

Ben Rogaly and Kaveri Qureshi were invited to speak at the Annual General Meeting of the Peterborough Racial Equality Council (PREC) in June 2012. The following is an extract from their talk. It begins with discussion of the workplace experiences of four migrant workers¹ and ends with a set of questions about class, migrants and regulation of workplace and housing conditions...

The value of focusing on workplace experiences, we hope, is firstly that it connects with a major interest of PREC via its casework on discrimination and abuses by unscrupulous employers – and how the ability of employers to get away with these things is shaped by wider political and economic changes such as labour market deregulation, the concentrated power of supermarket retailers, and a state focused on making deep cuts to the welfare budget; and secondly, through taking an historical perspective, that it enables us to explore continuities as well as changes across time through the lives of a small number of the participants in our research. This may then prompt questions about why work regimes in Peterborough have produced particular patterns and shared experiences –perhaps bringing social class back into view. It may also help to connect how workers based in Peterborough experience paid work with wider national and international experiences. Ashraf, the daily-paid labourer in Aman Sethi's book *A Free Man*, told Sethi 'the ideal job has the perfect balance of kamai and azadi. Kamai is what makes work work... A job is something a man is paid to do – and his pay is his kamai. Azadi [on the other hand] is the freedom to tell the [boss] to fuck off when you want to.'

Coming back to the importance of class can also help work against the divisive identification of the city's problems with racialised groups or those with particular – assumed?- national or ethnic heritages, be they a long-settled ethnic majority portrayed as lazy and dependent on benefits, a so-called 'eastern European' arrived in the last decade and seen as likely to rely heavily on drink, living in overcrowded housing and creating noise and nuisance in the neighbourhood, or Asian Muslims, portrayed by some media commentators as following a dangerous backward so-called 'desert' religion.

The way we want to do this is as follows:

¹ Some names and other details have been changed where research participants have wished to remain anonymous.

- We'll give some brief snippets of workplace experiences from the 1940s to the present drawing on some selected stories that shed particular light and reflect diversity. These stories, though still quite raw, illustrate the richness of the material and – hopefully – its value for pursuing an equalities agenda.
- Then we will try to draw together some common threads or questions arising for organisations interested in promoting workplace equalities.

We hope you will ask questions and comment at the end.

Alicia

Like many of the women we have come to know in Peterborough, Alicia narrated the story of her *working* life as interwoven with the story of the most significant *personal* events and relationships. Born in December 1924 in Belgium and moving to Peterborough in 1946 Alicia experienced a multitude of workplaces. She signed a letter to Ben: Interpreter, First aider, Auxillary nurse, Domestic, Factory worker, Machine operator, Supervisor

If you know Alicia, you will know she is a 'character'. Feisty, opinionated, energetic and passionate. The eldest of eleven children, her childhood alternated between two sets of grandparents, both farmers, and one of her earliest memories of work as a child was out on the land planting peas. She also worked for money as her father's income as a master plumber was not sufficient. Still a teenager, in the first part of the war she moved away to Brussels – to work as a live-in domestic and nanny. After three years she returned and took up factory work on the instructions of the German occupiers.

Alicia remembers several factory jobs in the early/ mid 1940s, including a glass bottle factory – dangerous work

'we had big, long glass tubes and we had to put them in to make little ones see, and if that broke you could cut your hands and everything'.

Characteristically she also took pleasure in telling Ben how she avoided the risk.

'I was crafty <laughs>. If I didn't like what was going on, I used to call the foreman. I said 'Here it ain't working properly!'.

Narrating her workplace experiences Alicia always drew attention both to injustices and also to her own ways of standing up to them.

After the Germans left Alicia met her first husband, a British serviceman stationed in Germany. They married in 1945 and she gave birth to a son the following year. Alicia and her child lived in the front room of her parents' house. Her husband visited from Germany whenever he could.

Languages could be both a resource and an obstacle for Alicia. Although the language spoken at home was a dialect of Flemish, from the age of 11 all her schooling had been in French, until it was finally disrupted at the age of 15 by the outbreak of war. German occupation had meant compulsory German classes. Now married to an English speaker communication was in sign language as she didn't have a word of English but, as Alicia put it, she *had to* move to England – it was the British army's instruction for all those who had married British soldiers. In August 1946 she moved to her mother-in-law's house near Flag Fen. Alicia's facial expression at this point in her story suggested that this was not a happy memory.

