

Fulfilling the 'British Way': Beyond constrained choice - Amazon workers' lived experiences of workfare

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Abstract

This article makes a distinctive contribution to critiquing the Taylor Review of Modern Working Practices (TRMWP). Rejecting TRMWP's abstracted concept of 'choice' and its celebration of the 'British way' of job creation, it emphasises the degree of *compulsion* experienced by low-pay, temporary workers in local labour markets. The empirical focus is on Amazon's 'fulfilment centre' at Swansea and draws on testimonies of 'associates', both permanent and, mostly, agency temps including migrant workers. The article situates these worker experiences in job-starved labour markets, considering the role of temporary worker agencies (TWAs) and the effects of workfare and benefit sanctions. The evidence compels a reconceptualization of the triangular relationship between TWAs, employers and temp workers as quadrilateral, emphasising the role of the state. A brutal, digitally-enabled lean workplace regime intersects with a brutal, digitally-enabled workfare regime which serves to thoroughly critique Taylor's absurdly optimistic characterisation of choice.

Introduction

The Taylor Review of Modern Working Practices (TRMWP) is riddled with contradictions. The most egregious concerns its relentless advocacy of the 'distinctive strengths of [our] existing labour markets and framework of regulation', its celebration of the 'British way', which it claims, has been unequivocally successful in creating jobs. Yet, this paean of praise to flexibility must be set against the labour market iniquities which prompted the Conservative Government to commission the review in the first place. Context is important. The year 2016 saw media exposure of the employment rights' deficit in the 'gig' or platform economy, particularly at Deliveroo and Uber. Relatedly, awareness grew that much self-employment was bogus, with deleterious consequences for the many workers, not employees, involved. The appalling employment and work conditions revealed at Sports Direct's Shirebrook warehouse (BIS, 2016) epitomised the ills of many contemporary workplaces; low-paid, insecure, arduous toil performed by disposable workers lacking basic rights and for whom in-work poverty is inescapable.

Faced with this outpouring, Prime Minister May's Government sought to minimise political damage by embracing a discourse of empathy with British workers, the so-called just about managing. Political repositioning required an initiative. Something had to be done or, more appositely, seen to be done. However, the outcome was a report that is ill-informed, evidence-light or plainly deficient and which glosses over, or misses entirely, realms of workers' experiences at the bottom-end of the labour market (Bloodworth, 2018). If its feeble recommendations were implemented, they would patently fail to meet its 'overriding ambition' to ensure that 'all work in the UK should be fair and decent with a realistic scope for development and fulfilment' (Taylor et al, 2017:6)

This article welcomes the trenchant analysis of TRMWP's limitations by Bales et al (2018) and Moore et al (2017). They interrogate its conceptual flaws, exposing its neo-liberal and New Labour ideological underpinnings, its lack of international comparative perspective, its disregard of ILO's binding decent work standards and rights and the European Social Charter. Bales et al (2018) highlight Taylor's lacuna with respect to trade unions' ability to deliver meaningful participation for workers to remedy problems. The report's preference for 'light regulation' contrasts sharply with the government's actual preference for strict legislation with the Trade Union Act (2016) and curtailment of workers' rights, considerations that Taylor evades.

This article makes a distinctive contribution to this critique by emphasising the *compulsion* experienced by vulnerable, low-paid temporary workers in local labour markets. Dominated by neo-liberal assumptions TRMWP is predicated on the leitmotif of *choice*, so that in employment and jobs, ‘individuals should be able to decide’, their choices facilitated by light touch legislation and (minimal) regulation but not prescription. A telling foregrounding sentence declares: ‘The most important factors determining people’s experience of work lie in the relationship between those who hire employ and manage on the one hand and those whose services they employ on the other’ (ibid, 7). Here the employment relationship is depicted as an individualistic, fair and implicitly equal exchange between the buyers and sellers of services, where the latter exercise choices that improve their work situation. In Taylor’s Panglossian world, ‘the vast majority of employers understand the value of good employment practice’.

The TRMWP fleetingly acknowledges that certain labour markets may lead to poor outcomes at ‘the individual level’. In a few paragraphs (p.26), it claims to address the question, ‘Why the labour market does not work for everyone’. For Taylor the ‘key factor is an imbalance of power between individuals and employers’, where dominant local employers or dominant employers of certain skills constrain employees over ‘who they work for’, conceding that they ‘could struggle to get another job if they were to leave an unsatisfactory job’. This brief admission was prompted by the Sports Direct ‘scandal’ (BIS, 2016). However, these instances are treated as aberrant, localised exceptions to successful job creation and exercise of choice. Regarding Taylor’s celebration of choice, which draws on preference theory (Moore et al, 2018), TRMWP overlooks how workers’ options are pre-determined, not merely by government policy, but by the construction of labour markets according to employers’ interests (Bales et al (2018: 50). Such neglect is consistent with approaches that abstract the constituent elements of good work from their institutional settings and contexts (Findlay et al, 2017).

The worst Taylor conceives of is the exceptional case of monopsony, where a dominant local employer engages in ‘exploitation’ of surplus labour. Yet, for millions the prevalence of *constrained choice* is fundamental to ‘modern work’. The essential problematic unaddressed by Taylor, ‘third-wayers’ and neo-liberals alike is under what conditions choices are made. At worst, as this article distinctively argues, many face an inescapable *compulsion to work*, the only *choice* being *not to work* which brings loss of benefit and extreme privation.

