



## History Acts 19:

### **The Work Crisis: How can workers organise, resist & protect themselves during this pandemic**

Online, 28 April

Activists: Victoria Holt (SWARM – Sex Workers Advocacy and Resistance Movement); Ian Hodson (National President, BFAWU – Bakers, Food & Allied Workers Union); Henry Lopez (President, IWGB – Independent Workers’ Union of Great Britain)

Historians: Erin Maglaque (Sheffield), Jack Saunders (King’s College London)

Key questions:

- What can we do to support the organisation of workers who have tended to be less well represented by trade unions? How can we help workers who lack legal recognition and therefore lose out on support?
- How can we resist emerging narratives that suggest divisions between workers by focusing on whether they are deserving or undeserving, heroic and essential or dispensable and stigmatised?
- How has worker organisation changed in response to the pandemic and what will be the long-term results of this?
- What can be done to support and protect vulnerable workers whose needs are dismissed by their employers once it becomes possible to return to regular work?
- Can examples of previous economic slumps and crises help us prepare to respond to redundancies after the crisis?

The chair, Steffan Blayney, opened the session by recognising the appropriateness of meeting for this event on International Workers’ Memorial Day.

Victoria Holt began by noting that sex workers around the world have been excluded from governments’ emergency provision during the pandemic. SWARM is based in the UK but the collective stands in solidarity with comparable organisations internationally. Social distancing regulations have stopped direct, face-to-face sex work. More sex workers are now working online, but many are feeling the consequences of restrictions.

Victoria pointed to the many historical tropes connecting sex workers with disease, such as narratives around soldiers buying sex in wartime and the Contagious Diseases Acts. At this moment, however, sex workers’ vulnerability is less a result of the disease itself and more of their struggle with working in the gig economy and of the fact that their work is criminalised and stigmatised. The illegality of their

work means that they miss out on government support, leaving them with a choice between working and continuing to earn and potentially harming their own and their loved ones' health. The current situation has produced increased community surveillance and police power, leaving many sex workers at risk of discrimination and sometimes deportation. Many fear disclosing to health workers and are therefore unable to access the right medical care. Sex workers may also be marginalised because they are using drugs, are homeless or transgender, or are migrants. There has been a strong organised response to this crisis from sex worker collectives and mutual aid schemes, but this cannot replace government support. Sex workers' groups are calling for decriminalisation and support from governments and unions. It is also possible to [donate to SWARM](#).

Ian Hodson opened with a brief overview of BFAWU's history of political campaigning and commitment to socialism. He hopes that this crisis will show that initiatives rooted in organising, such as the NHS and collective action projects, are what will help us survive this crisis, rather than the actions of politicians and the super rich. Low-paid workers, who have suffered from the consequences of austerity and who have been undervalued, dismissed as 'unskilled', and even demonised, have responded to this crisis and have been bearing its burdens. Trade unions are a key means of preventing a return to 'business as usual' after this crisis. Ian gave the example of workers' resistance to Wetherspoon's failure to pay wages until furlough funding was confirmed.

Low-paid workers receiving 80% of their wages on furlough are still paying 100% of their bills, which is likely to lead to debt in the longer term. Many are finding benefits too difficult to access. Better solutions for workers would have been to cancel or fund rents and introduce a universal basic income. For refugees, drawing attention to themselves and their inability to access support and healthcare could mean deportation. The risks to their health could also impact on their wider communities.

Key workers should be rewarded for their response to the crisis. Support, representation, and solidarity should be available to all workers. Collectivism is crucial in meeting these challenges. Ian closed by urging participants to join a trade union.

Henry Lopez explained that IWGB represents gig economy workers who have had the least access to protection and government support, including couriers and cleaners. A key issue has been that workers in insecure jobs often don't earn enough or don't work the required hours to access sick pay. As a result workers who fall ill are afraid to lose their work and even have their children taken away. Many have been laid off without pay or have had their contracts cut as employers were reluctant to put them on furlough.

IWGB have been actively recruiting from new workplaces as workers are becoming more aware of the importance of union membership. The union's previous successes include challenging outsourcing in the University of London. They are now challenging employers over issues like proper contracts for couriers who have been classed as self-employed. Another issue is the lack of protection, including PPE, provided to workers, even when their work is classified as essential.

IWGB offers support to workers for whom language barriers increase the difficulties of applying for benefits or workplace protections. They are seeking sick pay for all workers to ensure that low-paid workers do not have to choose between their income and their health. They have managed to have workers put on furlough instead of being made redundant or put on unpaid leave. Henry also shared IWGB's [petition](#) to support bicycle couriers in challenging changes to contracts and redundancies.

Erin Maglaque focused her contribution on the 1630 outbreak of the plague in Florence. The response was overseen by a municipal health board which was very concerned with the impact of the epidemic on workers. They were originally hesitant about imposing a general quarantine in the city because

they thought that suspending work would make workers too lazy to return to work after the epidemic. Erin noted that this chimes with current ongoing debates regarding which workers are or are not deserving of support.