This household of agricultural labourers became her new workplace and she found it unjust that she had to both 'pay them rent [for her and her child's keep] *and* do the housework...' They only had very little furniture, because it wasn't their own house. It was the farmer's house, a tied cottage. Lighting by paraffin lamp and heating from a coal fire. Alicia's first encounter with Peterborough was entering on a bus to buy things for the family. She remembers acutely the continuing need for sign language

I had to take it as I went along. If I went shopping I put my money in my hand and if they take it they took it and if they didn't take it...I used to hold my hand out, they used to take it and I didn't know any different

Feeling that she had been compelled to work by the Germans in Belgium, and then made by the British to move to England, Alicia now experienced a kind of forced *immobility*. She sounded disgusted as she recalled her life at the time.

I couldn't have gone back home again. I didn't have no money of any sort and I couldn't go back home because the rule was you were married to that person and you

had to make the best of whatever was going on... a dog had a better life than what I had. I had to do all the cleaning, all the washing, all the cooking. All of it as best as I knew how to do it, while they went to work. And I had to pay them as well.

However, when her in-laws left Flag Fen Alicia moved with them and she remembers the switch to another tied cottage in Farcet from where she had to walk into town 'with the pushchair and the baby in... 'cause there was no busses... rain, snow, wind, whatever, [she] had to go.'

Alicia's English had improved and her in-your-face approach eventually enabled her to persuade the council to allocate her a wooden hut at the former airfield at Westwood. Alicia portrays herself throughout her working life as a fighter. Someone, who, in spite of conditions not of her own choosing, found ways to be her 'own boss'. But Alicia's fight also took place in her home. On the receiving end of several bouts of violence and after a woman turned up with a baby and informed her it was Alicia's husband's Alicia moved out.

'I took the pram and [my own] baby, went to the police station. The police station took me to what they used to call the workhouse, and dumped me there. And there's where I stayed'.

Her older son was in care at this point. She remembers sharing the work of cleaning and washing utensils at the workhouse.

we used to wash ourselves and dress the baby and then we had to go from here to across the road, to go and get our food. 'cause we couldn't cook or anything, we didn't have nothing. We had to go to the kitchen and get our food and then we had to wash it up and take it back again.

Alicia took a live-in housekeeping job with two Polish brick yard workers in Cromwell Road and at the end of 1952, as her employers came to sell the house, she met the man who would much later become her second husband - a migrant worker from Italy - at a dance at the brick yard social club, the Four Press. They bought a house in Cromwell Road in 1954. He had arrived in Peterborough two years earlier and lived in the former prisoner of war camp at Sibson, where a number of brick yard workers were accommodated. Alicia said she learned

Italian as it was the only language spoken in the house in Cromwell Road – and it was widely spoken with the neighbours. Alicia responded robustly to her mother’s antagonism towards the couple living together out of wedlock: ‘Nobody else is going to put another noose around me neck’. The couple did finally tie the knot in 1976, over twenty years later.

During their time in Cromwell Road, Alicia worked first as a cleaner at Peterborough District Hospital and later at Farrows at their fruit and vegetable canning factory in Huntingdon. Peterborough then, as now, served as the living quarters of a regional flexible labour force. Alicia would go off in a bus from Lincoln Road at 6am and would be dropped back at 7 at night. She was a first aider at Farrows and also an interpreter between English supervisors and Italian workers. Alicia told me how she had come to give one of the English managers a ‘beautiful name’:

one day I stood on the machine and the belt was running but I didn’t get no peas in me hopper, there was a big hopper where the peas came in then from that one they used to go in the can, I didn’t get no peas and I was waiting. And he stood from here to my front room from me [just a couple of metres], the manager, and he went, ‘Oi!’ I couldn’t have the machine working so I never said nothing. So about five minutes after he went, ‘Oi!’ I still didn’t have no peas, I couldn’t work. The third time he did it again and I got down off the steps from the machine I said, ‘Ere, I’ve got a bloody name! You either call me by name or you fuck off!’ I did.

Alicia also talked about her work at Freemans, the clothing factory out at Westwood, a company described by another of the research participants, who had worked there as an industrial chaplain as a ‘mail order warehouse... a semi-automated picking and packing distribution centre... “seven acres of knickers and love bites it was described as!”’ Here, Alicia’s sense of justice, and above all of wanting to retain the camaraderie of the line was evident in her narration of the experience of being made a supervisor, a job which she ‘stuck... for three months and... told them to stick [it] up their bottoms’. She described why she found it difficult to be a supervisor, in a passage that speaks volumes about the value she placed on workplace solidarity:

it is very difficult, if you’ve been working with people and they take you on as friends and then you get made more than they are, they don’t want to know you anymore.

