

# CHANGED WORK, CHANGED LIVES? WORKERS' EXPERIENCE OF REDUNDANCY WITHIN THEIR COMMUNITY.

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## INTRODUCTION:

When international restructuring moves jobs across the globe, the effect on those left behind rarely dissipates as quickly as the publicity that may be attracted by localised protest. Using survey, interview and observational data, this paper analyses the experiences of the men and women employed by Burberry, the international clothing brand, in the aftermath of the closure of their manufacturing plant in South Wales, UK, and the transfer of its work to China. We focus on redundant workers' experiences and reflections in the two years following the demise of the plant, and consider in particular the personal, family and community impact of the break-up of a formerly tight-knit workforce. The wider contribution of the paper will be to challenge the (over) focus on leave and flexibility issues within the work-life balance discussions, and to underline the importance of income, predictability of the boundary between working time and leisure, and security, in facilitating and sustaining the successful integration of life inside and outside of paid work. We conclude that meaningful evaluation of work-life balance for lower paid workers must focus on the '*degree of control and choice [they] exercise over their working time pattern, and the scope this provides to mesh successfully their lives inside and outside the workplace*' (Blyton, 2008: 514, emphasis added).

## BACKGROUND:

The former Burberry factory was located in Treorchy, a small former coal-mining town in the Rhondda Valleys of South Wales, UK. Historically, communities were centred on the coal mine or 'pit'; indeed, it was said that the dynamics of work, labour organisation and society interacted as a 'unified social organism' (Will Paynter, <sup>1</sup> quoted in Francis and Smith, 1980: 34). But since the demise of coal the relative geographical isolation of former coal mining communities in this region presents distinctive challenges in terms of attracting work. Such 'occupational communities' have in the past displayed 'unusually strong community solidarities' and have been subject to much sociological enquiry which has highlighted the 'high degree of overlap between their occupational, social and domestic experiences' (see Parry, 2003: 230). The region's isolation has not only hindered investment in new industry but also presents problems for workers in accessing employment outside their locality. Transport links in the Valleys are difficult: relatively narrow roads snake around mountains and comparatively short distances demand far more time of the traveller than an equivalent distance on a motorway, assuming, that is that in an area of limited job opportunity the worker can afford to own and run their own car. It remains the case that this is an area where 'work' and 'home' have traditionally existed in close proximity to one another in both the geo-political and socio-economic contexts.

The Burberry manufacturing plant was founded in 1939; it was owned originally by the firm 'Polikoff's'<sup>2</sup> and in the locality many people continued to refer to the plant by that name. Thus it was not a 'newcomer' associated with the late twentieth century phase of industrial restructuring, but was rather in the vanguard of light industrial manufacturing

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<sup>1</sup>Will Paynter was a leading political figure of his day in South Wales, and was President of the South Wales Miners' Federation from 1951–1959.

<sup>2</sup>Also sometimes spelt as 'Polykoff's'

that came to Wales in the late 1930s (see Beddoe, 2000: 82). The factory was a long-term survivor and was all the more important for that. The regional context of industrial decline and relative isolation served to emphasise the plant's importance as a large employer situated 'on the doorstep' of workers with limited access to alternative sources of work, and in surrounding communities it had a reputation for steady, secure employment. It originally made products ranging from shirts, to duffel coats, to men's suits and trousers, and supplied a number of high profile customers, of which Burberry was always one. The factory changed ownership more than once in its history; it was taken over by Great Universal Stores (GUS) which itself had bought Burberry in 1955, and in 1989 it was finally made Burberry's exclusive base and ceased manufacturing for other retailers at that time. In its heyday it employed around 2,000 workers. As was the case in Cunnison's (1966) rich case study of workers in the waterproof garment industry, the community outside the workplace entered the factory gates in the form of familial ties, friendships and long-established associations. The workforce was overwhelmingly female, reflecting the gender profile of the clothing sector generally (see Winterton and Taplin, 1997: 10) and more particularly in Wales, where in the 1960s around 85% of the clothing workforce was female (Beddoe, 2000: 140). Little had changed in respect of gender mix at the Burberry plant by the time it closed in March 2007, but overall numbers employed had fallen gradually<sup>3</sup> to around 300 employees.

