THE DIGNITY OF WORKERS

IN THE 21ST CENTURY

DO JUSTICE | caritas social action network

Caritas Social Action Network
is an agency of the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales and a member of Caritas Internationalis

"Human work is a key, probably the essential key, to the whole social question, if we try to see that question really from the point of view of people's good. And if the solution - or rather the gradual solution - of the social question, which keeps coming up and becomes ever more complex, must be sought in the direction of 'making life more human', then the key, namely human work, acquires fundamental and decisive importance."

Pope John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens*, 3

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INTRODUCTION

Raymond Friel OBE,

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We are living through a time of radical change for work and the workplace, from what work we will do to how that work will be valued. It is an urgent moment to renew these discussions for the future of work, and the dignity of the worker. In this report, we look to the present and the future, inspired by the past.

On 15 May 1891, Pope Leo XIII promulgated *Rerum Novarum* ("On Labour and Capital"), the first papal encyclical to look in depth at the conditions facing workers and their families in the industrial age. This began the era of what is known as Catholic Social Teaching, or the social doctrine of the Church, which primarily refers to that body of papal teaching which shines the light of the Gospel on the social conditions of people, denouncing injustice and exploitation and proposing more just solutions.

Pope Leo XIII was strong in his denunciation of the situation facing many workers: "the hiring of labour and the conduct of trade are concentrated in the hands of comparatively few; so that a small number of very rich men have been able to lay upon the teeming masses of the labouring poor a yoke little better than that of slavery itself" (#3).

The document opposed both *laissez-faire* capitalism and collectivist ideologies which opposed the right to property and encouraged class warfare. Pope Leo XIII called for a just wage, for the right to form associations and the intervention of the state to protect those workers, since "The richer class have many ways of shielding themselves, and stand less in need of help from the State; whereas the mass of the poor have no resources of their own to fall back upon, and must chiefly depend upon the assistance of the State. And it is for this reason that wage earners, since they mostly belong in the mass of the needy, should be specially cared for and protected by the government" (#37).

Invoking the key concept of dignity, the encyclical calls upon the authority of the law. "if employers laid burdens upon their workmen which were unjust, or degraded them with conditions repugnant to their dignity as human beings" (#36). The fundamental principle of human dignity is rooted in Scripture (Genesis 1:27). Men and women are made in the image and likeness of God, that is they are made in love and for love. They are made, in other words, to be relational, since their ultimate vocation and destiny as human beings is communion with God.

With the principle of human dignity at the heart of the Catholic approach to work, it means that work can never be seen as merely transactional. People must be treated with dignity and work should be meaningful work. People are the priority, not capital. Conditions in work must protect and promote the dignity of the workers. Pope John Paul II, in his encyclical on work, *Laborem Exercens*, promulgated on the 90th anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*, developed

the teaching of his predecessor and laid more emphasis on work as participation in God's creation and part of a person's development, with and for the wider community. He called for more participation of workers in the workplace, in line with their dignity and the purpose of work, which could never be reduced to merely creating wealth for a few: "each person is fully entitled to consider himself a part-owner of the great workbench at which he is working with everyone else. A way towards that goal could be found by associating labour with the ownership of capital, as far as possible" (#14).

More recently, Pope Francis viewed the dignity of workers in terms of an integral ecology with a close reading of the signs of the times. In *Laudato Si*, he warned of a culture of relativism which drives people "to treat each other as mere objects, imposing forced labour on them or enslaving them to pay their debts" (#123). Here he introduced a new dimension to the topic, the global phenomenon of slave labour, arising from a disordered desire for profit and power. He touched on a theme which we anticipate Pope Leo XIV will develop further, the impact of technology and AI. Pope Francis taught that "the goal should not be that technological progress increasingly replace human work, for this would be detrimental to humanity" (#128). Like John Paul II, he regarded work as a vocation, which includes the Biblical imperative to "till and keep" (Genesis 2:15) the garden of creation.

Pope Francis was by no means anti-business, although like his predecessors he condemned "the mindset of those who say: let us allow the invisible forces of the market to regulate the economy, and consider their impact on society and nature as collateral damage" (#123). He deplored the "throwaway" culture, a symptom of this mindset, which disregards anything which is no longer useful, whether that is waste material or human beings, young and old. The economy should be people and community centred, producing diversity and business creativity, not just relentlessly focused on growth to feed a consumer society. "Business," he stated, "is a noble vocation, directed to producing wealth and improving our world. It can be a fruitful source of prosperity for the areas in which it operates, especially if it sees the creation of jobs as an essential part of its service to the common good" (#129).

On 15 May 2026, the 135th anniversary of the promulgation of *Rerum Novarum*, Caritas Social Action Network convened a symposium to celebrate this key document and to look to the future. The papers contained in this report were delivered on the day at Westminster Hall, next to Westminster Cathedral. These stimulating papers cover a wide range of topics, from the 19th century background to *Rerum Novarum*, to the current conditions for workers in Britain. There is compelling analysis of globalisation, nationalism and neoliberalism, as well as a powerful case study on migrant workers in the care sector.

This report is the beginning of a conversation, which we invite you to join. The aim of our symposium and this report is to shine the light of Catholic Social Teaching on work and the dignity of workers, bringing a vision of the common good and human flourishing to the debate. A year from now, we anticipate that we will have read and reflected on Pope Leo XIV's first encyclical, widely expected to cover some of the themes in our report. We would like to gather again, in 2027, with our reflections on the new encyclical and contributions from across the Church and wider public, private and charitable sector. We believe that now is the favourable time to develop together a vision for work which inspires and includes young people, does not cast out older people, and allows families to live in dignity, not in in-work poverty. We'd love to hear from you. If you have any responses to these papers, or any other reflections, please email us at admin@csan.org.uk with "Dignity of Workers" in the subject box.

We suggest that the following **guiding principles** might help to frame this first phase of the conversations. If you have any more suggestions, please do get in touch.

01. Work is a fundamental aspect of the human vocation as stewards of the earth and participants in the unfolding of creation, not an opportunity for profit at any cost.

02. Human beings have an intrinsic worth and dignity, made in the image of God in love and to be loving. Labour is more important than capital.

03. Work is a shared project for the common good, business enterprise has a key role to play in the sustainable and creative development of employment opportunities which benefit the community.

04. Technology, especially AI, is not harmful in itself, and has many benefits, but should not be seen as a way to replace human beings. The Catholic tradition does not support a future without work, but rather meaningful, safe, properly paid, fulfilling work for all.

05. The 21st century crisis is not just the rapid advance of AI, but the deterioration in trade relations and the rise in inequality, which undermines the common good.

06. We have an obligation to support younger people to enter the workforce with dignity. A crisis of work in the British context is the approximately one million young people not in education, employment or training (NEET). This is a profound crisis which will have lifelong effects.

07. With an ageing population, we call upon the Church, and all partners in the dialogue, to explore creative ways to use redundant assets (eg property) for social enterprises to provide caring services and employment opportunities.

08. Workers have the right to organise themselves and be represented collectively in the workplace by their Trade Unions. The Catholic tradition supports positive industrial relations based on collective bargaining and agreement between Trade Unions and employers.

09. Workers have a right to a just wage. We urge all employers, especially Catholic employers, to commit to a real living wage to ensure that work can support a decent standard of living.

10. Workers need improved social protection to avoid the trap of in-work poverty and to ensure that while out of work they can sustain a decent standard of living.

Finally, I'd like to thank the contributors we've been working with for over a year who have given generously of their time and talent: Maria Exall, John Battle, Clifford Longley, Jon Cruddas, Amy Daughton and Charles Wookey. Thanks also to Daisy Inglese, Communications and Public Affairs Manager at CSAN, for compiling and editing this report and supporting the process from the beginning.

Catholic Social Teaching
A radical inheritance

Jon Cruddas

MOVEMENTS FOR JUSTICE

May 15th marks the 135th anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*, the historic encyclical which inaugurated the tradition of Catholic Social Teaching (CST). In it Pope Leo XIII sought to preserve the essential human dignity of workers at a time of rapid social change driven by new technologies and the unbridled power of capital. Today in a world once more turned upside down by technological change, inequality and oligarchy, people are again turning to religion for answers; for a sense of meaning and purpose. Both church attendance and belief in God are on the rise, especially amongst younger generations. It is therefore worth recalling how spiritually driven movements for social justice have historically emerged to confront the moral imperatives of the day.

A prime example is the abolitionist cause of the late 18th and early 19th centuries to end slavery. The early campaign was pioneered by Quakers who dominated the Committee on the Abolition of the Slave Trade and first petitioned the government in 1793. Yet due to religious restrictions on Westminster MPs, they were forced to concede that the parliamentary campaign be led by Anglicans. Consequently, it fell to Evangelical reformers, such as John Newton, Henry Thornton and William Wilberforce, to drive through abolition, culminating in the legislation of 1807 and 1833.

Another example is the movement behind the Factory Acts to improve working conditions dating back to 1802. Its leaders were a combination of Evangelicals, such as the 7th Earl of Shaftesbury and Michael Thomas Sadler, as well as Methodists and Quakers, and even utopian socialist spiritualists such as Robert Owen. Moreover, study of the wider extra-parliamentary campaign for workers' rights and the history of the trade union movement cannot ignore the contribution of the Tolpuddle Martyrs in the 1830s, a contribution rooted in religious nonconformity.

We can also trace the history of human rights back to the religious concerns of the Levellers and Diggers in the 1640s. Indeed, post war concerns for human rights were as much inspired by ethical concerns to preserve the integrity of the human being, following the tyranny and genocide experienced in the Second World War, as they were by notions of natural or inalienable rights.

We could also point to Edwardian 'new' liberalism's links to dissenting protestant traditions; a political movement that achieved pioneering social reforms at the beginning of the last century. One that embraced progressive taxation, early pension reform and social security, the regulation of working hours and reforms to health and safety at work. Elements within liberalism that sought to erect a cooperative commonwealth built on explicitly moral foundations.

We might also consider the role of religious and spiritual movements in helping create political parties to remedy the ethical challenges of the time. For many, nonconformity emerged during the 1870s and 1880s as the conscience of the Liberal party. It was underpinned by a belief that the state was obliged to advance the moral welfare of its citizens. The leading nonconformist paper - The Nonconformist and Independent – proclaimed the Liberal Party as the 'party of Christ'.

For many historians the formation of the Labour Party cannot be understood without an appreciation of what has been termed the late nineteenth century era of the 'religion of socialism'. Where the origins of ethical socialism were to be found in dissident non conformity – Methodists, Baptists, Congregationalists, Quakers, Unitarians – alongside contributions from the likes of the Labour Church, later renamed the Socialist Church, the Ethical Church, the Brotherhood Church, as well as the Salvation Army and the Temperance Church, groups such as the Fellowship of the New Life and assorted spiritual movements. Movements that upheld visions of socialist fellowship and the 'moral economy' associated with figures such as John Ruskin and William Morris to confront the conditions created by the industrial revolution of the 1880s and 1890s. Activists were often termed 'apostles', intent on reclaiming the integrity of the human being from the indignities intrinsic to capitalist exploitation. The First Principle of the Labour Church stated 'That the Labour Movement is a religious movement'.

It was a movement that found expression in the poetry of Edward Carpenter and William Morris, including the latter's '*The Pilgrims of Hope*' from 1886. In books and pamphlets with titles such as Blatchford's '*The New Religion*' or Bruce Glasier's '*The Religion of Socialism*', in the Socialist Sunday School movement and the *Socialist Catechism* of J.L. Joynes, published weekly in 1884. It represented a politics of resistance to the commodification of life; of families, relationships; a continuous struggle, not just against the alienating effects of capitalism but also left-wing utilitarianism and Fabianism in the contest to shape a just society.

This political inheritance was clearly visible in the leadership of Keir Hardie, Ramsey MacDonald and George Lansbury, prophets of the old religion, whose political characters were shaped by these spiritual forces. As well as the three times Labour leader Arthur Henderson – a lifelong Wesleyan lay preacher. It was also detectable in the Congregationalist background of Harold Wilson and the Baptist origins of Jim Callaghan.

> *"History instructs us therefore that at key turning points, spiritual and religious movements have been at the vanguard of many of the great movements for social reform."*

History instructs us therefore that at key turning points, spiritual and religious movements have been at the vanguard of many of the great movements for social reform. Within this context we can return to the Catholic contribution to social justice.

CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING

Rerum Novarum, in English *Of New Things*, or *Rights and Duties of Capital and Labour*, was first published on 15th May 1891 by Pope Leo XIII. The encyclical stands as an extraordinary condemnation of unfettered industrialisation and the immiseration of the working classes. It began with the acknowledgment of 'the enormous fortunes of individuals and the poverty of the masses' and suggested 'there can be no question whatever that some remedy must be found, and quickly found for the misery and wretchedness which press so heavily at this moment on the large majority of the very poor.' It stated 'the working man is not to be

treated as a slave; in the market-place he is not simply merchandise' and the moral imperative to regulate capitalism. It placed a 'preferential option for the poor' at the centre of Catholic social thought. This new creed advocated unions, collective bargaining and a living wage to maintain and respect the dignity of the person, one created in the image of God. Since its publication the dignity of labour has remained a cornerstone within Catholic thought. It urged the capitalist 'not to look upon their work-people as their bondsmen, but to respect in every man his dignity as a person ennobled of Christian character'.[1] It is a text that successive Popes have returned to.

Quadragesima anno, translated as *In the 40th Year* and subtitled *Reconstruction of the Social Order* was an encyclical issued by Pope Pius XI on 15 May 1931, as its title suggests developing Catholic Social Teaching to mark the 40th year since *Rerum Novarum*. In emerged as a response both to the rise of German National Socialism and Soviet Communism. Here the remit is more extensive than its predecessor, concerned with wider social and economic relations over and above the capitalist employment relationship. Once again, the fundamental challenge remains the preservation of human dignity and how it can be endangered under various forms of social organisation prone to authoritarianism – unbridled capitalism, socialism and communism. The organisational underpinnings of the Common Good are here seen to be questions of solidarity and subsidiarity, an emphasis on the lowest levels of effective decision making traced back to Thomas Aquinas.[2] A social democratic character to the encyclical can be identified in its demands for more social solidarity and its critique of economic liberalism, international finance and the concentrations of wealth.

Ninety years after *Rerum Novarum in Laborem Exercens*[3], an encyclical on human work, Pope John Paul II offered a restatement of 'personalism' within this tradition of Catholic justice. It begins by clarifying why work is not simply a commodity to be traded or a random action but essential to human nature itself, 'a fundamental dimension of human existence on earth', and that 'man is the subject of work' and that by acting on nature through work finds fulfilment and thereby 'becomes more of a human being'. The text again reasserts 'a principle that has always been taught by the Church: the principle of the priority of labour over capital'. It upholds the political necessity of work protections to halt the violations of human dignity, including through unemployment, wage inequalities, job insecurities and the process of technological change. The latter can 'supplant' the person 'taking away all personal satisfaction and the incentive to creativity and responsibility, when it deprives many workers of their previous employment, or when, through exalting the machine, it reduces man to the status of a slave.' Work is considered a spiritual activity, following in the footsteps of a carpenter, through which man engages 'for the redemption of humanity'. Here John Paul distinguishes between work and toil, the latter the product of sin. Our task is one of nurturing fulfilling work. John Paul also spoke of the 'positive role of class conflict when it takes the shape of a struggle for social justice'.[4] Years later Pope Benedict XVI's 2009 social encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* offered a restatement of CST following the financial crisis. In his earlier 2006 encyclical *Deus caritas est* he stated that justice remained the defining concern of the state and central to politics.

This tradition in Catholic teaching, dating back to the late nineteenth century, constitutes a radical political inheritance, one that was upheld by Pope Francis. 'We do not get dignity from power or money or culture.

1. *Rerum Novarum*, Encyclical Letter of Pope Leo XIII on the Condition of Labour, Paulist Press, 1940.

2. Subsidiarity was also suggested in *Rerum Novarum*, although the term is not formally used in the encyclical.

3. *Laborem Exercens*, Encyclical on Human Work, United States Catholic Conference, 1981.

4. S.L. Kleeb, Gustavo Gutierrez's Notion of 'Liberation' and Marx's Legacy of 'Ruthless Criticism', University of Toronto, p. 58

Ford Madox Brown, *Work*, 1852–65. Oil on canvas, Manchester Art Gallery

Ford Madox Brown's Work places manual labour at the centre of Victorian society, surrounding the navvies with the poor, the wealthy, children, intellectuals, and religious reformers. For a discussion of Catholic Social Teaching, industrial capitalism, and the dignity of labour, the painting is unusually apt: it treats work not as mere economic activity, but as a social, moral, and spiritual question involving the whole political community.

We get dignity from work,' he said in 2013. 'Work is fundamental to the dignity of the person. Work, to use an image, 'anoints' with dignity, fills us with dignity, makes us similar to God who has worked and still works, who always acts.' On Twitter in 2014 he said 'How I wish everyone had decent work! It is essential for human dignity'. A recurring theme in Catholic thought is the recognition of dignity in our fellow humans as a means of recognising it in ourselves, central to Catholic democratic and political concerns. The new Pope, Cardinal Robert Prevost of Chicago, by taking the name Leo XIV has quite consciously sought to embed himself within this tradition traced back to Leo XIII and *Rerum Novarum*. Catholic concerns for human dignity inform an understanding of the capitalist employment relationship and the duties of employer and worker especially at times of profound technological change. A transhistorical spiritual concern for human dignity is moulded into a politics of social justice and an understanding of how under certain social relations our common humanity can be violated, yet through our actions also preserved.

SOCIAL JUSTICE

What influenced the drafting of *Rerum Novarum*? One was the emerging movement for social justice. The idea of the 'justice of society' is often traced back to Italian Catholic theologians of the 18th century, in particular members of the Society of Jesus, the Jesuits, the largest religious order of the Catholic Church. The specific term 'social justice' is generally credited to the Jesuit priest Luigi Taparelli d'Azeglio. Born in 1793, Taparelli became a Thomist Catholic philosopher concerned with the nature of the social order under industrial capitalism, whose teachings were highly influential in the thinking of Pius XIII. One of the original drafters of *Rerum Novarum* was Matteo Liberatore, another student of Taparelli. The encyclical therefore stands as a global landmark in the evolution of the idea of social justice.

Yet the origins of *Rerum Novarum* also lie closer to home. Cardinal Henry Edward Manning, the leading British Catholic of his day, became a high-profile figure in public life with his intervention in the East End of London during the 1889 national dock strike – just two years before *Rerum Novarum* was issued. In that struggle he worked alongside social reformers such as Annie Besant, trade unionists like Tom Mann and Ben Tillett, and emerging politicians that included John Benn, the grandfather of Tony Benn.

This intervention reflected Manning's long term commitment to effecting social change. Some 15 years before the strike, in 1874, Manning delivered an extraordinary lecture at the Leeds Mechanics Institute, a city heartland of the industrial revolution, entitled, in words almost identical to those later found in the encyclical, *The Dignity and Rights of Labour*. It began, 'I claim for labour all the rights of property'. He argued for the regulation of working hours, decent wages and the right to organise through unions to improve conditions.[5] This was a full 17 years before *Rerum Novarum*.[6] It is important to understand the context of Manning's lecture as at the time striking and picketing were literally criminal offences which carried with them the sentence of hard labour. In 1871 for instance five workers had been imprisoned for 12 months for their industrial action at Beckton Gas Company in the East End of London. Manning's speech marks an historic intervention by the leader of the Catholic community in the pursuit of British social justice. Later in 1884 Manning served on the Royal Commission into the Housing of the Working Classes, an important landmark in slum clearance and landlord regulation. In 1888, in response to the brutal 1887 'Bloody Sunday' clashes in Trafalgar Square between police and thousands protesting about the social conditions in Britain and the deteriorating situation in Ireland, Manning wrote *A Pleading for the Worthless*, a condemnation of urban poverty. In it he challenged notions of the deserving poor, protesting against the 'ruin of men from the straits of poverty' and the 'desperation of want'. The text strongly influenced the social concerns of William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army, who two years later published his famous *In Darkest England*.

In May 1891 *Rerum Novarum* was published in English. Manning was the official translator from the Latin. Labelled 'On the Condition of Labor,' it marked the first comprehensive Catholic encyclical concerning social justice - although the term social justice does not actually appear in the text.[7] It upheld the belief that 'There is no true solution to the social question apart from the gospel'. Its purpose was the rescue of human dignity in the modern industrial world, to forge

5. As Austin Ivereigh has argued : 'All these ideas: the need for decent wages, the right to form trade unions, and the obligation for the state to step in – despite the free-market ideology of the age – to regulate hours of work are exactly the major themes running through *Rerum Novarum* itself.'
www.thetablet.co.uk/blogs/was-catholic-social-teaching-made-in-leeds/

6. Other influences included Wilhelm von Ketteler, Bishop of Mainz in Germany until his death in 1877 and Frederic Ozanam, the French founder of the Society of St Vincent de Paul

7. In 1931 Pope Pius XI did use the term in *Quadragesimo anno* and again later in 1937 in *Divini Redemptoris* which links the search for social justice to the preservation and respect for human dignity.

Unknown photographer, *The Little Match Girl*, Thames Embankment, 1890.

This 1890 photograph of a young matchgirl sleeping on the Thames embankment gives stark visual form to the poverty, exhaustion, and vulnerability surrounding London's match trade. Placed beside the story of the 1888 matchgirls' strike, it reminds the reader that the dispute was not merely about wages or fines, but about the dignity of young women and girls living at the edge of Victorian industrial society.

a route between a liberal individualism and a doctrinal socialism, a genuine 'third way'. This was literally nine years before the formal creation of a political party pledged to uphold the dignity of labour, the Labour Party, formed in 1900 as the Labour Representation Committee. The encyclical argued that people must reject an over reliance on self-interest and return to questions of virtue, a spirit of justice, to help overcome the immiseration of the masses and enhance the dignity of labour, all themes articulated by Manning since the 1870s.

CARDINAL MANNING

Manning, born in Hertfordshire in 1808, was the son of a slave owner, governor of the Bank of England and Tory MP, yet would emerge as a key figure in the movement for social justice. Although never a public follower of John Henry Newman, as an Anglican Manning had aligned with the Oxford Movement, the Tractarians, and figures such as Edward Pusey, John Keble and their associates such as William Gladstone, who he had earlier preceded as President of the Oxford Union. In 1851 he was ordained at the Jesuit Catholic Church in Farm Street and in 1865, until his death in 1892, was appointed Archbishop of Westminster. As Archbishop he was a participant in the 1878 conclave that elected Leo XIII, having been made a cardinal a few years earlier. His historic significance in terms of social reform was intimately tied in with the brutal workplace realities of the late nineteenth century, in particular the combined effect of two epic industrial struggles in London's East End.