They don't want to know, they say, 'Well why should we take all this from her after all the years we've been friends with each other?'

Alicia and her husband left Cromwell Road for Fletton in 1972. Even today she shares nostalgic memories of the everyday interactions the late 1950s and 1960s among Italians in Cromwell Road – she called it 'the queen of the town'. But it was fear that their 16 year old daughter might get into a relationship with more recent arrivals from the Indian subcontinent that lay behind the move. 'We ain't having it' – she remembered her husband saying – 'we're moving, she's not having a foreigner'. As Ed Miliband ponders how to keep last week's promise made in Peterborough to look into the issue of houses of multiple occupation, he might want to consider the historical precedent. Alicia again on her husband's reasons for leaving:

It wasn't that he didn't like the what's name. It was just the rows they were making and the way they were living, because they weren't living just one person in the house or two. There was a bunch of them...

Ranjit

Ranjit Singh is 70 years old and came to Britain from India at the age of 14. The early years of his life were marked by turbulent moves and violence. He was born in a part of Punjab that was to become Pakistan, and migrated at the time of partition under heavy machine gun fire, accompanied by ghoulis trains laden with bloody corpses. The family settled in Patiala in Indian Punjab. His father was unable to re-establish himself after all this upheaval, and departed for Britain only four years after partition. Ranjit's brother followed in 1954 and Ranjit in 1960. Ranjit described their family as poor. They had been too hard-up before partition to send him to school, and after settling in India he studied for a few years but he 'used to not like to go'. In his view, migration to Britain was the big turning point in their life.

I reckon we've done very well for us, done very well for us. We were a poor family, father had a poor family which is two sons and two daughters... He done very good for us far as I reckon. Brought us to Britain.

Like Alicia, his youthful experiences muddy our view of what work is. He started out in Northern Ireland in an informal line, helping his father in the draper trade. Ranjit used to ride a pushbike, twenty miles down, twenty miles back, selling clothes door to door. He learnt his English from selling clothes and going to the cinema. Despite 46 years living in Peterborough, he speaks with an Irish touch in his accent. After three years in Ireland they moved to Edinburgh, where Ranjit had his first encounter with industrial work – as a railway shunter – before they moved down to Peterborough in 1966. In Peterborough Ranjit found himself instead applying for a job at the new Hotpoint factory. A Pakistani friend and neighbour from Cromwell Road filled out his application form for him because although he could speak English very well by then, he never mastered reading and writing.

Ranjit worked as a machine-operator at Hotpoint for nine years before moving to Perkins Engines for four years, and then returned to Hotpoint until he took early retirement on grounds of ill health: he had done his back in after many years of extremely hard manual labour. Unlike the other people we're talking about today, Ranjit's working life was relatively stable and secure. His years at Hotpoint were defining for him. He painted a picture of himself as a working man whose life was spent manufacturing material products through his own brute strength and heroic effort. He recounted story after story illustrating this effort, putting himself and his might and wit at the heart of what happened in his life. He wasn't telling himself as representative of any ethno-national category but as an individual with bags of charisma whose trajectory was buffeted by his own pluck. Getting a job in Hotpoint was itself a stroke of luck – though many tried, he was the only Asian there for many years.

Three-hundred people started in Hotpoint, I was the only one Indian! Everybody else was English. And when people find out that one person's started in Hotpoint, oh god, every day, cars full of Asians trying to go there and try to get a job.

Ranjit spoke of Hotpoint in positive terms, but as a vast factory with different sections and shifts, it was a curate's egg of different foremen, different supervisors, different personalities. One of his stories told of his foreman Mr Kelly, who he got on with well on the night shift, until he started having problems in his neck and he was moved onto day. There, he found himself under the charge of a new foreman who watched him and monitored his output in a way that Ranjit found oppressively close and left him feeling offended and uncooperative.

So I saw him, I said, 'You keep on watching me. I'll teach you a lesson.' So when he disappears I start doing my job very fast, and when he's come back I was doing very slow. So bad you wouldn't believe it... Now what happened, he keep on reporting me every day to the managing director, 'This man, he can't work five miles an hour three miles an hour, how can he do the job?' This, that, oh my god!... Then Mr Kelly came back to him and said, 'I want Ranjit Singh back on night shift.' He said, 'You must be joking. He's the laziest man in Peterborough! He can't work. He can't do the job. His record book – nothing. He hardly does any work.' He said, 'You must have upset him. He's the finest worker I know!'