Before committing to a general lockdown the Florence health board experimented with different kinds of welfare provision, such as the employment of workers in municipal building and gardening projects. The underlying idea was that the wages earned by people in work would enable them to eat well, making them healthier and therefore less vulnerable to disease. The experiment was unsuccessful, however, and poor workers filled the city's hospitals. Meanwhile the higher-risk aspects of welfare work, such as visiting poor workers' homes, were devolved to charities.

Erin explained that Early Modern society saw the human body as made up of four humours. It was believed that unbalances in these humours caused illness, and that they could be unbalanced by undernourishment. There had been a famine in Florence in the years leading up to plague. Because the government believed that well-fed people were less likely to catch or transmit disease, their welfare provision was a public health measure rather than charity. They eventually instituted a lockdown during which they provided food and wine to people confined to their homes. The food was deliberately of a much higher quality than the usual diet of many people in poverty because it was hoped that this would make workers more resilient.

Contemporary understanding and perception of the bodies of people in poverty was an important factor in the official response to the epidemic. Women and children were quarantined first. Many women worked as nurses and care workers in plague hospitals and were forbidden to leave their workplace because they might spread the plague. Records show cases of women running away from these quarantined workplaces in order to take care of their children. Reflecting on Victoria's observations on the historical connections between sex workers and disease, Erin pointed to the different ideas and assumptions that enabled the marginalisation of sex workers during the plague epidemic. For instance, it was believed that sex created heat in the body and this made people more vulnerable to disease. Belief in moral contagion played a part as well: the plague was seen as divine punishment for what was considered immoral behaviour. Sex workers were under increased surveillance and frequently appear in court records for breaking quarantine. Citizens were incentivised to report on their neighbours, a policy that impacted on marginalised groups including Jewish people and migrants as well as sex workers.

Erin recognised a historical parallel with the Early Modern idea that the plague exposed the worst conditions in society. Then as now, however, many of these underlying problems had already been apparent. There is a tension between ideas of vulnerability and culpability: while Florence fed its poorer citizens, it also blamed them for spreading the disease. There are debates among historians about whether the plague exacerbated Italy's longer-term economic decline. If Covid-19 has a similar effect, we need the activism of unions and collective action groups more than ever.

Jack Saunders explained how his research into the position of car workers and NHS staff in the mid-twentieth-century labour movement often revolves around questions of what makes a good or bad worker and trade unionist. He called car workers the 'folk devils' and NHS workers, especially nurses, the 'folk angels' of the labour movement and pointed out that these ideas chime with the current rhetoric around the 'heroism' of key workers. Many of these key workers, such as couriers and cleaners, are employed in the gig economy; but the services they provide have suddenly become of crucial importance to everyday life. Initiatives such as the weekly 'Clap for the NHS' are a collective acknowledgment of the heroism of work.

Jack agreed with Erin that the current situation has not exposed any problems that were not already apparent; but the large-scale changes the pandemic has brought about do invite questions about how we can remake a world without these structures based on who may or may not be deserving. The imagined binary of heroic key workers and the rest of the world will not be helpful in the long run. Once the crisis is over employers will seek to return to the status-quo, and this will erode the value now being put on key workers. Jack suggested a comparison with the 1972 Miners' Strike. The government believed that the relevance of coal as well as the organisation of the miners' unions were in decline so that the miners could not win a strike. Its rhetoric suggested that while miners' work had been important and difficult, it had ceased to be relevant and therefore could no longer be paid. Once the level and extent of the unions' organisation became apparent, however, the striking miners were quickly demonised. Comparably, tube workers were presented as heroes following the 2007 terror attacks but their public status declined again very rapidly. This shows that a heroic status does not help workers in the long run, but organising does. Jack's research has shown that while NHS workers have always been publicly lauded, the organised car workers were able to achieve more leverage.

The general discussion explored the historical connections between the impact of epidemics and revolt. Erin noted that there were revolts in several Italian cities – including Naples but not Florence – that had been severely impacted by the plague. There was certainly a political awareness of a potential link between disease and its socio-economic effects and civic unrest.

Participants asked how they could help to support workers who lacked legal status, such as homeless sex workers. Victoria explained that SWARM is calling for decriminalisation and a moratorium on brothel closures, arrests, and prosecutions because the intersection of criminalisation and other forms of marginalisation such as disability or migrant status is a key barrier for many sex workers. Stigmatisation has caused sex workers to disguise their work and as a result many do not have access to the most appropriate support. Giving sex work legal work status would begin to solve some of these problems.

