly in terms of designing or influencing policies related to the safety of workers. Many of the reps interviewed had considerable influence prior to Covid which waned as the context changed, though others actively helped to contribute to policy making – even if it was mostly constrained to issues directly related to the pandemic.

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# List of Abbreviations

| | |
|---|---|
| DC | Distribution Centre |
| FLT | Forklift truck |
| FTO | Full Time Official |
| GMB | General Municipal and Boilermakers (Union) |
| HR, HRM | Human Resources, Human Resource Management |
| ILO | International Labour Organisation |
| IR | Industrial Relations |
| JIT | Just-In-Time |
| LFS | Labour Force Survey |
| LPT | Labour Process Theory |
| ONS | Office for National Statistics |
| PCS | Public and Commercial Services Union |
| PM | Performance management |
| POS | Point of sale |
| RMT | The National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers |
| ULF | Union Learning Fund |
| USDAW | Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers |
| WIRS/WERS | Workplace Industrial Relations Survey/ Workplace Employment Relations Study |

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This thesis is dedicated to the memory of Matt Bailey.

# Chapter One: Introduction

## 1.1 Overview

This thesis originates from the disruption caused by the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic over the period from March 2020 to the end of 2022 where data collection ended. Specifically, it seeks to explore the ways that work and trade union representatives were affected in distribution workplaces as a result of the extraordinary events during this period. Trade union representatives (reps) have a pivotal role to play in moderating the relationship between managers and workers, though the pandemic context placed strain on both work and trade union activities while also potentially creating opportunities for gains for labour.

The thesis adopts a labour process perspective as the most appropriate means of understanding the employment relationship – as a means of explaining the need to control workers to ensure their productivity (Thompson, 1989), in explaining the structured antagonism (Edwards, 1988) between capital and labour, and which explains workers' desires to oppose managers individually and collectively. This framing then links to mobilisation theory (Kelly, 1998) which can be used to explore the interplay between union reps and their members in taking the potential opportunities of Covid-19 and translating that into action which advances members' interests. Beyond some participation in health and safety decision making, this did not occur in these workplaces.

## 1.2 Origins of the thesis

This research went through a number of iterations until its eventual form. This was significantly influenced by the changes to the research terrain as a result of Covid, which made accessing workplaces practically impossible. Earlier iterations came from a place of dissatisfaction with existing evidence from distribution workplaces which did not entirely tally with the researcher's lived experience of the sector – as a warehouse worker and Human Resources (HR) professional (see appendix 1). The workplaces examined in the UK supermarket supply chain for example (Newsome,

Thompson and Commander, 2013; Newsome, 2010; Thompson, Newsome and Commander, 2013) uncover limited types and degrees of worker resistance (limited essentially to 'grazing' – low level theft which entailed the consumption of the products being packed – and other minor thefts), whereas the researcher had observed much higher value thefts and fiddles, as well as less criminal forms of misbehaviour in similar workplaces. This work experience led the researcher to believe there was much more nuance to be revealed in shopfloor relations in distribution centres, and that workers' ability to informally navigate the pressures of work in these workplaces and such pressures were not experienced equally or evenly across the sector.

The Covid-19 pandemic began as the researcher was navigating access to workplaces, which was swiftly halted in line with the prevailing public health requirements. This major obstacle to the project became the new context for work, and the research pivoted to attempting to examine the same workplaces in this new terrain via the relationships the researcher had already created. This allowed an attempt to understand workplace dynamics, but with the research population now limited to trade union reps via regional officers, the data produced tended to be a combination of reps discussing their workplaces and detailing their experience of conducting trade union duties.

## 1.3 Research Question

The purpose of this research is to examine how Covid-19 affected not just work, but collective organisation in supply chain workplaces. As such, the overriding research question can be considered as follows:

> **How, and to what extent, has Covid-19 affected work and union activities in supply chains?**

This research question can be broken down further, with the intention of examining specific strands of work and collective organisation. This is to say that the research question can be subdivided into the following questions:

- How has Covid-19 affected the labour process in distribution centres and related logistics workplaces?
- How have the activities of union reps been affected by Covid-19 in supply chains?
- To what extent can workplace reps mobilise their membership during the Covid-19 pandemic

These questions reflect the contemporaneous nature of the research such that it was designed and executed as events transpired. This necessitated a somewhat adaptive approach that needed to be modified according to the changing terrain in the field, and access as it unfurled.

## 1.4 Contribution

Key insight has been obtained in a sector where critical research into the labour process is limited, and this novelty is furthered as a result of the pandemic context. The researcher argues that the uncovering of data in this context is a key achievement and one that is predicated on obtaining research access, which follows work experience in the sector as well as relationships with key gatekeepers. These relationships which predated the pandemic allowed for research to be conducted safely as restrictions began to ease. The researcher argues that this research access was supported via several factors which include proximity to Keele University's Industrial Relations distance learning programme, significant work experience in the sector, and a 'working class' presentation all of which aided in gaining access through multiple gatekeepers, but also in helping to obtain good quality insight which would not be available to all researchers. Access to these participants often required credibility to be established through vouches from third parties, which would hamper researchers who did not have a background of working in the sector or links to those key gatekeepers sympathetic to academic research being conducted into the labour movement. In this sense, the researcher argues he was well-placed to conduct this research and that other researchers with different backgrounds may have found conducting this research significantly more difficult, if impossible.

Having gained good access, the thesis seeks to theorise around themes generated through interviewing reps. The thesis seeks to outline the issues reps had in mobilising the workforce. While derived from extraordinary circumstances, many of the conclusions drawn have applicability in more 'normal' circumstances. The framing of 'restraint, constraints, and participation' is a potentially valuable structure to think about the various issues which explain the inability of workplace organisation to exploit an apparently febrile and favourable context. The findings also point to the importance of space in the workplace for the operation of the labour process and organising resistance. As such the discussion of spatial aspects of work forms a significant part of the attempt to

link to existing literature, which is generally limited in the workplace context. From a labour process perspective this has tended to focus on workplace surveillance (see assorted debates surrounding the panopticon e.g. (Sewell and Wilkinson, 1992; Bain and Taylor, 2000; Taylor and Bain, 2003; Thompson and Ackroyd, 1995), and on the contributions from economic geography which relate to analyses of globalisation (See assorted links to the economic geography concepts of global value chains, commodity chains, or production networks. E.g. (Newsome, 2015; Taylor, Newsome and Rainnie, 2013; Rainnie, McGrath-Champ and Herod,2010) Here the researcher argues the disruption to space also disrupted any desire or attempt to mobilise.

Finally, this thesis has a methodological contribution. The researcher has significant experience working in distribution centres, and this experience has proven invaluable in securing access to data. To this end, the researcher argues that the position of the researcher in relation to the sector makes for significantly greater validity following the need to repeatedly establish credibility while navigating a succession of gatekeepers. This credibility is essential in order to gain access to this particular population and also significantly aids the generation of high-quality data. Consequently, there is significant attention paid to the relationship of the researcher to the data/sector, and particularly the importance of continued links between scholarship and praxis. While labour process theory (LPT) forms the theoretical bedrock of the research, the researcher argues for the suitability of a pragmatist research philosophy as an appropriate means to understand workplace issues. Where other LPT researchers have looked to critical realism to solve the problem of subjectivity in the labour process (Edwards, O'Mahoney and Vincent, 2014), this piece instead argues that a pragmatist position also reconciles issues between objectivity and subjectivity. The thesis also engages with work on partisan scholarship (Darlington and Dobson, 2013; Thomas and Turnbull, 2021; Brook and Darlington, 2013; Stewart and Martinez Lucio, 2011) and argues that a partisan position is in fact a strength when attempting to get high quality insight where access is potentially difficult.

## 1.5 Summary of Chapters

Following this short introductory chapter, the thesis proceeds with a two-chapter literature review. The first seeks to create a theoretical and conceptual framework for how work can be understood, and how union reps can seek to advance their members' interests at workplace level. This is done firstly by grounding the research in labour process theory, which frames opposition to managers/the employer as rational, and indeed a likely (or inevitable) consequence of the capitalist mode of production. Subsequently, the assumed functions of workplace reps are explored, and the means available to them to create change in their workplaces – particularly through the lens of mobilisation theory (Kelly, 1998). This framing gives a theoretical understanding of the divergent interests between capital and labour in the workplace – which in many contexts could be argued to be heightened or revealed as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic – and how workplace reps can attempt to harness this discontent as a means to challenge managers.

The second literature chapter expands on this theoretical grounding by outlining empirical data which explores the negotiation of order on the shopfloor in more detail. This chapter explores data from the logistics/distribution context, but also identifies some limitations in this respect – the UK distribution context is severely underrepresented in academic literature, and many studies of successful organising and mobilising instead come from other national contexts, such as recent output from the Californian Inland Empire, or with particular focus on Amazon (see e.g. (Bonacich and Wilson, 2008; Allison, 2020; Alimahomed-Wilson, 2020; Boewe and Schulten,2020; De Lara, Reese and Struna, 2016a). Instead, some explanations for the absence of evidence follow – including the decline of organised labour in the UK, and the associated factors which go some way to explain weak organisation on the shop floor. This absence of evidence is not necessarily evidence of absence, and as such reveals a gap as well as opportunities to later elaborate on issues of access to data.

This chapter also contains some background information and seeks to outline context around two major themes – one is an outline of developments in logistics work, which explores the various causes and effects associated with a global reorganisation of production and consumption in which logistics performs an essential function in linking production and consumption across intercontinental scales. This section explores the 'how' and the 'why' of conditions in UK distribution work, including academic and public domain evidence of declining labour standards. Secondly, there is an exploration of emergent literature relating to the effects of the pandemic on work in a more general sense. This includes some academic discussion surrounding developments which affected UK workers – particularly a changed conception of places of work – but also some detail of public health measures taken which affected citizens in their work and non-work lives.

Subsequently, the methodological framing for the thesis is examined in Chapter Four. This includes an argument for a case for pragmatism in studying workplace phenomena, though also attempting to reconcile pragmatism with a labour process approach. Significant attention is given to the researcher's relationship to the sector and the data. This section is important in outlining the difficulty accessing the population of participants and how experience in the sector and a connection to friendly contacts was essential in securing access and producing valid, interesting findings. Finally, there is some discussion of the role of Industrial Relations (IR) scholarship and a partisan position as a researcher when exploring these topics.

A discussion of chosen methods, data collection and analysis follows (Chapter Five). A section is dedicated to exploring appropriate methods for an enquiry into reps' experiences of navigating Covid. This section outlines the process of navigating through gatekeepers to gain access to workplace reps, and the practicalities of collecting data. This section includes a brief discussion of each data intervention to give details of the reps and their workplaces to better illustrate the context in which each rep operates. There is also a brief outline of the process used to analyse the

data, which includes a discussion of the coding of the data, and a presentation of what each code means.

A discussion of the findings follows and is structured in terms of changes to the labour process, mobilisation around Covid, and the space of work/mobilising. The effects of Covid made for major disruptions to both spaces of work and resistance and the prevailing systems of control. Subsequently, reps' effectiveness is framed fundamentally in terms of reps being limited by *constraints, restraint and participation* – that is to say they were either constrained by various factors; exercised restraint in their interactions for various reasons; or participated in decision making in a limited and narrow way, which was mostly limited to Covid policy making. These themes overlap and interact, and also contain multiple other themes. These include (but are not limited to) the ways in which public health restrictions distorted the way we think of the 'space' of work – including limitations on movements of reps around their own workplaces, and having to navigate through virtual alternatives to meeting; how employers used the conditions of the time to advance their own interests (though with some concessions to labour in terms of workload and disciplinary action); and how in certain workplaces the union reps were able to dictate the terms on which work continued to operate – though this also had the effect of entrenching the managers' position and leaving the union at risk of members' ire. Generally, the picture from the workplaces examined is one where the reps were unable to make ground, workers occasionally received some benefits, and in some cases the conditions enabled the employer to circumnavigate or nullify the unions' influence – sometimes from a position of relative strength.

Finally, the thesis concludes with a discussion of the implications of the findings. Coming from a pragmatist position, it is important to consider the validity of knowledge in its application, and so some lessons for organised labour in other crisis situations are outlined. A discussion of further research follows. Having established relationships through the course of the fieldwork in seeking to investigate the turbulence of the Covid period, there is some justification in seeking to return to the

same reps to investigate if the subsequent cost of living crisis presented opportunities to harness workers' malcontent. The researcher also feels that the space of work and organising has been revealed to be an important and novel topic that warrants further exploration.

# Chapter Two: Literature 1 – A Theoretical Framework

## 2.1 Introduction

This chapter seeks to locate debates surrounding the nature of work in a theoretical framework. It will follow by exploring the framing of work from a Labour Process Theory (LPT) perspective, which will be shown to be the most appropriate means of understanding the employment relationship, particularly in respect of how workers behave in response to managerial instruction. This framing will be shown to be particularly apposite in understanding workers' divergences from the desires of managers, but also importantly to give legitimacy to these divergences by placing them in relation to the nature of work under capitalism. This is the main advantage of LPT, where other approaches may be more managerialist or 'unitarist' (Fox, 1966)) in their orientation, attributing workers' 'negative' behaviours to their assorted inadequacies rather than tensions which are inherent in the capital-labour relationship.

The chapter explores this dynamic by establishing a core theory of LPT (Thompson, 1989) which elaborates on this tension and explains the motivations of managers and workers in pursuit of their interests. This framing allows for a discussion of the assorted means of control available to managers, as well as the repertoire of behaviours available to workers in opposition. In discussing these strategies available to both parties there is specific focus on systems of control which are assumed to be dominant in distribution work, which is a focus on the micro-measurement and management of task, bolstered by systems of electronic surveillance, precarious employment and harsh systems of performance management. This assumption has some shortcomings in the UK distribution context, which is in relation to the comparative paucity of shop floor level research in these workplaces, and also in respect of the commonly understood 'rules' being subject to flux as the effects of Covid-19 disrupted our understanding of work. For this reason, other comparative workplace dynamics are discussed, and other consensual rather than coercive control systems will also be outlined.

LPT also has significant value in this context in explaining the function of logistics in the contemporary economy, as Newsome (2015) terms it, preserving 'value in motion'. This framing helps to understand logistics work as a (mostly) value-preserving rather than value-adding process, though one that is an essential requirement for global patterns of production and consumption to be reorganised, and generally organised in such a way that production occurs in lower wage economies many miles from the consumer. In this respect LPT approaches succeed in explaining the capital-labour relationship at both the plant and global level.

Having established that the capitalist employment relationship incentivises control over workers, their resistant strategies will be explored. This particularly relates to the divergences from close electronic surveillance, but it will also be argued that the full array of workers' recalcitrant strategies are available to distribution workers. While worker 'resistance' can be a difficult term to define, the range of approaches will be framed as a natural consequence of the capitalist labour process, and that these reactions can be categorised in multiple ways, which include many dimensions including that of individual or collective acts.

Having established a conceptual understanding of workplace dynamics using LPT as an intellectual foundation, this chapter explores the function of organised labour and its role as a mitigating factor in workplace activities. In doing so, the theoretical grounding likely exists in the overlap between LPT and industrial relations (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999:22). This discussion will include an elaboration of the purpose of trade unions, though also considering their shifting orientations in response to a period of decline. This decline has been predominantly driven by an ideological shift from the state where economic and legal policies have proven detrimental to union activities. In tandem with this hostile environment, the industries in which workers were traditionally well organised have largely vacated the UK (particularly primary and secondary industries) and been replaced by work which is hard to unionise. There are several groups who are considered difficult to unionise, and many of these are prevalent in logistics work – the young, migrants, and the

precariously employed (Thompson, Newsome and Commander, 2013; Lloyd and James, 2008; Newsome, Thompson and Commander,2009).

The chapter also seeks to ascertain the activities of the contemporary union rep to understand their role in the workplace. There is a degree of pessimism in presenting the union rep as a more muted or passive agent of labour in contemporary trade union literature – relegated to representing workers in individual casework, or otherwise engaging in activities which conform to a more individualised form of trade unionism. By contrast, this thesis will speculate on the potential for reps to be actively involved in workplace decision-making, with a range of formality, and that the conditions of Covid-19 presented a unique opportunity for trade unions to assert their value. This can be delineated into two forms, protecting workers' safety in the face of a pandemic and using the pandemic as a means of advancing other conditions such as pay or working/contractual conditions. The means for reps to do this will be framed in terms of Kelly's (1998) Mobilisation Theory, which seeks to understand how workers' grievances can translate into collective action. This theoretical framing helps us to understand the nature of the employment relationship and the antagonism at the heart of it, and how union reps can transform worker malcontent into action. This framing is also applicable when considering the various issues surrounding Covid-19, and the potential for workers and their unions to use the conditions of the pandemic to advance their conditions in other respects.

## 2.2 Labour Process Theory

Managerialist (or unitarist (Fox, 1966)) approaches frame opposition from workers as a problem to be solved, rather than a consequence of the nature of the relationship between capital and labour. A better framing of the phenomena stems from Marx's (Marx, 1954) analysis of the labour process and the implications this has for waged labour.  Under capitalism, workers are generally paid a wage for time worked rather than productivity. The purchaser – the employer - buys the capacity for work (labour power) with implications for both parties: Capital retains any produce created, and as such any profit realised when it is sold. Should the purchaser of labour power (capital) make workers

more productive, the average labour cost decreases, and so more surplus value is retained by capital when the good is sold. Workers, by contrast, do not benefit (financially) by working harder. This process - the labour process - has clear implications for explaining the need for managers to control workers' behaviour, as well as associated responses from workers. It is this context in which workplace conflict is best conceptualised - as a response to the conditions created through attempts to create and capture value. This lies in contrast to other potential explanations for conflict which are unitarist in character – attributed to workers' various inadequacies, misunderstandings, or troublemakers (Fox, 1966:12) – or increasingly in respect of workers' psychology (Godard, 2014; Budd, 2020). Similarly, the pluralist position which attributes conflict at work to a failure of institutions to effectively negotiate it away ignores the fundamental character of this relationship. Framing industrial relations as a means of examining the institutions of job regulation neglects the dynamics at play at work and in wider society (Hyman, 1975). This critical approach lies in contrast to the dominant thinking of human resource management (HRM) which is unitarist in character (Taylor, 2013), though the critical IR school has been much marginalised at the expense of HRM in universities (Gall, 2008).

The contemporary framing of labour process theory (LPT) is prompted by developments following Braverman's *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (Braverman, 1974). Following Braverman, and other 'waves' of LPT (Thompson and Newsome,2004), a core theory (Thompson, 1989) has been outlined which helps to frame any investigation into workplace conflict. This core theory helps to explain the underlying tension between capital and labour while also being able to effectively link with other aspects of academic enquiry (Thompson and Smith, 2009). In that sense, LPT is a broad church (Ackroyd, 2009) and the strength of a labour process position stems from its ability to place the economic reality of work at the centre of analysis while also offering concessions to variations across workplaces (see Edwards' (1986) 'relative autonomy') and also conceding to subjective aspects of work without abandoning the core nature of the employment relationship.

The core tenets of LPT establishes that the capital-labour relationship, and labour in particular, are privileged in analysis; that there is a logic of capital accumulation that prompts capital to revolutionise the production process in order to capture value at the expense of labour and other capitals; that control over labour is necessary to overcome its indeterminate character and ensure it is productive; and that there is a 'structured antagonism' (Edwards, 1986) in the social relations at work which explains an array of worker responses - ranging from hostility and resistance to accommodation and consent (Thompson, 1989).

Extending beyond the core theory, Edwards' concepts of the relative autonomy of the labour process (Edwards, 1986), and by extension how this relates to a 'cluster of factors' (Edwards, 1988) beyond the shop floor, explain variations in worker behaviour in different workplaces. These interrelated concepts help explain how the dynamics of the shopfloor in a given workplace are unique to a particular site and a result of the particulars of the site. In this sense, they are autonomous, but only relatively so – they are still affected by factors external to the business, though each particular workplace is affected by a different cluster of external factors – for example, the product market, labour market, and any other factor which may be relevant in affecting the employment relationship at a given location. This conceptualising is especially valuable in helping to understand and explain variations in workplaces, and in utilising theory from outside the 'core' of labour process – for example to explain how something such as militancy might explain the workplace gains of some groups of workers, though militant workers elsewhere might be hamstrung by factors which work against them. In this sense, Edwards' contribution here helps to incorporate greater complexity in seeking to explain variations between workplaces which might appear to be similar on the surface.

### *Logistics and LPT – Conceptualising Value*

Given the Marxian origins of labour process theory, the concept of 'value' in logistics is one which requires some exploration to relate it to a LPT analysis. The movement of goods is not a process which adds value to goods in a Marxian understanding of the concept. This is not to say that a LPT

framework is inappropriate, but rather that a modified understanding is required. Logistics is the process of moving goods from one space to another, and Newsome (2015) deals with this problem by conceiving of value as 'value in motion' - that the purpose of the logistics function is to preserve value while moving it from one location to another. This is an important theoretical consideration, as it helps to frame the intense pressures placed on workers in supply chains in pursuit of the capture of value (Newsome, 2015; Newsome, Thompson and Commander,2009; Newsome, 2010; Newsome, Thompson and Commander, 2013; Wright and Lund, 2003). Logistics services have also become a 'product' in their own right, with third party logistics firms (3PLs) operating in a pseudo market in which they compete on a cost basis while delivering Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) for their clients - a situation made more intense through dominant retailers putting logistics providers into competition against each other (see e.g. (Harvey, Quilley and Beyon, 2002; Newsome, Thompson and Commander, 2013; Newsome, 2015)). There is the potential for logistics providers to add value in this context too - through carrying out actions that might otherwise be conducted by the retailer, such as adding price tags. A labour process approach has been used in other work contexts where the concept of value is contested, though workers still ultimately work in the conditions of a capitalist political economy – for example, the public sector in the UK (see e.g. (Mather and Seifert, 2014; Mather, Worrall and Mather, 2012)). While it is necessary to address the applicability of labour process theory in a context where value capture is contested, the pressures transmitted onto workers in supply chains through their role in preserving value in motion justifies a labour process approach. Their existence in a capitalist mode of production and payment of wages justifies it further.

## 2.3 Theorising the Dynamics of the Workplace

### *2.3.1 Control*

Labour process theory establishes that there is a need to control workers in order to overcome the indeterminate character of labour as a peculiar commodity (Thompson, 1989). The nature of workplace control has attracted some debate regarding the application of different strategies and how they can be conceptualised. Early writings on workplace control from Edwards (1979) outline control strategies as existing in simple, technical, or bureaucratic forms. Further writings expand on this outlining the use of control strategies in combination, in an intermingled fashion, rather than each means of control superseding that which preceded it as Edwards argued (Callaghan and Thompson, 2001). Storey (1985) conceptualises means of control as operating in levels and circuits - able to be added and removed and operating at different levels of intensity. Elsewhere, control over work is conceptualised as a 'frontier of control' (Goodrich, 1920) that managers seek to extend, and workers seek to push back.

The following section briefly explores the specific control strategies that might be available in a manager's repertoire to ensure workers do as managers desire. As mid-20$^{th}$ century scholars asserted, there is a tension between managers' continued decisions between whether to use 'the carrot or the stick' in pursuit of their aims (Harbison and Myers, 1959:49). This tension might also be asserted in terms of thinking of HRM (or the management of labour more generally) as either 'hard' or 'soft' (Storey, 1995) . Contemporary labour process theory grew from Braverman's (Braverman, 1974) critique of Taylorism, an influential system of management predicated on micro measurement and management of preordained tasks (Taylor, 1911). In the contemporary context, the Taylorised labour process has evolved beyond the direct control (Edwards, 1979) approach as originally conceived by Taylor. Instead, workers are often monitored through electronic means such as wearable technology in distribution centres (Newsome, Thompson and Commander, 2013) or other electronic monitoring, such as call trackers used in call centres (Bain and Taylor, 2000; Taylor and

Bain, 1999). The micro measurement of tasks is bolstered by performance management (PM) systems which are used to facilitate the exit of low performers using hard management actions in contrast to the soft language of coaching and improvement which underpins HRM rhetoric surrounding PM (Taylor, 2013; Williams and Beck, 2018). The use of control mechanisms must also be met with consent from workers (Burawoy, 1979; McCabe, 2014) - The process is not one solely of coercion – and the 'soft' side of managerial control may also have some application even in workplaces that appear to be underpinned by Taylorised principles. Behavioural controls, the use of corporate value systems, or other normative controls have application in distribution work – such as Amazon's 'Work hard. Have fun. Make history' motto.

Managers have long been recognised to require more than just productivity from workers – requiring subordination and loyalty as prerequisites to achieving productivity (Harbison and Myers, 1959). There is the potential for the usage of corporate culture as a means of control (Willmott, 1993b) even where there is the assumption of Taylorised, process-driven work (Brannan, Parsons and Priola, 2015). Similarly, managers might expect workers to hold unitary assumptions about the firm such that the firm/customer's goals align with theirs (Korczynski, 2001), and recruiting managers may seek to recruit a problem-solving 'attitude', even within the constraints of otherwise tightly controlled work (Callaghan and Thompson, 2002). This might include having the stamina and guile to carry on in the face of mundane tasks (ibid) or engaging in problem-solving activities that otherwise benefit the organisation.

Some degree of self-organisation may be expected from workers, with 'responsible autonomy' (Friedman, 1977a) providing options for workers to self-determine and monitor their activities. By extension, teamwork provides a means of harnessing worker subjectivity in order to generate support for flexible working, reduced supervision, and extended responsibility (Knights and McCabe, 2003).

Managers might also use the rhetoric of teamwork in routine work in a fashion akin to 'Team Taylorism' (Baldry, Bain and Taylor, 1998) where the 'soft' language of empowerment and collective goals conceals the individualised and routine work that is being carried out. The 'team' rhetoric has other benefits to managers in having a bonding and socialising function (van, Callaghan and Thompson, 2004) and in reinforcing unitarist ideology (Korczynski, 2001). Work also may be posited as 'fun', or workers might be encouraged to express aspects of their non-work identities ('be yourself'), though workers do not necessarily accept this unquestioningly, and recognise normative/cultural management as a means to obscure technical and bureaucratic control, and that the extent of their freedoms is superficial (Fleming and Sturdy, 2011; Sturdy, Fleming and Delbridge,2010). Normative controls may also extend beyond the workplace in the age of social media, with managers able to check up on current employees, or profile potential recruits by examining their social media profiles (McDonald, Thompson and O' Connor, 2016). Social media also potentially blurs the boundaries of work and non-work time (Thompson, McDonald and O'Connor, 2019) – a distinction which may become increasingly relevant in a post-Covid employment landscape.

In short, managerial control extends beyond the rather simplistic analysis of a choice between simple, technical, and bureaucratic (Edwards, 1979). These forms can be used in tandem or combination – for example a Taylorised labour process that is managed through a bureaucratic PM system that ranks workers and punishes poor performers. There are also contexts in which softer forms of management might have application.

### *2.3.2 Space*

Until this point, spatial aspects of work have only received passing attention. The reframing of our understanding of work in a pandemic/post-pandemic context means that the concept of the 'space' of work is especially important. The arrangement of the workspace itself also forms a means of managerial control. The building itself facilitates both the coordination of production as well as

surveillance over it (Baldry, 1999). The building also forms a means of influence through providing behavioural cues for those that inhabit it (ibid). Spatial aspects of work are also significant in the location or relocation of work sites. Greenfield sites afford managers the ability to attempt to recast the dynamics of the employment relationship by starting with a clean slate - casting policies as they see fit without the constraints of brownfield sites (Hallier and Leopold, 2000).

While social media permits employers a route to observe workers' non-work lives, the same tool also provides workers with a space in which to express dissatisfaction (Thompson, McDonald and O'Connor, 2019) or to organise collectively (Upchurch and Grassman, 2016; Lyddon *et al.,* 2015). It is clear that control over the space of work can be used as a means of halting worker resistance, though workers' own utilisation of space may become valuable in helping them retaliate.

### *2.3.3 LPT and Spatial Aspects of Work: The Panopticon*

While Braverman is credited with reviving a sociology of work (Littler and Salaman, 1982), the central theses of Braverman have also drawn much criticism and provoked debates. Of central importance to this thesis are critiques of Braverman that revolve around an overly deterministic analysis of the labour process (ibid). Braverman has been criticised for overstating a tendency to deskill, as well as presenting an 'objective' view of the labour process in which resistance against the direction of travel of managerial objectives is generally overlooked. While there have been attempts to reconcile subjectivity in the labour process from scholars friendly to LPT (Jaros, 2010; Knights and McCabe, 2003), there has also been a schism in the subject with some turning to poststructuralism/postmodernism. Much of this debate follows attempts to include the conceptualising of the panopticon into critical workplace research a concept which relates directly to conceptions of design of both the labour process and the physical layout of the workplace.

In seeking to evaluate the influence of Foucault and the postmodern/structuralist position, a key site is that of the call centre. Taylor and Bain (2003) take the position that the framing of the electronic panopticon is an overly pessimistic reading of workplace conflict - that surveillance rendered perfect

leaves few opportunities for resistance and effectively eradicates it (see also (Taylor and Bain, 1999; Bain and Taylor, 2000; Thompson and Ackroyd, 1995) for further criticisms of this position). Fernie and Metcalf (1998) and Sewell and Wilkinson (1992) attract particular criticism for overstating the reach of the panoptic gaze, though Fernie and Metcalfe do identify means for workers to actively avoid work through manipulating the system which delivers it (Fernie and Metcalfe 1998:9). While this research adopts the theoretical framework of LPT and as such rejects pessimistic accounts of labour agency, the researcher recognises the value of the panopticon as a metaphor for workplace surveillance and it has been noted elsewhere that it is possible to draw on the works of Foucault without being slaves to it (Knights and McCabe, 2003). As such, this research will also occasionally draw from some accounts of those that were formerly LP theorists who split to adopt more postmodernist positions in the mid-1990s (Thompson and Newsome,2004), though will do so critically and still maintaining a labour process theory perspective.

## 2.4 Worker Resistance

While there are all manner of tools available to managers to control workers, a labour process framing offers legitimacy to worker resistance, though it is a term which is difficult to define (Collinson and Ackroyd,2005). There are a variety of terms with which to describe it, for example: opposition, resistance, or misbehaviour can be used almost interchangeably to describe the same activities (Bélanger and Thuderoz, 2010:143). Likewise, the use of the term 'resistance' suggests a deliberate and conscious attempt to subvert managerial expectations, which is not necessarily the case. Storey (1983) provides perhaps the most useful definition in respect of considering worker productivity - actions which prevent the transformation of labour power into labour (1983:158), and Edwards provides another useful definition in that of 'secondary adjustments' - actions that are contrary to the aims of managers (Edwards, 1988), though there are conditions under which these two definitions subtly differ. It must be recognised that managers too are (generally) employees,

whose interests may not coincide with capital, and that the 'model employee' in terms of surrendering labour power, may steal, sabotage, and openly criticise the organisation, displaying characteristics which meet Edwards' criteria, but not Storey's.

Ackroyd and Thompson (1999) outline the scope of what can be termed organisational misbehaviour and present a framework which outlines the terrain over which workers can resist - notwithstanding qualifications over the difficulty in defining terms. For each dimension that managers seek to manage, the same dimension is that over which workers seek to resist. These are over time, work, produce, and identity (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999: 25).

The process where managers seek to increase effort and workers withhold it, can be termed the effort bargain (Baldamus, 1961), and workers' strategies to withhold effort have been well explained, from the 'soldiering' of Taylor (1911) to the goldbricking of Roy (Roy, 1952), output restriction (Lupton, 1963), and the 'games' of Burawoy (1979).

Physically attending work is a matter which may have renewed significance under the context of a public health crisis. Absence can have many causes (Behrend, 1959; Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999:25) – not necessarily constituting resistant behaviour, though it can clearly contain a resistant component. Similarly, quitting or not taking certain jobs, might be termed the 'double indeterminacy' of labour (Smith, 2006) – workers can choose where to sell their labour power, as well as having agency over how it is applied within the workplace thus having a dual indeterminacy compared to the choices workers make while in a particular job. 'Exit' too remains an option when 'voice' is not possible (Hirschman, 1970).

Labour turnover has a more nuanced context. The inability to recruit sufficient or adequate labour is a problem for managers. There are also potential benefits for managers in turnover at work providing workers can be replaced. Turnover has been argued in management texts to bring benefits as a mode of improving organisational performance – to turn over the lowest 10% of performers annually to improve organisational efficiency (Michaels *et al*., 2001, in Taylor, 2013). Turnover in the

organisation has another function which benefits managers – in that it prevents the effective organisation of labour through collective means.

When considering the sorts of individual acts to be expected in distribution work, one might look to Mars (1982; 2006) who provides a framework to understand workplace 'fiddles', allocating typical fiddles to jobs depending on levels of autonomy and integration into workgroups – donkeys, wolves, vultures, and hawks. Distribution work is likely to conform to the 'donkey job' type – characterised by low integration into work groups, and low levels of autonomy. In the absence of being able to conduct other fiddles or gain autonomy, donkey job holders are forced to resist through withdrawing from the job or through destructive acts. Destruction has many purposes at work; the destruction of machinery can be carried out with the intent to protect jobs or earnings from the encroachment of technology - from the Luddites of the 19th Century, to attempts to resist Taylorism in the 20th Century. Likewise, destruction can be a means to make work more tolerable – to play games that involve the destruction of product or property, though ones that may be tacitly accepted by managers (see e.g. Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999:28). Linked to this is the concept of 'banana time' – to make space in the working day for workers to entertain themselves (Roy, 1959). Sabotage is not limited to workers and can also be carried out by managers (LaNuez and Jermier, 1994). There is limited scope to gain control over the various dimensions of work where controls are tightest, though there are degrees of autonomy/control and integration into work groups which might make some jobs more or less 'donkey' than others. Beyond the strict delineation of 'donkey jobs', and considering other illicit or deviant behaviours, workers have historically been able to supplement their incomes with an array of fiddles, pilfering and outright theft (e.g. (Mars, 1982; Ditton, 1977)

Workers can use humour as a direct means of undermining managerial authority (Taylor and Bain, 2003). By contrast, joking can form a means of group regulation, being used to encourage workers to conform to group norms - in some cases as a means of conformity to perceptions of masculinity (Collinson, 1992). A particular form of identity warrants exploration when considering migrant

labour. Taylor and Bain (2003) identify the scope for French-speaking workers to use language skills to conceal jokes being made at the expense of the organisation. In certain contexts, certain groups of workers might find ways to resist attempts to subsume personal identity into one of the organisation's designation. A specific example is part time single mothers who resist attempts to impose a corporate identity (Knights and McCabe, 2003:1616). Workers may also use social media or other online platforms such as blogs to criticise the organisation, or to otherwise express dissent (Thompson, McDonald and O'Connor, 2019).

It is potentially difficult for workers to recognise a disparity of interests between themselves and their employer – the surplus value appropriated through the enactment of the labour process is concealed through the payment of a wage (Cohen, 1978), and managers have an arsenal of strategies with which to foster positive identification with the firm, though these strategies may vary in their application or success. While post-war or Fordist models of industrial relations prompted income and job security, more recent developments have tended towards less secure employment. Increased precarity overlaps with attempts by managers to foster commitment, but with caveats – workers are expected to invest more of themselves into jobs, but employer promises are conditional (Thompson, 2003:364-5) and potentially more easily accessible to core rather than peripheral workers. In the contemporary economy it is harder for employers to 'keep their end of the bargain' (Thompson, 2003; Thompson, 2013) and in turn workers may be justified in withholding their commitment to the employer, or indeed direct their allegiances to other sources.

## 2.5 From Labour Process to Organised Labour

The negotiation of order on the shopfloor has a clear and direct link to the theoretical groundings of labour process, but here to be explored in its collective dimensions. Discussion so far has tended to revolve around individual and informal acts such as output restriction, quitting, stealing, joking, or criticising, which can arise spontaneously without the presence of a union. Trade unions and workplace reps can form an essential buttress to the wants of managers. However individual

workers generally have comparatively little power: The contract of employment places workers in a subordinate position (a "command under the guise of an agreement" (Wedderburn of Charlton, 1986:5)) and in order to gain power, workers must collectivise. Organised labour can play an essential part in 'resisting' the employer, or alternatively actively participating in determining the terms under which labour power is surrendered. Divorced from political economy there is the risk that the concept of collective labour is neglected (Martinez Lucio and Stewart, 1997) and that 'labour process' is simply a euphemism for 'work' (Roy, 1991 in (Martinez Lucio and Stewart, 1997)).

Collective labour is generally conceived of in its formal organised form, which is that of trade unions. Historically, the primary purpose of unions was assumed to be to collectively bargain over workers' terms and conditions (Webb and Webb, 1920), or to engage in what Flanders termed job regulation (Flanders, 1975). Trade union activities exist on a spectrum of political and economic activities – caught in a 'triple tension' of class, society, and market (Hyman, 2001), though they are mainly concerned with a collective bargaining agenda (Hyman, 1996:66). Through their activities, trade unions can actively participate in the regulation of the labour process in the workplace - to participate in the setting of targets, to negotiate over working hours, pay and conditions; in some cases, to actively halt management initiatives. In this context, union officials and workplace representatives are active participants in determining the conduct of the labour process. The relative effectiveness of UK unions in this respect has been subject to various pressures which have contributed to declining power, and a shift towards other activities such as partnership, learning, and servicing members (Terry, 2003).

However, collective bargaining is not the total of collective labour activity. The ability to effectively bargain is moderated by all manner of factors, and not all collective behaviour is formalised (See e.g. the informal work group activities of Burawoy (1979)), or indeed necessarily sanctioned by unions, or perhaps occurs in a context where a union is yet to be recognised. In a certain sense collective bargaining as the main purpose of trade unions might be held to be a somewhat outdated viewpoint

– if it is to be taken that it is possible to 'infer what they are for from what they do' (Flanders, 1975:41), then the purpose of unions may well have drifted some way from that of the post war 20th century where the bulk of union resources would be dedicated to bargaining (ibid).

It is in this context where this thesis demonstrates an overlap between the fields of labour process theory and industrial relations (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999:22). LPT is concerned with the negotiation of order in the workplace in a more informal and dynamic sense, whereas IR is generally more concerned with the institutions surrounding organised labour. The role of workplace reps in a pandemic context links to both arenas.

### *2.5.1 Workplace Reps*

Union workplace representatives hold a privileged and unique position in workplaces in being not only observers of management initiatives, but active participants in the social relations at work, attuned to the concerns and demands of their members, but also non-union members in the workplace (Taylor, 2013). These representatives 'reflect the dynamic of change within the heartbeat of the union movement' (Danford, Richardson and Upchurch, 2003; Taylor, 2013).

This piece will adopt a loose definition of 'union rep', recognising that it can cover a broad range of activities in the workplace. As Darlington terms it:

> *The term 'workplace union rep' is used fairly broadly to cover representatives including shop stewards, departmental reps, convenors, branch secretaries and health and safety reps, who represent union members collectively and individually with management and have specific functions related to providing advice and guidance to members or employers.* (Darlington, 2010:127)

There is an argument to be made however that the term 'shop steward' reflects an older model of trade union activity, and that 'rep' is reflective of a more muted form of trade union activism – providing union 'services' to members in the form of representation rather than a more directly participative and oppositional function that might be attributed to stewards. The 'steward' terminology remains in use (Joyce, 2016), though 'reps' is perhaps more useful in a wider sense reflecting the extent and diversity of the functions that might be divided between multiple people in

the workplace, as Darlington indicates. While the functions of the contemporary rep arguably reflect contemporary trade union activity (representation) rather than an older model of trade unionism, the terms are somewhat interchangeable.

While some seminal texts giving detailed accounts of the roles reps play in moderating aspects of managerial control (see e.g. (Batstone, Boraston and Frenkel, 1977; Edwards, 1982)), the conversation surrounding trade union activity has shifted markedly since the 1980s. This can be attributed in part to the weakening of the labour movement through various anti-union activities by the state (Ironside and Seifert, 2000), though trade unions too have taken assorted measures in response to declining membership and reduced prominence in the workplace. Post-New Labour, academic conversation surrounding union activity has pointed towards a small range of responses that unions have taken, and these tend away from a consideration of reps as active participants in the execution of the labour process and towards assorted survival strategies (see e.g. (Novitz, 2002; Bacon and Storey, 2000; Terry, 2003; McIlroy, 2008; Munro and Rainbird, 2004)– providing individualised support to members in the form of supporting their disciplinaries and grievances – or being preoccupied with organising workers.

### *2.5.2 Rep Typologies*

Batstone *et al* (1977) point to the different typologies of rep/shop-floor steward, grouping stewards along degrees of high or low pursuit of union principles, and whether they conduct themselves as representatives or delegates. These dimensions cross creating four ideal types of steward: leaders, nascent leaders, cowboys and populists (Batstone, Boraston and Frenkel, 1977:34). For Batstone *et al*. leaders (representative, high pursuit of union principles) and populists (delegate, low pursuit of union principles) reflect the majority of stewards, with both other groups tending to only last for a short period of time. This typology is useful in certain respects, though outdated in others and less reflective of the contemporary, possibly weakly unionised workplace. Other subsequent work points to the imprecise and limited definition of union principles, and the possibility for flexibility in the orientation of reps/stewards in differing contexts (Marchington and Armstrong, 1983) Despite

limitations in applying this model to the contemporary context and the authors' own admission of it being 'crude' (Batstone, Boraston and Frenkel, 1977:32), there is still some value in attempting to conceive of the factors which might affect rep/stewards' activities.

In the contemporary context it is perhaps useful to conceive of other explanations for effective shopfloor organisation. Orientations towards collectivism have declined – workers are more likely to be individualistically orientated (Danford, Richardson and Upchurch, 2003:2), and this may affect attitudes towards trade union strategies – there may be a tendency for individualised models of unionism rather than collective displays in the workplace.

## 2.6 Mobilisation Theory

Kelly's (1998) *Rethinking Industrial Relations,* where mobilisation theory was first presented, has been influential in framing collective action in the years since its publication (Holgate, Simms and Tapia, 2018:599). Central to mobilisation theory is an attempt to understand how workers move from a sense of individual grievances to a collective one, and how that translates to collective action.

Kelly's framing of the employment relationship has a clear fit with LP scholars, in that the indeterminate nature of the relationship is explicitly acknowledged, as well as the associated incentives for capital and labour that result from waged labour (Kelly, 1998:24-25). This analysis, like LPT, is rooted in Marxist thinking, and Kelly also acknowledges the parallels with more recent LP scholars such as Edwards (1986). These assumptions, as well as an analysis of variations in individualism and collectivism, also underpin the work of Tilly (1978), which Kelly seeks to build upon (Kelly, 1998:24-25).

For Kelly, collective action must follow an act of *injustice*; dissatisfaction alone is unlikely to be adequate to provoke a collective response. Workers suffering deleterious effects from management decisions (of many differing varieties) might acknowledge dissatisfaction, but if there is no sense that events or actions are somehow wrong or illegitimate (Kelly, 1998:27) then it is unlikely to result in a collective response from workers. This change can be rationalised by those decision makers as conforming to established rules, belief systems (e.g., a sense of fairness), or through implied consent from workers through their ongoing cooperation (ibid). For this injustice to translate to action, this sense of injustice or illegitimacy must be followed by three processes: attribution, social identification, and leadership (Kelly, 1998:29). The source of the injustice must be attributable to an external agency, people (workers) must be able to socially identify in collective opposition to the group to blame, and both attribution and social identity can be socially constructed by leaders (ibid). It is in this respect that the role of leaders is important – in framing workplace issues such that workers' grievances can be mobilised into collective action.

As Darlington (2018) argues, Kelly did not reinvent the wheel in pointing to the role of activists in mobilising collective action, with a raft of influential texts in the 1970s and 1980s having covered this in some detail. To offer a defence of Kelly, many of the older sources cited by Darlington are also referred to by Kelly in discussing the mobilisation of workers (e.g. (Batstone, Boraston and Frenkel, 1977; Beynon, 1984)). Also related to this is the concept of cultures of solidarity (Fantasia, 1989), which can be argued to be similar to Kelly's mobilisation, especially with regards to notions of leadership (Simms and Dean, 2015).

