

Less than zero: six months working in low-wage Britain

Going undercover in low-pay jobs, the author discovered a fearful and atomised working class that had lost its pride and dignity

By James Bloodworth
The New Statesman

Rolling over in bed in South Wales at half past six one frost-bitten November morning, I switched on the radio. As I turned the old-fashioned dial, through the crackle a heated argument boomed out. The outraged tone seemed to capture the mood of the times. An hour or so later I picked up a newspaper, which five months after the vote for Brexit was awash with recriminations, post-mortems



and fleeting despatches from parts of the country that were said to feel bitter and “left behind”.

South Wales marked the penultimate stop in my own six-month journey across Britain. I had set out in February 2016 to gather information for a book about the low-pay economy. Having wandered around this world in my early twenties – I had worked in a yoghurt factory, as a casual labourer and as a postman – I wanted to go back and examine something that was for the most part concealed from prosperous Britain. The aim was to offer a window into a hidden land in

which work had gone from being a source of dignity to a humiliating assault on a person’s self-respect.

The first stop on my journey was Rugeley, a former colliery town of 24,000 people in the West Midlands. I had got a job via an employment agency at Amazon, and was subsequently put to work for ten-and-a-half hours a day, four days a week in one of the huge “fulfilment centres” that processed items sold by the world’s largest retailer. Everything at Amazon had a euphemism. We didn’t work in a warehouse and we were not employees; rather we were “associates” on temporary zero-hours contracts. You weren’t sacked at the end of nine months; you were “released”. We were pawns in an algorithmic system of management that was a throwback to the theories of Frederick Taylor, who believed in the scientific perfectibility of labour activity.

Everything you did during a shift was carefully monitored and categorised, from how long you took to go to the toilet to how many items you picked off the shelves each hour. The job itself was fiendishly exhausting. I would clock off at close to midnight. With suppurating feet a dozen of us would traipse over frozen ground for the mile or so it took to get back to the poky dwellings we rented from local landlords. We filed past the murky waters of the Trent and Mersey canal and down rows of red-brick terraces that once served as the barracks of local industry. The stomp of steel-shod boots on the tarmac and the movement

of the winding gear had long since fallen silent, replaced by the Romanian curses of my co-workers.

The Lea Hall Colliery, once the biggest coal mine of its type in Europe, had closed on 25 January 1991, two decades before Amazon arrived. The closure of the pit immediately threw 1,250 men out of work. In reality the total was far higher, for it also included the support industries and the corner shops that the miners frequented at the end of their long shifts underground. Alex, a former pit mechanic who drank at the Lea Hall Miners Social Club, told me one evening that Rugeley had “never recovered” from the closure of the pit. “There are no jobs,” he said glumly, “or they’re minimum-wage jobs and they’re jobs based on short-term contracts and fear”. Towns like Rugeley have “merely replicated their economies” since the crash deindustrialisation of the 1980s and early 1990s, according to a 2015 report from the Centre for Cities think tank. They had “swapped cotton mills for call centres and dock yards for distribution sheds”. Despite some initial excitement whipped up by Amazon’s PR people and complaisant local newspapers when the warehouse first opened in Rugeley in 2011, there were few British order pickers by the time I arrived in 2016. Many of my co-workers were eastern European migrants, transported in on coaches from nearby towns such as Wolverhampton and Walsall: an invisible army that came and went while most people in Rugeley slept. Desperation had brought many of them to these shores; it was now their job to service the shopping whims of Britain’s middle class. As one young Romanian co-worker put it to me: “You can work here like an animal; you work four days, you know, and you have £240. I am a nobody here, yes; but back in Romania I am a nobody without enough money to eat.” Alex, who for years had got up every morning to face a terrifying coal seam 300 feet under