Taking Taylor’s reference to warehouses (2017:26) as a point of departure, the article centres on workers’ experiences at Amazon’s ‘fulfilment centre’ (FC) at Jersey Marine, Swansea Bay. This study derives from an 18-month investigation into labour process, working time and conditions and employment. The first semi-structured interviews with agency temps (ATs) elicited unprompted testimony of benefit sanctions that had affected their transitions to employment or would be imposed if they left voluntarily. These testimonies suggested a logic of inquiry, using TRMWP as critical counterpoint. To appreciate fully the situation of these Amazon workers requires us to situate their lived experiences within a multi-layered, multi-dimensional analysis integrating insights from several disciplines with data from diverse sources. A series of questions is proposed. First, what were the circumstances of Amazon’s 2008 arrival in Swansea and what are the essential characteristics of its fulfilment centre? Second, what are the dominant features of the labour markets (unemployment, claimant rates, industry/occupational structure) in Swansea, Neath/Port Talbot (NPT) and Amazon’s catchment area? Answers are a first step in interrogating Taylor’s notion of choice. Relatedly, there is the need to consider the legacies of de-industrialisation that contribute to constraining employment possibilities. Third, given the importance of agency working in Amazon’s labour utilisation strategy, in what ways might debates on the nature of agency work (including migrants) elucidate the experiences

of Amazon ATs? Fourth, what are consequences of the UK's 'welfare to workfare' regime for unemployed workers and ATs?

The compelling testimonies of a cohort of Amazon workers are structured according to the following themes – their experiences of sanctions, their entrance(s) into Amazon, their work experiences and exits. Prior to evaluating this data the research process is explicated and the conclusion returns to the critique of Taylor and discusses additional salient theoretical issues.

Amazon in the UK

Welsh First Minister, Rhodri Morgan, welcomed the opening of Amazon's 'fulfilment centre' in 2008 as:

...a powerful shot in the arm for the Welsh economy and the Swansea Bay area...Amazon is one of only a handful of truly world brands that have emerged since the internet changed the way we live...alongside Google, eBay, AOL and more recently Facebook and MySpace. (Wiredgov, 2008)

Swansea was Amazon's fourth UK centre, after Milton Keynes (1998), Gourock (2004) and Dunfermline (2005). Morgan's celebration of Amazon as 'an iconic global company right at the forefront of the e-economy' contrasted sharply with existing knowledge of UK working conditions since 2001 (*Guardian*, 2001). Rather than delivering creative, high-tech knowledge work, it had revealed itself as an anti-union employer responsible for a highly pressurised, target-driven workplace regime, offering low pay and few progression opportunities, and stood accused of discriminatory practices against migrant workers. As e-commerce exploded and CEO Jeff Bezos pursued his ambition to make Amazon 'the everything store' (Stone, 2013), it hugely expanded, so by 2017 estimated permanent employment was 15,500 in 14 fulfilment centres, with 20,300 'peak-time' tempsⁱ. Concomitantly, disclosure of its employment practices, through TV documentaries (BBC, 2013), social activist blogs (Angry Workers of the World, 2015) and trade unions (GMB, 2018) increased. The Inverclyde Advice and Employment Rights Centre is a good example of local campaigns which expose the abuses of workers' rights (e.g. *Evening Times*, 2012). Moreover, Amazon's tax avoidance strategies have become the subject of widespread censure (Bowers, 2016).

Given this evidence, Amazon's receipt of Welsh and Scottish Governments totaling £16.5m for 2012-3 (Chakraborty, 2015), must be questioned in terms of sustainability and quality of jobs offered. For Swansea, it seems that £4.9m was spent on building roads and facilities infrastructure in what Morgan hailed as a 'textbook example of regional economic development', providing 'flexible working opportunities for people' (Wiredgov, 2008). Space prohibits a fuller analysis of the political economy of e-retailing and Amazon, but the important point given the paper's focus, is the state's role in subsidising Amazon's profitability and endorsing its workplace regime.

Legacies of Work and (Un-)Employment in South Wales and Local Labour Markets

The South Wales labour market in which Amazon inserted itself is an important context. The 1980s witnessed the devastation of coalmining with 35 of 39 pits closing, alongside the contraction of much of the steel, metalworking and manufacturing industries (Williams, 1998). A backdrop to this study was the perilous existence of Tata Steel at Port Talbot. The region's occupational profile has additionally been impacted by the closure of garment manufacturers Dewhirst, near Swansea and Burberry at Treorchy in 2007 (Blyton and Jenkins, 2013). Additionally, redundancies hit the electronics branch plants that had located in the valleys in the 1980s, attracted by grants and abundant cheap labour (Danford, 1996). Data reveals major shifts in Welsh employment towards services (WISERD, 2011:26-8). Between 1984 and 2007, 'business and other services' grew from 14.7 to 21.3 per cent and 'non-marketed' services from 21.8 to 28.7 per cent. Using Gross Value Add (GVA) as proxy for job

quality demonstrates the poor profile of Wales and the sub-regional level of Amazon's catchment area. GVA per head is £20,357 for the UK, £14,842 for Wales and £12,860 for West Wales and the Valleys, indicating 'uniquely poor performance' (WISERD, 2011:6)

Amazon's centre on the Swansea-NPT boundary, was inevitably influenced by these legacies. It first sourced labour from adjacent labour markets with extremely high unemployment and claimant count rates (Table 2). Both are higher still for Merthyr Tydfil, Blaenau Gwent, Rhymney, Cynon Valley and the Rhondda from which Amazon later recruited (NAW, 2009).

Table 1: Unemployment Rates (ILO), Claimant Benefit Rate (2009-2016) Swansea and Neath/Port Talbot

| Unemployment Levels % economically active | Yr.to June 2009 | Yr.to June 2010 | Yr.to June 2011 | Yr. to June 2012 | Yr.to June 2013 | Yr.to June 2014 | Yr.to June 2015 | Yr.to June 2016 |
|--|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| <i>Swansea</i> | 10.1 | 8.8 | 11.2 | 9.5 | 8.1 | 8.6 | 8.8 | 5.1 |
| <i>NPT</i> | 7.1 | 9.4 | 10.1 | 9.1 | 7.6 | 8.5 | 6.2 | 6.4 |
| Claimants of Unemployed Related Benefits i.e. JSA % residents (16-64) of population | | | | | | | | |
| <i>Swansea</i> | 3.7 | 3.2 | 3.4 | 3.3 | 2.8 | 2.5 | 2.0 | 2.3 |
| <i>NPT</i> | 4.1 | 3.2 | 3.5 | 3.6 | 3.1 | 2.7 | 2.0 | 2.5 |
| Claimants Benefits (excluding UC) i.e. JSA % residents (16-64) of population | | | | | | | | |
| <i>Swansea</i> | 3.7 | 3.2 | 3.4 | 3.3 | 2.8 | 2.5 | 2.2 | 2.3 |
| <i>NPT</i> | 4.1 | 3.2 | 3.5 | 3.6 | 3.1 | 2.7 | 2.4 | 2.5 |
| Claimants Benefits (excluding JSA) i.e. JSA % residents (16-64) of population | 13 | 12.7 | 12.1 | 11.9 | 10.9 | 10.7 | 10.9 | 10.4 |
| | 17.3 | 17.0 | 16.4 | 16.0 | 14.3 | 14.1 | 18.1 | 14.2 |

