Nothing to Lose But Our Chains
Nothing to Lose But Our Chains

Work and Resistance in Twenty-First-Century Britain

Jane Hardy
## Contents

*List of Figures* vii
*List of Tables* viii
*Acknowledgements* ix
*List of Abbreviations* x

1. Changing Terrains of Work and Struggle 1
2. Neoliberal Britain 17
3. Narratives and Numbers of British Capitalism 32
4. New Icons of Work? The ‘Gig’ Economy and Precarious Labour 48
5. Explosive Struggles and Bitter Defeats 67
6. Opening the ‘Black Box’ of Trade Unions 87
7. Striking Women: Still Hidden from History 99
8. Migrant Workers: Here to Stay, Here to Fight 126
9. Taking the Bosses to the Cleaners 146
10. Working and Organising in New ‘Satanic Mills’ 162
11. Education Workers on the Front Line 173
12. New Kids on the Block 192
13. Capitalism’s Gravediggers 208

*Notes* 219
*References* 224
*Index* 239
Changing Terrains of Work and Struggle

NEW LANDSCAPES OF WORK

In 1993 the aircraft manufacturer, British Aerospace, located in the small town of Hatfield (Hertfordshire) 20 miles from London, ceased production and the site was handed to developers. This was part of a massive restructuring of British Aerospace, which slashed its entire workforce by almost half from 127,000 to 60,000; 40,000 of these jobs were from its aircraft division. The empty shell of a workplace in Hatfield was a sharp contrast to the human tide of workers flooding into the factory for the 7.30 am shift that I had witnessed only the year before. Skilled engineers and office and maintenance workers arrived on foot, or by bike, bus or car. The aircraft factory, opened by the de Havilland company in 1930, had been an icon of British industry. It was at the forefront of aerospace technology with the development of the Comet, the world’s first commercial jet airliner in the 1950s. In 1960, de Havilland was taken over by Hawker Siddeley, and the innovation of the Trident medium jet airliner was one of the most significant engineering achievements of the twentieth century. The contraction of the market for commercial aeroplanes, increased competition in the sector and financial problems contributed to the demise of the Hatfield site with the loss of 3,000 jobs.

With its sleek white art deco buildings, what eventually became British Aerospace when the industry was nationalised in 1978 had physically and economically dominated the local economy for more than five decades. With its production facilities, airstrip and hospital-ity suite for selling planes to customers from some dubious regimes, the site had occupied 400 square acres. The factory was at the hub of the town, with its vibrant social club and sports facilities fielding
sports teams that were second to none. Such was its global reputation that the Hatfield Technical College (the forerunner of Hatfield Polytechnic and then, in 1992, the University of Hertfordshire) was established in the 1950s to train aerospace engineers from all over the world. The factory was highly unionised with a systematic structure of shop stewards and, as in all sections of British manufacturing, at least a handful were members of the Communist Party. I was told by a former employee that in the 1930s workers in the factory paid for materials and constructed stretchers to fit onto the sidecars of motorcycles for use by the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War.

Over the three decades following the closure of British Aerospace the redundant land and buildings were completely transformed. Nobody could miss the irony of the fact that in 1997 one of the first uses for the site that had developed the Mosquito (then the fastest plane in the world that was pivotal in combat during the Second World War) was as a location for shooting Steven Spielberg’s war film, *Saving Private Ryan*, set in the same time period. The fictional ‘ruined’ French village of Ramelle was built on the abandoned site of the British Aerospace factory. The set was reused in 2001 for Steven Spielberg’s television series *Band Of Brothers* and then disassembled. But the much-vaunted Hertfordshire film cluster failed to materialise as competing film locations in Europe offering more substantial subsidies became more attractive.

A large tranche of the redundant British Aerospace site was developed as a business park. As part of the mass expansion of higher education in 2003, the University of Hertfordshire closed two of its rural campuses and consolidated them onto one large ‘state-of-the art’ campus built under the Private Finance Initiative (PFI) on the new site. The aircraft hangar, a listed building, is now David Lloyd Hatfield, reputed to be the largest health club in Europe, and the old control tower now houses offices. One particularly elegant art deco building was converted into the Hatfield Police Station outside of which there was a Black Lives Matter demonstration in August 2020. The business park is dominated by huge logistics firms who are moving things (Booker, Yodel, Royal Mail) or providing the technology for moving things (Computacenter) or are warehouses for storing things (Ocado). The business park houses the headquarters of multinational
companies, spawned from the privatisation of British utility companies, in shiny offices (EE phone company, Affinity Water).

