

# The Politics of Disablement and Precarious Work

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THE  
POLITICS OF  
DISABLEMENT  
&  
PRECARIOUS  
WORK

Jan 2023

INITIAL  
RESEARCH  
REPORT

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# WHAT THE PROJECT IS ABOUT

This project focuses on the paid and unpaid work done by people who identify as being disabled, neurodivergent, chronically ill, experiencing mental distress, and/or having impairments and who work in the gig economy. I will use the term 'disabled people' to keep the wordcount short.

The project shows that (and how) disablement oppression and exploitation through work take place within and outside waged work. The idea that unemployed people and gig economy workers are 'unproductive' / do not 'work' (much or at all) is false. The fewer resources and means for support one has, the more work they are forced to do themselves, on their own. In other words, austerity measures, precarious working conditions, disbelief from professionals and other people, and increased charges to social care (to name but a few examples) transfer and create more (unwaged) work for disabled people. This situation leaves disabled people with little time and resources to rest, resist, support themselves and others, and organise.

With this project, I highlight a wide variety of forms of work that disabled people in the gig economy do on a daily basis, and argue that this is work that current society, state institutions, employers, and the disabling capitalist system itself depend on. Instead of simply seeking either 'full employment' or 'the abolition of work', we instead need to first identify what work needs to be abolished, altered, and/or expanded. Such identification can be done by thinking beyond capitalist imperatives and enacting different ways of relating to one another.

## **Literatures informing the project:**

Disability Studies, Critical Political Economy, Autonomist Marxism, other resources from Sociology and Politics.

# THE PROJECT'S AIMS

1

## **IDENTITY-RELATED**

Find out how on what basis common ground could be established between people who identify as being disabled, chronically ill, neurodivergent, having impairments, and/or experiencing mental distress.

2

## **DAY-TO-DAY PAID & UNPAID WORK**

Highlight how participants navigated and resisted day-to-day work. 'Work', in this context, refers to activities that take place both for a job and outside of it.

3

## **HOW TO MAKE SENSE OF IT ALL**

Show why the UPIAS-inspired social model together with recent Marxist approaches to work and capitalism help to understand and inform collective challenges the current politics of disablement and work in the UK.

# THE PROJECT'S CONTRIBUTORS

## 27 participants

### Identifying as being:

- disabled,
- neurodivergent,
- chronically ill,
- experiencing mental distress,
- having impairments.
- Paid work - precarious, gig economy work
- Location: UK



### **PARTICIPANTS' INDUSTRIES**

retail (food stores and cafes), catering, social care, post-16 education, journalism, creative (audio-visual production, musical, theatre, arts and crafts), healthcare, planning, automotive, advocacy, and more - in the private, public, and third sectors.



### **PARTICIPANTS' JOBS**

administrative, (shop) greeting, teaching, cleaning, checkout operating, social media communications, warehouse work, fostering, personal assistance, door-to-door sales, sign language interpreting, online tutoring, examining, therapy provision, research, advocacy, translation and proofreading, journalistic, leading a choir, arts projects, consultancy and educational projects, and more.



### **WORK ARRANGEMENTS**

zero-hours contracts, casual and agency work, work for outsourced companies, payments-by-results, self-employment, (imposed) part-time work, freelance, managing a small Community Interest Company with income from fixed-term projects, internship, short-term contracts, working informally.

# TIMELINE

## JANUARY - NOVEMBER 2020

27

### **JAN - SEP 2020**

27 interviews

- 2 before the pandemic (in cafes, face-to-face)
- 25 during the Covid19 pandemic (over Zoom, Skype, phone, and WhatsApp)

12

### **SEP - NOV 2020**

12 diaries over 8 weeks

- hard-copy notebooks
- online (audio, written, video, and photo-based) diaries via a phone-based diary app and its browser version, or via WhatsApp

10

### **OCT - NOV 2020**

10 post-diary interviews

- over Zoom and Skype

# WHAT WE EXPLORED

## Matters discussed in the initial interviews:

- past and present experiences of waged work – including pay, working conditions, reasonable adjustments, others’ attitudes at work, resistance and trade unions;
- identification in relation to disability;
- how and to what extent participants had time and resources to rest;
- other work participants were doing outside their job(s);
- participants’ experiences of the social security system;
- what participants thought of the labour and disabled people’s movements in the UK;
- what it means to be a ‘productive member of society’; alternatives to the productivity ‘principle’ of valuing people in society.

## The focus of diaries:

- ·daily reflections on participants’ waged and unwaged work;
- ·weekly prompting questions about pay, work, resting, whether participants experienced instances of, e.g., unsolicited advice during the week.

## Matters discussed in post-diary interviews:

- ·how participants experienced the diary keeping phase;
- ·how the knowledge produced through the project could be disseminated to others who may be interested in these topics.

# INITIAL FINDINGS

## IDENTITY-RELATED

The question of disability-related identity is one over which there is a lot of disagreement - both in activist circles and in academic literature.

The interview discussions showed that there can be many different interpretations of identity. These interpretations depend on a person's:

- political inclinations;
- familiarity with particular models of disability;
- experiences of dealing with the state and the medical system;
- life story;
- assumptions about disability, impairments, chronic illness, mental distress, neurodivergence; other reasons.