Kelly justifies a focus on strikes as being the main locus of collective action for several reasons – including their effectiveness in harming the employer, though also that they are "sufficiently frequent and widespread to allow us insights into the industrial relations system as a whole" (Kelly, 1998:38). The use of strikes as a gauge of industrial discontent may have had some merit in the past (perhaps as recently as 1998), though in the contemporary context, this is not a satisfactory measure of collective action. The reasons for this are many: strike numbers have diminished greatly - 2018, for example contained the sixth lowest number of strike days on record, the second lowest number of stoppages, and around 2/3 of days lost were in the education sector (Office for National Statistics, 2019). This has shifted considerably in the post-pandemic recovery period. In the period June – December 2022 there were 2.472 million days lost to striking, and the most prominent sectors (79%) were transport, storage, information and communication (Office for National Statistics, 2023) The ONS attributes this activity to a shrinking real wage rather than the effects of Covid-19 (ibid). While this recent escalation of strike activity represents evidence of discontent, the muted levels of activity in the decades prior does not necessarily mean that discontent was absent, but also that the environment for industrial action was hostile. In this respect, some care must be given in using strike activity as a barometer of workplace satisfaction.

Notwithstanding this recent uptick in strike activity, at least some of the trend of decline can be attributed to greater difficulties in striking without fear of legal reprisal, though the wider political

context has also contributed to union decline (see e.g. (Ironside and Seifert, 2000)). Within this context unions have had to respond to decline, undertaking a multitude of different strategies, though key to this context, these strategies are generally less adversarial than industrial relations of old, and this clashes with understanding collective action mostly in terms of strikes. In the pandemic context, there are also further considerations around striking, where workers in evaluating the costs and benefits of striking might also have concerns over the consequences of striking in halting the flow of (perhaps essential) goods through the country at a time when there are other pressures on supply chains, and the importance of their continued successful functioning had been demonstrated.

### *2.6.1 Workplace Organising and Mobilisation*

Holgate *et al*. (2018) make an important distinction, which is relevant considering union decline in the UK – That there is a distinction between mobilising and organising workers: Mobilisation involves harnessing an existing base of power resources, whereas organising involves 'engaging and activating people' who may require persuasion, to self-identify with a shared objective (Holgate, Simms and Tapia, 2018). A distinction essentially between creating a power base and putting it to action. This distinction becomes important when considering collective responses to the apparent injustices associated with the Covid-19 pandemic – whether workers recognise the employers' actions as contrary to their own objectives, whether they recognise these as individual or collective issues, and whether power resources even exist to advance workers' interests.

### *2.6.2 Framing of Workplace Issues: Activists and Union Reps*

The Covid-19 pandemic and associated responses had the potential to create any number of workplace issues to which workers might conceivably feel a sense of injustice. However, there is also the potential for this to be considered external to the workplace, and therefore not attributable to managers. In this respect there are opportunities for unions to present the framing of workplace issues in relation to Covid-19 as a cause for collective mobilisation.

Darlington is somewhat critical of Kelly in highlighting the rich accounts of shop stewards' activities in case studies in the 1970s and 1980s prior to Kelly's work (Darlington, 2018). The contribution of

mobilisation theory is framed positively in terms of its contribution to an analysis of collective action, and in terms of the role of 'subjective agency of activist leadership' in translating grievance into action (Darlington, 2018:619). For Kelly, it is a small group who are responsible for the mobilisation of workers – activists, whose role is to persuade workers that what has previously been understood as normal or acceptable is unjust (Kelly, 1998). As such, the linguistic 'framing' of workplace issues is of major significance (ibid). As Darlington (2018) notes, reps/shop stewards and activists play a fundamental role in harnessing and directing worker discontent. Despite decades of weakening union strength, union reps have a fundamental and crucial part to play in mobilising workers and opposing management objectives (Darlington, 2010).

The framing of these issues then falls under the purview of union activists, whether full time officials, or activists within the workplace itself – including workplace representatives/shop stewards. In this sense, union reps are the locus of change in workplaces, holding a pivotal position where they can harness and focus discontent, being active agents in messaging, which is intended to collectivise workers and subsequently to direct this discontent in a meaningful way to manifest resistance. This may be called mobilisation or a particular interpretation of organising (which is motivated to make change rather than recruit for recruiting's sake), but in this context it is more important to consider how the effects of Covid-19 might affect the dynamics of the labour process, as well as workplace reps' ability to create or harness discontent in a context subject to constant change according to the prevailing government guidance.

## 2.7. Theoretical Framing and Alternatives

LPT's strength lies in its adaptability in linking to other theoretical explanations while providing an overview of the nature of work under capitalism and the various incentives and tendencies associated with the profit motive. As Ackroyd (2009) identifies, it is a broad church and allows interrogation into subjective aspects work around a core theory closer to its Marxian origins. Alternatives that frame worker action in terms of psychology are increasingly influential (Godard, 2014; Budd, 2020), though these are unsatisfactory in respect of ignoring the economic reality of work. Similarly, any theories that are more associated with HRM are underpinned by unitarist rhetoric and also ignore the economic realities of work.

Mobilisation theory meanwhile is valuable in considering the potential for renewal of trade unions (Martin, 1999 in Holgate, Simms and Tapia, 2018). Its value lies in its consideration of the transformation of the individual actor into collective action (ibid). Where LPT provides an important framing for 'work' and as such has limited alternatives, a consideration of worker and union responses can be grounded in alternative theories. One such theory that was considered for this research was social exchange theory (SET) – an interdisciplinary approach which frames work in terms of interactions which generate obligations (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005; Cropanzano *et al.,* 2017). Felstead and Henseke (2017) use SET as a means to understand the motives of workers who switch to remote or homeworking. While this research predates the Covid-19 pandemic, it illustrates the trade-offs workers might be willing to make in order to gain other concessions (such as home working). SET may have formed a useful framing to consider the interactions between workers, unions, managers, and other actors such as community. This approach would have had limitations in terms of practicality – reciprocity is hard to gauge, and this kind of theoretical framing would tend toward the need to investigate workers. Mobilisation theory approaches better fit the use of union reps as participants.

Another potential alternative framing was the use of the assorted conceptions of logistics workers operating within global value chains, commodity chains, or production networks (GVC, GCC, GPN respectively). This approach fits neatly with LPT such that there was a raft of output pertaining to incorporating economic geography into LP analysis, with logistics being an obvious field where this framing is suitable. This approach too is beset with issues of practicality. While these conceptions have explanatory power in respect of considering the effects for workers throughout the chains/networks, for there to be any analytical power, data needs to be forthcoming from nodes along the chain, and these nodes potentially exist at intercontinental distances. For that reason, this approach was too rejected.

## 2.8 Summary

This chapter has outlined how two core theoretical concepts can be used to understand the nature of work and the means with which reps can attempt to turn grievances into action. Firstly, the framing of work in terms of labour process theory helps in understanding the various incentives surrounding work under capitalism, while still providing adequate room for understanding variations in the application of management strategies across a range of contexts. Secondly, an understanding of workplace organisation and mobilisation theory (and surrounding arguments about what 'mobilisation' is) provides a lens through which to understand how workplace reps can utilise the Covid context to advance workers' interests. There is some debate to be had here over the terminology of workplace activism, particularly with respect to distinctions between organising and mobilising, but this broad concept provides a lens through which to consider the pandemic context. There were numerous sources of potential grievances and consequently the potential to turn that malcontent into advances for workers who continued to work through the public health measures. These debates provide a lens through which to interrogate how and why reps did or did not do this.

# Chapter Three: Literature 2 – Empirical Data

## 3.1 Introduction

This chapter follows the theoretical framing of labour process theory and mobilising/organising and presents empirical data surrounding the negotiation of order on the shop floor, with workplace reps as the primary locus of enquiry. Strong shopfloor organisation has diminished with the decline of the labour movement, and distribution/logistics workplaces have been particularly susceptible to attacks on working conditions, with evidence of a high surveillance, high intensity work environment with weak employment security and poor pay and conditions (Newsome, Thompson and Commander,2009; Newsome, Thompson and Commander, 2013; Moore *et al.,* 2018; Alimahomed-Wilson and Reese, 2021; Reese and Struna,2018). In this context, rigid control over the working day makes it hard to effectively harness and direct worker malcontent, though there is evidence of some potential to do so, even if this mostly comes from non-UK sources (Reese and Struna,2018; De Lara, Reese and Struna, 2016b).

This context justifies exploration, though there is also merit in exploring other contexts where workers have managed to sustain or establish strong workplace controls, whether this is through informal day-to-day negotiations, or more formalised means such as organising strikes. This potential for collective action is mitigated by numerous factors which hamper reps' abilities to effectively build or direct power. This exploration of context is particularly important when considering both the sector – with apparently weak organisation – but also the pandemic context where there was both the potential for new expressions of discontent, and the modification of 'normal' rules as workplaces adapted with the changing terrain as dictated by government.

This chapter explores wider evidence surrounding workplace dynamics in lieu of bountiful evidence from the UK distribution context, though doing so also presents evidence of a gap. Critical workplace research has not enjoyed the same access to workplaces compared to the heyday of industrial

relations, and where logistics work appeared to receive a somewhat 'fashionable' status in publications in the early 2010s, it lacked the penetration of call centre research some 10-15 years previously where there was comparatively more attention paid to workplace dynamics. This relative paucity of insight into UK distribution workplaces is likely evidence of a hostile environment for critical scholarship which has gone hand in hand with the rise of HRM and the decline of strong workplace organisation. As such, this provides a lens through which to consider the relative absence of evidence from the UK, and (later in the thesis) to evaluate the methodological implications of a difficult research environment.

## 3.2 UK Logistics

This thesis originates from a feeling of dissatisfaction with the academic literature in this sector. While there is limited output, this likely stems from difficulties obtaining access in the face of hostility in a controversial context. The researcher benefits from having worked in this sector and so has insight into not only the operation of work, but resistance to it. Appendix 1 outlines many of the researcher's experiences and observations, particularly in respect of worker recalcitrance. While these sites were typically characterised by precarious contract status and an intense level of surveillance, the researcher found there to be considerable variation across the sector. Further, there were many examples of deviant behaviour, and compliance was by no means assured. While the process of work was mostly consistent, there were variations in how it was executed. This included some roles where the worker was mostly stationary, and others where they were mobile – crossing aisles in DCs either on foot or using powered machinery. Similarly, the demographics of the workforce varied considerably, with some plants where the work was more physical being dominated by men, and others deploying large quantities of women. The migrant workforce also varied significantly. Much of this context is lacking from academic literature (for reasons of access and the consequences of revealing it), though it is important to be incorporated into this discussion

to frame the limitations of existing knowledge about work in the sector. While the following discussion outlines trends in the organisation of work and attendant effects for workers, it is important to not assume homogeneity in these workplaces.

### *3.2.1 The Sector*

Logistics is an essential function which coordinates the movement of goods over potentially multi-continental distances. Supply chains begin with production, which in many industries occurs in lower wage economies many miles from the consumer. These goods are then transported using shipping containers (Levinson, 2016) and tankers over multiple modes of transport until they reach distribution centres in which these consignments of goods are rearranged into new consignments of goods, and delivered by road to retailers, or customer's homes.

There has been a 'logistics revolution' (Bonacich and Wilson, 2008) which has contributed to changing patterns of production and consumption, as well as work in logistics jobs, which is ultimately the focus of this piece. Several factors help to explain these developments with retailer power, technology, and shifts in patterns of production and consumption facilitating and necessitating the movement of goods over vast distances. This logistics revolution has entailed a greater integration of supply chains with nodes co-ordinated, facilitated by tracking of consignments using information technology. This increased integration has been driven by growing retailer power with retailers able to dictate product lines as well as placing pressure on those that produce and supply their goods. This is often termed 'the Wal-Mart Effect', with Wal-Mart often cited for excellence and innovation in its logistics processes, while being able to exert considerable power over its suppliers (Bonacich and Wilson, 2008; Lichtenstein, 2006). This in turn has implications for workers at various nodes along supply chains where work is organised to meet the demands of the retailer (Wright and Lund, 2003; Wright and Lund, 2006; Newsome, 2010; Newsome, Thompson and Commander, 2013). Attempts to reduce costs along supply chains translate to attempts to intensify labour with the demands of the customer being a driving force in this intensification, including retailers who are customers for logistics services (Newsome, 2010).

Alongside the rise of retailer power comes changes to the means of production. Temporarily ignoring the off-shoring of manufacturing from developed economies, there has also been a shift in the way that goods are produced - from the previous mode of the 'push' of the producer, where the producer would produce goods that potentially went unconsumed - to the 'pull' of the market, where customer demand dictates production levels (Bonacich and Wilson, 2008). Integral to this process is the ability to monitor customer habits, and this is clearly made easier as a result of Point of Sale (POS) data, which makes demand relatively predictable, and accordingly, production can be planned to meet demand precisely. This too, inevitably has implications for labour along supply chains, whose work becomes more flexible in order to meet the rise and fall of consumer demand.

### *3.2.2 Supply Chains and Choke Points*

It is clear from workplaces that exhibit similar systems of control, or that carry out similar functions to distribution centres that there is the potential for resistant behaviour from workers. Likewise, there is a legacy of resistant behaviours in environments that preceded the contemporary supply chain - for example, docks where various forms of resistance including pilferage and militant organising were prevalent. Equally, it has been demonstrated that labour in supply chains can harness power to take advantage of weaknesses peculiar to supply chains (Alimahomed-Wilson and Ness, 2018).

In the same way that there are factors peculiar to supply chains which put pressure on workers to work harder (technological integration, surveillance, retailer power), there are factors which also make workers in supply chains capable of exerted significant power in their own right. Most significantly, this is in terms of occupying 'choke points' in the supply chain (Alimahomed-Wilson and Ness, 2018; Sowers, Ciccantell and Smith,2018) which leave supply chains that operate on tight lead times susceptible to disruptions, one of these disruptions being the actions of workers. There is some evidence of organised labour having a degree of success in organising disruption, though not necessarily reflected in their pay and conditions. Amazon workers (Amazon workers and supporters, 2018) reported a coordinated attempt to disrupt the flow of goods around a Poznan Distribution

Centre (DC) in response to additional demands made by managers where capacity had been moved from a German DC where industrial action was occurring. This informal action came at a cost however, with workers involved in it subject to dismissals and changes to their jobs. Amazon has remained mostly impervious to attempts by American workers to unionise, but workers have still been able to exert leverage through striking at critical points, such as Prime Day (Stewart, 2019), and demanding concessions to productivity targets, employment security and health and safety – issues which are somewhat universal when considering worker demands. It is not clear how successful collective action has been in DCs, but organised labour has significant disruptive potential, and in certain contexts has been able to put that to use.

There are challenges to organising workers in DCs, even where concessions have been gained. Reese and Struna (2018) demonstrate the difficulties in organising DC workers who are employed by a third party, such as an employment agency. Any recognition needs to be with the employer, and this is complicated when there are multiple third-party employers, who do not dictate the terms of the labour process, but merely provide labour to the DC. There is potential cause for optimism here too – some concessions were gained, but through a process of applying pressure on the retailer through a public relations campaign which resulted in gains for temporary workers in Walmart DCs despite the action being focused elsewhere. Attempts to apply this kind of leverage can be seen in the UK context too, with unions attempting to use PR tactics to highlight workplace issues (e.g. the GMB Union attempting to use social media to criticise Amazon (GMB Union, 2018). The use of social media and communications technology generally potentially provides opportunities for unions to both organise workers, as well as apply pressure on employers. Social media provides a resource to mobilise workers (Upchurch and Grassman, 2016) and is potentially a factor in workers' success in opposing managers. As workers are able to connect without physical contact, the use of social media and electronic communications as an organising/mobilising tool warrants further investigation (see, for example, the organising of the BA Mixed Fleet strike (Taylor, Moore and Byford, 2019)).

### *3.2.3 Union/Labour Successes in Supply Chains*

While comparisons with other contexts must be considered carefully with respect to their respective contexts, there are parallels in the USA and UK cases when considering the mobilisation and organisation of workers. American organised labour has faced decline as a result of neoliberal policies, global restructuring, and labour concurrently suffers the effects of JIT practices which have contributed to a tendency for increased contingency, greater flexibility, and lower pay (De Lara, Reese and Struna, 2016a:310). UK workers in supply chains have also felt these effects, being forced to work more intensely with less security (Newsome, Thompson and Commander, 2013; Newsome, Thompson and Commander,2009).

In this respect, some exploration of other national cases is justified – even if some care must be taken in doing so – especially because of the relative absence of similar output in UK contexts. While legal systems, legislation, and other assorted relevant factors (e.g. a more/less heterogenous migrant worker population) will differ between nations, the USA case provides some evidence of organised labour's resistant potential in this sector in a developed country which is reliant on logistics workers, and which is hostile to the activities of organised labour. Organising workers in the USA poses similar challenges to the UK – a neoliberal context, and one where workers are often immigrants or employed precariously (De Lara, Reese and Struna, 2016a; Reese and Struna,2018).

In logistics there have also been success stories, seemingly against the odds. Despite Amazon's reputation for hostility to labour unions, workers have gained concessions including health care, pay during various stoppages, health and safety concessions (including some related to Covid-19), and behavioural changes from managers (DCH1 Amazonians United, 2020:269-70). These successes come in the face of hostility from the employer, and through "talking with our co-workers; building relationships, community, and unity; coming together on issues using petitions; taking action; marching on our bosses, and going on strike" (ibid:270). In common with many other cases

presented here, the organisers point to framing issues in a way that seems reasonable to co-workers.

## 3.3 Union Decline and Responses

The trade union movement adopted several strategies in response to decline. There has been a tendency for unions to merge in response to declining membership, with smaller more specialised unions becoming amalgamated by larger more 'general' unions (Undy, 1999). With general unions tending to a more open model than smaller 'craft' counterparts (Turner, 1962), union strategy varies, and issues possibly arise with strategy as workers with diverse skills and professions must be accommodated.

With union power hamstrung and collective bargaining coverage weakened, unions adopted strategies to remain relevant – mostly around servicing, learning, partnership agreements and workplace organising. Of these strategies, the use of partnership or organising models represent two ends of a spectrum in dictating worker control over their workplace activities, with partnership representing a more 'business unionism' approach and organising seeking to build workplace power resources in opposition to the employer. Learning and representation approaches by contrast focus more on individual servicing of members, though not necessarily in ways incompatible with growing membership or the reach of the union.

### *3.3.1 Union Orientation – Partner With, or Organise Against?*

For Terry (2003), partnership represents trade unionism on management's terms, or for Kelly a means of managerial co-optation, 'demobilising any resistance that may occur' (Kelly, 1999 in (Terry, 2003)). In seeking to rationalise why unions may adopt this model, Terry argues that unions are gambling that greater embeddedness in the organisation offsets the loss of ability to challenge policy using more adversarial means. Similarly, in doing so, partnership provides opportunities to restate the legitimacy of trade unions in the workplace, and that some membership gains have been evident in some workplaces, though not without some sacrifice inherent in partnership agreements.

Kelly (2004) is more pessimistic over the value of partnership, pointing to data that suggests partnership does not protect jobs in declining firms but partnership with growing firms sees greater job creation – The same study finds no evidence that partnership points to improved wages or union density, and others assert concerns over the robustness of partnership agreements to survive the pressures of liberal market economies, being inherently unstable (Martinez Lucio and Stuart, 2005). Partnership reflects a position of weakness (Terry, 2003:468) – a bid to stay relevant in an otherwise hostile environment.

Organising as a contrasting approach does not necessarily come without critique either. Heery and Simms argue that gains from organising are at best 'modest' in spite of increased investment (Heery and Simms, 2008:24). There are multiple causes for this, both internal and external to unions. The 'hostile environment' for trade union activity contributes to some extent – resistance from employers, employment law, competition from other unions and apathy from potential members – but also internal factors, particularly focusing on opposition from personnel within the union (ibid). An adversarial approach to organising appears to reinforce the same behaviours from the employer, and employer hostility or support for organising/recognition seems to have a strong influence over its likelihood of success (Heery and Simms, 2010). This comparatively adversarial form of industrial relations does not appear to be a panacea for organised labour when contrasted with partnership, and a preference for either approach is perhaps more easily attributed to an ideological position over the purpose of unions and the nature of the capital-labour relationship.

For unions in the current climate, the nature of their relationship with the employer and the orientation towards a conflictual or cooperative mode of unionism has implications for the negotiation of order on the shopfloor, as well as the union's activities and relationship with decision making beyond the firm – including creating renewed purpose for unions in public health decisions and responses. In supply chains this is especially true with organised labour potentially able to exploit and leverage its strategic placement, or to support firms in achieving business aims.

### *3.3.2 Collective Bargaining – Content and Coverage*

While other countries felt the influence of austerity over collective agreements, the UK suffered relatively few changes, having already seen a shift towards single employer agreements, and a reduction in coverage of collective bargaining (López-Andreu, 2019). The risk of unemployment in the post-2008 crisis period was greater for the young, the precarious, and those in elementary or plant/machine operating positions (ibid). More significant in shaping the nature of collective agreements was the effects of policy and legislation following 1979, with a shift in content of collective agreement that moved towards greater flexibility and exercise of managerial prerogative by 1990 (Dunn and Wright, 1994). Subsequent governments were similarly ambivalent or hostile to a reinvigorated labour movement following a collective bargaining agenda, with New Labour conceiving of a model of partnership which is individualistic, procedural, and unitary in outlook (Novitz, 2002), and the coalition government seeking to weaken employees' rights relative to the employer more generally (Scott and Williams, 2014).

The contraction in coverage and scope of bargaining agreements is illustrated in data from the 2011 Workplace Industrial/Employment Relations survey (WIRS/WERS) and the 2017 Labour Force Survey (LFS) (Waddington, 2019). While public sector jobs remain moderately covered by collective bargaining (58% in 2017 (Waddington, 2019:611)), private sector coverage sits at 15% (ibid). While the level of bargaining in the public sector has retained a degree of multi-employer or national bargaining, this is much less prevalent in the private sector.

The scope of bargaining also has major significance in respect to this study. While the terms over which bargaining occurs have been narrowed ("hollowed out" (Waddington, 2019:614)), there are implications over the way unions navigate the changed terrain in terms of their interactions with the employer. The terms over which bargaining occurs have declined generally, but Waddington paints a particularly bleak picture of the private sector where fundamental terms over work are neglected in negotiations:

> *"To put this another way, in 2011 in the private sector where unions were recognised and trade unionists were present at the workplace, no negotiations took place at 44% of workplaces over pay, at 63% of workplaces over hours and at 59% of workplaces over holidays."* (Waddington, 2019:614)

The nature of change in the content of these agreements is also significant. Where negotiations occur, unions are most often forced into a trade-off. While collective agreements might have included trade-offs over productivity and pay when unions negotiated from a position of power, in their current position of relative weakness the trade-off is more likely to be over a commitment to continued levels of employment (Waddington, 2019; Wanrooy, 2013). At the time of writing, there are significant pressures on workers' pay and conditions, but also on their continued employment stemming from public health responses and recession surrounding Covid-19. Further, Brexit poses risks to employment security with the risk of capital flight and the cost of living crisis that immediately followed the Covid-19 pandemic has placed further pressures on working people's incomes.

The effects of Brexit may be varied and in terms of collective labour's power, and unshackling the UK from obligations to Europe may have unintended consequences. The current government, who already demonstrated hostility to trade unions via the Trade Union Act (2016) (Ford and Novitz, 2016) is not likely to become less hostile in the event of a severance with Europe, whose attempts to implement social policy have had a somewhat moderating influence over labour law. Instead, Novitz argues, a 'hard' Brexit is likely to place further pressures on workers' conditions as the UK seeks to negotiate trade deals with other partners (Novitz, 2017).

The enforcement of labour standards in distribution work is perhaps further atomised with a framing of governance occurring at a horizontal or nation state level rather than vertically 'up' supply chains (Thomas and Turnbull, 2018), though that is not to say that individual nodes in supply chains may not be able to negotiate better standards in a specific plant, though possibly at the expense of

others along the chain. Similarly, the notion of exploiting choke points gives workers at certain points opportunities for leverage, and not all working conditions are determined by International Labour Organisation (ILO) standards or other formal means.

These conversations around the 'new unionism' in 21st Century Britain reflect a position of pessimism regarding the role of workplace representatives in shaping shopfloor relations – that reps are limited to individualised means of protecting workers' interests, rather than advancing collective interests, and engaging in a way that creates meaningful resistance to the wants of managers. A useful counter to this position comes from a recent PhD thesis (Joyce, 2016) which examined the role of stewards in two workplace settings where reps/stewards were actively engaged in bargaining at workplace level. As Joyce puts it, despite changes to the terrain on which unions and reps operate, and despite the dominant narrative of reps as individual caseworkers, 'shop steward bargaining is not dead' (Joyce, 2016:12).

### *3.3.3 Organising the Hard to Reach*

#### Young People

While young people have been disproportionately affected by austerity, they are a group which tends to be underrepresented in unions (Hodder, 2014) This can be explained to some degree through the employment choices that young people make – in part time, flexible or temporary positions which are prone to be unorganised workplaces or sectors (Tailby and Pollert, 2011). There are also issues with perception with unions felt to be out of touch with young people - full of "middle aged white blokes" and having and image problem in terms of negative portrayals in media (Hodder, 2014). The labour movement has opportunities to attempt to reengage these workers however, the Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS) implementing programmes to engage young workers/members (ibid), and with the potential for social media to engage hard to reach workers more generally. Neglect of the internet has been cited as a specific cause of stagnating membership growth among young people (Bryson, Gomez and Willman, 2010), though also key is the development of a network of youth activists (Hodder, 2015).

## Migrant Workers

As a group, migrant workers have been identified as having barriers to effectively organise workers. Migrant workers in developed economies have been associated with sectors such as hospitality, care and domestic work, which are typically associated with poor working conditions (Ruhs and Anderson, 2012). There is research which suggests migrants are considered to be 'good' workers by UK employers (MacKenzie and Forde, 2009; Thompson, Newsome and Commander, 2013) with perceptions of a better work ethic than UK nationals, though also having a 'built-in obsolescence' as they became more accustomed to the host nation – recognising their employment rights and becoming more emboldened to reject discretionary activities such as optional overtime. In both cases, there is a link to the precarious nature of migrant workers, with Mackenzie and Forde pointing to the employer providing housing for workers, and Thompson *et al*. highlighting that much of the rhetoric around 'good workers' is more reflective of migrant workers' precarious status. This status perhaps goes some way to explain reticence to join unions.

There is a tension evident in union approaches around aspects of identity such as race or migration where these aspects of identity might be side-lined in favour of a purely economistic approach (Holgate, 2005). Some research points to unions' approaches to migrant workers being counter to successfully recruiting them – an approach which identifies them primarily as 'workers' neglects to consider other issues which migrants are affected by, and a more intersectional consideration rather than a narrow focus on class alone (Alberti, Holgate and Tapia, 2013). In this instance, whether the union takes a 'universalistic' or 'particularistic' approach to organising migrant workers (ibid). While there is the suggestion that unions have tended towards a universal rather than particularistic approach, Alberti *et al*. identify attempts by three of the largest unions in the UK to innovate around other issues that migrants face – including teaching political lobbying over immigration policy, ESOL classes, and other training and advice (e.g. on employment issues). These initiatives were not entirely successful however, and a focus on specific aspects of migrant workers' issues appears to be a precondition for success in organising them (Alberti, Holgate and Tapia, 2013).

Union learning has been identified as a possible means of organising workers generally, though also having specific value in organising migrants. While there has been some scepticism over the potential for learning programmes to foster union renewal (McIlroy, 2008), there is evidence that providing training such as ESOL has provided an indirect link to growing membership though fostering positive associations with the union (Heyes, 2009; Warhurst, Findlay and Thompson, 2007). Munro and Rainbird meanwhile find that learning has value in generating activity around the union providing it is supported by local activists (Munro and Rainbird, 2000) and that it has value in empowering otherwise disenfranchised and poorly represented workers (Munro and Rainbird, 2004). Learning strategies also require an established union presence in a workplace for there to be an impact (Martínez Lucio and Perrett, 2009:335) Notwithstanding critique or pessimism regarding the links between learning and growing membership and activity, research around learning suggests it has some value in accessing hard to reach groups such as migrants providing it is framed appropriately for their needs. The future of learning as a union strategy has recently come under threat with the withdrawal of state funding for the union learning fund (ULF) (Adams, 2021), and as such unions may perceive that there is greater value for money elsewhere in seeking to grow membership or maintain relevance.

### Women

Women are another group who are hard to organise. This is evident both in terms of recruitment, but also in respect of mobilising, where women are underrepresented theoretically as well as practically. Theoretically, there have been criticisms of IR scholarship, such that it is perceived to not be accommodating of feminist perspectives (Ledwith, 2012). Conceptually, this is also evident in terms of a tendency for mobilisation theory to be located in economistic terms and to neglect gender (see e.g. (Gall and Holgate, 2018) for critique). There has also been an argument that class identity has been usurped by other facets such as gender, but also race, sexuality and other strands of identity (Moore, 2011) and as such these issues might be seen as separate to the workplace.

Kirton and Healy (2013) identify that unions are often hostile to women. There have also been instances of women (along with migrants and young people) feeling that unions were not 'their' institutions (Heery and Simms, 2010:35). This is potentially reinforced by an absence of female leadership in unions – a perception that union leadership is 'male, pale and stale' and that women (especially BME women) have been excluded (Kirton and Healy, 2012).

Healy and Bergfield (2016) frame mobilisation in terms of gender, and frame union activities as lacking empathy with issues peculiar to women. This includes a sense that union leadership and mobilising activities are also masculinised and that women may respond to more feminised approaches. This includes a feeling that some of the organising principles marginalise or ignore women, but Kirton and Healy elsewhere also argue that female union leaders exhibit a more feminised leadership style (Kirton and Healy, 2012), and this may contribute to improved participation.

Practically, there are issues in attempts to mobilise women as a result of structural factors such as a greater tendency to be part time or otherwise in peripheral positions in the workforce. Where there are sectors in which women are prominent, such as education, union membership may well reflect the gender makeup of the workforce. In distribution jobs where women are more likely to be precarious, they are likely to be more difficult to mobilise. Similarly, workers in distribution workplaces may cross many of the intersections of demographics which are difficult to organise – young, female, and migrant (see e.g. Tapia and Alberti (2019) for a discussion of intersectionality).

The fundamental purpose of trade unions has altered significantly in response to decline and hostility from the state however, creating strategies accordingly including that of partnership with employers (Daniels and McIlroy, 2009), organising workers (ibid), and providing members with skills and training (McIlroy and Croucher,2009). These strategies represent an altogether less adversarial attitude towards industrial relations, and where partnership might be attempted one where the union's role is less preoccupied with a collective bargaining agenda.

The picture for organised labour is generally one of decline, and a significant source of this decline is an increase in 'never members' – those who have never joined a union (Bryson and Gomez, 2005). A further issue, as Moore identifies, is that class as a means of understanding or expressing identity has been somewhat usurped by other means of identity, such as gender, race or sexuality, and that this potentially runs contrary to a collectivist identity that would better manifest in opposition towards the employer, and likely goes some way to explain decline (Moore, 2011).

That is not to say that these 'new' forms of identity must replace or are irreconcilable with recognition of divergent interests to the employer. Moore identifies for example the role of equality reps providing a gateway for workers to become activists in other ways in the workplace (Moore, 2011:104). Nationality too provides a source of identity which can be harnessed into collectivism. Polish workers, for example, have been mobilised around collective issues felt by migrant community (particularly around work), and approached a union to help represent their interests (Fitzgerald and Hardy, 2010:140). The mobilisation of migrant workers is potentially difficult for multiple reasons, though they are well represented in supply chain jobs and have been shown to be vulnerable to acquiescence to all management requests when new to positions (Thompson, Newsome and Commander, 2013).

Workers' affiliation or identification with trade unionism is by no means automatically predicated on class consciousness however (Moore, 2011; Lockwood, 1958), though class consciousness plays some part in workers recognising their interests do not align with their employer. A certain amount of union affiliation or membership will be driven by other interests – pragmatism perhaps – that a well organised workplace has been demonstrated to deliver tangible results for workers.

### *3.3.4 Strategies and Successes for the Unorganisable*

Martinez Lucio *et al*. (2021) point to pessimism in understanding and predicting organised labour's resistant potential in the face of technological and organisational change. While video conferencing and remote working predated the pandemic, the pandemic context accelerated their usage as a

means of continuing business operations alongside public health responses. With these changes comes a new terrain for labour to navigate with respect to confronting managers – though this impact, as with other changes sits against a backdrop of regulatory and governmental hostility (ibid:8). The question remains, and indeed the focal point of this thesis, as to whether and how the unique context of the pandemic provided opportunities to mobilise workers.

In spite of the difficulty of mobilising and organising certain groups of workers, there are studies of successful attempts to do so. There is a growing body of work around logistics work (see chapters in (Alimahomed-Wilson and Ness, 2018; Alimahomed-Wilson and Reese, 2020b)) and regarding precarious/migrant workers more generally (Jiang and Korczynski, 2016; Heyes, 2009; Mustchin, 2012; MacKenzie and Forde, 2009; Alberti, Holgate and Tapia, 2013; Holgate, 2005).

The employment conditions of workers is not the sole barrier to successful mobilisation of migrant workers (Jiang and Korczynski, 2016). Jiang and Korczynski point to three barriers in organising 'unorganisable' workers – their employment conditions; the framing of their employment, which conceals exploitation; and issues around sustainability of collective action. In considering the 'framing' particularly, there is focus on how the setting influences workers' interactions – whether there is the setting for issues to be discussed, and whether workers can begin to frame their subjective experiences of work as issues with which to be engaged with rather than tolerated. While migrant domestic workers are 'unorganisable' for some reasons pertaining to the immediate surroundings of their employment – they are atomised, and in this case frame their work in more maternal or familial sense than workers in other sectors might – this case has some potential applicability beyond this setting, particularly in seeking to frame issues to migrants around their commonalities where their work otherwise leaves them isolated – HGV drivers in the logistics context, for example.

Outside of precarious workers, London Underground drivers (Darlington, 2009) and postal workers (Gall, 2003) have both been successful in recent history in collectively resisting managerial diktat,

and these cases reveal high levels of industrial, but also political militancy. While Kelly's (1998) mobilisation theory points to the role of activists and leaders and their importance in framing workplace issues, for Darlington this analysis neglects to consider aspects of left-wing leadership, which has contributed to the success of mobilising strikes action in cases such as the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers (RMT) (Darlington, 2018).

## 3.4 Covid-19 and Work

The pandemic context has reaffirmed the importance of industrial/employment relations, and highlighted shifts to conventional patterns of working brought about by the public health response (Hodder and Martinez Lucio, 2021; Hodder, 2020; Dobbins *et al.,* 2023). While the Covid-19 pandemic and its effects are ongoing and as such research is being conducted as events happen, there is an emerging body of literature examining work from a critical perspective. Some existing output has focused on health and safety and health and safety reps (Moore *et al.,* 2021; Cai *et al.,* 2022; Taylor, 2020b), work intensification and violent customer behaviour (Cai *et al.,* 2021), as well as the effects stemming from new patterns of work, such as surveillance of homeworking (Aloisi and De Stefano, 2021).

The effects of the pandemic are likely to be felt significantly by women, where they are more likely to hold frontline positions (Winton and Howcroft, 2020; Winton, 2022). Similarly, precarious workers are likely to be prominent. Wolf (2022) in examining app-based taxi drivers identifies the effects on immigrant workers, who find themselves thrust into 'essential' status but without the social safety net that comes with residential status and secure employment. While examining the academic setting, Hadjisolomou *et al*. (2022) identify the pressures that workers on insecure contracts face in respect of navigating sickness – being 'too scared to go sick' and so continuing to work even when ill. This paper focuses on the virtual or remote worker, and it is perhaps unsurprising that there has been a significant rise in the number of homeworkers, though homeworkers have also reported increased intensity, volume and pressure of work (Taylor, Scholarios and Howcroft, 2021). The

pandemic provided the terrain for a rapid adoption of home or hybrid working, though its sustained implementation has provided unintended benefits and challenges (Wheatley *et al.,* 2024). There is also emerging research into the physical and mental stresses brought about by working through the pandemic. Hadjisolomou and Simone (2021) identify the moral bind in which managers may find themselves while navigating both their and their family's health, while ensuring the continued operation of an enterprise.

In respect of the interests of this research, the output is narrower by virtue of its contemporaneous nature and focus on a particular sector and responses of trade union reps. Certain sectors such as nurses must evaluate the ethics of their protests in this context (Mavis Mulaudzi *et al.,* 2021) though ethical concerns are not a matter of public health for distribution workers. At the time of writing, academic output in the distribution context focuses on Amazon's failings as an employer with regard to worker safety (Rajendra, 2020), but directly comparable literature is limited.

Where Moore has sought to explore 'social identity as a subjective dimension of union activism' (Moore, 2011:6), this research is rather concerned with exploring the effect of the Covid-19 pandemic in shifting workers' sense of identity towards a greater appreciation of collectivism (or indeed other sources which conflict with or support managerial objectives). This is particularly in view of supply chain workers' function in carrying out 'essential' work, though also recognising a complex picture where conceptions of identity also intersect with workers' orientations to work.

Framing worker responses in terms of mobilisation theory (Kelly, 1998) - which posits that worker organisation is prompted by a perceived injustice from the employer's actions – workers can be spurred to collective action potentially in spite of an absent legacy of collectivism in a workplace. In the essential worker and pandemic context, there is the potential for workers to be spurred into action as a result of many flashpoints and concerns, with warehouse workers describing their workplace as a 'cradle of disease' (Hodder, 2020). The pandemic setting potentially provides a

moderating influence on worker action however with concerns over income security and or commitment to the goals of the organisation, even if only temporarily or specific to particular work settings (e.g. the pharmaceutical supply chain).

Certain businesses can face backlash for their employment practices, and for these to be made public, someone at some point likely must report transgressions to the media, or via social media posts to become newsworthy. In the pandemic context, certain employers faced public pressure as a result of these reports. Particularly noteworthy is Wetherspoons (Kleinman, 2020), and Amazon (Thomas, 2020), though neither of which have seen significant improvements to pay or conditions at the time of writing – though Amazon later faced building pressure from labour activists and the first strike at its plants in the UK (Stewart, 2023). Should the court of public opinion judge the transgression to be great enough and profits are challenged, this may affect the business sufficiently to alter its management policies and practices. The court of public opinion also has potential in the collective regulation of employment (Hillier (1928) in Lyddon *et al*. (2015:148)), forcing employers to change their practices.

Given the timing of this thesis overlaps with the cost-of-living crisis which followed Covid-19, some consideration must also be given to the growth of industrial action which has followed the pandemic. In the logistics context an Amazon plant in Coventry has successfully organised and balloted to strike (Stewart, 2023), while many other sectors have seen increased industrial action - rail and bus networks, postal workers, civil servants, teaching staff and NHS staff, and with 79% of strike days relating to workers in transport, storage, information and communication (Office for National Statistics, 2023)

## 3.5 Summary

This chapter has provided empirical evidence of workplace organisation, mobilisation and organising from a range of contexts in order to account for the absence of this in the UK logistics setting. Some attention has been given to the existing evidence from UK (and wider) logistics settings, but some critical attention has also been provided which points to a lack of knowledge from this context. The absence of research in this context can possibly be attributed to difficulties accessing the data – both in terms of the controversies surrounding the sector, but also in respect of difficulties conducting research with sympathy to workers' grievances where HR departments stand as gatekeepers.

The controversy surrounding working conditions in distribution work in the UK explains its importance as a topic of enquiry, but also the relative absence of detailed workplace studies. The fact that critical accounts have mostly come from journalistic sources also point to the issues of the ethically bound academic researcher navigating access through 'official' means, while still attempting to cast a critical eye over proceedings. While the assorted outputs from the supermarket supply chain are valuable (Newsome, Thompson and Commander, 2013; Thompson, Newsome and Commander, 2013), the means of acquiring data (management endorsed focus groups) (Newsome, Thompson and Commander,2009; Newsome, Thompson and Commander, 2013)are not likely to be effective in collecting dissenting opinions from workers. In this respect, there are two potential solutions – one is to report on experiences as an insider - as has happened with recent examples in call centres (Woodcock, 2016) and precariously employed delivery riding (Cant, 2019). This option comes with practical and ethical implications, but importantly also risks the researcher's health in a pandemic context. An alternative is to locate the research in a context which is friendly to the controversial issues being explored, which in this context is that of the unions themselves. This approach allows the interrogation of workplace phenomena close to the shopfloor – by seeking to primarily engage with union reps – and also consider the wider implications of trade unionism in this context. In this respect, the straddling of a labour process and IR approach is evident where

meaningful data along a labour process theme (such as the wide-ranging implications of managerial control under public health conditions) can be analysed, while also engaging in discussion of the functions of contemporary workplace rep under extraordinary circumstances. This workplace focus moves the debate from the abstract or the general when talking about collective organisation and helps to provide focus on the dynamics of collective action as close to the workplace as is physically possible under the circumstances. Importantly, this chapter has explored the shortage of data in the UK distribution context and as such demonstrated how this data would be valuable in this sector, and especially in respect of the extraordinary context of the Covid-19 pandemic.

# Chapter Four: Methodology

## 4.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a methodological overview by examining research philosophy, research reliability, validity, and generalisability, and the role of the researcher in research. This is done by examining the philosophical debates in LPT, particularly in respect of LPT's need to consider subjectivity and arguing that a pragmatist position is justified in respect of carrying out workplace research from a LPT perspective. While many LPT scholars have shifted to a critical realist position, the pragmatist position will be argued to solve a problem in LPT, which is that relating to the issue of subjectivity. It will be argued that the pragmatist position - that knowledge is valid when it is demonstrated in application - is useful in navigating theoretical issues in LPT such as the question of subjectivity, and that pragmatism is particularly useful in considering outcomes for workers rather than theoretical abstractions about the nature of reality.

This chapter will also address the role of the researcher in carrying out research. This will include a discussion of axiology but also present the researcher as a partisan scholar and also consider how the partisan position and previous experience in the sector are invaluable in negotiating access and gaining trust of gatekeepers and participants. A partisan position acknowledges issues of bias but also argues that the researcher is better placed to gain access, build relationships, and obtain valuable insights which are concealed from many other researchers.

## 4.2 Research Philosophy

The following section will explore differing research philosophies and paradigms which differ in terms of their considerations of ontology – questions regarding the nature of reality; epistemology – what constitutes valid knowledge; and axiology – the role of the researcher's values in conducting research (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). This section will briefly outline the competing philosophies and paradigms, consider the concept of incommensurability to question whether the paradigms are indeed competing, and finally to make a case for pragmatism best fitting organisational research. A pragmatic approach will be argued to be particularly apposite when considering some of the theoretical and meta-theoretical conversations surrounding subjectivity in labour process debates, as well as an appropriate response to the researcher's experience in relation to the sector.

Research philosophies are constructed around assumptions surrounding ontology, epistemology and axiology. The outer layer of 'the research onion' (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019:130) is concerned with the primary viewpoints in this regard, and include positivism, critical realism, interpretivism, postmodernism, and pragmatism, which each represent different viewpoints on matters of the nature of reality, knowledge, and the researcher's position in relation to research. At a fundamental level, these paradigms are concerned with how 'objective' reality is and as such how knowledge is to be understood when examining it. A brief outline of each position follows.

Positivism essentially aligns with the belief that social science can be studied in the same way as a natural science, observing a social reality in order to make generalisations (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019:144). This facilitates the making of 'laws' in social science that are generalisable and predictive. While positivists believe social reality is objectively observable, critical realists differ in seeing reality as layered in terms of its ontology, but that it is understood through empirical observations, which are in themselves socially and historically situated (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019:147). Interpretivists meanwhile reject positivist assumptions of reducing the social

world to general laws in favour of recognising it as overly simplistic and seeking to present narratives and interpretations in favour of attempting to create a more totalising view of social phenomena (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019:149). Postmodernists take a subjective view further, seeking to understand power relationships and in recognising that 'truth' is determined by the prevailing narrative, seeking to examine the voices that are omitted (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019:150). Pragmatists meanwhile are less concerned with questions of objectivity or subjectivity realities, but more concerned with action associated with research. Knowledge is considered to be valid when it can be put to application, and research might be prompted by the need to address a particular issue (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019:151).

### *4.2.1 Competing Paradigms and Incommensurability*

For Burrell and Morgan (1979) research paradigms in organisations can be divided into objective and subjective dimensions which intersect with other dimensions – that of regulation or change. These dimensions divide into four quadrants with an objective-subjective dimension, and change-regulation dimension making for radical humanism and radical structuralism, and interpretivism and functionalism moving from the subjectivist to objectivist understandings accordingly. For Burrell and Morgan, these paradigms represent incommensurable and competing philosophies which are mutually incompatible. The concept of incommensurability has proved to be influential but contentious (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019), and for this researcher provides an unsatisfactory set of assumptions. Willmott (1993a) persuasively reflects on Burawoy (1979; 1985) who argues that there is an objective *and* subjective consideration of work: Objective in terms of the nature of the capitalist labour process, though subjective in the worker's participation in it. As such, the incommensurability of objective-subjective dimensions must be rejected as an unsatisfactory framing in understanding the labour process. Given the unsatisfactory assumptions around incommensurability, which by definition precludes multi-paradigm approaches, a case will now be made for a pragmatic approach to research.