Over the three decades since the closure of British Aerospace the workforce has changed profoundly. Houses that had been the homes of British Aerospace workers were bought up by landlords and rented on a multiple occupancy basis to students and the migrant workers who had started to arrive, particularly from Central and Eastern Europe, after 2004. Such was the growth of the Polish community that, in cooperation with the university and on its premises, in 2011 a visit and talk was hosted for Lech Wałęsa, hero of the Solidarity uprising in 1981, as part of his whirlwind and lucrative tour of Britain. The shift to the service sector has not meant the evisceration of workplace strife – both the university and the giant Post Office distribution centre have been sites of strikes and picket lines. In November 2011, as part of a national strike of 2.5 million public sector workers protesting against detrimental changes to pensions, thousands of workers in Hertfordshire marched and demonstrated locally, culminating in a rally of unprecedented size at County Hall in Hertford.

This story of economic change has brought about a metamorphosis in employment in the town. The university, with its 20,000 students, is the largest employer and a hub for promoting ‘local development’, while the giant logistics firms on the business park have opened up more and new types of jobs in warehousing, transport and delivery. This journey through highly skilled aircraft production to filmmaking, distribution and education is emblematic of the restructuring of the British economy. There is nothing unique about changes to the local economy and work in Hatfield; the towns, cities and regions of Britain have all undergone transformations. The only differences are the timescale and the details.

From the early 1990s, along with changes in the economic structure of Britain, a pattern of historically low levels of strikes emerged. In every year since 1991 the number of strikes has been lower than the number of strikes in any year prior to 1991, and by 2020 this trend had continued unabated. Structural changes in the British economy, epitomised by Hatfield, have been cited as a key factor undermining the collective potential of workers, as traditional areas of the economy have been replaced by innovative forms of production and changing ways of consuming. In the early 1980s the decline of manufactur-
ing gathered pace and there has been an ascendancy of finance as, since 1979, the City of London has been courted and nurtured by successive governments. New categories of work have emerged, with some workers labelled as knowledge or creative workers who are, it is argued, qualitatively different and more difficult to organise into trade unions. The ‘gig’ economy has brought in its wake an explosion of casualisation in the form of short-term and zero-hours contracts (ZHCs), seen by some as a major explanation for the low level of trade union struggle.

One narrative is that work and the possibilities of resistance are different and more difficult under the pervasive influence of neoliberalism. A subtheme is that the financialisation of the economy, and interlinked trend of outsourcing, has pitted workers against each other and makes it more difficult for them to identify common interests. Specifically, it is claimed that divisions are entrenched between public and private sector workers and the young and old. With the end or decline of heavy industries such as iron and steel, coal mining and engineering, some point to the destruction of working-class communities and the solidarity that was embedded in them. A dominant narrative is that cooperation has been replaced by a fractured and individualistic labour force that is a barrier to collective action in the workplace. This is associated with pseudo-psychological explanations that focus on the neoliberal self, where the hegemonic idea of individuality has permeated everyday life to such an extent that young people are apathetic or even hostile to joining trade unions. Others have blamed the draconian anti-trade union legislation introduced by Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s, further tightened in 2016 by David Cameron’s Conservative government, for strangling the ability of workers to take industrial action through the use of the legal apparatus of the state.

**THEMES OF THE BOOK**

*Challenging Mainstream Narratives of British Capitalism*

There have been many attempts to write off the working class. The classic text, *The Affluent Worker in the Class Structure* (Goldthorpe et al., 1969), suggested that collectivity had been replaced by complacency as workers were ‘too well off’, while *Farewell to the Working Class*
(Gorz, 1997) laments the disappearance of the skilled worker who is the agent of change and author of the ‘socialist project’. More recently *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* (2011) by Guy Standing has reignited debates about the changing nature of the working class by suggesting that there is a sharp division and even mutual antagonism between those in stable and permanent work and a new group, the ‘precariat’, who experience unstable work and ZHCs. The first aim of this book is to challenge some of these grand narratives about capitalism in general, and British capitalism in particular, and the changes in work that it has brought about. Labels given to changes in capitalism since the early 1970s include post-Fordism and the post-industrial economy. These have been superseded by epitaphs of the knowledge economy and financial capitalism, and in the current period the ‘gig’ economy is imbued with totemic importance.