Ranjit took pleasure in these incidents where his craft was recognized in the factory and he was appreciated as a fine worker. Like Alicia, Ranjit had been offered opportunities as a supervisor but turned them down. He explained that because he wasn't very good at reading and writing, he preferred to stay as the in-charge of the section rather than trying for foreman. He was content with that – 'I could have gone up if I was able to read or write, but I didn't do too bad in my life'. Even being an in-charge was enough to stoke fires of jealousy in the bellies of some of his colleagues. Ranjit felt that many of the discriminatory experiences he had were motivated by his colleagues thinking 'why not me, why him?' – him being the only 'coloured' worker in there. However, he preferred to deal with these problems using his own luck and ingenuity rather than involving any representative structures such as the unions he paid his subs to. And it wasn't all bad – he had a lot of fun with his colleagues too, and made friends with his co-workers. He was a gregarious person who could 'yak yak all night'.

And after a hell of a long time there was another fellow named Ranjit Singh started in Hotpoint again. Whether you believe, believe it or not, somebody in the office shouts 'Ranjit Singh' and the manager from inside, he rush out, 'Where is Ranjit Singh?!' – they used to be missing me so much. He said, 'Where is Ranjit Singh?' He said, 'There.' 'Oh, that's not the same one.'

Unlike the others we're talking about today, Ranjit painted a picture of a person who wasn't alienated by his work but took pride in it. It also offered him relatively high wages and a stable position, which allowed him to obtain a mortgage. He eventually purchased five properties in the Millfield area which he was renting out to the newcomers he referred to as 'Europeans'. In his retirement, he was one of the Millfield HMO landlords that, as we heard

in Alicia's story, have long been present in Peterborough. Ranjit Singh was unapologetic about facilitating the presence of the recent Europeans and saw them as a valuable and hardworking labour force against a backdrop of lazy English people who didn't want to work.

A farmer friend of mine used to say if the Europeans didn't come, we would very much suffer. I went down to one time with somebody to do some job and oh god ... the farmer said June, July we'll still be cropping. European came down and done the job and all the work done in February. And then all cleared up, ready to do the next sowing. European men work hard. Englishman doesn't like to work hard. I mean to say, you look at Birmingham. All the foundries were worked by Indians. Indians made the work going. Otherwise they will be bankrupt.

These reflections are complicated – one the one hand Ranjit draws sympathetic connections between the recent Europeans and the earlier waves of Asian immigrants who filled the multiple occupancy housing (HMOs) of Millfield, who sustained Britain's moribund industries in the 1960s and 70s and kept them afloat. On the other, he endorses the categories of English and European which are deployed divisively to make some people out to be good workers whilst others are not; and the HMO properties might be seen as symptomatic of a particularly intensive and exploitative form of capitalism. We'll hear more about in a bit – from someone on the receiving end...

But before that, we'd like to muddy the sketch we're drawing of Peterborough's mass production factories by talking about a very different life history from that era.

Yasin

Yasin, unlike Ranjit, never managed to make it into the relatively well paid industrial workforce in Peterborough. Yasin is now in his late 50s and he grew up in a village near to Gujrat in Northern Pakistan. He came to Peterborough in 1967 as a fourteen year old, following in his uncle's footsteps. He was enrolled at Eastholme school, which he attended for two years, but his educational experiences there weren't edifying and he left school at 16 without any qualifications or much English fluency. His memories of Eastholme school resonate interestingly with some of the stories told by white English people we interviewed who attended the school in the same period. One, who had arrived recently from a services

childhood abroad, said of his time at Eastholme that it was ‘the worst year of my life’. He had been in his words a ‘misfit because the [other boys] would talk about what they were getting up to in their back gardens... and I could only talk about when I was in Germany or when I was in Singapore.’ It wasn’t just Asian kids who had a hard time there.

So - Yasin’s arrival in Peterborough embedded him more immediately into the working life of his uncle than into education. Like his uncle, Yasin ended up moving frequently between jobs, sometimes because of finding out about opportunities for better pay elsewhere, disagreements on the shop-floor, and visits back to Pakistan that were meant to be brief but kept on getting extended. Yasin would have loved to work at Perkins – like Ranjit – but he never managed it because it was already dominated by agency working: “I tried to get a job there many times but they wouldn’t give me, they only worked with an agent or something”. Instead, his was a lifetime of frequent moves.