Occupational profile and sector differences between Swansea and NPT are discernible. Only 5.6 per cent of Swansea's workforce was in manufacturing, compared to 20.0 per cent for NPT, reflecting the continued significance of steel production and the local authority's development of a diversified industrial base (NPT, 2017). Contrastingly, Swansea has 11.5 per cent in combined financial/business and administrative services, compared to NPT's 5.7 per cent, partly resulting from Swansea's inducement of contact centres (Virgin, BT) which often overlapped with financial services (HSBC, Admiral) (Swansea Council, 2018). The public sector is commonly important, although Swansea is a greater locus of employment in health, education, local government and national administration (Driver Vehicle Licencing Agency). Council labour market experts question the extent to which Amazon offers a pathway to higher quality employment, regarding it as 'hermetically sealed' and that 'other than filling a gap with the pre-Xmas hire-and-let go cycle' plays little role in workplace transitions (*Interviews*, Adil Pirmohamed, Julie Davies). NPT officers were unable to identify a single case of synergy, given the differing skills, qualifications and work experiences required. A Swansea officer (*Interview*, Steve King) contrasted the skill sets at Amazon with those of the business/financial services cluster as exemplifying labour market segmentation with little crossover capability.

Thus, Amazon assembles its workforce from labour markets indelibly stamped by de-industrialisation, in which unemployment and claimant counts exceed Welsh and UK averages, where segmented labour sub-markets appear to operate and the backdrop is uncertainty regarding some existing permanent, full-time employmentⁱⁱ. The TRMWP disregards such structural factors that make entry into paid employment difficult, unsustainable or inappropriate and which mean highly constrained choice at best.

Agencies and Agency Temps

A critical review of literature on agency temporary employment provides conceptual and empirical insight into the dynamics underpinning Amazon's extensive utilisation of this form of contingent labour. Temporary work agencies (TWAs), distinct from directly-employed temps, have grown rapidly. The Resolution Foundation, analysing Labour Force Survey figures, estimated 865,000 UK agency workers in 2016, an increase of 200,000 since 2011. Temps are 340,000 of all agency workers, including the 'startling' (Judge and Tomlinson 2016:5) number of 440,000 permanent agency workers and 66,000 second jobs. The TUC (2015) estimated AWs at 3 per cent of the workforce.

TWA's essential attraction to clients lies in their ability to deliver 'numerical flexibility', contingent labour meeting the peaks and troughs of (often seasonal) demand at lower costs, with reduced benefits (no holiday/sick pay) and lower exit costs, while minimising companies' screening, recruitment and training expenses (Forde et al, 2003). Purcell et al (2004) proposed a model consisting of triangular sets of relationships between employer, worker and agency. Many focus on the demand side, ascribing to employers rational choices regarding the scale and scope of jobs to be 'externalised'. While evidence suggests that high-end professionals have been subject to these arrangements, the strongest trend is of standardised, low-end jobs for which performance is easily monitored and firm-specific skills or knowledge are not required. Nevertheless, the demarcation between core and peripheral workers is fluid, the boundaries continuously re-drawn as firms' make decisions contingent on multiple factors, including demand, product mix, the availability of labour with requisite skills, and agencies' ability to meet service level agreements.

On the supply side, agencies have multiple motives, including enhancing their reputational 'capital' by embedding themselves more fully in client firms. Purcell et al (2004:721) indicated a shift from short-term provision to 'new style labour resourcing', whereby agencies supply parts of a client's workforce as a 'medium to long-term strategic alternative to direct employment'. Forde et al (2008) suggest an expanding range of tasks and managerial functions as TWAs 'insinuate' themselves as key players with employers in labour market niches. However, traditional reasons, meeting cyclical or intermittent fluctuations in demand, dominate companies' use of temps.

Many studies document the harsh treatment of migrant workers (e.g. Potter and Hamilton, 2014; Sporton, 2013). Due to ambiguous legal status, undocumented (and some documented) migrant labour are particularly susceptible to ill-treatment. Lewis et al (2015) conceptualise their condition as 'hyper-precarity', the outcome of evolving interplay of neo-liberalised labour markets with restrictive immigration regimes. Reflecting Marx's theory of the reserve army, it is argued that this surplus-labour power from beyond the nation-state 'can be hired, fired and [even] deported without regard to social reproduction' (Wills et al, 2010). What distinguishes migrants from other precarious workers is their location at the nexus of employment and immigration precarity (Fudge, 2012). The Worker Registration Scheme (WRS) contributed to local agency employment by enabling east European migrants to fulfil their immigrant requirements. Key developments were the eight accession (A8) and, later, (A2) states. 'Managed migration' required WRS registration and restricted welfare benefits but WRS ended, following the EU Treaty of Accession (2011). Although multinational (MN) or transnational (TN) recruitment agencies undoubtedly contributed to the A8 migrant workforce (McDowell et al, 2008), local agencies became institutionally embedded within evolving migratory networks (Sporton (2013:449). MN/TN agencies have become less important as networks of family, friends and *in situ* contacts supplant them and local agencies become increasingly used by newly arrived migrants.

