Feminist trade unionism and post-work imaginaries

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Feminist academics in the marketised university are doing not only unpaid emotional and social work, but other unpaid work which makes up the core business of the institution. In a culture of overwork and increased demands for productivity, teaching, research, and administration cannot fit into contracted hours so are done at nights and weekends. This article highlights the gendered impacts of current working conditions, focusing specifically on the conditions of precariously employed researchers and educators in the UK higher education system. Emphasising the unpaid work done by feminists in academia and beyond, this article suggests looking toward a post-work imaginary as one strategy to make possible more inclusive and accessible educational futures. Sharing feminist trade unionist strategies through which to question some of the unrealistic demands put upon university staff, the article emphasises the need for a feminist ethics of care to build sustainable movements and futures.

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While feminist, antiracist and other critical pedagogies might offer possibilities for countering market-driven models of education, academic staff are faced with increasing workloads and insecure working conditions, making not only such labour-intensive pedagogies but also other forms of activism harder to fit in alongside paid work. As socialist feminist scholars such as Dorothy Smith (2005) have argued, an expanded definition of 'work' which denotes not only paid labour but which includes the unpaid, emotional and social labour carried out by women and marginalised groups, might help us critique the gendered and racialised structures of work in our society. However, feminist academics in the marketised university are doing not only unpaid emotional and social work, but other unpaid work which makes up the core business of the institution: for many, teaching, research, and administration can no longer – if they ever did – fit into contracted hours but are done at nights and weekends. Many academics are furthermore under pressure related to insecure employment, which keeps them in a constant state of exhaustion.

Focusing on a UK context, this article examines the unpaid work done by feminists in academia and beyond. It suggests looking toward a post-work imaginary, that is to say an envisaging of a society situated outside the capitalist structuring of labour, as one strategy to endure neoliberal academia. Building on Kathi Weeks's anti-work Marxist feminism, the article conceives alternatives to a world structured by paid labour: a post-work imaginary bearing more inclusive and accessible educational futures. While such visions have been shared by socialist and anarchists for centuries, recent years' cultures of increasing ill health caused by stress and overwork have spurred a resurfaced interest in post-work strategies in some countries and sectors, for example in moves toward shorter working days and basic income. Post-work politics are thus both timeless and especially timely. Highlighting specifically the conditions of precariously employed researchers and educators, and drawing on the author's experience of collective organising in UK universities, this article shares feminist trade unionist strategies through which to question some of the unrealistic demands put upon university staff. In a work environment fractured by overwork and insecurity among both precariously employed and permanent staff, challenging the work ethic and envisaging alternatives become means of survival.

The gendered impacts of working conditions

The marketisation of higher education has been ongoing in the UK since the 1980s, or even earlier, but has intensified in recent years with successive right-wing governments' ideological austerity agenda. This development has meant increased tuition fees, funding cuts, increased workloads for staff, monitoring and a focus on 'measurable' productivity, degradation of pay and working conditions, and job insecurity or casualisation (Gill, 2010; Brown and Carasso, 2013). Casualisation, that is to say favouring of insecure contracts over permanent or tenure-track ones, is one

of the main features of the marketisation of higher education; it is now commonplace in UK, US and Australian academia, and is spreading fast elsewhere.[1]

Increasing workloads, performativity measures, and precarious employment have real consequences for those working in the sector: research findings by trade unions and scholars reveal a workplace marked by stress, overwork and anxiety. The UK higher education trade union University and College Union (UCU) in a 2013 report finds that nearly three-quarters of UK academics find their job stressful, with more than half of respondents indicating high levels of stress (UCU, 2013). A 2016 report finds that 83 percent of academic staff reported that the pace of work has increased over the past three years, with more than a quarter of respondents stating that their workload is unmanageable all or most of the time, and two thirds of staff stating that their workload is unmanageable at least half of the time (UCU, 2016a). Feminist scholarship provides examples of these figures. Rosalind Gill's (2010) detailing of the 'hidden injuries of neo-liberal academia' – injuries such as sleeplessness, worrying about not having time to write, and doing teaching preparation at night or at weekends – strikes a chord with many academics. Gill shares a conversation between two female colleagues:

> 'How are you?
>
> I am totally stressed at the moment, to be honest. Work is piling up and I'm just drowning. … I mean, I had 115 e-mails yesterday and they all needed answering. I'm doing 16 hour days just trying to keep on top of it. I feel like I'm always late with everything, and my 'to do' list grows faster than I can cross things off it. … I'm sleeping really badly and it all just feels completely out of control … It just gets worse.' (p. 228)

The 'academic insomnia' associated with current working conditions, due to overwork and stress, reappears in other feminist scholarship as being 'sleepless in academia' (Acker & Armenti, 2004). Faced with increasing workloads and monitoring of their productivity, a kind of speeding up of academic life (Hartman & Darab, 2012; O'Neill, 2014; Vostal, 2015; Berg & Seeber, 2016), many staff in the contemporary university are in a constant state of exhaustion; many fall ill, sometimes with chronic conditions (Gill, 2010; Lopes & Dewan, 2015; Pereira, 2017).