MATCHGIRLS' STRIKE

The first of two historic industrial disputes took place in and around a three acre factory site at Fairfield Road in Bow, established in 1861 by William Bryant and Francis May, both Quakers, the former an active Liberal. Many of the workforce were poor uneducated Irish women, who suffered terrible pay and working conditions, as the owners and shareholders reaped extraordinary dividends.[8] The exposure of the women to white phosphorus was especially dangerous, with the possibility of contracting a cancer labelled 'phossy jaw' which regularly led to the worker being sacked. Sporadic industrial action over wage rates and the punitive systems of fining matchmakers had occurred in 1881, 1885 and 1886, but without union organisation. The groundbreaking strike by some 1400 women in July 1888 was triggered by the sacking of workers suspected of leaking details of their wretched conditions to Annie Besant, a pioneer for social reform. The dismissed workers had refused to publicly deny these employment realities when revealed by Besant in an article in *The Link* newspaper on 23 June 1888, provocatively entitled 'White Slavery in London'.

Once the management offered to reinstate the women, the strikers shifted their demands onto reform of the fine structures in the plant, leading to its closure on 6 July. The strikers' protests, actively supported by Besant, included marching on parliament and after

8. From 1886 Charles Booth's annual survey labelled 'Life and Labour of the People of London' revealed the scale of poverty in the capital, with an estimated 50,000 of Tower Hamlets residents living below the poverty line.

negotiations the fine system was abolished and safety conditions improved. Their action led to the formation the Union of Women Match Makers, with Besant taking the role of secretary, later renamed the Matchmakers' Union, the largest union of women and girls in the country.[9] The landmark victory was the first time unskilled workers had successfully struck for better pay and working conditions. More generally the dispute revealed the nature of poverty in Victorian Britain at the heart of the world's largest city, the capital of the richest, most powerful country on earth, and set in motion a chain of events that led a year later to a landmark event in the battle for social justice.

DOCK STRIKE

The 1889 Dock strike began in August barely a mile from the Bryant and May Fairfield Road factory, its leaders inspired by the matchgirl success and action that had seen the recent introduction of an 8 hour day at the nearby Beckton Gas works. The five week strike by some 100,000 unskilled and semi-skilled workers, again many of Irish descent, alongside the matchgirls victory stand as key turning points in the evolution of both the British labour movement and Victorian campaigns for social justice, events that foreshadowed the publication of *Rerum Novarum*. It marked the re-appearance of the Catholic Church as a significant public actor in English politics, arguably for the first time since the reformation. The strike, run out of the Wade's Arms pub in Jeremiah Street, Poplar, began over reductions in bonus payments known as 'plus' money which soon spread throughout the whole Port of London.

The port was quickly paralysed as solidarity strikes began at locations along the river. Manning, along with the acting Lord Mayor of London and the acting commissioner of city police, approached the employers to accept the reasonable demands of the workers. Despite being rejected and an ongoing stalemate, the initial intervention led to the Lord Mayor convening a conciliation committee which also included Cardinal Manning, as well as the Bishop of London Frederick Temple, and representatives of the port. Following a direct request from strike leader Ben Tillett, Manning eventually helped resolve the dispute through a direct personal address to the strike committee, who then authorised him to negotiate on their behalf with the port employers. An agreement was eventually signed on 14 September which saw a 20 per cent pay increase – the introduction of the 'dockers tanner' - minimum hours and an end of the contract system to help curtail casual work. The resolution of the dispute became known as 'the Cardinal's Peace'.

"For Manning, modern capitalism threatened to turn the worker into a commodity which could be bought and sold. A dehumanising process of commodification hostile to family life which undermined relationships of faithfulness and love and which denied the labourer human or civic status."

The strike had been supported by other Protestant churches with a mission to the poor, signalling co-operation between the Catholic and Reformed churches, notably William Booth of the Salvation Army, who developed a close personal relationship with Manning. The 'labour representation committees' set up by the strike committee worked to overcome the division between local English and immigrant Catholic workers on the docks, concentrating on their common interest. Both Catholic and Protestant had worked together to support a grouping that was for the organised and democratic interest of labour. Just three years later 1892 Keir Hardie was elected MP for nearby West Ham South.

Rerum Novarum can be traced back to the theological thinking and the practical political interventions of Manning dating from the 1870s, especially the historic industrial struggles in London's East End. For Manning, modern capitalism threatened

9. A few years later the Salvation Army opened its own match factory in Bow to enhance the local working conditions, although this was later taken over by Bryant and May.

to turn the worker into a commodity which could be bought and sold. A dehumanising process of commodification hostile to family life which undermined relationships of faithfulness and love and which denied the labourer human or civic status. Manning argued that a worker under unrestrained capitalism was akin to being a slave. His response lay in reconciling the interests of capital and labour.[10]

The foundational document of modern CST was in part forged in Catholic engagement with workers in East London, a cauldron in the creation of both the Labour Party and trade union movement, that built on Manning's approach to social justice outlined some 15 years earlier. Ben Tillett who in September 1889 ratified the settlement on behalf of the workers paid tribute to the Cardinal in their victory. The strike leader Tom Mann, who became president of the new Dockers' union at the end of the strike, would say of the 80 year old Manning 'He spoke to the dockers in such a quiet, firm and advising, fatherly manner that minute by minute, as he was speaking, one could feel the mental atmosphere changing'. On his death in 1892 a resolution was moved in the London Trades Council that 'English, Irish and Italian workers in London felt that by the death of Cardinal Manning they had lost their very best friend'. On Sunday 15 September, the day after the dispute was resolved, the dockers marched triumphantly in blazing sunshine from Poplar to Hyde Park. At the front of the march numerous crosses were held in honour of Cardinal Manning.

LEGACY

The legacy of Catholic Social Teaching, its influence on movements for social justice, will hopefully be reassessed with the 135th anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*, not least because of the significance attached to this teaching by the new Pope. It is a legacy that includes a role in helping create organisations such as The Knights of Saint Columbanus, a national movement often associated with leading figures in the Irish Labour Party. Inspired by *Rerum Novarum* it was initially founded in 1915 by Canon James K. O'Neil in Belfast to support working class Catholics. In the political domain the influence of the social doctrine was clearly identifiable in the drafting of the Constitution of Ireland, effective from 29 December 1937, replacing the 1922 Constitution of the Irish free State. The process was personally supervised by Eamon De Valera. Prior to its tabling in the Dail a draft was twice presented to the Vatican for review and comment. The text stated that 'Justice and charity' must 'inform all the institutions of the national life' and the market must be regulated in the interests of the common good.

Quadragesima anno, the encyclical issued by Pope Pius XI on 15 May 1931, inspired the Catholic Worker Movement in the US founded in 1933 by Dorothy Day and the French Catholic theologian and social activist Peter Maurin. Closer to home there is evidence of *Rerum Novarum*'s influence in Catholic working class communities in the early twentieth century. For instance, Red Clydesider Harry McShane details intense debate over *Rerum Novarum* within the Glasgow Catholic communities in the 1900s, from which emerged figures such as John Wheatley, the founder of the Catholic Socialist Society, and Minister for Health in Labour's first cabinet in 1924. Those with a knowledge of East London history are also aware of the role of Catholic Social Teaching in the evolution of the British labour movement. For instance, while not a believer Clement Attlee was always ready to acknowledge both the contribution of religious inspired social work in the East End slums – the contribution of figures such as Charles Kingsley and F.D. Maurice - alongside that of Catholic teaching, in particular the role performed by Cardinal Manning. In conclusion, any reassessment of religiously inspired movements for social reform must acknowledge both Manning's theological influence on *Rerum Novarum* and his inter-related political interventions in the evolution of British social justice.

10. A parallel line of thought was developed by Archbishop Von Ketteler in Germany. He worked within a Dominican tradition revitalising Aristotle to provide the theoretical framework for *Rerum Novarum*.

History of the quest for human dignity in the workplace

Clifford Longley

The story of the Factory Acts is the story of the gradual awakening of the Victorian conscience to the indignity to which workers were being subjected as the Industrial Revolution unfolded. To an extent this awakening followed on from the movement to abolish the slave trade, culminating in the Act of Parliament of 1807 with that name, and overlapped with the campaign to abolish slavery itself in the British Empire, which was achieved, again by Act of Parliament, in 1833. The first Act in the Factory Act series is usually counted as the Health and Morals of Apprentices Act of 1802. The Cotton Mills and Factories Act followed in 1819, mainly concerned with the regulation of child labour in northern cotton mills.

But the overlap is not entirely cause and effect: William Wilberforce, the principal anti-slavery campaigner of his era, was lambasted by William Cobbett for ignoring the condition of white workers at home while worrying about the condition of black workers abroad, accusing him of "monstrous hypocrisy". Cobbett is a key figure in the various campaigns at the time to recognise the dignity of labour, though he had farm labourers more than industrial workers in mind. They lived and worked in conditions no better than African slaves on the West Indian plantations, he believed, and often worse.

Indeed, many industrial workers came originally from the countryside, a phenomenon referred to in the mid-Victorian novels of Elizabeth Gaskell. Many of the conflicts and crises of the Victorian working class were viewed by contemporary commentators through the lens of class and what was called "breeding", which saw humanity as stratified by inherited moral characteristics, according to which one's station in society was established. The very expression "nobility" referred not just to moral virtue but to birth. This class bias lowered expectations of what members of the labouring classes were capable of, and this makes any discussion of their condition sound patronising to modern ears. As late as the First World War, when recruits to the British army were being assessed, those who had been to public (ie independent) school were routinely separated from the rest and selected for officer training. No doubt this class-based bias shaped attitudes to workers and their rights, and until the fundamental equality of all human beings was generally accepted, talk of the "dignity of labour" would have had unstated prejudices hidden within it.

It is within that framework that the abolition of slavery and campaigns for the improvement of the condition of the industrial worker attracted individuals who were often well-placed themselves within the class system. They accepted most of its implicit assumptions, but wanted a society which corresponded more to what they saw as Biblical ideals. As with the apprentices Act of 1802, reform of morals, education of children, and Christian observance were seen as inextricably linked. But it was also acknowledged that degrading working conditions were not conducive to the cultivation of religious sentiment. In other words they were a barrier to the religious conversion which the campaigners wished to bring about.

"The story of the Factory Acts is the story of the gradual awakening of the Victorian conscience to the indignity to which workers were being subjected as the Industrial Revolution unfolded."

Anglican Evangelicalism, Methodism and the Quakers were the most prominent religious movements in both cases. In this respect, and despite the doubts expressed by Cobbett as to his sincerity, Wilberforce was typical, while Lord Ashley, later the Earl of Shaftesbury, exemplified it. He was a devout Evangelical, famous for instance for the abolition of the employment of children to sweep chimneys. Referring to a proposal to allow girls to work in factories after the age of 13, Ashley told the House of Commons in a debate on the Factory Regulations Bill in 1833, "it was absolutely horrifying to impose on young females a period of labour of more than ten hours. In fine, there was no period of a female's life in which she required more care, attention, and protection…" It was a plea for human dignity. Disregard of this principle would lead to "uncontrolled disgust" in the country at large, he said. Yet ten hours of unrelenting work in a Victorian cotton mill does not sound much like the "care, attention and protection" he said they deserved. But this was 1833, and they were, inevitably, children of the poor. It seems unlikely he would have accepted similar working conditions for his own daughters. Ashley was to become the leading voice among Evangelical social reformers of his day, notably in the callous treatment of those that Victorian society labelled "lunatics".

He was right that the public appetite for relief of factory workers ran well ahead of opinion among the mill owners themselves, though with glaring exceptions such as Robert Owen. The prevailing economic theory of the day was *laissez-faire*, "political economy", according to which, as a kind of God-given natural law, interference in the workings of the market by the principle of supply and demand, was not only morally and religiously objectionable but also ultimately futile. The harshest expression of this view was represented by Thomas Malthus. Thus if an unemployed man "cannot get subsistence from his parents, on whom he has a just demand, and if society does not want his labour, has no claim of right to the smallest portion of food and, in fact, has no business to be where he is. At nature's mighty feast there is no vacant cover for him. She tells him to be gone, and will quickly execute her own orders, if he does not work upon the compassion of some of her guests." (Quoted by Brian Inglis, *Poverty and the Industrial Revolution*, 1971). In other words, no right to life, certainly not to dignity. Just as people like Shaftsbury argued from Christian doctrine in favour of reform, so Malthus, a clergyman, argued against. He believed economic laws were part of the natural order ordained by God, so attempts to interfere with them were therefore close to blasphemy. And bound to be fruitless. Evangelicals argued the toss either way.

A similar distaste for intervening in the outcome of what were regarded as the providential workings of market forces was active among the other principal religious group campaigning for social reform, such as the Quakers. They had a prominent role, alongside Evangelicals and Methodists, in the campaign to abolish slavery. A number of well-run businesses were

Gustave Doré, *Workers in a London Warehouse*, from William Blanchard Jerrold and Gustave Doré, London: A Pilgrimage, 1872.

Doré's crowded warehouse scene captures the density, strain, and physical discipline of Victorian labour. Men and boys move goods through a commercial space shaped by cranes, platforms, and heavy loads, making visible the industrial world that prompted nineteenth-century debates about the dignity of work, exploitation, poverty, and the moral limits of laissez-faire economics.

created in the 19th century by Quaker entrepreneurs, names such as Cadbury, Fry, Rowntree, Huntley and Palmer, and Barclays and Lloyds in the banking sector. As factory owners they were more than averagely sensitive to working conditions, and most tended to support, rather than oppose, the Factory Act reforms. But their ethos was Puritan, with an emphasis on rewarding honest hard work rather than on the dignity of labour as such. And some Quakers were strong supporters of *laissez-faire* economics – the capitalist system which had made them rich. It was said of them that they "set out to do good, but instead did well".

This was the raging tidal current of "political economy" against which all the Factory Act campaigners had to push back. Which they did, with growing if gradual success. Starting with the employment of apprentices, then child labour especially girls, then women and more generally. A particular issue was the length of the working day, with campaigns to limit it to ten hours. The movement also extended its scope beyond the cotton and cloth industries to factory work in general, and also to coal mining. However, reform of agricultural work was resisted by rich landowners and farmers using the Combination Acts, which outlawed trade union activity such as strikes as an unlawful conspiracy to induce breaches of employment contacts, by binding union members to take part under oath.

From the apprentices legislation until the Health and Safety at Work Act of 1974 there were some 20 pieces of legislation passed by Parliament which partly or wholly touched on working conditions. It is fair to regard the 1974 Act as the great achievement and consummation of the Factory Act movement, though that Act itself is by no means the end of the story. Human dignity is still an unattainable goal for many workers. Indeed, many are still uncertain what the term means.

The abolition of slavery and the campaign for dignity at work were connected and indeed overlapped, and the two issues, when compared, may have something to offer towards a definition. The disagreement between William Wilberforce and William Cobbett over the nature of slavery was illuminating. Cobbett saw it as a matter of human dignity, so that whether a worker was a slave or not depended on the conditions in which he or she was forced to work. Wilberforce saw it as a legal status – which allowed a human person to be the property of another human person, to be used or sold as the owner thought fit.

Wilberforce was late to the abolition argument; indeed he only joined it when asked to lead it, by

William Pitt the Younger. (The oak tree under which this conversation took place is still known as the Wilberforce Oak, although only the stump remains.) He was in contact with the abolitionist campaigners who had brought about the release from slavery of James Somerset, originally from West Africa, who had been a slave on a plantation in Virginia and brought to England by his master. Granting a writ of *habeas corpus*, the Lord Chief Justice Lord Mansfield declared that slavery was unknown to the common law of England and not based on any statute, and hence the detention of Somerset by his owner was unlawful. This case may be said to be the origin of the idea that the opposite of slavery was freedom, in this case freedom to enter into a contract of employment and freedom to decline to do so. The common law presumed that two persons entering a contract were both free. This had a powerful influence on Wilberforce's understanding of slavery.

Cobbett's understanding however, was that this freedom was a legal fiction in many cases, not a reality. To Cobbett the opposite of slavery was human dignity, and whether or not a person could be called a slave depended on how he or she was treated. He saw that the great majority of agricultural or factory workers were not in fact free – regardless of their legal status – if their only alternative was imprisonment or starvation. That absence of the freedom to say No was his definition of slavery. It was a moral rather than a legal definition. It also gives us a way of defining human dignity.

WHAT MAKES A SLAVE A SLAVE?

If we imagine a spectrum, with nil dignity at one end and full and complete dignity at the other, we may find that that nil dignity is properly called slavery, the worst kind of which is chattel slavery. That is where the employer is also the owner, and not just of the slave's labour and its product, but of the slave him or her self, mind, body and soul, every minute of every day. So if we can describe slavery in detail, we may find ourselves with a description of the dignity of labour, as the obverse or opposite, like a photographic negative as it were where dark is light and light is dark. It is striking that the 19th century campaign to improve conditions in factories contains many links and comparisons with the campaign to abolish slavery. The word itself often occurs in criticisms of industrial working conditions: "…a small number of very rich men have been able to lay upon the teeming masses of the labouring poor a yoke little better than that of slavery itself." *Rerum Novarum*, Leo XIII,1891.

This would enable us to plot various positions on our spectrum according to the extent to which a particular job contains elements of slavery, hence elements contrary to dignity. And out of that could come criteria which could be applied in considering whether a particular job is on the whole compatible with the dignity of labour, or not as the case may be. It would be convenient and in keeping with the theological context of this product to take "integral human development" (*Populorum Progressio* etc) as what we think dignity at work should protect and promote.

This is what slavery looks like in detail – I assume a male slave for the sake of the argument.

- Like a beast of burden, a slave works when he has to, on pain of punishment.
- He does not choose the time he works, or how long for, or who with.
- He cannot refuse even if the work is dangerous or unhealthy.
- Meal times are not at his discretion nor type of food.
- He lives and sleeps where and when he is told to.
- He cannot rest when he needs or wants to.
- He performs bodily functions when allowed to, not when he needs to.
- The type of work is defined for him by others.
- He is not allowed to use his initiative in his work.
- He has no control of time and place.

- If sick, physically or mentally, he has no choice but to work, and if unable to he has no say whether he can have treatment or not.
- He is not paid for his work, nor may he save money or own property.
- He will have no access to education, or be allowed to learn to read or write.
- As a chattel he may be bought and sold by his master without his consent.
- He has no say in who owns and controls him.
- His relationships and interactions with other workers are rigidly controlled by his master.
- His religious observances and activities are entirely at the discretion of the master.
- Female slaves are required to breed with fellow slaves, and the master has the right to engage in sexual relations with his slaves, regardless of their consent.
- Slaves may be killed by the master as a punishment or for any other reason.
- No laws restrict the rights of the master, and slaves have no access to the courts or the criminal justice system.
- Slaves do not take part in political activity, or vote.
- Slaves may not organise or combine collectively with other slaves.
- Slaves may be bullied, insulted or abused without restrictions.
- Slaves have no influence over the purpose of the enterprise for which they work.

If we turn these 24 descriptions of slavery into their opposite, we have 24 criteria of whether a particular work context meets the test of dignified work – ie, a definition. They could be judged on a binary system, yes or no, or each criterion rated on a ten point scale, zero for no score, ten for fully compliant, and the rest in between.

To take a few examples:

Human dignity means:

- Workers are free to combine with other workers and organise to negotiate terms and conditions.
- Workers must not be subject to bullying, insults or abuse.
- They have the right to influence the purpose of the enterprise for which they work.
- They are allowed to choose who owns or controls their work.
- They are allowed to use their initiative in their work.
- They may refuse to undertake work which is dangerous or unhealthy, or demand extra protection and additional pay.
- If they are sick or injured by their work, they have the right to appropriate treatment and if necessary, compensation.
- Human dignity means women are protected from sexual abuse or any degrading treatment based on their sex.
- Human dignity means workers are subject to reasonable hours of work with suitable rest periods and breaks for food.
- Human dignity means fair treatment in the workplace with remedies and compensation available for unfairness.
- It means non-discriminatory practices based on protected categories under equalities legislation.
- It means adequate protection for whistle-blowers and effective ways to deal with problems that whistle-blowers might highlight.

This list is not exhaustive. If any worker experiences problems which feel like slavery, it probably is slavery.

It was to William Cobbett that we owe this approach to slavery and its opposite, dignified work. He saw slavery in a variety of guises and degrees and not just as a binary legal status - one either is or isn't a slave, depending on one's legal category. To that extent his

"It was to William Cobbett that we owe this approach to slavery and its opposite, dignified work. He saw slavery in a variety of guises and degrees and not just as a binary legal status - one either is or isn't a slave, depending on one's legal category."

insight was more profound than Lord Mansfield's when the Lord Chief Justice declared James Somerset to be a free man because slavery was not a category known to English common law. Cobbett saw slavery as a moral category and not merely a legal one. One could be a slave, socially, culturally and morally, even if not legally. Throughout his Rural Rides through the English countryside in early 19th century England he saw farm labourers who were, in his opinion, no freer than African slaves in the southern United States. Indeed some of the conditions he saw were worse.

Thus he implicitly invented the concept of degrees of slavery and types of slavery. His criterion was human dignity, not technical status. Wilberforce repeatedly refused to see this. He thought that as long as a man or woman was legally free to work or not – regardless of the dire consequences of the latter choice, even if he starved to death – that person was not a slave. Wilberforce failed to back factory law reform, even though, as an Evangelical, he could see that degrading working conditions did not condition a slave's soul to acceptance of the Word of God. This was one of the abiding forces driving the slavery abolition movement in the United States. The barrier to religious belief represented by the cruelties of slavery was summed up in a remark at the end of Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin, when fellow slave Cassie declares "I never have prayed since my children were sold!" For Stowe, abolition was a necessary condition for religious conversion. Indeed, Lord Shaftesbury would see degrading factory conditions in a similar light. Neither he nor Stowe would see the issue as human dignity.

Cobbett did. He turned to the theme of slavery many times. "Are there any of these, or did feudal times ever see any of them, so debased, so absolutely slaves, as the poor creatures who, in the 'enlightened' north, are compelled to work fourteen hours in a day, in a heat of eighty-four degrees; and who are liable to punishment for looking out of a window of the factory!"

William Cobbett's *History of the Protestant Reformation in England and Ireland* argues that the Reformation was a devastating looting of monastic wealth and influence that impoverished the English and Irish poor. Cobbett, himself an Anglican, emphasised the social and economic destruction after the physical destruction of the monastic system, and defended the pre-Reformation Catholic Church and its many monasteries, convents and abbeys, as an admirable guardian of the interests of the lower classes and the poor. In other words, a guardian of the dignity of labour.

Trade unions and the dignity of labour

Maria Exall

INTRODUCTION

The aspiration to express our humanity through meaningful productive activity with others is essential to our human dignity. The first Encyclical of the modern industrial age, *Rerum Novarum* addressed concerns about the degradations workers suffered in the industrial economy of the late 19th century. We are now in the 21st century going through the fourth industrial revolution, with hugely different workplaces and societal contexts, but Catholic Social Teaching on principles of workers' dignity remains. From *Rerum Novarum* onwards Catholic Social Teaching has supported the right of association of working people to improve their working conditions *themselves*, and therefore the positive role of Trade Unions. The Church recognises the wider social, economic, and political responsibilities we have towards the world of work as part of charity in the Christian tradition.