He started out painting toys at Combex, the factory on Lincoln Road in Werrington, with his cohort of school leavers from Eastholme. He spent just three weeks there before moving to one of the brick yards in Fletton, where for working five days a week he could earn between £12-13. That didn’t suit him either: “the money was very good, but it was riding on my bike first thing in the morning six miles from here... it was six miles all the way to Fletton”. Then, he was told by a friend from his village about a job in a poultry and vegetable packing factory in St Ives. So he moved and ended up living there for four years in a HMO with two families and a group of seven young Pakistani men, who shared two bedrooms. He used to visit Peterborough on the weekends if he wasn’t working. Many of his colleagues at the factory lived in Peterborough too. As in the food processing industry today, there was a factory coach laid on to pick up English and Italian women from Gladstone St, Cromwell Road, Fletton and Sawtry early in the morning and drop them back in the evening after an eight hour shift. Those who had their own transport could do twelve hour shifts, as Yasin put it ‘like a man’.

Yasin remembered that time in St Ives with great warmth. He kept good company with the bevy of English and Italian women he met there and learnt English and Italian.

Them ladies were very nice with me. They always looked after me, always give me a cup of coffee, give me cakes ...I was very happy with that work, ‘cause most of us, we had the whole community where we used to work, we had a mixed community

there, we had English, Italian, Pakistani ... That's all ladies there, and I was getting on with them alright. We were all young lads then anyway... it was doing the long hours, we was ... messing about with each other, fighting all the time. We kept together all the time with each other. Nobody can tell if enemies or friends!

The feeling of familiarity with Italian people stayed with him, when he came back to Peterborough he felt an affinity with Italian that went beyond his language skills.

When I was there I used to speak to the language, and as soon as I left there to come to Peterborough, various Italian friends there but I didn't speak to them in Italian at all. I understand a little bit of Italian but I can't speak no more.

These halcyon days finished in 1974 when Yasin went back to Pakistan to get married. When he returned to England, his uncle made him return to Peterborough. He remembered that as one of the worst mistakes of his life. It wasn't that he didn't like Peterborough – he loved Peterborough, Peterborough was his life. But Peterborough took him back to his circle of friends from Eastholme who were a bad influence.

I had my own property when my Mrs came over, but if I was [in St Ives] I was more family man than I was in Peterborough because when I came to Peterborough I made school friends. Back with school friends from Eastholme ... When I was [in St Ives] I wasn't doing that... If you look at it, Peterborough is my life, all my life Peterborough, I love Peterborough because Peterborough if I go somewhere else now I can ... I might go for some time and I might stay, but nowhere else I can live.

For the next six years he continued to move rapidly between manufacturing jobs in Peterborough. He started out back at Combex, working on the squeezer toys, which was a good job offering more pay than other sections of the factory. Following a reorganization at Christmas 1975, he lost his position in the squeezer section and was sent into injection moulding, which he didn't like: 'I said, 'I don't like this job. I give up'. And I left!'. He spent a year working in factory on Borough Rd that made machinery, and then went back to Combex to rejoin in his preferred squeezer toy section. He worked on the night shift there with the other Pakistani men. The day shifts were English and Italian women.

Lots of Italian women used to work there, Italian, English, Indian... Indian women used to work there, plenty come from Uganda. They used to work there. Combex was ... 300, 400, 500 women, like assembly, on the lines, women doing everything, packing, spraying the toys, cleaning the toys, they're grinding them on the machines and making them. We had people working the night shift, we had ... lots of Pakistanis working night shift, just blow moulding and injection moulding.

In 1979 he moved to the Mother's Pride bakery in Fengate. There, too, the workforce was divided along the lines of gender, race and migration. Yasin gave a hint of the kinds of ideas about men and women as appropriate for particular tasks that undergirded the segmentation of the workforce into different sections working in different conditions and for different pay.

Yasin: We had lots of women working there when I was in Mother's Pride.

Kaveri: Did they work in the same section as you or in a different part?

Yasin: They worked in different parts. They used to work in small bakery, morning goods, like making finger rolls. They were making cakes, donuts, filling them with like a cream or making special cakes, things like that. Any hard jobs, the men was doing it.

The early 80s saw him unemployed as the Mothers Pride bakery closed. He attempted to follow his old strategy of moving away from Peterborough, and found a job in a brickyard in Bedford but he only lasted there three months. After two years on the dole he managed to find another job in a bakery that went through three different managements but managed to survive until 2005. Yasin stayed there for fifteen years and rose to a position as foreman.

Yasin was a seasoned trades unionist and joined every union that he was eligible to. He took part in memorable strikes at the poultry and vegetable packing factory and at Combex. Laughingly, he recounted how they had gone on strike for better pay at the agribusiness factory only to find themselves chucked out and then re-employed ten weeks later.