Larger agencies are most likely to be involved in on-site recruitment, management, supervision and payment, and in establishing direct relationships with employers. If agencies create a second-tier of employment for 'native'/local workers one question is whether migrant workers constitute a third hyper-flexible, hyper-vulnerable tier. Evidently, though, agencies are not stepping stones' to

permanent jobs (Forde and Slater, 2005; Sporton, 2013). The article explores these dynamics, from the perspective of Amazon agency temps, mostly locals but including a clutch of migrant workers.

From Welfare to Workfare

In the 1980s when de-industrialisation, crisis, re-structuring and government policy caused mass job lossⁱⁱⁱ, the neo-liberal turn brought stigma to the unemployed. For the first time, benefits were curtailed and penalties imposed (Fletcher and Wright, 2018:325). The introduction of 'Restart' interviews (1986) initiated formalised conditional welfare, ushering in the prolonged transition from the right to welfare to the compulsion of workfare observable in many Western countries (Trickey and Lødemel, 2001:43). The notion of social security became an anachronism (Patrick, 2017). The Job Seeker's Allowance (JSA) and Jobseeker's Agreements (JAs) represented a step-change, imposing mandatory back-to-work plans and jobseekers' diaries, by which claimants had to demonstrate job search activity. Advisers could legally instruct jobseekers to take specific actions deemed necessary for finding work. Thus, the principle of behavioural conditionality, with threats of sanction for failure to comply, was established (Fletcher and Wright, 2018).

Accepting these foundations New Labour intensified 'coercive conditionality', prioritising 'work first' and 'work for all' rhetoric and reform (Lindsay et al, 2007). Compulsory welfare-to-work programmes included the New Deal, Employment Zones and Working Neighbourhood Pilots, and claimant refusal incurred sanctions (Patrick, 2017:43). While New Labour balanced coercion with measures to 'make work possible', including the National Minimum Wage and Working Tax Credits, they exceeded the Conservatives in applying work-related conditionality to lone parents and the disabled through work-focused interviews. Many ill or disabled claimants were moved to Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) and forced to undergo Work Capability Assessments to determine benefit eligibility and fitness for work (DWP, 2015).

Conditionality dominated political rhetoric and process to an unprecedented degree. Jobcentre Plus united the discrete social security and employment services into one centralised agency enforcing procedural standardisation and limiting frontline worker discretion. Compliance was combined with meagre mandatory support (call centres, self-help, privatised services) all aimed at the swiftest labour market re-entry at lowest possible cost (Wright, 2011). Austerity-driven cost-cutting truncated face-to-face interviews to brief, unhelpful encounters delivering, largely, harsh decisions. Simultaneously, employment services marketization was accelerated (Greer et al, 2017). In this 'pseudo-market', the private and third sectors were awarded lucrative contracts to support individuals into employment and assess claimants' eligibility.

The Con-Dem Government (2010-5) continued 'work first' but toughened the benefits regime. The Welfare Reform Act (2012) marked a qualitative leap in punitive conditionality, a decisive turn to workfare. Fletcher and Wright (2018:332) detail the sanctions tariff; failure to apply for jobs or refusing Mandatory Work Activity brings 91 days benefit exclusion for a first or second 'offence' and 182-1095 days for a third. For those in work, Universal Credit (UC) supplanted WTC, and Claimant Commitments replaced JSAs as the new standardised, instrument of back-to-work conditionality for all UC, JSA and ESA-WRAG claimants. A crucial feature is mandatory registration on the Job Match platform, digital monitoring by which advisers monitor claimants' activities. Fletcher and Wright (2018) draw on Bentham's metaphor for his model prison – the Panopticon – to describe a surveillance system^{iv} which harvests data to justify sanctions. Now claimants are obliged, on pain of sanction, to evidence 35 hours-a-week job search; a part-time worker employed for 10 hours must now document 25 hours job search.

Table 2: Jobseekers Allowance Disallowance Referrals (DR) and Adverse Decisions (AD) (2008-2012)

| | 2008 | | 2009 | | 2010 | | 2011 | | 2012 | |
|----------------|------|-----|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| | DR | AD | DR | AD | DR | AD | DR | AR | DR | AD |
| Swansea | 2230 | 940 | 2270 | 990 | 2130 | 970 | 2610 | 1530 | 2810 | 1040 |
| Neath | 1670 | 860 | 1880 | 990 | 1880 | 1070 | 2170 | 1300 | 1830 | 930 |
| Port Talbot | 1430 | 720 | 1820 | 1020 | 1150 | 610 | 1350 | 740 | 1270 | 720 |
| Llanelli | 1070 | 500 | 1130 | 540 | 1060 | 520 | 1540 | 850 | 1590 | 810 |
| Gorseinon | 740 | 340 | 980 | 520 | 680 | 330 | 610 | 320 | 930 | 390 |
| Morrison | 1380 | 680 | 1470 | 770 | 1160 | 620 | 1650 | 980 | 1630 | 900 |
| Ystradgynlis | 220 | 80 | 310 | 120 | 350 | 190 | 260 | 190 | 390 | 150 |
| Aberdare | 830 | 470 | 880 | 470 | 940 | 540 | 1170 | 540 | 1620 | 610 |
| Porthcawl | 110 | 60 | 250 | 140 | 260 | 140 | 300 | 150 | 300 | 150 |
| Pyle | 290 | 160 | 430 | 290 | 520 | 310 | 670 | 360 | 680 | 360 |
| Merthyr Tydfil | 970 | 570 | 970 | 500 | 1400 | 790 | 1810 | 940 | 2420 | 1140 |
| Tredegar | 210 | 130 | 220 | 130 | 450 | 260 | 700 | 360 | 760 | 420 |

This workfare regime is an overriding context in South Wales in which employment becomes for many not a *choice* but *compulsion*. In the UK, one-third of JSA claimants (2010-15) had punitive sanctions imposed (NAO, 2016) and in the year to September 2016, the sanctions total for unemployed claimants is calculated at 300,000. Series data on numbers sanctioned and receiving ‘adverse decisions’ by local Jobseeker Plus offices (Official Statistics, 2013) enables us to drill deep into workfare’s localised effects. Annual totals for 2008-2012 for Swansea and NPT as adjacent labour markets and surrounding towns deliver finely-grained evidence of threatened and actual sanctioning in Amazon’s catchment area (Table 2). In aggregate, the proportion of adverse decisions increases from 2008 (43.7 per cent) to 2009 (51.4 per cent) to 2010 (53 per cent) and to 2011 (55.7 per cent)^v, evidence of an increasingly punitive trend.