The UK clothing industry has been affected by the global shift of production towards 'low labour cost countries' (Jones, 2006: 101). Clothing workers, generally, are low paid everywhere. At the time of plant closure, allowing for individual exceptions, most sewing machinists interviewed at the Burberry plant in Treorchy reported earning on or around £208 per week, which at that time (2006) was roughly equivalent to the UK's National Minimum Wage.<sup>4</sup> This figure was confirmed by the full time union official for the plant, who explained that individual bonus payments had, over a period of years, been absorbed into the minimum wage, effectively eroding the piecework payment incentive. Workers had been neither blind to, nor content with this state of affairs, but the opportunity to work close to where they lived, minimising transport costs and facilitating the accommodation of child-care and other responsibilities outside work, mitigated the effect of their low earnings. However, in developed economies no matter how cheap a clothing worker may be they are not cheap enough to compete with poorer workers around the globe. The end of trade barriers like the Multi-Fibre Agreement (MFA) has allowed low cost import penetration into high wage economies and as a labour intensive industry where microelectronics and technology can make a contribution to research and design, but the human hand remains the best method of placing cloth to a needle, savings on the price of labour hold significant allure for manufacturers (see Winterton and Taplin, 1997:1-16). Burberry was one of the UK producers of high value garments that formerly set itself apart from this trend by 'focussed differentiation and niche marketing' (Winterton and Taplin, 1997: 194), but in 2006 it joined the ranks of other producers and gave notice of its intention to close its Treorchy plant, relocating production of its 'polo-shirt' to China.<sup>5</sup> For the majority of our respondents the closure of their factory meant the end of their factory community and ruptured friendships and associations that had been built up over lifetimes.

The wider academic canvas for this paper, is that much of the discussion on work-life balance in recent years has been restricted to a narrow range of issues and contexts. In important part this reflects the influence of two background factors: first, the growth in female participation in the labour force, and second, that much of the development occurring is an outgrowth of 'family-friendly' practices and policies that have focused primarily on working mothers with child-care responsibilities. Arguably, attention has concentrated on individuals and dual earners juggling work and non-work responsibilities so as to maintain (and advance) their careers whilst fulfilling care activities. Thus, there has been a tendency to consider work-life balance in terms of the need to reduce total hours of work, often associated with issues of diversity and the accommodation of non-paid caring responsibilities within the

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<sup>3</sup> By means of natural wastage and limited recruitment rather than redundancies.

<sup>4</sup>The UK minimum wage currently stands at £5.73 per hour for workers aged 22 years and older; the equivalent of 11.63 AU\$, or 8.43US\$ (April, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> Notice of closure to another outlet in the North of England followed at the end of 2008.

immediate or wider family unit (Kersley et al, 2006: 265). Elsewhere, we have discussed the narrowness of this pattern of response to work-life pressures – the emphasis they place on satisfying all the work and non-work role demands, rather than for example, seeking to modify those demands (see for example Blyton and Jenkins, 2007; Noon and Blyton, 2007). However, a further narrowing of focus is the way the work-life debate contains implicit assumptions regarding the status of the workers under discussion – assumptions about security, relative affluence, available choices, and so on. Yet for writers such as Warren (2004) and Lautsch and Scully (2007), people on low incomes, in insecure work, and able to call on few resources within their locality, will have a distinctive experience of work-life balance compared with higher earning, dual-career couples. In the UK women's employment continues to be concentrated in the lower paid, lower skilled manufacturing and service sectors (both private and public) (Purcell, 2000: 134). The 2004 Workplace Employment Relations Survey (WERS 2004) reported the gender composition for occupations caring, leisure and personal service was 82% female, and sales and customer service was 75% female (Kersley et al, 2006: 24). In a recent study of the implications of social policy for low waged mothers in England Warren et al (2009: 127) noted that 'the problems facing women are experienced most sharply by those with low qualifications, who are most likely to stop paid work when they have children, and to return to the lowest paid part-time jobs'. 'Problems' include being in marginalised employment, facing discrimination, enjoying relatively poorer working terms and conditions while at work, and the prospect of a 'retirement' lived in relative poverty. The attendant insecurity and social dislocation has the potential to harm the psychological and physical well being of workers and their families (Nolan et al, 2000: 181–209); a situation only compounded for the lower paid by the fear (and reality) of financial hardship.

In such a context, to speak of the balance between paid and non-paid work in terms of 'work-life balance' seems too full of contradictions. Non-professional workers have traditionally been the least likely to be able to access employment policies that allow them to combine work and life in a balanced way (see Appelbaum et al., 2006: 56). This is particularly likely to be the case where employee bargaining power is low. WERS 2004 reported that in the UK the proportion of workers across nine occupational classifications able to exercise control over their starting and finishing times was just 25 % of all employees, with sales and customer service workers reporting the least autonomy and influence over their work in every measure in the survey (Kersley et al, 2006: 97–98). Most of the respondents in our study entered relatively low paid employment in the home care and retail sectors and thus where they did find alternative employment after redundancy, it was mainly in occupations unlikely to offer significant choice or control over working time. Employer-driven measures to satisfy customer demand for 'around-the-clock' service may well involve temporary employment and variable hours contracts on low levels of pay; neither condition is likely to facilitate greater work-life balance. It would be wrong, for instance, to assume that working fewer hours on part-time or 'flexible' contracts *per se* necessarily accommodates work-life balance to any degree (see Wooden et al, 2009: 171–173) and despite some small advances in UK regulation there is little to make us confident that workers' interests are currently more protected at the level of the low-skilled, low-paid workplace (see TUC, 2008).