In addition to overwork, a larger number are under pressure related to precarious employment; the involuntarily 'rootless' precarious worker is now commonplace in academic settings (Morgan & Wood, 2017). As figures from UCU show, around half (50 percent) of all academic staff in UK universities are employed on insecure contracts (UCU, 2016b). A recent survey of staff on insecure contracts carried out by UCU reveals significant numbers of them struggling to get by: 17 percent of respondents say that they struggle to pay for food, 34 percent that they struggle to pay rent or mortgage repayments, and 36 percent that they struggle to pay household bills like fuel, electricity, water and repairs. One respondent states: '"I especially dread the summer and Easter periods as I have no idea how I will pay the rent"' (UCU, 2015).

As a result of this situation, many early-career and casualised academics maintain several jobs in different workplaces, sometimes in different cities, in order to make ends meet. The financial insecurity of precarious employment, and the lack of control over one's situation, cause significant anxiety and deterioration in both mental and physical health.

Indeed, job insecurity has been marked as one of the most significant source of stress for staff in higher education (Tytherleigh et al., 2005). A respondent in a 2015 UK study details the health consequences of teaching at multiple universities, describing having different briefcases for each day of the week: "'I actually got really despondent about it, because I did it for a year solid and almost had a nervous breakdown'" (Lopes & Dewan, 2015, p. 36). In the same study some respondents 'talked about being close to "breaking point"', while another respondent states that "'I've reached the stage where I'm thinking I don't even know if I can do this any more, I really don't'"(Lopes & Dewan, 2015, pp. 34-35). As such studies show, the emotional impact of job insecurity and exploitation entails stress, decreasing self-confidence and negative thoughts of the future.

Research suggests that staff of all categories – except perhaps well-paid vice chancellors (Hunt, 2017) – suffer from the culture of performativity and overwork in academia. However, the effects of the neoliberal university are 'written on the body', and they are 'felt more by some bodies than others': women, people of colour, disabled people, LGBTQ+ people, and colleagues of working class background or in financial precarity are impacted more directly by the current working conditions (Mountz et al., 2015, p. 1245; Menzies and Newson, 2008). As statistics from the Health and Safety Executive in the UK show, women are more likely than men to suffer from work-related stress (HSE, 2017). Women in particular show harmful effects such as 'exhaustion and stress, as well as shame, guilt, and paralysis or mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, or isolation' (Conesa Carpintero, 2017, p. 45). Indeed, Maria do Mar Pereira (2017) notes a collective 'depression' among the female academics interviewed, while in Aretha Phiri's 2015 study an early-career female scholar jokes that 'everyone she knows in academia has "anxiety or depression"' (2015, p. 21). In short, there is a 'psychosocial and somatic catastrophe' in contemporary higher education (Gill & Donaghue, 2016, p. 91). Just like in other sectors, women – especially women of colour, trans women, and disabled women – are in greater danger of harm (Chouinard, 1999; Serano, 2007; Gutiérrez y Muhs et al., 2012; Nishida, 2016; Conesa Carpintero, 2017; Gabriel & Tate, 2017; Qureshi, 2018; Inge, 2018). This unequal distribution of harm is due to the various intersecting oppressions prevalent in academia and beyond (Crenshaw, 1989) and – as the next section will show – due to the unpaid emotional and social labour such individuals are often asked to perform.

Feminist work in contemporary academia

One way of understanding the gendered impacts of current working conditions is through an expanded definition of work. As repeated studies of women's work show, much of the unpaid work carried out in academia falls on women and/or marginalised communities. Indeed, '[w]omen are more likely than men to report chronic stress and the feeling that life is out of control' because their time is taken up by multiple and sometimes conflicting responsibilities (Mountz et al., 2015, p. 1245). The gendered and in other ways unevenly distributed effects of worsening working conditions – along also racialised and classed lines, for example – are connected with gendered structures of work. While traditional Marxist and socialist theories define work as wage-based labour, part of the capitalist mode of production, feminist definitions of work expand the definition of the term to include not only paid labour but also the unrecognised work often done by women, at home and at work.

Socialist feminist Dorothy Smith conceptualises work as various kinds of unpaid, emotional and social labour: 'anything done by people that takes time and effort, that they mean to do, that is done under definite conditions and with whatever means and tools, and that they may have to think about' (2005, p. 152). This definition encompasses paid or unpaid work for an employer, everyday life work such as household chores or caring responsibilities, and activist work (DeVault & McCoy, 2006). Such labour includes not only housework and caring responsibilities, but also emotional labour which involves 'caring for others who are ill, disabled, upset, in crisis, or just the everyday work of recognising and empathising with the moods of others' (Murray, Crowley & Wånggren, 2016, p. 218). This unpaid and invisible work is not only gendered, but also racialised and classed according to the structures of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy (hooks, 2000, p. 4): structural inequalities demand women and racialised colleagues to work extra hard to be taken seriously, and sexist and other forms or harassment and prejudice require time and care to live through.