### *4.2.2 The Case for Pragmatism*

Pragmatism as a research paradigm "strives to reconcile both objectivism and subjectivism, facts and values, accurate and rigorous knowledge and different contextualised experiences" (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019:151), and as such provides a useful foundation for reconciling some of the issues in LP analysis – particularly in light of debates surrounding the neglect of subjectivity. The degree of objectivity or subjectivity incorporated into pragmatist research might vary greatly from piece to piece, and a pragmatist would recognise that there are multiple ways to interpret the world, and no single point of view can offer the full picture (ibid). As such, a pragmatist rejects notions of incommensurability, accepts the possibility of multiple means of enquiry, and focuses on the appropriate means with which to generate data which effectively contributes towards advancing research, or offers practical solutions (Kelemen and Rumens, 2008).

### *4.2.3 Research Paradigms and Worker Subjectivity*

Following Braverman (1974), the ontological and epistemological framing of critical workplace research has faced sustained conversation and schisms in the subject, particularly with the growth of poststructuralist and postmodern perspectives (see Thompson and Smith (2009)), and in response to criticisms of Braverman's perceived failure to address worker subjectivity (Willmott, 1993a). There has in response been a need to consider worker subjectivity, though not without critique of a tendency for those coming from this perspective to assume a totalising view of managerial power (see e.g. (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999)). Others seek to reconcile the two camps, pointing out that there is often little that separates them (Jaros, 2010), while those more hostile to poststructuralist perspectives consider them to be a 'rediscovery' or misrepresentation of that already discovered by LP theorists (Edwards, 2010:30). More commonly, in seeking to wrestle with meta-theoretical aspects of LPT, there have been attempts to make linkages to critical realism (Thompson and Vincent,2010) in order to attempt to reconcile debates following the apparently overly deterministic account from Braverman.

In this respect, the researcher feels that these debates reinforce the justification for a pragmatic approach to workplace research. Where schisms in the subject have followed a need to navigate subjectivities of labour, a pragmatist approach manages this by acknowledging that a more objective or subjective approach may be called for in different instances. In this respect critical realists and pragmatists would find some commonality – recognising that there are some more objective aspects of the labour process, while also acknowledging subjectivity. Where the pragmatist position mostly differs is in terms of considering the validity of research in terms of its application.

Given the practical nature of a pragmatist paradigm, some consideration must be given to practical outputs of a piece of work of this type. Given the origins of LPT, with foundations in Marxian concepts of the labour process, and with output which is at the very least sympathetic to the conditions of workers (Ackroyd, 2009), a practical output would be one which proposes means for workers' interests to be advanced, or at the very least uncovers novel information about workers' attitudes, interests, and behaviours that might be used as a platform for stakeholders such as unions to gain a deeper understanding of matters pertinent to their operations.

### *4.2.4 Research Approach*

IR research has been characterised by the use of both inductive and deductive approaches, as well as a form of legal and economic analysis (Strauss and Whitfield,1998:10). A great deal of British IR research has tended towards inductive reasoning, including influential writers such as the Webbs, Cole, and the Oxford school (Strauss and Whitfield,1998:10-11). The influence of the British tradition and labour process writers has contributed to the influence of inductive, institutional case study approaches which seek to understand the variation associated with the employment relationship in different contexts (ibid:11). There was also a trend in IR away from inductive, qualitative and policy-orientated research towards deductive, quantitative and discipline-orientated research however (Whitfield and Strauss, 2000). In short, IR research is not pinned to one particular approach, and this is perhaps a result of multitude of different ways to approach what is a potentially far-reaching topics in terms of scope.

Having established a case for a pragmatic research philosophy, there is a case that pragmatism might tend to an abductive approach (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019:157) – effectively, moving between inductive and deductive approaches. A relevant example of resistance and compliance (Bristow, Robinson and Ratle, 2017) is framed in an abductive sense where participants were interviewed using a loose framework so themes could be identified inductively and later applied to an existing theoretical framework, thus modifying it (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019:156). There is the potential for this research to proceed in a somewhat abductive fashion. Like Bristow *et al*. (2017) there is a pre-existing theoretical structure in the form of a broad brush understanding of the employment relationship using LPT as a framework to conceptualise social relations at work. Like Bristow *et al*., there is a need to proceed loosely around an existing structure to allow workers to discuss their experiences and perceptions. While the capitalist employment relationship can be seen as somewhat rigid and objective in some of its characteristics, others are more contingent, and this is perhaps even more likely to be the case in the pandemic context where such an unprecedented

and far-reaching issue has the potential to undermine attempts to second guess shifts in social relations in workplaces. In this respect, an inductive approach is justified in seeking to build data from the ground up, though this may later be applied against existing theory, depending on the nature of the data revealed. While given the frameworks around labour process theory are already quite loose, it seems unlikely that fundamental shifts around the nature of waged labour are likely to be revealed. The rather unprecedented and far-reaching effects of the pandemic tend towards a justification of an inductive approach, however. While existing systems of control and resistant strategies are already quite well explored, this particular context is unique, and it would feel inappropriate to create a hypothesis that greater job insecurity points to less resistance (for example), when it is difficult to control variables to explore that, there is a great deal of variation in different contexts, and that it is conceivable in the current climate that the pandemic might point to greater militancy in some worker places if the conditions allow it. In this respect it makes more sense to collect data around the changes to workplace relations and attempt to build theory from it, particularly as the potential for great variation points to difficulty second guessing what might be uncovered in different contexts.

### *4.2.5 Reliability, Validity, Generalisability*

In conducting research there are tests to measure the quality of the research design, namely that of construct validity, internal and external validity, and reliability. These criteria, commonly used to evaluate all forms of social research, also apply to that of case studies (Yin, 2018). These concepts will be explored in the following section, though there will also be some consideration of whether these criteria necessarily fit well with qualitative or non-positivist research.

Construct validity refers to how effectively a construct measures that which it is intended to measure. Case study approaches are often criticised for failing to achieve this aim, with researchers instead accused of using subjective judgements which confirm the researcher's preconceptions (Yin, 2018) Internal validity refers to the ability to attribute findings to the matter under investigation, rather than to poor research design, or issues which otherwise weaken internal validity, such as

participants leaving the study, or otherwise being influenced in ways that affects data (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019:215) This is mainly an issue in case studies where there is an attempt to establish causal relationships and the researcher has failed to account for a variable, or inferred causation where it could not be directly observed (Yin, 2018). External validity is concerned with whether findings can be generalised to other contexts (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019:216) and reliability is a measure of whether the study were conducted again by another researcher that the same conclusions would be drawn – in effect a test to minimise errors and biases (Yin, 2018).

As Saunders *et al*. (2019:215) note, the criteria referred to so far (particularly internal validity) are more representative of positivist, quantitative research, and do not apply to exploratory or descriptive studies, but rather causal and explanatory research. Instead, parallel terms can be substituted when considering qualitative research, with reliability, internal validity and external validity being replaced with dependability, credibility and transferability respectively (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019:216-217). These criteria apply an interpretivist alternative to evaluate the quality of research in contrast to the previously outlined more positivist criteria.

In parallel to reliability, dependability includes recording and monitoring changes to the research focus in order that it be understood and evaluated by others (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019:217). Credibility (parallel to internal validity) focuses on ensuring that there is an appropriate representation of participants' socially constructed realities. This is achieved through a process of challenging the preconceptions of the researcher throughout the process, reflection, and checking data with participants (ibid). Transferability (parallel to external validity) provides the reader with the opportunity to assess how transferable research might be through providing a detailed coverage of research design, context, findings and interpretations (ibid).

With this research being fundamentally more qualitative in design, and even though a pragmatist position has been outlined, this research is concerned with exploring the subjectivities of labour and so a greater alignment with some of the more interpretivist positions is justified. There is also an

attempt to proceed in an exploratory rather than explanatory fashion, and a more positivist evaluation of the quality of research is less appropriate in that context (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019:215). While as a pragmatist there is a recognition that varying degrees of objectivity or subjectivity are appropriate from context to context, in this context there is a specific focus on exploring the subjective experiences of labour, but also given the unique context and potential for variation between different work sites, any attempts to establish causation is likely difficult or impractical. In this respect, there is also limited value in attempting to establish an 'objective' and potentially generalisable mapping of changes in workers' responses to a pandemic, as it is not necessarily clear where those findings might be generalised to. Instead, a more 'transferable' (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019:217) approach is justified, leaving the reader to evaluate how transferable findings might be into contexts they are interested in investigating (ibid).

## 4.3 Research and the Researcher

### *4.3.1 Bias and Reflexivity (The Researcher's Relationship to the Sector)*

With varying attitudes to the objective or subjective nature of knowledge around research, a question of bias in relation to research activities can be raised. With the assumption of knowledge being objective (such as a positivist may assert), researchers are merely observing, discovering or mapping the unknown, which is there for the researcher to uncover. In this respect, the assumption of objective knowledge means that research should be easily replicable, and that the gathering of data can be done separate from the design of research, and that data collected and conclusions drawn are an objective picture of any research conducted (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019:144). Other research philosophies give greater weight to understanding or incorporating the researcher's values and biases, perhaps using them to drive the research or to be reflected on (ibid, 144-145).

For a pragmatist values drive the research, the researcher being driven by the researcher's doubts and beliefs (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019:145) though also with the need to reflect on those values and beliefs. For this pragmatist, a certain amount of reflection is perhaps additionally necessary as a result of proximity to the sector. Biases in this respect can be mitigated against, or minimised through a consideration of the researcher's relationship to the sector, and how the research process is fashioned in order to minimise the effects of bias. Following the assumption that pragmatist research is prompted by researcher doubts and beliefs (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019:145), this research had origins in the researcher's own experiences – partly through conducting an MA dissertation on DC workers, though also through engagement with literature on the sector that did not tally so neatly with the researcher's own experiences of work. Newsome *et al*. (2013), for example, is a prominent journal – one of few examining worker's experiences in DCs in UK, and coinciding approximately with a period where the researcher too worked in DCs. The limited coverage of the sector in journals along with a wider range of personal experience in the sector suggested that there was more to be uncovered than the existing journals revealed.

Bias in this context can, to a certain degree at least, be argued away. The researcher's experience points to a reasonable degree of variation in the intensity of application of management control in the sector. While management practices observed by the researcher are mostly consistent (a form of technologically driven Taylorism), not all DCs or associated jobs necessarily work at the intensity hinted at in the journals. Indeed, living in an area where distribution provides a sizeable number of jobs, it is easy to pick up anecdotes where workers have a comparatively easy time of distribution work – perhaps due to working a night shift that it is difficult to recruit for, or where there are jobs that allow a certain amount of self-organisation and autonomy. The researcher is willing to concede that some of these laxer systems of control might be the anomaly, but there is at least the willingness to concede uncertainty and that there are benefits to approaching field work with an open mind.

Further, the researcher's experience in this sector is somewhat constrained to a different place and time than the contemporary case – being a worker as a student in a more prosperous time (2002-2005) and as a young unemployed man seeking work post the 2008 financial crisis. While this experience is likely useful in building rapport with gatekeepers and participants – essentially being able to speak their language and contextualise their experiences – though the researcher's experiences vary significantly in that they did not occur against the backdrop of a global pandemic, or following exit from a customs union. Any concession to uncertainty and open mindedness is surely deepened when considering that the effects of the pandemic on work are only known to the researcher in a specific and limited way – that is in attempting to carry out research from a laptop, and being able to work remotely – a luxury not afforded to workers in supply chains.

Following an inductive approach also goes some way to minimise the effects of bias. While there is a large amount of research in the LP tradition across a wide range of settings, and focusing on different themes, the unique nature of this particular context justifies a 'bottom up' approach – generating theory led by the data rather than seeking data to test theory (Strauss and

Whitfield,1998:10). The selection of methods associated with an inductive approach (mostly qualitative case studies with attempts to triangulate data where possible) tend towards allowing participants to determine what issues are important rather than the researcher. Using semi-structured interviews constructed around prominent themes in LP research (e.g. managerial control, effort bargaining, (in)formal adjustments to official rules and norms, among more) allows for a degree of consistency that is perhaps less likely in totally open interviews, though also allows participants to bring up aspects of those themes that they deem important rather than more directed questioning which is more likely to lean towards the bias of the researcher.

While researcher bias cannot (and should not) be argued away entirely, attempts can be made to minimise the effects of bias. This is not a positivist piece of work that would make claims that there is no bias associated with research of an objective reality that exists simply to be observed. Instead, there is some need for reflexivity for the pragmatist - some of which is evident in the preceding section (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019:145). In considering that pragmatists focus on the validity of knowledge particularly in terms of solving a problem (Elkjaer and Simpson,2011; Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019), some consideration to the 'problem' is pertinent to the issue of bias. In this respect, and given the sympathies to labour in IR research, the 'problem' here is in understanding the conditions in which workers are operating, and in doing so providing opportunities for their resistance to the employer. Rather than identifying the conditions and activities of workers to managers for them to monitor or eradicate, by contrast findings from a study of this type provides the means for labour unions to harness malcontent, or perhaps to understand why they have not been able to effectively do so. The researcher's experience in non-unionised distribution workplaces is possibly useful in some respects but also limits the number of preconceptions by virtue of limited experience of union activities in these workplaces. Still, in order to mitigate against potential issues of bias, the researcher sought to continuously reflect on the data provided by participants, to seek to ask open questions as much as possible, and to ensure that each

participant interaction was approached with an open mind and to let the participants talk around topics they deemed important.

### *4.3.2 Partisan Scholarship*

The wider world of qualitative research points to occasional difficulties securing research access, and innovative ways to circumvent barriers. In this respect there are particular benefits to thinking about the wider context of ethnography or action research particularly as a means of collecting data.

In the academic sphere, data has recently emerged from workplace contexts. Woodcock (2016) and Cant (2019) both undertook work in workplaces receiving scholarly and public interest in the forms of the call centre, and the platform work of food delivery respectively. These kinds of works reveal a trade-off and other potential dilemmas. Given the starting point for this research came from a point of dissatisfaction with existing research in the sector, a concession has to be made that working a job is a very effective way of ensuring that workplace data is available. This researcher takes a view that a purely autoethnographical approach is unsatisfactory – biased, navel-gazing, or insufficiently rigorous (Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2011:185) – though where some of these misgivings can be overcome, more detailed and insightful data may be uncovered than through more systematically designed, representative or objective approaches. This of course can mean the use of autoethnography as part of a wider data collection strategy.

IR research draws from multiple methodological traditions (Whitfield and Strauss, 2000), and is in many ways a multi-disciplinary field drawing on aspects of sociology, politics, economics, management, and law in various context-sensitive combinations. In this respect, there is room for multiple approaches in terms of the lens through which a topic is viewed, but also in the methodological orientation of the researcher. Similarly, there is a debate to be had over the relationship of the researcher to the research site – in this context the workplace.

This is an appropriate juncture to explore the researcher's relationship to the topic in all manner of respects, but particularly with respect to bias or partisanship, the ways this can influence research

design, and subsequently how that affects insight into a given workplace topic. There have been concessions to IR researchers' tendency to have sympathies to workers' plights (Darlington and Dobson, 2013; Thomas and Turnbull, 2021; Brook and Darlington, 2013), and consequently how that may affect the conduct of research. Some scholars have argued the case for this bias being overcome through objective research design (Darlington and Dobson, 2013), which is conducted sufficiently rigorously and achieves high measures of reliability, validity, representativeness and verification (ibid, 287) such that it can overcome accusations of presenting a subjective perspective as fact. Darlington and Dobson (2013) present the achievement of objectivity as grounded in critical realism, though the arguments made for rigorous, externally valid and objective research also ring true from a pragmatist perspective - where the truth, and as such the success of a piece of research, is essentially measured in terms of how well it achieves what it sets out to do. This may result in more objective or subjective research outputs, but pragmatism does at least have in common with critical realism a rejection of a wholly objective or subjective position regarding the production of knowledge compared with positivist or constructivist/postmodern positions respectively (Darlington and Dobson, 2013:287-8).

An alternative perspective exists to overcoming the 'problem' of partisanship, which is that a partisan position helps to gain access to otherwise concealed information, and that there is a moral argument for it – particularly as academics invested in the advancement of workers' welfare while embedded in the neoliberal business school. Similarly to the argument that there can be objective yet partisan research such as that argued by Darlington and Dobson (Darlington and Dobson, 2013), a pragmatist might also argue for less objective research being valuable if it succeeds in creating solutions or uncovers otherwise hidden information. In assessing the quality of research, credibility might be a valid measure (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019:217)

A partisan position also goes some way to gaining credibility with research participants. Fantasia's appendix on methodology (Fantasia, 1989:247-254) proves informative in this sense in recognising

that there are trade-offs in creating well designed research, and in obtaining the trust of those who (with good cause) treat the motives of researchers with "a notepad, tape recorder, or clipboard" with mistrust (ibid, 248).

A partisan position could also raise certain ethical implications in as far as engaging in certain ethically dubious, or even illegal, activities which may happen in industrial disputes. Stewart and Martinez-Lucio (2011:337) cite Roy's (1970) partial playing of 'the conflict game', observing some activities, and participate-observing in others. While this study has not seen the researcher face live conflict situations requiring the need to consider ethical implications of a partisan position (such as the throwing of stones on a picket line), the researcher concurs with Stewart and Martinez-Lucio in recognising a need for a focus on the voices and activities on the shop floor.

While this research has not seen the need to play 'the conflict game' or to engage in ethical reflection, the previous experience of the researcher, a position of sympathy to workers, and other factors have been considered with respect to both the design of research, and its conduct. Fundamentally, this relates to aspects of the researcher's prior experience and presentation, with consideration to overlap between those factors.

At heart, the debate around partisan scholarship links in neatly with aspects of this research – there is a tension inherent in considering the researcher's bias when considering the objectivity of research. This can be presented as a problem to be overcome, or as a means of embedding a researcher as part of a wider struggle – presenting marginalised voices against powerful forces – and perhaps in certain circumstances both may be achieved. While partisan research could be argued to create issues that need to be managed, this researcher would concur with arguments that other research of business schools has its own (managerialist) biases in failing to interrogate the realities of the capital-labour relationship, and that partisanship can be framed as a strength in both facilitating access to otherwise unobtainable data, and in respect of contributing to meaningful change for workers. As a pragmatist researcher confronting and reflecting upon biases, there is a

case that the validity and strength of workplace research can be measured in how it contributes to the welfare of research participants and their peers.

This section presents an argument for a tension between well-designed workplace research and colleting rich data that reveals otherwise unobtainable insight. In that sense, it will be argued that getting ‘below the waterline’ in organisations often requires innovative or pragmatic orientations towards research design and data collection, that may often make for less ‘objective’ rigour. This is particularly the case in exploring potentially contentious issues, or in requesting participants to criticise aspects of their employers conduct in a sector notorious for weak employment security.

## 4.4 Summary

This chapter has given a broad methodological overview of LPT and IR research. It has discussed the competing paradigms while making a case for pragmatism in investigating workplace phenomena. The pragmatic position has the benefit of navigating the competing objective and subjective aspects of workplace research. A position of pragmatism and rejection of paradigm incommensurability also provides a means to take some research from other philosophical positions on their relative merits – particularly in terms of their application - rather than dismiss them entirely.

Beyond research philosophy, the chapter also examines the researcher's relationship with the sector as a means of obtaining access to good quality data. This relationship might come partnered with accusations of bias, though the researcher would argue that this provides insight which would be unobtainable to many other 'unbiased' researchers who would lack the credibility and presentation to get close to the data. Similarly, a debate has been presented surrounding the researcher's partisan position. While some argue that objective research design can overcome accusations of bias in this context (Darlington and Dobson, 2013), this researcher believes that in contexts where data is hard to access there is still merit to research where the design is a little more ad hoc in response to the terrain of the field. The challenging conditions of the pandemic and relative paucity of workplace research point to a partisan and insider position being a strength in this context. The continued need to establish credibility to layers of gatekeepers meant that this position was in fact a prerequisite to gaining access, and that the methods which might create more objective research (such as quantitative methods or sampling) were not viable in a pandemic context, or in studying the sector or participants who were involved.

# Chapter Five: Methods, Data Collection and Analysis

## 5.1 Introduction

Following an exploration of methodology, this chapter outlines the selection of methods, the fieldwork process, and the process of collecting and analysing data. Firstly comes a discussion of selected methods – semi-structured interviews across a range of cases – as well as rejected methods. The rejected methods discussed include surveys and ethnography which the researcher believes have merit for research of this nature but were not viable or have other shortcomings. A section discusses the process of securing access as a prerequisite to fieldwork – a process in this instance which proved challenging and required a process of establishing credibility through layers of gatekeepers. As such, a section is dedicated to discussing the relationship between the researcher and the sector. This discussion is particularly important in considering the contribution of this thesis where the researcher will argue that some of the deficiencies of IR scholarship stem from a problem of access to workplaces. While this research went through many iterations, the initial proposal was driven by the researcher's conflicting experience compared to published academic content in the sector, and sought to uncover data which revealed greater nuance. There is detail of how the fieldwork process commenced, including securing ethical approval and negotiating access.

Subsequently there is a summary of the interactions with the participants and their workplaces. Each data collection point is summarised with details of how the participant was accessed, relevant information about the participant and their employment, and other details as relevant/available.

This chapter also summarises the process of analysing the data. Interviews were transcribed and coded during the fieldwork process, and this iterative process led to a modification of interview questions and codes as more data were collected. This chapter justifies the use of thematic analysis, and outlines the process of coding as well as the significance of each code.

## 5.2 Research Methods

The following section explores the methods that were considered and ultimately selected before specific commentary is provided over how data were collected. In summary, the primary mode of data collection was through interviews with participants being grouped into specific sites or cases. The researcher considered other methods as the conditions surrounding access shifted, but these were ultimately rejected. This includes a brief discussion of the use of surveys and autoethnography as well as the reasons these were ultimately rejected. For the main part, it is accepted that these rejected methods have merit but were generally not practical in the conditions of a global pandemic in which the research was conducted.

### *5.2.1 Case Study Methods*

Case studies are a 'strategy for doing research which involves an empirical investigation of a particular contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context using multiple sources of evidence' (Robson and McCartan, 2016). As such, case studies are not a method in and of themselves, rather an approach, and can consist of multiple methods, both qualitative and quantitative – and potentially in combination. Case study approaches have multiple potential purposes, whether *descriptive* – to provide information about a phenomenon; *exploratory* – to seek to better understand something; or *explanatory* – to explain how or why something is happening (Yin, 2018). Case studies are particularly suited to answering 'how?' and 'why?' questions, where other methods might be better suited to answering 'Who? Where? What? How many?' or 'to what extent…?' questions. Case studies are also particularly suited to examining contemporary events without requiring control of the behaviour over those being studied (ibid). Edwards (1995:2) rightly points to the voluntarist tradition of UK IR meaning that there is greater weight attributable to informal or custom and practice shop floor relations rather than particulars of a contract, and this means that a case study approach is well suited to uncovering these interactions.

### *5.2.2 Designing and Selecting Case Studies*

In addition to the potential for diverse or mixed methods, and differing purposes and justifications for seeking to use case studies, their application can also vary, having both a spatial and temporal aspect to their design. Case studies can take in both single or multiple cases (spatial variation) or be examined over multiple time periods (temporal variation) or a combination of the two with associated approaches depending on the number of cases and the time periods which are being examined (Gerring, 2007:28).

Single or multi-cases must also be considered in terms of units of analysis in relation to each case (Yin, 2018). Whether single or multiple cases, there is the possibility for multiple units of analysis to be embedded within each case. Whether single or multiple cases, an immediately obvious example in the case of UK distribution might be the distinctions between 'native' and migrant workers which exist side by side within an organisation, but whose experiences of the same workplace might differ greatly.

In the selection of case studies, there is also the requirement to consider why each case might be selected, and there will also be the need to screen case studies in advance in order to ascertain how they comply with existing theoretical considerations. For example, in single case examples, where a case study is *critical* to demonstrating adherence to existing theoretical assumptions or whether alternative explanations might be proffered (Yin, 2018). By contrast, extreme or unusual cases may be sought to examine deviations from assumed norms, or 'common' cases might be explored to examine the context and processes around typical phenomena; revelatory cases might be single case studies that uncover an inaccessible (possibly illicit or illegal) phenomenon; or single cases might be studied longitudinally, for example where changes are expected over a time period.

Multiple case studies are associated with a different rationale and justification. Yin (2018) argues that multiple case studies must be underpinned by a logic of 'replication' with the intention of seeking case studies in multiple examples believed to be literal replications – for example two cases

that have achieved exemplary results in a particularly respect, while this could also have a multiple focus – a two tailed approach where there are multiple replications at each tail – for example replications of cases where there are exemplary results alongside multiple cases of bad results. These cases would be analysed and reported on individually with a view to then creating cross-case comparisons.

### *5.2.3 Interviews*

Interviews are 'a purposeful conversation' (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019:434) between a researcher and one or more participants, and are conducted with the purpose of eliciting certain information from the respondent (Moser and Kalton, 1971:271). They are the primary means of obtaining the subjective views and experiences of participants, and allow them to reveal their personal beliefs and the rationale which frames their actions (Whipp, 1998:54).

Interviews can be conducted with varying degrees of standardisation or formality, including totally standardised interviews, or different forms of non-standardised interviews (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019:437). The degree of standardisation (or formality) can be argued to exist on a 'continuum of formality' with completely formalised interviews at one end, and totally unformalised at the other (Grebinek and Moser,1962:16) In this instance, there is a preference for semi-structured interviews, which have the benefit of allowing respondents to talk about what is important to them, rather than the interviewer, while also allowing the interviewer to pull conversation back to core themes, or probe deeper on relevant points as they emerge (Bell, 1999:138). Semi-structured interviews also allow for themes to be developed depending on what emerges in the process of data collection and analysis, particularly where an inductive approach is used (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019:438). By contrast, totally formalised or structured interviews follow a process more akin to a verbally administered questionnaire (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019:437), and an unstructured interview involve no predetermined themes or interviews, other than prompts which emerge from themes the participant themselves introduce (ibid:437).

While interviews that are totally structured or unstructured are less satisfactory than their semi-structured counterparts in this setting, the role of assumptions and preconceptions around the research topic need to be addressed. There is a large body of work around all manner of workplace issues in the labour process tradition which reveals a number of themes which are easily mined for inclusion to discuss labour's resistant potential. In this respect, it might be argued that a more structured approach could be justified – that the responses of workers are well documented, and that each workplace is simply a new setting in which to explore the particular dynamics in a framework that is already well defined. This argument has some merit, though it could also be argued that the core theory of LPT (Thompson, 1989) is so broad as to essentially cover and explain all experiences and interactions in workplaces (though this is arguably also a strength). Research in this tradition has certainly presented sufficient quantity and variety of research to point to a number of themes which recur – particular around the nature and extent of managerial control, work responses to it, and more narrowly themes such as effort bargaining, informal adjustments, and the process of bargaining over productivity.

### *5.2.4 Interviews and data quality*

The process of interviewing requires demanding social skills, within the scope of which includes establishing credibility with those who may be wary of academics (Whipp, 1998:54). This section is perhaps not the place to discuss establishing credibility in detail, but the researcher's experiences and background go some way to aid in establishing credibility, having a great deal of experience in the sector and being able to build relationships with gatekeepers and participants where others might not.

This prior experience might also attract accusations of bias, however. Semi and unstructured interviews in particular attract criticism for the potential of bias to affect the quality of data as a result of their non-standardisation (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019:447). Issues of 'response bias', where the data is affected by the respondent's perception of the interviewer (ibid), should be allayed to some degree by the researcher's experience, though consideration must also be given to

issues of presentation such as clothing (ibid:456). Practically, this involved gaining trust of gatekeepers through trading stories about workplace misbehaviour, though sometimes motivations needed to be vouched for by other trade unionists, particularly where introductions had been brokered through Keele's network of former IR students, or where a lecturer had facilitated the introduction.

More relevant, perhaps, is the risk of interviewer bias given the proximity to the sector. While past experience is valuable in establishing credibility, there is a risk of imposition of the researcher's beliefs or values in influencing responses, or when interpreting data (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019:447). This can be assuaged to some degree through design of the interview, and through the researcher's reflexivity. While data generated from semi and unstructured interviews are less generalisable than structured interviews (or other collection methods – particularly quantitative which incorporate representative samples), they generally achieve a high degree of validity through allowing for clarification and probing (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019:451), where more rigid modes of data collection might fall short in this respect.

### *5.2.5 Rejected methods – Practicality and Research Design*

#### Surveys

The following section explores the relative merits of using surveys as a method. For this researcher, they have value in allowing self-reporting of perceptions, views, opinions, and behaviours (Hartley and Barling,1998:170) It is acknowledged however, that while surveys carry out this function effectively, they benefit from complementary qualitative research to 'tease out' meanings behind the data (ibid).

Given the potential issues surrounding access – surveys provide a palatable, transparent, and low effort prospect to gatekeepers, who otherwise might be indifferent (or worse) to research being conducted. In this sense, surveys provide a 'way in' where access might otherwise be refused, and this is potentially a greater threat in view of the issues created surrounding Covid-19. Surveys provide a means of improving the validity of any findings – two means of data collection identifying

the same thing has more validity than one alone (Bryman, 1992:146). Further, it is quite well established for IR research to follow a multimethod approach (Kochan, 1998) and it is not uncommon for case studies to utilise a blend of qualitative and quantitative methods (Bryman, 1992:146). A blend, such as the combination of interviews and surveys helps to improve the validity of data, though may also have benefits in terms of each method having different strengths, and therefore 'access to different levels of reality' (ibid). In this respect, each method may be adept at picking up data that the other misses, and a combination of the two allows for a degree of 'cross checking'.

While surveys have value for this researcher, their usefulness is strengthened when partnered with qualitative research, and/or when facilitating access to otherwise hard to reach participants. The research by Taylor (Taylor, 2020a; Taylor, 2020b) for instance is tremendously valuable in gaining insight into call centres during Covid-19, which would otherwise be difficult to conduct in the context of the time. This specific survey benefits from a high response rate (2,760 responses (Taylor, 2020a:9)) and a design which allows workers to anonymously disclose the issues in their workplaces. While the researcher would have pursued the use of surveys were it viable, sufficient access was not permitted on this occasion.

### Experimental Methods and (Auto)Ethnography

Experimental methods have some value and prominence in researching the world of work, but will also be rejected in this context. Perhaps the obvious example is the various changes made in the Hawthorne case, though there is also application in the industrial relations context too (Bruins, 1998). Experimental methods seek to establish causal relationships between variables by controlling a dependent variable and manipulating the independent variable to determine the relationship between the two (Bruins, 1998:85). These methods require a significant degree of cooperation from gatekeepers or means to recruit outside of a work setting, though equally these kinds of methods tell us little about the full array of worker behaviour (see criticisms of the Hawthorne Effect) and may indeed be seen as a pro-management intervention rather than an academic one. Any attempt

to apply experimental methods via union routes likely removes workers from their workplace setting and as such neglects less formal aspects of the employment relationship. This method is also not practical in a pandemic context.

Aspects of an ethnographic methodology must also be rejected, particularly those of participant observation and autoethnography – though autoethnography does have a small role to play in the origin of this thesis. Participant observation is a perfectly valid means of gathering data for a study of this type, though also comes with sufficient drawbacks for it to be discounted. Primarily, these centre around issues of practicality, ethics, and the risk of suspicion from those being observed.

In order of these potential shortcomings, studying informal practices would potentially point to observation - a number of classic workplace behavioural studies are founded on observation, from Taylor's original time and motion studies in Bethlehem (Taylor, 1911) to Roy's 'goldbricking' and Burawoy's 'games' (Roy, 1952; Burawoy, 1979) or Batstone *et al*'s investigation into shop stewards (Batstone, Boraston and Frenkel, 1977). Utilising this kind of method requires a level of embeddedness in an organisation however, and this method can be very time consuming and, while able to generate a good amount of detailed data in one setting, is not practical across a number of sites.

This leads to a discussion of the way data is obtained through observation. More 'deviant' behaviour is more likely to be uncovered through covert observation, but this raises ethical concerns, and is particularly pertinent when considering the theoretical foundations of this thesis – that the capital-labour relationship is one which is inherently founded on a tension between the two parties. Workers are often suspicious of the researcher's motives, with cause to suspect them as a 'spy' and gaining trust with one group may need to be repeated with newcomers to the group who may also question motives and neutrality (Friedman and McDaniel,1998:123). This point is somewhat reinforced when examining a case like Collinson's (1992), where the researcher was never totally accepted by the workers he was investigating, and his motives were viewed with suspicion, while

other cases have seen workers consider themselves part of an 'us and them' relationship, meaning anyone not considered one of 'us' must have introductions brokered through a trusted source – in this case a shop steward (Beyon and Blackburn, 1972:7). While there is perhaps some value to simply getting a job (Friedman and McDaniel,1998:122) in a site in this sector, and that this approach has previously yielded results (Roy (1952) and Burawoy (1979) being influential examples), this approach is also not viable for a number of reasons – particularly ones built around ethics and practicality. The researcher has previously held several jobs in this sector out of necessity and found it necessary to be economical with the truth in order to obtain work, especially having had previous managerial experience and higher education qualifications. Obtaining work as a researcher would require either lying by omission and therefore carrying out covert research or being honest and either not getting a job or getting one as what would appear to be a management stooge. This would tend to weaker data where workers might rightly hold greater suspicion regarding motives. There is also the issue here of control over what workplaces are accessed. Jobs in this sector are often precarious, recruitment is often through temporary employment agencies, and any work obtained could be short term, with no guarantee of union representation in the workplace. There are other issues with obtaining work in this setting related to the researcher's own health – a reasonably severe asthmatic – being placed into a setting where physical attendance and manual handling are integral parts of the job. For these reasons, getting a job was not practical, probably not ethical, though there might be a case that it could have obtained some interesting, albeit very context sensitive data.

This leads to a discussion of the role of autoethnography in this setting. Autoethnography is "an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyse (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno)" (Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2011:273). Autoethnography is, in part, a response to challenges of neutrality or objectivity in conducting research, and acknowledges, or embraces, matters of subjectivity, emotion, and the researcher's influence, rather than trying to argue them away (ibid:274).

The use of autoethnography has some relevance when considering the previous experience of the researcher in this setting. Indeed, earlier pre-pandemic iterations of this research were more directly prompted by the experience of the researcher as an order picker/packer and later as an HR representative. This experience can be explored here (briefly) in order to examine some of the researcher's existing insights, the relevance of existing knowledge to this project, and how this experience has value in providing credibility as a researcher when seeking to obtain access and gaining the trust of participants. Autoethnography as a method in this particular context has little value however. There are obvious issues around the practicality of obtaining a job in the current climate, and while doing this might have some value in terms of observation of others, the exploration of the self in this context gives a narrow, limited, and biased account of workplace behaviour where the researcher's views are privileged above others. Among the assorted criticisms of autoethnography comes accusations of using biased data, navel-gazing, but also insufficiently rigorous (Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2011:283). There are some work-related contexts where autoethnography has value, and perhaps additionally so in the pandemic context – the rise of sex work that came about in 2020 as a result of a number of factors (Oppenheim, 2021), for example – where personal accounts might produce more detailed, intimate data than other methods, or where access to other participants might be difficult where research is conducted by an 'outsider'. This justification could also be extended to other areas where there are illicit, extremely sensitive or socially unacceptable activities such as in prison or exploring ethical dilemmas around a child's health (Wall, 2006:185) for example. While trade unionists and workers might be right to view a researcher's motives with suspicion, their actions are not generally illegal and so the views, experiences, and motives of this population should be readily obtainable without needing to substitute the researcher's own experience in lieu of difficulty obtaining access. Perhaps most importantly, this particular researcher did not work in this sector during the pandemic, and so any insight is limited to a particular context. There are, however, some ways in which this experience

relates to the design and execution of this research while not explicitly incorporating autoethnography as a method.

## 5.3 The Researcher and the Sector

The researcher has extensive experience in the sector as a worker, HR representative, and from having researched a DC for a master's dissertation. Anecdotes from this period are provided in Appendix 1 to provide a sample of workers' recalcitrance in the sector, and in some detail below. This experience involved working in a number of DCs, primarily from 2003-2006 and 2010-2011 as a picker/packer, and later as a HR representative during 2014-15. The final workplace also served as a setting for MA level research where two sites were examined to explore workers' attitudes and behaviours towards the performance management system used to manage them. In this particular context, the larger of the two sites unionised in response to growing discontent in the larger site where the workload was heavier (in terms of physical exertion – it processed a heavier product) following the introduction of a formalised system of PM that resulted in the use of a PIP to manage exit from the firm. This business, an alcohol retailer and wholesaler, will be referred to as AlcoCo when discussion around the MA dissertation and HR experience is required in this section. While this experience directly influenced the progression of the initial iteration of this research, there was also some influence from the wider experience working in the sector.

Resistance, particularly informal and individualised forms, is largely missing from recent accounts in this sector. There is a growing contribution as the significance of the sector is acknowledged, though much of this is focused on non-UK contexts, or global organising of labour, rather than context specific explorations of the labour process. Where this has occurred – notably examinations of the UK supermarket supply chain (Newsome, Thompson and Commander, 2013; Thompson, Newsome and Commander, 2013) – resistance recorded is limited to collective bargaining over targets and the informal act of 'grazing' (Newsome, 2010) on the food goods being processed. The experience of the researcher points to these findings being limited in terms of the actual forms of misbehaviour that occur in these DCs. Rather than grazing on goods, the researcher has been made aware of a reasonably sophisticated fiddle (Mars, 1982) that enabled workers to deliberately damage stock so

that it was heavily discounted in staff sales (which the researcher used to manage) and then buy in bulk to sell informally. Similarly in the same workplace, managers later boasted of reducing shrinkage only to be engaged in a fiddle themselves which saw a number of warehouse managers dismissed. The investigation revealed evidence that they had appropriated workers' time on the job for their own criminal activity in appropriating stock and money. Even though working in HR in AlcoCo, much of these deviant activities came to light after leaving the business and after conducting a small research project with relatively boring findings. This goes some way to point to the limitations of research into more illicit activities unless carried out in a covert and perhaps unethical fashion. There is not the incentive for these activities to be revealed to a HR representative or researcher, but they are more easily revealed as a source of titillation and gossip, especially as the researcher has remained in contact with a number of workers through extended friendship groups. This is not necessarily the basis for a rigorous piece of research, however.

Within and beyond AlcoCo, the researcher has also been aware of other forms of resistance, or of limitations of managers in securing the levels of compliance they might like. While AlcoCo unionised, some of the managers interviewed pointed to the arbitrary setting of targets that had been based around approximate benchmarks of other plants with similar levels of manual handling, but happened to land on the 200 units/hour mark, which only a small number of the workforce were achieving. Rather than a formalised rationalised system of performance management, the PIP was used as a means of legitimising exit from the bottom up, but the performance targets were symbolic rather than a measure of accepted performance. The cull from the bottom up hit a natural plateau in line with workforce planning however, and a constraint on further dismissals followed difficulty in sourcing replacement workers which was in part because of the firm's poor reputation in the labour market.

Beyond AlcoCo, the researcher observed (and sometimes participated) in a number of means of avoiding work, the managerial gaze, or otherwise not doing as managers desired. This included

gaming of the surveillance system, such as deliberately not correcting mistakes so to avoid censure for missing targets, deliberately making mistakes as a form of protest, sending out 'freebies' to customers, spending large portions of a shift drunk or hungover hiding from managers (e.g. an entire shift asleep in a toilet cubicle), or anonymously sending abusive messages in with packages. This is by no means an exhaustive list, nor is the researcher claiming that this is a universal picture in the sector but having seen various combinations of these kinds of acts of individual resistance in multiple DC settings, the claims of 'grazing' as evidence of individual resistance in warehouses seems to paint an incomplete picture, even under systems of what might appear to be tight surveillance. The researcher has also 'survived' a performance management system which dismissed workers from the bottom up over the course of a seasonal placement lasting until nearly the final week where he was dismissed for taking a day sick. The 'carrot' of permanent jobs was dangled, though workers that had been placed there the previous year recanted them being sent home over the Christmas break and all being dismissed by text on Christmas Eve as they were sat in a pub. Despite the transparently punitive and callous nature of management in this particular DC, there were still many issues for managers in securing total compliance from those who worked there.

This experience is valuable in a number of respects when carrying out this kind of research. The researcher is not making claims that his own experience is illustrative of the wider world of logistics, but it does point to perhaps a less certain picture than the academic literature might paint – one of claustrophobic surveillance, though this sector has not received the same interrogation of worker agency around Taylorised surveillance as call centres received around the turn of this century (Taylor and Bain, 2003; Bain and Taylor, 2000; Taylor and Bain, 1999) where gaming of systems and active undermining of managers was revealed. This experience of work in logistics, rather than convincing the researcher that his experience is 'more correct' instead points to the suggestion that context and variations in context that are inherently associated with work make for less certainty when approaching work related issues. While there is a case that an auto/ethnography on some of these more deviant aspects of work might have some value, particularly as it seems these kinds of

accounts are otherwise absent, there are reasons to dismiss this on this occasion – the most important of which being that these observations did not occur during the Covid-19 pandemic. The value in this kind of experience then comes in providing the researcher with credibility in carrying out this kind of research in the eyes of potential participants and gatekeepers.

This experience is fundamental in terms of moulding the research approach and design. The researcher's experiences working in the sector cannot be separated from this process and in many ways can be argued to be a strength: This experience provides some insider knowledge that is more subtle, detailed, and nuanced than existing academic output in the sector; provides an understanding of the limitations of various methods in uncovering workers' behaviours and attitudes; and the experience also gives the researcher credibility when approaching gatekeepers and participants.

### *5.3.1 Access*

Access is an 'essential phase in the research process' and one of 'negotiation and renegotiation' (Burgess, 1984:45). Prior to the pandemic, access to the field was difficult but there had been considerable progress. As well as having friendly contacts within the GMB who had offered to facilitate ongoing access, the researcher had also negotiated access to two large DCs in the Stoke on Trent area via contacts in senior management positions. Generally speaking, attempts to negotiate access were ignored or declined, however. In the early stages of the PhD, the researcher sent template email/letters to a number of firms in the local area with a view to brokering access, but all were fruitless. Post-2020 the researcher also sought to cold call contacts in the labour movement, though this was also generally without success - Regional offices and generic emails tended to be dead ends. The TUC was more helpful in passing details to regional officers, though these contacts did not cascade sufficiently to recruit any participants. Other friendly contacts, such as a Unite branch secretary introduced the researcher to contacts via email, though this also failed to result in the generation of data.

'Friendly contacts' proved to be essential to the successful conduct of this research. Access to many of the reps was predicated on establishing a relationship with a key gatekeeper from whom most of the participants stemmed. This gatekeeper is a regional official for the GMB union who had a working relationship with the researcher's colleague and supervisor following him teaching GMB members. Initial contact was made in the summer of 2019 with the official being supportive of providing access to workplace reps. While the pandemic interrupted the potential for meaningful ongoing workplace access, some of the conversations held in 2019 proved to be fruitful when attempting to re-establish contact some 18 months later. One of the reps interviewed (Rep 2 – Medico, a convenor) offered physical access to the sites he covered stating that he was free to bring guests on site without management permission, and that this would provide an opportunity to recruit participants - the invitation was framed as an offer to come on site and set up in the union office with a view to being walked around the sites and introduced to members. While this option was potentially ethically dubious (and did not happen), the invitation points to a well-established degree of workplace organisation and ability to take meaningful action to advance his members' interests on the shopfloor that runs against the grain of assumptions about the contemporary distribution workplace. Covid interrupted this particular dynamic, but the relationships built with gatekeepers and reps ensured that data collection was viable once public health conditions eased. The same conditions, as well as tightening controls over reps' activities meant that access to members/workers was considerably less viable, and so prompted a focus on union personnel.

Beyond this site, the researcher found that access hinged upon being passed through a series of gatekeepers and needing to establish credibility at each stage. This would often include the need for a respected third party to vouch for credibility (in this case a member of staff in Keele's school of IR) while attempting to set up meetings. On two occasions this led to being invited to branch meetings to present the research to activists and leave recruitment materials. On one occasion this yielded a group of participants, but the other yielded none. The Webbs (1975:70-71) rightly point to the shortcomings of methods that request privileged or perhaps sensitive information – citing

"suspicion, caution and even resentment" in union officials asked to discuss their daily business. With this and Fantasia's (1989:247-254) commentary on suspicion towards researchers in mind, the researcher was keen to ensure that his presentation was such that he would not be considered a threat, and was sure to dress casually, speak candidly, and provide details of experience working in the sector as well as having links and sympathies with the labour movement.