Chapter 2 discusses how narratives of neoliberalism have fed pessimism about the combativeness of workers. I argue that accounts of global capital mobility that leave workers powerless have been exaggerated. The importance of the financial sector is highlighted and, in particular, the interconnection between financialisation, privatisation and outsourcing is underlined – in the care and higher education sectors for example. However, workers have not been passive in the face of Britain’s particularly financialised version of neoliberalism and later chapters are a testament to the successful struggles of workers who have been challenged, but far from disarmed, by outsourcing. Chapter 3 dissects two other stories of British capitalism. The argument of the ‘weightless’ economy that relegates producing real goods to the sidelines of economic activity is taken apart by arguing that the line between manufacturing and services is blurred and that the creation of surplus value is dispersed throughout a chain of activities. Claims that new innovations in technology are game changers in terms of the amount of employment and the nature of work itself with the rise of a new breed of ‘knowledge’ and ‘creative’ workers are put under scrutiny. I argue that these categories are arbitrary and artificial and that this hype is not only divisive, but ignores the underlying labour process. Chapter 4 engages with debates about the new icons of neoliberalism – namely the gig economy and associated insecure work. Widespread coverage of precarious work by the progressive media and academics
has been important in shining a spotlight on some of the scandalous conditions in which some people work for unscrupulous bosses, but is in danger of inducing pessimism and a hand-wringing fatalism. In order to tease out what practices are new and what are hangovers from the past I argue that many contemporary discussions about precarious work lack rigour in terms of definitions, data and historical continuities. In these contemplations of the current economy, the history of work is woefully neglected. The reason for placing struggles in a longer historical sweep is not just to celebrate past victories of workers, but to inform current debate and tease out lessons for activists in terms of what are continuities and what are cleavages over time.

Taken together, the purpose of these three chapters is to recognise and document the dynamic change that capitalism brings to the structure of economies and transformations in the type and nature of work. An understanding of developments in global neoliberalism and how these are refracted in the particularity of British neoliberalism, in a more general sense and in the workplace, lays bare the new challenges for workers and organised labour. However, relabeling the institutional arrangements of capitalism, focusing on its superficial characteristics and proposing new categories of work that divide workers from one another, distracts from its underlying drivers. In proposing that there is an inherent conflict between capital and workers in capitalist production, with exploitation at its heart, Marx provided the tools for understanding that all workers have a common cause. The term ‘exploitation’ is more than a negative adjective or a judgement about where bosses lie on the Richter scale of meanness. Marx explained that workers are not paid fully for the hours of labour that they expend in making goods or producing a service – in other words they create surplus value, the source of all profit. But the existence of competition, inscribed in the DNA of the capitalist system, means that bosses are constantly forced to defend their profits through extensive exploitation (longer working hours), intensive methods (harder work) or lowering wages. Whether a worker is a cleaner, a warehouse operative, a games developer or a university lecturer, exploitation lies at the heart of capital–labour relationships. Therefore, the second theme of this book is an exploration of the institutional response of workers to exploitation – namely trade unions.
Trade unions grew out of the collective response and struggles of working people to poor wages and harsh working conditions. Engels (1881) points out that because capitalists are always organised and have the full backing of the state, ‘the work people from the very beginning cannot do without strong organisation, well-defined rules and delegating its authority to officers and committees’. In the first part of the nineteenth century trade unions were the preserve of conservative craft unions, but upheavals at the end of the century (in particular the Match Women’s strike of 1888 and the Great Dock Strike of 1889) brought unskilled workers into trade unions in their tens of thousands – groups of workers who today would be labelled as precarious. Even in the current period establishing a trade union in a workplace and going on strike meets with harsh and aggressive responses from some employers. Witness Michael Ryan, CEO of Ryanair, who boasted that ‘hell would freeze over’ before he had unions in his company, being forced to back down, negotiate with striking pilots and recognise trade unions (Stern, 2017).

The barometer of workers’ militancy is conventionally measured in working days lost through strikes (ONS, 2020a) that are taken as a rough guide to the ebb and flow of struggles over time. In Britain there has been a long-term downward trend; 2020 saw the lowest level of strikes since data collection began. A pessimistic reading of these dismal figures might give succour to governments and employers, who see this as a shift in the frontier of control that gives them carte blanche to hold down pay, introduce practices detrimental to working conditions and bully employees with impunity. However, although strikes are the highest and most visible form of struggle, resistance by workers takes many and varied forms. Throwing ‘a spanner in the works’ to stop the production line has a long history as a way of protesting against the boredom and intensity of work and is alive and kicking under contemporary capitalism. The contradiction in capitalism between workers – who generate wealth and have nothing to sell but their labour – and those that own the means of production embeds conflict in the workplace.