Feminist scholars have noted the essential yet unacknowledged unpaid emotional and administrative work done by women and members of marginalised communities in marketised universities, as in other workplaces. The gendered division of labour means that female academics are often called on to provide this form of labour for colleagues and students, with precariously employed colleagues facing an additional burden of such work (Bellas, 1999; Tunguz, 2016; Heijstra et al., 2017). Noting the amounts of invisible labour done by women, the 'academic housework' essential to the running of the university but often unpaid and underappreciated, makes possible a feminist critique of the neoliberal university through revealing these gendered structures, and a working toward alternatives.

In the current state of higher education, however, female academics are doing not only unpaid emotional and social work. As employers stretch the limits of the working day by adding more and more tasks to staff workloads, while deliberately

understaffing institutions and increasing student to staff ratios, colleagues are forced to give up their free, unpaid time – evenings, nights, and weekends – to carry out the work required. Writing lectures, replying to emails, organising events, marking, preparing for meetings, and (if one is lucky) research, take up many more hours than those stipulated in one's contract. Maria do Mar Pereira (2017) describes the conditions of writing her book:

> The book has been written late at night, on weekends, during bank holidays, while on maternity leave, sacrificing sleep, sanity, self-care, and time with, and care for, my family and friends. ... I am composing this paragraph on an unusually sunny Sunday morning in March, hoping I can finish this section quickly so I can go downstairs to join my 15-month old baby .... I am checking the final proofs for this page in absolute silence at 4.56 am on a dark night in November, desperate to go to bed because I will now only get 2 hours of sleep before the lecture I am due to teach in the morning.
>
> (pp. 217-218)

The unpaid work described by Pereira here is not just care work or social work, but rather research – that is to say, the core business of a university, and work required of her in order to keep her job. Like many colleagues, the only time left to do this research is at night or at weekends, due to unrealistic workloads and the constant pressure to produce.

When staff fall physically ill from work, the current situation is not tenable. A number of academics have abandoned the sector, including well-established UK academics such as Marina Warner and Joyce Canaan: Warner (2015) finally quit after being asked to take a year's unpaid leave, while Canaan left her post as professor of Sociology because, as she puts it, the contemporary university 'was making me ill' (Wardrop & Withers, 2014, p. 39). For those who remain, there is an urgent need to resist the state of affairs and try to turn around the worsening working conditions. In addition to emphasising the unpaid work done by women and other marginalised groups, and demanding pay for or more equal distribution of such work, the next section emphasises collective organising for better working conditions as one of the most important – and arguably most effective – ways to create tenable educational futures.

Feminist trade unionism

While the state of contemporary UK higher education is disheartening, with many scholars and educators simply leaving the sector, out of exhaustion or in acts of self-preservation (or both), there are real and effective strategies for resistance. Feminist activism in educational institutions does not only concern our teaching practices and collegial relations, but necessarily also involves a struggle over our working conditions. Trade unionism provides a way of fighting gendered, racialised and other injustices in marketised academia.

Trade unions in many parts of the world have a dire history of sexism, misogyny, and racism, within the movement itself (Sullivan, 2012; Boston, 2015; Eddo-Lodge, 2017; Sundari & Pearson, 2018). However, while there are still sexist and racist structures, sentiments and techniques lingering in such communities, some trade unions have learnt from their mistakes, and have put mechanisms in place to aim for a fairer representation of the workers making up the unions. The Trade Union Congress (TUC) and the Scottish Trade Union Congress (STUC), which are national federations of trade unions in England and Wales, and Scotland respectively, have equality structures in place such as women's committees, black workers' committees, disabled workers' committees, and LGBTQ+ workers' committees. In the UK there are now more women leaders, officers and activists in trade unions than ever before (in 2012 the TUC gained its first female general secretary), and union membership is currently around 50:50 men and women (Boston, 2015, p. viii). Despite erasure from history, women and feminists have long organised through trade unions as a way of fighting against gendered and other injustices (Lewenhak, 1977; Boston, 2015; Busby, 2016; Sundari & Pearson, 2018).

As detailed in the previous section, feminist definitions of work include activist work: trade union organising is one such kind of work. There are obvious feminist gains made by trade unions, including legislation on equal pay and parental leave, and against sexual harassment, sexist and other forms of discrimination by employers and third parties (although recent right-wing legislation in the UK has weakened such legislation[2]). Less visible to those outside the trade union movement is other feminist work carried out by unions: action on housing, health and safety, against public sector cuts which disproportionately affect women, and much more (in recent years in support of groups such as Sisters Uncut, or antiracist organisations). The notion of finding strength in a collective is itself and has always been crucial to any feminist or social justice movement: working in communities and as part of collectives rather than as isolated individuals makes possible an analysis of structural oppressions and injustices. It is also a more effective way of changing the state of relations: unity is strength.