There are deep and persisting problems in the world of work in the UK today. Millions of people experience poverty pay and job insecurity. Workers' incomes have stagnated or gone down in real terms. Meanwhile those who are wealthy are getting richer with a corrosive effect on social cohesion. Our current economic model in this country is not working fairly. Labour deregulation has led to working people enduring most of the poverty and social inequality that has resulted from market failures. A rebalance in the world of work is overdue and urgent. To shift our current politics away from the lure of populist authoritarianism it is vital to support greater power in the workplace for working class people. It is a central issue for the sustainability of our democracy.

Below I will discuss some key challenges to the dignity of labour in 2026 from a workers' perspective; the current conditions of work particularly for those who are low paid and those in insecure employment; the wider context of contemporary economic and social inequality and its connection with the erosion of Trade Union rights; and certain 'new things' in the modern world of work including in-work poverty, changing social protections and accelerated technological development including AI.

THE CONDITIONS OF WORK IN BRITAIN TODAY

As *Rerum Novarum* states 'the condition of the working classes is the pressing question of the hour, and nothing can be of higher interest to all classes of the State than it should be rightly and reasonably settled'. This is as true in 2026 as it was in 1891. From *Rerum Novarum* to *Fratelli Tutti*, the Church has called for the working classes to share in the wealth which they create - 'justice...demands that working classes... who contribute so largely to the advantage to the community...may themselves share in the benefits which they create'.

We are living through a cost-of-living crisis. Working people in the UK have experienced the longest and harshest squeeze on wages in two hundred years. Following the financial crash of 2007-8 there has been stagnant economic growth and a proliferation of insecure and low paid work. Working people are struggling with the cost of living whether they live in cities, in towns or in rural areas, in the North or in the South, in the Red Wall or the Blue Wall.

One of the immediate causes of the current crisis is the holding down of workers' pay because of austerity policies brought in by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition in 2010 in response to the rise in Government debt after the financial crash. These policies continued under subsequent Conservative Governments between 2015 and 2024. The longer-term growth of wage inequality and in-work poverty however is the result of the accommodation, to varying degrees, to a neo liberal economic consensus by all Governments over the past four decades.

This has led to a situation where UK workers are working harder, for longer, for less. We have the longest working hours and the highest level of unpaid overtime in Europe. 'Work intensification' and a narrow instrumentalisation of productivity has created bullying cultures in too many workplaces. This culture does not fit with teleological understandings of the nature of work in the Catholic Social Teaching tradition. Our working lives should be where we are given the chance to flourish, to develop our abilities and be respected and valued by others.

Many in the workforce who do the most important jobs in our society, including public services, education, health and social care, saw the value of their pay reduced by up to 25% because of fourteen years of austerity and on-off Government pay freezes between 2010 and 2024. The settling of pay disputes such as those of resident doctors and the teachers within months of the election of the current Labour Government is part of a long overdue reset. Pay restoration to pre-austerity levels for public sector workers continues to be a challenge, however, for the Government as do the budgets for improved staffing levels and planned public investment.

It is the application of market led performance management models in all areas of the workforce; private, public and third sector, that has resulted in the most drastic changes in conditions at work. Such changes have undermined our human aspiration for fulfilling productive activity, instead the predominant human resources models are based primarily on workers seen as 'mere instruments of money making'. This has had a negative effect on wellbeing and job satisfaction. These changes have contributed to an increase in working people experiencing mental health problems, with stress now the leading reason for sick absences.

The assumption that employees are mere units of production expected to meet accelerating targets, has become the norm. Rather than recognising the importance of taking pride in a job well done, and the satisfaction of the delivery of a good service, work becomes soulless and soul destroying.

The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) recent Good Work survey revealed that a half of all workers see their work as purely transactional i.e. just "doing it for the money". Just under half feel less enthusiastic about their job "always or often" and many feel bored, miserable or lonely

Diego Rivera, Detroit Industry Murals, south wall detail, 1932–33. Fresco panels, Detroit Institute of Arts, Gift of Edsel B. Ford, 33.10. Photograph: quickfix, CC BY-SA 2.0.

Rivera's Detroit Industry Murals monumentalise modern industrial labour: workers, machines, science, and production appear as part of one vast social organism. For a discussion of Catholic Social Teaching and the future of work, the image captures both the promise and danger of technological modernity: human creativity can shape the world, but work can also be absorbed into systems that risk reducing the person to a function of the machine.

at work.[11] In the corporate world there is talk about meaningful work, about ethics and culture, and social responsibility, even spirituality at work. These are good things in themselves, but are discredited in the eyes of many working people because what they actually experience in their working lives is far from this.

In 2026 modern performance management has reached a whole new level of effectiveness because of the sophistication of digital tools of monitoring and surveillance. But the application of these tools has exacerbated bullying cultures, including harassment and discriminatory treatment particularly of those with mental and physical disabilities. This has become a cutting edge of the struggle for dignity at work, an area of workplace injustice highlighted by Pope Francis in *Fratelli Tutti.*

Lack of autonomy at work leads to day-to-day pressure and stress for every section of the workforce. It applies to skilled workers expected to meet higher and higher targets, as well as the lowest paid workers whose every keystroke or delivery is surveyed and recorded. Whether you are a professional or a 'blue collar' worker, whether you work on a manufacturing production line, in sales and marketing, in public services or for a global corporation this is an issue. There is often additional pressure because of remote home and hybrid working. Indeed, rather than being a 'soft option' remote working increases the pressure to be digitally 'on', working late into the evening, missing breaks, and constantly being available. The blurring of home and work life because of remote working can be harmful. For a significant group of vulnerable employees working from home does not suit them at

11. www.cipd.org/uk/knowledge/reports/goodwork

all and they miss the emotional and practical support of work-related personal interaction. The experience of those who worked remotely during COVID has been well documented. For those with existing mental health issues the social isolation of home working can be problematic.

The use of AI within the workplace has the potential, like other new technologies, to increase productivity and reduce the drudgery of work processes. However, there are serious questions about the consequences of its use without proper regulation. Effective governance of this powerful technology is essential to stop its misuse and there are ethical questions about its failure to integrate diverse human representation in its processes. The immediate current issue is, however, that financialisation is distorting its development, tending more towards a 'bubble' than a boom. In the current arrangements respect and reward for human intellectual and creative activity is lacking. Workers in the creative industries are worried that loose regulation on copyright will lead to a free-for-all with large corporations making money out of their creative endeavours, while they themselves are losing out.

LOW PAY AND JOB INSECURITY

Persistent low pay in the UK economy is caused in part by casualisation, job insecurity and false self-employment with a significant percentage of the workforce only having access to minimal entitlements to adequate pensions and in-work benefits. More than four million working people in the UK are without proper employment rights. Workers without contracts with guaranteed hours must live with uncertainty, not knowing when their next shift will be or when or if they will be able to earn enough from week to week to pay their bills.[12]

This is unjust but is not just a problem for casual workers but for all of us. The use of zero-hours contracts and the proliferation of temporary and agency workers exert a downward pressure on wages and terms and conditions in the sectors where it is prevalent. This has had a knock-on effect on the pay and conditions for workers in more secure employment in those same sectors because of competitive market pressures.

The increase in insecure work in the UK has disproportionally affected Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) workers. Agency and seasonal workers, often migrants, are subject to exploitation from payroll companies and become trapped into paying exorbitant recruitment fees. Meanwhile the expansion of the 'gig economy', casualisation and false self-employment save employers billions because they can avoid providing proper remuneration in pensions and benefits.

Some argue that casualisation and precarity is a new work phenomenon, but this claim may well have surprised Pope Leo XIII. The practices expected of the four million working in the casualised 'precariat' economy - piece work, bogus self-employment, and lack of access to basic employment rights - are throwbacks to the days when masses of workers were unprotected by employment laws, or by collective agreements.

We must listen to the wisdom of *Laborem Exercens* when it says that the subjective experiences at work such as low-quality jobs with low pay and poor satisfaction are corrosive of the dignity of labour. For being treated fairly does not just mean decent terms of pay and conditions, it also includes respect and dignity. In the fourth industrial revolution we are living through, CST has made a contribution to both the objective problems of economic exploitation and the subjective problems of alienation because of bad terms and conditions at work.

The current Labour Government's Employment Rights Act 2025 is a welcome recognition of the seriousness of these problems in the world of work. It is the most significant attempt to deal with them in generations. Its aim is to encourage decent work and

12. https://labourunions.org.uk/guaranteedhours/

greater security for workers, their families and raise standards of work in communities. The case for raising the bar on workers' rights from its current low level is compelling from the perspective of Catholic Social Teaching. Earning a living wage and having a secure job is just and necessary. And being treated fairly at work is an important part of our sense of belonging and is integral to the moral health of our society.

We need to move on from a market dominated approach to one where we promote good work practices in both the objective and subjective sense. Good work can be the basis for better productivity and growth that benefits all. Investment in improved skills training and more career pathways, including proper apprenticeships is necessary. We can create decent paid secure jobs spread across all regions of the UK, renew our crumbling social fabric and restore hope. But to do this we need to move on from the neo liberal model of political economy that has dominated our country and rebalance power in the workplace.

POLITICAL ECONOMY AND WORKERS' POWER

The predominance of free market dogmas in the UK for the last four decades has massively increased economic inequality between the few at the top and most working people. This contrasts with the post-World War 2 settlement in the UK which led to steady improvements in working class incomes and job security. The introduction of new protections by the 1945 Labour Government including socialised medicine, expanding social housing and secondary education, and a comprehensive but minimum floor of social security improved millions of working people's lives.

Since then, the employee share of British national income, that is the proportion of created wealth that goes to labour rather than capital, has declined by ten points. It has fallen to less than half of GDP from 59% to 48% since 1980, the decade when the post war consensus on social democracy ended in the UK, after 1979 the Conservative Government led by Margaret Thatcher began to implement neo liberal economic policies in many industrial sectors and public institutions.

Thatcher was inspired by the market fundamentalist thought of the Mont Pelerin Society (MPS). The MPS was an international neo liberal organisation founded in 1947 whose intellectuals included Frederick Hayek and Milton Friedman. They had an individualist and positivist understanding of freedom and rejected the right of working people to collectively organise because it frustrated the will of the free market. They saw market freedom as the only guarantee of a good society. This market fundamentalism was a Manichean approach to political economy asserting the private and individual as good and the public and collective as bad.

The apparent rationale for the policies of the MPS promoted during the Thatcher era was greater economic efficiency and enhanced individual freedom. But, as identified by Pope Francis, the 'trickle down' argument made to justify this approach has been

found wanting. It has not contributed to the common good. Instead, the hegemony of neo liberal economics has seen a greater concentration of wealth in the hands of the few. Letting the rich get richer has not improved the standard of living for all. The wealth expropriated this way has often accumulated in the offshore accounts and financed vanity projects of the super-rich. Profits have not been re-invested in the economy. There are a handful of noble philanthropic exceptions but the 'trickle down' model has been comprehensively road tested and is now exposed as an excuse for greed.

Removing Trade Union rights and collective power in the workplace was a key motivation for those who supported Thatcher's policies of the free market during the 1980's and early 1990's. The Thatcherite Governments used the power of the State to push back against Trades Unions' right of association and their ability to take action, the source of workers' power. Since the major industrial clashes with the mining unions in the strike of 1984-5 and the print unions at Warrington in 1983 and Wapping in 1986 there has been a reduction in British trade union membership from just over half to under a quarter of employees. There has been an even steeper reduction of the number of working people covered by collective bargaining arrangements

It is well documented that the erosion of collective workers' rights since this time has been a significant factor in rising economic inequality. A closer look at the labour market shows that where there is no Union organised in the workplace employers often take advantage to lower rates of pay, cut pension entitlements and other benefits. Where union organisation exists, pay rates are higher and terms and conditions are better.[13] Further there is also a growing recognition that Trade Unions presence and power in the workplace is key to humanising the world of work.

Many working people have a sense of powerlessness about what to do in response to increased work pressures and injustice at work. The patchy spread of Trade Union presence and organisation in the workplace is such that workers often feel there is no one on their side, no one to stand up for them. Having an effective collective voice at work makes a real difference. There is an urgent need to increase collective organisation at the workplace and in sectors of the economy to turn around the trend of low pay and insecure work we have discussed above. The historic achievements of the UK labour movement in improving the world of work came from giving working people power and rights to be collectively represented in the workplace. It is collective bargaining and union organisation which delivers better pay and job security. Just as in the docks and mills of the past, to move away from 'piece work' to job security, to health and safety and other standards you need collective organisation and collective bargaining as well as enforceable legal rights.

THE LIBERALISATION OF THE LABOUR MARKET AND DE-UNIONISATION

There has been a 'race to the bottom' in workers' conditions of employment since the privatisation and liberalisation of the Thatcher era. It has led to lower pay rates, cutbacks on maternity provisions and time off for caring responsibilities, a scaling back of sick pay, annual leave, and company pensions provision. Most of the increases in the profits from the liberalisation and privatisations of utilities such as telecoms, energy, rail, water and post came from two sources. Firstly, the expropriation of the infrastructure built up from previous public investment over decades and secondly reducing pay and conditions of work for those in the lowest sections of the workforce. In contrast the pay of those at CEO and Board level in privatised utilities has seen steady movement upwards.

The greater efficiency and productivity promised under privatisations and market deregulation has not materialised. Liberalisation has not overall led to

13. www.tuc.org.uk/research-analysis/reports/making-work-pay-good-economics

better services for customers, with the current legacy of privatised companies on water standards and energy prices cases in point. In addition, it is worth highlighting that the 'race to the bottom' has led to younger workers losing out on access to what were decently paid skilled jobs with a proper career structure.

Market liberalisation, privatisation of utilities and outsourcing within public services, reduced direct and 'core' labour in the private, public and third sector. Even where Trades Unions manage to maintain certain labour standards and benefits through collective bargaining, there is often a two tier workforce with newer, often younger recruits, on reduced pay, conditions and longer hours. Migrant workers do not have equal employment rights, relying on unfair visa arrangements, and are often subject to gross exploitation with many ending up in debt bondage.

The fall in union density and in coverage of negotiated collective agreements over the last four decades mirrors the increase in wage inequality and fragmentation of terms and conditions of employment. Whilst there have been good initiatives by different unions to organise workers in the new 'gig' and precarious section of the economy many remain unorganised and unrepresented.

Structural factors including the closure of highly union organised workplaces in several sectors and regions, lower rates of unionisation in new and growing sectors of the economy, and reduction in public sector employment (where in general unionisation rates are higher) have suppressed significant growth in union membership, though this is steadily increasing.

In response Unions, particularly those covering sectors where there is currently no Union recognition have prioritised organising the unorganised and atypical workers. Unions have developed approaches to organise those who are 'self-employed' whether legitimately or in name only. In the creative sector and in growing areas in tech there have been new forms of workers' organisation to meet the demands of a workforce with occasional or limited contractual entitlements. The better rights of access by unions to workplaces together with fairer rules for determining bargaining units and ballots for recognition which are being brought in by the Employment Rights Act 2025 will boost unionisation drives as will the new rights that restrict the use of zero-hour contracts.

But these structural changes in political economy are by no means the main part of the story of de-unionisation in the UK. A raft of anti-union laws brought in between 1979 and 2010 restricted Trades Unions' collective organisation, with over thirteen separate pieces of legislation in the 1980's alone. The purpose of these laws and the use of 'union busters' by multi-national companies was to stop union recognition and effective collective organisation to keep down the employee share of the profits made.

The ongoing GMB Union campaign for recognition and collective bargaining in Amazon fulfilment centres in the UK (and in the US) is just one example of how Trade Unions continue to organise in a labour market framed by a neoliberal political economy and with a legal framework stacked against them. There are many others including in innovative areas of the economy. In 2025 hundreds of content moderators employed by TikTok in London were sacked. These redundancies happened to coincide with the culmination of a successful unionisation drive by the Communication Workers Union tech section to establish a collective bargaining unit. The staff were a week away from a ballot on Union recognition when the mass redundancies were announced.

EMPLOYMENT RIGHTS ACT 2025

After the Conservative Government of 1979-1997 was defeated, the Labour Government of 1997-2010 brought in positive employment laws including the individual right to be represented by a trade union and a National Minimum Wage (NMW). But the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Government of 2010-15 then brought in the Lobbying Act designed to restrict the political involvement of Unions, charities, and campaigning organisations. The majority Conservative Government elected in 2015 brought

in the 2016 Trade Union Act which made it much harder for Unions to take legal industrial action and introduced Minimum Service Levels during industrial action. The current Labour Government has rolled back this anti-union legislation. In 2024 the current Government also extended the remit of the Low Pay Commission (which sets the level of the Minimum Wage) to include the cost of living.

In the Labour Government's Employment Rights Act 2025, however, we see the most important attempt to deal with problems of increasing inequality of income and job insecurity. Underpinning the Act is a welcome recognition that the UK needs strong and free trade unions to create a fairer and more equal society.[14]

The Employment Rights Act ends exploitative zero hours contracts and improves rights for casualised workers, which means greater control and regulation in the 'gig' and wider platform economy. It creates a Fair Work Agency which will monitor and maintain standards, though its effectiveness will rely on its remit and adequate funding. This together with strong Union organisation at shopfloor and workplace level can lift wages and terms and conditions and empower working people. The Act has introduced rights from day one of employment to sick pay and parental leave, with rights for unfair dismissal for all after six months (rather than the current two years) and the removal of the limit of compensation for egregious and discriminatory dismissals. All this will mean that up to a third of the UK workforce will gain new rights, both workers in casualised employment and those that have a permanent contract.

The Act also halts most practices of 'fire and rehire' whereby working people are expected to sign new contracts or face the sack if they do not agree. This would help deal with circumstances such as the mass sacking by P&O of its entire operational workforce without notice or consultation in 2022. As this case demonstrated, multinational company ownership, including the majority of organisations in sectors like seafaring, is often a gateway to cheap labour and bad practices. There is an accountability gap because of differing labour standards worldwide which weakens the rights of UK employees to take action against those who are actually responsible for the decisions that affect their job.

The Act brings in new rights for flexible working, against sexual harassment, for pregnant workers, those experiencing bereavement and for those with caring responsibilities. The Government has promised to bring in further employment legislation to monitor the race pay gap and improve rights for workers with disabilities. These combined mean greater equality, family rights and work/life balance. It is a welcome first move towards a more care focused economy.

"The Government has promised to bring in further employment legislation to monitor the race pay gap and improve rights for workers with disabilities. These combined mean greater equality, family rights and work/life balance. It is a welcome first move towards a more care focused economy."

Unions that promoted a 'New Deal for Workers', which was the political impetus for the 2025 Employment Rights Act are looking forward to a second Employment Rights Bill which will go further. This could include strengthening and extending comprehensive collective bargaining in important sectors of the economy and create a legal single status of workers to tackle the remaining loopholes that lead to persisting job insecurity.[15]

14. https://acas.org.uk/employment-rights-act-2025

15. https://labourunions.org.uk/about/newdeal/

After decades of ideological attacks on the principle of collective organisation at work, including a lauding of purely individual economic success as necessary for social status, there appears to be a sea change in attitudes amongst the public. Recent social attitude surveys in Britain have shown a growing level of support for Trades Unions, unprecedented since the 1970's. Younger workers consistently rate issues of work/life balance, equalities, wellbeing, and opportunities for training highly. These are all things that Unions promote in the workplace and work positively with good employers to achieve.

The increased presence of women in the workforce (double in a generation) has changed many expectations of work and social protections. On the agenda of many younger workers are demands for shorter working time, time off for caring responsibilities and childcare support, work/life balance, flexible working rights, and equality in the workplace. An increasingly diverse workforce in the UK has led to an expanded conception of fairness at work. This fairness ranges from the unacceptability of sexual harassment, the urgent need to tackle racism at work, a greater respect for lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT+) workers and a recognition of improvements in reasonable adjustments that give people with disabilities access to work.

TOWARDS A MORE MORAL ECONOMY OF WORK

Now that the neo liberal economic theories promoting deregulated labour markets are questioned there is a growing consensus that we are at a crossroads. Either we change direction and integrate matters of social and environmental sustainability into our models of economic growth or forces will take us down the authoritarian populist route of continuing labour exploitation, social division, and environmental destruction.

The rebalancing of the economy towards workers' rights in the Employment Rights Act allows for the alternative possibility of a much more socially and environmentally sustainable labour market. Improved rights at work and the subsequent rise in standards of employment means better quality services and a healthier workforce. These are gains for everyone. A fairer distribution of the benefits of economic growth means a turn towards an economic model that recognises good work as essential for collective prosperity. Decent pay, skills training, more career pathways, including proper apprenticeships, and other improvements are in the interests of all.

A fairer and more inclusive economic model would allow for companies in essential sectors to plan for long term investment. Remits and protocols on regulation can take account of the social and environmental effects of the development of critical infrastructure and the essential services including energy and water to transport and broadband. This can create decent paid secure jobs spread across all regions of the UK. Secure jobs and decent work can help prepare for the challenges of the future including climate change and a just transition to a greener economy.

Greater job security can also contribute towards improving our democracy. The experience of work intensification in modern workplaces means people's ability to contribute to their communities and civil society in the way they could in the past has been curtailed. Time and energy for community involvement and collective activities as well as leisure time for family and communal life is hard to find in many working households. Working class representation in civic life and political activity has been made more difficult. More rights at work, decent pay and job security across the workforce allows every person a chance to contribute to a healthy democratic culture.

Any commitment to developing a fairer economic model raises questions about the regulation and ownership of the utilities upon which all businesses in the country's economy rely. When regulation fails, as it has in the UK water industry, it begs the question of whether it is possible to have effective democratic accountability without some form of public ownership. Workers in these key industries deserve job security,

access to training and decent pay to deliver good services to the customer. But the remit given to the regulators of these services prioritise price competition rather than quality of service or a stable and well-trained workforce. If the ownership or regulation of key utilities is not subject to stricter criteria then vital sectors of the economy are prey to private equality, hedge funds, and asset stripping companies with no obligation to the workforce, delivery to the customer or the wider economic and social health of the country.

There is an international dimension to rebalancing the labour market. A fairer future in the UK world of work is connected to higher standards of labour rights worldwide, including cutting exploitation in global supply chains by multinational companies. Supporting international labour rights and cracking down on tax avoiding employers is essential for the UK's economic sustainability and for that of the world. In the expanding and highly productive sectors of the global economy such as new tech and AI we have seen exponential increases in profits to the owners but job and pay cuts for employees. The question of the moment is who will gain from the exponential increases in productivity of the fourth industrial revolution – the billionaires or all of us?

A more humane workplace, a more moral economy and social solidarity are shared values between the British labour movement and Catholic Social Teaching. In pursuing these values, we echo the aspiration for a better society based on the universal destination of material goods.