This positioning, it is argued, was essential for the participants to have trust in the intentions of the researcher. To illustrate this point, some of the participants had met the researcher in 2019 but became suspicious of his motives and refused to continue, but in 2022 were more amiable having spoken to the researcher's supervisor in the interim. Similarly, proximity to the supervisor facilitated recording of an interview with a senior rep stating 'if you're with him then I'm sure it's fine' when the participants were asked if they consented to being recorded. This context relates to the relationship of the researcher to the participants in respect of sympathies to their plight (Stewart and Martinez Lucio, 2011), and can also be placed in terms of Gramsci's organic intellectuals (Crehan, 2016) or Bourdieu's habitus (Stewart and Martinez Lucio, 2011). Importantly, the experience of navigating access suggests it is a fragile and precarious journey and one in which the researcher's presentation, credibility and (extended) network are essential prerequisites for continued access and good quality data. The fragile and contingent context in which access is negotiated informs research design as well as the navigation of the process of gaining ethical approval.

## 5.4 Ethical approval

Ethical approval was initially sought in 2018 and eventually approved in 2019 after multiple submissions. Some earlier iterations of the ethical approval form reflect the changing nature of the research design such that other methods such as surveys were included, as the access was negotiated and continued to shift. Once ethical approval had been obtained, data collection commenced, though this was interrupted by the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic and the mandatory cessation of all fieldwork. Once this restriction was lifted in 2021, an amendment to the existing ethical approval was submitted and field work resumed. The approval of this ethical amendment is included as appendix 4, along with other forms and the information sheet for participants.

## 5.5 Data Collection

Interviews were conducted between December 2021 and November 2022. These interviews, being semi-structured in nature, tended to being open in character in the early stages, with more directed questions being introduced as themes emerged from the data.

In practice, interviews started with the question ‘Can you tell me about your experiences as a worker and rep over the last two years?’. This had the effect of allowing the participants to highlight the issues they deemed most important, while also allowing the researcher to probe further on particular topics. This also enabled the researcher to develop a list of questions to follow up on if the participant was vague, or unsure of which topics to discuss. This approach is shown to be valuable in some of the themes that quickly emerged, such as the suspension of performance management policies, and ways in which spatial aspects of work and representing workers were significant. In later interviews it was possible to ask participants questions such as ‘Is performance management operated in the same way?’, ‘Are you able to move freely around your workplace?’, or ‘Are you able to keep in contact with other reps?’.

The interviews were conducted both electronically and in person. Where interviews were conducted in person, care was taken to ensure that privacy was guaranteed, and this meant the use of union facilities such as regional offices. A number of interviews were conducted electronically – using media such as MS Teams or Zoom as well as the telephone – and this reflects the shifting terrain of work and the rapid adoption of technology from the onset of the pandemic, as well as facilitating access around both public health requirements and the participants' own lives. 'Zoom' interviews have both benefits and drawbacks (Oliffe *et al.,* 2021). Per Oliffe *et al*., there were tangible benefits such as the mitigation of cost and familiar home surroundings which allowed participants to speak candidly, but also drawbacks. Connectivity provides a common obstacle to overcome, and the researcher also loses control over the environment in which the interview takes place. A pertinent example from this project included a participant video calling from their kitchen in which they were also roasting a chicken which required intermittent attention. This technology provides an essential solution to problems brought on by public health restrictions, though is clearly not without some drawbacks. This is not to say that in-situ interviews are immune from interruptions, and on balance the use of video calling technology was invaluable given the barriers that otherwise existed to gather data. The use of this software had an additional benefit, which was the inbuilt recording and transcription tools. All participants but a group at one site consented to being recorded, and the recordings and transcription tools were useful in terms of reducing time and cost associated with transcribing. The reps who did not consent to recording were not asked – they consist of some of the same group that in 2019 agreed to participate but withdrew upon meeting – and so the researcher felt it best to not invite suspicion and to instead take notes during and after the meeting.

An indicative interview schedule follows. It reflects the approach that reps were prompted to answer an open question in the first instance, and later be directed to questions on other themes such as those pertaining to safety, changing activities, the employer's attitudes, and so on.

How would you describe your experience of the last few years as a rep and worker?

How would you describe your employer's attitude to the pandemic?

How seriously did the employer take Covid safety?

To what extent were reps involved in decision making?

How did the pandemic affect the way you worked?

Were you able to move freely around the workplace?

Did the employer alter its management practices as a result of the pandemic?

- Did they change their performance management policies?

What were the typical disciplinary issues you faced in the workplace?

- Were disciplinaries of the same type/frequency as before the pandemic?

Were you able to meet other reps/members?

- How did you hold branch meetings?
- How did you communicate between other reps/members?

How much support did you receive from the union?

What does your membership look like in terms of density/headcount?

Have you been able to gain any concessions as a result of the pandemic?

Have you negotiated any pay awards?

## 5.6 The Participants

The following section continues by outlining each data intervention in brief detail. This includes a table summarising each interview/participant, followed by a brief summary of each site in which the participants were based. All work locations are in an area broadly defined as the Midlands – within a 50-mile radius of Birmingham. Descriptions of the participants and their workplaces follow chronologically in order of interview and reflects some uneven provision of data about the sites and the reps. Information is included where it is known and relevant.

| Data point | Job Role | Workplace | Union | Union Role | Date collected | Mode of interaction | Recorded/transcribed? |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Rep 1 | FLT driver | Packaging Co | Unite | Union Rep | 13th December 2021 | Telephone (70 mins) | Yes |
| Branch Meeting | Warehouse workers/drivers | Multiple workplaces | GMB | | 6th March 2022 | In person – Social club function room | Field diary entry |
| Secretary 1 | Local Council Manager | Local Council | Unite | Branch Secretary | 16th March 2022 | In person | |
| Rep 2 | FT Union Rep | Medico | GMB | Branch Secretary/Convenor | 18th March 2022 | Telephone (80 minutes) | Yes |
| Rep 3 | HGV Driver | Foodhaul | GMB | Union Rep | 15th April 2022 | Telephone (75 minutes) | Yes |
| Rep 4 | Warehouse Administrator | Medico | GMB | H&S Rep | 16th April 2022 | Teams call (65 minutes) | Yes |
| Rep 5 | Warehouse Worker | Alpha Supermarket (managed by TransportCo | USDAW | Senior Rep | 4th May 2022 | In person – Unite office (60 minutes) | Yes |
| Branch Meeting | Warehouse workers/drivers | Convenience Co | Unite | | 14th May 2022 | In person – public house function room | Field diary entry |
| Rep 6 | Warehouse worker | Beta Supermarket | GMB | Senior Rep | 18th May 2022 | In person – GMB regional office (90 minutes) | Not recorded, notes taken |
| Rep 7 | Warehouse worker | Beta Supermarket | GMB | Union Rep | 18th May 2022 | In person – GMB regional office (90 minutes) | Not recorded, notes taken |
| Rep 8 | Warehouse worker | Beta Supermarket | GMB | Union Rep | 18th May 2022 | In person – GMB regional office (90 minutes) | Not recorded, notes taken |

| | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Rep 9 | Warehouse worker | Beta Supermarket | GMB | Union Rep | 18th May 2022 | In person – GMB regional office (90 minutes) | Not recorded, notes taken |
| Rep 10 | Warehouse worker | Beta Supermarket | GMB | Union Rep | 18th May 2022 | In person – GMB regional office (90 minutes) | Not recorded, notes taken |
| Rep 11 | Warehouse worker | Beta Supermarket | GMB | Union Rep | 18th May 2022 | In person – GMB regional office (90 minutes) | Not recorded, notes taken |
| Rep 12 | Warehouse worker | Beta Supermarket | GMB | Union Rep | 18th May 2022 | In person – GMB regional office (90 minutes) | Not recorded, notes taken |
| Rep 13 | Warehouse worker | Gamma Supermarket | USDAW | Branch Secretary/Senior Rep | 18th May 2022 | Telephone (60 minutes) | Yes |
| Regional Official 1 | | | Unite | Unite Regional Officer | 18th August 2022 | In person – Unite office (60 minutes) | Yes |
| Rep 14 | Factory logistics | Building Co | GMB | Senior Rep | 18th November 2022 | In person – GMB regional office (60 minutes) | Yes |
| Rep 15 | Warehouse logistics | Building Co | GMB | Union Rep | 18th November 2022 | In person – GMB regional office (60 minutes) | Yes |
| Rep 16 | Warehouse logistics | Building Co | GMB | Union Rep | 18th November 2022 | In person – GMB regional office (60 minutes) | Yes |
| Rep 17 | Factory logistics | Building Co | GMB | Union Rep | 18th November 2022 | In person – GMB regional office (60 minutes) | Yes |

*Figure 1 Table of Participants*

*The Case Study Sites*

### *5.6.1 Packaging Co (Rep 1) UNITE*

Packaging Co was deemed part of the essential supply chain with its products (cardboard packaging) being used in pharmaceutical and food industries. The plant is located in a small town in the East Midlands, which has road links to the Northeast and Southeast. The rep drives a forklift truck (FLT) as well as carrying out union duties. Union membership in the plant tends around 100%, and generally only varies around the need for recruitment with new recruits tending to join. The plant is represented by UNITE.

Rep 1 is a male in his late 40s, and also a fellow PhD student in KBS – working alongside his PhD in IR. It was for this reason he was chosen as the first participant – he had valuable existing insight into IR issues, as well as an understanding of the research process. This insight meant that some of the barriers to participation with other participants were not present – it was not necessary to build credibility as the participant was already aware of the researcher's credentials and the intricacies of the research and ethical process. The existing relationship and insight of the participant meant that there were some breaks in the interview to discuss the process, and some consideration from the participant to feel the need to act 'in character' as though we were unacquainted. In spite of these considerations, there was no indication that the exchange resulted in any holding back or colouring of events being discussed.

### *5.6.2 Medico/TransportCo (Rep 2 and Rep 4) GMB*

'Medico' includes three distinct DCs, distributing medical products as part of a large multinational distribution company (TransportCo, as referred to elsewhere in this thesis), and has a recognition agreement with the GMB union. This business formed part of the essential supply chain during the pandemic on account of the product being distributed.

Rep 2 was described as 'a rottweiler' and someone who gets things done by another rep interviewed. As well as being convenor for the three sites of MedCo, he is the branch secretary for a

branch which incorporates other distribution firms in the area. These reps were met through attending a branch meeting and leaving contact details.

### *5.6.3 Foodhaul (Rep 3) GMB*

Rep 3 is a lorry driver and rep for a group of Foodhaul sites in the East Midlands. The rep was a long-standing HGV driver operating out of a depot/warehouse which served the Southeast of England. Union membership had recently declined from around 76% to 52%, and the membership was proportionately overrepresented by drivers than warehouse workers and administrative staff.

Foodhaul is a food wholesaler which supplies a range of high street and household name fast food chains. The firm provides logistical support to these restaurants via distribution centres and driving. The firm is owned by a large UK supermarket whose DC houses a rep interviewed elsewhere in this thesis.

### *5.6.4 Alpha Supermarket/TransportCo, (Rep 5) USDAW*

This rep contacted the researcher after finding out about the research from a mutual contact in a trades council. The rep had recently retired, but was previously a senior figure in his branch, having organised the workplace in the face of much hostility in the early 21st Century. The workplace is a major supermarket whose logistics functions are carried out by Transport Co, a multinational logistics firm, though the site had been run by other logistics firms in the past. USDAW were recognised on this site, and engaged in a significant degree of training, being embedded in various initiatives with the employer. The site had come under pressure in the past from an attempt to replace USDAW with Unite, and this was argued to have been driven by factions in the union, particularly driven by lorry drivers.

### *5.6.5 Beta Supermarket, (Reps 6-12) GMB*

This site distributes clothing as part of a major UK supermarket. The GMB are recognised on site and union membership is constant at around 75% of an 800 strong workforce. This group of reps agreed to meet following a meeting of their own on facilities time in a GMB regional office. They were put in contact with the researcher by a regional official, and a number of them knew the researcher's

supervisor as a result of his teaching activities. The supervisor arranged the interview having introduced the two parties. Many of this group had agreed to meet in 2019 but became hostile when the research was being discussed so the interview never took place. This was likely a result of one particular rep misunderstanding the purpose of the research stating he did not want his business spread around Keele University. In turn this then soured the rest of the group. As a consequence, when 3-4 of the original 7 were in the room in 2022, a decision was made not to request for audio recording, and instead to take notes and to type them up immediately after the meeting had taken place. These reps on this occasion were willing to talk openly.

### *5.6.6 Gamma Supermarket (Rep 13) USDAW*

Rep 13 was a recently dismissed rep and branch secretary in a major supermarket's DC. Gamma Supermarket is one of the UK's 'Big Four' supermarkets, and the DC the rep was situated in was distributed food as part of the essential supply chain. Rep 13 was the only participant to contact the researcher without the source of contact being known – it is likely that some of the speculative emails sent to workers organisations found their way to him. The nature of the contact means that the researcher was careful to ensure that the rep's anonymity was protected, and so demographic questions were passed over. Despite feeling the need for precautions, the rep was open and at one point stated he enjoys discussing these topics. There was some discussion about academics and their attitudes towards working people.

This rep demonstrated a level of militancy that was much higher and more vocal than the other reps interviewed, and this seemed to put him at odds with the employer and union and likely explains his dismissal – an unfair dismissal case was pending which the rep linked to his union activism. He argued USDAW's attitude and inaction had caused them to lose a third of reps, and that the union was 'threatened' by new reps who wanted to affect change.

### *5.6.7 Unite regional official*

The regional official was known to Keele school of IR and was contacted by the researcher's supervisor by means of introduction. A number of regional officials or other gatekeepers in similar

positions tended to be willing to pass on details but not to do interviews themselves – possibly down to issues of time. In this case, the official was happy to participate, as well as cascade recruitment materials, though in this instance no further access materialised. The official covered a number of workplaces, including supermarkets – one 'big four' supermarket and a number of smaller ones (as well as workplaces in other sectors).

The officer provided a different and wider perspective than just speaking to reps in workplaces. He informed on issues such as auxiliary workers such as IT or customer service facing unduly harsh disciplinary action for gaps in work caused by issues beyond their control. This could be internet outages, or failed visits to sites where they were not able to access the required resources to complete jobs. He also reported that in many of the supermarket sites it was typical for Unite to be the smallest union on site with them being more used to negotiating with GMB or USDAW.

#### *5.6.8 Construction Co (Reps 14-17) GMB*

The interview with Construction Co reps occurred at GMB offices following preparations for a pay negotiation. The firm operates a factory and head office with a number of distribution centres and smaller factories in close proximity (eight in total). The senior rep present described the many sites as like medieval fiefdoms, operating independently with their own different rules. The reps reported close to 100% membership at all sites. The business originally closed at the beginning of the pandemic, but opened shortly after using supply of parts to the medical supply chain as justification for 'essential' status.

## 5.7 Data Analysis and Coding

Data were analysed using qualitative thematic analysis. Thematic analysis includes the coding of data in relation to a research question to identify themes or patterns for further analysis (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019:651). This approach is suited to a range of research philosophies, and is also flexible, permitting use for inductive, abductive, or deductive approaches (ibid).

Interviews were recorded where possible and transcribed using Office 365 initially and later the transcription website Temi. When recorded audio was not available as a result of participants declining to be recorded, or comments made after the recording had ended, field diary entries or detailed notes were used as substitutes. In the case of additional comments following the recording ending, consent was sought to include the extra points that were made. Recordings were transcribed as soon as was practicable after the interview, and so there was an overlap between the transcription and interview process. As the interviews were transcribed, initial coding was also undertaken using Nvivo 12.

The process of interviewing and coding was therefore an iterative process where the emergence of themes informed subsequent interview questions. As interviews continued and data were analysed, codes began to be merged or separated according to the researcher's judgements of their relevance. For example, a significant amount of thought was given to the distinction between two codes: 'Participation in decision-making' and 'Challenging managers'. The reason for this was that some participants demonstrated much more co-operative approaches whereas some were more adversarial in their approach. Similarly, some were prepared to co-operate on grounds relating to Covid-19 safety, but were willing to be more adversarial on other issues. For this reason, a decision was made that the two codes represent alternate approaches to attempting to influence management practices in the workplace. For this reason, it should be apparent that there are potential overlaps in the coding where points made by participants could align with multiple codes.

The following table lists codes which delineate the findings in the following chapter. It includes a number pertaining to each code, a brief description, and reference to strands of academic literature to which the codes can be linked. The findings in the following chapter are grouped into three core themes. That is: the labour process, mobilisation, and spatial dimensions of work/mobilisation. Given the propensity for quotes to straddle multiple codes, and in turn codes to potentially cross between the themes, some consideration is given to discussing them where they fit most logically.

| Number | Code | Explanation of the code | Literature topics/theme related to the code |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Organisation/managers' conduct | The participant's perceptions of how managers and the organisation more generally responded to the issues as they arose | Mobilisation |
| 2 | Participation in decision-making | The ways and extent to which union reps/activists were able to insert themselves into policy making | Labour Process<br>Mobilisation |
| 3 | Absences and policy | The implications of Covid-19 on absences and the changes to absence policy in the sites | Labour Process<br>Mobilisation |
| 4 | Covid H&S vs other H&S | The differences in attitudes in the workplaces between Covid safety and other health and safety obligations | Mobilisation |
| 5 | Rep's movements/accessing workers | The extent to which reps were able to be spatially mobile in their workplaces in order to access workers/members | Space<br>Mobilisation |
| 6 | Communication | The ways and extent to which reps were able to communicate with managers and members – both in terms of transmitting and receiving information | Mobilisation |
| 7 | Places to meet/congregate | Discussion surrounding the ability for reps/workers to physically meet | Space<br>Mobilisation |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | whether inside or outside the workplace | |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 8 | Branch meetings | Data relating to the operating of branch meetings around public health restrictions | Mobilisation |
| 9 | Virtual space/technological solutions | Points relating to the use of virtual/electronic forms of meeting and communication, particularly platforms such as Teams or Zoom, or other social media alternatives | Space<br>Mobilisation |
| 10 | Homeworking | The ways in which homeworking affected the workplaces and the reps | Space |
| 11 | The battle for space | Insights provided by reps on how Covid-19 created tension with the employers over the use of physical space in the workplace – such as union facilities | Space<br>Labour Process<br>Mobilisation |
| 12 | Support for reps, FTOs and the wider union | The relationship between workplace reps and the wider union infrastructure, including FTOs or other officials/decision makers in the labour movement | Mobilisation |
| 13 | Changing patterns of work/managerial control | The ways in which Covid-19/employers' responses affected the patterns of work or systems of control over work | Labour Process |
| 14 | Physical presence of management | Data which relates to managers' presence on the shopfloor | Labour Process<br>Space |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 15 | Challenging managers | Ways in which reps/workers were able to challenge managers – differing from participation in decision making where reps might be able to challenge various aspects of work, rather than collaborating with employers on specific Covid-19-related aspects | Labour Process<br>Mobilisation |
| 16 | Perf mgmt. and targets | The ways in which the measurement and management of performance was altered in response to the changing conditions of the period | Labour Process |
| 17 | Disciplinary topics/carrying out hearings | The character of disciplinary issues and the conduct of procedures surrounding disciplinaries | Labour Process |
| 18 | Bypassing/undermining the union | Ways in which the employer actively sought to undermine the union's presence in the organisation | Mobilisation |
| 19 | Pay and pay negotiation | Details of any pay awards or negotiations conducted during the research period | Mobilisation<br>Labour Process |
| 20 | Different treatment between groups | Evidence of different treatment between groups of workers – e.g. the core workforce and agency workers who were drafted in, or differences between different demographic groups | Mobilisation |

*Figure 2 Table of Codes*

## 5.8 Summary

This chapter has outlined the process of choosing methods, data collection and analysis. Fundamentally, the chapter points to difficulties in accessing participants in the field, and how these difficulties were navigated. These difficulties arise as a result of caution from participants, the need to navigate through gatekeepers to gain access, and the challenges presented as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. These challenges were overcome through the use of telecommunications in respect of the pandemic, but access to participants via gatekeepers required to continuous establishing of credibility through gatekeepers and access to key personnel in the labour movement who were sympathetic to brokering initial contact. While multiple methods are justifiable, the access available pointed to interview methods across a range of cases as the most viable option in the context.

The data points have been briefly summarised in terms of the key points leading to the interventions, and a brief summary of the participants and the data collection process, there has been a discussion of the process of coding and specific codes which allows for a thematic analysis of the data. The process of coding data resulted in an initial analysis which was refined until the codes effectively reflected the content of the data, and the subsequent chapter will present select quotations and commentary that came from this analysis. In coding the data, it was possible to group together strands in an otherwise large dataset and delineate it in such a way that meaningful thematic analysis was able to occur.

# Chapter Six: Findings

## 6.1 Introduction

This chapter now proceeds by taking select quotations from the interview data according to relevant coding and providing commentary to frame this data. The researcher must make decisions in grouping this output such that it appears in a logical order for the reader. This is done by grouping the data into themes and sub themes such that they highlight and group key points from the data for analysis. This approach proceeds by attempting to frame data according to three main themes. Following the theoretical framing presented in the literature chapter, the researcher feels it is logical to present these themes as those relating to:

- changes and effects for the logistics labour process;
- considering the context for union mobilisation, and finally;
- to examine the spatial aspects of both work and labour organising/mobilising in the investigated sites.

This chapter will demonstrate a range of approaches from employers and unions. While individual workers may have been able to use the pandemic context to deviate from the desires of managers where policies and procedures were relaxed, union reps were generally not able to take advantage of this context and found themselves marginalised or engaged only in a limited form of participation relating to Covid-19 policy. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the interruption to 'normal' ways of working stemming from Covid meant that spatial aspects were significant, both in terms of changing work, but also means of conducting union activities.

## 6.2 The Labour Process

This section groups together data which is broadly linked to the labour process. In this respect the analysis might be best framed in considering how Covid-19 altered the labour process in these workplaces, taking into consideration managerial actions, workers' responses, and union interventions. This framing enables the analysis to consider common labour process themes such as the capital-labour relationship and the associated management of it. This includes the control-resistance dialectic, performance management, and other aspects of the need to secure workers' compliance in the employment relationship. One of the key findings to emerge in this respect is that in many of these plants, management vacated the shopfloor and workers were able to self-regulate their pace of work. As an extension of this, some of the workplaces suspended performance management – whether a conscious decision or being unable to proactively manage performance because of difficulties enacting the process.

Reps across the sites reported necessary changes to the labour process. This was generally a result of the need to maintain distance and meant that workers gained some control over the pace of their work. In some cases this was a question of pragmatism for managers, though in others the reps interviewed had an active role in shaping policy. The changes to 'management as usual' meant there were benefits for some workers in plants where work changed dramatically. This is most evident in respect of changing or suspended performance targets and other factors associated with a withdrawal of management that gave workers respite from the high performance targets usually associated with logistics work.

### *6.2.1 Performance Management, Targets, and the Effort Bargain*

There was a range of responses to questions about use of performance management or expectation of targets being achieved. While some of the sites reported work slowed down due to social distancing preventing workers from coming too close to each other (and sometimes other causes),

some workplaces reported pressure from managers to encourage workers to pick up the pace even where this may breach regulations.

In the first instance, performance management was suspended or ignored in some sites. Rep 13 reported that the employer initially suspended pick targets in the DC at the onset of the pandemic, and some workers drastically reduced their rate of work: 'They, they initially conceded to no targets whatsoever. Um, unfortunately people did take the piss, with that' (Rep 13, Gamma). Within 5-6 months of the initial public health response, the Gamma DC went from no targets or enforcement of PM policies back to the expectation of full performance:

> *Um, but you know, it, it, it was, it was, it was, it was a pretty big turnaround. I mean, we we'd gone from no, no performance whatsoever. And I mean, there, there, of course there was a minority that did, uh, take the piss, but, but in the same sense, it was a fridge warehouse. It's cold. People are not gonna stand around for the sake of it either. Um, uh, and then to go from that, to, within, within the space of, I think five or six months, we were back at full performance.* (Rep 13, Gamma Supermarket, code 16)

While the targets fluctuated with public health measures, there was also an expectation that targets be hit, and it was the public health advice of maintaining social distancing that permitted workers to reduce their pace of work:

> *In the area, um, where I was, the issue that we had was that we were being told on the one hand by the company, you know, follow all the legislation, two metres, masks, do all this, you know, be safe. But then we were also being told after a certain amount of time, once the performance was lifted, after we come out of the emergency lockdown, when it was just the staggered lockdowns, they staggered their performance with that. So they started moving it back up*
>
> *We will review it in two months when the situation changes. And, uh, and that, that, that, that was basically their, their, uh, idea. They, they initially conceded to no targets whatsoever.*
>
> *So easily by Easter '21, we were, we were pretty much back to, um, back to sort of firing on all, all cylinders, if you like.* (Rep 13, Gamma Supermarket, code 16)

Elsewhere, in Beta, as well as being able to informally self-regulate workloads by maintaining social distancing in the workplace, more formal means of performance management was also avoided. This came about as a quirk of the agreement over performance where challenges over gaps in the

working day on the scanner needed to be challenged within 24 hours. Workers could simply attribute their downtime to needing to maintain distance, that is if they were challenged at all:

> *Also difficult to enforce on grounds of performance – measure is 'down time' rather than pick rate, but down time investigations have to happen within 24 hours. No managers on the floor to investigate them. Workers also savvy and mindful of public health so unwilling to break distancing rules by entering aisles with other pickers in them. More likely to investigate workers for down time issues than breaching social distance – "did it need to take that long to wait to go down that aisle?"* (Field note entry 25th May 2022, Beta Supermarket, Code 14, 16)

Reps in some of the sites reported that workload and performance targets were not necessarily intense for reasons outside of Covid-19 - In contrast to the received wisdom around distribution work, Rep 1 reported that Packaging Co is not a high-pressure performance environment, and that he is generally allowed to organise his own workload. The nature of the industry and market conditions meant that workload decreased during Covid, despite the firm being part of the essential supply chain.

> *I think workload, probably you wanna think back. I don't think it's really changed that much. It might have dropped off a little bit because of Covid. Initially, because you know then then so the this. Then the workload for the what else would have been this much. Maybe that's my own sort of quite anecdotal, sort of. You know I'm remembering back 'cause they lost sort of contracts for certain things. You know 'cause obviously the wider economy. So some places were shutting down so they contracts, but generally… In that industry it kind of makes a lot of stuff for supermarkets. You know and a lot of stuff you know like it didn't really impact.* (Rep 1, Packaging Co, Code 16)

By contrast, at the time of interview (April 2022) the rep in Food Haul reported issues in the depot with managers being unable to effectively motivate workers to meet pick rates. He attributed this to issues with recruitment and labour turnover meaning that the new workers were not hitting targets. This also had the effect of meaning some of the established workforce were also less inclined to exert the level of effort that had previously been expected:

> *The warehouse is under pressure because they're very short of pickers. And because should be picking around 125, they're averaging about 85. They're slowing down the process. Purposefully. It's bit like if you're going shopping to get your lunch, yeah? Quick because you've got a given time, haven't you?*
>
> *It's all management. Yes, definitely poor management. Uhm, they were picking higher* (than 125) *at one point. They're not staying long enough. Not staying long enough, is the honest*

> *answer. And then you have those that have been there a long time. Why should I pick that when he's not? And why should I work my butt off if he's not working his butt off? Yeah, it's pretty poor management.* (Rep 3, Food Haul, Code 16)

Workers gained some concessions in Food Haul – specifically drivers who benefitted from changes to policy. For drivers, the safe system of work transferred some of the workload from drivers to the stores where stock is delivered – namely the breaking down and putting away of pallets, which are loaded to the curb rather than taken into the buildings:

> *Obviously, the two-metre distancing. We followed everything that was nationally required and but from a point of view of a driver - instead of him breaking down a pallet and taking the goods inside the store, he'd deliver the pallet to the external side of the building, so whether it be a drive-thru, [fast food outlets] or, a loading bay or just a back door in the town. He'd put the pallet down and then he stood there while the customer checked off the goods. The customer put their own stock away.* (Rep 3, Food Haul, Code 13)

The difficulties managing effort led to managers deploying temporary workers in some DCs. Where this happened, the agency workers tended to be expected to achieve the stated targets, where the existing workforce would not. In Beta Supermarket, the core workforce's 'immunity' from performance management created issues in respect of the employers using agency workers whose performance *was* managed. The framing of the issue in the workplace was that the Eastern European agency workers were in place to pick up the lost productivity from permanent workers and that they needed to work harder:

> *"Eastern European agency workers who didn't give a fuck". Creating a two-tiered workforce – they are picking up the slack because these won't work fast enough (i.e. by keeping to the rules to keep themselves safe). Pressure put on the agency workers to ignore the distance regs.* (Field note entry 25th May 2022 – Beta Supermarket, Code 16, 20)

While the Gamma site flexed its performance policies with public health requirements, the respite from targets was precarious, with core workers being told to do their best to hit targets despite the public health conditions. Agency workers were recruited and expected to be hitting targets and often flouted safe systems of work to do so:

> *We were getting mixed messages from the employer then, because we, uh, you know, the Gamma contracted staff were told that we were, you know, you know, face space, safe, all that, all that stuff. So we were told to basically, uh, work as safe as possible, but also hit all our targets. And if we didn't, we'd be disciplined. Um, and the agency workers were in it were in an even worse situation because employment protections were a lot weaker. Um, so a lot of them would come in when they were ill, which increased the cases in the warehouse of Covid. Uh, unfortunately we had this sort of division between the agency workers that were scared of losing their job that were essentially climbing through cages and clambering over pallets to try and hit their targets.* (Rep 13, Gamma Supermarket, Code 16, 20)

The pressure on agency workers was particularly acute with the use of the wearable scanners being used to apply pressure on workers to hit targets even where doing so breaches other employment rights:

> *…the agency was through a group called [Agency]. And they were actually being sent through their, through their trackable, uh, computers on their wrist. They were sent messages, basically telling them to work, to target, um, and to not have a break unless they had exceeded their target by a certain amount of percentage points. Um, and obviously during Covid that meant that there was this sort of, this sort of, um, division* (Rep 13, Gamma Supermarket, Code 16, 20)

### *6.2.2 Absent Managers*

The changes to performance management in this instance can be explained especially by the shifts to the physical presence of managers on the shopfloor, and adjustments to the disciplinary process which necessarily underpins any PM system. Whether through necessity or choice, the employers did not exercise the disciplinary process with the same intensity in many of these workplaces, particularly where public health restrictions were at their most stringent.

For instance, in Beta Supermarket managers were still required to physically come to work, but the reps reported that shopfloor managers and HR almost entirely vacated the shopfloor during periods where the government guidelines required social distancing. Similarly in Gamma, the effects of the pandemic removed 'lane checkers' who have functions related to the operations of the business, but also carried out other functions which benefitted managers in preventing informal conversations on the shop floor.

> *And we used to have lane checkers that were basically, basically, basically watch you, uh, watch you work. They were there formally, they were there to, um, they were there to straighten up the cages and restack and do that. But in reality, they were there to make sure that people weren't clumped together for long amounts of time that no, no idiot was getting on a soapbox, uh, sort of thing.* (Rep 13, Gamma Supermarket, code 7,11,13,14,16)

The rep at Packaging Co stated that he had a large amount of discretion over his work before Covid, and physical supervision was limited ('…the supervision level is not that intense really. You know, you've got a lot of leeway to kind of work on your own'), but also that the effects of the pandemic had reduced the physical presence of managers more generally. This was reflected in his area and shift, but also across other sections of the plant.

> *Well, I think it's like it's probably led to less supervision in a way. You know, like I work at a weekend and because, well, it has led to less supervision 'cause people don't, people aren't really going in on site outside their working hours. So I won't really see a manager at the weekend. And and they and speaking to the guys that I work with, you know, they sort of say in the week it's really dead. You've got like core productions or managers in they said there's no one else there. No, there's no office staff, and there's no other, you know the you know the management team who run the place aren't there. They're all working from home. Yeah, so it's probably so yeah, kind of a little more… I don't know as much in the week, but maybe it is a bit more, uh, like a relaxed environment. I don't know. I mean it is in my job because we just don't see anybody anymore. We just got one manager's on site with us. and that's it. Because they're all of all, keeping out. You know, unless they have to come in. They won't come into work, you know?* (Rep 1, Packaging Co, Code 13, 14)

### *6.2.3 Managing absences*

Absence policy varied between the sites, with most generally being more proactive and accommodating in ensuring Covid absences were not counted against absence management policies. In some sites there was evidence of this extending to illness following vaccines, and this was sometimes a 'win' for unions in negotiating the implementation of these rules as an extension of the wider public health measures. Despite this, some of the workplaces demonstrate inequalities between groups, particularly temporary workers, where the payment structure for absences meant a greater incentive for these workers to stray from isolation guidelines where there had been contact, for example, and to continue to come to work.

In some cases, the employer's management of absence permitted benefits for the workers. This included forgiving or generous policy which guaranteed pay or retention of other benefits while sick. For instance, Packaging Co amended its policies so that Covid absences did not affect bonuses, but also so that when workers received vaccines they were entitled to additional days off to recover should they be needed.

> *…it didn't affect your bonuses. You know we get sickness bonuses and stuff, but if you're off with Covid and you show them your certificates that, you know, proof. You know you're you're OK, but we had some issues with some, like for example, things to do with the vaccines so uhm, the group would allow you to have three days off sick if you had the vaccine and it be full paid.* (Rep 1, Packaging Co, Code 3, 13)

While the employer was sympathetic to absences from Covid, Rep 1 argued that there were increased absences at times where society changed in its attitudes to Covid – as people mingled socially more often as restrictions relaxed, and perhaps became more complacent as the public health response included things such as vaccines.

> *I think I think what's happening is it's obviously, and most I'd say most people being vaccinated. And I think what's happened is people who, you know, that whole period where everybody just stayed at home, you know. And there's lockdowns and stuff like that. I think just because everyone is going out now and just mixing and going to pubs and stuff. It's just loads of people that loads of people getting Covid, but they've all been vaccinated, so they're not really being that, you know, they're not getting that ill with it. It just seems to me that this is just like anecdotal sort of observation that a lot of people I know have caught Covid in the last three months. And had to be off work because but they've all been vaccinated, so they've not really got ill with it. You know the people who got including myself, the people who caught Covid first? You know, in the, maybe in the first year before the vaccine happened got quite ill, you know what I mean? Like I did and my mate did at work. We kind of got it before the vaccines and got ill. Now people are getting it and they're not really that ill 'cause they've been vaccinated, but it's causing a problem. A lot of people are off at the moment. Uhm, it's almost like the kind of postpone the problem but obviously people have been vaccinated, so it's just… There's nothing really you can do about it 'cause the company can. They they're still sticking to their guidelines, but of course a worker can go into work socially distance all day long. You know, to clock in and check the temperature, wear a proximity alarm all day long. And then clock out of work. Go to the pub, or go to a gig, or go to a football match, you know. That's kind of where it is at the moment.* (Rep 1, Packaging Co, Code 3)

By way of contrast, two of the cases made reference to workers exploiting the policy in place such that they were able to gain paid time when not sick (to 'take the piss') and in the Alpha case, this was such that it became a disciplinary issue. The rep cited a worker who would typically take

emergency days as leave though during Covid he began to instead isolate. This pattern had been noted by managers who issued a warning.

> *…we had a colleague up there think had Covid seven times or he'd been in contact with people and he had been paid all the way through… He always has time off for childcare two or three times a year. He says since we've been paying him nonstop, he hasn't had any childcare he's had Covid instead* (Rep 5, Alpha Supermarket, code 3, 17)

The Construction Co reps reported that the absence policy in place was good – that it took little more than declaring you had Covid to get paid time off with 95% sick pay. This resulted in people 'taking the piss massively', but by contrast the statutory sick pay in place for agency workers resulted in them concealing sickness in order to continue to get paid.

> *They were good regarding Covid absence. With like people phoning with Covid with, there was no question. It was you're staying off until you clear. Yeah, yeah. There was no question …because we paid 95% sick pay. So of course people are gonna take the piss, aren't they? But there was also an element of people not taking the piss because they were on, they were agency, they only get statutory sick pay. So they'd come in and mask the fact that they'd got Covid - I'm going in because I'm not getting paid...* (Rep 15, Construction Co, Code 3, 20)

The implementation of absence policy reflects a pragmatism from the employers with the need to ensure that those who are sick do not spread illness through the workforce, though also gives workers that are inclined to abuse this policy the opportunity to do so. Ensuring that workers are actually at work is a key feature of the management of the labour process, though one which Covid clearly interrupts and provides workers with some benefits in terms of paid absence. Some workplaces, particularly evident in the Alpha case, also chose to continue to manage absence while other workplaces such as Construction Co saw workers able to 'take the piss' even if only the core workforce. This disparity between contractual status and eligibility for sick pay is both a factor which leverages managerial control over the precarious workers, but also risks undermining the intentions of the sickness policy for the core workforce. Put simply, there is little benefit paying core workers to remain home when ill if temporary workers are pressured to attend work while ill and risk spreading illness.

### *6.2.4 Disciplinaries and the Disciplinary Process*

The disciplinary process shifted in character in some of these sites, with Covid-19 bringing both new 'offences', and also new means of negotiating the process, particularly with the incorporation of electronic hearings. The shifts to disciplinaries can be broadly considered under the following categories: disciplinaries continuing as they might ordinarily, sometimes with union support and sometimes with modification; the suspension of disciplinaries through the employer's choice, practicality, or union opposition; and changes to the dynamics/content of disciplinaries.

#### Disciplinaries held as usual

While some of the sites reported that Covid halted usual disciplinary processes, the rep at Alpha informed that they continued with provisions for distancing which varied according to the prevailing government advice. The kind of disciplinary offences were consistent with non-Covid periods; the most common disciplinary was for absence - 'mainly time off' - and some of these related to conduct around Covid testing:

> *…he said he'd had a Covid test that was negative. And then he got something on his phone that said he was positive. So he, he shot out didn't even bother clock off. But there must have been in his story things that didn't add up… I can't remember what they gave him - a warning.* (Rep 5, Alpha Supermarket, Code 3, 17)

Beyond this, Food Haul also continued the use of disciplinaries, with the union actively supporting cases where the disciplinary charge was something such as breaching a safe system of work. In this instance the worker had little room to oppose a disciplinary hearing happening when they had shown themselves to be unconcerned about Covid risks.

> *It was agreed if somebody was at work that you could hold a disciplinary, but from a point of view of space every room that we had had, uh, plastic screens. And all the wipes, sanitiser, masks available. You had to have a mask on in the building anyway. Yeah, and drivers were provided with washable masks and disposable masks, as was every other member of staff. And in fact, they still are available if you still need it. So if you had a disciplinary and it would be taken into a room that would normally be big enough for eight to ten people.*
>
> *And it wouldn't be in a closed room, and where the windows would be open. And it's something that obviously had to take place, yeah? But all safety precautions were followed for everybody and it was an option if the person individual wasn't comfortable with that room. And their personal opinions regarding Covid, uh would be adhered to.* (Rep 3, Food Haul, Code 17)

In some instances, the union would be supportive of a particular form of disciplinary action that was designed to stop workers breaching the safe systems of work that were implemented to halt the spread of Covid – in this case, the recipient of goods being required to break down orders and take them into their own building without the help of drivers:

> Rep 3: *You would have had people did and for a free pizza would take stuff indoors. Yeah, and then the next time a driver goes there and says no, we're not allowed indoors, the customer saying, well, your mate did or what was, what's his name and then they will be dealt with by the disciplinary procedure.*
>
> Interviewer: *Right so uhm. That would become a thing would it? Or it was that obviously that would have been a new kind of disciplinary issue because it wasn't a thing before. But was that coming up a lot that people would kind of skirt around the rules?*
>
> Rep 3: *Oh yeah, yeah. And yeah, there was quite a lot of it.*
>
> Interviewer: *And was the disciplinary side? Was that something that the union supported or proposed or put forward?*
>
> Rep 3: *And we actually supported it yeah, because they weren't just putting themselves at risk, they were putting their colleagues at risk, their family at risk.*
>
> (Rep 3, Food Haul, Code 2, 4, 17)

In Food Haul – where the union rep had been involved in creating a safe system of work – these cases reflect the active role of the union in propping up the policy in order to ensure wider safety:

> *The thing is you also have to remember, if somebody says 'I don't want to go into a room with three other people and because we, we should hold 8 to 9 people, and because I don't think there's enough space for me to be safe and the question would be 'so why did you deliver into the unit?'* (Rep 3, Food Haul, Code 2, 17)

What is perhaps telling about the cases of Alpha and Food Haul is that the disciplinary process continued as usual here, but both cases included reps who were closely involved in the creation of policy around Covid safety. In that respect the links between policy making and enforcement are unsurprising.

### Disciplinaries suspended or postponed through union intervention

Disciplinaries were frequently suspended or postponed in these workplaces, particularly in the earlier stages of the pandemic as employers either chose to not manage certain aspects of policy, or were unable to as a result of the context or union pressure.

Packaging Co provides an illustrative example where disciplinary matters became suspended as a result of the large task managing Covid issues at the beginning of the pandemic, though as the situation became more 'normalised', disciplinary issues resumed.

> *…the management then starts to just go back to other things, just, you know, just general disciplinaries disciplining people you know just whereas at first that weren't really happening. Because they they're just focusing on the Covid situation so everyone just sort of thinking about that. Then after a while once it's all, you know, settled down and all the sort of rules are in place, it becomes just like that's just like normal part of working life then then it becomes, you know, just back to normal* (Rep 1, Packaging Co, Code 13, 17)

The Beta reps reported that Covid halted disciplinary and grievance procedures for two main reasons: Firstly, that managers and HR professionals were unwilling to risk their own health to carry out meetings in office spaces that would bring them into close contact with others in confined spaces, but also that disciplinaries on the grounds of performance could not be investigated. This was a result of managers vacating the shop floor and allowing workers to self-regulate, but also because the measure of performance was 'down time' on the scanner rather than output. The agreement around performance meant that any issues needed to be challenged within 24 hours and managers were not present to challenge down time. As one rep put it: 'If they ask you what you were up to two Fridays ago at 2:15, how are you meant to be able to answer that?'.

- *Disciplines and grievances effectively knocked on their head – managers and HR unable/unwilling to go into rooms with multiple people. Also difficult to enforce on grounds of performance – measure is 'down time' rather than pick rate, but down time investigations have to happen within 24 hours. No managers on the floor to investigate them.* (Field diary entry, 25th May 2022 – Beta Supermarket, Code 13, 14, 17)

Similarly, the reps at Medico reported that disciplinary action was almost entirely postponed as a result of Covid, and that this was the result of their refusal to hold hearings virtually, and that the

usual major source of disciplinary action (short term absence) ceased to be a disciplinary matter because of Covid. The union argued that the Acas code on disciplinaries should be interpreted as physical representation:

> *But when it came to disciplinaries and grievances and all the rest of it and, and accompanying people we kind of put our foot down and says, oh, you can't accompany somebody on the telly. You know, it's, you know, if I watch, if I watch Coronation St doesn't mean I've, I've accompanied, you know, Gail Tilsley or something like that, you know, you know, we argued a case that, you know, you know, that Acas code says, you know, we've got right to accompany people, it doesn't, doesn't say via Zoom or any of the rest of it and, and they did back down* (Rep 2 Medico, Code 9, 17)

### Changes to the character of the hearing

Disciplinary meetings, where they did occur, began to take a different form with electronic meetings becoming normalised or necessary, and this affecting the dynamic between the rep and employer.

