

Workers' inquiry in the time of a pandemic

Supervisors: [Dr Jamie Woodcock](#) and [Dr Nela Smolović Jones](#), Department for People and Organisations, The Open University Business School

Project description:

There has been much recent discussion about the future of work. In some cases, this has focused on how automation will displace many workers (Frey and Osborne, 2017) or how new digital technologies like platforms are reshaping the economy (Srnicsek, 2017). However, following the COVID-19 pandemic, many of these debates around work need to be urgently revisited. The traditional (and problematic) distinctions between low- and high-skilled clearly no longer reflect how many are working. Similarly, the pandemic has drawn into sharp relief many of the underlying tensions and contradictions of contemporary work. There is a need to return to the importance of the experience of work. While technological innovation, new management techniques, new organisational forms, and a range of other factors need to be analysed, the experience of workers remains a key – and under-researched – part of these debates.

It is through understanding the changes that are happening in work at the present time that we can better understand what possible futures of work there are. For an approach inspired by workers' inquiry, this involves examining the composition of work at different points in the economy: understanding how workers experience the technical and gendered organisation of their work, including the labour process, management, and use of technology; the organisation of workers in society, with oppression, work segregation and reproductive labour, patterns of migration, access to housing, and so on; and the forms of resistance and political organisation that workers develop.

We are therefore interested in proposals that engage with the debates on work through workers inquiry. Broadly speaking, we consider this to involve empirical research with workers combined with a focus on resistance and/or organising. We consider these inquiries as potentially broad in scope, method, and methodology, but expect proposals that explore workers' experiences. These could focus on how workers:

- build solidarity and collective forms of non-hierarchical leadership;
- collectively learn, generate and deploy knowledge;
- draw on aesthetic and affective resources and methods to engage others in ethically and politically salient ways;
- develop intersectional experiences of organising
- use new forms of digital technology to organise and subvert exploitative working conditions.

Methodologically, successful applicants will pursue (auto)ethnography, interviews, visual or other qualitative methods, and we are particularly looking for proposals that experiment with approaches to co-create research findings with workers (see, for example, Woodcock, 2017; Waters and Woodcock, 2017; Cant, 2019). Possible research sites could include both new and traditional forms of work, for example platform work, the care sector, logistics or other under-researched areas.

The successful applicant will be based within the innovative Research into Employment, Empowerment and Futures group (REEF) within the Department for People and Organisations. The focus of the group is upon better understanding the possibilities for emancipatory future work, in particular issues of identity, leadership, power, trade union organising and learning. The group will provide opportunities for collaboration and other collegiate activities.

A desirable applicant will have some experience of precarious, zero-hours and gig economy work and/or some direct knowledge and contacts within such a context, through a trade union, more directly or both. However, the supervision team will be able to assist a successful applicant with research access.

About the Supervisors:

Dr Nela Smolović Jones is interested in the interface between gender and democratic practice, especially topics such as feminist solidarity building, equality at the workplace and gendered corruption. She is currently focusing on how communities democratically engage to build policy towards a just transition to a green economy.

Dr Jamie Woodcock's research is inspired by workers' inquiry. This involves experimenting with ways to combine research on workers experience with organising. He is interested in labour, work, the gig economy, platforms, resistance, organising, and videogames. Jamie is on the editorial board of Notes from Below and Historical Materialism.

References:

- Cant, C. (2019) *Riding for Deliveroo: Resistance in the New Economy*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Frey, C.B. and Osborne, M.A. (2017) The future of employment: How susceptible are jobs to computerisation? *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, 114: 254–80.
- Srnicek, N. (2017) *Platform Capitalism*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Waters, F. and Woodcock, J. (2017) Far from seamless: A workers' inquiry at Deliveroo. *Viewpoint Magazine*, 20 September. Available at: <https://www.viewpointmag.com/2017/09/20/far-seamless-workersinquiry-deliveroo/>
- Woodcock, J. (2017) *Working the Phones: Control and Resistance in Call Centres*. London: Pluto.