



INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY INTERVIEW SERIES, 2018

A series of interviews with working class women from west London

To mark international women's day...

AngryWorkers would like to share five stories of working women in the sprawling city of London in 2018. They are from a cross-section of people that we have met in our neck of the woods: the western suburban hinterland that is home to many migrants, new and old, who bust their asses at work and at home, who are on the frontlines of austerity and brexit policies, but who all live in relative obscurity. The papers are full of stories of scroungers, thieves, murderers and rip-off merchants. They are bleeding this country dry, apparently. But the people who keep the economy going – those doing the low-paid jobs, those doing the lionshare of caring work – are rarely given any meaningful space to articulate their own experiences, needs and desires. We hope this series plays a modest role in giving some space over to them.

Over the last few years, there has been an avalanche of campaigns and news centred around the violence and harassment of women: the relentless everyday sexism and harassment through #MeToo on social media, which followed the accusations of rape by Harvey Weinstein, that itself was the latest in a string of high-profile men outed as rapists. More recently we have heard about the collusion of humanitarian institutions with the widespread sexual abuse of young women and girls. This followed on from reports about the collusion of state and public agencies in regional paedophile rings. All of these cases are seen as 'scandals'. This extends to news on exploitation in general: for example, the 'victorian conditions' endured by the workers of Amazon and Sports Direct. But the focus on

'scandals', preferably with a discernible villain like Weinstein, Crosby, Saville or 'Muslim men', keeps the daily and structural oppression of working class women hidden in the shadows.

In the current aftermath of the financial crisis in 2008 working class women have been squeezed between welfare cuts and the increased pressure to work more on one side, and the conservative backlash that promotes traditional family values on the other. This has a practical purpose: valorising the family sets it up as a safe haven or ideal antidote to these times of austerity and hardship - as well as the masculine uncertainties it invokes. But it is increasingly impossible to both bring in an extra-income and create a family haven. Instead, these conflicting pressures of modern life make the home into a place of tension, that can easily boil over into violence.

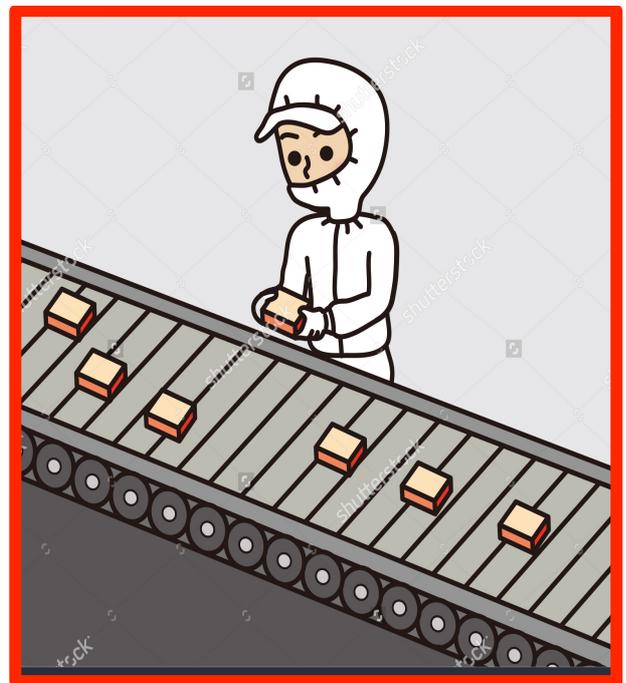
We need to address the main contradiction of women's continued triple burden (of waged work, emotional labour and male violence) in an age of supposed equality. The role of a feminist movement and analysis is vital if we are to properly understand and respond to the worsening situation of the labour market in terms of real wages, precarisation, legal rights and the slashing of the social wage. We cannot afford to cling to the old labour organising models of 'natural leaders' and singular workplace-focused issues, that, implicitly, relegate women to the margins. Now, more than ever, we need class action that has its roots in the experiences of working class lives. If this is not the starting point of our political activities, we lay ourselves open to 'representative' talking heads that fill the vacuum of ideas. There are aspects of the feminist movement in the UK that do this better, for

example supporters of Yarl's Wood detainees.¹ Often though, feminism does not touch the lives of the women it professes to place at its centre. A feminism that largely focuses on 'choice', when it come to, for example, the question of abortion, sex work or 'gender identity' often fails to address the material forces on working class women which often make such 'choices' a privilege.