The collective nature of trade union organising can be used to counteract the individualising impulse or 'responsibilisation' of neoliberal governmentality, which signifies a shift of responsibility from the structural to the individual. Marketised workplaces frame colleagues as neoliberal subjects or as an 'entrepreneur of himself' (Foucault, 2008) and thus solely responsible for a number of problems that might otherwise be considered as structural or political. Ill health, stress, overwork, or unemployment are framed as a problem of self-management, to be countered by courses in stress control, resilience, mindfulness, or time management (Gill & Donaghue, 2016). The direct linking by a number of feminist scholars of individual struggles with a structural failure to care for staff and students can be seen as a resistance to the marketised university's individualising impulse.

In addition to inequalities of gendered and racialised labour, contract status and financial precarity place feminist academics in a position of vulnerability. Casualised colleagues often have three, four, or even five jobs, in different locations, which they move between every week. It is an incredibly stressful situation, and impossible to keep up for longer than a few years. Indeed, studies of casualised staff in UK higher education show a correlation between burnout, signalled by disengagement and psychological fatigue, and job insecurity: the longer one is one an insecure contract, the higher is the risk of burnout (Chen & Lopes, 2015). Among the many feminist academics speaking out, the voices of academics on precarious contracts present particularly stark contrasts to the popular romanticised image of academia as a privileged ivory tower:

> I lived in my friend's box room for twelve months. The university teaching and research jobs that I was doing didn't pay enough to cover rent in the city I lived and worked in. … The contracts I was on at the time did not enable me to access the resources I needed to do the work. I couldn't access university computers or printers. (Breeze, 2017a)

Insecure employment leaves university staff without basic facilities such as office space, access to printing, paid time to meet students, training, or even a contract. As Maddie Breeze explains in relation to the above quote, feelings of failure, insecurity and worry among early-career female academics do not appear surprising under these circumstances: not having access to the resources necessary to do one's work, due to structural failings by the employer, is certain to have an impact. Órla Murray (2018) similarly shares the 'moments of self-doubt, tears, stress, and getting physically ill due to anxiety' that lie behind her academic successes:

> But these experiences are not only personal or confined to myself, they are inevitably tied up in national and global trends in higher education. My experiences are couched in structural privileges and oppressions, in the history of these institutions, and the current socio-political climate. They are structurally facilitated, encouraged, and tolerated. (p. 170)

As Murray underlines, her experiences are not confined to herself, but they are collective problems tied up in national and global trends and processes. In addition to many more individual scholars protesting current conditions, women have collaborated to form collective resistances to worsening conditions (Mountz et al., 2015; Res-Sisters, 2016). Indeed, the collective nature of trade union as well as feminist work is an essential strategy in counteracting the individualism of the neoliberal workplace.

There can be considerable discomfort in challenging university management when management's decisions seem contrary to colleagues' wellbeing. Quoting Sara Ahmed, Muireann Crowley (2017) notes a difficulty in being a voice of criticism, since institutions tend to conflate the 'complaint' and the 'complainer': 'If you are heard as complaining then what you say is dismissible, as if you are complaining because that

is your personal tendency' (Ahmed, 2017a). In this way, the issues criticised – such as excessive workloads, or widespread use of precarious contracts – become linked to the identity of the complainer, which can distract from addressing the actual problem. Because of this tendency to confuse the complaint and complainer, 'it is important to belong to a collective that is willing to speak and act together' (Crowley, 2017). If the problem is structural and collective, it makes sense that we cannot solve the problem on an individual basis but only collectively. We cannot, as Maria do Mar Pereira notes, individually simply 'work harder, manage our time better' (2012, p. 133). If we do, we will only be given more work, as will our colleagues. Rather we collectively organise and demand better working conditions, while at the same time making realistic adjustments in our working lives. As Pereira states, we need to 'both *be realistic and demand the* (allegedly) *impossible*' (2012, p. 133). Feminist trade union organising is one of the most effective ways to demand supposedly 'impossible' improvements to gendered and other workplace injustices.