When identities are regarded as simply different and unconnected, this can lead to problematic divisions. To eliminate disablement oppression and exploitation in society, common ground needs to be found.

### Recommendation

- Regardless of what identity terms participants used to describe themselves, all talked about the disabling injustices they faced;
- Whilst through the social model, a distinction is made between 'disability' and 'impairments', mental distress & neurodivergence cannot necessarily be regarded as 'impairments';
- My proposed non-identity concept 'subjects of disablement' would be useful to stress the commonality of being subjected to structural capitalist disablement (i.e. oppression and exploitation). Subjects of disablement are all people who are neurodivergent, chronically ill, who experience mental distress, or have impairments - who may or may not assume the identity 'disabled'. 'Subjects of disablement' would complement the (political) identity 'disabled people' and allow for one's chosen terms for identity (& newer identities may emerge later).

# INITIAL FINDINGS (I)

## DAILY WORK-RELATED

### **Gig economy working conditions**

Participants reported high levels of precarity in relation to pay, workers' rights, and reasonable adjustments. More autonomy was reported by participants who had set up their own CICs, although they, too, experienced financial insecurity and income fluctuation.

### **Assisting oneself and others**

Participants reported doing assistance work for themselves and others such as family members, friends, colleagues - regularly. Some of this work was done due to a lack of other sources of support (replacing the sources that should have been there in the first place).

### **Resting**

None of the participants had enough time and means to fully rest. Resting took place for a wide variety of reasons, but often it was done in preparation for the next day of (imposed) work. In the post-diary interviews, all participants reported wishing to have had more time and resources to rest. Resting isn't simply an 'absence of work'.

### **Dealing with the individual model in daily life**

Participants gave accounts of being misunderstood and disbelieved not only by professionals (medical, state) but also by friends, colleagues and family. Participants had to do the work of navigating, resisting, and/or accommodating (especially) non-disabled people's prejudices. This work was taking up headspace and energy.

# INITIAL FINDINGS (II)

## DAILY WORK-RELATED

### **Social security & unpaid work for the state**

Negative experiences of the social security system were reported by most participants, including: being sanctioned, assessors lying in their reports, and the whole process making participants feel suicidal. The participants with more positive experiences suggested that these instances are rare. Many participants were actively trying not to claim social security due to the harrowing experiences they (or people close to them) had in the past. Those who did use social security had to adhere to the demands of their Job Coaches to do job searches, apply for particular jobs, or leave their previous careers behind. The coaches were acting as if they were participants' managers. In effect, participants were working for the state, for free.

### **Subversion and collective self-activity**

Whilst some participants were active in trade unions, others were not members - even though all participants viewed unions positively. Reasons for non-membership varied and were often related to: the precarity of their jobs; being wrongly told by those in union staff or work managers that they couldn't join a union; not knowing that unions for their particular sector existed; reporting that they could not afford the membership fee. All participants suggested that more could and should be done by unions to centre disabled gig economy workers' interests and support their involvement in union activities/structures.

Some participants were also doing organising work in other activist groups, including DPOs; some were doing volunteering work in foodbanks, mutual aid, disability advocacy groups and refugee groups.

# INITIAL FINDINGS

## MAKING SENSE OF DISABLEMENT & WORK

Waged work in general, and gig economy work in particular, as well as other forms of non-waged work are exploitative and reproduce capitalist disablement. We cannot talk about disablement without talking about the wage system, and vice-versa.

Dealing with the DWP, Job Coaches, and 'professionals' is some of disabled people's unpaid work that institutions depend on. Many disabled people are made to do this unpaid work to maintain state, employer, and generally capitalist domination, and as a condition for mere survival. This domination takes place at the expense of disabled people's autonomy, flourishing, aspirations, and liberation.

Organising, mutual support, resisting, some types of volunteering, and (yes!) resting are forms of work that can lead to social change - we need more of this kind of work.

Some forms of work need to be abolished, others altered, and others still expanded. As a society, we need to make space for more resources and time for rest and organising, and to eliminate work that maintains oppression and exploitation. No particular form of work should be the condition for one's survival. The transfer of work from employers, the state, professionals, and others onto disabled people needs to be opposed, ended and/or reversed.

The UPIAS-inspired social model of disability, together with Autonomist, Black, and Feminist Marxism are the best approaches through which structural disablement can be understood, in order to organise collectively for its abolition. **We want bread but roses too.**

# WHY THESE FINDINGS & ARGUMENTS MATTER

## **Policy**

they could be resources to counteract disablist narratives around 'productivity' and stress the need for alternatives (& rest); demands for survival are not enough;

## **Individuals**

they could be resources for individuals and collectives to assess their own day-to-day work, to then (to the extent possible) re-prioritise activities, resources, and time;

## **Organising groups**

they could be resources for disabled people's organisations, trade unions, and other community and activist groups when building campaigns;


## **Society**

bringing new arguments within societal narratives (including through the media) is one way in which change can be enacted over time;



## **Employers**

employers will never make changes benevolently by reading a research report - hence the groups and individuals mentioned above are my focus.



# WHAT DO YOU THINK?




How (if at all) is this research useful to you/ the organisation(s) you are engaged in?



How could these findings and arguments reach and be made useful to others?



Off the back of this work, what else would be useful to do?



Please feel free to email me suggestions or arrange a meeting to discuss ideas.

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