We got sacked! <Laughs> They said, 'We don't need you. We'll get somebody else.' So they come to Peterborough and take a bus full of others. In 1972, when we done the strike, it was very hard that you can find a job... just like now... So they came into Peterborough, they got people here and they took them there, so I didn't have a

job for ten weeks. After ten weeks they take me back! <Laughs> ‘You want to come back?’ I said, ‘Yeah.’ ‘Alright then, come back on your job.’

Yasin had seen much discrimination on the shopfloor in his time. He said it was inevitable. Rather than turning to the union for back-up – he noted that the shop stewards were always English or Italian – he described learning to deal with it through thick-skinned, good-natured banter rather than taking it seriously, as he had as a youth. He reminded Kaveri that in those times the Italians were also picked on for racist name-calling as well.

We do have some people they take very seriously calling us names and that, and that, and we used to ... laugh at them or ... they still call us names. <Laughs> Black wog or Paki or Chapatti. I remember when we came here first I was usually called Chapatti. <Laughs> Then Curry, then Paki. Changing every time. Italians had a worse time than we had it... Italians, very racist innit, [they] call them Itis.

When Yasin was made redundant from the bakery in 2005, he turned to the union for help for the first time in his life, and was given his job back – but after only four months, the bakery closed down and he left with an even smaller redundancy payment than if he’d left when he was first offered. He has been unemployed and on Jobseekers Allowance since 2005. His thoughts about what kinds of work he can or would do illustrate how the labour market in Peterborough has changed with the decline of its manufacturing sector.

Wherever you go, too old. Sorry, bye. Don’t give you a reason! <Laughs>... I’d like a job in McCains or brickyard ... they don’t have jobs for me, there aren’t any brickyards left in Peterborough, so I wouldn’t mind to be working any factory, food factory or vegetable factory ... I know all them jobs. Can’t find any.

Nina

Nina was born in a town in Latvia in the 1980s and has lived in Peterborough for about seven years, arriving about a year after the enlargement of the European Union removed the need for a visa for Latvian nationals wanting to enter Britain to seek work. Nina’s father has had various jobs. Nina’s mother migrated to Germany to work in a distribution warehouse when she was small. Though resources were tight at home she has happy memories – her father

took pleasure in the aesthetics of the flat they lived in and both parents encouraged her and her sister to spend time on their studies. Nina has always enjoyed studying as well as reflecting on her own experience.

Nina was nineteen and one year into her university degree when she decided to come to England. Having negotiated an exceptional gap year arrangement with her university, and hoping to learn better English and to earn some money for specific things she wanted, she came alone. One member of family was already living in Peterborough. Nina had had temporary jobs in Latvia, picking fruit, selling newspapers, working in a mobile phone shop. As with Alicia, language has long been an issue for Nina. When she arrived in England she was very concerned about her English and the whole process of approaching agencies in Peterborough for work – and then getting a job quickly – within days - was the cause of celebration.

And then we called my parents because it was of course huge happiness that I got a job in a foreign country so quickly. You hear sometimes stories or at least we had so many stories that you could read on the internet and in newspapers that people are looking for weeks or months or they work in a field and they are really kind of exhausted because of work conditions [but my offer of work so quickly] looked quite good and we hoped that everything would be OK.

However, when she turned up in the morning at the time and place appointed for a van to pick her up, a car drove up at exactly the appointed time – the man inside responded positively when she asked if he was from the agency. It turned out to be a kidnapping and when Nina discovered that the driver was not taking her to the factory she dived out of the moving car. This was seven years ago and she still hasn't told her parents. She returned, shaken, to the agency with a friend of her relative's whom she was living with. The agency found her an alternative job. She laughed as she remembered what seemed to be an absurd division of labour, one that – in contrast to the segmented labour force described by Yasin - indicated so clearly an undifferentiated demand for workers as bodies, rather than workers as people.

And this was quite funny because the first time in my life I saw that there is <laughs> something strange, like for example in factories, they don't look if you are a female or a male, if you are weak or if you are big and strong and they give you any job, even if

it isn't suitable for you. So I went with four guys by car, by taxi, I was the only girl and what they got, they got little packs, a lot of packs of cereals on the side, they got little boxes of cereals, you know sometimes there are eight joined boxes, so they had to pick up like three or something and they were putting on machines. After two hours I had really a backache for the first time ever I think [She laughed ironically again] I just thought how unfair it is four guys putting these little light things and I am with a box here and again I didn't speak English enough, I thought maybe I shouldn't say because I might lose my job.