Trade union representatives often come up against limitations to their work: anti-union legislation and policies, and anti-union sentiment among colleagues and management, both of which can circumvent effective action; the difficulty in uniting members with differing views and priorities; the sheer mass of work needed to be done to represent members adequately, and the lack of time in which to do this work. Sometimes trade unions can seem to fail their members, seen as not taking adequate action on issues that matter; or even when this is not the case, taking just one hour to participate in a union meeting can seem like another impossible addition to one's workload. Those staff members who need protection at work more than others – precarious staff – are furthermore generally the most difficult group for trade unions to reach: these hourly-paid, fixed-term or part-time colleagues are often scattered geographically, without mailboxes, office space, telephone numbers or even university email addresses, without presence on university webpages, and moving between workplaces every few months. For these categories of staff juggling multiple commitments, joining a union might not be a priority. Adding to these limitations are the still lingering traces of sexist and racist exclusionary practices within unions themselves, which silence members and make them feel unwelcome. In a global context, trade union organising might not be possible due to repressive legislation, something which affects not only many international colleagues but also UK colleagues working in 'satellite campuses'. Trade union work cannot be the only feminist and anti-oppressive work we do in education.

However, in the UK, collective organising remains the strongest weapon we have in fighting unrealistic workloads and job insecurity. If you are not already a member, join a trade union. If you have time and energy: become more active in that union. Rather than individually refusing to work long hours – which we should of course refuse to do if we can – we act together with colleagues: union organising means *collective* struggle. Even small victories, such as reformulating workload models, or

negotiating for slightly better job security, or pay for previously unpaid work, can make an enormous difference for colleagues as well as for students. Much of the work done by trade unions is invisible to those who are not representatives or officers: negotiating with employers on a national level, campaigning for job security or equal pay, ensuring staff are represented on HR policy groups and equality committees, and of course the daily representation of individual members' cases. Without a continued strong trade union movement, staff in higher education institutions would all be on hourly contracts with no sick pay, no weekends, and no holidays.

Post-work imaginaries

Despite the demonstrated widespread culture of overwork, some might question whether university staff are really working hard enough. Indeed, the principal of a certain university told a trade union colleague that academics raising concerns about unrealistic workloads are simply 'lazy'. Considering the number of colleagues falling ill from stress and constantly growing workloads, however the issue seems rather to be that we are working too much. As our identities become shaped by work, and work-life boundaries become blurred through information technologies and academic social media, work comes to infiltrate life; to structure time, thought and emotion. Indeed, the areas of life where we can 'forget our work-based identities … are steadily shrinking' (Paulsen, 2014, p. 2). As noted earlier, socialist feminists early on questioned the social construction of work, by noting women's unpaid work outside of paid labour. Building on such feminist scholarship and activism, looking toward a post-work imaginary (Aronowitz & Cutler, 1998; Weeks, 2011; Srnicek & Williams, 2015) serves as a crucial strategy to survive the culture of constant performativity and speeded-up productivity of marketised academia. Importantly, the term 'post-work' does not signify a society where humans do not work. Rather, it means a society outside of or against the capitalist formulation of work as wage-based labour transacted in an unequal and exploitative relation between worker and employer; a society where an individual's worth is not defined by their place in such a system.

   One of the biggest challenges to imagining and moving toward a post-work society, is the hegemony of the work ethic; the ideology of work. At the moment we live in a society based on the work ethic, that is to say the idea that everyone should and must work (in paid labour) in order to be a worthy citizen. It is a culture in which the first question you ask when meeting new people is 'what do you do [for a living]?' In such a society, 'work' in the abstract sense (as compulsion or morality) is always present, often accompanied with feelings of guilt when one is not working: '"Do you *really* deserve this? Is it *really* okay for you to take time off right now?"' (Paulsen, 2014, p. xiii). As Weeks notes, the work ethic is not a natural or transhistorical social occurrence, and work is not just an economic practice:

> Indeed, that every individual is required to work, that most are expected to work for wages or be supported by someone who does, is a social convention and disciplinary apparatus rather than an economic necessity. That every individual must not only do some work but more often a lifetime of work, that individuals must not only work but become workers, is not necessary to the production of social wealth. ... The normative expectation of waged work as an individual responsibility has more to do with the socially mediating role of work than its strictly productive function.

(Weeks, 2011, pp. 7-8)

Weeks is not saying that humans have not always worked, or that they should not do meaningful work. Rather, she is saying that the current organisation of work under capitalism, and the correlation of paid labour with social status and citizenship, is a social construct: 'a social convention and disciplinary apparatus rather than an economic necessity'.

The work ethic is older than neoliberalism and possibly even capitalism: Max Weber argued that its roots are found in Protestant theology, which in turn facilitated the spread of capitalism (Beder, 2000; Weeks, 2011). However, the work ethic has increasingly been invoked in recent years' austerity programmes in the UK (and seen in higher education marketisation measures), coupled with an increasing narrative of 'responsibilisation' in which unemployment (and 'employability') is framed as a failure (or success) of an individual rather than of the labour market. Unemployed people are labelled 'scroungers' by media and right-wing politicians. But as figures show, throughout the UK there are now more jobseekers than jobs, a fact that highlights the deployment of the work ethic as part of successive right-wing governments' destruction of the welfare system, rather than as a realistic approach to the contemporary world.

