Power shifts: From fast-food jobs to academic posts, I've seen why workers need unions

JEFFERY, Robert <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0615-8728>

the Sociological Review

The Sociological Review magazine article template

Name of first author:	Bob Jeffery
Email address:	r.f.jeffery@shu.ac.uk
Additional authors:	
Biography: Include a short bio written in the third person for each author (maximum 100 words) beginning with current full job title and institution.	Dr Bob Jeffery is Senior Lecturer in Sociology at Sheffield Hallam University. His research focuses on social inequalities, particularly in terms of social class, but also extending to racism and gender inequalities. He has produced work that examines gentrification, policing, welfare reform, and class. His more recent work focuses on experiences of work and employment, particularly in terms low paid and insecure work, employment rights abuses and challenges around union organising. He is a UCU representative at Sheffield Hallam University and Vice-Chair of the North East, Yorkshire and Humber Regional TUC.
Social media accounts:	LinkedIn: https://www.linkedin.com/in/bob-jeffery-5ab422158/
Synopsis: Please provide a 60-word synopsis of your article, and between three and five main keywords.	I reflect on some of my own early experiences of witnessing exploitation in Britain's highly deregulated economic sectors. While such jobs are often reductively referred to as 'entry level', many millions of people will spend large sections of their working lives engaged in this kind of work. I link my experiences to some of my later research on work and employment, as well as my union activism. Author's suggested headline: Reclaiming Power in 21st Century Workplaces
References and further reading: No more than six references. Please format in APA style.	Beresford, R., & Jeffery, B. (2024) 'Challenging Sexual Harassment in Low Paid and Precarious Hospitality Work'. *Notes from Below*. Retrieved from https://notesfrombelow.org/article/challenging-sexual-harassment-low-paid-and-precari Davies, J. (2019) 'From severe to routine labour exploitation: The case of migrant workers in the UK food industry', *Criminology & Criminal Justice*, 19(3): 294-310. Ioannou, G. and Dukes, R. (2021) 'Anything goes? Exploring the limits of employment law in UK hospitality and catering', *Industrial Relations*, vol. 52: 255-269.

	Jeffery, B., Etherington, D., Ledger-Jessop, B., Thomas, P., & Jones, M. (2024) 'Exposure to harm as a function of bargaining position: The class composition of hospitality workers in Sheffield'. *Capital & Class*. Royle, T. (2000) *Working for McDonalds in Europe: The Unequal Struggle*, London and New York: Routledge. Strom, P. Collins, C. J. Avgar, A. C. and Ryan, K. (2023) 'Drawing the line: How the workplace shapes the naming of sexual harassment', Personnel Psychology, vol. 76: 113-139.

Entry-Level Jobs

Are so-called 'entry-level' jobs 'character building' and a 'rite of passage', or are the terrible working conditions just a means for young people – and not so young people – to become habituated into low expectations of work in Britain? If you have ever done one, you will probably say the latter.

In 2001 I worked in a popular fast-food chain in Carlisle, my hometown. I was 17 – a couple of years before the 'youth rate' of the National Minimum Wage for 16- and 17-year-olds was introduced and set at 60% of the adult wage. I do not remember the exact hourly rate but I recall coming home with around £30 for an 8-hour shift. The work was hard – stood all day feeding burgers into a red-hot oven and fries into a vat of boiling oil. These were my early experiences of the Fordist assembly line and the pressure to get the food out to often impatient and, not uncommonly, abusive customers.

However, the worst feature was undoubtedly the disrespect meted out to the workforce (of mostly 16–20-year-olds) by the general manager, and some of the supervisors. Part of this was 'using their temper as a management technique' (as a fast-food worker and research participant would later put it). This 'technique' was used to exhort the young workers to work harder and faster to meet sales targets. But part of it was more gratuitous than that; a grown man towering over young people just out of secondary school, screaming, swearing, occasionally pushing, prodding or sexually harassing them.

Research conducted by Dr Ruth Beresford and me shows just how widespread workplace sexual harassment is; experienced by 1/3 of workers every year, disproportionately female, young, from a minoritised ethnicity, disabled, Lesbian Gay Bisexual and Trans, and/or on a precarious contract. Industries, like hospitality, profit from the sexualisation of women's bodies and the systematic reliance of industries on what Tony Royle called 'acquiescent

workers'. Workers who, by dint of their age or ethnicity and associated lack of status, confidence or experience, are less able to stand up for themselves. Zero-hour contracts, more prevalent now, make it even more difficult to assert your employment rights. For example, our research documented a young woman who had hours cut for 3 weeks as a punishment for reporting sexual harassment.

