

Volume 8 Issue 1: Editorial

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At the end of 2022 we hoped that 2023 would bring us further scholarship and stories relating to working-class people around the world. This June issue certainly does so, and we are delighted to offer seven scholarly articles, two personal essays, a poem and five book reviews.

The topics covered are wide-ranging and cross continents, and the issue begins with an examination of the fight for an Irish-language school in a working-class neighbourhood in Dublin, Ireland in the early 1970s. In his article, ‘“Sure why would they need Irish?": Scoil an tSeachtar Laoch, Ballymun, and working-class decolonisation, c.1970-73’, Kerron Ó Luain outlines the determination of the local working-class community as they fought for the right for their children to be educated in Irish and also points to the decline in conditions that made the school possible such as access to secure housing. With housing insecurity increasing in many places around the world, Ó Luain’s article serves not only as an historical analysis, but also as a reminder of the destructive forces of neoliberalism.

Ireland also features in Jordan Kirwan’s study of Irish academic activists – ‘Experiences of academic-activists in Ireland: comfortable and uncomfortable activism in the current institutional environment’. In his article, Kirwan looks at the differences experienced by academics from working-class backgrounds compared to their more privileged counterparts and the ways in which academics from marginalised groups are more likely to engage in the kind of activism that is not rewarded by their institutions. While it seems clear that precariously employed academics might face more pressure to not get involved with activism that could lead to them being labelled as ‘troublemakers’, Kirwan also notes that race, gender and class identity are big factors in whether an academic is concerned about how their activism might be perceived (and judged).

The next two articles focus on working-class culture, with Billy Williams’ ethnographic study of demolition derby participants in Arkansas, USA. In ‘Demolition Derby, Working-Class Identity and Capitalist Geographies’, Williams considers how working-class people deliberately create spectacles and create meaning through their engagement with the subculture while being fully aware of how this culture is perceived outside of their working-class communities.

Mikkel Jensen follows with a comparative study of three films set in deindustrialised locations, one from the US, one from Denmark and another from the UK in ‘Laughing all the Way to the Closed Factory: The Deindustrialization Comedy’. He looks at the use of comedy to provide both some escape for working-class viewers through the hopeful elements contained in the films, but also served as education of the consequences of deindustrialisation, particularly on men as they lost their jobs and sense of identity as workers.

The attention then turns to literature, with three articles looking at different aspects of working-class literature. In ‘Problems and possibilities for Swedish working-class literature in a neoliberal age’, Magnus Gustafson looks at some examples of contemporary Swedish literature and considers whether the authors demonstrate clear class perspectives and representation of

labour movements, or whether their work has turned to more individual and therefore, neoliberal concerns.

Ronald Paul follows with an analysis of the fiction of Dorothy Hewett and Ruth Park, who both wrote about working-class Sydney in the 1940s and 1950s. ‘‘Typical characters under typical circumstances’’: The Slum Fiction of Dorothy Hewett and Ruth Park’ considers the kinds of representations of working-class people in their books and asks which of the authors captured the lives of working-class people more successfully.

The last article focused on literature is James O’Donoghue’s ‘Dropping Voices: Southern Black Agrarian Revolt in Charles Chesnutt’s Fiction’ in which he looks at the intersections of class and race in Chesnutt’s work and offers some criticisms of a perceived middle-class individualism in his work.

Two personal essays follow – Bob Zecker’s ‘They Died from Misadventure and Accident’: Learning from our Missing Ancestral Failures’ offers a narrative based on his own family history, and a ‘missing’ ancestor who may, or may not, have been present during a terrible fire in a 1900s Newark lamp factory. Zecker uses his family stories to point to the ways that working-class people have, and continue to be placed in dangerous conditions to produce the goods that people want to buy.

In ‘Invisible Laborers: A storied love letter to other working-class mothers in academia, Miranda Cunningham uses personal narrative to explore how working-class mothers in higher education experience and respond to classism.

A poem by Ian C Smith follows – ‘The Laughing Face of Youth’, a prose poem about a young worker unloading trucks and his memory of his unforgiving boss who is described as a ‘swine’ and ‘gripped by a demon’ (many workers would be able to relate to this kind of boss!).

There are also five books reviews, edited by Christie Launius, which once again show that there are many books out there that explore working-class life and experience, even if they do not always use the term ‘working class’ in their titles. These are books that working-class studies scholars believe are of value and make important contributions to the field. The topics of the reviewed books are diverse, and include queer theory and Marxism, advice for marginalised workers, cooperative housing in New York City, the role of universities in taking over neighbourhoods in parts of the US, and the effects of the Covid pandemic on the US workforce.

This editorial and the production of this issue has also crossed continents, with Sarah working from Australia, the US and Germany while travelling for work and to visit family. The chance to travel to these places has been a great privilege, and Sarah still sometimes finds it hard to believe that the former girl from the council estate now has these kinds of opportunities. But the travel between these very different places also shows what needs to change to improve the lives of working-class people¹. In US cities, homelessness is very visible, as is the lack of affordable health care, as people’s suffering also spills onto the streets. Immigrant workers in the US often work in very poor conditions. In Germany, there is also visible homelessness, particularly around main train stations in the large cities. Germany’s rate of homelessness is rising, and although there are multiple reasons for the high rate – a lack of affordable housing

¹ While we use the term ‘working class’, we are also including those who are not employed.

is a large factor. Affordable housing is also an issue in Australia, with large increases in rents making it increasingly difficult to find somewhere to live for many workers. The decline in social housing has contributed to the problem, with long waiting lists for social housing leaving people waiting for years for secure homes. Secure housing has many positive flow-on effects, and its importance can not be overestimated.

Moving between countries also shows that there are many universal aspects to working-class lives. The sense of community runs strongly through all, as does the wishes for decent and secure housing, jobs with good wages and conditions, and access to quality healthcare and education. Working-class studies scholars and activists continue to advocate on behalf of working-class people, and this Journal hopes to play some part too.