The ideology of work remains the dominant narrative in UK society, and seems inescapable: within capitalism, the majority have to perform paid labour to survive. In recent years, however, there have been increased demands for and pilots in universal basic income and shorter working hours, demonstrating that a post-work society is not only achievable, but also viable and desirable (Srnicek & Williams, 2015). Parallel to socialist feminist critiques of the centrality of paid labour, there is a long history of resistance to and of critique of work as structured under capitalism (Gorz, 1999; Fleming, 2009; Paulsen, 2014); especially autonomous Marxist, anarchist and syndicalist movements have a long tradition of direct action against capital through subversive workplace practices (Goldman, 1913; Dubois, 1979; Franks, 2009). Such everyday resistance through 'organisational misbehaviour', defined as 'anything you do at work you are not supposed to do' (Ackroyd & Thompson, 1999, p. 2), include the limitation of working effort or the appropriation of time or product. Karl Marx delineated the logics of time appropriation at work in the first volume of *Capital*

(1876): 'If the worker consumes his disposable time for himself, he robs the capitalist' (1990, p. 342).

Most such strategies however, time appropriation in particular, are difficult or even counterproductive in an academic workplace where there are always essays to mark, classes to prepare, articles to write, emails to respond to. Especially in the context of the marketised university's accelerated working pace, where the clash between increased workloads and unchanged time resources often has 'particularly misfortunate implications – for social environments, human relations, mental health and well-being' (Vostal, 2015, p. 298), taking time off from work simply means *delaying* work, with an increased workload on return. Practicing a 'slow scholarship', as called for by recent scholars, might not be a viable option particularly for colleagues struggling to survive in precarious employment, where the only time one can do research is at night or at weekends: it is easier for academics in secure positions to 'go slow' (Mendick, 2014).

Considered through a post-work imaginary, trade union work in universities is one way for academics to resist the hegemony of the work ethic. The possibilities of fighting back against the speeded-up culture of productivity in academia, while also retaining one's health, is connected to the 'problem with work' (Weeks, 2011). Academics have been described as the ideal neoliberal subjects in their flexibility and readiness to work long hours, as their work is a 'labour of love'; it takes effort to redirect such subjectivities away from an ideology of work to a post-work imaginary. There is a real need for a post-work politics to counter the power of the work ethic, and even limited demands can work as tools for radical change (Weeks, 2011). The role of imagination in political action should not be underestimated: by envisaging alternative futures and organising after such patterns, we already bring about change in our relationships. Resisting excessive workloads through trade union campaigns and negotiations for more realistic workload allocation models, or for increased job security, demanding pay for all hours worked, while also caring for ourselves and our colleagues and students, become a kind of 'prefigurative politics' (Leach 2013) in which we maintain relationships that reflect that future society we want to build. A recent collaborative article asks readers to rethink what is valued and counted in our academic practice, to think outside of metricised work 'outputs': 'What if we counted differently? Instead of articles published or grants applied for, what if we accounted for thank you notes received, friendships formed, collaborations forged?' (Mountz et al., 2015, p. 243).

The recent 14-day long national USS pensions strike, which saw the largest strike action in UK higher education history (Bergfeld, 2018), gave many colleagues a glimpse of a post-work imaginary. One placard from a Scottish picket line asked the question: 'Do you believe in life after work?', a question which – in various reformulations – recurred on picket lines, in union meetings, and at teach-outs and rallies, where colleagues found a different kind of work, of purpose, than the

metricised marketised everyday of contemporary academia. One colleague found that the collective agency enabled by industrial action 'has shown us glimpses of a utopia … It has shown us ways of being together and working together that are built on cooperation and solidarity' (Krause, 2018; Wånggren, 2019). In a marketised education system, thinking otherwise and against this same system becomes a necessity.

Considering work society for what it is – a historical construct embodied in economic structures – might take some weight off our shoulders. While not lifting the burden of excessive workloads, such thinking might counteract the sense of guilt felt when not succeeding in mastering that unmanageable workload. Swedish syndicalist writer Stig Dagerman criticised capitalist structures of work by noting their constructed character:

> As I stand by the sea, so can I learn from the sea. No one has the right to demand of the sea that it bear an infinite number of boats, nor of the wind that it continually fill every sail. By the same token I can hardly be expected to hold my life captive to the performance of certain tasks. It is not a question of 'Duty above all else!' but of life above everything. … So I lift the yoke of time from my shoulders and in doing so I also shrug free of the obligation to achieve. My life is not to be measured.
>
> (Dagerman, 2014, pp. 305-306)

If we step back and consider the larger historical contexts of ongoing struggles, we see that humans were not created to do paid labour: we may do this work, but it is not a transhistorical or natural phenomenon. As Dagerman continues: while we may 'operate machines or write books … we could just as well be doing other things' (p. 306). While work in a wider definition, such as that provided by Smith (2005), is a necessity and a social good, and often a source of joy and pride to the labourer, the organisation of work under capitalism turns a voluntary and meaningful occupation into a forced structure of obedience.