There remains the important question of frontline advisers at Jobcentre Plus being obliged to implement sanction decisions. Here the contested terrain of the employment relationship in this highly-unionised (Public and Commercial Services Union – PCS) agency is a crucial factor. The DWP progressively reduced advisers’ ability to exercise discretion (Patrick, 2017; Wright and Stewart, 2016), while managers subject Jobcentre Plus staff to Performance Improvement Plans (PIPs)^{vi} if their sanctioning rates fall below prescribed targets, with underperforming workers labelled ‘not meeting expectations’ (House of Commons, 2015; *Guardian*, 2015). The PCS has condemned the ‘continued ramping up the sanctions regime’ and is committed to fighting targets for Jobcentre Plus advisers to defending affected members (PCS, 2014). A PCS survey found 61 per cent of DWP members pressurised into inappropriate referral of claimants for sanctioning. PCS challenged the results of an investigation by Neil Couling (Director General of the UC Programme), which denied systemic targeting, attributing instances to ‘rogue managers’.

Given the obligation on claimants to take *any* job, lest they are sanctioned, Taylor’s neglect or, more likely, purposive failure, to consider *compulsion* is remarkable. TRMWP contains not a single mention of ‘sanction’/‘sanctions’/‘sanctioned’, one reference to ‘jobseeker’ and none to ‘workfare’.

Sources and Methods

Qualitative data was gathered through semi-structured interviews in cafes, Wetherspoons’ pubs (surrogate community centres, see Bloodworth, 2018), bars, employees’ homes and even a rugby club. The schedule was structured around employees’/ex-employees’ work histories, their transition to Amazon, contracts, duration of employment, roles undertaken, nature of tasks, experiences of timings, targets and pressure, performance management practices, discipline, and the contrasting

experiences of temps and permanents. Interviews lasted a minimum of 45 minutes, but most were an hour long with a few stretching to three hours.

A serendipitous, snowballing approach to identifying subjects was adopted. Initial recruits were friends or relatives of local trade unionists, who provided further contacts and suggested additional candidates. These were complemented by random subjects, such as Steve working in a record shop frequented by one of the authors (Table 3). Meeting the initial research objective, respondents comprehensively reported on the labour process and work experiences from across the fulfilment centre. Yet, the first interviews delivered unprompted testimony of sanctions and the *compulsion* to work at Amazon, themes fully explored in later interviews. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, or extensive notes taken and written-up immediately afterwards. A matrix analytic strategy was adopted which organised data according to the principle themes. Ethical consent protocols were followed, confidentiality assured and individuals' names and identities anonymised, not least because of fears that current or future employment might be jeopardised or that Amazon might seek reprisal.

Table 3 here

Of the 25 respondents, 7 were permanent 'associates', all employed at interview, while 18 were currently or recently employed temps. Three permanents were lower-middle managers (Tier 1-4), with the remainder were in diverse fulfilment centre roles. Excepting Charlotte (hired at Amazon's start-up), every 'associate' commenced employment as an agency temp. Seven were female and 18 male, and 4 were migrant workers (3 from Eastern Europe, 1 from Latin America). The majority were aged 20-30 (17), with the others distributed as follows: (30-40, 2), (40-50, 2) and (50-60, 4). The most accurate residential designations are Swansea (12), NPT (3), Aberdare (3), Swansea Valleys (3), Llanelli (2), Merthyr (1) and Gorseinon (1). Additionally, four trade union officers with either national responsibility for organising (GMB) or a local remit for recruiting and supporting Amazon members (two from Unite the Union and one from the GMB) were interviewed.

Compulsion to Precarity

Sanctions, Agencies, Entrances, Exits

While respondents revealed diverse work histories, dominant themes emerge. Nineteen explicitly reported the sanctions pressure that compelled temps' employment at Amazon. Kirsten and five others had suffered benefits cuts:

I was sanctioned by the Benefits Agency, who had already cut my benefits for three months, so I did not have any choice. I had to come from Llanelli where six agencies were recruiting at the Job Centre and at the end of the day one took me on to start the next day at Amazon.

Recently graduated students entered an unpromising labour market.

I'd finished my degree and was looking for work. I managed to get a few hours waitressing but couldn't find anything. I wasn't then looking for a career, just a job that paid the bills and wasn't too crap, but there wasn't anything. The Job Centre was onto me. My benefits were being cut completely. I was sent to an agency who told me I had to go to Amazon. (Rebecca)

The most common trajectory was unemployed workers facing imminent sanctions if they declined job offers. Steve's experience gives additional insight into the constraints of Swansea's labour market:

I started in June 2014 through AM2PM. Literally, my choice was McDonalds or Amazon. I was signing on and if I hadn't taken one of these jobs I would have been sanctioned. The Job Centre

strongly suggested Amazon to me but because of what I knew from friends who'd worked there...it was the last place I would've chosen to work. They threatened sanctions so I took the McDonalds job. It was in the city centre, working night-shift, finishing at 5.30am, but there wasn't a bus to take me home for more than an hour after...So I took the job at Amazon – I had no choice, they would have stopped my benefit.

Those from valley towns described harsher labour market contexts. Their accounts of job seeking revealed the interconnections between Jobcentre Plus, the privatised employment services, temporary agencies and Amazon. Within this state-capital nexus, with marketised government services and TWAs as intermediaries, the work lives of many, are determined:

Just down the road (in Aberdare) I was with TBG Leaning doing training. They were working alongside the Jobcentre and had a contract with Aberdare agencies, who were taking people on. Like me, many ended up at Amazon because there are no jobs. If you don't take the job when you are sent by the Job Centre they stop your benefit for 6 months. So many people are forced into working there. (Larry)

Shildrick et al (2012) depict the repeated, unchosen transitions between paid work and benefits as the 'low-pay, no-pay cycle', an apt description of the work lives of most of the temps interviewed. Once their employment finished they unwillingly returned to benefits only to have to take again the only job available.