Accounts of contemporary workers’ struggles are foregrounded in Chapters 5 and 6. These explore the central contradiction in the insti-
tutional form that this conflict takes – that is, trade unions. Mainstream accounts of industrial relations can be arid and superficial, treating trade unions as monolithic and uncontested organisations and thereby conflating the interests and aspirations of ordinary members and the leadership. But the dual nature of labour organisations in managing discontent pulls them in different directions as they try to walk the tightrope between currying favour with employers and meeting some of the aspirations of their members. C. Wright Mills (1948) referred to the ambivalence of trade union leaders in leading and supporting struggles by dubbing them ‘manager(s) of discontent’, where their role was to control and defuse explosions of anger. Chapter 5 sets the balance of power between the state and employers on the one hand and workers on the other, and within unions in the historical context of the post-war era, showing how this balance may veer between high and low points of workers’ struggles, with explosions of militancy and bitter defeats. Chapter 6 sheds light on the experience of many activists who have had to wage battles inside their trade unions to secure support from the leadership and other echelons of the bureaucracy and gain financial resources and solidarity with which to fight against intransigent employers. It opens the ‘black box’ of trade unions to tease out the dynamics between the leadership, paid officials and rank-and-file activists.

A major caveat is that I do not claim to systematically cover ‘industrial relations’ in this period. Rather the focus is on case studies of important campaigns and strikes that are either completely absent from, or covered cursorily by, the mainstream and even left-wing media. This is both to shed light on the ‘ingredients’ of successful struggles and to give a voice to workers from below.

**Women and Migrant Workers Centre Stage**

Gone is the prevailing image in the two decades following the Second World War of workers and trade unionists as white, male, manual workers. Therefore, the third aim of the book is to examine the changing landscape of a working class in which women and migrant workers are now central. In 2020, although 50 years had elapsed since the Equal Pay Act of 1970 and 45 since the Sex Discrimination Act of 1975, the gender pay gap was 9 per cent for full-time employees, and
the division of labour between men’s and women’s jobs remained stubbornly in place. Women are still having to struggle for the equality at work that they were promised five decades ago, both with employers and in getting their trade unions to fight for their legal entitlements. Women have been the sacrificial lambs of the Covid-19 pandemic. Affordable childcare has contracted, a disproportionate number of women have been furloughed and they have carried the lion’s share of home schooling. There is a real threat that hard-fought gains for equality will go into reverse.

Chapter 7 looks at the struggles of women care workers in Birmingham and women council workers in Glasgow. The two-day strike in October 2018, by mainly women workers, in Glasgow and their victory in winning equal pay was hugely significant. They succeeded in bringing the city to a standstill and exposed the lack of resolution on the part of the top echelons of trade unions to resolve inequality in the workplace nearly five decades after equal pay and anti-discrimination legislation – yet this barely registered in the media. Also hidden from history has been the long dispute of women care workers, members of the Unison trade union, with Birmingham City Council. In May 2019, after nearly two years and 82 days of strike action over the imposition of new contracts that would have slashed their hours and wages, the council backed down and the women won a momentous victory.

Chapter 8 focuses on migrant workers on whom British capitalism has always relied to fill labour shortages, for example Irish workers in the construction of the railways in the nineteenth century. After 1945 the country drew on its fading imperial past by inviting workers from the Caribbean to work in public services such as transport and the National Health Service (NHS), and from the Indian subcontinent to provide labour for the textile industry in Yorkshire and Lancashire and the engineering factories of Birmingham. In 2004, acute shortages of labour motivated the Labour government to make Britain one of three countries to fully open its labour market after the accession of the (mainly) post-Communist countries of Europe into the European Union (EU). The labour force was profoundly changed as the number of workers who arrived was estimated to be between 600,000 and one million, the majority of whom were Polish. Despite the stream of xenophobia from successive Conservative governments, and more veiled anti-immigrant rhetoric from some sections of the Labour Party,
the dependence of the British economy on foreign-born workers has increased, with their share of the labour market increasing from 7.2 per cent in 1993 to 17 per cent in 2017 (Migration Observatory, 2019). The reliance on foreign-born workers in some sectors is stark. But we live in uncertain times and with retail, manufacturing and hospitality the worst-hit sectors during the Covid-19 pandemic it has been estimated that 1.3 million foreign-born workers left the country in 2020 (O’Connor and Portes, 2021). Yet despite the concentration of migrant workers in low-paid and precarious work they have, as we shall see, been at the forefront of important struggles.