IN-WORK POVERTY AND SOCIAL PROTECTIONS; AGAINST INDIVIDUALISM

Rerum Novarum recognises the need for social protections as well as just labour market regulation for 'the richer class have many ways of shielding themselves, and stand less in need of help from the State; whereas the mass of the poor have no resources of their own to fall back on and must chiefly depend upon the assistance of the State'.

The ideological hegemony of neo liberal economics has had a negative effect on the social policies on welfare and the provision of decent public services of successive Governments. In addition to lower pay and greater insecurity at work, the poorest working people have lost out from the reductions in social protection. We have a mean, cruel and punitive benefits system that fails to deliver proper social security for those in need.

"The question of the moment is who will gain from the exponential increases in productivity of the fourth industrial revolution – the billionaires or all of us?"

There have been significant increases in in-work poverty and child poverty in the last fifteen years. Though we are the sixth largest economy in the world we fail to protect eight million working people and their families from poverty. Records from 2024 showed the proportion of children in poverty living in a household with someone in work increased from 58 per cent to 71% from 2010 to 2023. Now over half of those in relative poverty are from working households. There are seven million children living in working households with low income. The majority experience of poorer people in the UK is that work cannot keep them or their family from poverty. The previous accepted wisdom that work pays is untrue.

The decision of the Labour Government in 2025 to reverse the two-child benefit cap that had been in place since 2017 is a promising development. This, if accompanied by other improvements in workers' rights alongside proper funding of public services, has the potential to tackle the scourge of in-work poverty which leads to the injustice of child poverty.

The introduction of austerity policies by the Conservative and Liberal Democrat Coalition Government in 2010 led to comprehensive cuts to local public services with disproportionate effects in different

areas of the country. Local authorities in predominantly working-class areas were subject to a 50% reduction in central Government funding. The experience that your work environment is getting harsher, and your local community is getting poorer is a double alienation for those in working-class communities.

The macro-economic neoliberal policies that have hit wage earners harder than capital owners over the past decades did not just have an effect within the labour market but also in the level of political support for progressive social policies on welfare and the provision of decent public services. So, as well as lower pay, fewer in-work benefits and greater insecurity at work, all working people have lost out from the reductions in social protection whether for the 'in-work' poverty that results from low wage economy, or protection from redundancy and unemployment or access to social care. Effective mechanisms against in-work poverty and practical support for those most in need is essential for a civilised society. We need social solidarity between those in work and those out of work. We need dignity and respect at work, *and* dignity and respect when circumstances force us out of work.

Universal Basic Income (UBI) is proposed as an alternative modern form of social protection, but it is unclear this would be the answer in advanced capitalist countries where there are developed welfare systems such as the UK. Most trials in Britain have been small scale and targeted at particular groups. There is a paucity of evidence as to the effect a full UBI would have on economic and social equality if it applied to the whole of the working age population.

UBI has a mixed political heritage, championed in the past by right wing figures including most notably Milton Friedman and Richard Nixon. They saw it as an opportunity to dismantle the State institutions that administer social security. The danger is that if a UBI is not set at a high enough level to cover people's real-life needs, especially housing costs and supported care for those who are vulnerable, it becomes an excuse for minimalist welfare provision.

A more effective way to deal with in-work poverty could be to raise the minimum wage significantly and subsidise social and affordable housing. This, along with properly funded provision of childcare and childcare support and social care for dependent vulnerable adults and older relatives, would do more to tackle the effects of poverty and improve quality of life in working class communities. It is a UBS (Universal Basic Services) approach instead of UBI. The advantage of such a UBS approach is that it is collective, i.e. we all agree to support the services necessary to help those in need in our society. It makes clear that it is collective responsibility that frames individual entitlement.

The warnings from 'post capitalists' that we are heading for a workless future often underpin the case for UBI but these fears are unproven. Indeed, it has been a perennial claim made whenever there is a change of technological paradigm that work will disappear. But the lessons of the past 135 years are that modern technologies bring changes to the nature and structure rather than the quantity of employment.

The eroding of a national tax base because of widespread tax avoidance and evasion, including by the biggest new tech conglomerates and platform companies, undermines Government's ability to provide a safety net for those in poverty. It is important that the profits from economic development in the fourth industrial revolution are invested in the UK to improve the lives of all rather than leading to even greater wealth accumulation for those who already have billions.

In his study of current trends, the economist Thomas Piketty warned of the effects of runaway wealth accumulation on economic growth and social cohesiveness. He pointed out that current wealth concentration is as bad as it was in the monopolistic phase of the first industrial revolution, and, if unchecked, will soon go way beyond this. To halt the slide to even grosser inequality it is necessary to introduce taxes on wealth.[16] I The global financial

16. Thomas Piketty, Capital in the Twenty-First Century, 2014 Harvard University Press

crisis of 2007-8 exposed the irrationality, out of control wealth accumulation, and other absurdities of market-based economics and financialisation. Since then, there has been a shift in the political-economic consensus, with more room to talk about the need for moral values to rein in the market system, as well as discussion on the purpose and ends of economics. There is a necessary questioning about our priorities for future economic growth, not least in the level of investment in green energy and other technologies that respond to climate change challenges and the future of our planet.

We are living in the time of the most socialised and interconnected system of economic production the world has ever seen - capitalism. But we still see these social relations through an individual lens. There is of course a reason for this ideological dissonance. For those with power and privilege promote individualism and competition as central to our economy. They want people to believe they have 'won' their wealth in a 'fair competition' so they are fully entitled to it. But there is no evidence that existing wealth distribution is based either on merit or success.

And there is a price paid for the promotion of these ideologies of individualism and competition. As Tony Annett has pointed out, if we accept there is a moral imperative to compete against each other we create a society of low self-esteem for those who fail, and status anxiety for those who succeed. Competition may be appropriate for the sports field or athletics track but not as a rule for our economy or working lives.

The powerful and privileged do not need cooperation and collectivism to achieve financial security. They have it already. Ordinary working people do not have this security, which is why we rely on collective strength at work and the collective provision of social protections.

CONCLUSION

Conditions at work matter for our security and individual prosperity. But conditions at work and our rights at work are part of prosperity in a wider sense. This wider prosperity is living in a society which allows for the full flourishing of our humanity: with priorities including access to health care, being kept safe, the rights to education and learning, access to arts and culture, economic and social sustainable communities to live in, and to healthy democracy and accountable politics.

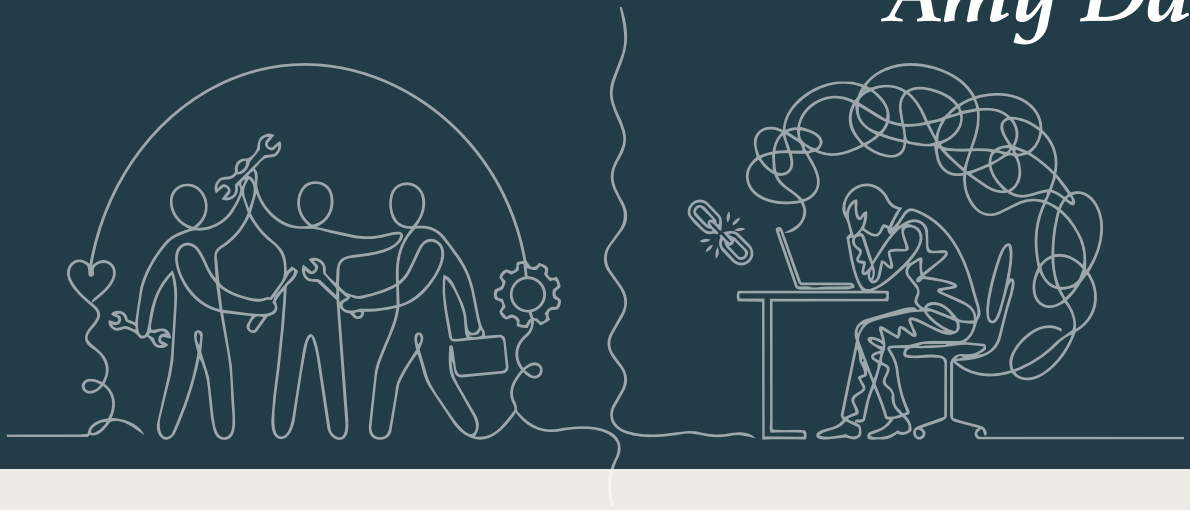
Papal Social Encyclicals from *Rerum Novarum* onwards have considered the positive role of the collective organisations of workers, the Trade Unions, to contribute to this wider sense of prosperity by supporting the right of all to decent and dignified work. Whether we are treated fairly and valued at work, how we fit our life around work, and how we are dealt with when we leave the workplace due to age or illness, or because of structural change, affects the wider health of our democracy. When these are overwhelming negative experiences it stretches the sinews of social solidarity.

The inequality and poverty that has resulted from the rise of economic neoliberalism fuels a dangerous disaffection with politics. Experiences of indignity at work can lead to profound alienation. The experience of disempowerment at work and in wider society can lead to a distrust of democracy itself. A rebalancing shift of power in the workplace is then to be welcomed. The alternative is an acceptance of a plutocracy where economic might is right.

For democracy to be successful everyone must have a stake in society. Improving life at work is key to developing greater social solidarity and rebuilding respect and dignity in working class communities. We need proper jobs in decent workplaces, with secure homes and social security. This is the antidote to the pull towards the reactionary nationalist populism that promotes division and undermines our collective human dignity.

The meaning and meaningfulness of work

Amy Daughton



Catholic Social Teaching speaks in a hopeful register. It tells an idealised story about work, and shows us what work could be. This is a story that has had to be retold across generations as a response to concrete injustices suffered by workers. We are in such a moment: other papers in this collection tell another story, one of exploitation, commodification, even enslavement, harming how people live their lives, and warping how we might be able to live our lives together.

In this paper I intend to tell CST's story of work in a renewed way, taking work as an integral feature of how to live well and how we form and nourish community and wider society. I want to show how CST's ideas about work are resonant with international and national commitments already made to protect workers' rights, to recognise the social responsibility of organisations, and to value the role of public dialogue, negotiation and regulation in safeguarding both.

To do that I want to discuss the meaningfulness of work, as workers experience it, and point toward the fundamental meaning of work itself. Where 'decent work' has become the reference point for shaping international development goals, CST makes a critical contribution by considering what work itself means. It represents an approach that insists on the moral and political implications of our collective choices about work, and highlights the risks and opportunities of the present moment, in their full economic and socio-political reality.

As we shall see, CST's consideration of work includes waged and unwaged work, and both what Hannah Arendt would call cyclical labour that meets our biological needs and work that produces something. One of Arendt's concerns was with the blurring of these categories and the effects this would have on our capacity to truly work, and further, to act in a genuinely public way in the world. CST is concerned with both work and labour in service of humanity's shared public vocation. While we will need to reckon with the handling of gender in CST, it does take traditionally gendered forms of work seriously. It reads cyclical labour as social in forming the household and caring relationships as the pre-political foundation of public life, and, in one of the major publications of Francis's papacy, *Laudato Si'*

Caroline Walker, *Pre-Snack Play*, 2025. Oil on linen, 180 × 134.9 cm. © Caroline Walker. Courtesy the Artist; GRIMM, Amsterdam/New York/London; Ingleby Gallery, Edinburgh; and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London and New York. Photo: Peter Mallet.

Caroline Walker's Pre-Snack Play depicts a nursery worker crouched among children in a scene of ordinary, attentive care. The painting makes visible the relational labour involved in childcare: supervision, education, emotional presence, safety, play, and routine. For a discussion of Catholic Social Teaching, care work, and the future of work, it gives visual force to the claim that caring is not marginal to the economy but one of the forms of labour by which society is sustained.

(LS)[17] has continually expanded its concern with work to encompass all forms of 'modification of existing reality, from producing a social report to the design of a technological development' (LS, 125). It assesses work in terms of the vocation of becoming more fully human. Consequently 'work' is any activity that can be recognised as work in the light of that shared vocation.

Indeed, how we recognise work is itself part of the point: the meaning of work is in the worker, as its proper subject. This begins to suggest that certain forms of so-called work cease to genuinely be work because the relationship with our self and with 'what is other than ourselves' is being distorted – whether that is recognition of the self, other people, our principles or so on. Before we fully reconstruct these ideas and their implications, let us set them within the international frameworks of decent work and social research on meaningful work.

CONTEMPORARY FRAMEWORKS FOR IDENTIFYING AND ENABLING DECENT WORK

In discussions of the expansion of employment, workers' rights, and opportunities, public policy discourse has settled around the language of decent work. Significant international examples can be seen in the wording of the Sustainable Development Goals, where goal 8 aims to 'Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all.' Targets tracking progress toward that goal consider economic diversification, innovation and concrete matters of slavery, forced labour and youth unemployment. Target 8.5 continues the language of 'decent' work by aiming at achieving 'full and productive employment and decent work for all women and men, including for young people and persons with disabilities, and equal pay for work of equal value.' This language echoes earlier international frameworks, where the 1999 International Labour Conference Report framed the focus on 'Opportunities for women and men to obtain decent and productive work in conditions of freedom, equity, security and human dignity.'

Such frameworks have long made plain what is valued in understanding 'decent' work – expanding and equalising opportunity and recognition, assuring dignified conditions in the workplace, and rejecting harmful employment scenarios from slavery to precarity. To this we should add the increasing attention to worker participation in social dialogue, which suggests strengthening the social institutions for worker-employee negotiating, information sharing and collective bargaining. That can be seen most clearly in the mutually reinforcing pillars of the ILO: guaranteeing rights at work; job creation and opportunities; social protection; and promoting social dialogue, with gender as a cross-cutting theme.

Such emphases reflect a recognition of the equal dignity of workers, which concrete working conditions

17. Francis, (2015). *Laudato Si'. On Care for Our Common Home*, Vatican.

should reflect. We see also the agency of the worker who can associate with others, and develop dialogue. Lastly we see economic growth set hand in hand with the strengthening of workers' rights and opportunities: the goal is the betterment of those in jobs, and the wider economic health of the community.

WHAT IS MISSING AND WHY DOES IT MATTER?

The traditions of Catholic Social Teaching already powerfully reflect these concerns, as we shall see, but nevertheless, these international structures miss giving a full account both of the worker and the nature of work. The CST account can offer a foundation for a more detailed and responsive assessment of the risks and opportunities of the world of work and labour, as it faces radical upheaval around AI, automation, hostility toward free movement, and more. To more fully consider what work is 'decent and productive' requires us to attend to the meaningfulness of work.

Increasingly social research has revealed how workers' experiences of their work as meaningful can measurably impact wellbeing, motivation, and engagement.[18] In turn this leads to economic and social consequences such as worker performance, and creativity.[19] Conversely, a lack of meaning can be linked with alienation from work altogether. This cluster of insights makes clear that considering meaning is no naïve philosophical concern, but embedded in the pragmatics of an organisation's health.

International frameworks aimed at improving work as a social and economic phenomenon do not address meaning as a distinct target, though it remains implicit in the language of work that is 'decent'. One might suppose that this is owing to the challenge of measuring meaning. In fact, significant research, largely from organisational psychology, has developed a range of measures for meaningfulness in work including the Comprehensive Meaningful Work Scale.[20] Measures like this build on earlier work from the 1970s, demonstrating how long the meaningfulness of work has been of concern in organisational development.

To use the CMSW as an illustrative example, that measure considers service to others, unity with others, the development of the inner self and expressing one's full potential. It also introduces two dynamics within which meaning-making seeks a balance: being and doing, and self and others, as well as the context of both inspiration and reality as aspects of the 'search for meaning'. What this study also valuably suggests is that workers experience and understand meaning through balancing these dimensions and forming them into a coherent account of meaning in context. It may be meaningful working for a socially responsible organisation, but this means less and less if that social responsibility is merely lip-service.

Approaches that take up alienation from work as their starting point show the timeliness of these observations. Gig economy, AI, automation, and broader patterns of technological innovation are urgent sites for mapping workers' understandings of meaning and meaninglessness in contexts of precarity and poor recognition of their work. Entangled with meaninglessness as a factor in alienation from work are powerlessness, normlessness, and estrangement from self, others and wider culture. We may even

18. For example: De Neve, J.-E., & Ward, G. (2023). *Measuring workplace wellbeing*. Wellbeing Research Centre; Ferraro, T., Moreira, J. M., dos Santos, N. R., Pais, L., & Sedmak, C. (2018). Decent work, work motivation and psychological capital: An empirical research. *WORK: A Journal of Prevention, Assessment & Rehabilitation*, 60(2), 339-354.

19. For example, Cohen-Meitar, R., Carmeli, A., & Waldman, D. A. (2009). Linking Meaningfulness in the Workplace to Employee Creativity: The Intervening Role of Organizational Identification and Positive Psychological Experiences. *Creativity Research Journal*, 21(4), 361–375.

20. Lips-Wiersma, M., & Wright, S. (2012). Measuring the Meaning of Meaningful Work: Development and Validation of the Comprehensive Meaningful Work Scale (CMWS). *Group & Organization Management*, 37(5), 655-685.

be reminded of the provocative investigation by David Graeber which described the experience of working in apparently pointless (or bullshit) jobs as a form of 'spiritual violence'.[21] Although such research concentrates on workplaces, we might see important resonances with the UK's political landscape today.

> *"Work is integral to living lives we have reason to value."*

The picture painted is of meaning-making in work as an existential concern, entangled with a range of dimensions and dynamics and facing serious risks. The concerns of meaning and meaningfulness are no mere luxury of the privileged, but are connected with features of contemporary society from productivity to cultural estrangement. Work is integral to living lives we have reason to value.[22] When we consider the meaningfulness of work to the worker, we are concerned with wellbeing in the very largest sense, where the meaning of work is part of the wider social endeavour of choosing to live together. The meaning and meaningfulness of work are foundational to economic development, and social and political participation. CST offers a framework to think about the future of work in this fully human and political sense.

CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING ON THE MEANING OF WORK

As other papers in this collection have already introduced, the Catholic Social Tradition emerged in its modern form from a text particularly focused on the social question of work. *Rerum Novarum* (RN) was responsive to radical shifts in working patterns, technologies, relationships and institutions. It is a document that argues for urgent attention to the consequences of those cultural and industrial shifts by resolving ongoing injustices around fair wages, overwork and improper work, freedom of association. It takes as read that work is necessary and can be toilsome, but should also be a tool for the individual and her family to better their lot in life, where work itself can transform the world and warns that the principle of ownership arising from one's labour needs to be protected. It considers the role and the limits of the State, the Church, owners and employees in all these concerns.

The philosophy of RN often stays implicit, but as well as initiating the development of the wider tradition of CST, it is the first in a series of work-focused documents. Three play a particularly significant role in making sense of the meaning of work: *Quadregesimo Anno* (QA), *Laborem Exercens* (LE), and *Centesimus Annus* (CA).[23] QA is named for the fortieth anniversary of RN and CA the hundredth. LE understandably just missed the exact date of the ninetieth anniversary by four months following the attempted assassination of John Paul II earlier that year. Evidently, Catholic Social Teaching loves an anniversary. While not surprising from an institution of cycles and feasts, this makes visible that each document is deliberately set in conversation with the texts that came before. Benedict XVI would call this a 'hermeneutics of continuity', but this is a term that can sometimes obscure the innovation and development as each text faces a new historical reality. In this sense CST is a discursive tradition, ready to speak to present circumstances.

What I present here is a way of attending to the

21. Graeber, D., (2018). *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory*. Penguin. On alienation see Conway, E., Monks, K., Fu, N., Alfes, K., & Bailey, K. (2020). Reimagining alienation within a relational framework: evidence from the public sector in Ireland and the UK. The International Journal of Human Resource Management, 31(21), 2673–2694

22. Sen, A., (1999). *Development as Freedom*. Oxford University Press.

23. Pius XI, (1931). *Quadragesimo Anno. On Reconstruction of the Social Order*; John Paul II (1981). *Laborem Exercens. On Human Work*; John Paul II (1991). *Centesimus Annus*. Vatican.

philosophy of this thread of texts, and seeks to draw out the ways they speak to work in our present moment. That approach also remains substantively grounded in the experiences of work we all share.

WORK IS INTEGRAL TO, EVEN CONSTITUTIVE OF, THE HUMAN PERSON

As a category, 'work' carries some ambiguity. In one reading it is entangled with humanity's loss of innocence in the Genesis myth which suggests that work became harder when we left the paradisical garden. The toilsomeness of work and its connection with morality plays into other philosophical traditions where work takes on a penitential role, shifting into a redemptive, even salvific register: working harder and harder becomes virtuous itself, and the product of work becomes a measure of that virtue. Such an approach inflects the post-Weberian 'protestant work ethic' for example, and perhaps can be seen in the 9-9-6 phenomenon currently being lauded by (some, mostly) tech workers. This is a 9am to 9pm, six days a week, working rhythm, and often comes with a series of other life rules. That attitude can be seen in recent reports from fields where AI agents are increasingly in use, with workers becoming consumed with their relative productivity, seeking to set AI assignments that can run while they sleep.

> *"Work is 'for man' and not man 'for work'."*

Yet the mythic origins of work also reveal the other side of the coin, which is that work itself was original to paradise. The story suggests work gets harder outside Eden, but the vision of the garden evokes delight in work, organisation, purposeful action. Work is good, good for us, if understood in a proper way, and something that most people want to do (RN 38). This is the trajectory that Catholic Social Teaching travels.

Humanity 'is born to labor as the bird to fly' (QA 61). Work, like the flight of birds, has to be learned, and becomes how we move through the world. It is a necessity for earning one's daily bread, and beyond that is part of how we fully cultivate ourselves, develop our abilities, and find happiness (QA 118). While work may involve toil it is not solely to be experienced as a penal sentence, but part of our self-development. This emphasis is retained through the later expressions of Catholic thought. In the 1960s the Second Vatican Council could suggest that through work, each person develops themselves as well as the world around them. Work is integral to the fulfilment of what it means to be human.

This has consequences for how work and humanity are each understood. If work is integral to human fulfilment, this means that 'work is "for man" and not man "for work".' (LE 6). This might take us aback, as we consider vocations that serve others, like care work or teaching, and we've become used to thinking in terms of service users, or customers. CST represents a radical reframing where the worker is the subject of work. Work matters in the first place because it is people who are doing it. Even CST's emphasis on property and ownership reflects the way the human person is prized as the site of initiative and decision. To have property allows for the 'power of disposal' (RN 4); so work is not for the necessities themselves, but for the worker with needs, desires and hopes. The worker is 'a conscious and free subject, that is to say a subject that decides about himself' (LE 6, emphasis mine).

Characterising the worker in these reflexive terms has congruence with a range of investigations into the meaningfulness of work, which demonstrate that the theological anthropology of CST reflects everyday human experience. First, investigations into alienation in work frequently cite limited autonomy, even self-estrangement, as a factor.[24] Second, voluntarist framings of work argue that the meaningfulness of work is located not in the experience or the features of

24. For a UK example see Shantz, A., Alfes, K., Bailey, C., & Soane, E. (2015). Drivers and Outcomes of Work Alienation: Reviving a Concept: Reviving a Concept. *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 24(4), 382-393.

the job, but in the fact that it is me doing it – I am not a cog, but an individual with particular gifts that I am choosing to commit to this task.[25] Thirdly and finally, in the meaningfulness of work as conceptualised in the CMWS, two of the dimensions are self-oriented: 'developing the inner self' and 'personal development'. Meaning-making is addressed through a constant dynamic between self and other. I am working for myself.