The women in this interview series bear the brunt of sexism in the workplace, racist border controls and an increasingly punitive welfare system, with little recourse to amplify their experiences through the media or organisations that can represent them. We don't just want to share them as 'sad tale' fodder, but as the foundation upon which we can orient our political work. We need to build working class, grassroots organisations that address working class women's issues. AngryWorkers tries to do this with our workplace newsletters,² weekly solidarity network drop-ins and newspaper.³

We think these short interviews show the complexity and richness of womens' lived experiences in relation to the broader changes of capitalist expansion and crisis. They should be our starting point.

We hope you find them interesting.



1. Hanna

Since 2004 many people from Eastern Europe have come to work in the UK - to make and save some money, perhaps learn English and make the most of the opportunities available to them. They are often either demonised in the media or seen as victims of the system, prepared to accept any pay or conditions. But we rarely hear their own voices. Like the vast majority of people from EU8 countries, Hanna is of working age, in employment, and is over-qualified for the work she does here. Like many others, she has worked in other European countries before reaching England. There is some power in this mobility: you can move job if things are not good at work - especially when you have been in the country for a while, know some people, and can perhaps speak a little English. But with poor pay and conditions endemic in the lower ranks of the labour market, moving job will not necessarily improve things much. With possible restrictions in mobility on the horizon with Brexit, can this be translated into an organised collective power against the bosses?

¹ <https://detainedvoices.com/tag/yarls-wood/>

² <https://angryworkersworld.files.wordpress.com/2018/02/bakkavor-bulletin-issue-3.pdf>
<https://angryworkersworld.files.wordpress.com/2017/10/bakkavor-bulletin-issue-1.pdf>

³ https://workerswildwest.files.wordpress.com/2016/07/www4_finalproof.pdf

“I was born in 1989 in Hungary. I lived with my parents in a small town called Lecksemét. After high-school, my parents wanted me to go to the university. I passed the entrance examination but I did not get enough points for a scholarship. So I had to pay more than £1200 per year in student fees.

I went to Budapest and registered to a college. I studied tourism and catering for one year. My parents paid everything for me but I felt bad about it. I took a part-time job at Tesco. I was working night shift, shelving clothes and things like that. After one year, I wanted to stop the Uni but my parents wanted me to continue. I shifted to a financial course. It was quite mathematical, which I did not mind, but it was very boring. Simultaneously, I found work as a room attendant in a five star hotel. I liked the job but it was paid less than £300 per month. Of course, in Hungary the rents are less expensive than in London, but the food for example is just as expensive. During my time in Budapest, I was living in a big private dormitory. We were four girls in a room. The showers were at the end of the corridor. I paid £90 per month for this accommodation. In the end, they closed the dormitory. I lived in the family of an ex-boyfriend for a while, but they were so poor that I felt bad about staying there.

I decided to stop attending college and find a job. With a friend of mine, we registered at an agency called Otto Workforce. This was in 2011. We had interviews in English in Budapest and they sent us to the Netherlands. We were picking in a huge warehouse near a town called Oss. We all lived in bungalows. The accommodation cost around £50 per week. The agency would pick us by car in the morning to bring us to the warehouse and they would bring us back to the bungalows in the evening.

Every day you would learn if you had work for this day or not. There were many Eastern Europeans there. At the beginning it was okay, but then they chose a Polish guy to be the supervisor and he would only give work to the Polish. My friend and I asked for another job. We worked in a chiller for some time. Then they sent us to a place close to Düsseldorf. We lived in dormitories in an old military base. There were people from Poland, Romania, Hungary, Slovakia, Slovenia, Czech Republic. There was not enough work there, we could not pay for the accommodation. It was always harder for women, because some jobs they would only give to men. So we came back to Hungary.