After the fast-food gig, I had my first experience of an employment agency. I was living with my brother for the summer, who was studying in the East Midlands, and I was attempting to pay my own way (not always very successfully, as he'd probably note). Most agencies were not very interested in a 17-year-old with limited work experience, and competition was high given the upward trend in youth unemployment (especially for 16–17-year-olds). Eventually an agency put me to work in a series of sandwich factories. I was getting up at 3:45 in the morning to get to the city centre for 5:00am, to then be ferried out to one of the factories for an 8- and 12-hour shift (when I got active in the trade union movement, I would raise an eyebrow at the line 'the unions won the 8-hour day', because I already knew it had been lost again).

Our assembly line consisted of a crew of up to a dozen, repeating the same fragmented task hundreds of times an hour. I would place two slices of cucumber on the sandwich, my co-worker would place the next two, the next two workers would add the sliced tomato, and so on and so forth. The work at the factory was monotonous, but the real problem was the constant atmosphere of low-level hostility from supervisors and managers (some barely above the minimum wage themselves), which occasionally spilt over into shouting, swearing, and public humiliations (much of this subtly – and not so subtly - racialised).

This was fairly obvious from the moment I arrived at the minibus pick-up point; almost all of the other agency workers were black, or of a migrant background, or both. This was my first introduction to racial/racist segregation in the labour force, and how much worse these workers were treated. Migrants compose 40% of UK food production industry, are another example of Royle's acquiescent worker, and – as Jon Davies' shows - their experience of labour exploitation is entirely routine.

By my early 20s I managed to escape that kind of work; I was undertaking a PhD and I joined a trade union - the UCU - for the first time. My early experiences in the UCU however, weren't universally positive – I remember, as a zero-hours lecturer, picketing a building to defend a pension scheme I wasn't a member of, while senior colleagues on high salaries breezed past me. But, I did start to see how workers acting collectively could challenge the workplace despotism.

I also learned the power of trade unions through becoming active in my local Trades Council. These are bodies of ordinary union members coming together to work over issues of common concern in their localities, and some of them – like Sheffield Trades Union Council – are amongst the oldest collective organisations of workers on the planet. Through this work I realised that unions were often least present where they were needed most, partly due to the ideological assault against the unions over the late 20th century. I recall laughing at union members depicted as self-interested lazy troublemakers in the film Carry On at Your Convenience and hearing family members repeat Tory attack-lines about 'overmighty unions'.

It was only after I moved to the 'Socialist Republic of South Yorkshire' that I learned that the BBC had reversed the footage of the Battle of Orgreave to make it appear that the miners had attacked the police first. This ideological assault was accompanied by a physical assault and legislative assault, including bans on solidarity strikes, arcane balloting procedures, and ballot thresholds that would never be applied to any other democratic process. But, another part of the explanation is the way that unions became bureaucratised, centralised, and eventually disconnected from the communities they emerged.

Rebuilding the Unions

Across the UK different groups of workers have been experimenting with new forms of organising, some inspired by the ideas of the late Jane McAlevey on building power through direct engagement with workers, some by industrial unionism, and some by migrants rights and housing struggles. In the course of the last decade I've been involved in successful local disputes over workloads, the pay of zero-hour contract lecturers, and hard-fought-for terms and conditions. I've also had the privilege of working with a group of trade unionists and activists on Sheffield Needs A Pay Rise (SNAP), a campaign aiming to help workers to organise and to raise awareness of trade unions, poverty pay, zero hour contracts, poor health and safety, and disrespect in the workplace. To begin with we relied on volunteers hitting the high street with our Know Your Rights leaflet, but in 2018 we signed a Partnership Agreement with the Bakers Union that allowed us to hire for a union organiser role. These talented organisers – Jack Pearson, Rohan Kon, Jesse Palmer, and Gareth Lane - hit the streets and helped workers to understand how they could build power in their workplaces, encouraging them to take action. This led to some impressive results: regaining £10k in unpaid wages after a fast-food franchisee had shut up shop overnight; securing union recognition at a city centre café; and winning a 44% pay increase for the youngest workers at a 'food hall'.

One example I often retell is how one of our organisers helped fast-food workers to organise a 'march on the boss' to secure locks on the female changing room door. Previously there was the tendency for older male managers to 'accidentally' walk in on

younger female workers while they were changing. This is a powerful example of workers fighting back, but it is also amongst the more outrageous of the often invisible abuses that Gregoris Ioannou and Ruth Dukes describe as 'akin to industry norms' in hospitality.

Unions often overlook such opportunities that campaigns like SNAP represent: sharing some decision-making power with local activists means unions can unleash the passion of those who are willing to fight for better terms and conditions in their communities. After all, the modern trade union movement emerged from exactly this kind of place-based activism.

Unfortunately, since the 1980s, the general deregulation of employment rights across the UK has created miserable working conditions for many people, particularly in so-called 'entry level' jobs of the kind I experienced in my youth, where abuse and exploitation are routine. These negative experiences can lead to a phenomenon known as 'imprinting', where expectations of work are lowered permanently. I have spent the past decade studying these issues as a sociologist, but I have also experienced them first-hand on the frontline. It's not enough to interpret the terrible working conditions in Britain in the 21st century; the point is to change them.