Pragmatically, it is therefore worth recalling the impact of meaningfulness on a range of factors – engagement, productivity, creativity – which represent straightforward consequences for any organisation failing to take seriously the significance meaningfulness may have for their bottom line. Yet workers' wellbeing goes well beyond these concerns:

> *'As a person he works, he performs various actions belonging to the work process... these actions must all serve to realize his humanity, to fulfil the calling to be a person that is his by reason of his very humanity.'* (LE 6).

One's vocation is not about a career in this conception, but about being and fully becoming a person. This suggests that work is not only necessary and integral to personal self-development but constitutive of it. In an unusual formulation, LE opens with the suggestion that each person's 'life is built up every day from work; from work it derives its specific dignity' (1). This is unusual as frequently CST formulations take human dignity as the foundational starting point for rights and duties. Here work is constitutive in making sense of what it means to be human with dignity and becoming fully ourselves.

These claims come with a range of concrete and ethical consequences. It is no surprise that CST consistently identifies and rejects injustices of the labour market at each historical moment: unfair wages or contracts, improper work and over-work, the limiting of union activity. The root of such injustices is in treating workers not as subjects but objects: 'as though they were things in the pursuit of gain' (RN 20).

The diagnosis of unfair working conditions rests not only in a metric, but in an assessment of exploitation and commodification of people. By contrast, decent work is integral to the development, expression and recognition of human dignity.

WORK TAKES US OUTSIDE OF OUR SELVES

So far the self has been centred in understanding the meaning and meaningfulness of work. The argument builds from here to suggest that work constitutes the self because it takes us outside ourselves; that it is through relating to others that we can fully become ourselves.

This claim brings out in sharp relief how strongly relational the CST approach is to understanding the human person. Examples of the CST tradition that focus on self-development immediately place this in relation to others: 'He learns much, he cultivates his resources, he goes outside of himself and beyond himself' (GS 35). Throughout CST discourse the self is situated as free yet inter-dependent, where on a concrete level we cannot do everything for ourselves and rely on each other. Rather than hyper-individualist approaches to meaning-making, the self is made sense of within networks of relationship and institutions. We come to understand ourselves in and through that web.

In RN these relationships are read through agrarian legacies, despite the positioning of RN as a response to industrialisation. What is owed between persons here carried a feudal quality, from when employment relationships were anchored in shared concerns for cultivating the land. In the twenty-first century, CST has developed to reflect patterns of work as we undertake it today and so capital, technology, service provision and so on all become mediators of working relationships, and are themselves produced through work. Work necessarily requires us to engage with others in that context of interdependence, both in

25. Mortimer, S. (2023). What makes work meaningful? *Journal of Business Ethics*, 185(4), 835–845.

specific encounters, and through social institutions. This is not just about service industries: all work makes visible the interdependence of human persons, and our shared relationships with the world around us. 'Underlying every form of work is a concept of the relationship which we can and must have with what is other than ourselves.' (LS 125). LE insists that that principle is solidarity, shifting out of the feudal mode of earlier CST as today we consider the inclusivity of work-from-home, or migrants' access to work as integral to integration. Work is a collaborative activity in which new forms of solidarity need to be continually worked out and tested.

Here the resonance with mapping people's experience of meaningful work persists. Another dimension of the CMWS is 'service to others' but all of the dimensions of meaning are navigated by balancing the dynamic of the needs of self and others. Interestingly the authors note that meaning has to be re-articulated, and that having to narrate meaning is itself part of how meaning is formed and understood. The empirical insights here also suggest that the relationship between self and others needs to be continually re-understood and perhaps renewed. It reflects the suggestion that beneath any given piece of work is a fundamental principle of relating beyond the self.

Concern for the ethical conditions of work is consequently sharpened. Solidarity has long been the driver of CST responses on work, focused on the combination of rights and duties across employees and employers and in particular owners. Any future of work must consider the mutuality of duties between employer and employee, while also insisting that need and slender means must be prioritised, even treated as sacred (RN 20). Both vulnerability and power need are moral demands on solidarity, and policy demands on the State. Collective associations are crucial entities shaping these policy and relational exchanges.

Yet at the same time, it is becoming evident through this section that the suggestion of an underlying perspective that looks outward from the self is not only to do with others. It is to do with what work itself

Caroline Walker, *Sticker Dolly Dressing*, 2024. Oil on linen, 255 × 180 cm. © Caroline Walker. Courtesy the artist; Stephen Friedman Gallery, London and New York; GRIMM, Amsterdam / New York / London; and Ingleby Gallery, Edinburgh. Photo: Peter Mallet.

Caroline Walker's Sticker Dolly Dressing places care, play, domestic labour, and family intimacy inside a richly observed kitchen scene. For a discussion of care work and the future of work, the painting makes visible forms of labour that are often hidden or feminised: teaching, tending, cleaning, feeding, supervising, and sustaining the conditions in which ordinary life can flourish.

means, in the context of the political community, and the values and norms that are embodied in that work. By taking work as a site that can generate solidarity and mediates social relationships, CST resists the technological erosion of our recognition of each other's value, and the calcification of our social bonds into a closed and hostile society.

WORK IS THE ENGAGEMENT OF INDIVIDUALS IN THE SHARED ENDEAVOUR OF CIVILIZATION

When *Rerum Novarum* was written it asked the question of what to do 'when a society is perishing' (27)? This was not a condemnation of industry, or capital, nor the developing patterns of urbanisation

themselves. Rather, society was under threat through the failure of the underlying relationships, made manifest in exploitation and the undermining of workers' wages, freedoms, and flourishing. Exploitative labour, forced labour, commodification, objectification – these are all forms of so-called work that reveal an impoverished and distorted conception of how humans should relate to each other and the world.

CST's alternative vision is where work is understood as 'the mark of a person operating within a community of persons' (LE Blessing). Work itself is a way for the person to be admitted 'to the life of the community' (LE 22). This is an illustration of CST's insistence on rejecting forms of dependency, instead seeking to support and transform need through forms of welfare that enable participation in the life of the community. All parts of the community play roles in this, from the State through other intermediating organisations like unions, guilds, associations, familial, religious and cultural institutions. There is a mirroring, even here, of the meaningfulness experienced in work of 'unity with others,' the final dimension of the CMWS.

The relationship between self, others and institutions is a mutual one, and so, in turn, society is created in and through work. Work can benefit wider society too, where it contributes to the common good. RN would characterise working as a kind of gift we offer to each other (22), in sharing talents that enrich the whole political community. LE redeveloped this all the more strongly, calling society the 'great historical and social incarnation of the work of all generations' (10), both in terms of the nation but also the wider, shared world.

Work when fully understood and practically enabled has the potential to transform the world materially and relationally. The worker 'leaves his imprint', as Paul VI put it[26]; we are always creators. Sometimes this is obvious where the worker is building, cultivating, analysing, reporting. It is true also in labour that doesn't 'produce' something but enables other people – such as care work which supports another's capacity, teaching that changes someone's approach to the world, or the work of regulation and scrutiny that supports justice and confronts exploitations. The material transformation of the world is always entangled with the kinds of communities our work builds, and vice versa.

In his (newly relevant) reflections on the economy in Caritas in Veritate (CV)[27] Benedict XVI points toward the danger of both bad contractual arrangements, and an economy that relies only on contractual arrangements. Bad working conditions, or poor regulation, undermine 'the freedom and creativity of the person and his family and social relationships, causing great psychological and spiritual suffering' (CV 25) It is economically short-sighted, as the engagement with empirical research through this paper has emphasised, where the worker alienated from their work, from themselves and their communities, will do poorer work. 'Human costs always include economic costs, and economic dysfunctions always involve human costs' (CV 32).

Moreover, when the only kind of working exchange that is valued is the transactional, we also miss the possibility of gratuitousness: the gift economy that is enacted profoundly in work. Work involves the gift of self, participating in the building up of solidarity and the community. Work within the family, in the many forms of solidarity in and outside workplaces, in the participative structures of democracy, and a generous spirit in public discourse that can shape our politics and our markets.

Leisure plays a role here too. Following the philosopher Josef Pieper, rest is not just stoppage and recovery, but the opportunity for contemplation of what is ultimately most meaningful. This too is the foundation of what work itself may be for. RN calls this 'hallowed' when experienced as religious, but there is a broader public idea here of the ultimate importance

26. Paul VI, (1967). *Populorum Progressio. On The Development of Peoples*. Vatican.

27. Benedict XVI, (2009). *Caritas in Veritate. On Integral Human Development.* Vatican.

Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Touch Sanitation*, 1979–80. Performance with New York City Department of Sanitation workers. © Mierle Laderman Ukeles. Courtesy the artist and Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York.

Mierle Laderman Ukeles's Touch Sanitation reframed sanitation work as essential civic maintenance rather than invisible drudgery. By thanking thousands of New York sanitation workers for "keeping New York City alive," the project gives powerful visual form to the dignity of care, cleaning, upkeep, and maintenance labour — the forms of work that sustain public life but are often undervalued or ignored.

of work, as part of looking outside oneself. How does work enable us to live lives we each have reason to value, and how does that enable our collective life together?

'A society is alienated if its forms of social organization, production and consumption make it more difficult to offer this gift of self and to establish this solidarity between people' (CA 41). All forms of work that erode that sociality, or working conditions that fail to recognise the dignity of the worker as subject and giver, harm the potential fullness of our shared life. Impoverished visions of work go hand in hand with impoverished visions of society.

Articulated more fully in *Fratelli Tutti*[28] are the steps from self to other to community:

'In a genuinely developed society, work is an essential dimension of social life, for it is not only a means of earning one's daily bread, but also of personal growth, the building of healthy relationships, self-expression and the exchange of gifts. Work gives us a sense of shared responsibility for the development of the world, and ultimately, for our life as a people.' (162).

28. Francis, (2020). *Fratelli Tutti. On Fraternity and Social Friendship.* Vatican.

A distinctive thread in Francis's writings was an emphasis on 'the people' as an idea. 'The people' is not a fixed concept nor an (a)historical ideal to be restored. Rather it is a reality that requires continual renewal.

That 'the people' is not static is crucial for the critical reception of CST's insights into the plural, political life of the UK. I would argue that work is itself a place in which fundamentally different value systems meet and are worked through; it is not to be treated as a locus of the miraculous resolution of differences. There are competing economies of worth even within a given organisation, let alone the UK as a whole; how we navigate those collectively is itself a demonstration of discursive recognition of each other.

Nevertheless, who gets to work, what that work is, how it is valued, and what kind of life that work enables all carry political significance. Moral norms represent a meeting point of many different world views, as too does resistance to their erosion. Work is part of the renewal of a society because it is a mechanism to enable participation in that society, as a potential site to test solidarity, and collaborative transformation of the world.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS ON CST, WORK AND GENDER

Much of the early CST discussions of work assumed a single, male breadwinner, with the argument on just wages consequently considering how that wage could support a family. Indeed both RN and QA are explicit in arguing that women should not take on certain occupations, and should prioritise their roles in the home. Such a position misses women's work at various levels. Women's work and craft have always played an economic role, women have long taken on formal employment, and women's work within the domestic sphere has been the subject of feminist critique, including wage-based protest, for generations. The cultural restriction of women to household activity has brought with it an undervaluing of paid domestic work translating into the contemporary care industry too, manifesting in exploitative working practices.

By the time we reach LE in the 1980s, the urgency of recognising domestic work is front and centre, challenging the undervaluing of all forms of care work, paid and unpaid. Care and family work is framed as a serious and substantive contribution to the common good that needs recognition and remuneration. Work in the home is of a public character. Moreover, this text insists on the full participation of women in society without discrimination and, albeit largely by implication, the importance of tools such as maternity leave, and other welfare support, to enable that.

The consideration of care work can be taken as a microcosm of the larger analysis of work. Whether care work is currently unpaid or waged it is a gift of self, and has the capacity to enable self-realisation, engagement with others, and the building up of society. It is also especially vulnerable to exploitation. While CA asserted that the forms of exploitation analysed by Marx had disappeared in the west, today's analysis must be clear sighted in naming and confronting exploitation across all work. The discussion of how care work is valued is an urgent one for those waged or unwaged, and those conversations should not be limited to mothers, but all carers.

Nevertheless, it is still women who are cast as the proper figures for work in the domestic sphere in the formal documents of CST. While rooted in the 'genius of women' and attending seriously to injustices and opportunities (John Paul II famously advocated for a 'new feminism'), this is a strand of thinking that needs critical consideration if drawing on CST today. Any development of CST must speak to care and domestic work as part of the profoundly unequal position of women globally. For now we can still take certain important insights from both what is valued and what is missed: that care and domestic work is integral to the flourishing of community; that it should be recognised and supported, including financially, whether through formal wages or other forms of redistribution; that it is a gift to the community in fundamental ways; and that none of this activity should be a barrier to other forms of participation in public life.

WHAT IS THE FUTURE OF WORK?

There is a future of work that can be envisaged, characterised by exploitation, commodification and instrumentalisation of people. It is a future where work colonises all our time, yet access to work and the wider life of the community remains unequal. In such a scenario the meaningfulness of that work is undermined and consequently so too is the wellbeing and prosperity of the political community and its members, estranged even from themselves and wider society. What CST's understanding of work represents is a critique of the underlying logic of inhuman labour, and that logic's manifestations in unjust and meaningless working circumstances.

CST has offered its critique at various points in history as a reaction to examples of that inhuman logic being embodied in real cultural and industrial patterns. We are in such a moment now. As we face changes in the nature of work, and the operation of labour markets in the UK, building the alternative is a shared responsibility. One thing I have aimed to do in this piece is make clear how CST is congruent with what actually matters to people in terms of the meaning of their work, as well as their working conditions. Meaningful work is experienced in terms of self-development and relationship with others, interpersonally and communally, enabling participation in wider political life. When the international frameworks of decent work emphasise equality of opportunity and job creation this is not solely a question of investment for financial growth, but as a way to build lives we have reason to value. The State is a key player here, and so too are organisations, employers, workers, unions and a whole range of mediating cultural and social institutions.

It is also always an ongoing negotiation of many conflicting views. The meaning of work needs to be rearticulated in plural forms of solidarity as part of the task of reimagining our social and political future. CST offers principles against which to test a new future of work: recognising the absolute dignity of the human person, and of solidarity between persons especially in circumstances of vulnerability and need. It sets that against a discursive horizon of seeking the common good of all. It presents that project as necessarily concerned with economic reality and political community. To take up the question of the future of work is to open a conversation on the meaning of our collective life.

RN, and the succeeding documents of CST, inaugurated a concern with work as 'a key, probably the essential key' to the social question of making life more human (LE 3). In doing so it warns against the danger of totalised work, where work is cast as salvific. We see that danger in CST itself, in the language of work as a good hardship (LE). But work is not good because it is toilsome. Rather there is good in the toil where the worker is truly a subject, including the recognition of workers' 'sacred' rights, and when work enables our self-development, relationship with others and directs our attention to the social whole and the common good.

Work is not a panacea for wider social ills, but it is an integral element in a consideration of our political future. The questions that CST asks help to reveal concerns that are perennially important: manifestations of the abuse of power and instances where fundamental political and social relationships are eroded through the character and meaning of work as it is experienced today. The future of work contains risk and possibility for further damage or renewal.

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Globalisation, democracy and workers' rights

Maria Exall

Over 60 years ago *Gaudium et Spes* recognised that our growing global economic and social interdependence created the potential for "a more universal form of human culture, which better promotes and expresses the unity of the human race". The dignity of workers across the world is a matter for us. Workers' struggles in other countries cannot be separated from the struggle for human rights and democracy in those countries and our own.

In response to the dominance of economic orthodoxies of the neoliberal era, post liberal politics has focused on the communal and national as sources of resistance. However, this has been at the expense of a recognition of the importance of universal values in the social and political order and a wider internationalist perspective.

In *Fratelli Tutti* Pope Francis contrasted a closed ethics of competing communal identities to the vision of charity as an openness of love that is "existential rather than geographic". He insisted on universal values as foundational for all cultures, for to be local in a healthy rather than a narcissistic way we must be "sincerely open to the universal" for " a culture without universal values is not truly a culture".

The immediate political challenges of the early 21st century require global co-ordination. Moving forward on peace, the challenges of climate change, to biodiversity and environmental sustainability, and regulation of the financial and the corporate tech giants of the fourth industrial revolution, require international agreements to promote the common good.

"Workers' struggles in other countries cannot be separated from the struggle for human rights and democracy in those countries and our own."

Pope Leo XIV has supported the principles of international humanitarian law in response to the fast-moving political situations throughout the world in 2026. He has highlighted how the rules-based order created after World War 2 has been undermined and with it the foundations of peaceful coexistence.

WORKERS' RIGHTS IN THE NEW ERA OF NEOLIBERALISM

Contemporary economists maintain that we are in a changed era from the high peak of neoliberalism of 1991-2007. After the global financial crash of 2007-8, when States had to rescue financial and banking institutions from collapse, the effectiveness and stability of a deregulated market and financial system has been in question. From the International Monetary Fund and World Bank to progressive academic economists, there is a consensus that the primacy of economic deregulation based on the philosophy of the free market has run its course.

In contrast an outline of a new world order of muti-polar geopolitics is emerging, with overt imperialist ambitions of superpowers including the United States, Russia and China becoming more evident. The United States, some countries in Eastern Europe and some developing economic powerhouses in the global south, have seen the growth of populist authoritarian governments. This new multi-polar order is backed ideologically by civilisational fascisms with political-theological roots such as Modi's Hindu nationalism in India, Putin's use of Russian Orthodoxy to promote Greater Russia, and others with more generic religious connections such as Trump's MAGA.

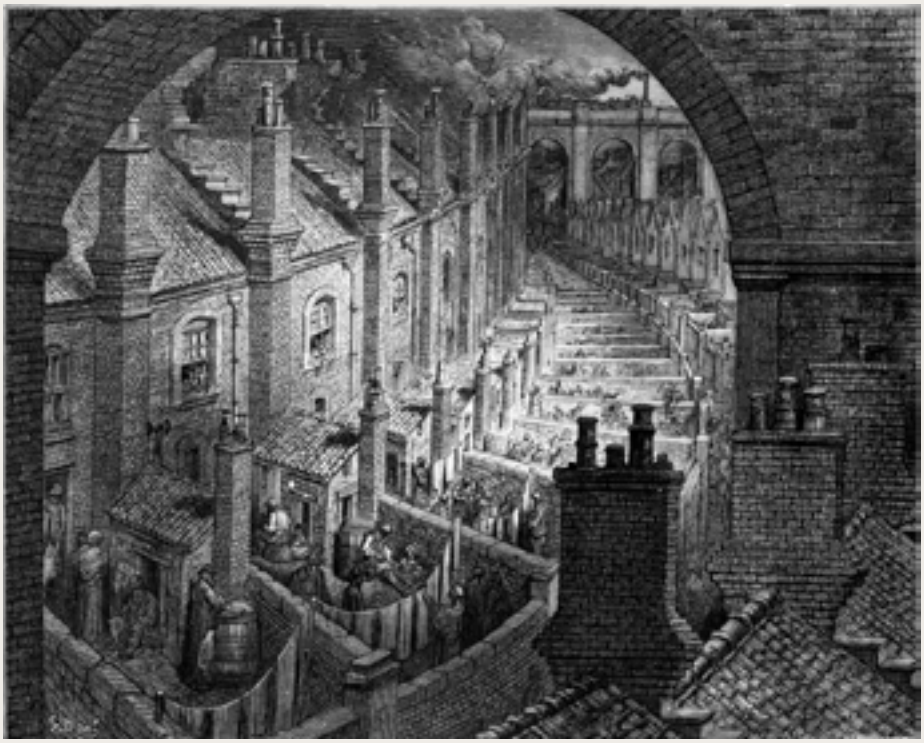
There are post liberal political theologies which welcome the rollback of social and political rights in the new emerging world order.[29] They counterpose these rights to the empowerment of working class communities which have suffered the economic effects of high peak neoliberalism. There is little evidence that this trade-off is credible. The marketised economy that increased economic inequality for working people over the last four decades persists, as do the accompanying attacks on Trade Union and labour rights. There is a dystopian post liberal politics that fits well with the rise of nationalist authoritarian populisms. These populisms are disdainful about universal values in the social and political order and committed to continuing a neoliberal economic agenda.

Donald Trump maintains he is for the 'working man' but he has given the biggest tax break to billionaires in US economic history. Within 6 months of taking office, he took union rights away from a million federal workers and sacked a quarter of a million of them. He has undermined the National Labor Board, is reducing the minimal health and welfare provisions for workers in the US and is ruthlessly deporting migrant workers. National populisms such as MAGA attempt to co-opt the interests of workers to a nationalist agenda, but their approach fits too well with policies of global labour market deregulation which undermine workers' rights.

The struggle for workers' dignity cannot be subsumed to an agenda of xenophobic and divisive thinking. The nativism promoted by the populist right (and some on the populist left) asserts a chauvinist interpretation of working class interests unconnected to the actual views of the diverse workforce of today. This interpretation became an accepted explanation for the shock Brexit vote of 2016 in the UK - but ignored the fact that the majority of the vote for Leave came from higher social classes in southern England.[30] The narrative that Brexit was a revolt of the geographically marginalised 'left behinds' was promoted by sections of the capitalist class. They saw their own interests advanced by leaving the European

29. A couple of examples - in the UK Maurice Glassman *Blue Labour: The Politics of the Common Good* 2022 Polity - in the US Michael Lind *The New Class War: Saving Democracy from the Managerial Elite* 2020 Penguin Random House

30. Analysis by the social geographer Danny Dorling showed that the majority of the Leave vote (59%) came from social classes ABC1, and that 52% was from southern England https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/brexit-inequality-and-the-demographic-divide/ Already existing political allegiances in 2016 were a significant factor in the referendum, with two thirds of Conservative voters supporting Leave and two thirds of Labour voters voting Remain.



Gustave Doré, *Over London — By Rail*, from William Blanchard Jerrold and Gustave Doré, London: A Pilgrimage, 1872. Wood engraving. Public Domain.

Doré's elevated railway view presents industrial London as a vast landscape of smoke, rooftops, railways, crowded housing, and human compression. It is an ideal image for the Factory Acts and Victorian labour reform: the city itself appears as a machine, revealing why religious and social reformers came to see industrial poverty not as private misfortune but as a public moral crisis.

Union and organised accordingly. Their motivation was avoiding European market financial regulation as well as the obligations to meet social and environmental standards that would affect their profitability.