When being asked to do work for free, or to fit three hours' work into one, refusing to do unpaid work becomes a political act, especially when done collectively as part of trade union campaigns and industrial action for fairer working conditions. Remembering that the victories we have made – which include shortened working hours, parental leave, paid annual leave, and weekends – are results of struggle, we recognise that unless we make use of these victories, they are likely to be (indeed they already have been in practice, for many workers) taken back by employers. Part of doing trade union work is thus something that is quite pleasant: *taking time off work*. When you take time off from work – at weekends, as annual leave, during lunch breaks if provided – you are refusing to be exploited, in a way limiting the profit made out of your labour. Many workers however struggle to stop feeding the institution unpaid work, especially when in situations involving an aspect of care (such as teaching). We sometimes need specific strategies to stop feeling guilty about not working, or taking

time off work, a feeling shared by many colleagues – especially female colleagues, as research suggests (Acker & Feuerverger, 1996; Mountz et al., 2015; Conesa Carpintero, 2017). Combining a trade union approach with a feminist ethics of care allows a structural analysis of the feelings of inadequacy, tiredness, and fear many academics experience: missing unmanageable deadlines becomes not an individual failing but a structural one.

Feminist ethics of care

The constant pressures and gendered demands on their time lead many women to internalise feelings of not being 'good enough' (Acker & Feuerverger, 1996; Acker & Armenti, 2004), a feeling that has been theorised as the 'imposter syndrome' (Clance & Imes, 1978). Many women blame themselves for not 'managing their time' adequately: in a recent article, one woman states that '*it is partly my own fault for not learning the art of saying no*' (Mountz et al., 2015, p. 1245). There is an individualising impulse here, intensified by the neoliberal framing of achievements and setbacks as individual rather than collective or structural outcomes. Like the 'public feeling' of low mood in universities (Pereira, 2017), the feelings of inadequacy or 'imposter syndrome' can be shifted from being seen as 'a personal problem of faulty self-esteem inviting individualized coping solutions', to be understood instead in a sociopolitical context focused on the structure and academic labour (Breeze, 2017b; cf. Breeze 2018). The problem is more productively framed as a structural issue of workload and of laying more burdens on women.

Through a feminist trade unionist perspective which notes gendered structures of labour, phenomena such as the 'imposter syndrome' and its sibling 'presumed incompetency' (Gutiérrez y Muhs et al., 2012) are understood in a political, structural framework: perilous working conditions are located as a collective concern rather than as individual shortcomings. Simply 'playing the game' and working harder and longer hours will never allow us to catch up, but only encourages a race to the bottom – the bottom of our health, our confidence, and the quality of our work. The faster we work, the more tasks our employers will force on us and our colleagues; the more unpaid work we take on, the more unpaid work employers will expect us and our colleagues to do. Feminist scholars can use such a perspective to resist the impetus to work faster, work more, and to do this work unpaid.

Contradictorily, sometimes trade union work – rather than paid work – is what burns out activists. The author of this article, despite a determination and politics against working at weekends, finished this very article on a very long Saturday, making up for research time lost on two working days spent representing members at a trade union conference. Feminist trade unionists face a problematic question, relating to the often unpaid and often also emotionally draining nature of trade union work. While highlighting the importance of doing feminist and trade union work, and encircling

the vital role of women in trade unions, how do we ensure that this field of labour becomes not just another unpaid and invisible role taken on by women? Indeed, collective organising and activism themselves often reproduce gendered divisions of labour and exploitation of feminised work. We have to somehow do both, while also taking care of each other and ourselves. In practical terms, union representatives can negotiate for and make sure to use the legislated facility time: the paid time an employer has to provide for union duties. However, we need strategies beyond this for countering activist burnout. Both the feeling of 'guilt' for time spent not working, and the time and emotional demands of trade union work itself, outlines a need for a feminist ethics of care.

Caring for ourselves and our colleagues is a political act, and a feminist ethics of care is necessary in order to avoid activist burnout. This caretaking might involve checking in with each other, supporting each other through difficulties, creating safer spaces both in and outside of the workplace, or even something as simple as meeting up for lunch. Feminist activists and scholars have noted that through caring for others we resist imperatives of competition and individualism, and build alternative ways of being and of working: 'Relations of love, care and solidarity build on and evoke a sense of responsibility toward others, not only toward one's (performative) self, and are deeply embedded in the purposes and work of education' (McLeod, 2017, p. 51). Caring for colleagues and students, and for oneself, can thus be configured as 'a radical practice, subversive of the neoliberal university's rational, instrumental focus' (Res-Sisters, 2016, p. 275). The care for the collective links feminist and trade union struggles; Crowley (2017) explicitly links her work as a union representative with a feminist ethics of care, both these labours being concerned with the wellbeing of the community. Enacting a feminist ethics of care, in which we do the work of caring emotionally, socially, and physically for oneself and for others, becomes a necessary strategy to avoid burnout from excessive workloads or from the exhausting nature of much trade union work. A feminist trade unionist approach asks us to not only fight collectively but also to centre vulnerability, and to make time for caring.