Nina was also laughing when she related an incident almost worthy of language school slapstick in one job-seeking encounter:

and I didn't speak English much yet because in the factories also you have a lot of foreign people who make mistakes as well so you don't learn it properly but you learn more or less just to speak or you learn, 'You take, bring here,' and you don't really say full sentences. So I remember there was a security guy, a black guy and I wanted to ask him (I was of course learning this by heart before I told him) and the sentence was, 'Hi, I'm looking for a job, can you help me?' And then I said, 'Hi, I'm looking for a job, can I help you?' And then he looked at me, he started to laugh and he said, 'Yes, first thing is go back home and learn English and then one day you can come back and you can get a job, we could give you an application.'

From Ben's first meeting with Nina he realised that she had a positive outlook on life and did not want me to portray the lives of migrant workers like herself as ground down, as entirely negative, exploited. The humour in her telling is a further sign of this. Yet, her experiences can be helpful in understanding some of the harsher aspects of contemporary work in the food industry. At one point in the second half of the 2000s, after marrying the boyfriend she had met in Peterborough, Nina worked for eight months for a potato packing company. She described the regime there as like a 'war camp' – which resonated for me with the forced labour regimes that other interviewees spoke of during and after the second world war. Nina's description also pointed upward to the giant retail corporations and the way their requirements often shape workplace conditions:

we had huge lines, really wide and a lot of potatoes were going very fast through the lines, so it was like every second you saw 100 – 200 potatoes passing. They told us

about the different diseases of potatoes, different kinds of black holes and green potatoes. They said, 'OK, now it's going to be value pack, which is much cheaper, you can leave some green potatoes. Now it's going to be Asda, they want the best potatoes only, you have to take off everything that's got this or that.' This was four days' work, four days off. It's 12 hours and you get one break of half an hour and two of 15 minutes. You are in uniform... There was this loud sound for a break and everybody was walking with their faces down, then coming back and this was so lifeless and after a few months, it's just terrible... They decided if you go to the toilet in work time, you can be there up until seven minutes if not they will come and find you! And what if you need longer? Sorry. <laughs> But then I remember we couldn't talk, we still spoke a lot but if somebody saw they would come and make problems of course.

After returning from a three month break with her husband in his country of origin, Nina sought work as a supervisor. She worked at a salad packing plant, responsible for recruitment, for aligning the supply of workers to the demands of the line on a particular day. From 20 to 100 people might be needed on any particular day or night shift. She experienced the stress of being responsible for what we would argue is effectively having to put into action the just-in-time demands for workers typical of many companies in the fresh produce business.

We got there and it was six thirty in the morning let's say and my manager said we need 30 more people. I don't know how you're going to do it but I want people now... You had to call all people at this time. They were getting angry. They said no I'm not coming are you crazy? What are you doing...? And when a lot of Gypsy people starting come to the city then because was really difficult for them to get work because they didn't speak English, because people didn't want to take them... We called Gypsy people really quickly because for example they said yes I've got five people, I've got car I can come straightaway to factory.

Here – perhaps ironically – and only because of a desperation brought about by wider experiences of discrimination, it was European Roma who were sought as the ideal just-in-time workforce. Again, like Alicia before her, Nina has experienced work in a range of sectors. Several positions later, having injured her spine in an accident at a distribution warehouse, and, in spite of the continuing effects of this, been asked to carry breakfast trays

upstairs to guests staying at one of Peterborough's top end hotels – against the agreement made when she was appointed - Nina found herself working for a high street hospitality chain in the city. She described this as 'one of [her] worst jobs in England'. She said that the manager, who she described as English was:

treating English people much better than Latvian ones... every week... some waitress was crying there you know, outside for a moment crying, coming back and working... I remember that one of the managers told my Latvian friend she has to do work quicker, do this better, etcetera and she started to cry there in the restaurant while she was carrying food. And I said to him 'are you crazy or something? Can you stop treating people in this way? Look what you did. And he told me 'shut up'. [In a more polite equivalent to Alicia's F off to her manager, also delivered because of how he addressed her, Nina answered back:] 'no I'm sorry you shut up. You won't talk to me like that.' And then when he heard he said 'what did you say? Okay you are not working here anymore'.

Nina's continuing description of the collusion between this manager and his senior over disciplining her, the degrading and deeply upsetting example of cleaning the toilet with her finger he gave to emphasise that she had to do anything he told her, underpayment by recording fewer hours worked than were worked evidence some of the abusive employment practices with which PREC and ourselves are concerned.

Discussion

When we were invited to give this talk we were asked to think about the 'so what' question, the implications that might be raised for people involved in day to day policy and practice in Peterborough. We come to this final section tentatively as we are at an early stage in the analysis of the interviews and have only talked about four stories today.