*Microcosms of Struggle*

The final aim of this book is to bring together the previous three themes by focusing on microcosms of struggle. Workplace grievances and action bubble up constantly and, more often than not, quickly dissipate; they are absent from the mainstream media and below the radar of official measures of industrial action. Ballots in favour of industrial action and a quick retreat by employers are not newsworthy. But when employers are intransigent, ballots that translate into strikes have the potential to change the workers who take part and to escalate into something bigger, involving more workers and raising political demands. If strike statistics paint a broad but incomplete picture, then studies of individual strikes are a microcosm of the interplay between the specific form of exploitation, the role of the state and the balance of power within trade unions themselves. However, the type and level of struggle cannot simply be read off economic circumstances and/or the existence of restrictive or permissive legislation. The anger and grievances of workers do not automatically translate into joining trade unions and/or taking industrial action. No mechanical formula exists to act as a conveyor belt, moving those who work for poverty wages in abysmal conditions into struggles for better pay and conditions. To understand why some industrial disputes take off and others do not, and why some action results in victory and others in defeat, we need to look at microcosms of struggle. The focus of Chapters 9 and 10 is to look at selected important disputes in the period 2015 to 2019.

Chapter 9 focuses on workplace battles waged by low-paid workers. In a fight against outsourcing, London cleaners – regarded as an
organisationally weak group of mainly migrant workers—pitted themselves against powerful public sector institutions (universities and government departments) and multinational subcontracting firms and achieved significant gains in their wages and working conditions. This book is a celebration of successful struggles in a dismal period for trade unions, where the tenacity and resilience some groups of workers have shown in taking industrial action is humbling. But I also try to escape ‘the fog of euphoria’ (Hyman, 1980) by including one example in this chapter where the outcome of a campaign to organise has been disappointing. The case study of the Sports Direct warehouse is important because of its high profile as an example of poor work, extreme exploitation and surveillance in the employment of mainly migrant workers from Central and Eastern Europe. Despite being shamed in the media and the heroic efforts made by socialists in the locality and activists in the Unite trade union, the gains made have at best been modest because industrial action was never on the agenda.

Chapter 11 looks at how neoliberalism has proletarianised workers in education and brought them into confrontation with the government and their employers. In universities the blue paper that ignited accumulated grievances about heavy workloads, casualisation and stagnating pay was the seemingly arcane issue of proposed changes to pensions that resulted in 36 days of strikes between 2018 and 2020. The Covid-19 epidemic that spread globally in 2020 brought teachers into collision with the government who they forced to retreat twice on fully opening schools. In both cases these struggles generated new waves of rank-and-file activists and reinvigorated their local and national trade union structures.

Chapter 12 argues that a feature of the landscape of work in the new millennium is that there are now no ‘no-go’ areas for trade unions. This is especially important given claims by some that young people are not interested in joining trade unions and collective action. Yet young people have experienced the brunt of unemployment during the Covid-19 pandemic. By March 2021 almost two-thirds of people who lost their jobs were under 25. This chapter challenges that assumption. Beyond the drama of strikes and industrial action, the chapter includes a case study of games developers whose organising is at an embryonic stage. Although representing only a small group of workers, electronic games development represents the cutting edge of the ‘new economy’
and epitomises ‘cool jobs’. The rhetoric and reality diverge sharply. I look at how these mainly young workers are subject to new forms of exploitation in the form of systematic overtime and rampant bullying, and how they are challenging them by organising in both established and newly formed militant trade unions. I discuss how other groups of workers, in hospitality and working as couriers, thought to be beyond the pale of trade unions, have organised successfully against precarious work. Finally, although still controversial in the labour movement, I focus on how support for the organisation and health and safety of sex workers has grown in mainstream trade unions.

These disputes enable an exploration of new terrains of struggle for labour organisations, where a series of mergers has swallowed up smaller trade unions to form mega organisations such as Unite, Unison and the GMB with between half and one and a half million members. At the other end of the spectrum there has been the emergence of very small and militant trade unions such as the Independent Workers of Great Britain (IWGB) and the United Voices of the World (UVW), founded in 2013 and 2014 respectively, that have advocated for and organised low-skilled and migrant workers as well as those in the gig economy, such as games developers and couriers. They have punched above their weight and have achieved some remarkable victories.