Well, the first thing to say is that I did not have any choice. I had to take the job there and then or I would have had my benefits stopped. I didn't like going there in the mornings because I knew what to expect...although the job is horrible, the pay is poor, there's always pressure because mostly you can't meet your targets, I will be applying to work there again in November because you have to have a job or your benefits get stopped. (Alwyn)

Regarding migrant experience, Anton from a Baltic State had worked in several jobs (logistics, light manufacturing) in South Wales for three years, living with already settled relatives before starting at Amazon via a local agency. The two other Eastern Europeans (Gregory, Helena) were, initially, recruited by a transnational agency but subsequently hired by a local agency for their first UK employment. Finally, Carlos from Latin America was engaged locally having completed a Masters' degree at Swansea and navigated complex visa obstacles. These narratives give tantalising glimpses of the differing pathways of migrant workers, although so few subjects renders generalisation problematic. The limited evidence supports Sporton's (2013) emphasis on local agencies and family and friendship networks. Finally, comment must be made of TRMWP's almost complete neglect of migrant workers' labour market participation^{vii}, in its nationalistic genuflection before the 'British way' and its omission of discussion of Brexit's potential consequences.

Agencies, Contracts, Exits

Agencies are central to Amazon's labour utilisation strategy and fulfilment centre regime. Assembling the temporary workforce is determined by annual pre-Xmas demand cycles which sees headcount rise from 1,200 to 2,000. Named agencies included AM2PM, Abacus, Meridien, PMP and Transline (ditched by Amazon after the Sports Direct inquiry, *Independent*, 2017) and, for earlier years, Blue Arrow and Cymru. Seasonality is central to embedding agencies as key actors in Amazon's labour supply chain. Delivering numerical flexibility is less about short-term reactive supply and more a strategic objective in which agencies become 'fully managed service providers', supporting Purcell et al's (2004) verdict on TWAs' expanded remit.

All interviewees, including permanents, were hired through agencies as 'temporary associates'. New starts are either on short-term pre-Xmas contracts or, mostly, 9 months contracts, although this duration rarely materialises because most are released before or shortly after Xmas. On engagement, temps are invariably promised that performance at consistently high standards will lead to permanent contracts. Of the sample, only Simon, Anton, Dan, Stan, Rhys and Terry succeeded. Further, temps are frequently laid off mid-shift, with no notice, or arrive at work and are then sent home. These *de facto* ZHCs are apparently imposed most stringently on pickers and packers. Larry's first experience was repeated on three later occasions:

I turned up and did a couple of hours work and the agency reps came and told us we were not needed any more. That was it – we had to leave the building. We had to wait outside the building in the rain for the bus. They laid off about 200 people at the same time.

I was consistently told, 'Don't come in, your shift has been cancelled', several days in a row. Then they told me not to come in at all. I was then called in for the busy time before Xmas but on Boxing Day my sister-in-law gave me a lift in from Llanelli and two hours later I was sent home, told to leave, no transport home. (Kirsten)

Ellie's termination was a case of refused entry.

It happened a week before Xmas. When I got to the door I used my swipe card as usual but it wasn't working. Then I realised there were six of us standing about in the rain and the same happened to them. The number grew, maybe 12-15, mostly packers. Someone phoned the agency rep who eventually came out and told us our services were no longer required as there wasn't any work. That was it.

A notorious episode was recalled by several respondents:

It was shortly after Xmas [2015] and a group of temps had travelled down from Merthyr for a morning shift. They did get into the building but were immediately instructed to empty their lockers and go to the canteen. They had to wait nearly ten hours for the bus to take them home. I heard about a similar case about a mini-bus load from Maesteg. (Dan)

Amazon operates a hierarchy of disposability, finely calibrating its human capital in anticipation of, or in response to, variable customer demand, driven by the imperative to shave labour costs to the barest minimum. A veteran explained:

If there's no work they want you to go home with no pay, even if you are permanent. They always go for agency people first if not required. They can though come a cropper, though, when they've sent too many people home, a pile of work comes in and they panic because they haven't got the manpower. (Rhys)

Work was so arduous, damaging to health, pressurised and humiliating that three chose to leave.

I quit. I thought, "I am better than this". I couldn't stand it in there any more, the way we were treated, the humiliation and seeing other people treated so badly. There was a temp, who had an accident, some boxes fell on his foot and badly bruised it and he was only off for a couple of days but they got rid of him. I left, I took the hit. I got sanctioned. (Lance)

Agencies assume responsibility for selecting and hiring temps, closely collaborating with Amazon managers and advisers at Jobcentre Plus, using the latter's facilities for recruitment days, screening workers for suitability including drugs and alcohol tests. Rhys believed that through the agencies 'people seen as potential troublemakers are weeded out early'. Others described how people they

worked alongside one week might be missing the next without explanation. A system of dual labour control - Amazon managers and agency supervisors – operates. Temps report to agency reps on pay and employment issues. Lydia reflected:

It definitely felt like you had two sets of managers. Our team lead would come up to us individually on her walk around and tell us to hurry up and 20-30 minutes later Dave from the agency would say practically the same thing.

Crucially, the supervisors' remit embraces discipline, day-to-day monitoring and performance management. Based in on-site offices, they execute the decisions made by Amazon, based on the performance data from its IT systems.

Discipline-wise it would always be the agency reps who carried things out but the information they used against you come from Amazon managers. (Steve)

Again, agencies' expanding strategic managerial role is confirmed (Purcell et al, 2004; Forde et al, 2008). Then, there are the pay differentials. Hourly pay in 2014 was £8.00 for permanents and £6.70 (£7.20 nightshift) for temps, the gap narrowing after the 2016 introduction of the National Living Wage. Although temps work alongside permanents, the division between them is visible through the different coloured badges they must wear, green for temps and blue for permanents, with blue with yellow or red borders for higher grades.