the ground, told me that he wouldn’t work at Amazon because of “how they treat people”. I encountered something similar as I left the Midlands and travelled down to the Welsh Valleys. At the end of a long and undulating street in the town of Cwm in Blaenau Gwent the imposing Marine Colliery had once employed over 2,000 men. It was the last large deep mine to work in the Ebbw Valley and closed in March 1989, one year and eight months before Margaret Thatcher resigned as prime minister. Apart from cars on the bypass close by, the only sound you can hear standing at the top of the hill in Cwm today comes from the hundreds of tiny birds in the pines, oaks and Sitka spruce that form a patchwork of green on the surrounding hills – hills that were once synonymous with a modest prosperity. “There’s no work around here, there’s nothing,” an elderly woman named Anne in a beige overcoat told me as I made my way down from the old pit one cold December afternoon. “There’s a couple of workshops down the bottom, but I don’t think they employ many. Nothing where you can say there’s ten or 20 people working or anything.” Britain’s former mining areas are home to about 5.5 million people – about 9 per cent of the population. The scorched-earth policy enacted by the governments of the 1980s left a legacy that can still be observed today. Indeed, the Welsh Valleys offer an aperture into the “post-work world” that has become a talking point now that middle-class jobs are threatened with automation (a recent report by Deloitte found that over 100,000 jobs in the legal sector are at high risk of being automated in the next 20 years). The unemployment rate in South Wales is one of the highest in the country and has been ever since industry was wound up abruptly by Conservative governments intent on crushing Arthur Scargill’s National Union of Mineworkers. “When Maggie Thatcher beat the miners’ union a lot of people in this

country didn't give a damn about it," said Selwyn Williams, a former miner I met in the Merthyr Tydfil Labour Club. "But it affected everybody that's working, even up to this day."

In Blaenau Gwent, one in six residents in a population of 60,000 was collecting a prescription for antidepressants, according to NHS data from 2013. In nearby Ebbw Vale, a town whose steelworks once produced the material used to construct the Sydney Harbour Bridge and the Stockton and Darlington Railway lines, five food banks operated within an area of about 42 square miles. Streets named after heroes of the labour movement were full of rent-to-own stores, betting shops and arcades. On the short Ebbw Vale high street I counted three pawnbrokers. In the Wetherspoons a portrait of the late former Labour leader Michael Foot was squeezed incongruously between two flashing fruit machines.

To get a job you often have to move away from towns like Ebbw Vale and Cwm or commute to bigger cities – Cardiff is an hour and a half away on the train. I was selling car insurance in a call centre in Swansea – a sleek and streamlined world all but impenetrable to those without the language skills or cultural capital required for the customer-focused "service economy". In 2012 in the South Wales coalfield area, the number of jobs per 100 residents of working age was estimated at 41.

Other towns I visited were beset by different challenges, albeit with similar consequences. I spent six weeks in Blackpool over the summer months, where I worked as a home carer. The job was physically and emotionally consuming and poorly remunerated. From early morning until late at night an overwhelmingly female workforce of isolated, harried and cobalt-uniformed workers dashed through the cluttered terraces of Blackpool's South Shore. It was our job to wipe bottoms, give baths,

administer medication and, occasionally, to clean up piles of sick ("Extra Strong Mints are the best thing to get rid of the smell of poo and sick," one carer told me).

Most care visits had to be completed within 20 minutes, resulting in what has been accurately described as "clock-watch care". At a time of punishing cuts to local authority budgets, the care companies that promised to empty the most catheters and change the most sanitary pads at the lowest cost invariably won the contracts from the council. The result, as one care worker put it to me, was that Britain's elderly resemble "units parcelled up and sold to the lowest bidder". Beyond the front-of-town façade of rock shops, bouffanted crooners, stag parties and lager tops, Blackpool is a forlorn place, far from the "abode of health and amusement" it was described as in 1789. On my first night in town I stayed on Central Drive, a street that begins near the promenade a few blocks from the 19th-century Winter Gardens complex and snakes for about a mile until it reaches Bloomfield Road stadium, home to Blackpool FC.

It is the poorest area of Blackpool and one of the most deprived in England. There is an offence for every 250 residents and half the population smokes. Half the children in this part of town live in poverty. The homeless population is huge and very visible. The highs and lows of seasonal work in Blackpool have been exacerbated by the recent recession and subsequent government cuts. Between 2008 and 2012 the level of peak winter claimant unemployment in Blackpool doubled. "People come here for the day and think, 'Oh, what a nice place; everyone must be buzzing'... All it is is zero-hours contracts," said Gaz, an unemployed man whom I found traipsing desperately up and down the promenade hawking a glossy magazine for £3.