1. Focusing on capitalism or its symptoms?

We've seen much continuity in and around Peterborough in the period since the second world war.

Shift working.

Hard manual work and a variety of work regimes ranging from brutal to benign.

Houses of multiple occupation.

Employment of incomers – whether from elsewhere in the UK or further afield.

Sometimes, even those with recent family histories of international migration of their own, like Ed Miliband in June 2012, cause the policy focus in response to such practices to be on migrants, on newcomers. Even though he has been apologising for the lack of UK transitional arrangements following the 2004 EU enlargement and for Gordon Brown's 'bigot' gaffe, the effect of his statement may be to cause people who are longer settled to identify more recent arrivals themselves as the problem, something which can be very dangerous, especially in times of recession and austerity.

Peterborough has a long history of relatively successful integration of migrants, not least the tens of thousands of Londoners and other UK nationals who moved to the new towns from the late 1960s, and other English people from closer by, from the Fens, as well as many foreign nationals. Would it in fact be a more responsible politics to turn attention back to Ed Miliband's concerns expressed earlier about responsible capitalism? Should we not pay more attention to what produces houses of multiple occupation, shifts that end in the early hours of the morning, and jobs with conditions that locally-raised people are often unwilling to do rather than on the symptoms? What are the effects, for example, of the concentrated buying power of UK retailers on the employment practices of their suppliers, or of the series of international takeovers of Perkins and Hotpoint? Is the city's strategy for inward investment one that celebrates the arrival of any retail or hospitality chain regardless of whether it has a history of decent, humane employment practices for all those who work for it at every grade directly or indirectly?

2. Workers as people or workers as bodies?

The four case studies that we have talked about today emerge from a research practice of listening to the viewpoints and experiences of people who are often unheard, who may in fact believe – or have been conditioned to believe - that their stories don't count. However, while a company may want working *bodies* for repetitive manual roles but they always get *people*.

We have heard from people who, in certain conditions and perhaps exceptionally, would prefer to be line workers than supervisors or managers; and people who have determinedly pursued skills in several languages including English even when government pronouncements suggest that learning English language needs to be coerced.

People have lives beyond the workplace and there is always a relation between the two. Alicia's experience of meeting her husband through work resonate with some of the later life histories we've been recording with people who ended up in mixed relationships as a result of banter at work that took on a more romantic quality. The kinds of cheek-by-jowl juxtapositions that you find in many workplaces have been re-moulding people in smaller ways, too – giving people like Yasin a sense of familiarity with Italian language and ways of living, for example. Yasin never claimed any proficiency in Italian but his experiences in St Ives left him with an affinity for Italian people that have endured for decades.

People do not simply accept injustice. Even if characters like Alicia and Nina who stood up against abusive, disrespectful or bullying managers had greater than average courage, Ranjit's story speaks of a quieter, more subtle resistance campaign involving footdragging.

Workers as people fight not only for better working conditions but for dignity too. Question number two is how can the daily politics and practice of this city work alongside individual workers' struggles to retain or reclaim their dignity of personhood, to be spoken to at work with decency and respect as people rather than merely as bodies?

3. 'Us' and 'Them'?

Our third and final question relates to the way in which we often think about each other according to some larger ethnic, national or faith identity. It is everyday practice in Peterborough as elsewhere to talk about Muslims, Asians, eastern Europeans, 'indigenous white working class' etc as though it was self-evident that each of us fits into one of these boxes and this determines our workplace performance and our likely relation with others.

Of course people's national and ethnic heritages (many of us have more than one of each) are often important to them – and this includes white English people. And some progressive struggles for greater equality have relied on a strategic use of such categories. But our work

shows so much diversity within and regular examples of intimacy across apparently hard and fast boundaries.

Work-place experiences – breaks, shifts, pay, lack of it, difficult bosses, injuries, camaraderie, living in versus living out – transcend ethno-national categories. Work-places as we've seen can be sites of camaraderie and/ or of racist name calling and of gendered bullying and harassment. But if it is unity that is required in order to face down the more ruthless forms of capitalist employment relations that have emerged (or reemerged) in recent years, would the most effective form of resistance not be to start thinking about class again rather than emphasising a division of interests between natives and newcomers?

If ethno-national categories are mobilized to divide and rule, is the most progressive way forward to emphasise the commonality in aspects of people's work-based experiences, and thus to work against the enmity in working class experiences that racism and ideas of indigeneity and nativism entrench? This isn't to suggest something plaintive about how we're all the same, but to start to ask questions about how best to stand up and resist voices that would divide us and pit us against one another.