The story of Brexit and the rise of right-wing populism in the UK then is not of a grassroots rejection of neoliberalism in the name of 'the people', or of national sovereignty, or marginalised places and culture. Further it is clear that contemporary Far Right Parties worldwide, from Argentina to the USA and Central and Eastern Europe, are not in fact disruptors of the neoliberal order but cheerleaders for it. They have emerged within neoliberalism not in opposition to it.[31] They accept the globalisation of an international division of labour with cross-border flows of goods and multilateral trade agreements but promote strict controls on migration. They do not support the regulation of the financial sector or policies of job security but instead institute tax cuts and privatisations, i.e. they continue the neoliberal politics of the past four decades which are global.

Digging deeper it appears that changes in the economic order since the financial crash have had little effect so far on the globalisation of the world economy. World financial-market flows continue. The ratio of world imports-plus-exports to world output has stagnated at 60% since 2007-8 (having risen from 20% since the 1950's). There is no trend for exchange controls to be reintroduced, though China continues its policy. The effects of Trump's promised extension of tariffs depends upon the pan-national political-economic deals he will make. In short, world financial and goods and services markets continue to frame national economies. There is no significant reversal of the dominance of marketisation that we have seen since the ending of the post war consensus.

There is recognition of the need for State intervention in the economy following the major bailout of the banks in 2008. States have made strategic acquisitions and used subsidies to encourage key industries despite pursuing marketised policies. Examples of this include the Trump Government acquiring shares in Intel and the Biden Government using subsidies to encourage chip production. The Entrepreneurial State described by Mariana Mazzucato applies across the political spectrum.

The vast profits from globalised and interlinked systems of production distribution and exchange of the past few decades have not been used, in the main, to promote the common good either within the nations

31. Quinn Slobodian *Hayek's Bastards*: *The Neoliberal Roots of the Populist Right* 2025 Allen Lane

where the multinational firms and conglomerates are based or where their profits come from. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union it is estimated that half of the GDP of Russia has found its way to the private offshore accounts of oligarchs and friends of the political leadership.[32] If current trends continue half of all the money in the world will be in the accounts of private lenders, that is in the unregulated and unaccountable shadow banking system. This appropriation will only increase if the digital and AI economy develops without proper regulation and with the support of authoritarian politicians.

Our current era then is not a return to pre global marketisation. It is not even national market liberalism; it is the coexistence of national authoritarianism within world markets. It is unclear that this is in the economic interests of most working people in advanced capitalist countries and it is certainly against the social interests of many, and against the longer term political aspirations of the organised working class.

GLOBALISATION AND INTERNATIONAL HUMAN AND LABOUR RIGHTS

Paid employment in an urban environment is now the most common experience of work in the world. In a globalising world the interests of those of us who live in the First Industrial Nation are now more closely aligned with those of other workers throughout the world then they have ever been. But in the new world political order will this mean greater opportunities for good work and prosperity or greater opportunity for exploitation and inequality?

Greater globalisation of production in recent decades has not led to fairer development of the world economy. The ability to outsource certain labour processes to countries with cheap labour supply may provide much needed employment and investment and reduce some poverty. However, decision making on investment and planning, and much of the higher skilled better paid work is retained in advanced capitalist countries. External investment is accompanied by structural arrangements such as freeports and special economic zones in developing economies with the collusion of their governments and the repression of workers' rights, including collective representation on everything from health and safety to sexual harassment.

The world of work in the UK is intricately connected, now and in the future, to upholding standards of international labour rights and expanding trade union organisation. These standards must apply across all global supply chains. For those of us who work for multinational companies based in the UK offshoring is an immediate threat to jobs. However, the answer is a restructuring of regional economies to support affected areas which is, in the end, dependent on political will. The prioritising of job security and services for local communities affected by changes within the nature of industrial production because of globalisation is perfectly possible – but it requires redistribution of resources and greater economic planning and development.

Internationalism has always mattered to the labour movement in the UK. British trade unionists have a proud history in standing in solidarity with oppressed people worldwide. International Trade Union solidarity builds bridges across very different countries and cultures and holistically develops the principles underlying human rights as well as labour rights. From solidarity with COSATU and the anti-apartheid campaign in South Africa, to supporting the peoples of Latin America and of the Palestinian and Ukrainian people, British trade unionists have stood up for human rights and people's dignity across the world.[33]

British trade unionists support those who suffer for exercising their human and labour rights including the imprisonment of trade union leaders in Belarus and the

32. Catherine Belton *Putin's People: How the KGB Took Back Russia and Then Took on the West* 2020 Harper Collins

33. International Trades Union Congress www.ituc-csi.org/global-rights-index

Hong Kong democracy protestors, as well as against the repression of Chinese Muslim minority Uyghurs, the Christian minority in Manipur, and community and trade union activists in Myanmar.

The British labour movement supports the rights of migrants as well as asylum seekers and refugees. The 272 million people in the world who work outside their country of origin often experience degrading and unsafe conditions and are denied the most basic labour rights. There is an institutionalisation of second-class labour status for migrant workers. This is not new in economic history but the greater flows of labour and capital in our globalising world make it more common. Here in the UK Unions do pro-active work to support the integration of migrant workers in the workplace and local communities. They campaign to counter divisive negative stereotypes that exist in wider society, educating their own members on this and promoting community cohesions and dignity and respect for all.

More migrant workers exist within their country of origin than work outside it, and the industrial scale and egregious exploitation of these 700 million workers is stark. Often this leads to discrimination against minority ethnic communities and indigenous peoples.

"It is up to us how we use this, for economic exploitation or for the development of our collective humanity."

We need to recognise the problems, but also the potential, of the phase of capitalism we are in. The mass development of communications and transport technologies in the late 20th century and now digital, big tech and AI in the 21st century means we have never been more globally inter connected. It is up to us how we use this, for economic exploitation or for the development of our collective humanity.

GLOBAL CHALLENGES OF TECHNOLOGY AND ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

In *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis drew attention to the link between dignified work and a just ecological transition for the planet. Taking into account the interdependence between human work and the natural environment, there is a need to rethink the kinds of work that ought to be promoted for the sake of care for our common home.

'Future of Work: Labour after Laudato Si' project produced a report during the COVID pandemic which was in effect a stress test for workers' rights globally.[34] It showed that in the pandemic, as in other major disasters, it is poorer and marginalised people including migrant workers who suffer most. In the pandemic existing economic inequality was exacerbated by the lack of social protections for more than half of the world's population, and had a disproportionate effect on women workers, often those who worked in the informal economy. In addition, there was major disruption to social enterprises developed to address the needs of poorer workers in developing economies.

At a time of climate crisis, it is necessary to promote a more ecological approach to the environmental challenges of the whole planet. The domestic economies of advanced capitalist countries use an outstandingly disproportionate amount of the world's natural resources. We need more effective pan national agreements on climate change. But stronger legislation will not be democratically supported in our society without a just transition for working people. This means replacing good jobs with good jobs, not a move to no jobs or worse jobs. You cannot win people over and take them with you for a radical programme to deal with our climate emergency without fairness and equity.

34. https://futureofwork-labourafterlaudatosi.net/ This project has been supported by the Vatican's Dicastery for the Promotion of Integral Human Development in collaboration with The International Labour Organisation (ILO)

We need to turn around our current use of the amazing technologies of the fourth industrial revolution. The real contemporary challenge is how to use these technologies in dealing with challenges of climate change and economic inequalities rather than just be cash cows for the super-rich, increasing consumerism and producing things we do not need. The massive profitability from technological change can be used to improve the lives of all, not least to support the development of green technologies and green jobs for the future.

The integration of environmental concerns into our vision of economic and social justice allows us to reconsider some of the basic ideas of the dignity of labour as a human value. The dignity of labour in the 21st century cannot be based on a command-and-control view of our relationship to our common home and the sentient beings we cohabit with. We must stop acting on our environment, continuing to extract the world resources, ignoring the effect on biodiversity, and promoting selfish individualism and greed and calling them economic success.

CONCLUSION: DEMOCRACY AND WORKERS' RIGHTS

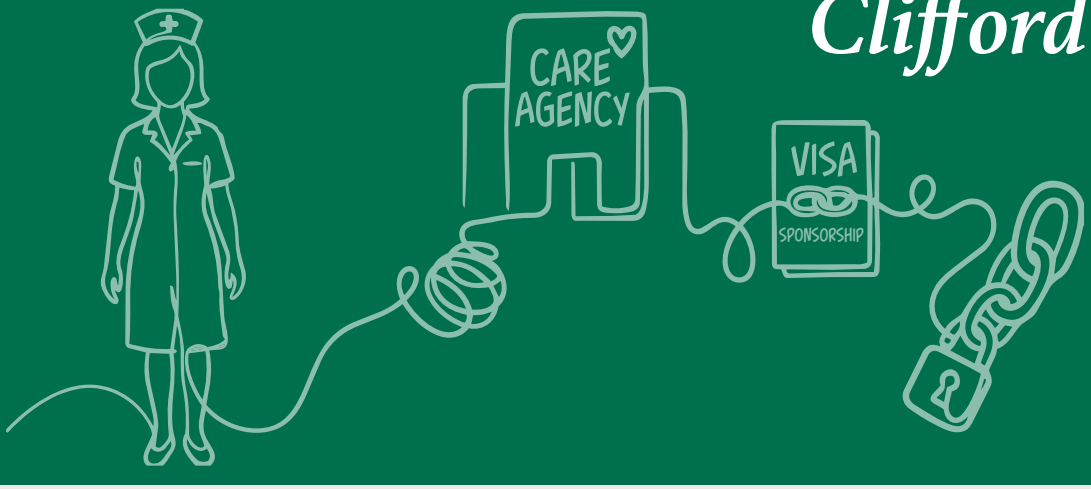
The question, sometimes asked, whether a global or a national focus is better for workers is the wrong one. Instead, we should be asking what sort of globalisation? An economically liberal globalisation coexisting with social and political authoritarianism? Or an economically egalitarian globalisation with respect for universal values of human rights and democracy?

Peak neoliberalism, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, presumed that extending economic 'freedom' would promote democratic freedoms. Frictionless trade, the growth of the knowledge economy and accelerated innovation was assumed to inevitably lead to a spread of democracy. But our more interconnected and economically open world has instead led to a spread of autocracy. Global and national financial institutions have been happy to ignore the exploitative (and sometimes corrupt) origins of the money they trade in because of eye watering returns. They have, as Anne Applebaum describes, been prepared to sign up to Autocracy Inc. As Quinn Slobodian has shown, when mainstream political parties lose ground to right-wing populists, elites use this support to continue neoliberalist policies. They reap the political benefit because of the economic inequality and democratic deficit that they have helped create.

Democracy and workers' rights go together. British labour movement pioneers from the Chartists onwards knew how important political democracy was, it was at the forefront of the demands. Their vision was of an enabling democracy with accountability to working people. Of a democracy that would allow working people to lead decent and fulfilling lives and a political system that took seriously justice at home and abroad. From Keir Hardie's support for Home Rule in the 19th century to the ending of British colonial rule in the 20th century we have a proud labour movement legacy of collectively challenging injustices at work, in wider society and internationally. These coincide with the principles of Catholic Social Teaching. It is from this meeting of traditions we can draw hope.

Migrant care workers in the UK

Clifford Longley



The Government has now begun its review of the domiciliary social care system in Britain and of working conditions in the industry. It is clear, in the name of the dignity of work, that there are really serious problems here. The issue is compounded by the way it has become mixed with other agendas, such as the desire of the Home Office to revise the rules regarding the settlement of workers who came to Britain to work in the social care system with work visas. They were recruited from overseas when Brexit led to the drying up of recruits from Europe. This avenue to recruitment has now been closed with the ending of the care-worker visa scheme, but the great majority of those who came to Britain are still here.

Without such workers the system would collapse. Yet they are among the most exploited group of workers in the country. Most are female. Most are Black. The word "slavery" is regularly used to describe their conditions, which is a cruel irony considering that many of them came from those parts of West Africa which gave the North Atlantic slave trade its eastern hub. The social care sector cannot fulfil its duty to care for those who, because of age, disability or illness, need help to look after themselves at home, if it neglects those who actually provide such crucial and necessary support.

The evidence is overwhelming. "A post-Brexit visa scheme to fill vacancies in social care was badly designed and enabled 'horrific' abuse of migrant workers", the UK's anti-slavery watchdog has said. Commissioner Eleanor Lyons said the care-worker visa route introduced by the Conservatives in February 2022 had caused avoidable harm and 'some really severe' exploitation."

"The social care sector cannot fulfil its duty to care for those who, because of age, disability or illness, need help to look after themselves at home, if it neglects those who actually provide such crucial and necessary support."

The Migration Observatory at Oxford University states: "The care industry is a high-risk industry for exploitation. Widespread qualitative evidence suggests that many care workers are not receiving the pay or working conditions they were promised, while others have experienced severe forms of exploitation and modern slavery."

These comments predate the announcement of a new set of rules governing how care workers with work visas can gain the right to live in Britain permanently. They came to Britain to fill vacancies that existed in the care system because recruitment into the sector was falling short. They were promised that once they had stayed for five years they would become eligible for Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR), and after that eventually for full naturalisation – the process whereby people of foreign nationality living in Britain can qualify for full British citizenship. The Government has announced proposals to extend that interval before qualifying for ILR, to 15 years. It is rare to see such a blatant case of "moving the goalposts".

Andrea Egan, general secretary of Unison[35], described this as "nothing less than a full-frontal attack on migrant workers and a wrecking ball for public services from a government that should be standing up for both. We already have a visa system that ties care workers to their employers, leaving them vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. Months without pay. Working without days off for weeks on end. Grafting for 16 hours and only getting paid for two of them." At a very minimum, new rules about qualifying for ILR should apply only those who came to Britain after the change, honouring the implicit promise contained in the previous arrangement.

The State recognised its responsibility to those needing care through the 2014 Care Act, which was an update to previous legislation. But because of poor pay and conditions, there is a huge shortfall of recruits to the industry from the indigenous British population. The Conservative Government therefore encouraged the overseas recruitment of domiciliary care workers, often from less developed economies. Pre-Brexit, many home care-worker roles were filled by recruits from elsewhere in Europe.

The present Labour Government has now closed this route, mainly because of concern over overall immigration numbers rather than because of exploitation. Logically, however, there is no connection between the flow of migrant care workers into Britain on care-worker visas, and any alleged "pull" factors driving up illegal immigration numbers. Migrant care workers did not arrive in rubber boats.

Meanwhile those who came to Britain under the visa scheme are still here, still working in the sector and still being exploited. They number about a hundred thousand, mainly female and mainly from west and central Africa. It is worth noting that many of them come from cultures which have a high level of respect for elderly people, regarding them as precious members of the community rather than redundant and a burden because their useful lives are over.

These lovely people face a host of problems, in the light of which it becomes obvious why recruitment into this industry has proved so difficult. It is not enough to note that overseas workers are prepared to do jobs that the British themselves do not want to do, without asking why. Pay is by no means the only issue. Nor is the nature of the work, which can be very rewarding. Though it is not legally recognised as such, this is "nursing" as a vocation, traditionally understood – the application of "tender loving care" to vulnerable patients who need it, by dedicated and trained professionals.

Very little research has been done into the actual conditions under which they work. But among migrant care workers who are Black, the majority, the experience of racism is commonplace. Some elderly clients are overtly hostile or at least unhelpful. Anecdotally, these carers are sometimes forbidden the use of such domestic facilities as toilets or bathrooms. If they bring food with them which needs heating, they are not allowed the use of microwaves in the household kitchen. Care workers walking alone to get to their next job sometimes experience casual racial abuse from passers-by.

Some of it is down to poor and abusive employment practices in a thinly regulated sector of the labour market. Some is structural, that is to say even good

35. www.unison.org.uk/our-campaigns/migrant-care-workers/

Ai Weiwei, Law of the Journey, 2017. Photograph by Gilbert Sopakuwa. Used under Creative Commons CC BY-NC-ND 2.0 via Flickr.

Ai Weiwei's monumental rubber boat filled with anonymous refugee figures confronts the viewer with the human cost of displacement, closed borders, and political indifference. In a discussion of Catholic Social Teaching, universal dignity, and global interdependence, it gives stark visual form to the claim that workers' rights, human rights, migration, peace, and democracy cannot be separated from one another.

employers have to operate within financial constraints that are imposed on them, and care workers are subject to official rules, such is visa restrictions, that are the detailed consequence of this "badly designed" scheme. There are numerous ways the scheme fails to meet minimal standards to be regarded as offering "dignified work".

Before the migrant worker visa route was closed, an agency recruiting and employing care workers had to be licensed by the Home Office to sponsor those it recruits. Many bogus schemes sprung up, and it has to be admitted that this particular form of exploitation was sometimes organised in the country of origin. The Home Office has worked strenuously to close down such schemes, which were bringing care workers recruited in their home country into Britain with no care work opportunities arranged or available, as a route simply to defeat immigration controls. Many recruits duped into taking part in such schemes arrived in Britain and then found themselves stranded.

Only workers sponsored in this way could then claim a migrant worker visa permitting them entry to the UK with the right to work. Agencies routinely required the workers they sponsored to pay them a fee in return, and some of the fees demanded could be outrageously high. Visa conditions for migrant care workers specify that their visa, and hence permission to remain in the UK and to work here, will automatically expire if they are unemployed for more than 60 days.

This gives employers almost unbridled power over the care workers they employ, as the threat of dismissal automatically contains a threat of deportation if the visa requirements can no longer be fulfilled. Meanwhile fees may still be outstanding. It is this aspect above all which makes the migrant care worker system intrinsically abusive and why it has

been likened to slavery. Care workers report that if they complain, many agency managers use tight visa restrictions as an excuse for bad practice, or even use the argument "if you don't like it you can always go home" – though they would still be expected to pay off any outstanding fees or loans.

There is a strong case for overhauling the sponsorship system itself, however, for instance by having one national body responsible for sponsoring care workers rather than leaving it to individual agencies. This would remove the competition between agencies regarding sponsorship terms, but that competition has not served the interests of the workers themselves. It would ensure that fees for sponsorship were reasonable and transparent.

Better still would be to let migrant care workers make full use of the Government's national Job Centre network, where a register of notified vacancies could be maintained. And the 60-day time-limit on the period when care workers must look for a new job with a sponsoring agency serves no useful purpose and is the cause of much abuse. With the clock ticking, a migrant care worker looking for a new position is at a grossly unfair disadvantage when negotiating terms and conditions.

Problems include a lack of career structure, insufficient access to skills training, and guidance to develop a culture of mutual support, respect and cooperation. Membership of a trade union should be recognised as a right, and collective bargaining where appropriate. Some trade unions, Unison in particular, have worked tirelessly to improve conditions of work, but migrant care work is largely within the gig-economy where union recruitment and organising is difficult. Credit must also be given to the Work Rights Centre[36], a charity set up by migrant workers themselves to campaign for improved conditions. It offers a free advice service through its webpage.

Workers are paid by the hour at a minimum wage level, but only when are actually present with a client. The nature of the work follows a Package of Care for each client, drawn up by the local authority under the 2014 Care Act. The authority places a contract with an agency of its choice, which is then largely left unsupervised. Needless to say, agencies compete on price for such contracts, with little regard for other conditions such as the welfare of those the local authority will be indirectly employing.

Care workers could be assigned to visit as many as a dozen clients per day. They have to make their own way to each address, using public transport if necessary. If an appointment is cancelled, they are not paid for it. They are not paid for time spent travelling, even though their duties require it. Some agencies pay bus and train fares, some do not. Their weekly wage is significantly below average for a normal working week. This is manifestly unfair. The agency has no choice as the fees they are paid by the local authority under each Package of Care are based on time actually spent with clients, regardless of travel times.

Workers subject to "immigration control" such as most migrant care workers are under a visa condition of "no recourse to public funds". The origin of this policy dates from a time when work visas were made available to specialist groups with professional expertise who had to be offered jobs considerably above average wage levels. These were assumed to be high enough to ensure an individual could stand on their own feet without the need to access such public funds as universal credit, housing benefit or job seekers' allowance. Migrant care workers fall well below the levels of income for which the policy was designed. Yet they are still not allowed access to certain welfare benefits which count as "recourse to public funds." Such benefits exist to help people in need because of income or some other reason. Migrant care workers certainly come into this category. This is manifestly unfair and discriminatory.

The financial plight of care workers with children – they were allowed to be joined by family members

36. www.workrightscentre.org/publications/2024/the-forgotten-third-migrant-workers-views-on-improving-conditions-in-englands-adult-social-care-sector/

until March 2024, when the rules changed – has been examined in depth by Oxford University's Migration Observatory[37]. "Their earnings … were sufficiently low that most British workers with children would qualify for substantial in-work benefits to reduce their risk of poverty. Indeed, an adult on a single care-worker salary with children and no access to in-work benefits could easily be below the official poverty line."

Many care workers are female, and may be married with children who, after the withdrawal of the scheme for permitting family members to join them, are still back home with aunts or grandparents. Many such care workers find themselves under pressure to send money home, to assist with the cost of raising those children, including school fees. The separation from children also puts an emotional cost on both sides of the relationship. Furthermore separation from spouses may lead to feelings of isolation and depression. Being a migrant in a strange and unfamiliar culture can itself be a source of stress and mental illness.

Accommodation offered to migrant care workers is often inadequate, sub-standard, unhygienic and overcrowded. Because it is arranged by their sponsoring agency they can feel tied and unable to complain. It is sometimes far away from the area where they will work, increasing travel times and costs. Although the Care Quality Commission has been given responsibility to oversee domiciliary care agencies, it has no duty of care towards their employees when they are off duty

Migrant care workers are usually on zero hours contracts, so if they do not work, for whatever reason, they will not be paid. This insecurity increases their dependency on their sponsoring agency. They are not paid for rest days or when they are sick. If they were employed by a local authority directly, for instance, instead of via an agency, they would have a full-time contract. Care agencies do not guarantee a minimum amount of work, so if enough work is not available care workers may fall short of a full working week. In some instances too many care workers are chasing after too few jobs. The opposite also happens.