Several questions were raised about supporting vulnerable workers in the longer term. What can we do to support trade union organisation in workplaces that don't tend to be unionised, or where workers feel less represented by unions? What will happen to workers who are more vulnerable to the virus when the majority are able to return to work and they can't or are not allowed to? What about people whose needs and vulnerabilities are denied or dismissed at work? How should we respond to moral judgments on people who have not been able to 'step up' like the lauded heroic workers for health reasons or because of caring responsibilities? One example of this is the moral pressure on health workers to go into work regardless of their needs and situation. Ian stated that it is most helpful to give workers support to self-organise and organise their own workplaces. He gave the example of Greggs which recognises BFAWU and doesn't use zero-hours or minimum wage contracts. Greggs are considering workers' safety in their plans to reopen shops; in the meanwhile they are continuing to pay full wages. In contrast the union is currently challenging McDonalds on its failure to do any of this. These examples can prove to workers what organisation can achieve. More generally they show that Greggs can recognise the union and look after its workers and still remain a large-scale and hugely profitable concern. Jack added that labour activists should prepare to respond to and resist changes in the discourses of heroism and moral pressure around workers.

Participants asked whether examples of previous economic slumps and crises can help us prepare to respond to large-scale redundancies after the crisis. Victoria pointed out that austerity had already brought more people into sex work; there is now an increase in women selling sex online because they have lost their jobs or support networks. As a result sex workers, although marginalised, are spread across social strata and are much more visible than people tend to think. Ian added that government

promises of pay rises are likely to be the first policies to be jettisoned after the crisis. Zero-hours contracts are likely to increase because they keep unemployment figures low. These workers will fall through the cracks in welfare provision. Unions and workers should prepare to resist this through mutual support and formulating clear collective demands. Jack noted that reports had emerged of private contractors' mismanagement of testing facilities; this shows that the response to the crisis is still driven by neo-liberal ideology. Although it is difficult to come up with historical examples of workers successfully forcing a government to pay the cost of a crisis, potential examples are post-WWII welfare structures and the 1973 oil crash when the direct action of workers taking control of their workplaces at least delayed the economic burden on workers.

The activists were asked how the crisis has changed the practical sides of worker organisation, and what long-term changes this is likely to cause. Henry explained that IWGB organisers were now working from home but were continuing to organise workplaces by sharing information with workers digitally and calling their members to encourage them to help their co-workers to organise. This has actually increased recruitment. In addition the union is challenging employers not just through legal action but also by shaming them on social media. English- and Spanish-language members' meetings take place on Zoom. A useful next step would be to encourage renters to organise. Victoria added that SWARM has also moved its organising online using Zoom meetings. The collective has found ways of making its hardship fund available to workers who cannot access it online: for instance, local outreach projects are able to give cash to street-based workers who may not have bank accounts. This work is also giving SWARM a lot more exposure.

Participants asked whether the Spanish Flu epidemic is a useful point of comparison. Erin pointed to a history of the temporary idealisation of health and care workers. Historically women have tended to be co-opted into care work but forgotten about once the moment of crisis has passed. Jack gave the example of the National Asylum Workers' Union. In spite of the well of sympathy for workers in physical and mental health care following the First World War and the Spanish Flu, the skills and needs of these workers were often disregarded. The 1930s saw another crisis of conditions in nursing and recruitment to the profession. Jack sees this as evidence that public sympathy will not help workers in subsequent struggles.

The discussion turned to the lack of solidarity with sex workers within Labour; a recent letter signed by Labour MPs has condemned sex worker advocacy groups for using this crisis to advance their agenda. Sex work tends not to be regarded as work because it does not have legal status; but criminalised work places also exist under capitalism. This raised the issue of how distinctions between work and love or care are deliberately blurred to allow certain types of work to be economically undervalued. 'Feminised' work is often not recognised as work. For instance ideas like the heroism of the NHS are being used to disguise the economic context of work, by suggesting that workers' 'vocation' removes the need for decent wages and conditions. While this crisis is demonstrating that the concept of work is very wide-ranging and includes sex work, care work, and emotional labour, it is likely that this kind of narrative will become more widespread.

Victoria pointed to the rhetoric around perceptions of need that was also used during austerity. While these narratives argue that there is no need to buy certain things – whether they be sex or luxuries – they disregard the people who have to make a living from selling them. There is another link here to ideas about who is deserving of what. She argued that it is easier to talk about the bodies and virtue of women than about poverty and welfare cuts as reasons why people sell sex, and about the wider systems of exploitation that impact on workers such as nannies, cleaners, and shop workers as well as sex workers. Exploitation and violence happen across different types of jobs, but sex workers are currently more vulnerable to them because they are not allowed to unionise. In addition

criminalisation forces sex workers to work alone or with criminals. Jack suggested that the concept of labour has historically been very flexible; he gave the example of second-wave feminism's transformation of what had traditionally been perceived as women's work. He asked whether a similar transformation in the increased recognition of sex work as work could already be happening.

The speakers concluded by arguing that it is very important for workers to formulate clear collective aims and demands, especially with Brexit in mind. It is imperative to shape a counter-narrative based on the universal right to a secure home, protection in the workplace, and decent wages. Henry also called for volunteer support for IWGB. It is important to recognise the historical gains made by collective action and socialist activism and to consider how they can help us to organise in the present day. These examples show how much power we can have as a collective.