The Unite reginal officer reported a difference in the way that hearings were conducted, whether in-person or virtually:

> *I think, I think on odd occasion, a couple of cases, I can think of the individuals from the organisation being in different locations and also being on video screen. If I could meet the member and it was safe and supposed to be in the same room I would do. Um, but it's very hard to gain that human contact and also sometimes to read people. Cause when you are in the room, you sort of, you intuition kicks in, you can also read body language generally when you can only see somebody's head or head and shoulders to get that human engagement also to read somebody's body language or get a sense that you do when you are in a, a room face to face, made it more difficult, um, and dealing, dealing with cases anyway, because it, I find it a combination of I'm thinking about what I need to be mindful of and my input also what the member is likely to say or will say, cause I have prepped them before we go in the meeting, manage them emotionally that if I need to have ask for a break, either to look after their welfare or advise them accordingly I've also then got a contract on what the other side is saying to either prevent my member from saying something that they shouldn't do.* (URO1, Code 9, 17)

In addition to being unable to intuitively gauge the mood of meetings, virtual hearings placed constraints on being able to support members at times of stress:

> *To build up that rapport and trust, that was difficult. In some cases, um, either the combination of people that needed more reassurance or, um, their anxiety levels were increased by the fact that a) that they're in a pandemic and they were going through some sort of formal process with their employer that they were uncertain about. Um, most of the times, as a regional officer, the first time you contacted somebody, generally, they're not in a*

*good place to start with. So you are already on the back foot trying to establish that rapport, manage their expectations, manage them as an individual, and then get to the, the, sort of the details of the case, which I need to know to be able to offer them correct, sound advice, and then to be able to support them.* (URO1, Code 9, 17)

This differing context was recognised by the Medico rep as a justification for postponing disciplinaries so that the union member could be better represented. The reasoning behind this was that it was hard to 'have an argument over Zoom 'so the 'certain meetings' where that might be required were postponed until they could be safely held physically:

*So we, we argued that, you know, they could, they could have certain meetings, but the, you know, they, they tried and tried to stop, you know, they tried to make, make these over Zoom 'cause it's very, you know, the ones even investigation means it's very difficult to have an argument over Zoom. Unless, unless you that wee, you know, that that parish council, when they went viral, they seemed to manage, but it was, it was just alien and, and you know, therefore we did suggest that disciplinaries were postponed until the lockdown was over* (Rep 2, Medico, Code 9, 17)

The Packaging Co rep (Rep 1) was an accredited Unite rep, giving him the credentials to attend workplace hearings elsewhere in place of a regional officer. He reported doing this twice during the Covid period, and both hearings were held virtually (one over Teams and one by conference call). While he believed it was difficult to evaluate the effects of holding virtual hearings, he cited being unable to meet the member for coffee before the hearing as an issue created by Covid:

*Where a guy had a grievance sort of thing that was turning into a disciplinary case and. And then even he was, I mean, I was sort of saying that then, then circumstances. You know, I'm not going in. You know, I think companies would stop people coming in as well. That's they're not necessarily stopping you doing it, they're just saying you can't come on site. So I did one over the conference call type thing. So that that went very good. You can imagine how all that is to represent somebody. Just normally you would you know you'd phone them up then you would go and meet them. You know have a coffee or something. Yes, and you'd sit with them and go through the case, you know. Then you meet them on the day you go in with them. The big thing about representing somebody is you know you've got somebody sitting next to you the meeting you're getting disciplined. You've got a person sitting next to you in the room. It's not... especially on a phone conference call. When this company I did it for didn't have like Teams set up, so it's just you don't know what's going on. He's just on a, you know you're on the phone. On speakerphone. There's a disciplinary hearing going on and you can hear everyone talking. Yeah, I mean you just have to adapt to it and try your best but I imagine like I say that must have happened a lot.* (Rep 1, Packing Co, Code 6, 9, 17)

Like the regional officer, he also attributed virtual hearings of meetings where there may be some conflict being affected in terms of dynamics of the meeting, as well as some practicalities compared to in-person hearings:

> *Um I'd just say the dynamics in the kind of room. It's just, it's just difficult to, you know? Where you have to like you'd have to just keep adjourning, and it's just even if things like that. I mean, if you're in a disciplinary with someone you know it's starting to go sort of bit weird and you want to meet with people, he's just like oh...*
>
> *The meeting before, probably because you could just do over the phone, have a chat and stuff, but I think meeting, I think doing things like that I think this is only my own opinion... Someone else might say it don't matter, but I think representing somebody. In again, a disciplinary or grievance if you can't go in and meet them beforehand and sit in with them, I think it makes it harder to do it. It's just that it's just the thing. If you're in a room, you know if you're in a room with people, you know, HR managers, someone's getting disciplined and you're in that room with them, but it's just totally different, like dynamic. You know, if they're on Microsoft Teams and you are, and the other people are it's like totally different. It's like totally different situation it's like being in the meeting with people and you're all on Zoom. It isn't the same, it's all right. You know, if you're just having a meeting with somebody just to discuss something I don't really think it matters, you know what I mean. Like I said, oh well, have a meeting with you just to generally discuss something. But if you're in a meeting, like in if you're trying to negotiate something or there's something like a conflict, like say, conflict situation like that. But someone getting disciplined, I think it definitely makes a difference if you're not actually all in there together. Uhm, yeah I'd I'd say that that. That has sort of changed things.* (Rep 1, Packing Co, Code 6, 9, 17)

Recognising the shifting context and the potential shifts to the dynamics in virtual meetings, reps might also evaluate whether to manage the case electronically, or opt to attend physically. As a regional officer, URO1 was required to represent workers in absence of an available rep, or in workplaces where there is no rep present. The severity of the case would contribute to the decision of whether to hold the hearing physically or virtually.

> *So generally as a rule of thumb, if we did meetings that, um, and this isn't to lessen the impact on anybody, if it was a disciplinary meeting where for example, two colleagues had had a bit of a spat with one another. We could do that by a virtual meeting, whether it was Teams or Zoom. If it was a meeting where it was likely to result in dismissal then as officers, we had the decision of whether we would attend that physically.* (URO1, Code 9, 17)

Rep 1 also reported a number of approved reps had ceased to represent workers in place of the regional officer, and that this was an issue as many workplaces in the East Midlands contained union members, but no union rep:

> *And then I know some people dropped out of it because of Covid you know, people who were doing it. And they just dropped out of it like I've heard that you know. So and so is not doing this anymore. They'll do it after Covid, he probably felt uncomfortable themselves. You know, going in. You know, going into different places, trying to keep himself safe and stuff.* (Rep 1, Packaging Co, Code 4, 9, 17)

This context is particularly important in considering the wider context of the labour movement where workplaces contain union members, but have no union recognition or reps in place. In this instance the support of accredited reps or FTOs is essential, but the pandemic context and proliferation of video call technology increases the likelihood that hearings may be held remotely.

By contrast, Construction Co reps found that the meetings being held virtually gave them a more formal character and allowed the employer to increase disciplinary penalties. This was argued to be partially attributed to the inability to have informal meetings with managers to influence the outcome of disciplinaries ahead of the hearing.

> *First things first. We never had any disciplinary relating in any way, shape, or forms to Covid. None. Never happened. The general stuff. Um, because the meetings were remote. I mean, obviously you can't have the conversations that you probably would with a face-to-face meeting, which at times was problematic as reps. You build relationships with your management and there are times when a quiet word here or there, um, a discussion outside of the meeting can close the disciplinary down very quickly. I mean basically you have that conversation to one side, look, do we really need to go down this route? Is it, is it really necessary? Look, look at the whole process. Look at this. You couldn't do that.* (Rep 14, Construction Co, Code 9, 13, 15, 17)

As well as being unable to shut down disciplinaries before they got to the formal stage, the reps found that the sanctions that came from disciplinaries were harsher – 'verbals became writtens'. The ability to informally speak with managers before the disciplinary was a tool to help influence the sanction.

> *Because that that first point you went in management where you say 'look, hold on a minute this ain't right, is it'. It should be this, not this. You've made them nine times outta 10 - You've made their mind up for 'em, don't you? With a little word. So before you know it, they're in the process and you can't, it's already gone. It's already gone.* (Rep 15, Construction Co, Code 9, 17)

Similarly, the Unite official felt that virtual meetings allowed HR representatives to 'push boundaries'. He cited instances where HR would continually rephrase questions in the hope of catching workers out by identifying inconsistencies. These sorts of behaviours, he argued, were less likely when a rep or official is physically present in meetings:

> *I think some managers in HR did take advantage of the fact that they were on a video link and not physically in the room. And through experience, I, I found out that when a union representative, whether that's a workplace rep or full-time official is in the room, the organisation will behave differently because they know that they've got somebody on the other side of the table that has an education standard and a knowledge that is on par or passes their own and they will be challenged. And I think certain individuals, and I think it's more to do with their personality, took advantages, the fact they, on a video link. That they push the boundaries of their behaviour within their organisational structure to a degree that they could get away with because they weren't physically in the room.* (URO, Code 9, 15, 17)

### *6.2.5 Summary*

The Covid-19 pandemic directly interrupted the labour process of those workers who had to continue to work in these distribution sites. Where workers were required to come into close proximity, they were able to self-regulate their work by refusing to come within two metres in accordance with the prevailing public health guidance. Workers also gained concessions in respect of workload where managers ceased to manage – this reflects a withdrawal of managers from the shop floor, but also that performance management tended to not be enforced in some workplaces. This reflects disruptions to the operation of performance management, but also union interjection – in particular with respect to the operation of disciplinary processes. Significantly, there was also a raft of new forms of disciplinary offences, especially pertaining to breaching safe systems of work. In some instances, the union reps would also endorse and help to enforce these policies.

## 6.3 Mobilising Workers

The following section highlights the dynamic context in which the union operated with respect to mobilising members. While their input in respect of negotiating aspects of the execution of the labour process – pay, safe systems of work, PM and disciplinary processes – reflect an important aspect of trade union activity, the following section analyses the context for mobilisation. This specifically elaborates upon and frames the kinds of issues that may have been mobilised around, and the extent to which attempts to mobilise were possible. Generally, these reps were unable to mobilise workers, and so this section attempts to understand why they did not.

It identifies a range of issues that the union reps may have used to frame mobilisation – particularly in terms of perception of the organisations' conduct. This included allegations of profiteering and placing safety – both in terms of general health and safety and Covid measures – as secondary to the ongoing operation of the business. There were also issues of differential treatment across groups, though where this group consists of agency workers, they present a difficult group to mobilise by virtue of their precarious status.

In other respects the union reps faced hostility from employers, including attempts to bypass or undermine the union's existing structures. This was evident in respect of attempting to introduce policies without the established negotiation with reps/the union, and attempts to undermine the union, especially by deflecting blame. Also tellingly, one of the more militant reps interviewed was dismissed and in the process of pursuing an unfair dismissal case through the tribunal system which he attributed to his union activity.

There were some efforts to mobilise, though these were narrow in scope. Many of the sites received pay rises, and one successfully organised a strike in order to do so. In other sites, pay awards were more reflective of the increasing cost of living which followed the relaxing of public health measures, and in some instances were linked to other factors, such as being part of a national bargaining unit

containing other industries. In this respect, Covid-19 and some of the associated issues were not effective leverage for mobilising workers to action.

Generally, the findings linked to mobilising workers reflect tensions between navigating safety in the workplace, which tended to require a cooperative approach with the employer. This had a range of causes – a more adversarial approach becoming more muted, unions being undermined by the employers, or having existing structures in place which tend towards partnership. In some instances, the employer exhibited hostility and sought to undermine collective organisation.

### *6.3.1 Identifying and Framing Issues*

The following discussions outline a tension where the union might identify issues in the employer's conduct whether through their own perception, or through members, and face hostility from the employer. There are recurring themes in respect of identifying issues related to employers' conduct that might be points to mobilise around. In a general sense, these include feelings that the organisation was profiteering from continued operation and to a significant extent, these revolve around the business prioritising profit over the health of workers. This especially includes the employer using tenuous justification for being part of the essential supply chain; and tokenistic or uneven application of safety measures.

Medico is an important case to outline firstly as it was one where there was a concerted effort to pull a 'stunt' to draw attention to the employer's inaction over PPE. There were some issues identified with the procurement and allocation of PPE and other sanitation items, particularly early in the pandemic. One union rep was particularly innovative in organising the purchase of a pallet-full of masks from their own DC when managers would not sanction their use, claiming shortages. This stunt allowed the reps to subvert a 'masquerade' communication from managers at the head office of this MNC by also circulating GMB-branded PPE.

Beta Supermarket provides an illustrative account of a site where the employer was both contemptuous towards the public health requirements, but also hostile towards the union's

challenges. This supermarket was one of a small number of sites investigated where the reps interviewed reported active breaches of Covid safety, as well as a degree of hostility or contempt towards the union. The reps reported issues with the workforce overestimating the reach of the union: While this DC distributed clothing to a major supermarket, the two neighbouring DCs on the industrial estate closed at the onset of the pandemic, supplying clothing to high street retailers and so being dubbed 'unessential' compared to the supermarket supply chain. A number of the workforce challenged the union reps – 'Why are you not shutting the place down?' – rather than directing this frustration to the employer. When reps challenged managers on this DC remaining open when neighbours distributing the same kind of goods were closed, a manager responded 'My mum pisses her pants and needs clean underwear'.

While there were some concessions to Covid safety, these were tokenistic – the reps pointed to sanitising stations being introduced but not maintained, and that one-way systems were rendered meaningless. Workers would exit the workplace through a designated exit, only to have to re-enter through the designated entrance to retrieve their coats and bags from the same area just passed through by the next shift. A larger issue the reps pointed to included workers being sent to other depots, specifically workers travelling between a Yorkshire DC and the Midlands DC where the reps interviewed were situated. The reps cited this as being an active cause of Covid transmission in the workplace, particularly as the minibuses being used to transport workers were not being cleaned between journeys, as evidenced by food wrappers left on the buses. The reps believed that this movement of workers was not based on the need to shift labour capacity around the supply chain, but rather as justification for keeping a clothing DC open and to profit from this advantage over competitors. It was argued that workers moved were not needed elsewhere, but rather it needed to *appear* that other more essential parts of the supermarket supply chain (e.g. food DCs) might need to 'borrow' workers from the less essential DCs such as the clothing plant these reps worked in. This was referenced especially as the number of employees sent to food DCs was small, and that workers from the food DCs would be coming *back* on the return journey. One of the reps reported going to a

food DC and being shouted at by a colleague because he was there unnecessarily and was interfering with their work. The reps felt this movement of workers was done purely to justify the operation of the clothes arm of the chain if the firm were to be challenged, and that it actively contributed to the spread of Covid between Midlands and Yorkshire plants. One rep in particular frequently referenced the opportunities and profits that this provided for the employer while their health was at risk.

Similarly, the rep in Gamma (Rep 13) made frequent reference to his perception of profiteering by the supermarket, with the belief that the concessions made to allowing workers to self-regulate their safety in the initial stages of the pandemic resulted in them trying to 'claw back' profits that were lost in the original stages.

> *Um, they, the company viewed that as, uh, an insult basically, how, how dare we, how dare we impact their profits by wanting to stay alive? You know, we, we are so selfish, all that crap. Um, so they were then obviously trying to claw back their, their profits that they had lost, uh, during, during furlough* (Rep 13, Gamma Supermarket, Code 1, 15)

The rep felt that when there were pressures on ensuring goods were moved that Covid safety measures came secondary to completing the work. Workers were expected to maintain distance 'when they could'

> *It was twofold because when they were busy and, and when they had late lorries coming in, no one gave a shit about Covid safety. They said, get it in and keep a mask on and distance when you can.* (Rep 13, Gamma Supermarket, Code 1)

The rep also felt that the government guidance was deliberately vague, and that this helped to facilitate the environment for employers to bend rules as suited them:

> *Yeah. So as the, as the government advice got vaguer and vaguer, uh, that was, that was you. I mean, the government gave that advice deliberately vague, so the businesses could do what they did. Um, so that, that was not unexpected at all.* (Rep 13, Gamma Supermarket, Code 1)

The reps in Construction Co cited the firm's motivation to keep workers safe as being driven by profit fundamentally. They believed the firm had delivered on a number of fronts in terms of safety, but this was mostly in order to keep production moving for the purpose of profit.

> *You said production. Production's the wrong word. Profits. That's all it's about. That's all the whole thing has ever been about protecting profit margins for [Construction Co].* (Rep 14, Construction Co)

> *They did everything they could to keep production going, didn't they? Everything. Everything humanly possible. If you couldn't wear a mask, they'd get you a screen. There was no, there was no, there was no, they didn't try to understand why you wouldn't wear or you couldn't wear a mask. It was okay. If you can't wear a mask, we'll get you a screen.* (Rep 16, Construction Co)

> *The only thing that the company were interested in was maintaining production and again, maintaining those profits and that profit margin. That that was the only concern. I had direct discussions with our general manager and the um, our director. It's plain to see. How can we make sure it doesn't impact on production? How can we keep the people in?* (Rep 14, Construction Co) (Code 1)

They believed that this was part of a cynical approach which resulted in the firm creating a justification for essential worker status so they could continue to operate. The firm supplied a medical part that was a minor contribution their overall operation, which was the production of machinery used in the construction sector:

> *So that, that, so our warehouse gets around it because we supply, um, apparently we supply hospitals, with generators, backup generators. We are the parts for those backup generators. It's very little, just little things like that. It's a foothold in the door, isn't it?* (Rep 15, Construction Co, Code 1)

The reps here also felt there was a contradiction between the desire to test to keep people safe, but also to *avoid* testing if they felt it would interfere with profit.

> *…that if anybody even suspected if they sneezed, farted the wrong way they'd do the tests. But once they realised hang on a minute, if we go start getting people going off…* (Rep 14, Construction Co, Code 1, 3)

While there was the implementation of many measures which would help the public health burden the reps felt that much of the actions were tokenistic and that keeping production moving was the primary concern:

> *it's just to be seen to be doing something.* (Rep 16, Construction Co)
>
> *Yeah, of course it was. It was, you know, we can keep it going. Keeping you safe. If anybody asks, we can say we staggered shifts* (Rep 15, Construction Co) (Code 1)

The reps also believed that the firm had actively lied about market conditions in order to justify the implementation of breaks to agreements in the pay deal:

> *…that was based on a lie we subsequently found out. It was they hadn't lost orders. They'd archived them, they're two completely different things.* (Rep 14, Construction Co)
>
> *…we got this emergency thing. We're losing orders here. We're losing orders there. And each one of those meetings, the scenario appeared to be worse than the last one. Covid was was a gift that dropped into their lap. Any way to pinch a penny, isn't it? Any way you can. It was the gift that kept on giving for two years.* (Rep 15, Construction Co) (Code 1, 19)

The firm also took advantage of a clause that allowed them to temporarily halt overtime. Rather than this being in suspended in five-week blocks 'for business needs', the firm justified breaking this into weekly blocks on an ad hoc basis as a result of supply chain pressures caused by Covid issues in other countries.

> *Instead of it being a 5 week block, they were allowed to break it down into weekly blocks purely for business needs because of parts in the supply chain and getting problems in they could say 'they got no engines next week. So, um, no overtime for that'.* (Rep 14, Construction Co, Code 1, 19)

These items collectively contribute to issues which reps may have used to mobilise around and direct ire towards the employer.

### *6.3.2 Other Aspects of Health and Safety*

One might assume that public health issues might provide a platform from which to launch efforts to mobilise collective resources. While these plants were mostly limited or hampered in their ability to mobilise, there were also other aspects of health and safety that could have been framed in efforts to mobilise.

Health and safety in the workplace is a matter which is typically underpinned by legislation and regulatory bodies in a way that employment issues are not. The HSE is able to take real time action in a way that employment tribunals cannot as they mostly navigate issues of fairness after employees exit their jobs. In this respect, the use of health and safety as a tool to lever management, or build support from members might by a strategy that has success. in respect of safety measures on the site.

Some reps reported a marked difference between the implementation of Covid safety policies, and other safety policies. This was most obvious where there was a distinction between abiding by distancing regulations but ignoring other safety protocols – including pallets being stacked over height, and workers clambering through racking. In some of the sites both Covid and other H&S were neglected, with a mentality of 'get it on the vehicle' or related to other time-sensitive pressures. One rep identified the 'government-backed' nature of the Covid regulations – that these were given higher priority as matters for discussion compared to regular health and safety matters. Elsewhere, the researcher's attendance at a Unite branch meeting (May 2022) included reference to persistent issues with the employer's neglect in providing adequate safety items, including that of cones for vehicles, hi-vis, and gloves.

The Gamma rep found that changes to other H&S rules, such as on pallet heights came into effect. Reps tried to build momentum in order to challenge managers on these issues, but struggled to gain support from the workforce.

> *And when we tried to get mass grievances on things and people sort of said, oh, it's just a petition. That's not gonna do anything. You're wasting your time you're well intentioned, but you wasting your time. And then when we had pallets started splitting from the sheer volume of product that was on 'em and heavy stock was stacked at the top, uh, and pallet heights were derestricted…* (Rep 13, Gamma Supermarket, Code 4, 5, 15)

The flouting of non-Covid H&S rules had some real-world effects, including injury to workers from falling stock.

> *Um, and then suddenly you had people breaking their noses in a freezer and a fridge because of heavy stock falling from, uh, almost two meters. On their head. Um, then when they come to us asking what we should do, um, I, I, I sort of sort of bit my bit, my lip so hard. I said, well, the first thing you could have done was sign the bit of paper that took two seconds to sign and get your time sheets from the pallets for your still time for your delay* (Rep 13, Gamma Supermarket, Code 4, 15)

The Beta reps reported that H&S was not a priority for this employer generally, beyond their general antipathy to Covid measures. The reps reported that the environment agency visited the site during Covid and that the response was similar to their H&S response outside of pandemic – 'they only pay

attention the week before an inspection'. This meant there were regularly breaches of H&S regulations in the DC, such as obstruction of fire doors.

At the Food Haul site, the rep reported proactivity from managers with respect to managing Covid safety, but he referred to issues with respect to other H&S, attributing the difference in attitudes to Covid measures being 'government-backed' and presenting opportunities to engage on policy. Still, this added importance was given to Covid measures as a result of the added scrutiny and importance that followed the government's public health response.

> Rep 3: *It should be, but I think Covid was government backed. And we had to be seen to be doing something over and above, which we did. And in fact we were over and above standards of our parent company.*
>
> Interviewer*: Did Covid give you of any kind of leverage powers over all the things?…*
>
> Rep 3: *Not powers, no, not powers. It could be the opportunity to argue. Because at the end of the day I could say, 'well isn't the government saying this as well?'* (Rep 3, Food Haul, Code 1, 15)

Some of the H&S issues (such as pallets being stacked too high) are attributed to the managers being 'old school and only want to get home early' and having an attitude of 'get it on the vehicle' – that is to do what needs to be done to get deliveries loaded and despatched.

> *I've had an issue with pallet heights. And the weight of the pallets we have, because you know they are heavy you know you're delivering a lot of oil, bottles of wine bottles of beer, flours, rices. Now an average pallet could weigh 900 kilo and this issue has been in since 2018. And the manager, the senior warehouse manager that's in charge of it, he just seems to want to do a file note. 'I've done this, I've done that blah blah blah'. When you look at it, you go back into the warehouse you see these pallets 7 foot high. Managers, although the policies are all in place, management will pass them, ignore it. As far as they're concerned, it's an old saying that we have is 'get it on the vehicle.'* (Rep 3, Food Haul, Code 4)

Health and safety became an issue for Construction Co reps generally – the furlough of the entire head office meant that the health and safety director was completely absent from work, and managers at each plant were unwilling to make decisions in absence of the director. This indecision

persisted until head office returned and decisions were cascaded down. This had the effect of meaning critical decisions were not made.

> *What's changed for us? We've no longer got a relation, working relationship with the health and safety manager. We have changed health and safety managers since that time, but, um, we were the only site working, left working through, we, we worked throughout the pandemic. We didn't have any secondment, like everybody, it was, it was all the way through. Cause I work at the [warehouse]. Um, me and [rep] were arguing the toss week in, week out. We needed to get masks. We need to get hand sanitizer. You need to leave doors open with don't need to be shut. Wasn't taken seriously until [head office/factory] went back to work. And then everybody went back to work and the main health and safety manager there cascades down to his managers on other sites. This needs to be implemented. This needs to be implemented. That's when it got implemented. And was that like, why, why did it take them reopening to cascade down to you? Because nobody will make a decision. Nobody will make a decision until the person at the top makes their decision.* (Rep 15, Construction Co, Code 1, 4)

### *6.3.3 Bypassing and Undermining Collective Organisation*

The interruption caused by the pandemic facilitated the advancement of managerial interests in some of the plants. Where this happened, it included attempts to ignore established systems of negotiation, or to more proactively undermine the union.

While Packaging Co was proactive around introducing and enforcing measures to protect the health of workers and wider society, the conditions of the pandemic made it possible for the employer to bypass the union in certain respects. This has been evident in the introduction of, and worker malcontent towards, biometric clocking in scanners, but also other policies such as the introduction of CCTV. Prior to Covid, these issues would be negotiated, but subsequently reps were *told* of changes:

> *Uh, yeah, I don't think the union had much sort of to do with like say the different things other than just sort of being consulted on them, yeah? But then maybe a little bit of that, maybe an element of you know, just people knowing that, you know that all these things were just brought in, you know, rather than being like negotiated, you know they were kind of just, you know, the company just brought the senior reps into meetings explain what's going to happen, you know?* (Rep 1, Packaging Co, Code 2,18)

In other plants where managers were countering union efforts, the attempts were more actively hostile. The rep in Gamma – who was more vocally militant than other reps interviewed – was

dismissed and pursuing an unfair dismissal case. Still, prior to his dismissal, he identified attempts from managers to nullify his influence including attempts to subsume him into management:

> *So when it came down to it, they, they didn't give a shit. I mean, I mean, they tried to buy me out with a, with a junior management position about six months into being a rep, um, sort of unofficially they'd said, oh, well, you, we think you'd make a good warehouse coordinator, which is like the level below junior manager, you get like an extra tenner a week* (Rep 13, Gamma Supermarket, Code 18)

Similarly, he felt that managers were seeking to actively undermine his position by offering him special treatment such as jumping queues for training or finishing early which were not afforded to other people. These perks were also often framed in such a way that if the rep refused them – such as training – then nobody would receive them.

> *The fact that I was, that I didn't take perks from managers. They would ask me sometimes if I, if I wanted to finish early and then they wouldn't let other people finish early. And I would say, no, whoever asked first will finish early. I'm not, I mean, even on, even on skills training, they would offer it to jump me ahead with the queue. Um, when some of the lads that I did forklift training with wanted training to, to change the batteries, we need to do like a, a crane, uh, thing to change because they're big industrial acid ones. Um, and they offered to train me first. I said, no, there's, there's people there that have been here, they've been here years that need to be trained first. And they said, okay, well, we'll train nobody then* (Rep 13, Gamma Supermarket, Code 18, 20)

Other sites saw managers attempt to undermine the union/reps more generally. In Beta, for instance, the employer's hostility towards the union reps was demonstrated by reference to a 'union variant' that a manager cited as the cause for one of the reps needing a prolonged time off work. The reps at Construction Co felt that Covid had been a useful cover for the employer to project anger over various issues onto the union. This was mostly focused around blaming them for public health measures, stating that the union have made the workers do various things. The management also passed on the responsibility of policing public health measures onto the reps, and used this as a means of deflecting this anger onto them rather than the employer.

> *You know. But they expected us to go and tell them, basically, take on their role. They expected us to be their rod basically. And I've gotta say certainly from our factory and the*

*management we had in place at the time, which is now changed, but I believed it was used by the - I won't say cleverly, but they used it as a means of dirtying the union's name: Well the union are telling you to you've gotta wear a mask, the union are telling you you've gotta do this. No, no, no, no. The risk assessment says that, that's your problem*. (Rep 14, Construction Co)

*That's it in a nutshell manner, mate, they were, they were deflecting blame onto us.* (Rep 16, Construction Co)

*And like you say, they flipped it management there, they flipped it on you to take the blame for bringing these rules into place. Yes. We wanted the rules. Of course we wanted the rules in place because it's protecting everybody. You're trying to protect yourself as well. You still want to, I still wanted to go to work as well as everybody else. But when you're getting absolutely bombarded with people that saying, I'm not doing it. I'm not doing that.* (Rep 15, Construction Co) (Code 2, 18)

Despite the reps' ambivalence at enforcing health and safety in the workplace – believing it is the role of management – they were still pressured to confront those who were willing to flaunt the advice of the time. As a result, they were the focus of the ire of members who did not believe it to be necessary.

*Our stance was 'well if they don't wanna wear a mask, they're not gonna wear a mask'. It's as simple as that. They're the ones that are putting themselves at risk. We've got a mask on. But management was saying no, no, you need to go speak to him...*

*You always get health and safety don't you, you are trying to protect your member. That, that's the be all and end all. But all you get is when you, when you are talking to your member and say, look mate, come on, put your mask on properly. Make sure you keep your recommended distance - 'Oh, you're a fucking health and safety dickhead, you are'. That's unfortunately that's the perception you get when you're walking around telling people, which actually you shouldn't be having to do that. That should be your fucking management that's doing that. But they were pushing for us to go around doing that.* (Rep 15, Construction Co, Code 2, 18)

Similarly at Alpha, there were still some attempts from managers to push responsibility for the contractual obligations onto the union, rather than the result of negotiation over the content of the employee handbook. In this instance the rep identifies the example of members working additional days:

*I got people coming up to, to me. Why have you agreed to that? What you on about? He's told us all the managers that he's told to come and say, the union have agreed to it. I said, there's nothing agreed to that isn't in the handbook. That was what you signed up to like I did. But they haven't got the balls to just say, 'No, we can do this. I don't like doing it but this is your contract'* (Rep 5, Alpha Supermarket, Code 2, 18)

### *6.3.4 Tensions Between Safety and Union Activity*

The tensions between policing safety and union activity present other issues – especially in that it makes it difficult for reps to counter policy that is bundled up in Covid safety policy. The proactive nature of managers at Packaging Co, where the employer implemented a response which protected workers quickly was seen as also creating issues for reps in challenging managers over issues which were perceived as a problem. This included issues where it was perceived as 'hard' to push back on things which are being introduced to make you safe.

> *Again, they probably placed in a difficult position because. It's hard to argue when it's, so. It's like you know, it's like a public health crisis going on. You know, in the country it's hard to you, know you kind of almost get swept up into. Well, you know what it's like, you know with people just generally you know with wearing masks and stuff you kind of just do it. You know, people just do it. 'cause you just kind of get swept up into the fact you've got to do it don't you. Yeah, that's why everyone obeys the rules and stuff and. So I can kinda sort of in a way sympathise with what they were doing, because he probably just thought, well, I can't really. You know they probably found. It's difficult to oppose it.* (Rep 1, Packaging Co, Code 2).

This position, where the union found it hard to oppose policies, also extended beyond Covid. The employer was able to bypass some of the more formal procedures in place which would entail consultation with the reps to introduce things such as CCTV without challenge:

> *…say they're bringing like something like CCTV or something like that, you know? They would have to kind of negotiate with you and stick to certain procedures I think that kind of went a little bit out of the window 'cause I don't think like when they were bringing stuff in and not from my experience and not from what I saw that they were necessarily. You know, like negotiating with the union on whether they should do it because it was just kind of like it was going to happen I suppose.*

> *So when you started it first and you didn't take your temperature, but then one of the team leaders would have to stand as everyone walked in and clocked in then they would have to stand and physically take your temperature. Which one was kind of… You know making everybody sort of stand together kind of which they didn't want and there was making one of their team leaders have to stand there and be in contact with everybody, which they didn't want so, So they just bought one this stuff where you just literally go up to a screen. Put your face next to it. And it would clock you in. And take your temperature. You know people aren't happy about that.* (Rep 1, Packaging Co, Code 2)

The reps in Packaging Co had influence over decisions made at plant level through various consultation procedures. However, reps found it hard to act between managers and some issues raised by workers. The employer's proactive and responsible position occasionally put Rep 1 and his colleagues at odds with the membership where certain policies would be argued against, but leaves the union reps in a difficult position where they cannot 'argue to make things less safe'.

> *You know it's not doing any harm to anybody, so it's hard to really argue against it. You know, even the face masks, which are annoying to wear all day long. It's very hard to kind of... It's almost like it's like you put a decision where you're trying to argue to make it less safe.* (Rep 1, Packaging Co, Code 2)

This employer asked the union reps to join in a joint statement, but the union argued that trusting the employees to do the right thing is more beneficial, and that they could not endorse everything the employer proposed:

> *…they would kind of say we want to sort of make a statement about it and do it as a joint statement from the union and the company saying that people basically are kind of taking you know, are not taking the mick with it, things like that. We would say no, no we're not going along with that you know you just gotta just trust people you know.*
>
> *So we started to get a little bit more. Yeah, maybe after about a year or so, then then you would start to be more, you know, oppositional. You know, you're not going to go along with everything.* (Rep 1, Packaging Co, Code 2, 15)

In spite of the employer's intentions to introduce measures in a way that protected workers, this was shown to not necessarily mean that either the workforce or its representatives were totally committed to the employer's actions. This is neatly illustrated in terms of both the mask policy, and the introduction of a new swipe in system which was handsfree and measured workers' temperature.

> *People you know, people just don't. You know people get suspicious down they about things I personally don't. I'm not really like care about stuff, I'm just sort of like that, well what, no, it's not recording anything, it's just you know it's just taking your it's just clocking you in, you know. And people just didn't like the fact they were doing that* (Rep 1, Packaging Co, Code 1, 2)

The union's participation in allowing these decisions was a source of conflict where members were dissatisfied that certain measures had been introduced that had implications beyond Covid, and that the union had not adequately consulted with members.

> *Then then that would just that would just agreed by like the senior union rep you know without really speaking to anyone people didn't like that you know people didn't like that either. You know the things were just being just agreed like no. No. Those small discussions though. But they were probably in a difficult... I wasn't involved in them meetings about being involved in being since then. Again, they probably placed in a difficult position because. It's hard to argue when it's, so. It's like you know, it's like a public health crisis going on* (Rep 1, Packaging Co, Code 2, 15)

The challenging context made interactions between the union and managers a little more 'collaborative' in this context, where it was difficult for reps to oppose measures.

> *It got a bit sort of collaborative sort of, you know, with them and the management they were working quite closely together on stuff. Then people started moaning about, you know some of the members were starting to moan because you know things like we get like facial recognition software, you know, like so when you go to clock in. That sort of thing was going on, whereas like they would take our temperature, you know when you walk in.* (Rep 1, Packaging Co, Code 2, 15)

For Packaging Co, the relationship *became* collaborative, and this was partially a result of needing to agree with managers over aspects of policy, but also because there were different orientations towards trade unionism from groups of reps. The tension between collaborating with managers and needing to oppose them was also revealed in a rift between groups of reps who were orientated differently in terms of how oppositional they felt the union needed to be with the employer. This was particularly felt through complaints from members where some of the more cooperative reps had failed to push against managers who introduced measures which created discontent from members. The pressure of the situation led to the resignation of two senior reps who were handling much of the negotiation in the early stages, and allowed for another group of reps to take their place:

> *It was like group of reps and I was pretty much distancing myself from some of it. And then so there's two other people involved really who were going into the meetings with management at that first period, yeah? They just, I don't think they could handle it really, you know. By the end of that year, they both resigned. So Covid happened in March, then at*

> *the end of March one was gone by September. And the other once was gone by Christmas.* (Rep 1, Packaging Co, Code 2, 15)

### *6.3.5 Collaborating With Management*

'Collaboration' was a prominent theme in some of the sites. While Packaging Co and Construction Co had enforcement of Covid measures thrust upon them, reps in other sites were more proactive in respect of creating safe systems of work. This may seem like a logical function of a workplace union, but the negotiation of rules in the workplace also helps to embed the union into the managerial function. There were two prominent examples of the union reps actively creating safe systems of work – one where the reps were already engaged in a partnership agreement and had close working relationships with management (Alpha), and one where the rep was part of a wider national network of reps who collectively produced a safe system of work which the rep interviewed for this study (Rep 3, Food Haul) presented to managers and was adopted entirely.

The relationship between reps and managers/HR representatives at Alpha Supermarket was such that management would attend courses with USDAW designed to promote good industrial relations. Rather than oppose the presence of the union, managers tended to support their presence.

> *Some of the managers were brilliant. I lose count of how many managers that came up to me while I was working. Can you just log off and go speak to this person here? They're not in the union but I presume they'll join.* (Rep 5, Alpha Supermarket, Code 2)

For Alpha, the partnership between the union and HR/management facilitated a speedy response and active role in decision making. The rep (5) here reported that the employer had not only been proactive in doing the right things in terms of public health, but that the union reps were active participants in the ongoing response. They were able to feed back concerns and routinely meet with managers to discuss the various activities around the warehouse to maintain safety.

> *Yeah. Couldn't fault em. Yeah. I mean, there's things as we thought were a bit dodgy. But, they always seemed to come up with an answer. You know, I wouldn't trust them hundred percent, no way. I probably wouldn't trust them more than 60% of the time, but everything I could see to me. And there was three or four us, like senior reps on site and we used to have*

*half an hour after the meeting had finished. We, we couldn't pick any holes in what they do.* (Rep 5, Alpha Supermarket, Code 1, 2)

In a similar fashion, the rep (3) at Food Haul recognised the employer was receptive to the union's input into workplace safety but acknowledged that the group assembled to create a safe system of work had insight that the managers lacked. The rep also recognised the business had gone beyond government floors of protection in allowing those furloughed to get full pay, and for this to essentially include those that self-selected for reasons of vulnerability:

*And I fair play to [parent company], they didn't. What's the word I was looking for? Just lost the word now where they stayed at home and got paid 80%. The furlough - Yeah, we didn't have any of that and the people that had to stay at home had full pay.*

*Those that could work from home - Office staff did work from home and were provided the facilities to do so if they didn't already have them, yeah. We had asthmatic drivers etc who just stayed at home and were on call if required.*

*…if somebody believed that they were vulnerable. All that was required cause a lot of doctors weren't doing the letters. So all all what was required was a letter from themselves to the employer HR department. And you know, given the reasons so that it kept it as private as possible. Uh, you know, extremely severe asthmatics It's quite clear cause they were on medication. They could put that they were on medication. Yeah, but they didn't need the doctor's letter to have that.* (Rep 3, Food Haul, Code 1, 2)

This orientation towards collaboration also benefits workers/members where reps are more easily able to advocate for them. Both sites where the reps directly engaged in the creation of safe systems of work were also able to cite instances where individual issues were easily and swiftly resolved. The Alpha rep, for example, reported an instance where workers were being forced into coming in on rest days despite working lots of voluntary extra hours:

*And this lad had come in on the Tuesday his rest day. And worked over a couple of hours on two of these shift he was in for. And they told him he's got come in Saturday and he said, well, I've done an extra shift. Yeah. But you volunteered for that…*

*I said, you can't do that. And I told him, speak to one of the operations managers, [name]. And uh, he told him you're not coming in. You've done your bit. And I'll be speaking to him 'cause we don't do that kind of thing. He knew, if you're going to do that, people are not going volunteer for come in. They'll just wait for get called in.* (Rep 5, Alpha Supermarket, Code 2, 15)

Similarly Rep 3 in Food Haul was able to directly support members placed into environments where they had concerns over their physical health:

> *Again, contacted me to stress the fact that the social distancing was horrendous, and they were fearing for themselves. 'cause three of my colleagues had partners that worked in the NHS. vulnerable care etc. Yeah, and they got in touch with me. Within six hours I've been in touch with the depot manager and then they were pulled out there straight away.* (Rep 3, Food Haul, Code 2)

This close working relationship and influence, while beneficial for ensuring members' safety, also plays a role in hampering reps from being more adversarial in their approach. There was some appetite from members in Alpha to challenge the employer on various aspects, but the union reps on site were already embedded in decision making processes on the site, both in terms of escalating concerns within the union, and being present in routine meetings with management.

> *You used to have people coming up to you saying 'company can't do that'. And how do you know that? Cause I've looked and they can. And I've taken advice off the area organiser who contacts the legal department if it's anything he can't answer. 'Well, my mate's missus works in a solicitors'. What does she do? Make the tea or is she a solicitor?* (Rep 5, Alpha Supermarket, Code 2, 12, 15)

While they are well placed to service individual members as outlined above, they are potentially placed in a difficult situation in attempting to mobilise. In Alpha, this was also complicated by a partnership agreement which contained a no-strike clause. While the degree of collaboration paints a partial picture in respect of opposing managers and mobilising members, there is a clear tension in respect of the need to collaborate with managers and the ability to oppose them. This has a range of causes and implications, including issues that affect members being wrapped in safety measures, and the need for a more collaborative approach because of the nature of the issues.

### *6.3.6 FTOs and the Wider Union Context*

There is also a question of the role the wider union infrastructure plays in supporting workplace reps. Where the role of the union beyond the workplace was discussed, it was often in a negative sense. This was particularly an issue for reps in GMB sites: Beta supermarket (and Construction Co to

a lesser degree) who felt isolated as a result of FTOs being furloughed; Food Haul who felt the union had created issues but found support in other reps; and USDAW sites where the rep's militancy was at odds with FTOs (Gamma), and where a no-strike agreement had been put in place after a difficult organising campaign (Alpha).

Though this research overrepresents GMB sites by virtue of access, a number of reps were critical of the GMB, especially in relation to an absence of support. Two groups of reps (Beta and Construction Co) were interviewed in the same GMB regional office, and both reported that at the onset of the pandemic they completely lost contact with their union. They reported that offices closed down and emails would go unread and without response.

> *Well initially, um, basically everybody was furloughed you couldn't get hold of anyone. They were non-existent weren't they cause they were furloughed.* (Rep 15, Construction Co, Code 12)

The reps in Beta Supermarket revealed genuine and quite intense anger towards the GMB for failing to support them in the previous years. They reported issues with being unable to access the branch offices as a means for their own use, but also that the support the office and FTOs provided was absent both for them and members. Their meeting for this interview was their first use of the branch office on facilities time since before Covid, and they expressed a great deal of anger over the new company cars that were parked on the car park. They pointed to the pressures put on by the GMB to recruit, but that it is hard to do so when it's seen that support is lacking when it's required.

> *Palpable anger towards the GMB. I asked how they had supported the reps during Covid and they were described as 'fucking wank'. The office we were in closed for 2 years from March 2020. Members would phone the branch office to find it closed and have to go to the reps. Anger regarding things like the people working there turning up in new hybrid cars once the office had reopened, subs going up but members unable to get any contact, taking months to reply to an email. Also very important – the reps felt they had simply been cut adrift for two years. "Let down by GMB", "shit job", "The union is a business". Union issued pamphlets for Covid related things and always had recruitment details on the back – they badger for recruitment but don't support the membership/reps in ways that are needed.* (Field notes, 25th May 2022, Beta Supermarket, Code 12)

The group of reps in Beta had misgivings about the wider union machinery homeworking during the pandemic, though not necessarily attributed to them 'not coming to work' but rather failing to provide ongoing support to reps and members as a result of vacating the branch office.

The rep for Food Haul also felt there was anger from his members as a result of the union's employees working from home while members continued to physically attend work, as well as also cancelling a will-writing service that was used as an incentive to recruit new members:

- *Two main reasons members are pissed off with GMB*
    - *Working from home while their members continued to go into work*
    - *Promoted a will-writing service to gain members that was pulled.*
    - *These things create friction while trying to recruit*
      (Field diary entry, 15th April 2022, Food Haul, Code 12)

For these reps, there is an issue in respect of lacking support from FTOs, but also involving pressures to recruit and a tension where reps (and members) do not feel they are getting support or value for money from the wider union.

Some of the reps found alternative or informal means of support. Rep 3 stated that he would have left the GMB were it not for the support of other reps:

> *Yeah but there's 12345... there's 9 of us in the NJC groups. We communicate on a daily basis, so I've got support from my colleagues on other sites. That's been the... In fact to be quite honest with you, my colleagues have been more supportive to me than my regional or national officers.* (Rep 3, Food Haul, Code 6, 9, 12)

The NJC that Rep 3 describes formulated the safe system of work that the rep was able to implement. For Construction Co reps, these issues were navigated informally by having direct contact with a furloughed FTO who would take calls, and indicated that later health and safety 'caught up' through the education arm of the union.

For two of the sites, the issues with the wider union reflect a level of militancy or model of trade unionism which clashes with the reps interviewed. In these instances, USDAW represented both sites – both DCs supplying supermarkets in the form of Alpha and Gamma supermarkets. While

Alpha reps had a longstanding relationship with the employer, the rep remained somewhat suspicious of the employer's motives. He described a prolonged and fraught organising campaign when the site was opened, and expressed disappointment that having exposed himself to risk on a greenfield site that USDAW had agreed to a no strike clause:

> *…this is what, one thing that pissed me off with the union when they signed the agreement. And I only found out through this first area organiser we had, there was a no strike agreement up there.* (Rep 5, Alpha Supermarket, Code 2, 12)

The framing of trade unionism on this site likely explains the high levels of participation and collaboration in decision-making, though this also demonstrates a more neutered form of trade unionism such that members and reps cannot be more adversarial and attempt to meaningfully mobilise.