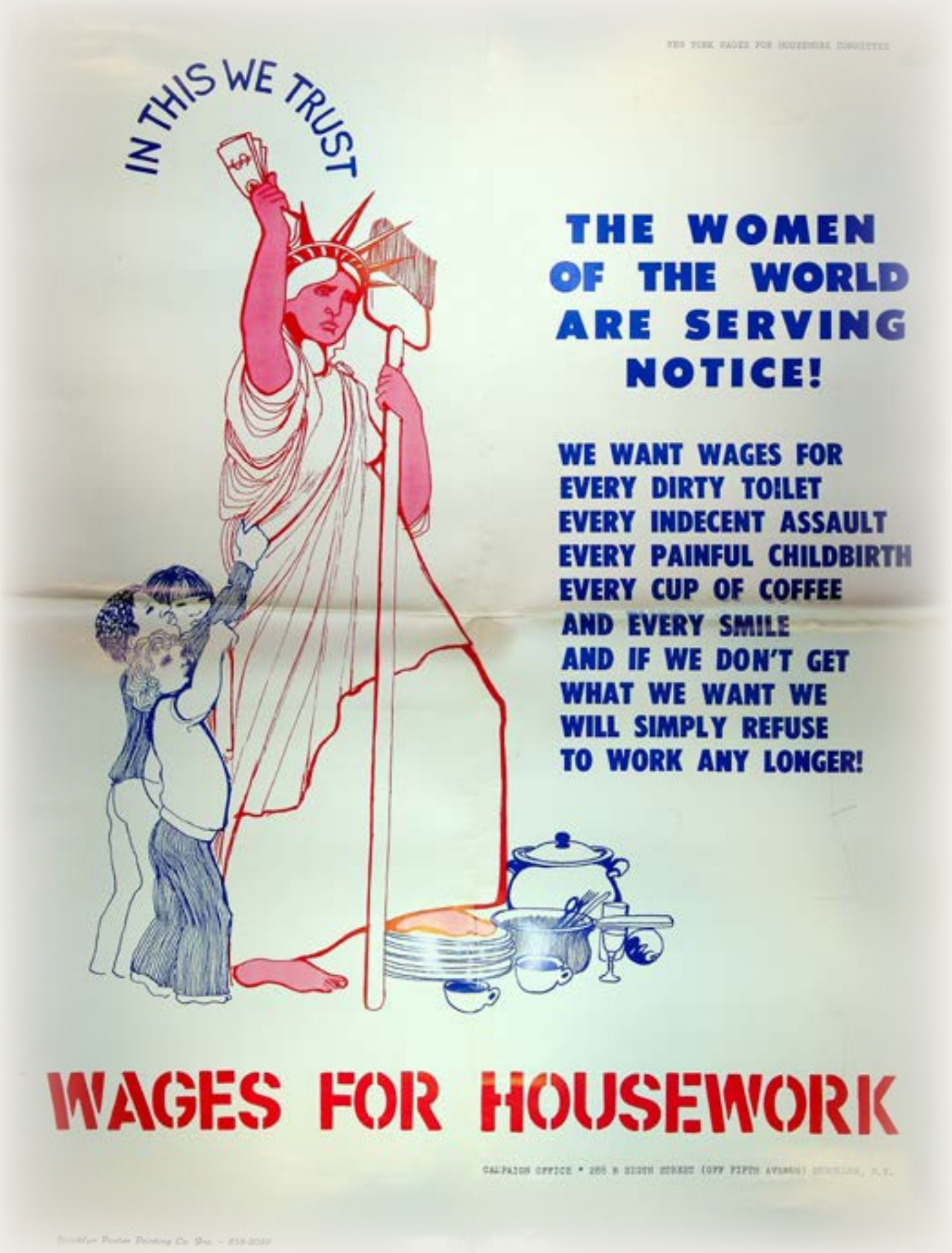
Migrant care workers make up about a third of the total social-care work force. Many are well qualified, dedicated to the work they do and to the needs of their clients. Without migrant care workers the care sector would be even less able to support the NHS hospital sector by providing adequate alternative care for patients after discharge. This has knock-on effects and partly explains long waiting lists and trolley queues in A and E corridors, while patients wait for an available bed. The country owes an enormous debt of gratitude to its migrant care workers, and failing to look after them properly is inexcusable. It is a "structure of sin" if ever there was one.

"The country owes an enormous debt of gratitude to its migrant care workers, and failing to look after them properly is inexcusable."

But why have these blatant injustices been allowed to continue, or were not spotted and corrected at the outset? Is this because policy-making in official circles in Britain is still influenced by implicit racism? And if the Government hopes the need to recruit care workers from overseas can be reduced or eliminated by encouraging recruitment from the British population, how likely is it that such potential recruits will find the prospect attractive, given how poorly existing care workers have been exploited? The government is hiding in cloud cuckooland.

This report was compiled with input from migrant care workers including from Cameroon, Ghana, Nigeria, Uganda and India.

37. https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/commentaries/the-ban-on-care-workers-family-members-what-will-be-the-impact/


IN THIS WE TRUST
THE WOMEN OF THE WORLD ARE SERVING NOTICE!
WE WANT WAGES FOR
EVERY DIRTY TOILET
EVERY INDECENT ASSAULT
EVERY PAINFUL CHILDBIRTH
EVERY CUP OF COFFEE
AND EVERY SMILE
AND IF WE DON'T GET
WHAT WE WANT WE
WILL SIMPLY REFUSE
TO WORK ANY LONGER!
WAGES FOR HOUSEWORK

The dignity of work and neoliberalism

Clifford Longley

There seems to be a consensus among economists that neoliberalism is dead, at least as an infallible doctrine. It continues as an influential legacy, however, largely because it has not been replaced by anything nearly as simple and compelling. Its great advantage is that it does not rest in any particular moral consensus. When the foundation documents of neoliberalism were being written, Adam Smith's Wealth of Nations and its associated volume, his Theory of Moral Sentiments, he would have taken it for granted that the society he was writing about had certain unspoken moral norms. They were, so to speak, part of the wallpaper, things everybody took for granted. Behind them lay more than a millennium of Christian history and culture. To extract his economic theory from that moral context, to let it stand alone, is to ignore what Smith would have taken for granted as the bedrock on which it is built. He would have rejected an amoral view of economics. Yet the advantage of modern neoliberalism is precisely that it appeals to a secular world, one that is not wedded to any particular philosophical or religious view of the purpose of human life. It is also the fundamental flaw that ultimately undermines it.

Neoliberalism, sometimes called market fundamentalism, drove the world economy to the edge of the precipice in the crash of 2008. Yet it was an article of faith to market fundamentalists and neoliberal economists that this could never happen. Enormous damage – up to $30 trillion's-worth – resulted. The world was saved from even worse only by government intervention at vast expense. The public is still paying the price. Neoliberalism is plainly not a scientifically sound economic theory. Critics agree the solution lies somewhere in the area of morality. The basic flaw in the system was not just about personal greed, but about the idea that free market forces need not be, and should not be, deflected by scruples about their consequences; in other words that economics has no need of morality, that "the business of business is business", and that what matters is the short-term maximisation of shareholder value.

Some neoliberal economists still believe that to be true, or at least act as if it were. Much of the furniture of modern economic life was put together when neoliberalism was the unchallenged orthodoxy. The selling-off of publicly owned industries and services under Margaret Thatcher's and John Major's

governments produced new corporate institutions which were neoliberal in character. They existed to make a profit. Regulation by the state, such as it was, was primarily designed to encourage competition and prevent cartels. As Adam Smith himself noticed, "People of the same trade seldom meet together, even for merriment and diversion, but the conversation ends in a conspiracy against the public."

"Neoliberalism is plainly not a scientifically sound economic theory."

Latter versions of "political economy" added the assumption that free-market systems were self-regulating, that is to say the State did not, and normally should not, intervene on the side of some external interests; and that they were efficient, that is to say they would automatically extract the greatest value from the resources available.

So where, apart from the structure or privatised industries, does the legacy left by free market economics from the days when it was unchallenged, now chiefly reside? In Britain, the somewhat surprising answer lies in Clause 172 of the Companies Act. It was passed by a Labour Government in 2006, two years before the great crash called neoliberalism doctrine into question. It was meant to bring about the humanisation and remoralising of business practices by insisting that companies had to operate within a socially responsible framework. Apart from the direct shareholders, Clause 172 said that a business had responsibilities – albeit limited – to a series of other "stakeholders" such as employees, customers, suppliers and the community. It was a fashionable progressive cause at the time, sometimes known as the "stakeholder movement".

Although all companies registered in Britain are required to pay lip service to it, the clause has made at most a marginal difference to boardroom decision-making. The passing of the act was the high point in the life of the stakeholder movement. The government promoting it was a Labour government, though it was anxious not to be seen to be unfriendly to business interests. So the attempt to make business socially responsible by law was watered down to the point where it became marginal – where it remains. The imperative to promote the interest of shareholders swamps any other deliberation. It was, in short, a feeble attempt to reign in neoliberalism in the name of the public good, and it largely failed to do so. Apart from anything else, company directors are also usually shareholders in the business, yet such conflicts of interest are ignored by Clause 172.

Clause 172 refers to the duty of the directors of a company to its members, that is to say to its shareholders. The language of "a company" and its "members" dates from the origins of company law in the middle of the nineteenth century. A company was a group of investors, companions or partners so to speak, who came together to promote a business venture by putting up the funds. They were individually and collectively liable for any losses, and if the business went bankrupt it could take them down with it. It was to address this, and encourage such activity, that the concept of limited liability was invented, protecting individual investors and allowing the enterprise to take greater risks without threatening their personal ruin. The company became an entity with a legal personality of its own, for instance so it could enter contracts and sue and be sued – including by its own members. But it could not be sued by stakeholders. They had no legal rights.

Clause 172 (1) states:

Duty to promote the success of the company

A director of a company must act in the way he considers, in good faith, would be most likely to promote the success of the company for the benefit of its members as a whole, and in doing so have regard (amongst other matters) to —

(a) the likely consequences of any decision in the long term,

(b) the interests of the company's employees,

(c) the need to foster the company's business

relationships with suppliers, customers and others,

(d) the impact of the company's operations on the community and the environment,

(e) the desirability of the company maintaining a reputation for high standards of business conduct, and

(f) the need to act fairly as between members of the company.

In the spring and summer of 2025 the Department for Business and Trade (DBT) commissioned Ipsos "to conduct qualitative research with executive directors and company secretaries of large companies to understand their perceptions of Section 172 of the Companies Act (2006), introduction of the requirement to publish a 172 (1) statement in their annual accounts, and the impact that these have had on company decision-making."

The report concluded that the impact on decision-making was minimal, though directors did not in principle reject the case for considering the effects of their decision on stakeholders other than shareholders. Many said they would anyway, without a legal obligation. But it added "The lack of legal enforcement and accountability of directors to stakeholders means s.172 is regarded with lower priority and minimises its actual influence on decision making. As directors pointed out and was highlighted in the literature review, companies can operate in ways that are not compliant with s.172, without suffering any legal consequences."

This seemed to confirm the judgement, quoted in a research paper published by Durham Business School in 2016, that "The high-point of the stakeholder movement in British business is probably represented by the reform of the Companies Act in 2006, and the failure of that reform to deliver much of anything may explain the subsequent decline in interest." (This was actually a quotation from *Just Money, How Catholic Social Teaching can Redeem Capitalism*, (Theos 2014) by the author of this paper, Clifford Longley.) In other words Clause 172 has not redeemed capitalism, which remains committed to the interests of its shareholders if necessary even at the expense of other stakeholders. At the high point of neoliberalism its essential point was contained in the aphorism, coined by Milton Friedman in 1970, that "the business of business is business." This became the central pillar of both Thatcherism and Reaganomics, known on the continent of Europe as the Anglo-Saxon model. Its international version became known as the Washington Consensus. It forces less developed countries applying for developmental assistance from bodies like the World Bank or the IMF, for instance in order to be rescued from high levels of international debt, to apply the principles of neoliberalism to their own economies, sometimes with disastrous consequences for their own populations.

The birth of free market theory is usually dated from Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, published in 1776, which contained the well known proposition that the collective public good emerges automatically from the individual pursuit of private goods. It has various popular versions, from "a rising tide lifts all boats" to "greed is good", and so-called "trickle-down economics".

What Smith actually wrote is that an individual businessman "by directing that industry in such a manner as its produce may be of the greatest value, he intends only his own gain, and he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention. Nor is it always the worse for the society that it was no part of it. By pursuing his own interest he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it. I have never known much good done by those who affected to trade for the public good."

There was no sign of this "invisible hand" when the pursuit of personal gain, disregarding the public good, brought Western financial capitalism almost to the brink of collapse in 2008. (And the word "frequently" is frequently overlooked in economic textbooks, implicitly replaced by something more like "invariably".) Something more drastic is clearly required, and this

has to be addressed if the United Kingdom is not to continue with a flawed business model that reflects out-dated economic theory. Productivity, for instance, has for decades lagged far behind profitability in the British corporate sector, yet productivity is the key to economic growth. Is there, for instance, a connection between productivity and how the average business regards its workforce? Does that workforce feel disengaged, and could that be because the maximisation of shareholder value is of little interest to the average workers except in so far as it continues to provide them with a wage or salary?

Is there a way of overcoming that alienation, so that workers feel valued and involved and can understand that their interests and the interests of shareholders are aligned rather than opposed? There is, and the Durham Business School paper spells it out. The issue of "dignity of work" is key to that transformation. And at its heart is a realisation that wealth creation is not the product of capital alone but of a collaboration between capital and labour. Such an idea would have been beyond the imagination of most 19th century entrepreneurs. Capital was the asset they possessed, often in the form of land and inherited wealth. They were the masters. Labour was work done by servants, hence the master-servant relationship became the standard way to understand the relationship between a businessman and those they employed. Assumptions about class, indeed of breeding, were implicit in those assumptions. The idea that a worker "owned" his own labour, and that that ownership gave him rights at least equivalent to the rights of those who owned capital, would have been incomprehensible at the time.

A working paper from Durham Business School, written in collaboration with the Centre for Catholic Social Thought and Practice, proposed that Clause 172 be rewritten to recognise this radical equality. The paper proposes simply that employees (at least those of some length of service) should be included as "members of the company" whose interests is it the duty of directors of the company to promote. It adds: "The interests of employees and long-term shareholders in the success of a particular enterprise are for the most part aligned, in a manner that does not necessarily apply to other stakeholders, with whom there is greater scope for conflicts of interest. Both employees and long-term shareholders can profit from the success of the enterprise without doing so at the expense of the other."

Such an amendment would make it easier for a company to adopt a formal "purpose" as part of its terms of reference and constitution, as at the moment the concept seems at odds with the maximisation of shareholder value (which is already the implicit purpose of the business.) But a joint purpose, properly understood and publicly declared, could go a long way to motivate a workforce. The comparison could fairly be made with wartime experience, when factory workers felt they were contributing to the war effort and were regularly prepared to go beyond the call of duty. They had a motive to push their output and their productivity to its maximum.

There were high hopes that the 2006 Companies Act reform would energise business culture and persuade it to turn outwards, understanding its place as a good citizen in the community at large. Many companies already do that, though they still have a model of industrial relations which is in essence adversarial. There are some who prefer it that way, for whom industrial relations are still conflictual by nature, a localised stage for the conduct of class war. Clause 172 as it stands seems to justify that implication, for it invites directors, many of whom are also shareholders, to take a zero-sum approach to the interests of their employees – what is given to the employees in wages and salaries has to be at the expense of shareholders in dividends and enhanced share price.

If they work together to increase the size of the cake, as it were, there would be more for everybody. But more importantly still, making them members of the company alongside shareholders would dignify workers in their own eyes and the eyes of shareholders. They would cease to be "hired hands" and become equal partners. They would see improvements in productivity not as an unwelcome imposition but as serving their own interests. The

Andreas Gursky, Chicago, Board of Trade II, 1999. Colour photograph. Courtesy Monika Sprüth Galerie, Köln / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn and DACS, London 2026.

Gursky's Chicago, Board of Trade II transforms the trading floor into a vast, almost abstract field of colour, speed, bodies, screens, and financial signals. For a discussion of neoliberalism, market fundamentalism, and the 2008 crash, the image powerfully evokes an economic system that has become dazzling, impersonal, and difficult to morally comprehend: human beings appear caught within the motion of the market rather than clearly governing it.

challenge of integrating AI into working practices in particular will be difficult if it is seen as a threat. On the other hand the successful implementation of AI will call for maximum ingenuity and flexibility from the workforce. The greater the sense of participation and partnership the workforce acknowledges and is acknowledged, the better will be the result.

The Durham paper is an application of Catholic Social Teaching to the world of business. It leads to the moral claim that workers enjoy a natural right of membership of the company or group that employs them, as natural as their right to own their own bodies. Legal recognition of this natural right would permit companies to adopt a corporate purpose beyond the pursuit of shareholder value, which is unlikely otherwise to take place. Directors are required to promote the success (not simply the profits) of the company for the benefit of its members (not simply its shareholders). Automatic worker membership would empower directors to pursue the success of the enterprise in which long-term shareholders and workers have a common interest. In this sense workers could begin to understand that they are working for themselves as well as for the owners of the business. This could be a powerful motivating factor, and make it easier to understand work as a contribution to the common good.

Nevertheless such recognition would not be sufficient without some transfer of sovereignty over takeover decisions from shareholders to directors and workers. Directors would need to be free to pursue the success of the enterprise without the threat of hostile takeover. Furthermore, since an enterprise may be worth more to shareholders dead than alive, the consent of workers would be needed to takeovers recommended by directors.

A company has no natural right to the privileges of a human person. Limited liability was intended to protect people from ruin, not to permit the shirking of responsibilities to stakeholders. Parent companies should be held liable for the obligations of their subsidiaries.

A change in the understanding of the nature of property in companies is needed. The right to own property is not unlimited, but subject to responsibilities that arise from it. These proposals are a feasible and incremental move towards a fairer and must just society which respects the dignity of people and so generates a fair return for responsible investors. They are also key to economic growth, which the existing model of capitalism, represented in Clause 172, is manifestly finding very difficult.

What is being proposed is not the adoption of the John Lewis model, where a business is owned by its employees, nor the Co-op model, where a business is owned by its customers, and nor is it the Nationwide model, where the business is run for the mutual benefit of its customers. They are all fine models which clearly work. But this approach recognises the moral equivalence of labour and capital in the conduct of a business, showing that wealth creation is the product of collaboration between the two, and that shareholders and workers have similar interests.

Not all workers can be present at every board meeting, obviously, so some system of democratic representation would have to be created. The exact role of trade unions, where they exist, would have to be worked out and they would have choices to make. Do they want to handle the process of democratic representation, or would they prefer a separate process, independently organised? There are models available that could be adapted from abroad, especially from Germany.

Could this model be applied to the public sector? There are already examples of it, for instance in the constitution of National Health Hospital Trusts, where the shareholder is the state and maximisation of profit is not the purpose of the enterprise. But many hospitals get their model of industrial relations from the private sector, where the assumption is an adversarial relationship between labour and capital. The proposed changes to company law outlined here would alter how industrial relations are conducted in the private sector and therefore alter the model that the public sector would follow.

Above all these changes would respect and enhance the dignity of work, elevating it from drudgery to vocation and making all employees participants in the success of the enterprise. It is well known that job satisfaction is a major influence in what motivates and dignifies workers, and making them co-responsible for the governance of a business would reinforce a sense of partnership and pride in what they do. That way lies increased profit, economic growth, and improved productivity. The present neo-liberal model of company governance is harmful to business, harmful to workers and harmful to the national economy. It belongs in the 19th century, where it originated. It belongs to a theory of economics which is discredited.

Where will our children work? Reimagining employment

John Battle

ABSTRACT

The key question here is: what is the future of work for the next generation?

The recent economic and employment case study of Leeds sets a template.

Will new technology developments provide new jobs or lead to increasing inequalities?

The challenge is particularly for young people and women. Can an "economy of caring" be realistically introduced? Can Catholic Social Teaching help, in particular the encyclicals *Mater et Magister* of Pope John XXIII (1961, anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*), the social encyclicals of both Pope Benedict and Francis? Pope Francis's new "Foundation for the Economics of Francisco" may be a spark.

These complement the recent work of some prophetic and visionary economists of "Caring" and "Communion".

INTRODUCTION

A comment by a Leeds high school student that "boosting high tech jobs for some Uni students only generates baristas, cleaning jobs and beauty salons, ... all low paid for us", captures a key concern of our times.

A generation of young people are asking, "where shall we work?", "how will we earn a living and support ourselves and future families?" This question represents a significant loss of a sense of future, leading some to depression and despair.

From the northern perspective of a city like Leeds, it is not a new question. De-industrialisation and a shift away from traditional manufacturing jobs that dominated the northern economies since the industrial revolution has led to almost a century of "employment crises", some previously softened by the siren offer of "a job down south".

Leeds, with the current population of almost a million, has for over 150 years provided a statistical microcosm of national economic trends, especially in terms of labour market and economic development.

The citywide employment rate is usually the national average.

The figures, though, mask huge differences between the inner city and outer wards in a city region still dividing in terms of income between rich and poor.

Leeds, originally a market town, was for most of the 20th century a place where engineering, clothing, and printing provided the majority of manufacturing employment in the city. Leeds developed a wide and diverse economic base and by 1950 was known as "the city of 1000 firms", mainly in engineering, textiles, and printing.

By 2000, this had expanded to over 6,000 firms and consequently Leeds avoided the worst economic recessions of the 20th century.

A telling statistic revealed that 17,500 jobs lost in traditional manufacturing in the decade 1977 to 1987 (as unemployment nationally rose up to 3 million) were replaced as exactly 17,500 new jobs emerged in the public and private sectors.

As clothing manufacturers moved over into High Street retail, public sector employment increased with the expansion of health and education sectors and civic administration reorganisation. At the same time, Leeds began attracting investment from the finance sector, becoming second to London for banking headquarters, accountancy services, and legal firms clustering in Leeds.

The development of offices and shops replaced factories, and workers moved from factories into the service sectors in transportation and office cleaning. Mainly women workers moved into the new services in the city centre of retail, cafés, hospitality, and entertainment services.

This shift to retail and financialisation reflected national economic shifts. The emergence of new technologies and communications industries represents a further and more universal structural employment shift.

The questions remain: where will our children and grandchildren work in future? What will they find work doing? What should our schools and colleges educate and train them for in the future?

It cannot be adequate to try and simply oppose rapid technological change, challenging though it is to the way we communicate, work, and live, and indeed relate to each other.

THE TECHNOLOGY FUTURE?

Where then are the new jobs now?

While adverts for new jobs in "digital content" and "app" development are increasing in Leeds, along with creative advertising agency work, beauty, cosmetics, and hairdressing, these current job opportunities are often in the low-paid service sector.

In reality, new opportunities, especially for young people and women, continue to divide the labour market, and incomes, into those with employment and some financial prospects and those who see their future in low-paid temporary part-time service sector work.

In November 2024, BBC research declared Yorkshire as "the capital of warehousing", whose "staggering growth accounts for nearly half of new employment in the coalfields region today".[38]

As many people are now employed in warehousing as worked in the Yorkshire coalfields during the coal industry's peak. Over 60,000 people now work in over 1,000 warehouses in West Yorkshire alone. The Amazon "Fulfilment Centre" near Leeds employs some 2,000 people.

The Evri warehouse consists of 7 miles of conveyor belts, now sorting parcels by robotic machines. But this warehousing work comes with a labour market caveat.

The "State of the Coalfields Report 2024" challenged the quality of these new warehouse jobs as "labour intensive, poorly paid, and with little union representation".[39]

Call centres, warehouses, and the new data centres are now providing increasing employment, and significantly more for women than men. The so-called "gig economy" of insecure part-time and temporary work, often on zero hours contracts, remains.

Many workers are increasingly under new "surveillance" technologies checking on every minute. As one warehouse worker put it: "It's not enough to do the work. You have to prove that you have been working", effectively reducing the person to a measurable tool.