Although lacking company data on workforce composition, interviewees suggest around 70 per cent temp/30 per cent permanent for the pre-Xmas period, which differs from publicly cited figures. Estimates of migrant numbers are more speculative. Some referred to the areas they worked. For Larry in a stowing team of 15, 'there were four Poles, one Russian, one Bulgarian and one Italian, but most were Welsh'. Anton reported that Poles were the largest migrant group, but other eastern European nationalities had grown. Kirsten recalled that on packing 80 per cent were temps, one-in-five being Poles. Simon conducted an informal mini-investigation into ethnicity:

We've got Poles, the first and largest group, but also Estonians, Latvians, Lithuanians, Ugandans, Somalis, Eritreans, Nigerians, French, Spanish, Portuguese. I've got a multinational workforce, particularly at weekends. The security guys think the breakdown is 40 per cent born in the UK, 60 per cent from overseas.

'Work Hard, Have Fun, Make History'

The Orwellian nature of Jeff Bezos' injunction is exposed by workers' experiences. Several likened the centre to a prison, one comparing it to Guantanamo, due to workers' orange high-viz jackets. Allan described it as a 'borderline sweatshop'. The penal sensation is accentuated by rigorous security checks and searches on entrance and exit. Once at work, an inescapable source of insecurity was the strict system of 'pointing', derided by every interviewee. Lateness at the start of a shift or return from a break brings an 'associate' ½pt. If absent, 1pt is incurred with ½pt for each successive absence, with 3 points awarded if a worker fails to inform management. Incurring 3pts elicits a verbal warning, a further ½ or 1pt a written warning and another 1pt brings a final warning. Apparently 6pts is the most a worker can acquire without being sacked. Permanents have slightly less stringent criteria, with 4pts the first warning threshold.

Disciplinary tariffs operate alongside an extraordinarily harsh control system. The crux is the Asset Management Programme (AMP) that measures workers' speed, productivity, accuracy and errors in real-time and, retrospectively bundles together quantitative and qualitative measures into a single, composite assessment of performance. It provides the statistical basis for direct supervisory

intervention. AMP's 'software architecture' aligns targets to customers' increasingly extravagant delivery expectations (e.g. *Prime*). Consistent with lean precepts, Amazon is obsessed with 'eliminating waste through the maximum usage of active time, through optimisation of the flow' (Dan). According to experienced respondents, AMP targets operate to the normal distribution curve, but Amazon keeps moving the 'standard deviation' goalposts, using the curve and temps' individual performance scores to decide who should be exited first. Management consists of executing decisions based on data analytics. The UK 'Data Analytic Office' is located in Slough, Europe's in Luxembourg and for the US and globally at its Seattle HQ. 'Managers at Swansea are very low in the data analytical hierarchy, they receive data and forecasts rather than creating patterns based on centre level data. (Simon)

Temps, acutely aware of the consequences of failing to meet targets, commonly reported that a week of underperformance brings a meeting with the agency rep, a second week means another meeting and a warning, and a third results in sacking. Seemingly, permanents get a fourth week before being exited. Every associate saw targets as oppressive, capricious, opaque and mostly unattainable.

Targets are arbitrary and based on Amazon's requirements rather than what is achievable. We have *kaizen* targets, optimal numbers employed etc. all part of a lean system, the targets for each precise location, how many on bulk entry, stowing, picking, packing etc. Lean without any fat as AMP translates centre-wide targets into individual worker targets. The temps are only ever one missed tackle away from a red card. (Stan)

The fixation on maximising active time and flow optimisation means eliminating idle time. According to Rhys, 'Mangers don't manage, they are dictated to by the system and because the AMP churn out stats after stats, they are constantly embattled'. Standing at computer terminals, they have a digital representation of real-time workflow. Any obstruction or delay generates a flashing red light requiring response. Managers are 'radio-ed up' to ensure immediate intervention. Alwyn, Larry, Helen and Robert used similar words to describe how, if a workers' performance dips below prescribed levels they 'receive a visit' from an agency rep who 'have a word with you'.

My agency rep was always on my back – hit your targets, hit your targets – and Amazon managers were always on your back as well shouting at you, using terrible language, personal stuff sometimes. (Kris)

A key link in the supply chain, pickers face the 'highest bawl out rate' (Dan).

Alongside penalty points for working time infractions and under-hitting targets, workers face 'etiquette errors'. Minimising errors at each stage of the flow constitute additional, ever-present micro-management with disciplinary consequences. Respondents provided plentiful evidence. Receivers can make errors when checking product description against barcode, or stowers may incorrectly record an item's location causing difficulties for pickers. Errors mostly result from the frantic pace of work and may not be caused by the associate deemed responsible. Three 'etiquette' breaches in a rolling week triggers a disciplinary.

Thus, in the interdependent labour processes of receive, stowing, picking, packing, dispatch, shipping and in ICQA (inventory control), all associates, but temps more than permanents, reported pressure from the integrated control and disciplinary mechanisms of pointing, targeting and etiquette errors. Migrant workers suggested certain distinctive experiences. Anton reported verbal hostility directed at him and others by local co-workers. Compounding the discrimination which, he believed, they experienced was the failure of management to act.

Increasing Catchment Area

A final theme concerns Amazon's difficulties in recruiting from Swansea and NPT.

Now Amazon never realise that when people work for us they have a bad experience and their reputation is damaged. Swansea is a big village and everyone tells what's happened to them. People don't want to work here, but many have to. Amazon depends on high unemployment and the fear of sanctions, which is why they recruit through the valleys. I'll give an example. Last Q4 I had guys from Mountain Ash and Tedegar. Amazon has gone to these places because they're no longer able to recruit from the big labour pools. (Simon)

By 2016, with a modest improvement in labour market conditions, Stan believed:

Amazon has dipped so often into the bath that it can't recruit. Across the region people know from friends and family how awful the conditions are and how badly they will be treated.