In the summer of 2012, I got a job opportunity through a colleague of my mum who worked as a manicure-pedicurist in Cyprus. I went there and learnt about this trade. I was paid £750 per month and worked 5 days a week. I lived with my mum's colleague. The rent was £200. The job was good but I was lonely there. I tried to learn a bit of Greek but I did not have lots of motivation as I did not really want to stay. I could not even go to the sea because we were in the centre of the island and there was almost no transportation. There were bus stops, but you never knew if and when a bus would come, and where it would go... It also turned out that my mum's colleague was very unfriendly. She made me pay for a lot of things and never contributed to anything. The house was not properly insulated and in the winter it got very cold in there. My mum came visit me around Christmas and when she saw the situation she took me back to Hungary with her.

I am an only child, but I have lots of cousins. When I look at my friends and cousins, I can say that many of them have left Hungary. Of the ones who have stayed, I've got friends who

work in a Mercedes factory, one as a mechanic and one as a welder. Those are skilled jobs and the pay is a bit higher. But it's harder for women because they will only be put to work on the line in these factories. A cousin of mine works at a reception desk. She works 60 hours per week but is only paid £4 per hour and this is not even the worst hourly rate you can get. I think the minimum wage is around £200 per month in Hungary.

In 2013, I decided to move to the UK. A cousin of mine fell in love with a guy from Azerbaijan who had lived in the UK for a long long and had a UK passport. He found a room for us in Brentwood. The room was huge and I had to pay £210 per month. I found a job as a room attendant in a hotel. I liked the job. The staff was all British and they were extremely nice with me. When I left they gave me lots of presents and I cried.

In January 2014, my cousin moved back to Hungary. She had split with the guy and found a Hungarian boyfriend online. I could not keep the huge room on my own so I found a boxroom online for £65 per week. It was near Bank station. The flatmates were nice. They were from Italy, Spain, Romania. I applied for a job in the Hilton Hotel but had a bad feeling there. At the same time, I got a text message from the agency Omni for a room attendant job in the Park Plaza hotel, which I think is the second biggest hotel in London. It was a full time job, but paid at the minimum wage through the agency. I was working from 8am to 4:30pm with a 30 minutes unpaid break, but at least they would give us food. What was unfair was that if you could not finish the rooms you had to do in this time frame, then you had to do unpaid overtime, which happened regularly. I do not regret that I worked there though, because I met my best friend in this place, a Hungarian girl. There were also

many Romanians in housekeeping.

After a couple of months, I decided that I wanted a Monday to Friday job. I registered at another local temp agency. They got me a job in a chocolate factory in Park Royal. There were maybe a hundred people working there, plus the agency staff. I met my second best friend in this factory. There were only a few British workers, but many Polish, Lithuanian, Romanians. They put me in production. The shift was from 2pm to 11pm and I worked 6 days a week. It was still a minimum wage job (at the time the hourly rate was £6.50).

I was not happy with working 6 days a week because I paid too much in taxes and it was not worth it. I complained to the head of production. I thought she would fire me but in fact she offered me a contract. The hourly pay was £6.66 at the beginning but it went up to £8.75 after six months. This was in February 2015. I had a lot of responsibilities. In the morning, I was supposed to plan everything for the day, the order in which we would treat the different orders, etc. There was a lot to think about, for example one should not do an order with black chocolate before one with white chocolate, because black chocolate is harder to clean and will contaminate white chocolate. But although I planned everything carefully, the packing manager would always change all my plans, which was really annoying.



I loved the job and was really dedicated. I even bought a couple of things myself to improve work. For example, I bought a fork we used to make shapes on hot chocolate because the ones we had in the factory did not work properly. One day, I bought amaretto biscuits at Tesco because I was sure the head of production would have forgotten to order them and we needed them for a decoration. I knew everything there. I would test the different types of chocolates, etc. I even thought of becoming a 'chocolatier'. But the head of production, a German lady we called 'Hitler', was really terrible. I cried almost every day after work because of her. In February 2016, I decided to leave, but I still miss that job. Before leaving, I trained my friend there. Now she is just below the head of production. She has lots of responsibilities but had to fight to get £9.75 per hour, which is still not enough. The 'chocolatier' gets £12 per hour.