LIVED EXPERIENCES OF WORK AND STRUGGLE

Workers as Agents of Struggle

In the early post-war period sociologists, then a relatively new breed of academics, put workers under the microscope as objects of their dispassionate studies. In parallel, the study of industrial relations in the 1950s and 1960s was focused on instilling an orderly framework for trade unions to mediate between capital and the grievances of workers. This was in the face of what were perceived as unruly workplaces with frequent ‘wildcat’ strikes, where employers and the government claimed that shop stewards (workplace representatives) lacked accountability to the official trade union machinery. But in the late 1960s a handful of groundbreaking books recorded the lived experiences and testimonies of workers, giving them humanity and agency and making them the subject of the workplace. These seminal contri-
butions include, for example, *Working for Ford* by Huw Beynon (1973) and *Girls, Wives, Factory Lives* by Anna Pollert (1981).

Accounts of strikes provide important lessons for activists. Between the late 1960s and mid-1970s there was an explosion of academic studies, films and plays that put the independent action of workers at their centre – reflecting the eruption of industrial struggles led by the rank and file. These sidelined the arid and neutral approach to industrial relations and were an antidote to anti-trade union films, such as *I'm Alright Jack* (1959) and *The Angry Silence* (1960), that dominated the 1950s and early 1960s. The first full-scale study was of the seven-week strike of 8,500 workers at Pilkington’s glass factory in St Helens, Lancashire, in 1970, also the subject of the television play *The Rank and File* (1971). Both were important for exposing the strike’s dynamics whereby disillusionment with the union (the General and Municipal Boilermakers’ Union) prompted the workers to set up an independent strike committee (Lane and Roberts, 1971; Barker, 1970). Since then there have been other powerful accounts of individual struggles from the point of view of workers, relating to the explosion of strikes in the early 1970s by miners, dockers and building workers (Darlington and Lyddon, 2001); the Miners’ Strike of 1984/5 (Callinicos and Simons, 1985); and the Liverpool dockers’ strike in the mid-1990s (Lavalette and Kennedy, 1996). More recently, other books sympathetic to workers include coverage of the British Airways dispute (Taylor and Moore, 2019), the Grunwick and Gate Gourmet strikes involving Asian women (Anitha and Pearson, 2018) and the experience of working in a call centre (Woodcock, 2017). Socialists and academics have rescued other important disputes from falling into obscurity, for example the Lee Jeans occupation in Scotland (Robertson and Clark, 2019) and the Trico equal pay strike (Groves and Merritt, 2018), which are discussed in Chapter 7. The disputes covered in this book draw on this tradition of workers’ self-organisation and their lived experience of struggle.

*The Research*

Case studies of struggles in the workplace provide the opportunity for a rich exploration of the dynamics of strikes and campaigns, each
of which is unique. The workplaces covered in this book are set in the economic context of the given sector and how the specific conditions of exploitation are shaped by the product market for the goods or service and the nature of competition. I capture the lived experiences of workers – care workers, cleaners, games developers, warehouse workers, teachers and university workers – to give a flavour of labouring in the neoliberal era. The stories of struggles that are the focus of this book are told by the workers who took part in them. The case study disputes are drawn from the length of Britain – London, Birmingham, Nottingham, Sheffield and Glasgow – where I travelled to carry out face-to-face interviews between 2016 and 2019 and, from the end of January 2020, using Zoom. I have cited some interviewees, who were keen to be acknowledged by name; in other cases workers fearful of recriminations have been given pseudonyms.

Through interviews with rank-and-file workers, activists, elected branch officials and union organisers close to the workers, the narrative captures the accumulation of grievances and explosions of anger that are eventually provoked. I look at how events unfold, how strikers manage the day-to-day realities of keeping a dispute going in the face of intransient and sometimes vicious managements, and how they fend off attempts by their own unions to foist negotiated deals on them that fall far short of their demands. Above all the case studies capture the role of a fresh layer of activists, the emergence of new leaders and the transformation of workers and their workplaces as a result of their participation in struggle. I am grateful for the time they found to speak to me and I am in awe of their enthusiasm, resilience and the resounding victories they have achieved, particularly at a time when the level of strikes is at a low ebb.

Finally, an important clarification is necessary in the discussion that follows. When I refer to socialists I am not talking about those who merely give themselves that label and sit on their hands, but about those who believe in democratic unions, the self-activity of workers and supporting action wherever it appears. As we shall see, they are not only catalysts for action in their own workplaces and committed to solidarity with other workers, but make links between ‘bread-and-butter’ fights and broader political struggles both at home and abroad.