Temps revealed hardships encountered in daily commutes from the valley towns of higher unemployment where sanctioning is severe. Kris's account was representative:

I was living in Aberdare...and had to get up at a quarter-to-four, but then it became a quarter-to-three. The bus would wait for two minutes at the stop. If you missed the bus and phoned in you could still be sacked and then sanctioned.

Conclusion

The testimony of Amazon's temps prompts a re-consideration of the model of the triangular relationship between employer, agency and employee. The intervention of the state and the workfare architecture executed through Jobcentre Plus and the ubiquitous sanctions regime (Fletcher and Wright, 2018) challenge the triad of actors formulation. At the bottom of the labour market, these third-party intermediaries are part-integrated into state welfare/workfare institutions, obliging us to reconceptualise the interrelationships between actors as quadrilateral rather than triangular. Jobcentre Plus is a fourth actor, intervening to *compel* unemployed claimants to take unwanted jobs on insecure contracts through agencies and other labour providers. Studies of TWA do not support Taylor's benign depiction of workers being able to decide to take or not to take an 'assignment', because of multiple insecurities; temps are more likely to get sacked, have less legal protection and 'non-compliant temps' are not offered future work. This study confirms that agency temps comprise a cheap and disposable workforce expected to work more intensively.

Yet, the Amazon evidence extends beyond this understanding of highly constrained choice and vulnerable work, to grasp the unavoidable *compulsion* facing unemployed workers deriving from workfare sanctions in job-starved labour markets. Peck and Theodore (2001:474) argued that agencies are 'active institutional agents' in remaking de-regulated labour markets and through their brokerage between the unemployed and putative employers, but it is necessary to include also the brokerage role of the state. It includes attracting businesses to local areas through development grants, building infrastructure and assuming recruitment costs by introducing compulsion into labour supply chains. Here Burawoy's concept of a despotic factory regime for pre-Fordist contexts may be appropriate if established on a robust analytical foundation, in which the workfare regime, including agency work, is the potent link between the micro-dimension of the labour process and the macro-dimension of the production process. Burawoy believed that market despotism would be a 'relatively rare form of factory regime' (1983:588) but this study suggests this verdict requires revision.

This article depicts a continuum of no choice to highly constrained choice that bears no resemblance to TRMWP's abstracted 'choice'. Respondents did report concrete choices – take the job or get sanctioned, endure workplace tyranny or voluntarily exit and get sanctioned, stay and have very limited opportunity to progress to permanent, and exit back to the bleak labour market – which repeats Shildrick et al' (2102) 'no-job, low-pay cycle'.

From this perspective, the 'British way' becomes a de-humanised, punitive sanctions-based workfare regime that criminalises the poor and dragoons the unemployed, lone parents and disabled into fruitless hours seeking often non-existent decent work with, for many, no choice but to take the degrading jobs on offer. The TRMWP's failure to consider workfare and sanctions endorses what Wacquant (2009) theorises as the normalisation of social insecurity. This study reveals much more than precarious employment, but an all-encompassing social precarity that chimes with Bloodworth's (2018) scathing account of working lives at the bottom-end of UK's labour market. Thus, this article contributes to the limited literature on the lived experiences of those directly affected by the consequences of welfare-to-workfare and the relationships between benefits receipt and transitions into (and out of) employment (Patrick, 2017:3). Taylor's 'choice' is a fantasy for the very many for whom decent work is an unattainable pipedream.

The Amazon fulfilment centre is characterised by continual influx and outflow of contingent temporary labour, an extreme form of numerical flexibility. The expansion and contraction of employment to meet customer demand are so finely calibrated that they occur not just seasonally but daily or even during shifts. Once in work associates are on receiving end of a bastardised, technologically-driven, cost-obsessed form of lean working that has consequences exceeding those extreme versions revealed in recent studies (e.g. Carter et al, 2013). Temps experience in the words of one respondent 'a sort of fucked up social Darwinism where you have this continuous churn', where only a few survive.

There is neither explicit nor implicit wage-effort bargain. If workers do not perform according to prescribed but obscured metrics the 'contractual bargain' is terminated. The ineluctable asymmetry weighs massively against employees by virtue of this labour process. In a perverse intersection, then, the brutal digitally enabled micro-management of the workplace regime melds with the brutal digitally enabled sanctioning of the workfare regime, extending far beyond the limited cases of monopsony that Taylor suggests.

A final observation is how the Amazon case displays variance at spatial scale, from the local to the regional and the global in the ways that agency workers are assembled, employed, managed, controlled, disciplined and released. In the intersection between workplace regime, workfare regime and migrant labour regime, we have only scratched the surface, prompting the need to expand the research agenda to incorporate, particularly, the last of these.

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ⁱ Amazon provide no 'official' employment figures. Its Companies House entry has no data, perhaps due to its status as a non-profit making company in the UK and not paying taxes. Totals given are painstakingly collated from local newspaper reports.

ⁱⁱ Virgin's announced closure (May 2018) raises doubts over the sustainability of contact centre jobs.

ⁱⁱⁱ The devastation of mining communities burns deeply in the collective memory of the South Wales working-class. The Manic Street Preachers 2013 album '*Rewind the Film*' captures the social and cultural significance.

^{iv} According to the Panopticon perspective, the incarcerated, aware of the disciplinary gaze, modify their behaviour. Fletcher and Wright highlight Job Match as an alarming punitive tool. Yet, the claimants' situation is worse than the metaphor implies. Rather than intermittent surveillance causing internalisation of disciplinary power, digital monitoring means claimants *know* their activities are continuously recorded and data used against them in disciplinaries (sanctions).

^v Difficulties exist in extrapolating for 2012 as data is for 8 months. Post-2012, the transition to UC changed the categories and makes data non-comparable.

^{vi} See Taylor, P. (2013).

^{vii} The exception is a reference to The Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority following the death of the Chinese cockle workers at Morecombe Bay.