In October 2015 I had moved to Greenford with my boyfriend. I like the area. It's also convenient because it's close to Heathrow. Now I still live here, but not with my boyfriend anymore. I have to say that life was not easy when I was working day shift and he was working night shift. After a while he could not stand the night shift any more and had a mental breakdown. It was not only the night work but also the drugs, it was too much.

After the chocolate factory, I registered in several temp agencies again. I was sent to a car parts warehouse in Feltham (easy but boring); then to a food distribution warehouse in Park Royal (working in the cold area at 5C). We had to separate fresh garlic and despatch it in small bags. It was a bit disgusting because they were many snails. We also had to pack lots of different types of flowers, leaves, etc. in bags

that would be sent to posh restaurants in London. I don't even know how people can eat those!

After this, I found a job through a colleague from the chocolate factory, a Hungarian lady who was a carer and took care of three disabled ladies. I was supposed to take care of a disabled lady. I would stay at her place for 24 hours, 2 or 3 days a week. When I was there, I had to wake up at 4:30, take care of her four dogs, wash the clothes of his 19-year old son, etc. Lots of things which had nothing to do with helping the disabled lady. I think you have to be submissive to do this type of job. I did not like it. I stayed only for one month. I was paid cash in hand there.



At this point, a friend of mine started a little business making and selling traditional Hungarian 'chimney cakes' at a market in Stratford. I decided to help her. We did that from Monday to Friday until Christmas 2016, but then my friend decided to stop. It was not easy to make enough money and it was getting very cold on the market.

In 2017, I found a packing job online, through the 'Indeed' website. I had a contract but the pay was still only £7.20 per hour, the minimum wage then. I was working for a

pharmaceutical company in Park Royal. Actually, it was much more than packing: we had to operate lots of different machines, and they wanted us to read all the regulations concerning these machines, because they were afraid that an inspector would come and realise that we were not trained to use them. There were three supervisors, a Polish, a British and an Indian. They were friendly. We would go out together from time to time, go to pubs, etc. But I did not like the job. I felt very lonely standing on the side of a machine for hours.



We had to learn so much but we were still paid very badly. I thought it was not fair. What was also strange was that they were changing their plans all the time. The organisation was weird. I knew that the same factory was operated before by another company who was forced to close down after an inspection. What always bothered me was that the new company seemed to have strong ties to the old one. It looked unclear to me. Anyway, after a few months I decided to leave and shortly after everyone in production was fired. There are still people working in the offices, but I do not understand what they do.

Now I found a job as a cleaner, near Oxford Circus. I know that the job is okay for me because I feel relaxed there. I think it's a good sign where you are not stressed going to work.

I do not want to go back to Hungary. Of course, I miss my family a bit, but I couldn't live their lives. My parents

live in a small flat in my home-town. I could not live with them. My friends at home can't save anything. They don't even have money to go out. The only thing they do is get drunk every weekend. A friend of mine works in a printing company for £2 per hour. Another one works in customer services in a kind of B&Q store; sometimes she works 18 hours a day. My cousin's boyfriend has a very good job, he is a web developer, but lately I learnt that the company does not pay his salary...

In Hungary, you can only afford to go in holidays once a year, and only in a nearby country, Croatia or Bulgaria, maybe Turkey. In August last year, I went to Ibiza: I would not be able to go if I was working there. And you can have a much healthier life here. For example, the oat milk I like to drink is £1 here but £2 in Hungary. Here I can easily go to the gym, but in Hungary I could not afford it.

For all these reasons, I want to stay here.

Of course, now there is all this talk about Brexit. But I'm not afraid. I've been working here for five years. I've got a contract. I don't think they will ask me to leave. And in the worst case, I will go to another country and find another job. I don't think it will be a problem. In any case, I don't want to go back to Hungary. But you have to be strong when you are alone."

AngryWorkers are a political collective based in west London. We get jobs in the bigger local workplaces and see how we can organise with our co-workers. We encourage workers' self-activity and mutual help. We run weekly solidarity network drop-ins and distribute a local workers' newspaper. Get in touch!
www.angryworkersworld.wordpress.com
www.workerswildwest.wordpress.com