The USDAW rep in Gamma was frequently at odds with the wider union governance, especially with respect to his more militant orientation. This resulted in clashes with both USDAW officials and other reps. In this instance he felt that there was an opportunity to continue to organise the workplace and to use strike action as a means to leverage greater pay. This appetite for industrial action lays in contrast to the national officer who negotiated a pay increase.

> *I think we had 86%, uh, in the preliminary ballot, uh, for strike action. And we were initially given 2% at the end of those negotiations and ballots we were offered five and a half percent, uh, personally I think we should have got, we should have pushed for more. We should have, we should have gone out on strike for more, we should have carried on, but you know, the, the, the officials negotiated what they negotiated and, and, and I, I couldn't, I couldn't change that unfortunately, but my role in, in organising the strike was basically how I'd organised the branch, but for a strike* (Rep 13, Gamma Supermarket, Code 12, 19)

The rep was eventually dismissed and as such gave up his role as branch secretary. He was critical of union bureaucracy generally, and expressed remorse that he was unable to use a quip he had heard to criticise inaction from 'right wingers' in unions:

> *It was also the trade union bureaucrats that, that used it to further their idea of what is, uh, what is stability, uh, that a lovely two lovely phrases that I hear from right wingers in unions is that they have to keep their powder dry. Um, and I heard a lovely little quip from [Name] … Um, and so he, he said, oh, well, you know, carry on like this, we'll all be dead surrounded by*

*dry powder. Um, which I thought was, I thought was lovely, but I never got the chance to say that to an official before I got dismissed.* (Rep 13, Gamma Supermarket, Code 12)

### *6.3.7 Pay and Other Action*

Where there were gains or victories, it was mostly in terms of pay, and this cannot necessarily be linked to the influences of the pandemic, nor necessarily the influences of unions – especially at workplace level. Many of the pay awards gained are entangled in other factors than the Covid pandemic, especially that of labour market factors and the cost of living crisis provoked by the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 which drove up energy prices. While the presence of unions in these workplaces may have helped ensure that pay increased, it is difficult to isolate these effects and for the purposes of this investigation, it is hard to link these rises directly to mobilisation.

There is one site where action was coordinated with a view to gaining a pay increase, namely that of Gamma, where a strike was organised. The rep was asked whether Covid was a factor in mobilising workers to strike or to be used in pay negotiations, and the rep revealed a tension in respect of exploiting Covid. His more militant orientation put him at odds with some of the less militant reps as a result of his desires to use strike action as a means to leverage better terms.

> *It was framed as a leverage thing even by the other reps, um, which was very unfortunate because the people that I spoke to would've definitely, I think it, it was more, more of a hardened core of about 15, 15 to 20 people that I would discuss with regularly. At that time it started off obviously five or six, but we had things get leaked. We had people, we had people switch sides. We had people give statements in. We had, we had, uh, you know, got a bit, got a bit like, uh, Lord of the Flies at times, um, where, um, you know, so, so I mean, in, in that, in that sense, uh, I was actually reprimanded by another rep for saying that during the first ballot on the first wage of negotiations that I, I think I, I raised the point at branch committee that we should let members know that the best and most serious, uh, weapon for us to use is, uh, a strike, not, not necessarily immediate all out strike, but as part of negotiations, if we do a, a roll in strike, uh, for example, one day a week, just to sort of, um, maintain control of, of, of the lorries, uh, we can do, we can do hour long walkouts to, to throw out their planning.* (Rep 13, Gamma Supermarket, Code 19)

Specifically, the rep in Gamma recognised a tension in utilising the conditions of the pandemic as a means for advancing terms and conditions - That the perception of using Covid for leverage could be

perceived as morally dubious and contrary to the national interest. He believed this gave protection to the employer, but also to unions.

> *Um, I mean, Covid was used at least in my experience as a, as basically a bit of a, a shield, uh, for bosses, uh, you know, this whole false dichotomy of sort of this idea of national interest and so on. I think even some of the, some of the larger trade union leaders, uh, fell into that trap. I dunno if you saw, um, Frances O'Grady and Rishi Sunak having their little date outside, number 10. Um, doing furlough and all that. So that tied into this whole sort of idea of, well, you know, it'd be morally wrong to try and use this to defend or even advance our terms and conditions. Um, and yeah, this was, I mean, it was, it was used by both sides. Honestly, obviously it, it, this whole idea of, of morality to me is, is irrelevant.* (Rep 13, Gamma Supermarket, Code 12, 19)

Where other sites may have received pay increases in the period following the onset of Covid, these generally cannot be concretely attributed to the pandemic, and can often be linked to other external factors such as labour market pressures and rising costs of living.

This is neatly exemplified by the Construction Co case. At interview there was some discussion around pay negotiations, and one rep stated '…well I tell you what we haven't had. We haven't had a thank you or a recognition working all the way through the pandemic.' (Rep 15). When asked if that work would form part of the upcoming pay negotiations the rep stated 'No, they don't give a shit about it' (Rep 15). The upcoming round of pay negotiations were intended to be used as a means of equalising terms across the sites, and also sat against the backdrop of the cost of living crisis with the interview occurring in November 2022 and the pay deal expiring in January 2023.

For some of the case study sites, pay negotiations or awards were linked to the labour market, especially a shortage of HGV drivers. The Beta reps reported that they are part of a national bargaining unit and that a national campaign was currently underway to gain a pay rise. They cited an enthusiastic national officer who was social media savvy and had created a catchy campaign of '£2/£4', which was a £2/hour pay increase for warehouse workers and £4 for drivers. The reps did not believe that this campaign was related to Covid as much as it was to labour market conditions at the time of the interview (May 2022). Specifically, the reasons being given for the pay demands were

skills shortages and pay increases being received at comparable employers. The retention pay offered to lorry drivers was also argued to have created a wedge between groups of workers.

> *Bargaining unit is national. Pay deal negs are starting at 2/4 pounds for warehouse and drivers respectively. National officer is good, very active on social media such as youtube. £2/£4 is picked up on by members, but reps have to manage their expectations as that is a starting position and likely won't be achieved. Pay deal is framed more around skill shortages, movement in labour market, and workplaces seeing comparative workplaces get rises. The leverage comes from the pay increases being seen at competitors.* (Field diary entry, 25th May 2022, Beta Supermarket, Code 12, 19)

Similarly at Food Haul, pay was framed in terms of labour market pressures, especially that shortages of drivers prompted workers to leave for higher paid alternatives. The turnover around this period (mid 2022) meant the rep was less familiar with colleagues: '…we currently have 145 drivers at my depot. So if I know 45 of them I'll be lucky'.

Part of this turnover can be attributed to the changing conditions as the Covid rules were relaxed, meaning drivers' duties became more involved as they were expected to complete tasks that the safe system of work prohibited:

> *It was good for newbie drivers coming in because you were being paid for a minimum 12 hour shift, you're on a four day working week. You go into a customer, you're parking outside his unit saying 'here's your delivery, get on with it'. Under normal circumstances you're taking that inside for them and breaking pallets down. Now that they're having to do that, they're thinking that this isn't for me.* (Rep 3, Food Haul, Code 13, 19)

The market conditions meant that there were a number of driver vacancies (145 drivers were employed from a budget of 185), and the usage of agency drivers was an issue for Rep 3, stating that the pay differential was a cause of discontent (£96/day for permanent staff, and £250/day for agency drivers). Drivers in this workplace had received a 10% pay rise around the time of this interview (April 2022)

> *Even with our pay rise now we're still level in the same the same money as companies that say just drop it there. You know, so yeah, the drivers are leaving. As I said. I think we need about 30 drivers at the moment. We have a high number of agency. And it didn't help when. The agency driver says, oh, I'm happy doing what I'm doing. He says I'm on £25 an hour. All*

> *right, I'll give you an example - The job that I do, the agency drivers that do what I do, I have an 8 hour shift which I get paid for. If through no fault of my own those hours are extended I get paid. However, the agency driver gets paid from start to finish, he's on £25 an hour. Yeah, they say things like, 'well, he doesn't get sickness he doesn't get this blah blah blah'. They don't need to. Yeah, they're earning £250 a day, whereas I'm earning about £96.* (Rep 3, Food Haul, Code 19)

The size and scope of the bargaining unit was also potentially significant in explaining pay awards. Packaging Co is part of a national bargaining unit, which is a result of a legacy of its membership in printing unions. Rep 1 attributes this legacy to creating a high membership density, and a greater embeddedness of the union in the plant. The rep reported that pay was taken out of the hands of workplace reps as a result of national pay bargaining. When bargaining locally, compromises from workers in the site that may be used as leverage to justify pay increases.

> *I've worked in the place before. Where you, when the pay negotiation happens you would be talking directly with the managers just about your factory. So in that. Situation you probably could, you know you could probably go 'Oh, we've done all this this year and we've done this, and no one's been off sick with Covid and we've followed everything, you know, so we want a really good pay rise or we want to tie this into the pay rise'. You know what I mean? We can't really do that. It's good 'cause it you get a good you kind of maintain the wage levels really good 'cause the industry. You know the unions on behalf of the industry put in a pay offer.* (Rep 1, Packaging Co, Code 19)

However, he could not be certain the extent to which performance during the pandemic influenced the pay deal, and at the time of the interview (January 2022), inflation was already beginning to overtake the deal that was gained.

> *I think it was 2.3% that the companies were offering. But the union negotiators were able to get 3.8%. Which turned into kind of below inflation by the time it was all settled you know I mean, because inflation is rising so fast. But but you gotta put that into context of you know, manufacturing industry. And what's going on in other places you know what I mean? Cause you hear in other places getting kinda 2% offers and that you know. Or settling for sort of 2, 2.5%. You know what I mean? Around the same time. I'm not sure whether I could say that was because of Covid or not, you know, but I think Covid would definitely be mentioned in that sort of negotiation.* (Rep 1, Packaging Co, Code 19)

For these sites, there was a general lack of pay increases being linked to Covid, and it is difficult to disentangle other factors from the pay awards – especially labour market factors, rising costs of

living, and existing bargaining structures. While the impacts of Covid may have formed part of negotiations at a national level, it is also difficult to disentangle the other external factors from negotiation, and the specifics of smaller sites are lost where negotiation occurs at a higher level.

While this section focuses mostly on pay, it also links to other action, especially that of striking. While Gamma Supermarket successfully organised a strike, the site exhibited a sense of tension or conflict between reps over the morality of it. The Gamma rep was vocally militant, and this perhaps explains its organisation in contrast to the Food Haul rep who commented words to the effect of 'you'd never be able to call a strike at that depot' because workers would not be prepared to 'back each other up'.

### *6.3.8 Summary*

For reps in the sites investigated, there were a range of issues which might be mobilised around. These especially pertain to a sense of some of the firms profiteering, and this includes breaching safety guidelines to do so, or otherwise prioritise the operation of the business over safety. In other sites mobilising was difficult for other reasons – especially in respect of navigating safety policy in conjunction with union activity. Some reps also faced hostility in the form of active attempts to undermine collective organisation. For some plants it was 'hard to argue to make yourself less safe', whereas in others there was a collaborative approach to creating and enforcing policy – whether a result of existing partnership structures, or proactive action from reps. This link to partnership also reflects the role of the wider union and full time officials. GMB reps felt that they had been isolated as a result of the FTOs being furloughed and therefore unable to contact their regional offices. Where USDAW may be more orientated towards partnership, the militant rep in Gamma Supermarket found himself frequently at odds with union bureaucracy. These assorted factors can be summarised as that of constraint; restraint; and participation. That is to say that reps were constrained from effectively mobilising in various ways; exercised restraint in their conduct; or actively collaborated with management. The following chapter outlines this framework in more detail.

## 6.4 Spatial Aspects of Work and Trade Union Activity

This section explores specific aspects of the data which potentially straddles both of the previous themes – the labour process and limitations on mobilisation. 'Space' of work was a prominent theme and some of these points relate directly to aspects of work or the labour process, where others reflect spaces of trade union organising and mobilising. These strands are discussed separately as the theme of space emerged prominently and warrant deeper analysis. Covid-19 might be argued to be fundamentally an interruption into the space of work, which transformed both understandings of the 'place' of work – especially as workers who were able continued to work remotely, and workers deemed essential who were unable to work remotely continued to attend work. This includes workers in logistics whose work requires them to physically handle goods, though in ways which is dictated by different forms of work organisation in each site. While the changes to the space of work brought about an altered labour process and provided concessions to workers who were able to slow their pace of work, the same conditions hampered collective organisation where reps were limited in their ability to meet members and each other.

### *6.4.1 Physical Movement in the Workplace*

One of the most prominent themes that emerged was that of the reps' abilities to move around their own sites. Limitations on movement were not consistent across all sites and participants, though where there were barriers to movement the reps affected reported this as a significant barrier to their effectiveness.

In Medico, this was cited as the most important issue that had resulted from Covid, with the convenor (Rep 2) reporting that where he previously had access to all three sites, his swipe card permissions were revoked around the sites, and that as a public health measure he could only physically access one site per 24-hour period.

> *Well, I've personally, I feel they used, they used it to kinda curtail our movements, whereas I used to just swan about, yeah, no, no swan about, but I could have full access to the three sites. I could go on one site. So straight away they stopped that you, you weren't allowed on,*

> *you know, you were only allowed on one site. If you went on another, you know, if you went to another site, couldn't, you go in your original site where the union office is set up. And other sites kinda thing. So if, if I had to go in for any reason, then one of the other two sites, then, then I could only go in that site, that day kinda thing. And, you know, then wandering about, you know, and, and the wandering about talking to people was, well, not allowed kind of thing.* (Rep 2, Medico, Code 5, 11, 18)

As public health restrictions were lifted these limitations on movement persisted: The convenor's swipe card access was not reinstated to the levels enjoyed previously, instead reps are requested to contact managers in advance to access areas on a case-by-case basis. These limitations also extended to other benefits the union previously enjoyed, such as participation in the induction of new workers.

> *…and it's happening my site, but I'm still, I've, you know, asked last, last month. Can I now have access back on, you know, cause my swipe card stopped. Not just me everybody's, you know, so, and can I, can get access. 'Oh yeah. We'll Sort that, but let me know, let us, let management know when you're, when you're coming on site' and all that. That didn't where before I didn't used to, but they still no gave me that access. So I can't go wandering about the other, the other two sites…* (Rep 2, Medico, Code 5, 11, 18)

Another rep in the same business (Rep 4) reported this as effectively 'kneecapping the union', hampering not just the receiving of information, but its distribution too:

> *…the union have been sort of kneecapped I have to say with Covid in a way that we are not allowed to cross sites, especially sort of [Rep 2], [named rep], um, you know, four team members. They haven't been to visit any other sites. So I can't say that there's much of a structure to use that to their advantage, but there is definitely, um, it's reduced the amount of information the union can get out.* (Rep 4, Medico, Code 5, 11, 18)

Rep 1 also reported that the limits on distancing put in place created issues for reps to meet members face to face to discuss and communicate issues. This was particularly an issue where reps would be unable to communicate with other shifts, both in terms of being unallowed to meet as shifts crossed, but also with reps prevented from going on to other shifts. This meant that reps were effectively contained in a 'bubble' with the people they immediately worked with.

> *Another major thing that I noticed was just very, very difficult as well - to communicate with everybody. Just 'cause you know where well I work, the shifts will be split into four separate shifts. And then there be restrictions on so, like you know, one shift would have to sit in the car until the other shift has left. You know, see we might go for a whole period of six months or more, probably up to a year where you would only immediately see the people you work*

> *with every day, you know, and you couldn't really communicate. And that's definitely led to, like, you know, a lot of a lot of issues. You know you're actually stopped going on to other shifts.* (Rep 1, Medico, Code 5)

This also contributed to poor turnout in a pay negotiation. This was particularly evident where the ballot had to be conducted by post, though a later workplace ballot that had a 70% turnout was still hampered by the inability to access some of the membership.

> *But yeah, it was hard and it's hard to like, you know you can't walk around talking to people like you used to be able to. You can't go on to other shifts. You know you're actually stopped going on to other shifts so you're not allowed onto another shift. So I, I... Probably have to get the figures for you, but I imagine the turn out was quite low for last year's pay negotiation. I'll try and find that for you. Because it was all done by post because of Covid. Whereas this year this year we did a work, we did a workplace ballot this year. And like our workplace, but I was even and even that was like we couldn't get to some people again because of Covid. But we still got like over 70% turn out.* (Rep 1, Medico, Code 5, 19)

The 'space' of mobilising workers is clearly significant in creating and harnessing discontent – reps must be able to communicate with members, and physical contact is a key part of this. The space of union activity was not altered in the same way in other sites. There were two sites where rep movements were less restricted: Gamma, where the rep was permitted more freedom as a result of the absence of managers; and Alpha, where the collaborative relationship with management facilitated continued union activities.

The Gamma rep used this freedom to move around the workplace and gain signatures for items to challenge managers and policies.

> *Um, yeah. Yeah. So that, that, that helped us in a way, um, that sort of lull, I actually, uh, I think I got more signatures for any emails during that time. Um, then I would get on a normal day working to target… I dunno what type of trade unionist I'd be if I didn't use that opportunity to, to build… so I'd say I definitely covered a lot of ground there. Um, not just not least because I had the freedom to actually talk with people, which was quite rare before, given Covid.* (Rep 13, Gamma Supermarket, Code 5, 15)

The rep believed that these informal conversations were important, and a valuable means of helping persuade workers to the union's cause. He gave an example of using issues in the warehouse such as H&S issues as a means of initiating conversations which have greater value than mass email communications – that one 'in the hand' is worth twenty in the bush:

> *So like appropriate health and safety, uh, mitigation, that sort of stuff. So for example, if we had, um, if we had like a pallet that was split on someone had cut themselves, or someone had been injured or, or, uh, someone had basically, um, like if I had to help somebody with something, I'd, I'd sort of say, well, you know, this wouldn't happen if, you know, if [Gamma] would invest 0.2% of the, the billions that they make every year in giving us proper forklift trucks that aren't bent and proper rollers for the batteries and proper lasers for our scanners. Um, and proper locks for our lockers. Um, and that to me was more valuable than, you know, one in your hand is worth twenty in the bush. Like if you've got it in front of you is better than firing off, you know, frankly sometimes ineffective diatribe on an email, uh, when, if you people remember people learn by doing and hearing not by not by reading, uh, as much. So that to me was more, more valuable, I would say, definitely.* (Rep 13, Gamma Supermarket, Code 5, 6, 15)

Similarly, reps in Construction Co were able to move freely around their site, and while managers attempted to push blame for issues onto the reps, having face to face contact and an established relationship helped the reps to be able to communicate their message appropriately.

> *You've got to know your membership obviously and you do that by going around talking to people, and they make a judgment on you - taking into account the whole of your job and your role and the things that you've done previously and the things that you're still doing. You're gonna get one or two people that I, you get relationships with people. Some are good, some are bad. You're always gonna have that, you are. But, they know, when you're genuine or not. They can spot a bullshitter a mile off.* (Rep 14, Construction Co, Code 5, 6)

The Alpha rep reported that movement around the workplace was barely halted. The canteen was a focal point of union contact, and though distancing was expected to be maintained, they were still able to move freely about the workplace and even hold routine surgeries.

> *We used to have union surgeries. Um, where for three shifts, one union rep was taken out the business and just sat in the canteen or what have you, so people come up and speak you, if they got a problem, which, which is great. Or we could go round…*
> *Still, yeah, we still did 'em yeah. They knew weren't getting many people coming in, but they still, still allowed that. Cause it was a voice.* (Rep 5, Alpha Supermarket, Code, Code 2, 5)

This freedom of movement around the workplace extended to allowing the collecting of votes for a pay ballot early in the pandemic.

> *So what they were doing was taking the ballot box round to certain areas. So you could let, yeah. We had a list of all the members and just ticked them off. So you could do that, obviously they didn't want anybody getting too close...* (Rep 5, Alpha Supermarket, Code, Code 2, 5, 19)

Beta reps, were not hampered from accessing their workers, but described contact with workers as a problem rather than an opportunity to gather or distribute information. This was particularly an issue because their union (GMB) had closed the regional office and they had no access to policy information other than watching the daily briefs on television that were publicly accessible. They had limited information to give to members, but were under pressure from the membership to relay information which they did not have. One rep described the experience of trying to shop in his employer's store before opening hours (which was a perk afforded to NHS and key workers early in the pandemic) but finding this to be an issue as he would bump into colleagues wanting information:

> *Related, the reps cited the first 2-3 months of Covid to be absolutely hellish. They had members chasing them for info all the time and mostly were unable to give it. Partly because they were keeping pace with the public health message as it changed, and partly because GMB cut them loose. One rep reported that [Beta] gave them permission to use the stores early around the time that they were open exclusively for NHS/essential workers, and he was chased across the car park by a member wanting info. More hassle than it was worth because he'd see people from the DC* (Field diary entry, 25th May 2022, Beta Supermarket, Code 5, 6)

The rep at Food Haul's movements were not hampered by virtue of his job as an HGV driver which meant he was routinely driving as part of his usual duties. His main depot was in the East Midlands, but was also responsible for another depot in Southwest England:

> *Well, me personally I look after as from my point of view I look after two sites which is transport in [Food Haul depot location] and I have to look after a satellite depot we have in [Southwest England]. Uh, so my number's readily available to them* (Rep 3, Food Haul, Code 5, 6)

### *6.4.2 Communication and Space*

The Food Haul case is illustrative in providing an example of an existing means to communicate across space in the absence of physical proximity. While the restrictions on physical movement created issues for reps in some sites, the Food Haul rep had existing systems and infrastructure as a result of being an HGV driver and being familiar with representing workers at a distance:

> *Well, all my members have my mobile. Phone contact me 24/7. Yeah, I may be unusual in that respect and... But also if they couldn't get hold of me and they would leave a message with the transport department, who would in turn get in touch with me. I fortunately didn't have much of an issue. Yeah, in the first days it was just more clarification of what they were allowed to do and what they weren't allowed to do* (Rep 3, Food Haul, Code 2, 5, 6)

This mode of operating allowed the rep to not only quickly and informally deal with issues such as relocating members with relatives at risk but also maintain contact with a national network of reps from which to draw solidarity in the absence of FTOs.

A similar mode of communication was evident in Alpha Supermarket where reps already had established means of communication through circulating their phone numbers via a notice board which detailed shift patterns so that members could access reps at any time. The reps believed this was unusual and attracted comments from officials.

> *…every area organiser that we had couldn't believe what we did as union reps we put all the mobiles up on the union notice board with what shift you're on. So you could ring it any time. And when we've been on courses and tell 'em what we do - what are you mental? Yeah. My missus used to go mad at me cause I'd be sitting there having my tea, and it would go off, my phone would.* (Rep 5, Alpha Supermarket, Code 5, 6)

The reps at this site made extensive use of notice boards to communicate to members. This had a purpose for Covid messaging, but also to highlight the value of the union to the workforce. The rep interviewed had organised the site against some hostility approximately 18 years previously, and many of the benefits on the site had been gained through collective bargaining. In this instance, the gains from the union's activities were illustrated to demonstrate its value to workers:

> *We did a, we put it on the union noticeboard. Like a tree before and after. Like a tree with no leaves on it. Then we had one of the lads did this with all the things that we've got. Cause people say 'you don't do fuck all for us. You don't do anything for us'. Well, you get this don't you? Yeah, but that's because the company have give it us… We've asked for it, and had to tell them why we think it's a good idea.* (Rep 5, Alpha Supermarket, Code 6)

As has been noted, the Alpha case is one in which there is a sense of collaboration between union and management. This is demonstrated both before and during the pandemic response, though is also underpinned by a no-strike agreement and a partnership orientation from USDAW.

Nonetheless, this agreement facilitated the union reps' position as a communication node between workers and management, able to receive and distribute information in both directions. This was facilitated through regular meetings on site with reps and HR, and by circulating information to workers through the use of paper flyers and notice boards:

> *One of the things discussed today was that the EOS information board in the warehouse will now be changed to a Covid 19 board for colleagues to post their questions and for management to answer.* (Minutes, 31 March 2020)

The rep on this site provided minutes from meetings and various emails that demonstrate the collaboration between the groups. These began early in the pandemic, and minutes forwarded to the researcher suggest they persisted at least until early 2021. An email from an HR official early in the pandemic reveals how union reps in this workplace were incorporated into regular meetings to assist in sharing information from the workforce:

> *Hi all,*
>
> *I'm very conscious at the moment that you have so many questions and concerns and that I am struggling to keep up with them all and my responses to you are taking longer than I would like. I'd like to propose a temporary way of working whilst we are going through the challenge of this virus and get your views on this approach:*
>
> *Twice a week, I will meet [names] to have a very brief, face to face update session. This will give me the opportunity to bring you up to speed with any updates as they happen and for you to bring me any questions. [Name] will join us on those sessions when he can.*
> *[Name], I will need to think of a solution for yourself, whether that's a call or that I come in early once a week to talk to you?*
> *[Names] will pick this up for you and take a similar approach for Transport.*
>
> *I will then send adhoc emails for anything that cannot wait until our next meeting.*
> *I know that this feels a little odd considering that most other meetings are being cancelled but I feel it is sensible and necessary under the circumstances but I am happy to take any challenge on that. If we do it in the conference room, the social distancing can be maintained.*
> (Email 27 March 2020 – HR to all reps)

In contrast to some sites where communication was stalled but managed, the Medico site highlighted the disruption to communication as a major and fundamental issue in hampering union activity. This was an issue in respect of both transmitting and receiving information.

Rep 2 (the convenor) reported that the distancing regulations affected his interactions with the workforce, being unable recognise masked workers who had to shout to him because of the distances between them. Being unable to have frequent informal contact with the workforce meant that the union was unable to pick up on issues as they developed unless the members were active in reporting them. Equally, the distance between workers stopped them from 'gossiping' between each other to discuss their workplace:

> *Well, it, it, you know, unless somebody had a problem, you know, it was, it was more, it became that, whereas you'd go walk around do the health and safety inspections and all the rest and, and talk to people. It was like, cause of the, you know, two metre rule, you could, you'd have to shout to somebody, you know? And you couldn't go and have, you know, just have, and the other thing that really I didn't know who people were, people like, 'all right, [Rep 2], how are you?' And I'm like, 'Yeah I'm fine - who the fuck was that?' You know, cause they're masked up and all the rest that you, you, you don't recognise faces you know, is, you know, and it's just, it was very difficult to go and have one to one conversations how you doing and, and the likes and is everything alright?*
>
> *And, and they couldn't come to you and have a moan and what, you know, and so unless something happened and people gave you a phone and phoned you up and says, oh, this is a problem. Well, that's a problem. Then you couldn't, you didn't, you know, you were kinda hindered in finding out what the word on the street was, and, and what was happening within the workplace. Cause people weren't allowed, and people weren't talking to other people as well. So, you know, it's like, you know, your, your reps and then your kind of activists, the ones that know what's going on and keep your ear to the ground and, and let you know what's happening here. And, you know, but you go up to people what's, oh it's all too quiet. Everything's quiet and because people weren't standing about gossiping, if you like, and, and that, that didn't help either.* (Rep 2, Medico, Code 5, 6)

The H&S rep in this workplace (Rep 4) also attributed issues in *transmitting* communications with workers as a result of the restrictions in place:

> *They haven't been to visit any other sites. So I can't say that there's much of a structure use that to their advantage, but there is definitely, um, it's reduced the amount of information the union can get out. Um, granted there has been a sort of piece and notifications on the board, but the lockdown also meant that we didn't receive as many approaches by members of staff.* (Rep 4, Medico, Code 5, 6)

The limits on 'approaches' from staff meant that the union was unable to receive information regarding issues which needed to be escalated:

> *Um, but the thing with the union, they can only really rely on complaints from members. Um, and as I said, and as actually tell to the other members of you, unless you specifically say to me, I want you to look into it. I can't look into it. I can't, I can't assume you have a problem and take that to management. That needs to be an action problem. You need to document it, we need to evidence it. Um, and the complacency is set it in across the board. So it's not just the management that not enforcing it, but it's also, the staff don't want it. So they are not complaining from my perspective. They're not complaining to the union to do anything about it.* (Rep 4, Medico, Code 5, 6)

The H&S rep (Rep 4) believed that managers benefitted from not proactively correcting misinformation which circulated between workers around rights and obligations surrounding isolation. He believed this misinformation benefitted managers in maintaining staffing levels :

> *I think at the beginning, for me, from the warehouse perspective, um, there was lot of misinformation. Uh, and lot of it was not necessarily pushed at management level because they relied on the staffing levels to remain constant due to this misinformation, especially when it came to, you know, time to be taken off when it came to self-isolate. A lot of, there was a lot of contradictory information going around on the floor and they seemed very slow to react to it. A lot of my queries around that time came, so am I allowed to self-isolate, do I have to self-isolate, there was, there was a lot of that focus around for a very, very good first few months* (Rep 4, Medico, Code 5, 6)

The H&S rep also felt that there was a missed opportunity from the perspective of the union and the employer to collaborate on providing a united message to the workforce, particularly around the public health limitations, and that the limits on movement contributed to this:

> *I can't really think of anything as I can think of perhaps some opportunities that might have missed. Um, both by the union and the company's perspective and the first one is mutual cooperation. Um, I found that there was an instant distrust, right at the beginning between, um, you know, anything that the union might want to back. Anything the company were forced to do. I think the open communication could been a lot quicker right at the beginning. Um, misinformation was very much, um, a tool both for and against the union. Um, not, not portrayed by the union. I think they were quite concise about the information they put out as far as new newsletters and that were concerned. For me, the problem we had was there were no boots on the ground. There were no, um, union full-time reps able to go across all the sites so misinformation prospered.* (Rep 4, Medico, Code 2, 5, 6)

### *6.4.3 Meetings and Alternative Means of Communication*

While some reps identified successes in navigating 'new' means of communication such as Zoom or Teams – especially in respect of attending national meetings – there was a feeling that this mode of communication hampered communication with members.

For Construction Co reps moving their routine communications onto Teams solved some issues for them, but was still considered 'not ideal'.

> *Teams was… it's not ideal. Teams was the new technology wasn't it, as such, during Covid. It wasn't ideal, but it did aid us in doing that. Yeah. Um, we have, um, it usually it's alternate weekly. We have um, a Teams meeting and then we have the full meeting up here. Generally fortnightly. Everything went to Teams, basically. Um, we even to the point of um, disciplinaries taking place over Teams.* (Rep 14, Construction Co, Code 6, 9, 17)

Rep 1 (Packaging Co) meanwhile reported that branch meetings (like all other meetings held during the restrictions) were held virtually, which affected both the dynamic and the attendance. The rep cited going from a meeting in a pub, to attempting to hold them online with a much diminished attendance:

> *Obviously it's trying to sort of run branch meetings where you would have a branch meeting maybe every few months in a pub you know you can't do that anymore, so you've got to then try and you know, set up online sort of meetings with people who just don't really want to do it, you know? Yeah, you know you're going from having 40 people turning up in a meeting to sort of eight or nine. Yeah, so there's a lot of effort then as well involved in that. You know, trying to set like a Zoom, uhm, branch meeting and the people I work with are not really that tech savvy* (Rep 1, Packaging Co, Code 8, 9)

Issues with technology were identified as an issue especially, despite the training provided by Unite. The Unite guidance for holding virtual meetings is included in Appendix 5.

> *I mean, we've just had to use the technology as best as we could, I suppose. Uh, but again, I mean you might. Like I was able to use technology, but you know, I mean, I imagine you've had reps out there who just. I mean, Unite would put on training, but it's probably hard to to to use that technology. You know, that's why I let's say our branch meetings would drop to like eight people turned up. At the branch meeting, whereas we had one last week in a pub, and there's not really anything major going on, there was probably 25 people there. And it's just a totally different thing when you're sitting in, you know on the table with 25 people in a room talking about union issues, there's obviously different than everybody sitting on their laptop at home or something. Uhm, yeah, so that was like definitely the would have happening, but I imagine it's had an impact on union organisation you know throughout the country for that reason* (Rep 1, Packaging Co, Code 8, 9)

The usage of technological alternatives affects the dynamics of meetings, both with respect to meeting members, but also with managers:

> *I mean it's been difficult 'cause you know you have to… It's like saying that branch meetings and things you know. It's very difficult, we couldn't organise them. You can't organise face to*

> *face meeting and had to go through a whole period where we would do... Uh, like this year all the meetings you know with management would be on Microsoft Teams. It's just not the same, you know it's hard to have a proper meeting, it is hard to have meetings like that when you're not all not in the same room. Yeah, just that difference with like not just sitting around the table and all being in the same room, it's difficult and you're not really, you know you're not meeting. We would like normally have meetings like that and all the reps would meet before and you'd sit for half an hour to an hour or so. Saying it's trying to organise all stuff like that. It's hard, you know* (Rep 1, Packaging Co, Code 8, 9)

By extension, the Medico convenor (Rep 2) argued that meetings like disciplinaries and pay negotiations had to be in person as it was not possible to have 'an argument over Zoom'. Similarly, there were issues with the reps in Medico being unfamiliar with the technology, and therefore unable to successfully participate in virtual disciplinary hearings:

> *We've done some of them over Zoom right at the start, but some, some of the reps didn't couldn't do Zoom, could, you know, no disrespect to them. But the, the one they had enough bother working their mobile phones, never mind Teams, Zoom and all the rest. It was just, you know, 'cause we didn't have, you know, it's not as if they trained us up or trained up in using Zoom, you know, it was all new, new to people and we didn't have any training when using it* (Rep 2, Medico, Code 8, 9)

In Gamma, the rep indicated various facets of his political beliefs during the interview which pointed to him being more militant than some of the other reps interviewed. The rep believed this militancy ran in contrast to the desires of union officials such that they used the technology available (Zoom) to mute dissenting views:

> *Yeah, so we had branch meetings on Zoom. Yeah. Uh, but they were heavily stage managed by the officials. Um, which is easy to do online because you can just be muted <laugh> so, yeah.* (Rep 13, Gamma Supermarket, Code 8, 9, 12)

While the rep felt the technological aspects of online meetings enabled organisers to 'stage manage' meetings to drown out dissenting views, the rep felt this extended to a wider issue of union democracy, and that Covid was used as an excuse to stifle dissent.

> *…it was harder to get points of order across, and, and this was something that was symptomatic of USDAW generally I went to the online ADM, uh, as a delegate, uh, from my branch. And it was stage managed to the point where there was an open letter, uh, that myself and another rep, uh, signed, um, along with, you know, I think 30 or 40 other reps that, that signed an open letter, basically grievancing the conduct of the standing orders committee at the ADM. Um, and also the fact that it was, it was basically just very, very*

> *undemocratic and, and quite a salacious way of, of doing, doing a, doing a, a, an ADM. Uh, and that was used under the, under the guise of, of Covid* (Rep 13, Gamma Supermarket, Code 8, 9, 12)

The use of Teams/Zoom also reflects in the previous discussion of disciplinaries. Reps found increased formality in the virtual disciplinary context, partially as a result of being unable to informally influence managers prior to hearings. Similarly, other reps felt the virtual option limited the amount of support that reps could give to members facing the disciplinary process.

### *6.4.4 Battling For Space – Spaces of Solidarity*

Physical space is also a potential terrain over which industrial conflict can manifest. The rep in Gamma reported that facilities that used by the union, such as a meeting room and locked storage for union materials, which were formalised as part of their agreement, were withdrawn and appropriated by the company for Covid purposes.

> *It's in black and white, where it says the union should be given appropriate space to hold branch meetings on site and a lockable filing cabinet. And a separate room for that to comply with, uh, data protection, obviously during Covid we never had that. And actually the union office on site was turned into a, uh, temperature check in, uh, station.* (Rep 13, Gamma Supermarket, Code 11, 18)

The rep believed this appropriation of union space was deliberate, where alternatives were viable.

> *Yeah. Um, so, so that obviously sort of showed, I mean, I, I think that's probably the most obvious example of Covid being used as there are plenty of other rooms that could used, there was empty offices upstairs, but they chose the union office specifically to make a point to the reps that, that they were gonna do whatever they could do* (Rep 13, Gamma Supermarket, Code 11, 18))

Prior to the pandemic, there were also issues with the use of an office on site for union purposes. When the room was used for branch meetings it was subject to intrusions from managers:

> *When we did get branch meetings before Covid, uh, we would notice that the managers would come and have a look inside the room to see who was there. Which granted there's no specific, they, they would just say we were just passing through, we heard lively debate. We wanted to check that all of our employees are in a safe environment, all of that they would, but they're, they're there to, to write down who's there and if they can eaves drop, they will.* (Rep 13, Gamma Supermarket, Code 8, 11, 18)

In this respect, space is a battleground over which Covid afforded the employer the ability to advance their interests by removing facilities in which mobilisation could be coordinated. Still, the physical presence of union facilities on the employer's property enables the employer to demonstrate hostility to union efforts. In this respect, virtual alternatives are more secure options in that they prevent managers from being able to surveil nascent attempts to mobilise.

By extension, secure spaces in which reps can discuss issues and strategise are also valuable, and reps identified their absence as an issue. The Beta reps reported the closure of the GMB branch office as a serious issue which limited their abilities to meet and had to compensate through the use of messaging on WhatsApp. This virtual component was deemed important given the inability to 'get away together' and meet somewhere such as the GMB branch office, which had been closed for two years from March 2020. WhatsApp was particularly valuable with respect to providing mutual support and building camaraderie. This platform allowed them to both pass information between themselves and support each other in the context where they were unable to meet physically. The researcher met these reps in their branch office which had only been recently reopened, and they cited its closure as an issue in terms of being able to get them in the same place at once:

> *Building solidarity between reps – the camaraderie kept them going, but missing a space like GMB office to get away from it was difficult* (Field note entry, 25th May 2022 – Beta Supermarket, Code 9, 12)

For Beta reps, in much the same way as the Food Haul rep identified with the NJC, WhatsApp groups served as a means to provide and receive support from other reps, particularly in the absence of effective support from FTOs.

> *Rep activity – using whatsapp groups for mutual support. Handovers between reps between shifts* (Field note entry, 25th May 2022 – Beta Supermarket, Code 9, 12)

Similarly, the Construction Co reps – referring to the same regional office as Beta reps – identified the closed office as an obstacle to being able to effectively plan.

### *6.4.5 Homeworking*

While logistics workers are generally precluded from homeworking as a result of needing to physically interact with the goods they are helping to distribute, the shift to homeworking represents a new terrain for negotiation over the labour process of workers in ancillary functions such as administration and elements of management. Similarly, some union activities could be navigated remotely, notwithstanding the issues created for reps by being unable to physically access workers.

Some of the management and other clerical support staff at Medico took the opportunity to work from home because of the pandemic, but one of the reps in a clerical role had to present a case and utilise the union's persuasive powers in the workplace in order to receive the same:

> *…but they've already told customer services and finance departments that they could work from home. Certain management levels had already taken the decision themselves and off they went. My first opportunity to talk about that I want to work from home. So I think where [Rep 2] and the union became very useful is just by presence, that we have the wealth of the company can't company can't turn around and say, oh, by the way, this is unheard of, this is not something we can do because [Rep 2]'s presence or the union's presence allows says, well, actually we have evidence. Even if it's unspoken, we know that there are others that are doing this, so why are we not doing it as this individual case?* (Rep 4, Medico, Code 10)

The Medico convenor (Rep 2) also began to work from home because of a need to isolate and used the experience as an excuse to continue rep duties from home. This gives the convenor some control over his activities, but he also identifies that managers are likely happy that he is not on the site:

> *When I, you know, I says, well, I I'll just, you know, I'm fine. I can, I can do a lot of stuff at home. And my, you know, on my laptop and on the phone and all the rest of it, and I'm isolating. 'Oh, we'll give you a back to work interview'. I was at work. You know, that I'm still working, working for home still. And, you know, it pissed me off that much, that I turned round and says by, by the way, boss says I have to work from home when, where I can, so anytime I can work for home, I'll be picking and choosing. And, and they didn't, in fact I'm still, I'm still allowed to work for home, even though it's, you know, I think they're quite happy I'm, I'm not in there that much kind of thing. So, so I kind of go in about on average, about three days, you know, sometimes I'd go in for half a day and do half a day at home kind of thing.* (Rep 2, Medico, Code 10)

An interesting point was raised by the Unite regional official that while not specific to this sector, or even trade unionism, highlights an issue raised as a result of the new mode of working that Covid prompted. This specifically pertains to the burnout that comes from multiple successive meetings. He cited that driving between meetings was a valuable process in respect of decompressing and also preparing for subsequent meetings. The availability of electronic calendars and potential for time to be booked in discrete units out of the official's control facilitates an intensification of the FTO's work.

> *…the virtual meetings on Teams or Zooms, or maybe they were a beneficial tool, there was also a downside that because they were a curse. So if I'm out on patch, um, I will plan my day. So I will try say for example, um, if I'm on one side of the city, I might go to the other side of the city later on that day. And then I may do another one on, on my way back out or across. But with Zoom, I think there was not an expectation, but I think there was an insensitivity to the fact that you could have a Zoom at nine o'clock in the morning, say for two hours. And then somebody would put another Zoom in at 1130. And I had one day where I had six Zooms or Teams one after the other, after the other. I think not only is that emotionally draining on you to do a number of meetings like that during the day. Your drive time, I tend to process what's happening. And I, I use that to partly switch off and also process what I've just done and then think about where I'm going to next. But literally sitting at a desk, going from electronic meeting to electronic meeting and so forth physically and mentally, it was really, really draining.* (URO, Code 10)

### *6.4.6 Summary*

Considering Covid-19 as an interruption to space is a useful way to consider and frame work and labour organising/mobilising. While the theme of space straddles both that of issues related to a changing labour process and attempts to mobilise, there are specific aspects that have a clearer spatial dimension. In this instance, it is shown that the interruptions to space that provided benefits to workers in respect of affording greater control over their work also hindered collective organisation. Especially significant are the effects evident as a result of reps being unable to make physical contact with each other, members, and managers. Space too becomes a contested terrain – one where managers potentially seek to deprive union reps of space, or benefit from their inability to traverse it. While virtual alternatives provided an essential function to enable reps to compensate

for their absence of close contact, these alternatives were generally not adequate to prop up union functions, nor democracy.

## 6.5 Conclusion

This chapter has highlighted key themes from the data, organised into those which affected the labour process; those which affected the terrain for mobilising workers, and the influence of space as a moderating factor for both. Fundamentally, it has been identified that the labour process was moderated where the public health measures of the time came into contradiction with the typical operation of work – especially where workers were required to come into close contact. This also included the suspension of disciplinary processes and modification of typical forms of labour control such that workers were often left to self-regulate their work activities. The conditions that afforded workers this latitude by contrast hampered union activities. Reps lost contact with their members as well as wider systems of support from the union infrastructure. Managers in these plants also sought to marginalise and undermine union activities, though in two of the sites they were receptive to input into safe systems of work. The space of work and organising is especially relevant in respect of both of these themes. For workers, the need to maintain space was the driver of any relaxation of typical managerial policies, whereas for reps the removal of space hampered their effective operation. This was especially evident in the reduced ability to receive and transmit information where electronic means of communication were found to be weak alternatives to face to face contact.

# Chapter Seven: Discussion

## 7.1 Introduction

This chapter follows by filtering the coded and collated data through the theoretical and empirical literature which stood at the beginning of this thesis. In a broad sense, the thesis sought to examine whether and how organised labour at workplace level was able to advance members' interests in the context of the pandemic. The preceding findings hopefully illustrate that the successes in this respect were limited, and that often employers were able to take advantage of the conditions to hamper the effectiveness of reps. While there was evidence of reps being actively engaged influencing managers over the operation of the labour process, this was in a limited and narrow respect – mostly in respect of participating in the creation of Covid safety policy. The data also reveals changes to the operation of the understood control mechanisms in these workplaces – workers were effectively able to slow their rate of work by refusing to come close to colleagues, and the typical means of enforcing performance were often suspended.

This discussion delineates these findings into three broad themes: control and resistance; space of work; and (non) mobilisation. This framing allows a discussion of the changing relations at work to be filtered through a typical labour process framing by examining the shifting terrain which affected the capital-labour relationship at the workplace. A discussion of space is important in that the concept straddles nearly all of the topics in the data, though perhaps naively, was not anticipated to be as significant as it was. While possibly unique to a pandemic and public health context, the requirement to create distance between people affected both work *and* reps' capacity to carry out their functions. In this respect, control over space is important for managers and opposition to them, and so this topic straddles discussions of both adjustments to the labour process on the shop floor, and the mobilisation of workers. In respect of mobilisation specifically, the sum of the experiences reported by these reps can be argued to be mostly covered by the descriptors *constraints, restraint, and participation.* That is that the reps were constrained in their activities by various factors;

exercised restraint in their interactions with managers for various reasons; or participated in decision making, though generally in a respect that was limited to ensuring workers' health and safety and not otherwise capitalising on the conditions of the period.

