Surviving Work
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Abstract
Current research indicates there are 5 million working people in the UK earning less than a living wage and two thirds of British children living in poverty are in households where one adult works. Despite 30 years of externalized and flexible work forms in the UK, there continues to be relatively limited research on the link between precarious work and precarious workers and the decline in mental health experienced by individuals and their organisations.

This growth of precarity is often described as a ‘catastrophe’ where the loss of security is leading to a growth in a dangerous new underclass. There is a reality to this, with local trade unions faced with often overwhelming demands to manage individual cases and grievances. Partly because of this overwhelm, some union organisations react to the issue of mental health with a defensive resistance to ideas of ‘wellbeing’ and ‘resilience’. One aspect of this debate is whether there is a progressive and effective model of mental health at work, as an alternative to current workplace wellbeing models.

This case study focusses on an initiative called Surviving Work launched in 2011 to provide free resources for individuals to build their resilience. This initiative uses social media and anonymous podcasts of people’s stories about how they survive work. The content of the library was created through over 150 recording events with individuals and groups in workplaces, trade union branches and events, and mental health groups.

This case study raises important questions about the centrality of mental health for managing future work and the capacity of trade unions to adapt to this reality. The paper is positive about the potential for moving from a ‘catastrophic’ sense of precarious work through the revival of workers’ education methods and an emphasis on the pragmatic benefits of collectivisation.

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