The final leg of my journey was spent in London among workers in the burgeoning

“gig” economy, in which self-employed contractors are sent jobs via apps on their phones. For several months I drove an Uber taxi and was directed through the city by the capricious instructions of an algorithm under the pretext of “being my own boss”. Behind this euphemism I found a familiar story of exploitation masquerading as liberation. Much of my job flexibility as an Uber driver was illusory. At a training session I was told that I could not “pick and choose” which fares I accepted. “The reason you’re online is to accept any job that’s given to you,” I was told by the representative of a company that was supposed to be my “partner”. Such was the level of control exercised that I was even told what conversational subjects were off-limits with passengers – politics, religion and sport, for example. A tool that allows passengers to award drivers between one and five stars at the end of every journey was sometimes abused, with passengers leaving poor ratings if you didn’t let them put loud music on or offer them free bottles of water. If your rating fell below 4.4 Uber threatened to ban you from using the app altogether. As much as Uber liked to say the passenger was your customer, it felt like they were Uber’s. It was this purported “freedom” for which gig workers had sacrificed most of their employment rights.

Much of the inequality and division I witnessed on my travels had been there in the background for some time, like the engine under a car bonnet whose whirrings you ignore until you find yourself broken down in a dingy layby. What was different about 2016 was that discontent began to percolate up to the surface, whether in the vote for Brexit, the dramatic swing of the Labour Party to the left, or in the rise of demagogues, like Donald Trump in the US. It would be naive to call Brexit a working-class revolt, yet as every one of the depressed towns I visited went on to

vote overwhelmingly to leave the EU, it seems clear that the outcome was about more than a rejection of foreigners and European regulation. To many of the people I met, Europe was a target for their resentment of the pain inflicted by the untouchable hand of the market. Whether in Blackpool, Rugeley, Ebbw Vale or Cwm – all over there were persuasive reasons to want to “take back control”. “My personal view,” said Brian, a former miner at Bryn Colliery whom I met in Port Talbot, “is that it all started [to go downhill] as soon as we joined the EU... Look at this country [Wales], and look at how it was thriving in the Fifties, Sixties, even up to the Seventies, but since we joined the EU it’s just gone down”.

Britain is wealthier than it was in the 1970s, but much of today’s wealth is extracted from an underclass whose penurious existence is characterised by an almost total subservience to the whims of their employers. Trade unions have little power in this world. “Like Maggie Thatcher said when we were on strike – when I finish, she said, I want ten men chasing one job,” Selwyn told me over a pint back in Merthyr Tydfil. “And everyone thought she was talking pie in the sky. But it’s right today, isn’t it?”

When I left London early in 2016 Britain was not expected to leave the EU and it was assumed that Hillary Clinton would be a shoo-in for the White House. By the end of that year the complacency of four decades had given way to a powerful sense of dread. On both sides of the Atlantic there was a flurry of introspection and a renewed interest in those citizens who were said to feel “left behind” by globalisation.

This empathetic about-turn was short-lived. The backlash that created so much political turmoil two years ago has produced a further backlash: the working class have again become maligned caricatures or, worse, invisible. Despite a series of unpleasant

shocks, the liberal capitalist order clings on. There is little understanding – at least in the communities I visited – of how change might come about. The mood there was characterised by a doleful apathy as much as by anger and resentment at the status quo. Few expressed voluble enthusiasm for the Labour Party, despite its recent transformation.

As I drank a mug of strong tea in a South Wales bedsit, it struck me that, almost 40 years after the curtain was violently brought down on the social democratic consensus during the bitter miners' strike, there was a great deal in Britain to be in revolt against. Indeed, it took a certain type of affluent liberal hubris not to see it. The road to 2016 had been paved by several generations of politicians who believed not only in the fantasy of the "end of history", but who had assumed that the market would guarantee the good life for just enough people to ignore those who failed to grasp the levers of social ascent. The result of this complacency has been the rise of demagogues who promise, in common with the fascists of the 20th century, to replace the invisible power of the market with the visible power of the infallible leader. For all its dirt and danger, the old world of pits and steelworks at least offered the chance to join a trade union and take charge of your own destiny. It also gave birth to valuable neighbourhood associations – the factory became an extension of the wider family. In contrast, employment for a diminished and cowed working class today is often characterised by its antipathy to either pride or dignity. Both qualities were absent from the world I occupied for six months – a fearful and atomised domain in which the balance of power had been firmly tilted in favour of management. Of all the hardships facing the working class, I suspect it is this erosion of self-respect and solidarity that is the hardest to bear. "People actually say, 'I'm only at

Amazon,' and in the past they would've never said, 'I'm only at the pit,'" Alex told me over a drink at the Lea Hall Miners Social Club one evening. "You'd have said, 'I'm a collier,' because that's what you were and you were proud of it."