The discussion of the findings is framed in terms of a small number of themes which were covered in the literature review. While the table of codes describes the content of the data associated with each code, the themes in the table take a broad brush approach in describing how they relate to the literature. This section now begins to expand on how the themes include a greater number of sub-themes which have received attention earlier in this thesis.

## 7.2 The Labour Process: Control- Resistance

Notwithstanding debates regarding the concerns that 'labour process theory' can be reduced to meaning 'work' if uncoupled from a political economy context, it remains an effective means of understanding the dynamics of a particular workplace whether linked to wider political economy or its immediate surroundings. Taking the relative autonomy (Edwards, 1986) of the labour process, and the cluster of factors (Edwards, 1988) which moderate the internal relations of a given workplace, there is likely to be variation in the capital-labour relationship in various locations while still experiencing the effects of the wider context with respect to the public health response surrounding Covid-19.

LPT provides the tools to understand this context at work – labour power as a commodity has an indeterminate character which necessitates control over its application (Thompson, 1989). The nature of this relationship is consequently predicated on a structured antagonism (Edwards, 1986) which manifests a range of responses from workers ranging from consent and accommodation to hostility and resistance (Thompson, 1989; Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999). The application of the tools designed to ensure productivity (meaning 'management' or 'control') were put under strain by

the many pressures caused by the public health measures while these essential workers continued to work.

### *7.2.1 Performance Management, Pace of Work and Targets*

While the dominant medium of control in DCs is assumed to be a Taylorised system where workers are micromanaged and measured through electronic scanners (Newsome, Thompson and Commander, 2013), the pandemic context changed this dynamic greatly. Reps did not report that the organisation of work changed especially, however they did report that the management of their effort *did* in a number of these organisations. While nearly all the participants were able to describe a system of control which ordinarily would resemble the 'electronic panopticon' (Bain and Taylor, 2000) of Taylorised surveillance typical of those generally seen in DCs (Newsome, Thompson and Commander, 2013), the pandemic had several effects which modified the prevailing systems of control. Though possibly Covid specific and unlikely to persist beyond the period, the means to ensure workers worked were often relaxed or absent altogether. Key to this was managers vacating the shopfloor in many of these organisations, and the effective suspension of performance management. The causes of this were varied – in some cases performance management was formally and deliberately suspended, but in other sites the inability to carry out disciplinaries meant that the use of targets was impossible with no means to sanction offenders.

Physical supervision appears to form an important part of management of labour in these workplaces. Some reps reported that managers vacated the shopfloor which permitted workers latitude – one (rep 13) citing the abandonment of 'lane checkers' who performed a checking and correcting function, but also to supervise and stop workers grouping together. Despite the apparent tyranny of the electronic panopticon and performance management regime, these workers still felt able to slow the pace of work to protect their own health. Rather than seeking to reignite old debates regarding the panopticon and labour control[1], the researcher seeks to explain worker

[1] The insertion of the panopticon as a means of framing electronic surveillance caused much debate, prompted by wider issues of the shift to incorporate subjectivity and poststructuralist perspectives.

'performance' in terms of the multiple layers of control in place: the digital performance management tools form a significant but not total sum of the labour control regime in place in these sites. Physical supervision forms an important managerial function (other than its suspension during the pandemic), and it remains a key part of the performance management regimen. One site in particular reported the absence of management as a fundamental reason for the collapse of performance management – downtime on the scanner needed to be challenged inside 24 hours and managers were simply unavailable to investigate because of an unwillingness to risk their own health on the shop floor.

In contrast to the received wisdom on control in these workplaces, one plant described a system of control that was very different to the received wisdom regarding work in supply chains – that the work was not generally high pressure, and that a significant degree of self-organisation was possible, more closely representing a system of responsible autonomy (Friedman, 1977b; Friedman, 1977a). This is possibly explained by the plant being not strictly a DC, though it was part of the supply chain of a factory which supplied a number of essential goods for the retail and pharmaceutical industries. The rep here also reported a legacy of militancy both as a hangover from being part of print unions and also a prolonged strike over unfair dismissal in recent history, which may have contributed to greater collective power in the plant.

Far from being driven by the 'tyranny' (Taylor, 2013) or continuous intrusion (Williams and Beck, 2018; Newsome, Thompson and Commander, 2013) of performance management, workers were often left to work without management. This was also aided by the removal of the 'simple' control (Edwards, 1979) of physical supervision in many sites and difficulties implementing the bureaucratic systems in place. The control structures were often such that workers would continue to work as dictated by their scanners or instructions, but that the standards or targets could not be enforced.

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See e.g. (Thompson and Ackroyd, 1995; Bain and Taylor, 2000; Knights and McCabe, 2003; Fernie and Metcalf, 1998; Knights and Vurdubakis,1994; Edwards, 2010) among many on this topic

This was caused by a number of factors – key to this was the inability of employers to carry out disciplinaries, which necessarily underpins any PM system (see e.g. usage of the PIP (Taylor, 2013). In some plants the suspension of disciplinary action was negotiated, though in others it was difficult for managers to make a case for action on performance grounds. Investigations or disciplinaries could not always be held – sometimes through the reluctance of managers, issues with Covid affecting procedures, or through the reps being able to frustrate the process.

Similarly, the bureaucratic process of disciplinaries was propped up on a number of principles. In some plants they were suspended – either through managerial decision or union pressure. Without being able to see the procedures first hand (because of access at a distance), it is not possible to be certain how PM policies are applied. There is evidence in the wider context of PM being propped up on a continuous system of bureaucratic measures ostensibly designed to coach improvement, but in reality a means of facilitating 'exit' (Williams and Beck, 2018; Taylor, 2013; Newsome, Thompson and Commander, 2013). With these means unavailable to managers, they instead resorted to the use of casualised labour in the form of agency workers. These agency workers were reported to have messages sent to their scanners such that they had to hit targets or miss breaks, or being explicitly told that they were there to pick up slack from the core workforce in two major supermarkets. These workers lack the employment protection afforded by a permanent contract, and in the case of Eastern European agency workers possibly lacked the embeddedness in the workforce that might have provided the confidence to push back against instructions (Thompson, Newsome and Commander, 2013). The permanent contract status certainly helped to protect workers in the case of Medico where the ACAS code was explicitly cited as a means of postponing disciplinaries where reps could not physically attend. The ease of 'exiting' workers on casualised contracts gave the means for managers to intensify their effort, being able to bypass the processes which protect the core workforce. Where disciplinaries did continue to run, reps argued that they lacked the ability to informally influence the outcome or halt it entirely, with the effect that outcomes were more severe

– receiving written warnings for offences that would previously attract verbal warnings, or not make it to the process at all.

### *7.2.2 Self-regulation of Work*

The public health measures gave workers some control over their work. It provided a legitimate excuse to avoid tasks entirely – e.g. the lorry drivers dropping at kerbside rather than entering premises – and allowed others to slow the pace of work by refusing to enter spaces where doing so would bring them within 2m of colleagues – e.g. order pickers queuing at the end of aisles rather than passing those already picking in them. Maintaining distance from colleagues allowed workers to exert some control over pace of work – where sites reported no slow down, it was generally a result of the picking procedure being conducted in single aisles or stations such that the only close contact came during breaks and changeovers. Here, the effort bargain (Baldamus, 1961) was effectively moderated by the public health requirements of the time as well as the particular organisation of he workplace – where distancing could be maintained through the organisation of work, the pace of work could not be slowed. In one particular workplace, the rep articulated a clear framing of the conditions as an opportunity for workers – stating they were able to adjust their surplus value – though also believing the employer later retaliated against the workforce in terms of attempting to claw back lost productivity.

The effort bargain was also somewhat moderated by labour market conditions which allowed workers to choose to sell their labour elsewhere – the 'double indeterminacy' of labour, as termed by Smith (2006). Food Haul saw an exodus of HGV drivers prompted by labour shortages, though two sites reported that the employer had struggled to recruit workers of a standard they were accustomed to, and as a result there were behavioural issues, and an inability to maintain targets at previous levels. The Food Haul depot rep reported market conditions and 'poor management' meant that workers were routinely failing to hit targets and that the average pick rate in the warehouse

was down on previous years. This was attributed to high turnover and poor recruitment which in turn disincentivised workers of longer standing from working to hit the established targets. Reps in Construction Co stated that labour market conditions meant the business was recruiting workers of a lower behavioural standard than they might have previously, and that issues stemming from the pandemic may have exacerbated these problems – particularly in terms of workers' mental health.

### *7.2.3 Absence*

For the employer, ensuring attendance at work is a key part of generating productivity, though another aspect of work which the pandemic context reshaped. In contrast to other professions where working remotely is possible, distribution work requires interaction with physical items and so cannot be done from home, and consequently also could not be done when workers are or believe themselves to be ill. This creates challenges for managers in terms of ensuring the continued operation of the business, and possibly creates tensions between public health and profit. The management of absence became a contested issue with varying approaches between employers.

While the causes of absences are multiple and varied (Behrend, 1959; Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999:25), the control-resistance context here is more ambiguous with employers and workers forced to make decisions that could potentially affect multiple people's health. Reflecting this tension, the reps reported varying policy positions towards taking leave and managing sickness in the businesses. While some sites (e.g. Packaging Co) offered comprehensive sick pay and workers responded to this trust by maintaining high levels of attendance, other reps did not report the same experience. Some (e.g. Construction Co and Beta) reported contradictions in the operation of policy where policies and measures put in place were a façade designed to create the illusion of public health compliance but being primarily concerned with maintaining production in the pursuit of profit. This manifested in policies which were sometimes contradictory, and workers reporting close contact with positive cases being told to come in while awaiting test results. In some cases the disciplinary process continued unchecked, and in these cases there was the occasional use of sanction for sickness absences.

Managing absence was reported as a typical source of disciplinary action, and with various difficulties enforcing absence management or electing to suspend it, there were opportunities for workers to take advantage of the context. This gave workers opportunity to take time off in many instances by simply reporting symptoms. One group of reps (Construction Co) cited this as an excuse to '[take] the piss massively' where policy allowed 95% sick pay. Elsewhere a rep (rep 5 - Alpha) reported a disciplinary case where a manager had noticed a worker had ceased using childcare days, but instead had reported six positive Covid tests.

In short, where the organisation of work permitted the restriction of output by workers, the context of the day - whether driven by public health measures or the labour market – made it difficult for managers to extract more effort from the core workforce. Workers often continued to work regardless of the suspension of normal management, but often at a slower pace. This generally pivoted on whether managers were willing or able to use the tools of PM, and in some plants instead recruited agency labour, sometimes vocally expressing that they are there to pick up the slack and threatening them with sanctions (dismissal and lost breaks) should they fail to hit targets. While there was some lost production at various stages of the pandemic, attempts to continue to extract effort sometimes ran contrary to public health aims. This was mostly evident in terms of contradictory policy in terms of absence, and the use of agency workers who were pressured to ignore the safety guidance that the core workforce could utilise to slow down their own work.

## 7.3 Space

Conceptions of space are especially relevant to work in the pandemic, if not more generally. Covid-19 can be thought of as a fundamental interruption to space via the assorted public health interventions, many of which translated into workplaces. Key to this conception of space was the need to maintain distance between citizens, which affected work though logistics also provides a solution in terms of creating a spatial fix for capital when organising production and consumption. While the shifted reorganisation of production and consumption that allows goods to be moved on a global scale ('the logistics revolution' (Bonacich and Wilson, 2008)) suggests a discussion of the political economy of work and space (perhaps via Covid) is worthwhile, here the context must focus on the micro level, even if only for reasons of access to data under the circumstances. Discussions surrounding space have emerged through the labour process tradition – both at micro and macro levels (or arguably at the meso level (Taylor, 2015)), though the unique context here examines the interruption of the space of the labour process which affected workers interactions with their workplace, colleagues, managers, and importantly, their union representatives.

### *7.3.1 Space and Control/Resistance*

In many ways, the concept of space of work is an effective bridge between exploring the means of management control, and the mobilising activities of reps in the pandemic context since space affects both the informal aspects of the employment relationship, as well as reps' abilities to organise. Heiland (2021) indicates how the work platforms transform conceptions of space of work, but also use the mechanisms available to them to ensure that workers are controlled – this control extends to both ensuring an efficient execution of the labour process, but also in ensuring workers are unable to congregate so to be able to organise. While the totalising surveillance of GPS associated with delivery platforms is not viable in DCs – workers must necessarily come into some proximity with each other and move around a relatively small area – the effects of the pandemic both increased the distance between workers for public health purposes, though also allowed

managers opportunities to 'kneecap' effective activists by limiting their mobility. In the context of these workplaces, it can broadly be said that the interruptions to space gave workers some control over their work activities, though also often hampered collective organisation.

As Heiland points out – LPT has a blind spot with respect to space, but space is critical in considering the production of conflict – even beyond the obvious application to platform delivery work. While LPT has engaged critically with geography in logistics when considering the transmission of effects along value chains (see e.g. (Taylor, Newsome and Rainnie, 2013; Newsome *et al.,* 2015; Rainnie, McGrath-Champ and Herod,2010)), and by examining the effects of workplace layout and surveillance (for layout see e.g. (Baldry, 1999). For debates on surveillance see (Bain and Taylor, 2000) among many others), less explicit focus is given to space for worker resistance at workplace level. The pandemic context might make this framing specific to a particular period and less relevant beyond it, but the data points to space being a particularly important factor both in terms of control of work, as well as mitigating attempts to resist collectively. While distancing in these workplaces created 'room' for many workers in terms of workload, the interruption to physical space and the inadequacy of virtual alternatives limited attempts to successfully oppose managers beyond matters directly relating to Covid. The workspace of warehousing in this context was fundamental to both the restriction of output, and the limitation of collective action. Discussions of the geographies of logistics and panopticonised surveillance structures do not adequately frame interruptions to work in this kind of workplace which are often predicated on movement between tasks in within fixed bounds. A recent examination of the geography of warehouses (Jordhus-Lier, Underthun and Zampoukos, 2019) addresses this somewhat by placing the 'scale' of the workplace as a means to link to labour process theory, though LPT is arguably already sufficiently equipped to 'zoom in' to the workplace, this conception of scale is useful in terms of 'zooming out' of the workplace. This conceptualising is arguably similar (though also arguably more developed) to Edwards' relative autonomy of the workplace, and while valuable is not necessarily useful in this context – the focus is on how movement *around a workplace* is relevant in terms of the capital-labour relationship, rather

than the mitigations of and links to external factors beyond the walls of the site. This framing may have value ordinarily, but the extraordinary circumstances of the time make for difficulty in researching wider links. When considering space and questions of scale, in this context there may be some value in applying the same frameworks to conceptions of union activity – the workplace at the micro scale, and the meso scale of the paid officials of the union. Similarly, in this context it is harder to consider the influence of the union infrastructure on these workplaces as FTOs proved more difficult to gain access to (though many were happy to pass details to branches), and at the most senior level, union negotiations would have occurred between the government or large employers. The public health response surrounding Covid-19 points to an interruption of space more generally (consider the mantra of 'social distancing'), here attention is drawn to its implications in shaping the dynamics of work at the point of production rather than as part of a wider context, value chain, or with respect to the circuit of capital.

### *7.3.2 Workplace Layout and Mobility*

Workplace layout was revealed to be a fundamental driver of the patterns of control and resistance. This piece builds on a long legacy of critical workplace research which considers the effects of workplace layout as a means of managerial control (Bain and Taylor, 2000; Fernie and Metcalf, 1998; Sewell and Wilkinson, 1992; Baldry, Bain and Taylor, 1998; Baldry, 1999; Baldry and Barnes, 2012; Baldry and Hallier, 2010).

In considering space, the building itself facilitates both the organisation of work as well as surveillance over it, and behavioural cues for activities within it (Baldry, 1999). Much of the labour process debate has surrounded discussions around the application of the panopticon metaphor for workplace surveillance (Taylor and Bain, 1999; Bain and Taylor, 2000; Thompson and Ackroyd, 1995) – though the panoptic gaze has limited reach in this context – the formal systems underpinning electronic surveillance were often suspended or unenforceable. The previous section detailed to a significant extent how the collapse of performance management was significantly predicated on the inability to hold disciplinaries and the pace of work was slowed in many sites according to the

willingness of workers to come close to each other. In this respect, physical space and the layout of the workplace was a fundamental factor in dictating the informal dynamics within. By contrast, workers were expected to maintain the pace of work where the workplace layout facilitated it. Similarly, the 'gaze' of electronic surveillance can only ensure that workers are doing as instructed – where workers are physically mobile (as they often are within DCs), other forms of control are required to ensure they do not carry out acts such as theft, sabotage, or other undesirable acts. These acts are often concealed by definition, and impossible for a researcher to uncover at a distance. The researcher's employment history (see Appendix One) in the sector suggests destructive or criminal acts are frequent (though not universal) in these kinds of workplaces, and that they are often found in the cracks of the prevailing control systems – a scanner can only monitor how fast a worker is doing assigned tasks, not whether they are deliberately damaging stock as they do so. Similarly, this is a limitation of previous research into the supermarket supply chain (Newsome, Thompson and Commander, 2013). The pace and intensity of work can be measured and managed using a scanner and so can easily be explored through interviews with managers and workers. This method does not reveal what workers are able to get away with when away from the scanner. Workers are hardly likely to self-report means to avoid work that are concealed from managers, nor deviant acts that the scanner cannot observe such as theft, sabotage, or damage to property. Considering Ackroyd and Thompson's (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999) dimensions of organisational misbehaviour, the gaze of electronic surveillance is limited to constraining certain forms of misbehaviour – the soldiering or manipulating of time. While there is the online space which allows manifestations of dissent (Thompson, McDonald and O'Connor, 2019), there is still room to manoeuvre in the physical workplace for workers to individually rebel. Perhaps unsurprisingly these resemble the means associated with donkey jobs (Mars, 1982; Mars, 2006) in the researcher's experience.

Workplace layout is also pivotal in respect of achieving managers' objectives in countering organised labour. The pandemic afforded managers the opportunity to remove physical space from reps – in

terms of hampering or removing their mobility around the workplace, or in respect of removing facilities used for union duties. One rep (Rep 4) cited the lack of 'boots on the ground' as a major issue, and that the employer had (perhaps serendipitously) 'kneecapped' the union. Rep 2 from the same plant cited restricted movement as the major issue, and that the employer was happy for him to conduct his facilities time at home. These barriers significantly shift the frontier of control (Goodrich, 1920) in the employer's favour. Where reps are unable to move around a workplace their ability to influence employers is greatly diminished. This was demonstrated in terms of representing workers and in building the union's workplace power. This was evident in reps' difficulties influencing or halting disciplinaries through informal means, and in terms of being unable to effectively access members to obtain 'the word on the street'. The 'space' of the union was also revealed to be a source of contest in some workplaces where union facilities such as offices or storage spaces were appropriated, ostensibly for Covid safety purposes. Homeworking (for facilities time) was similarly used as a means of reducing reps' influence in the workplace.

### *7.3.3 Communication, Virtual Spaces, and Alternatives to Meeting*

Where mobility around the workplace was a pivotal issue in carrying out union duties, a significant issue was that of communication – an inability to collect information from members, and difficulty in communicating information outwardly. The unusual circumstances of the time mean that it is difficult to centre reps' communications in existing literature, though there are concessions to union organisation and the use of electronic communications, particularly in terms of social media. There are workplaces and industrial disputes where mobilising has been achieved despite distances between workers and activists, so there was the potential for the issues of distance to be overcome – though possibly requiring additional support.

New technologies present challenges for organised labour, but also provide the context for new forms of collective organisation in response (Martínez Lucio *et al.,* 2021). While the changes brought on by the pandemic were not a new technology as such (in the same way as the changes prompted in the gig/platform economy), the circumstances made for a new normal underpinned by existing

technologies which were essential for work to continue remotely in many sectors. In this case the video call/conferencing solutions which came into common parlance in March 2020, such as Zoom and MS Teams, provided the means for many workers to continue to work from home. This same technology, as well as others which were already in common usage, (potentially) allow workers to organise even where they are unable to physically meet.

While the internet provides the means to mobilise, there remains potential issues with access to hardware (Fitzgerald, Hardy and Martinez Lucio, 2012). While Fitzgerald *et al*. recognise the constraints of hardware and time, this is less of an issue in the contemporary context with the proliferation of (budget) smartphones. Here the issue is not just access to hardware, but also technological aptitude. Smartphones provide all manner of access to these channels of communication at relatively low cost, and there is evidence of both technological use and barriers to its implementation.

One participant (Rep 1) described his colleagues as not being 'tech savvy' and another (Rep 2) pointed to reps 'having enough bother working their mobile phones', and not being able to use the likes of Zoom.  While these tech solutions create virtual spaces of organising - possibly in the complete absence of physical options – and have enormous potential to link activists such as in the case of the British Airways strike (Taylor, Moore and Byford, 2019), this is contingent on the activists being able to use the technology. While the Unite regional official provided documentation which was circulated to members to help them navigate this new technology (see appendix 5), there was no such evidence from the GMB reps who formed most of the participants – Many GMB reps were in fact openly critical of the union in leaving them without support. This aside, the one Unite rep interviewed still pointed to low engagement with virtual options. By contrast, union activism in the case of the BA mixed fleet strike was coordinated despite limited physical interface between reps/officials and members, and with members having fleeting contact with each other in the course of work. In the case of these distribution workplaces, the data suggests that technological capability

is a significant factor in explaining the inability to meet outside of normal physical channels, though access to members may have also revealed other causes. Electronic communication includes open and closed channels of internet communication which are variously visible or concealed to outsiders (Fitzgerald, Hardy and Martinez Lucio, 2012). These closed channels (such as WhatsApp groups) were valuable to reps in terms of providing mutual support and communicating current public health guidance, though there was not evidence of these groups forming part of a wider strategy incorporating members. This may have required support from the wider union infrastructure given the circumstances, or have been part of a more concrete attempt to mobilise workers in response to specific issues. Electronic communications likely form an important solution to issues such as distance between members, and the researcher has since become aware from a GMB officer that the recent (2023) strikes in Amazon have been organised via TikTok. Social media, it should be added, is a contested terrain of work, with the potential for the boundaries of work and non-work to be blurred, and for employers to monitor workers' activities (Thompson, McDonald and O'Connor, 2019; McDonald, Thompson and O' Connor, 2016)

Interestingly, one rep (Rep 3, Food Haul/GMB) managed to successfully navigate the issues associated with inability to physically meet members through the infrastructure he had created prior to the pandemic as a result of his mobility away from the depot as an HGV driver. This distance meant he conducted the bulk of his union affairs over the telephone, and while this does not facilitate group meetings, it does provide the capacity for him to advocate for members on issues they present to him, and he did so with respect to quickly handling issues from members such as being moved to distant or unsafe sites.

While virtual meetings provided solutions for disciplinaries, the reps reported that they were greatly changed in their dynamic. Construction Co reps cited greatly formality and inability to influence the outcome, the Unite rep and regional officer cited issues in representing members in sites with no rep in place. Here the issue was one of a changed dynamic over a screen – one rep reporting that he

wanted to see the whites of their eyes in negotiations – though representing in disciplinaries was also affected in terms of practicalities. Reps and officers were often unable to meet members in advance of meetings, and unable to affect their member's behaviour in the course of them. While representing workers is arguably a more muted form of trade unionism – representative of the shift to servicing members and partnership that came in response to decline (Terry, 2003; Kelly, 2004) – this is still an important function in protecting members and places some restraint on managerial prerogative. Moreover, it is one which demonstrates the importance of maintaining some degree of physical closeness, or at least considering adequate solutions to overcoming distance. Reps cited similar issues with participation in branch meetings – one citing attendance dropping from around 40 to single digits once they moved online, and rising again once restrictions allowed physical meetings to resume.

It is difficult to place a discussion of space in terms of existing literature, such was the dramatic effect of the pandemic on spatial aspects of work – many professions found their work temporarily suspended, while the remainder who worked either did so remotely, or continued to attend a physical place of work, modifying their activities according to prevailing governmental guidance. The concept of space is essential in understanding many of the effects of the pandemic on work and trade union organisation. While space remains an important concept when thinking about the labour process and organised labour generally, not all of the conclusions drawn from this data are necessarily relevant beyond the pandemic setting. The ability to limit output or avoid disciplinary action was fundamentally related to the necessity to maintain distance which interrupted the typical execution of work. The need for reps and the wider union to consider space when attempting to generate resistance is more important – approaching the topic as a pragmatist and therefore looking for the application of knowledge, the post-pandemic setting may be used by managers to continue to limit the mobility of reps around workplaces, to remove union spaces and to benefit from less physical presence from reps generally. Here the challenge is to ensure that these issues (many technological) can be navigated.

## 7.4 Mobilisation Theory

This thesis is focused on whether and the extent to which union reps were able to influence the operation of their workplaces during the Covid-19 pandemic. While the findings presented do not point to a great deal of advancement of union power in these workplaces, the analytical tool of mobilisation theory (Kelly, 1998) provides a way to contextualise the experience of the pandemic, and explain why the reps *didn't* manage to advance their members' interests. Despite reasonably recent (post New Labour) evidence that reps are able to mobilise workers collectively and to gain concessions from managers (Darlington, 2018), the evidence here suggests an inability to do so in the workplaces in this thesis – beyond some participation in Covid safety policy. This participation however will be shown to also be a constraining factor on reps.

Considering the distinction between mobilising and organising (Holgate, Simms and Tapia, 2018) with respect to whether the existing base of power exists or needs to be built is a little challenging in the pandemic context, though this framing can be used to consider how organised each particular workplace was before the pandemic – that is the extent to which reps had the capacity to draw on the power of the membership to challenge managers. Here, the workplaces were well organised – membership was reported to be above 70% in all the sites. Subsequently, the fundamental tenets of mobilisation theory can be considered to analyse the extent to which reps and activists could identify and frame injustice in order to direct this power resource towards meaningful change. The fundamentals of Kelly's (Kelly, 1998) Mobilisation Theory describes how leaders (in this case union reps) frame a sense of perceived injustice, and attribute it to an external party (e.g. managers) such that the group of workers can mobilise around it. Darlington (Darlington, 2018:632) points to the use of mobilisation theory in understanding why collective action *hasn't* occurred despite the apparent conditions for it, and the need to examine cases in detail where this has transpired. This work hopefully contributes to this need, though conclusions may also be constrained to an incredibly unique context, and unfortunately limited as a result of access – single or multisite case studies

would be useful in understanding how the dynamics between members and attempts to drive them to action, but the same context also made access to workplaces difficult if not impossible.

With Darlington (Darlington, 2018:633) pointing to the need for research into the current state of workplace reps (a la Joyce (2016)) in order to understand the 'limits and potential' of mobilisation, this research goes some way to addressing this. It is difficult, however, to assess how much of a power resource the reps had to draw upon given the nature of the access, though they were able to report on their membership to some extent. The nature of research access and public health restrictions mean it is hard to have a deep understanding of the extent to which members were angered by issues, or how driven to action they might be – unfortunately, if the reps could not access their own members then it is even more difficult for the outsider researcher to get access. The reps interviewed generally pointed to high membership in their workplaces, and it is unsurprising that the workplaces and branches that are well organised (in terms of membership at least) were receptive to research being carried out where accessing less organised sites would prove much more difficult.

In terms of explanations as to why reps could not mobilise workers, there was a raft of evidence that shows how reps were both in the midst of issues that could be perceived as unjust, though also unable to translate this into action. There was much presented in the data that suggested a sense of injustice was felt by reps, members, and the workforce generally. If the issues were present which could be mobilised around, then what prevented them from being transferred into action? For Kelly, mobilisation follows when this sense of injustice can be attributed to external agents (managers, the employer) by leaders who frame these issues as something towards which action can be directed. For the most part, this did not happen despite there being a number of issues brought up in discussion that could constitute 'injustice' and evidence that there was discontent from members around these issues. The following sections discuss the various strands of potential cases of injustice

which might have been used to mobilise workers, and attempt to provide reasons why this did not occur.

### *7.4.1 Perception of Managers' Conduct*

One supermarket DC in particular revealed real anger with the employer over the movement of workers between DCs in the North of England and Midlands, and members directly asked them 'why haven't you shut us down?' when neighbouring DCs trading in the same goods were closed. The question here remains *why* reps were unable to use Covid as a means of advancing their power base in the workplace, and it is here that the actions of reps can be grouped in terms of *constraint, restraint,* and *participation.* Put simply, they either chose not to confront the employer, wanted to but were hampered in some way(s), or pursued a participative approach which revolved around engaging with the employer on Covid safety. While some of the workplaces and rep's experiences sit neatly in each category, it is more useful to think of each in terms of actions or events rather than orientation. For example, while there was evidence of varying degrees of orientation towards a conflictual approach, those that reported a participative approach over Covid safety may also be more inclined to being more bullish in other respects should the conditions permit. This following section attempts to relate the data through the lens of mobilisation and to consider the various strands why this did not occur in these workplaces.

As Kelly (1998) identifies, a sense of injustice is required as a starting point for mobilisation to occur. There were many issues identified in this data which were reported as being causes for malcontent. These included matters directly related to Covid safety - the movement of workers between sites on minibuses which had not been cleaned, patchy implementation of safety measures which were sometimes argued to be tokenistic and sometimes lapsed, as well as other issues related to mistreatment or variable treatment between groups and accusations of profiteering or greed. There was potential for Covid to be used as a means of advancing the goals of organised labour – the Unite branch secretary who was met in March 2022 reported that they had successfully negotiated a number of gains for essential (non-distribution) workers that were so significant they had

deliberately not promoted them for fear of bad publicity seeing them lost. This included half workdays for full pay, changed rotas, and pay increases to ’12 grand a month’ for one group of workers in a critical role.

When seeking to explain how these issues didn’t translate to action in already well-unionised workplaces, the following table provides a summary of reasons why reps may not have pushed against managers.

### *7.4.2 Reasons for Non-Mobilisation*

| | |
|---|---|
| Restraint | - Morally wrong<br>- Conflicting objectives: "How can you go up against the employer when you're arguing to make yourself less safe?"<br>- Ambiguous/contentious issues: Being unwilling to police ambiguous/contentious issues – e.g. Member scepticism towards masks/vaccines<br>- Rep scepticism of worker solidarity – "They'll never strike here" |
| Constraint | - Navigating space in the workplace – being unable to have 'boots on the ground' or otherwise approach members<br>- The inadequacy of virtual alternatives to physically meeting<br>- Issues with communication both to and from the union reps<br>- Workplace organisation vs. union bureaucracy – a lack of support from the union machinery, or FTOs agreeing to things independently of reps<br>- Countermobilisation from managers, including the removal of union facilities, narratives about the union, and attacks on functions which support union activities |
| Participation | - The design of safe systems of work to ensure safety of members<br>- Existing partnership orientations and infrastructure |

*Figure 3 Reasons For Non-Mobilisation*

In respect of restraint, reps' reluctance to go against managers could have been anticipated to some degree because of the nature of the particular context. As 'essential workers' by definition – these workers continued to work throughout the pandemic – there may have been some expectation of a tension between a feeling of contributing towards some sort of 'national effort' and utilising the essential status as a means of advancing members' interests. While this did not emerge prominently from the interviews, it is possible that the sense of competing loyalties between advancing members' interests and delivering essential services formed a sort of normative control over workers and placed reps in a difficult position. One rep did identify the perception of using the

pandemic as leverage to be 'morally wrong' and as such a shield for managers, but beyond this and another rep lamenting the absence of a 'thank you' for working through the pandemic, this normative aspect was not especially visible, though the researcher concedes it is likely relevant and may well have appeared if the research design was more embedded in workplaces and close to workers. Nonetheless, it is important to consider that workers have competing loyalties, and that securing loyalty is a prerequisite for managers to secure productivity (Harbison and Myers, 1959). Similarly, the unitarist assumptions of management may be reinforced by rationale that worker and customer interests are aligned (Korczynski, 2001), and given the pandemic context this may have been sufficient to ensure the application of effort despite the absence of management, and the reluctance to pursue collective action.

Beyond this, 'restraint' was less prominent in the findings than some of the other themes and revolves around reps' participation in ensuring the safety of their members. The trade union movement had a role to play along with business and government in supporting the public health response (Brandl, 2021). UK unions were also capable of alerting the government to issues and plugging gaps where the government had neglected to do so (Watterson, 2020). While using data from countries within the EU and focusing at national level, Thomas *et al*. (2022) point to difficulties for unions in creating coherent policy as a result of the plurality of attitudes of members – citing "the need to choose between the preferences of part of their membership and public health imperatives" (ibid). Though reps at workplace level are less concerned with making national policy, they did demonstrate the capacity to influence and create policy, and in some cases were tasked with enforcing it. As Thomas *et al*. demonstrate, vaccine policy was potentially polarising and in this study reps reported feeling unable to challenge company policy where doing so could make members less safe (irrespective of members' views), or feeling under pressure where members rebuke reps for attempting to ensure policies are followed. This context demonstrates ways in which reps might be hesitant to be bullish with the employer where doing so might be at the detriment of a group of workers. Similarly, as one rep put it – "you get into the whole argument about the science of face

masks and whether it is safe and you don't really want to go down that road either" (Rep 1). These pressures explain the reticence of reps to push against employers in this context to a significant degree.

While these aspects of restraint from reps was evident in some respects, the constraints placed upon them were evident in a number of respects. The spatial aspects of work have received significant attention already in this chapter, but largely, the influence of the changing conception of space can be understood to have had some short term benefits for some workers while also having major implications for collective organisation. This was mostly manifested in terms of the physical distance between reps and members preventing them from being able to gather and distribute sufficient information about workplace issues, and virtual alternatives providing weak alternatives.

### *Reps as leaders*

Leadership as part of mobilisation is also fundamentally related to wider networks of collective action (Darlington, 2018; Blyton and Jenkins, 2013) and the wider context of media and political influence, as well as the absence of visibility of other 'successes' at other sites (Darlington, 2018). Many of the reps interviewed reported variations of being 'cut adrift' or FTOs acting contrary to interests of workplace organisation, meaning the wider infrastructure was also likely to be a barrier to nascent attempts to mobilise. The context of this period may contribute to a longer term sense of injustice which has contributed to the wave of strikes from late 2022 into 2023. While the framing of this action is generally made in terms of the cost of living crisis, the memories of the pandemic will still be fresh in many workers' minds and the current support from the wider union movement as well as evidence of strikes in many sectors is likely to be a contributing factor in encouraging others to strike. Importantly now, the wider union infrastructure is able to support action, and action over cost of living is perhaps less contentious than that which interferes with the operation of 'essential' businesses during a pandemic.

There was evidence of attempts of reps seizing the initiative as leaders to try to manufacture discontent, though also numerous barriers to this gathering pace. One prominent example was the Medico case, where reps bought a consignment of masks from their own employer in response to the employer's claims to be unable to source masks. This was followed up with the circulation of GMB branded masks as a means of challenging the competing legitimacy of claims between employer and union to be protecting the interests of the workforce.

The sustained decline of the labour movement has meant that there is not the experience in workplaces of how to meaningfully mobilise workers on the shopfloor. The ability to mobilise workers is to some degree predicated on a legacy of collective action in a plant such that reps can draw upon previous strategies and victories to coordinate and inspire members to action (Batstone, Boraston and Frenkel, 1977; Beynon, 1984). Hyman refers to the legacy of previous action in terms of demonstrating the efficacy of collective action in terms of providing credible examples of success in opposing the employer (Hyman, 1975:154) Similarly, where other sectors such as rail or Royal Mail have a legacy of militancy (Darlington, 2009; Gall, 2003), this is not so visible in the unions (or workplaces) studied here. There were only two sites where reps reported any real militancy, adversarial orientation or recent industrial action. One site (Packaging Co) cited industrial action over a dismissed rep as still affecting relations with the employer, but also citing that the employer going above and beyond as a cause to not push against the employer – not arguing to make members less safe. This cooperative orientation for much of the pandemic was acknowledged and the rep recognised that there was a need to become more adversarial, and this also involved a need to remove a group of reps who were more orientated towards cooperating with the employer on issues beyond Covid.

Militancy was also evident in the Gamma site where there had been a ballot for a strike which forced through a 2% pay rise. The rep was acutely aware that the threat of the strike was leverage and that it would likely not have happened. This case is particularly interesting because this rep was a self-

declared Trotskyist whose orientation towards the union and employer was much more militant than his union. The rep reported hostility towards him, including from the union bureaucracy who were keen to marginalise him – including a literal muting during meetings. The links between mobilisation, resistance, and physical space are evident here with attempts to generate resistance tempered at a distance by those able to use technology to silence dissenting voices. This rep was later dismissed for what he argued were spurious reasons and a result of his union activities. Militancy is difficult to foster in workplaces in the face of union decline where workers are likely to have little experience of previous action. Unions cannot escape their role as vehicles of class action (Hyman, 2001), though this orientation has more recently been subsumed by other expressions of identity and class remains marginalised (Moore, 2011). Reps face challenges in attempting to mobilise to action in this context. While it is difficult to ascertain the demographics of these workplaces by interviewing reps remotely, the researcher's experience and academic sources (Thompson, Newsome and Commander, 2013) suggest that DCs are significantly staffed by migrant workers, particularly from Eastern Europe. The pressures on these workers make opposition to the employer more risky, though it is difficult to determine if this is an issue in these workplaces from the data. This would certainly represent another constraining (or possibly restraining) factor. Workplace demographics aside, there was certainly some evidence of suspicion towards membership having sufficient solidarity to take action, that workers will never 'back each other up'.

This leads to a discussion of the tensions between workplace organisation and union bureaucracy. A number of the sites cited issues with union bureaucracy conflicting with the aims of shopfloor organisation. This included FTOs including no strike agreements following a risky recruitment and recognition campaign by a rep. Similarly, one rep reported disillusion with the union as a result of an aggressive recruitment campaign underpinned by a will writing service which was subsequently withdrawn after attracting members. Other reps cited a complete shut down of union offices which left them feeling unsupported and unable to determine how best to support their members. The GMB in particular received significant ire from some participants where union officials had been

furloughed or worked from home but the reps continued to risk their health while feeling unsupported by the union bureaucracy. There was a feeling that 'the union is a business' rather than an organic or radical organisation designed to support  One of the more militant reps was acutely aware of the contradictions between trade unionism as a vehicle of class conflict and the moderating effects of union bureaucracy in pursuing a more cooperative or business-led approach.

Union activities exist on a spectrum of political and economic activities, though are mostly preoccupied with a collective bargaining agenda (Hyman, 1996). Being fundamentally embedded within capitalism rather than seeking to challenge it, the role of unions and therefore FTOs is to find accommodations and compromises (Darlington, 2014b). This 'bureaucratic' orientation is also framed in terms of the embeddedness of unions as actors which moderate the competing interests between employer, government and workers, sometimes exercising restraint as part of wider conceptions of the 'national interest' (Darlington, 2014b), and unions to some degree have been persuaded or strong-armed into conceding that militancy or more aggressive strategies are at odds with national interests (Hassel, 2003). Much of the more muted orientations towards trade unionism have also occurred against the backdrop of sustained decline, with a number of these strategies adopted intended to secure relevance in a hostile environment. Partnership for example, effectively being a weak solution and representing unionism on management's terms (Terry, 2003; Kelly, 2004). These strategies are particularly prominent in the large general unions such as GMB, Unite, USDAW. Crucially, much trade union action now operates on a different terrain where collective expressions of conflict have been displaced and much of this expression is now through employment tribunals (Kirk, 2018), which are more individualistic in orientation.

The pandemic context is unique in this respect. No doubt these factors contribute to hamstringing attempts to mobilise members by workplace activists, but union bureaucracy was also fundamentally embedded in discussions with the state in respect of policy. Union officials themselves may have felt restraint in respect of attempting to leverage the pandemic position, and

the effects of this translate to tension with workplace activists eager to take action to both protect workers and advance their interests more widely. This is neatly encapsulated by a quote reported by the Gamma rep who stated another rep had said 'If we carry on like this, we'll all be dead surrounded by dry powder' in response to an official's urge to keep their powder dry.

Workers were also frequently subject to various initiatives from management designed to undermine collective organisation. There were a raft of circumstantial issues which limited the ability to mobilise – a distinction between intent and good fortune on the side of managers. This included the removal of union spaces, the accusations of there being a 'union variant' which affected reps on sick leave, and the direction of blame onto the union for safety initiatives which were agreed with the employer. The latter also reaffirms the importance of spatial mobility around a workplace in cultivating relationships. Reps referred to 'one in the hand being worth twenty in the bush' and an ability for members to gauge a rep's sincerity through them walking around having conversations.

### *7.4.3 Health and Safety and Policy*

Workplace H&S reps are key to pushing back against a 'culture of denial' in workplace, and can be fundamentally important in regulating issues around workplace/Covid safety (Cai *et al.,* 2022). These reps reported varying orientations from the employers in terms of incorporating the union in decision making, or in the union having to be proactive in forcing their hand to take safety seriously. Where reps were more embedded in Covid decision making, this apparent strength and influence can also limit the ability to meaningfully advance interests in other ways. One rep described the situation as having 'got a bit cooperative' and that they would seek to address that as the public health picture changed. This changed footing emboldened the employer to introduce policy which otherwise would require consultation, some of it ostensibly to protect the safety of workers. The partnership approach in this context arguably makes sense – the union, whether at workplace or regional/national level will have prioritised the safety of members over all else, and there will have been various tensions surrounding the centrality of work in supply chains to ensuring the continued functioning of the country.

As Darlington (Darlington, 2014a) puts it, trade unions are vehicles for both conflict and accommodation for workers – they exhibit a dualism where they seek to mobilise power to enhance members' various conditions without necessarily challenging the status quo. In this context the challenges were particularly muted. Attempts to approach the employer on a conflictual footing were generally avoided or mitigated. In the pandemic context reps who sought to participate in creating policy which protected members were effectively placed in a bind - seeking to ensure the safety of their members reinforces the legitimacy of the operation and permits work to continue in a way that is effectively rubber stamped by the union and also attracts criticism for its operation.

## 7.5 Summary

This chapter has sought to locate the data from reps in terms of labour process theory and mobilisation theory to explain the changes to and operations of workplaces, as well as the actions and resistant potential of workplace union reps. Fundamentally, the chapter contributes to discussions around the control of labour particularly with respect to the role of physical supervision in an assumed system of electronic surveillance, but also to frame the ways in which Covid affected the management of effort in these workplaces. Perhaps most interesting is the continued operation of work without the presence of management, but also how Covid facilitated reduced levels of output.

The reps found themselves in a difficult and unique environment. If looking to consider whether the reps were able to use these circumstances to advance members' interests beyond their immediate safety, the overwhelming evidence suggests they could not. This has been framed in terms of a variety of factors which overlap, but can be summarised as restraint, constraint and participation – a cluster of factors which are relevant to different sites/reps to different degrees but effectively covers the various issues reps faced. This is that they chose to exercise restraint for some reasons, were constrained by various factors, or focused on participating in making Covid policy rather than engaging in more oppositional strategies.

The concept of space is fundamentally important in both these spheres. Covid can be thought of as a fundamental interruption of space which affected work equally to other dimensions of citizens' lives. While there is existing theory in these traditions which incorporate space, it is less useful in application here – referring to surveillance or aspects of globalisation. The literature on workplace layout is more relevant, and the experience of Covid revealed here suggests that the concept of space as a means of manifesting meaningful resistance could be expanded and considered beyond the pandemic context. Here the pragmatic orientation of the researcher is hopefully demonstrated in respect of tangible outputs of research. The physical presence of reps in generating resistance

may be a factor to be considered, or at least some concession to ensuring that communication technologies are implemented adequately so not to alienate sections of the membership.

# Chapter Eight: Conclusions

## 8.1 Introduction

The chapters in the thesis have explored the usage of labour process theory and mobilisation theory as a means to understand work and trade union activity. There has been an exploration of the issues in mobilising workers in a context hostile to trade unions, and a sector which is typified by being difficult to organise/mobilise for various reasons. The Covid-19 pandemic also drastically altered conceptions of work and dynamics between managers and workers. Various aspects of methodology were outlined, including a case for a pragmatic research philosophy in exploring issues surrounding labour, and outlining a partisan position and considering the ways in which this might create issues with bias, but also in the context of a partisan position being an asset in terms of facilitating access in a field which is potentially difficult to access. Having established the usage of thematic analysis, the findings outlined the changes to work and trade union activity in these workplaces. The core insight from this study outlines the reasons why these reps were unable to mobilise their members in the context of multiple issues which might be expected to generate potential collective action. These findings informed the subsequent discussion placing these insights in the framing of labour process theory and mobilisation theory, focusing particularly on spatial aspects of work and trade union activity.