While insecurity takes its toll, low pay in the region remains a primary cause of poverty.

An estimated half a million workers are still not getting the statutory minimum wage (since 2011 referred to as the "living wage", but not to be confused with the higher voluntary living wage campaign championed by the national Living Wage Foundation).[40]

Despite the detailed evidence, economic commentators continue to insist that "work is the best way out of poverty", repeating the debilitating myth that any job, no matter how insecure or poorly paid, is better than no job.

Increasingly, it is the 18 to 35-year-olds who are the "new poor" in our society. Young people are now bearing the brunt of rising unemployment.

Nearly a million young people are currently not in work, education, or training (referred to as NEETs). In Yorkshire and Humberside alone, 16.8% of young people are currently classed as NEETs.

Moreover, 45% of current 25-year-olds have never had a job.

Commenting on his forthcoming "Young People and Work Review", the chair Alan Milburn pointed out that if you haven't had a job by the age of 24, "that entails a long-term scarring effect and you're probably then stuck in a lifetime on benefits."

38. BBC Research November 2024 " How warehousing jobs have transformed the coalfields", Stephanie Miskin on BBC News 11 Nov 2024

39. The State of the Coalfields Report 2024, Fothergill.S, Gore.T, Leather.D, published by Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research , Sheffield Hallam University , 19 April 2024

40. cf The " Fair Work Agency" launched in April 2026, chair Matthew Taylor

He added: "we are seeing something dramatic changing in the labour markets… this nation risks creating a generation on the scrapheap".[41]

Graduate unemployment is now at a record high and continues to increase as the role of developing new tech technologies, not least AI, is leading to a displacement of jobs.

Back in November 2015, the chief economist of the Bank of England, Andy Haldane, warned that 15 million jobs in the UK would be lost through automation, AI, and robotics.[42]

Despite pessimistic predictions, the positive contribution that AI could contribute to new scientific and engineering employment, not least in the medical field and in engineering design and planning, should not be ignored.

But while demand for digital cyber security services is currently one of the fastest growing job sectors, there is no doubt that AI is impacting on current graduate employment.

Likewise, the growth in the use of drones and robotics is increasingly replacing human functions. Even education systems, particularly post-Covid, are already experiencing the replacement of staff by technology.

Robots in China and Japan are providing elderly home caring, and greatly underestimated in manufacturing, engineering, and construction is the impact of the introduction of 3D printing technologies.

Oxford University Martin Programme of Technology and Employment predicted in September 2013 that many well-paid middle-income jobs were at risk.[43]

Author Yuval Noah Harari went further to warn that in future "workers will no longer be exploited, merely irrelevant".[44]

But as 3D printing marks a significant move away from mass production and the outsourcing phase of manufacturing, it contains perhaps the possibilities of bringing production "back to the local" and focusing on the possibilities of local economic development.

In contrast to President Trump's inaugural declaration that America would soon "become a manufacturing nation once again" by policies of tariffs and repatriation, in his Farewell Address, President Biden focused on the question of whether the new 21st century high-tech industries could redirect their efforts to tackling the really big challenges facing the world in terms of healthcare, education, science, and the environment, rather than turning into a defence industrial military economy platform focusing on surveillance and weapons.

In other words, can economies — and that is especially work and employment — possibly be geared to "caring": caring for children through education, caring for health through health and community social services, and providing social care for the elderly whilst making space for the creative energies of the arts?

Could personal extended social services rebalance future economies in an era of high and fast-developing technologies, often outside government controls though receiving subsidies? Can their profits and resources be guided and redirected?

As an example, nearly all the "care home" sector for the elderly is privately owned and by large and distant US hedge funds. Yet the previous providers, mainly local authorities, are obliged to cover residential costs with public support funding, thus massively subsidising and underpinning this highly profitable, now overseas sector.

Much needed restructuring of social care needs to focus on local rehabilitation of provision.

41. Rt Hon Alan Milburn cited in The Guardian 14 March 2026

42. Andy Haldane speech to TUC 12 Nov 2015

43. Oxford Martin School of Technology and Employment, University of Oxford; info@oxfordmartin.ox.ac.uk

44. Harari YN " Lessons for the Twenty First Century", (2018, London pg 38-39).

A CATHOLIC CONTRIBUTION?

Can the Catholic Church positively contribute to this debate in the light of its traditional development of Catholic Social Teaching?

In his first address, the newly elected Pope Leo XIV reminded us that "in our own day the Church offers everyone the treasury of its social teaching in response to another industrial revolution and to developments in the field of AI that pose new challenges for the defence of human dignity, labour, and justice"[45].

Pope Leo XIV is firmly within a tradition developed further recently by Pope Benedict XVI, who in his most economic encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* stressed that "in so far as they are instruments, the entire economy and finance, not just in certain sectors, must be used in an ethical way so as to create suitable conditions for human development of peoples".[46]

In an underrated encyclical, *Mater et Magister* (1961), Pope John XXIII developed hints from Pope Pius's *Quadragesimo Anno*, by stressing the need to turn to "a proper balance in the economy", not least between agriculture, industry, and the service sectors.

Notably, these two encyclicals commemorate the foundational document on work, *Rerum Novarum*.

There are insights in *Mater et Magister* that suggest a fundamental economic restructuring could be developed by refocusing on the role of local economies.

The dream of integrated economic globalisation led, in practice, to a restructuring focus that promoted "offshoring" and exporting industrial production, and concentration on supply chains, with the resultant hollowing out of traditional producing economies.

This has led to a new wave of protectionism, attempts at "reshoring", and economic nationalism, while local economies remain neglected and economic inequalities between and within nations intensify.

Perhaps localised production of goods and services, even "tailor-made" (think 3D printing), and community-based economies — including agriculture, industry, and services, and not least personal social services — suggest the possibilities of more stable and sustainable employment opportunities.

The Centre for Understanding Sustainable Prosperity[47] argues the case for more stable patterns of employment opportunities for secure work and fulfilling leisure and dependable public services that make care for the poor and care for the environment more attainable.

> *"In so far as they are instruments, the entire economy and finance, not just in certain sectors, must be used in an ethical way so as to create suitable conditions for human development of peoples."*

The central issue is: can an economy be developed that is responsive to the proper care of humanity and the care of the Earth and that also includes developing worthwhile employment?

Can there be, as Dr James Caccamo suggests, "morally sustainable employment for the digital workforce of the future?"[48]

45. Pope Leo XIV, Homily at Inaugural Mass, 18 May 2025

46. Pope Benedict XVI " Caritas in Veritate", (2019) para 65

47. cf Centre for Understanding of Sustainable Prosperity based at University of Surrey; https://cusp.ac.uk/

48. Professor James Caccamo at St Joseph's University Philadelphia, known for his work in Christian Ethics and the moral implications of information technologies (associated with CUSP) cf "Technology Choices as Moral Choices", Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics.", 42. (2)

Moreover, as Professor Mariana Mazzucato has proposed, can "caring service provision", especially in societies of aging populations with great need of personal-caring services, along with education work, not be regarded as an "afterthought to economic growth" but rather as "integral to it"?

As she stresses, economic growth "cannot be isolated from the common good and shared responsibility".[49]

Can we therefore experiment more with localised and sustainable models of social enterprises, cooperative, and community economies?

Rather more radically, Pope Francis spoke of "giving soul to the economy of the future". He set up the Francisco Foundation to introduce a "new economy of friendship with the earth and economy of peace"[50], with the ethical vision of his *Laudato Si* encyclical.

This Foundation aims to draw on a new generation of thinkers and practitioners "to transform an economy that kills into an economy that is of life in all its aspects".

The work of the "Economy of Francisco" has brought together Italian economists such as Luigino Bruni, who worked on the "economics of communion", stressing an economy of love and reciprocity[51], and Stefano Zamagni, along with theologian and economist Sr Helen Alford OP, all now providing challenging prophetic voices for a new economy.

Nor are they isolated from wider economic radical thinking.

Professor Jennifer Nedelsky of the University of Toronto works on "revaluing care in the global

49. Professor Mariana Mazzucato " What If Our Economy Valued What Matters" March 2022: "Care is the life giving force that sustains health and well being binding together societies and ecologies. But everyday forms of care, though essential, are systematically undervalued "; published by Project Syndicate; https://www.project-syndicate.org/

50. The Economy of Francisco Foundation(est 2024) Gen Sec Chiara Pancino, https://francescoeconomy.org/the-eof-foundation/

51. Bruni L. ed(2002);" The Economics of Communion: Towards a Multi Dimensional Economic Culture "(NY) "Communion is the deep tension of the economy and the basis of the Economy of Communion project that seeks to give rise to businesses that are run according to a new culture, the culture of giving"

economy", advocating the restructuring of work "to integrate caregiving into economic life".[52]

She builds on the work of the Canadian economist Joan Tronto on what she called "a new caring economy".[53]

A prophetic vision of an integrated caring economy, in which the fruits and profits of the fast-developing technological economy are transformed into a "care economy" which at the same time supports incomes and livelihoods, with space and time for real growth and development, is now our largest challenge.

In his *Centesimus Annus* encyclical, Pope John Paul II writes: "work is work for others, for the fruits of this labour offer occasions for exchange, relationships, and encounter" (para 31).

Theologian Anna Rowlands of Durham University puts it succinctly: "work is caring; caring is work".

Shaping the potential and impacts of the new technologies to respond to real caring needs is a primary economic challenge.

In other words, the fundamental challenge of understanding what we mean and dream of by "work", "vocation", and "service", enlightened by Catholic Social Teaching, is beginning to clearly emerge.

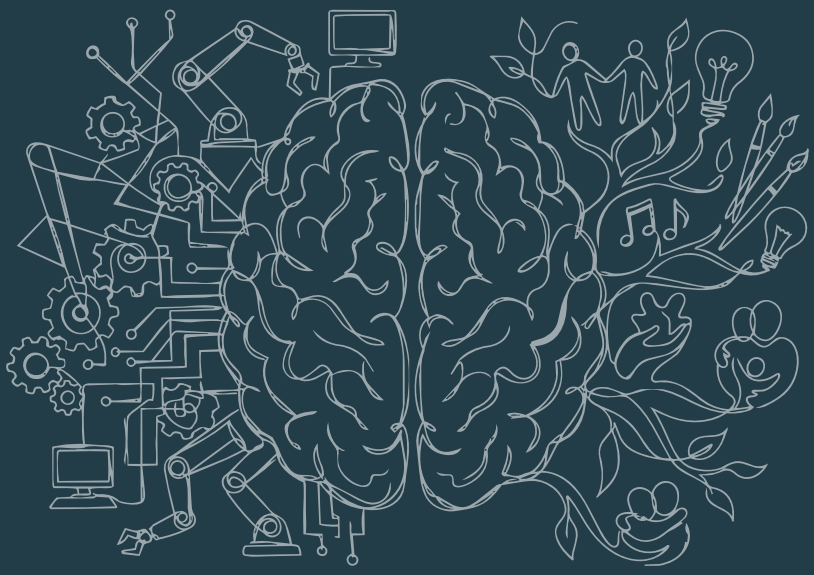
To conclude with the message of Pope Francis to a meeting of the World Bank in 2025:

"Despite our deeply held conviction that all men and women are created equal, many of our brothers and sisters of the human family are effectively excluded from the financial world. If we are to come out of this situation as a better, more human, and solidarity world, new creative forms of political and economic participation must be devised, sensitive to the voice of the poor and committed to including them in building our economic future."

52. Professor Jennifer Nedelsky " Part Time for All: A Care Manifesto " co-authored with Tom Malleson. OUP 2023

53. Joan C Tronto " Caring Democracy: Markets, Equality and Justice", (2013) NY University Press; and " Who Cares?". (2015) Ithaca. NY. Both deal with how democracy and care are deeply interconnected and propose that democratic societies must structure institutions and policies to support care as a public good and not relegate it to private life.

Business purpose and the uses of AI



Charles Wookey

What is the role of business in society? Over the next few years, how business leaders answer this question will profoundly shape the deployment of AI systems and thereby the kind of society we will all soon be living in.

The dominant view in the lead up to the great financial crisis in 2008 was that the core role of business was to make money for investors. As one bank Chairman put it at the time, the only questions being asked of a new product or service were "is it profitable and is it legal?". A narrow and exclusive focus on profit as an end in itself had legitimated behaviour in the financial sector which ignored wider social and environmental impacts, and in the end undermined the very basis of trust in the market on which all profitable activity depends.

So was there a better answer? This question was at the heart of soul-searching reflections among a group of UK business leaders and others in 2012 which led to the formation of an unusual charity, A Blueprint for Better Business.[54] The charity, which has a secular foundation but whose approach draws heavily on Catholic social thought, thought there was: the role of business is to benefit society. Making money is necessary of course, but not the ultimate purpose. A business contributes to building up the common good by producing goods that are truly good and services that truly serve, providing useful and worthwhile jobs where people feel valued, caring about social and environmental impacts, and thereby delivering a fair return to responsible investors. Blueprint and others called such businesses "purpose-led" recognising that taking this view is a choice within existing law (which contrary to popular belief does not mandate the maximisation of shareholder value as the ultimate aim). And to work effectively the leaders of the business need to believe that such an approach will deliver a better business that is also better for people, society and the planet.

In the years since 2012 many businesses have sought to move away from a narrow focus on profits as the only or ultimate goal, and the language of

54. See Blueprintforbusiness.org

business purpose beyond profit has gradually become mainstream, even if the radical shift in thinking it implies is still highly contested – with some arguing that being purpose-led will inevitably mean being less profitable. That suspicion, along with the anti-woke agenda, has fuelled a degree of pushback, particularly in the USA. But there is also a generational shift with many younger talented people wanting to work for organisations they can see having a positive impact on the world. They reject not only the narrow view of profit as all that matters in business, but also the narrow appeal to money, status and power as the only drivers of personal behaviour, recognising that as human beings we are meaning-seeking and fundamentally social, with desires to belong, to contribute and find fulfilment through worthwhile work. They also recognise the deep social and environmental instability of the current economic system, and know that in coming decades businesses will have to show up differently if they are to be agents of vital systemic change.

"A narrow and exclusive focus on profit as an end in itself had legitimated behaviour in the financial sector which ignored wider social and environmental impacts."

It is within this contested context that, 15 years on from the financial crisis, many businesses are now grappling with the challenges and opportunities presented by rapid advances in AI systems and robotics. Blueprint as a charity has recently been convening business leaders from different sectors to share insights and discuss how they are thinking about the future. It turns out that the question of the role of business in society is as relevant as ever. To see why, it is helpful to look back to the history of AI.

In the 1970s there were two centres for AI research associated with Stanford University. One, John McCarthy's Stanford Artificial Intelligence Laboratory focussed on creating autonomous systems that could reason, solve problems and potentially pass the Turing test. It was about machine intelligence and automation.

Another was Douglas Engelbart's Augmentation Research Centre. This had a very different philosophy. Engelbart was focussed on augmenting human intelligence rather than replacing it. He was primarily interested in how we can use machines to make people more capable. His vision was of computers as tools that amplify human capacities - "bicycles for the mind" (a phrase popularised by one of his students, Steve Jobs).

The legacy of Engelbart's ideas about augmenting human abilities for thought and action can be seen in subsequent decades in the personal computer revolution, the development of the internet and more recently the development of search engines such as Google.

In contrast the automation path led in a different direction. The symbolic AI approach led to expert control systems in the 1980s seeking to automate specialist knowledge, but many of these approaches failed commercially and led to an atrophying of AI research using rules-based logic. Decades later, machine learning revived the automation dream with systems that could recognise images and speech better than rule-based systems, and engage in general reasoning. The astonishing success of DeepMind's AlphaGo and AlphaFold heralded an extraordinary breakthrough.

The current landscape of AI development combines elements of automation and augmentation, but there still exists a profound difference in approach. The automation philosophy has as its aim to eliminate the need for human effort and to replace human labour wherever possible. It sees labour as a cost to be minimised. It is exemplified today by the self-driving car, and the latest Amazon warehouses being designed to have minimal human involvement. In contrast, the augmentation philosophy has a different aim - to make people more effective, creative and fulfilled.

It sees human labour having an intrinsic value and seeks to enhance human capability and judgement. It is exemplified by Microsoft's GitHub supporting coders, and the use of AI tools in medical settings from diagnosis in imaging to robotic surgery.

Here we see the link between business purpose and the deployment of AI systems. If the core role of business in society is to make money for shareholders, the natural corollary is to automate wherever possible, as substitution of human labour reduces costs. Automation results in a diminishment in the participation of labour in sharing the profits generated by the business, and increasing the returns to the owners of capital. It's a logical fit.

In contrast, if the role of business is to benefit society, including through the provision of meaningful work, then the natural corollary is to augment job roles wherever possible, and substitute only where necessary. Their belief is that there is a future where humans are more capable, not more obsolete and that technology should improve the quality of work and over time create new roles as it displaces others.

Many people's roles in businesses have already evolved, with some tasks substituted through automation and others further enabled through augmentation. Overall to date the impact is often to enhance aspects of a job without replacing it entirely, and fears of imminent widespread job losses have not materialised, though there are early signs in some sectors and business functions. So far automation tends to dominate in narrow well defined tasks with clear metrics, whereas augmentation is also very common particularly in complex areas of work such as medicine. But the landscape will change in coming years with the widespread introduction of AI assistants and developments linking AI and robotics. It is here that profound business choices will be made that have much wider social impact. Decisions about whether to automate or augment will be shaped not only by the economic constraints and opportunities afforded for new business models and markets, but by what business sees as its role in society.

It is not a level playing field. We need also to

recognise the huge power and influence of the current leaders of the tech sector. As MIT Professor David Autor notes in a 2023 paper "Can we have a pro-worker AI?":

"Beyond economic incentives, the dominant intellectual paradigm in today's digital tech sector – among both business leaders and academic researchers – favours the automation path. A major focus of AI research is to attain human parity in a vast range of cognitive tasks and, more generally, to achieve "artificial general intelligence" that fully mimics and then surpasses capabilities of the human mind. This intellectual focus encourages automation rather than the development of human-complementary technologies." [55]

At the recent business seminars organised by Blueprint in autumn 2025, the charity CEO Sarah Gillard posed this question:

"What needs to be true such that this paradigm-shifting technology might be deployed, particularly by business, in a way that enhances our human dignity, satisfies our innate sense of fairness and contributes to the common good?"[56]

Many factors were discussed. But a striking common theme was the need for collective discussion and deliberation – both within individual business, with trade unions, and in society through mechanisms such as citizens' assemblies. In individual businesses when consulted many employees are realistic, thoughtful and innovative, and contribute usefully to enable businesses to "do what we do better, faster and cheaper", as well as stimulate business innovation. One AI leader in a large organisation with no strong union presence called for collective bargaining to create internal structures for discussion about the deployment of AI systems and how best to realise their potential. It was noted that businesses with more inclusive cultures are better positioned to navigate AI's challenges. And business type is also relevant – mutuals and employee owned businesses, for instance, having greater leeway to consult and consider broader outcomes, whereas public companies face tighter shareholder constraints, with a greater tendency for top-down decisions.

This points to the importance of wider systemic issues in shaping how business leaders think and act. The advance of purpose-led business at its best is a positive cultural transformation which seeks to put the common good at the heart of business success. It is necessary but not sufficient. We also need to consider how to institutionalise greater worker voice and participation in decisions taking. And the incentive structure for investment in public companies and private equity needs to adapt so that a thriving and productive jobs environment is encouraged. This will need regulatory change including to the tax system to correct the current systemic bias towards automation.

David Autor outlines a wonderfully positive potential future in which AI systems are deployed to upskill workers, enhance education and level up employment, But he warns:

"There is no guarantee that the transformative capabilities of generative AI will be used for the betterment of work or workers. The bias of the tax code, of the private sector generally, and of the technology sector specifically, leans towards automation over augmentation. But there are also potentially powerful AI-based tools that can be used to create new tasks, boosting expertise and productivity across a

55. Can We Have Pro-Worker AI — Acemoglu, Autor, Johnson (2023-09-19)

56. See Blueprint's approach set out here A-framework-for-using-AI-booklet-draft-1.pdf

range of skills."[57]

Those attending Blueprint's seminars agreed that what happens in the next couple of years is critical – akin to how decisions made by social media companies in 2013-15 have had such far reaching consequences in the decade since. Design choices and investments will be made which will shape business activity and the shape of work over the longer term.

There are some encouraging signs that the bias towards automation is under increasing scrutiny as business leaders become more aware of the risks of outsourcing judgement to AI systems. Efficiency gains made at the cost of the capacity to think and understand long term consequences is a clear business risk. As AI systems become embedded across business functions more leaders are becoming alive to the need to specify and ensure human accountability, and guard against the atrophying of the human capacity to analyse and judge. As Benjamin Laker wrote recently reflecting on discussions on AI at Davos in January 2026:

"The future belongs to organizations that treat AI as a partner in thinking, not a substitute for it."[58]

In her fascinating history The Story of Work[59], Jan Lucassen surveys the impact of successive technological transformations on the world of work. Automation is centuries old, and work has been constantly changing and evolving, with new jobs being created over time as old ones go. A striking conclusion from her study is that the desire to work is deeply human:

"We relate to each other through work.. Although work is driven by need mankind also works because it produces self esteem and elicits esteem from others"

This empirical observation also chimes with the consistent affirmation in Catholic Social Teaching that worthwhile, dignified and relational work is essential to realising the potential of people and the vitality and creativity of society. We need to navigate this latest era of technological change with clear social objectives to which businesses contribute. AI innovation can become the midwife of wider shared prosperity - but only if we make conscious choices about business purpose, structural reform and the preservation of meaningful work. The next few years will determine which path we take.

"AI innovation can become the midwife of wider shared prosperity – but only if we make conscious choices about business purpose, structural reform and the preservation of meaningful work."

57. ibid.

58. AI Is Moving From Innovation To Governance And Leaders Aren't Ready

59. Jan Lucassen, The Story of Work, Yale University Press, 2021

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p46: New York Wages for Housework Committee, Welfare Conference Poster, 1976. From the collection of Silvia Federici; reproduced in Silvia Federici and Arlen Austin, eds., The New York Wages for Housework Committee 1972–1977: History, Theory and Documents (Autonomedia, 2019). Image: Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 4.0.

p58: Jacquie Ursula Caldwell, drawing; text from Judy Quinlan, "Notice to All Governments"; New York Wages for Housework Committee, The Women of the World Are Serving Notice! / Wages for Housework, 1974. From the collection of Silvia Federici. Image: Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 4.0.

"Solidarity means much more than engaging in sporadic acts of generosity. It means thinking and acting in terms of community. It means that the lives of all are prior to the appropriation of goods by a few. It also means combatting the structural causes of poverty, inequality, the lack of work, land and housing, the denial of social and labour rights. It means confronting the destructive effects of the empire of money... Solidarity, understood in its most profound meaning, is a way of making history, and this is what popular movements are doing."

Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, 116

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