As noted at the outset of this article, the marketisation of higher education impacts staff and students along gendered, racialised, and classed lines. It is thus more difficult to speak out against injustice when facing job insecurity or sexist, racist or other forms of harassment. Indeed the resurgence of feminist interest in an ethics of care exists alongside growing attention to the politics of vulnerability and precarity; there is a widespread feeling that 'we are living in especially precarious times' (McLeod, 2017, p. 44). In such times, care and interdependence become more pressing. It is difficult to explain the exhaustion that comes from being on precarious contracts, the emotional distress added to financial insecurity. If employers treat one as expendable, in a society structured by the ideology of work, it is easy to feel as if one's own person (rather than one's labour) is expendable. Considering the health consequences of job insecurity, and the increased risk of burnout (Chen & Lopes,

2015), staff on insecure contracts need more time and investment to recover. Similarly, in organisations marked by structural sexism and racism, with the rich white able-bodied man as norm, women and non-binary people, LGBTQ+ people, people of colour, disabled people, and otherwise historically oppressed groups often need spaces of recuperation and care simply to exist in structures that silence them.

Refusing to do work, or calling out one's employer's bad working conditions, can be risky in these precarious times. For marginalised 'others' and precariously employed scholars and educators such a practice carries particular risks (Res-Sisters, 2016). The collective nature of trade union organising makes speaking out easier: rather than being perceived as an individual troublemaker, if acting as a trade union representative on behalf of members, legislation provides some protection. This kind or organising also builds on that collective feminist ethos of care much needed in precarious times. The support of colleagues in more secured or privileged positions makes an incredible difference, and the unity in strength that lies at the heart of trade union work is possibly more vital for casualised colleagues: As Krista Bonello Rutter Giappone (2018) reports in her recent study, the one positive note casualised colleagues could find in their situation was the solidarity offered and communities built between colleagues. There is a crucial part to play for male allies to support women and non-binary colleagues, for white people to speak out against racism, and for permanent staff to amplify the voices of colleagues in precarious employment.

Conclusion: Reject giving free labour to the machine

As noted at the outset of this article, it is clear that current working conditions endanger not only research and teaching practice but the health and wellbeing of staff and students. Rather than facilitating the constantly accelerating speeding up of academic work, taking a step back to consider our working conditions is crucial for many colleagues in order to survive the current state of higher education. Some may think that 'surviving' is a misleading term, given the high salaries and security of many academic staff – but as seen in recent years' studies and media reporting, the marketised university causes not only ill health but in extreme cases death (Parr, 2014; Pells, 2018). Slowing down, not speeding up, is the only way to go if we want to imagine any future worth its name in education. In the current individualised and stressful marketised university, taking breaks, weekends, and holidays become politicised acts, particularly if coupled with trade union organisation to enable others to take time off.

Enacting a post-work and trade unionist politics is however not always easy. Murray (2018) notes the difficulty of doing enough work to be able to pay one's bills and imagine a future career, while also taking time out. Finding moments in which one can step back, if only momentarily, from the demands put upon staff, is therefore necessary in order to rest, recuperate and also resist the order of things. Continuing Dagerman's metaphor of the sea, noted earlier, we 'can hardly stand forever facing the

ocean, comparing its freedom to mine'. We must return to paid labour in order to survive:

> There comes a time at last when I must turn landward again to meet the organizers of my oppression. … With all my newfound freedom I cannot crush these structures – I can only groan under their weight.
>
> (Dagerman, 2014, pp. 306-307)

However, Dagerman notes, we can consider the 'demands human beings must face and distinguish between those that are unreasonable and those that are inevitable' (2014, p. 307). A post-work imaginary allows us to apply a historical contextualising of the work ethic, and to decide which tasks are inevitable and which ones can be resisted. Noting the revolutionary potential of everyday acts of resistance, Ahmed warns us not to discard the importance of such moments: 'Moments can build a movement, a movement assembled from lighter materials. This is not a secure dwelling. We are shattered, too often; but see how the walls move' (Ahmed, 2017b, p. 268). We exist not only in but also outside of capitalism every day: when talking to a friend or loved one, when reading a book for pleasure, or when looking out at the sea. We need moments such as these in order to envisage things being otherwise.

By imagining the world differently, and connecting with friends, families, colleagues and students in caring ways, we create more collegial and kind futures. Through trade unionist organising – informed by feminist theories of work – we can find space to resist and agitate for change collectively, and space to take time off work.

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2 Recent UK right-wing governments have weakened legislation protecting workers against discrimination and harassment, for example by abolishing third party harassment legislation and introducing employment tribunal fees (Trade Union Congress, 2016).