This chapter also identifies contributions to knowledge, theory, methodology and practice, and considers further research which may be carried out subsequently. The contribution to knowledge is arguably the greatest from this work, with limited data evident from distribution workplaces in the UK, much less that in a pandemic context. This in turn has obvious implications for practice, especially given the data which uncovered tensions between the rank and file and union bureaucracy. The theoretical considerations with respect to spaces of resistance and a framing of a failure to mobilise have relevance beyond the pandemic context – work has become increasingly spatially fragmented, and many of the barriers to mobilising remain relevant even beyond the

extraordinary circumstances of the pandemic. While the context of the Covid-19 pandemic is unlikely to occur again imminently, trade union activists can draw conclusions from these findings to inform their own practice. A particularly important factor is the need to have close contact with members, or alternatively to consider ways to improve upon the use of virtual options. In this respect, it is clear that there is a need to consider the space of work and labour organising in order for it to be effective.

The researcher recognises that the stated contribution in terms of methodology is weaker, but there is still a case to be made for pragmatism as a valid solution to issues of subjectivity in the labour process. It is also important to recognise that this thesis hung on access. Against that backdrop innovative means must be used to access workers and their representatives. Part of this innovation requires some sort of embeddedness of the researcher in the labour movement.

## 8.2 Key Findings and the Research Question

The research question sought to answer how Covid-19 had affected work and union activities in supply chains. Specifically, this broke down into three sub questions, which were to explore how work (the labour process) and union reps were affected, and to consider how effectively reps might be able to mobilise workers in the conditions of the pandemic. This section elaborates on key findings, especially by identifying shifts to the labour process in respect of control of workers, the changing terrain for reps, and the reasons they mostly did not mobilise against employers.

Fundamentally this piece of research has succeeded in uncovering data in a field which has been under researched and where this can be partly attributed to issues of meaningful access in a contentious and controversial sector. Despite this context and with the additional issue of the pandemic, valuable insight into these workplaces was still forthcoming. In terms of patterns of control and resistance, it seems that the presence of physical managers is an important feature of ensuring productivity even in high surveillance contexts. These managers perform multiple

functions, and while their influence as a means of 'simple' control is difficult to ascertain at a distance, their absence was an influential part of the inability to implement the bureaucracy of PM in those workplaces that did or did not continue enforcing performance measures. PM was also affected by the ability to hold disciplinary proceedings – some workplaces suspended PM and many effectively suspended disciplinaries for much of the pandemic period. Without these tools to enforce compliance, the effort bargain shifted allowing workers to slow their pace of work, though this was also often a measure designed to preserve their own health by maintaining distance from colleagues, it presented opportunities for workers to limit their output. Despite the absence of management in many of the sites, it was generally reported that workers continued to work, which may tell us something about the normative effects of both the 'common sense' of capitalism and contributing to 'essential' work, though also potentially fear in respect of losing income in uncertain times with performance still recorded if not obviously managed.

While this shift to the control-resistance context was a response to the interruption to space which was precipitated by Covid-19 and the associated public health response, the acts and functions of reps was also drastically affected. Reps were generally able to have meaningful input into the creation of safety policy, sometimes designing it entirely and presenting it to the employer. This embeddedness in decision making is potentially a double-edged sword, however. While the reps are rightly primarily concerned with members' safety, the proximity to these decisions allows ire from workers over contentious decisions to be directed to the union, or for the employer to actively encourage this. The preoccupation with H&S can also allow certain policies to be introduced which advance the employer's position and leaves reps feeling unable to challenge where the employer is otherwise doing the right things for safety.

Reps were generally unable or unwilling to mobilise workers. There were many causes for this but one of the most significant was an inability to access workers/members so that information could flow (in either direction) and that the virtual alternatives to meeting in person were poor in

attendance or execution compared to physical alternatives. This is potentially the most important point in terms of tangible action to be taken from this thesis where workers and reps lacked the technological skill or interest to engage. Where other groups of workers have successfully mobilised in the face of spatial constraints, these groups were not able to. There was however much to mobilise around: there was much anger about profiteering and the sustained operation of businesses where workers/reps did not perceive the work to be essential. By extension, many reps reported the feeling of measures been implemented in a tokenistic way, or limited if they interfered with business objectives. One particular employer was actively moving workers around sites in dirty minibuses to justify keeping a clothing warehouse open so to be able to justify the need for employee headcount in other parts of the business. This resulted in new cases in the site where the reps worked. Despite the anger surrounding these kinds of issues this did not translate into action.

This data tells us interesting and unique aspects of work under Covid that were not widely reported at the time and would have been cause for scandal if they had been. While the unique and extreme circumstances created opportunities for workers in some workplaces to vary their pace of work and avoid disciplinary sanctions, this was against the backdrop of their attempts to preserve their own health. While union reps were often able to insert themselves into the decision-making process (with varying degrees of accommodation from the employer), this was generally the extent of their advancement, with employers able to use the cover of the pandemic as a means of removing effective structures from organised labour.

## 8.3 Contribution to Theory

This thesis originated from a point of dissatisfaction with existing evidence from critical research into the UK distribution sector, which did not tally with the researcher's experience of working in the sector. While distribution might have appeared to be the kind of terrain which might have received significant attention as the call centre did in the 1990s and early 2000s, detailed workplace case studies did not materialise in the same volume. Instead, a small selection of works investigate

distribution centres in the post-credit crunch context in the UK (Newsome, Thompson and Commander, 2013; Newsome, 2010; Taylor, Newsome and Rainnie, 2013; Thompson, Newsome and Commander, 2013; Newsome, 2015), in relation to other distribution work such as driving (Moore *et al.,* 2018), or considering the effects of logistics as a means of facilitating global restructuring of production and consumption (Bonacich and Wilson, 2008). More recently, there has been a wealth of research coming from these workplaces on a global scale (see e.g. chapters from (Alimahomed-Wilson and Reese, 2020a; Alimahomed-Wilson and Ness, 2018)), though detailed data from the shop floor is limited (For some non-UK examples: (DCH1 Amazonians United, 2020; Amazon workers and supporters, 2018; Reese and Struna,2018) ).

This context points to two important contributions from this thesis: Firstly, while being unable to physically access these workplaces because of the public health response of the time, the modified research design (which shifted from workplace case studies interviewing workers/members to interviewing rep) still generated important data about the nature of control and resistance in distribution work, including aspects of informal acts and limitations of the prevailing control systems. This data is less detailed than it will have been had close case studies been conducted with workers as participants, but reps are still in a privileged position with respect to being able to report on the actions of workers and managers in their workplaces. The findings here, while context-sensitive to some degree, demonstrate some of the gaps in the systems of control in distribution work in contrast to existing discussions of work in DCs. Ultimately, there is a demonstration that performance management is still somewhat predicated on the physical presence of managers, and this lies in contrast to earlier discussions around panopticonised systems of performance management. Similarly, Darlington (2018:633) argues that empirical evidence of reps' activities with respect to mobilisation is in short supply, and this data contributes in this respect – even if only seeking to explain reasons for its absence. The framing of reasons for non-mobilisation could be built upon in future research and many of the reasons uncovered are not unique to the context in which they were found.

Secondly, the thesis makes a methodological contribution. While other works have engaged with topics such as the need to establish credibility with union personnel (see e.g. Roy in (Stewart and Martinez Lucio, 2011) or in respect of partisan scholarship (Darlington and Dobson, 2013; Thomas and Turnbull, 2021; Stewart and Martínez Lucio, 2017; Brook and Darlington, 2013), this thesis builds on these debates to make the case that certain research in this field cannot be conducted without embeddedness into aspects of the labour movement for reasons of both access and credibility. The adoption of a pragmatist research philosophy also sets this piece apart from other contemporary labour process theorists who have tended to seek to resolve issues of subjectivity through critical realism (Edwards, O'Mahoney and Vincent, 2014)

In a more general sense, this work sought to place the experience of working through the pandemic in context of a labour process control-resistance framing, and to examine the capacity of unions reps to mobilise members via the framing of mobilisation theory. The theorising of reps' issues with respect to their inability to capitalise on the context has linkages specific to Covid in many respects, but could also be considered as having value for the labour movement in the longer term. As a pragmatist and partisan scholar, the researcher believes the value in this work is in its application to union activities. While the constraints of Covid-19 are unlikely to be experience in the exact same way again, a number of findings emerge which point to ways union bureaucracy could better support workplace organisation and that organised labour was (perhaps unsurprisingly) unprepared for the issues that arose. Potentially the most important contribution in this respect is in considering how physical space is (or is not) important for labour resistance in the contemporary context. The space of work is under theorised in labour process theory (Heiland, 2021), and in generating an explanation of how disruptions to space changed workplace dynamics, this work will hopefully have a contribution to the understanding of space as a moderating factor of control and resistance (whether individual or collective) beyond the pandemic context.

## 8.4 Contribution to Practice

Should the findings of this thesis influence the labour movement, the most obvious, serious, and applicable implications likely lie in terms of how the wider union bureaucracy engages with workplace reps in terms of supporting them in terms of managing crisis and supporting workplace organisation. The latter point is likely to be contentious with union bureaucracy sometimes choosing models of trade unionism built around cooperative and pluralist principals rather than more antagonistic modes. Similarly, the findings present something resembling a taxonomy of non-mobilisation which activists and union bureaucracy may find useful when strategising.

## 8.6 Methodological Limitations

The main methodological limitation in this research stem from the same factors which led to this research being conducted, that being the pandemic itself. This is to say that the conditions that made this topic worthy of investigation, also hampered effective investigation into it. It would have been desirable, perhaps even preferable, to have been able to access workers directly. Similarly, it may have been desirable to access workplaces directly, and this was an option in earlier iterations of this research. These issues were mitigated by pivoting to the access which was viable, specifically by focusing on union reps who have insight into both their workplace (as workers within it) as well as union activities. Constraints on access also hamper research design to some extent – it is not necessarily possible to select cases, as much as it is to proceed with the cases that become viable through gatekeepers.

Alternative methods were considered as the research design moved through various iterations, and these were discounted for reasons already highlighted. Surveys may have been a means to access a wider population, though this approach would have been contingent on further permission, potentially further layers of gatekeepers, and risks souring existing relationships. While the thesis reflects on the use of autoethnography, the researcher has reservations about its use, but more

practically, the public health measures of the times would make obtaining a job risky, as well as potentially ethically dubious.

In respect of achieving the aims of the research, many of these limitations have been mitigated. This is achieved especially by focusing on reps and their activities rather than the workforce – access to which would have proven difficult. Reps are (generally) workers themselves, and also well placed to report on activities and perceptions in the workplace by virtue of their union activities. By extension, in carrying out interviews, Zoom interviews can be beset with issues – including a staccato interview style, and technological issues (Oliffe *et al.,* 2021) – they also offer benefits, and ultimately facilitate research of this type. This is also to recognise, that a significant proportion of interviews were conducted in person with data collection beginning as public health restrictions relaxed.

## 8.7 Further Work and Conclusions

Given the stated importance of credibility and relationship building with respect to access, further work could follow with the same research population now relationships have been built with key gatekeepers. It would be potentially valuable to explore the ongoing situation in these workplaces with respect to mobilisation now Covid is effectively finished from a public health perspective, and also that at the time of writing (early 2023), waves of strikes are traversing the UK, industrial action apparently underpinned by a sense of injustice at the rising cost of living and stagnating pay. With many of the spatial constraints no longer in place, subsequent investigation could explore whether/how reps had managed to frame the new issues in respect of building workplace power, and/or if the effects of Covid-19 still persist in hampering their abilities. Notwithstanding the challenges that have been outlined in this work with respect to accessing the workforce for research, the linkages made in the conduct of this research make access to this population viable and as such could make an ongoing important empirical contribution to a field where the voices of workers are severely underrepresented. Similarly, this thesis raises questions regarding the nature of spatial dimensions of organising and mobilising workers, and this topic warrants further investigation.

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# Appendices

## Appendix 1: Workplace anecdotes/the researcher's experiences

### THE

Approx dates: March 2003 – October 2003, June 2004 – June 2005

THE was a home entertainment (CD/DVD/books/games) distributor who primarily served two large supermarkets, smaller stores, and also some home fulfilment orders and contracts with independent distributors. The researcher worked in a number of departments here, initially full time and alternating between full and part time according to university attendance. The roles entailed multiple picking and processing roles across different departments until eventually being placed in a role with more responsibility – correcting small orders and proactively managing issues with stock by ordering between overspill warehouses near to this DC. Most work in the DC revolved around a large belt that snaked through the DC moving boxes to stations where a picker would scan a paper pick note and cross off the amount picked before putting the box back onto the belt.

This was the researcher's first warehouse role and provided opportunities to observe a number of themes that were presented in academic literature as the researcher's academic career progressed.

This DC was staffed almost entirely by temporary workers with two recruitment agencies having on-site offices. Work was monitored through electronic means with a barcode on the worker's swipe card which was swiped in tandem with pick notes at workstations. In spite of this electronic surveillance, targets were not given by managers, nor were temp workers given information on their pick rates. The permanent workers appeared to be monitored more closely, though they were prompted to game the monitoring system by 'cherry picking' – seeking out orders that were easy to inflate their pick rates. Despite the apparent monitoring, it was easy to avoid work and the workplace had a reputation of being a 'doss'. This is illustrated in a few ways – the researcher once arrived to work two hours late, too hungover to work and spent the entire remainder of the shift sat in a mezzanine break area, and was unchallenged the entire day. Similarly, a student friend arrived to work drunk and asked the researcher to fetch him from the toilet where he would be sleeping if anyone was looking for him. Another friend walked offsite for two hours in order to go to the dentist without his absence being noted. While the technology was in place to spot gaps in the working day, it was easy to create gaps away from work because they would not be challenged, and it was common for time to be taken off recorded tasks to do other tasks – moving to other departments to help out, tidying areas, stickering stock and so on. Whenever the (generally hard-working and diligent) researcher was challenged, it was verbally and through a sense that the manager didn't like talking or 'felt' that work was not being done.

Beyond the avoidance of work, there were significant issues for the employer in terms of the sorts of illicit behaviours that might be associated with Mars's (1982) donkey jobs – theft, vandalism, petty destruction, low level sabotage and similar. The site had many CCTV cameras, including in the toilets, and a security crew which frisked workers leaving the site. During this period one worker was sacked for an innovative means of theft which bypassed security for a long period. This worker, as a permanent member of staff, was permitted access to the computer games cage where he would send new release games back to his home fulfilment workstation. On return, he would send these items to his home address and sold them around his local area. This tale had achieved legendary status in the warehouse, especially amid rumours that he was about to get his job back.

### TK Maxx

Approx dates: January 2004 – May 2004

This DC was part of the supply chain for TK Maxx and supplied various clothing items to its own stores. The researcher worked 20 hours a week during evenings unboxing shoes and putting elastic bands around them.

This workplace was another where productivity was not explicitly monitored. Instead, shifts began with an indication of the evening's workload and its allocation by an FLM. The conduct of the work was mostly left to the discretion of the workers who worked in pairs and were free to chat to neighbouring stations.

While there was no obvious difficulties for managers in securing compliance from workers – as loosely defined as it was – this workplace provided the researcher with the first encounter of normative control as a managerial strategy, which the researcher attributed to the more Americanised 'TJX' culture in the workplace – including the (then uncommon) usage of terms like 'FLM' to describe supervisors.

This placement began with a four-hour induction where workers were shown videos and 'corrected' when any described their perception of TK Maxx as 'like a jumble sale' – along with other more practical aspects such as uniform allocation and H&S information. More relevantly, towards the end of the researcher's temp assignment, each worker (including temps) were given an appraisal of sorts by a new FLM which included the question 'what do you think of the teamwork here?'. The researcher became involved in a prolonged discussion asserting that the working practices could not be described as teamwork in any meaningful sense while the new FLM repeated the question to get an answer to put on his form. Any claims to the validity of 'teamwork' were further undermined where one agency paid minimum wage to its temps, while another were paid more plus an evening enhancement.

### Norbert Dentressangle/Marks and Spencers

Approx dates : August 2010 – December 2010

This DC was operated by Norbert Dentressangle as a 3PL for M&S. It handled a number of M&S's seasonal ranges, and so actively recruited temporary workers from summer until Christmas, incorporating bedding, Halloween, bonfire night, and Christmas goods in accordance with their demand accordingly. The researcher worked here full time from August until being dismissed having taken two days sick with a cold in mid-December 2010.

Work here consisted of walking through lanes of pallets or racking with a cage or trolley and adding goods in accordance with the demands of a scanner. The worker could not correct mis-scanned or mis-picked items without managerial intervention, and so workers often sent out orders with known mistakes rather than risk affecting their pick rates. The expectation of picking performance was not articulated in this warehouse, though the means of managing performance was visible through implication: each Tuesday a new group of workers would be inducted into the DC, and one day each week a representative from the employment agency would allow workers to clock in (at 6am) check their name against a list where they would be either allowed into work, or sent home. This constant churn from the bottom up made it apparent that some measure of performance was being used and that job security was contingent on a high level of performance. The researcher (as a then fit 28 year old) outlasted many peers and new recruits and by working until approximately December 10$^{th}$ can only assume that he was just outside the core group that survived until Christmas, or the two days sick were sufficient cause to differentiate from others in the group. The employer also greatly

benefited from flexibility on a day-to-day basis: a number of workers were regularly offered an early finish, with the effect that the 2-10 shift that followed was often cancelled altogether.

The DC management frequently used the carrot of permanent jobs as incentive for performance, presented during team briefings. While there was a small pool of permanent workers there, it was well known amongst the workers that this incentive was transparently untrue. Many workers had worked the previous year and discussed how upon leaving for drinks on Christmas Eve, and being told 'Enjoy your Christmas, we'll see you on January 3rd', each worker in the pub received a text message thanking them for their work and telling them they were no longer required. This duplicity of communication was also reflected in a schoolfriend of the researcher telling the agency he was quitting to tour with his band, and the agency (incorrectly) telling him he'd signed a contract until Christmas, and could not quit. There were other punitive threats made frequently where workers were threatened with breathalysers at the weekend, with them to be dismissed if they had been out the night before. Similarly, the working day was often halted with calls to a 'hot spot' for minor health and safety breaches, with threats of dismissal and humiliation for those making even minor breaches of safe systems of work.

This workplace more closely resembled some of the more sinister depictions of work in supply chains, though again was not without evidence of difficulties for managers in securing 'good' workers. Workers frequently privately expressed how they recognised the inconsistency in management communications and were simply waiting for their day to surrender their swipe card. A number of the workers there discussed that they had been court-mandated to take the jobs and were indifferent to being sacked. One worker in the same cohort as the researcher picked his shifts as he pleased for a number of weeks before being sacked. Similarly, a number of workers were there only on an interim basis, having enjoyed better pay or status elsewhere and as such were seeing the work as a short-term necessity to tolerate.

The recognition of threats and illusionary permanent jobs, as well as the constant replacement of low performers helped secure high levels of effort, even if only by removing those unable or unprepared to give it. There were still a great number of workers unprepared to commit to the expected levels of performance and knowing they would be sacked for it.

### Beta Supermarket

Approx dates: One week – Christmas 2010

### NVS

Approx dates: January 2011 – August 2011

The veterinary supplies warehouse operated on a similar basis to THE (Home Entertainment) whereby boxes traversed the warehouse on a motorised belt, stopped at stations, and the picker was required to scan the pick note and an identifying barcode before picking items and returning the box to the belt. In this workplace the products consisted of veterinary supplies (medicines, apparatus) and pet toys.

This DC was mostly staffed by permanent staff, and the researcher, working 20 hours a week in evenings, was offered a permanent job after 12 weeks taking working hours up to 25 before quitting after supervisors were rotated and the job became significantly more unpleasant.

This workplace was much more tightly monitored than some previous DC experiences, though again, there was no explicit expression of measurement of performance. Instead, like many of these workplaces, performance targets were implied with a sense that, as temps, the placement would

simply be terminated if the employers desired it to be. This is not to say that the workload was unrelenting either, however. The pace of work was set by the belt, with boxes occasionally stacking up as they came faster than the picker could fill them. This sequential flow of work meant that bottlenecks might exist for this reason and that reduced the workload at subsequent stations, or workers would move (either directed by supervisors or through their own initiative) to help at stations where there was more work.

While this workplace made it much more difficult to avoid work, there was still evidence of other recalcitrance. During the researcher's employment, a group of workers were dismissed for rocking items out of the vending machines in the break area.

### Alco Co

Approx dates: October 2014 – June 2015

This workplace experience differs to many previous roles held by the researcher in that the employment was in HR, effectively providing a management perspective on supply chain work. The HR position here mostly entailed recruitment of warehouse workers and employment law consultancy to franchised shops, though also included frequent ad hoc HR firefighting and other tasks. Importantly, this employment also led to access to fieldwork for the researcher's MA, examining labour process themes in the DC – specifically that of perceptions of performance management systems.

This DC provided alcohol and small amounts of convenience goods to predominantly franchised off licence and convenience stores across the UK. Work revolved around pulling a powered pump truck (PPT) carrying quantities of beers, wines, and spirits, which were left in an area to be loaded onto lorries and sent to stores. Work was dictated by a wrist-worn scanner, and the performance management environment changed over the course of the researcher leaving the business and conducting fieldwork. While there was always a nominal target of 200 cases/hour, enforcement of PM was often ad hoc and dismissals related more often to conduct or attendance. The firm attempted multiple interventions in the DC to soften the management approach, and multiple normative measures in order to try to soften the reputation of the firm as a bad employer. This included running the warehouse with permanently employed staff (where the researcher was tasked with creating and implementing the recruitment processes), and multiple soft HR style measures such as introducing company values and attempting to expand comms to provide continuous information to the workforce. Much of this was prompted by attempts to emulate John Lewis styles of people management, following the arrival of a former Waitrose director.

Many of these interventions can be judged to be short-lived or to have failed entirely, however. Less than a year after the direct recruitment campaign, a newly introduced operations team resumed usage of temporary labour, and enforced PM policies more rigorously. Some managers were interviewed for an MA dissertation, and it was revealed that the targets remained more symbolic than tangible, and that dismissal from the bottom up on the grounds of performance had stopped at an arbitrary point where they felt they could no longer replace workers, rather than using a 'scientific' measure of appropriate effort.

Experiences of this workplace both as a worker and researcher contributed greatly to the initial design of this PhD research. In response to the harder management introduced by new ops managers, a union member organised the DC, taking membership from around 10 to 90, out of a working population of 140.

Sustained contact with this workplace through friendship groups meant a consistent trail of workplace gossip, especially where significant events in the warehouse were concerned. This contact revealed two large and systematic means of theft that were occurring in the DC, but unknown to the researcher as both an employee and researcher. Firstly, the workers there had developed an innovative means of ensuring that the staff sale was well supplied with damaged stock. This was achieved by slashing wrap on pallets before they were loaded onto trucks so that when the truck turned the pallet would topple and damage packaging on any items that fell. The franchise agreement allowed franchisees to reject any items with any damage, and so this tended to mean that entire consignments were returned, and the firm then could only destroy the returned items which no other franchisee would accept, or sell them to staff at a heavily discounted rate. The researcher was in charge of these sales and would price to ensure items sold (~£0.15/can of beer). It was later discovered that some of the vast quantities that were being bought were being sold on by some of the workers. A franchisee attempted to alert the business to this, but failed to properly articulate what was happening by saying 'how am I meant to compete with your staff sale?', and not adequately informing that the issue was that stock was being sold to his competitors, and so his complaint was ignored.

A further and more scandalous theft was later revealed where the new operations management team had devised a means to move stock offsite. The details remain inconsistent and vague, but the researcher was told by multiple sources that a manager was found with £40,000 cash in his locker, that the fiddle involved moving stock to non-existent stores, and workers were being given time off their job and paid extra with the business's petrol to run errands for the managers. Four operations managers were dismissed, with one not involved but 'should have been aware'. The researcher was aware of these developments from having friends in head office, but had more details confirmed when the USDAW rep on site phoned in fits of laughter.

# Appendix 2: Interviewees

| Data point | Job Role | Workplace | Union | Union Role | Date collected |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Rep 1 | FLT driver | Packaging Co | Unite | Union Rep | 13th December 2021 |
| Branch Meeting | Warehouse workers/drivers | Multiple workplaces | GMB | | 6th March 2022 |
| Secretary 1 | Local Council Manager | Local Council | Unite | Branch Secretary | 16th March 2022 |
| Rep 2 | FT Union Rep | Medico | GMB | Branch Secretary/Convenor | 18th March 2022 |
| Rep 3 | HGV Driver | Foodhaul | GMB | Union Rep | 15th April 2022 |
| Rep 4 | Warehouse Administrator | Medico | GMB | H&S Rep | 16th April 2022 |
| Rep 5 | Warehouse Worker | Alpha Supermarket (managed by TransportCo | USDAW | Senior Rep | 4th May 2022 |
| Branch Meeting | Warehouse workers/drivers | Convenience Co | Unite | | 14th May 2022 |
| Rep 6 | Warehouse worker | Beta Supermarket | GMB | Senior Rep | 18th May 2022 |
| Rep 7 | Warehouse worker | Beta Supermarket | GMB | Union Rep | 18th May 2022 |
| Rep 8 | Warehouse worker | Beta Supermarket | GMB | Union Rep | 18th May 2022 |
| Rep 9 | Warehouse worker | Beta Supermarket | GMB | Union Rep | 18th May 2022 |
| Rep 10 | Warehouse worker | Beta Supermarket | GMB | Union Rep | 18th May 2022 |
| Rep 11 | Warehouse worker | Beta Supermarket | GMB | Union Rep | 18th May 2022 |
| Rep 12 | Warehouse worker | Beta Supermarket | GMB | Union Rep | 18th May 2022 |
| Rep 13 | Warehouse worker | Gamma Supermarket | USDAW | Branch Secretary/Senior Rep | 18th May 2022 |
| Regional Official 1 | | | Unite | Unite Regional Officer | 18th August 2022 |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Rep 14 | Factory logistics | Building Co | GMB | Senior Rep | 18th November 2022 |
| Rep 15 | Warehouse logistics | Building Co | GMB | Union Rep | 18th November 2022 |
| Rep 16 | Warehouse logistics | Building Co | GMB | Union Rep | 18th November 2022 |
| Rep 17 | Factory logistics | Building Co | GMB | Union Rep | 18th November 2022 |

## Appendix 3: Indicative Interview Schedule

How would you describe your experience of the last few years as a rep and worker?

How would you describe your employer's attitude to the pandemic?

How seriously did the employer take Covid safety?

To what extent were reps involved in decision making?

How did the pandemic affect the way you worked?

Were you able to move freely around the workplace?

Did the employer alter its management practices as a result of the pandemic?

- Did they change their performance management policies?

What were the typical disciplinary issues you faced in the workplace?

- Were disciplinaries of the same type/frequency as before the pandemic?

Were you able to meet other reps/members?

- How did you hold branch meetings?
- How did you communicate between other reps/members?

How much support did you receive from the union?

What does your membership look like in terms of density/headcount?

Have you been able to gain any concessions as a result of the pandemic?

Have you negotiated any pay awards?

# Appendix 4: Ethics/Consent Forms

Keele University HumSS Faculty Research Ethics Committee
humss.ethics@keele.ac.uk

Keele UNIVERSITY

20th October 2021

Dear Bryn Evans,

| | |
|---|---|
| **Project Title:** | Supply chain workers' responses to Covid-19 |
| **REC Project Reference:** | HU-190026 |
| **Type of Application** | Amendment |
| **Amendment Reference:** | HU-210134 |
| **Amendment Date:** | 06/10/2021 |

Keele University's Research Ethics Committee reviewed the above amendment.

**Favourable Ethical opinion**
The members of the Committee gave a favourable ethical opinion of the above research on the basis described in the application form, protocol and supporting documentation, subject to the conditions specified below.

**Recommendations**
"Overall, the proposed amendments are reasonable and considered adjustments in response to a changing environment generated by experiences of living and working with Covid-19. The proposed amendments do not generate any significant new ethical issues. There is a slight concern that research participants would be identifiable if the workplace is named and only one or very few participants join the project, especially if unions are also associated. However, the coding and full anonymisation of participants and their responses in place should mitigate this and make it extremely unlikely that any issues will arise.

There are a few suggested minor amendments that should be undertaken, although there is no need to resubmit the amended forms for further approval. These are as follows:"

| | |
|---|---|
| 1. | Information sheet – The section "What will happen if I take part" should be changed to reflect there is only one stage/method under the amended research design, hence you should delete the phrase: "You can choose to participate in any, or all, of the following stages". |
| 2. | The contact at the bottom of the information sheet for complaints or concerns looks out of date, as I don't think Nicola Leighton still is at Keele and the Directorate of |

| | |
|---|---|
| | Engagement and Partnerships has been replaced by RaISE (Research and Innovation Support Enhancement). |

**Reporting requirements**
The University's standard operating procedures give detailed guidance on reporting requirements for studies with a favourable opinion including:

- Notifying substantial amendments
- Notifying issues which may have an impact upon ethical opinion of the study
- Progress reports
- Notifying the end of the study

**Approved documents**
The documents reviewed and approved are:

| Document | Version | Date |
|---|---|---|
| urec-qcd41-humss-frec-amendment-form-V2.1-11nov2019 - Bryn Evans | 1 | 20/10/21 |
| UREC-QCD-40-HumSS-FREC-Application-Form-V1.0-12NOV2018 - Bryn Evans | 1 | 20/10/21 |
| Protocol - Bryn Evans | 1 | 20/10/21 |
| Invitation to participate - Bryn Evans | 1 | 20/10/21 |
| INFORMATION SHEET v2.0 June 2021 - Bryn Evans | 1 | 20/10/21 |
| Indicative interview schedules - Bryn Evans | 1 | 20/10/21 |
| Consent prior - Bryn Evans | 1 | 20/10/21 |
| Consent post - Bryn Evans | 1 | 20/10/21 |
| Amendments details - Bryn Evans | 1 | 20/10/21 |

Yours sincerely,

**Anthony Wrigley**

**Chair / Lead Reviewer**

# INFORMATION SHEET

**Study Title**: Supply chain workers' responses to Covid-19

**Invitation**
You are being invited to consider taking part in the research study **Supply chain workers' responses to Covid-19**. This project is being undertaken by Bryn Evans from Keele University as part of a doctoral study.

Before you decide whether or not you wish to take part, it is important for you to understand why this research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read this information carefully and discuss it with friends and relatives if you wish. Please ask if there is anything that is unclear or if you would like more information.

**Aims of the Research**
This research aims to examine the ways that workers have responded to the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. This includes worker/union behaviour in warehouses/distribution centres (DC) as well as other associated workplaces in the supply chain.

**Why have I been invited?**
This research is about understanding changing attitudes and behaviours as a result of the effects of Covid-19. You have been invited because you are a worker, a union representative, or other official associated with representing workers in supply chain jobs.

**Do I have to take part?**
You are free to decide whether you wish to take part or not. You are free to withdraw from this study at any time and without giving reasons and can do so by contacting the researcher. If you choose to withdraw, any information you have submitted will be destroyed as soon as is practically possible, and will not be included in any published work based on this research.

**What will happen if I take part?**
you consent to being interviewed, an interview would be expected to take between 30 minutes and 1 hour and would be conducted in person in a private space, or by telephone or video. Every effort will be made to maintain your anonymity with respect to comments you make during the interview. This will be done by anonymising both you and your workplace when the work is published. For example you might be named Rep 1 who is based in Workplace X, or Worker 1 in 'FoodCo', for example.

**What will happen if I wish to withdraw?**
You can withdraw from the research up to **30/06/2022**. After this point it is no longer possible. If you wish to withdraw you should email the researcher (b.a.evans@keele.ac.uk) in the first instance.

If you take part in an interview you can withdraw some or any of the comments you make by contacting the researcher at the above email address. You can withdraw from the any or all parts of the research that you have participated in.

**What are the benefits (if any) of taking part?**
You will be helping to contribute information to research in an area which is not currently well researched. Any findings could have potential implications for policy both at work and in the public arena in a sector which has been shown to be crucial to the functioning of the UK, particularly following the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic.

**What are the risks (if any) of taking part?**
There are no risks associated with participating in this research.

**How will information about me be used?**
Data that you provide through the electronic questionnaire and/or interviews will be used to form the basis of findings in a thesis that will be submitted in order to obtain a PhD at Keele University. The findings may also be published in any subsequent works based on this thesis.

**Who will have access to information about me?**
Access to your data will be limited to the researcher and his supervisory team. If you consent to being recorded the recording will be securely stored at Keele University on a password protected computer in a secure place which is monitored by 24 hour security. Any other data will also be securely stored at Keele University. Physical copies of data will be stored in a locked cabinet within Keele Business School. Only the researcher and his supervisory team will have access to recordings or notes made during interviews. A professional transcriber may also be used to transcribe parts of or full interviews. In the finished piece of research, any findings will be anonymised, and coding will be used to ensure this. You may be referred to as Rep 1 in Workplace X, for example. Once the study is completed, any data will be securely disposed of within six years.

**Who is funding and organising the research?**
Keele University are funding the doctoral study of Bryn Evans, who is conducting this research.

**What if there is a problem?**
If you have a concern about any aspect of this study, you may wish to speak to the researcher(s) who will do their best to answer your questions. You should contact Bryn Evans at b.a.evans@keele.ac.uk. Alternatively, if you do not wish to contact the researcher you may contact his supervisor, Prof. Elaine Ferneley, whose details are below:

Professor Elaine Ferneley
Professor in Management
Keele Business School
Keele University
ST5 5BG
United Kingdom

If you remain unhappy about the research and/or wish to raise a complaint about any aspect of the way that you have been approached or treated during the course of the study please write to Nicola Leighton who is the University's contact for complaints regarding research at the following address:-

Joanne Simon
Research Governance Officer
Directorate of Engagement and Partnerships
IC2 Building
Keele University
ST5 5NH
E-mail: research.governance@keele.ac.uk

**Contact for further information**
Bryn Evans, Keele Business School, Keele University, ST5 5BG
b.a.evans@keele.ac.uk

Keele University

## CONSENT FORM [to be completed prior to interviews]

**Title of Project:** Supply chain workers' responses to Covid-19

**Name and contact details of Principal Investigator:**
Bryn Evans
b.a.evans@keele.ac.uk

| | | Please tick box if you agree with the statement |
|---|---|---|
| 1. | I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions. | ☐ |
| 2. | I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time | ☐ |
| 3. | I agree to take part in this study. | ☐ |
| 4. | I understand that data collected about me will be anonymised before it is submitted for publication | ☐ |
| 5. | I agree to the interview being audio taped | ☐ |
| 6. | I agree for any comments I make to be quoted in any subsequent publication(s) of the study's findings | ☐ |

| _____ | _____ | _____ |
|---|---|---|
| Name of participant | Date | Signature |

| _____ | _____ | _____ |
|---|---|---|
| Researcher | Date | Signature |

Keele University

# CONSENT FORM
## [To be completed after interviews]

**Title of Project:** Supply chain workers' responses to Covid-19

**Name and contact details of Principal Investigator:**
Bryn Evans
b.a.evans@keele.ac.uk

| | | **Please tick box if you agree with the statement** |
|---|---|---|
| 1. | I agree for my quotes to be used | ☐ |
| 2. | I do not agree for my quotes to be used | ☐ |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Name of participant | Date | Signature |
| Researcher | Date | Signature |



ERP060715

Version No: 1
Date: 10/02/2018
1 for participant, 1 for researcher

# Appendix 5: Unite Virtual Meetings Guidance

Executive Council Guidance

# Holding your branch meeting online

*advice for branch officers*

**There has been a huge growth in meetings online, for both work and personal events.**

Unite committees and branches have also been making use of the software that is out there to ensure that the business of the union can be conducted during this time of crisis, tiers, lockdowns and profound upheaval.

The union's rules and standing orders governing the conduct of branch meetings were written with physical, in person, meetings in mind. Where branches can hold in person meetings in a Covid safe way with appropriate social distancing and other measures in place they may continue to do so.But as Unite branches adapt by holding virtual meetings, this guidance has been produced to support you.

This guidance is designed to ensure that you can adhere to the requirements placed on branches by the Unite rule book for passing motions, spending branch funds, making nominations etc when holding your online meetings.

**Virtual (aka online) meetings may take the form of a telephone or video conference call.**

## GETTING STARTED

### What software should your branch use?

Video conferencing software, such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams, is readily available and easy to install.

### Does your branch need special equipment?

No, Zoom and Microsoft Teams can be run on your desktop computer, laptop, tablet or mobile phone. They will need you to be connected to your Wi-Fi. Check that your speaker and camera work because you will need these to participate in the meeting.

### Notify members in advance

Your branch should contact members to ensure that they know that the meeting is upcoming. Make sure that you include the details needed to join the meeting, such as its ID and password.

### Make use of My Account on the Unite membership system

Many branches have a notice on the My Account section of the membership system showing when and where they meet.

Branch secretaries should make sure that this notice is kept up to date. The date of the branch's virtual meeting should also be clear. The branch secretary should indicate that the meeting will be held in a virtual format and the date and time of the meeting should be indicated.

**Make sure that the time, date and format of the branch meeting is clear to all members – and can be easily found.**

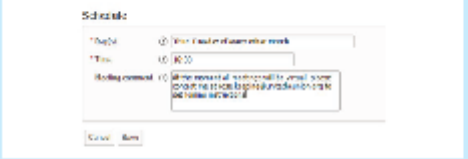
**Make sure to include a notice asking members to contact the branch secretary for details of how to join the meeting.**

**Remember to include the branch secretary's e-mail address in the contact information for the branch.**

### Post your meeting on the branch portal

Branch secretaries should ensure that their branch's meeting details are up to date by logging on to the branch portal **https://branch.unitetheunion.org/.**

The screenshot below shows how the branch secretary can enter the information on the membership system using the branch portal.



### What if your branch doesn't use My Account?

If your branch does not post details of its meetings on the membership website then email members with the arrangements for the meeting etc, when holding your online meeting.

# Executive Council Guidance — Holding your branch meeting online

**IMPORTANT: Remember the GDPR rules when emailing members**
Branch secretaries should always bear in mind GDPR issues around personal information when sending emails to branch members. You must use the BCC function to hide the names and e-mail addresses of the members. If you fail to do this, members could complain about a data breach.

### Keep members' email and contact details up to date
Make sure that your members keep their contact details up to date using the MyAccount facility on the website. You can also update a members e-mail address using the branch Portal. E-mail distribution lists should always be taken direct from branch information available using the Branch Portal, to ensure that you always use the most up to date data available.

### If you don't have a member's email address...
Your branch may also write to members by post giving details of the virtual branch meeting, time, date, format and how to get joining details from the secretary. Your regional administration will be able to assist with this task. The cost of such mailings will be deducted from the branch administration allowance.

### What about using social media to notify members?
Branches may also advertise their meetings on social media and/or on their branch website. Branch secretaries should ensure that only the date and time of the meeting are advertised, joining instructions should not be circulated on social media or on websites; a member must contact the branch secretary to receive these.

### Joining instructions are for branch members ONLY
The branch secretary should ensure that the joining instructions for a meeting are only sent to bone fide branch members. They can then check membership details on Stratum, if necessary.

### Keep an attendance list
When admitting members to a meeting, the secretary should ensure that they keep a list of those in attendance for the minutes of the meeting.

### Get the agenda ready – and circulate – in advance
When the branch secretary is notifying members of the meeting it is recommended that they list agenda items for discussion and request that members raise any other items they wish to consider prior to the meeting.

The branch secretary and the branch chair should agree the final agenda which should be sent with the joining instructions. The agenda for the meeting should not be posted on social media or on websites.

# RUNNING A SUCCESSFUL ONLINE MEETING

### At the meeting
The branch secretary and Chair should work closely together to make sure that the meeting runs in an orderly fashion.

The Chair should run the meeting in the way that they would an in-person meeting, calling people to speak, keeping order, and taking votes etc.

### The mute button is the meeting's friend
People should be muted when they are not speaking. There should be no speaking over other people.

### Who is the Host?
On Zoom the person setting up the meeting is called the Host. This person may chair the meeting, but for a branch meeting it is better that the secretary is the Host.

The secretary can make the Chair a co-host, but as Host the secretary will have more control over the virtual part of the meeting.

### What is the Waiting Room?
When setting up the meeting the branch secretary (Host) should make sure that there is a waiting room facility or similar for the meeting. This will allow them to verify that people seeking to join the meeting are branch members and to keep a note of who joins for minuting purposes.

For larger meetings, the secretary may need another person (e.g. a branch committee member) to assist them in ensuring that people are admitted and noted in an efficient way.

### Do you need a Minute Secretary?
The branch should also consider whether they need a minute secretary to support the branch secretary in capturing the decisions of the meeting including voting records.

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**Make sure all names are displayed**
Each person in attendance at the meeting should have their correct name displayed for identification purposes. The secretary may advise someone to amend the name showing on screen or they may do this for them.

Members intending to join the meeting by smart phone should give the number to the branch secretary to allow them to be identified when they seek access to the meeting. If someone is joining by smart phone their number should be replaced by their proper name.

**Quorum still stands**
The requirement for a minimum of 5 members in attendance to make a quorum is not varied for virtual meetings.

**Voters must be seen – and votes must be verified**
It is common practice in video meeting calls for people in attendance to turn off their video, e.g. if they have a poor Wi-Fi signal.

However, when taking a vote the Chair should ensure that all members voting can be seen and have their video turned on to verify that the meeting remains quorate.

If the member cannot turn on their video they should verbally confirm that they are still in the meeting.

If the chair is uncertain whether a member is actually on the call when a vote is being taken they should speak to them to verify the position.

In smaller meetings, the chair can ask for a show of hands on screen and may call out how each member has voted. This helps whoever is taking minutes.

For larger meetings, there is a voting facility on Zoom which allows those in attendance to indicate yes, no or abstain, providing an instantaneous count.

**Keep it confidential**
Members attending a branch meeting in a virtual format should treat it as if it is an in-person meeting. The usual requirements to respect others in attendance and to keep the confidentiality and integrity of the meeting remain in place.

# HELP IS ON HAND

Where a branch secretary does not have suitable IT equipment to set up such a meeting or does not have a Wi-Fi connection, the branch fund may be used to support them. That could mean assisting in the provision of a laptop or tablet, webcam, headphones or Wi-Fi connection. Unite can purchase a laptop for the branch at a discount. The cost would be deducted from the branch fund.

Where a branch has insufficient funds to assist then the branch may apply to their region for financial assistance. The cost of this regional support would be set against the branch fund.

**Zoom discount available**
Unite can provide a substantially discounted subscription to Zoom to any branch that would like to set one up to conduct virtual branch meetings.

**Contact Unite ICT helpdesk for information on discounts available on email: icthelpdesk@unitetheunion.org or call: 020 3371 2100.**

The operation of such accounts is subject to Unite policies. The charge for such an account will be deducted from the branch fund.

**Help with a branch website**
Any branch that wants to set up a branch website should also contact the ICT helpdesk or their Regional Digital Assistant for further details.

**No cost for meetings**
The branch should not be responsible for any cost incurred by individual members for joining a virtual meeting.

**Your region can help**
Regional administrations should be available to assist in showing a branch how to set up a meeting.
Zoom training for branch secretaries and Chairs will be offered as soon as is practicable. Details will be available from Regional Education Officers or your Regional Digital Assistant.

# USEFUL RESOURCES

Unite has produced a number of Digital guides that will help branches in setting up a meeting. These are available on Vimeo and YouTube:

## On Vimeo:

**Setting up a video call**
https://vimeo.com/486858075

**How to use Zoom**
https://vimeo.com/486848140

**Video call etiquette**
https://vimeo.com/486854744

**How to use WhatsApp**
https://vimeo.com/486861243

## And on YouTube:

The guides are in a playlist on YouTube so you only need to do one click and the videos are in one place.

**Playlist link:** https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PL_CA8fbghqrKTw4-yYK9ZhGJMAwyOFixw

If anyone wants the individual links:

**How to use Zoom:** https://youtu.be/73lUQozfdWs

**Setting up a video call:**
https://youtu.be/unTweB1v3m0

**Video call etiquette:** https://youtu.be/tVJtlYieNdg

**How to use WhatsApp:**
https://youtu.be/ryBJoRI3OSg

If you require further advice on the Branch Portal please contact your Regional Office.

- Unite's harassment policy also applies to virtual meetings and branches must ensure the of security of participants in terms of screen sharing, recording, preventing bullying, harassment and discrimination
- Unite's commitment to supporting disabled members' access to meetings also applies to virtual meetings please contact your regional administration if you require further information
- Unite guidance on timing of meetings to maximise attendance and equality also applies to virtual meetings

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