## **METHODS:**

In the present study we examined several effects of the Burberry redundancies over an extended research period which had key stages in 2007, 2008 and 2009. Our research began in January 2007, and initially concentrated on the workers' union campaign against closure of the plant<sup>6</sup>: regular semi-structured and unstructured interviews were held with full-time and lay union representatives; unstructured interviews were undertaken with shop-floor staff; and a short survey was issued to employees while the plant was still open. Interviews with union representatives have continued from that initial research period up to the present day. In addition, the authors attended public events such as organised protests outside Burberry's stores in London's Bond Street, media events, workers' reunions and also the first performance of a verbatim play about the campaign which was composed by a local playwright and first performed at the Sherman Theatre in Cardiff, in the summer of 2008. In 2008 a survey of workers one year after closure sought information on their experiences of life after redundancy. It was issued to 191 shop floor workers and elicited 80 usable replies.

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<sup>6</sup> This lasted from September 2006 until March 2007 when the plant was finally closed.

Twenty-eight respondents to the 2008 survey initially indicated their willingness to participate in ongoing research. In January 2009 they were contacted and asked to participate in one-to-one interviews about their experiences since redundancy. Eleven agreed, and semi-structured interviews took place throughout March 2009, focusing on their experiences while employed at the factory and the way their lives had changed since it closed. Apart from the first 'pilot' interview where both researchers participated, interviews were conducted by the same individual interviewer in respondents' own homes. Apart from one which was around forty minutes, interviews lasted on average one hour and forty minutes. Two of the interviewees were male; nine were female. At the time the interviews were conducted, four interviewees were in employment, four were unemployed (each had held jobs since the factory closed but were again unemployed and intending to seek work), and three classed themselves as 'retired'. In outlining the overall study findings in the following section, we will report data from interviews in 2007 and the 2008 survey, and will concentrate on material from interviews conducted in March 2009 in evaluating the post-redundancy experiences of former employees.

## RESULTS:

The 2008 survey provided factual information about the demographics of our respondents, the type of jobs they had held since redundancy, and also offered scope for subjective statements about what they 'missed' about factory life. Somewhat reflecting the lower levels of recruitment to the plant in recent years, (70%) of our survey respondents were 45 years or over; (74%) were married or living with a partner and (72%) had no children living at home. Almost all of the respondents had been employed at Burberry for 5 years or more, with the average number of years' service of respondents being 16 years. The largest group in the sample were former sewing machinists (47%) with smaller proportions employed at the plant in inspection, cutting and supervision. Almost all (97%) of respondents had been employed by Burberry on a full-time basis, a characteristic feature of manufacturing employment in the UK (Kersley et al, 2006: 78). The 2008 survey showed that, one year on from the factory closure, 75% of our respondents were in some form of paid work, but just over half of them were working part-time hours. The remaining 25% of our respondents were divided equally between those who had retired and those still seeking employment.

Part-time hours dominated alternative employment opportunities for the former Burberry workers; interviewees said that they were all that was available, rather than being sought. Local vacancies were, in the main, relatively low-skill shop-assistant, care-work, call-centre or light manufacturing employment on or around the level of the national minimum wage, offering variable hours. On the basis of our 2008 survey, the areas of work entered by our respondents were mainly in the manufacturing, home-care and retail sectors. Of those respondents in paid work, (25%) of the sample were employed in other manufacturing units,<sup>7</sup> while the majority of the remaining respondents – no less than (40%) of those in paid work – were in the home-care or retailing sectors. A further (25%) of respondents in paid work were in service sector jobs doing clerical duties, cleaning and catering. All but one of those who re-entered manufacturing employment worked full-time hours, but in home care, retailing and other service sector positions, the majority of workers were all part-time.

Though workers spoke of their need for a full-time wage, they conceded that part-time hours had to be considered as they were all that was available locally. However, it was frequently the case that the spread of the pattern of work compounded workers' problems in taking up such work. In the retailing sector interviewees stated that the majority of jobs were advertised at no more than 16 hours per week. Even where supermarkets offered more hours, candidates found that this might be spread over a number of days making the job economically impossible. For example, one male interviewee said that there were jobs advertised at 27 hours a week for a branch of Tesco some thirteen miles away from Treorchy, which he considered, until he learned the hours were spread over six days of the week. On earnings at the level of the minimum wage this meant he could not afford his travelling costs. We might ask why workers were not more ready to relocate for work. Apart from the traditions of community in this region (see Parry

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<sup>7</sup> Around 15 redundant workers found employment in a sewing factory nearby, but by 2009 on the basis of anecdotal evidence from other interviewees, most of these workers had been made redundant again.

2003), relocation in search of work was an unrealistic option. As workers classed as 'low skilled' or 'unskilled' outside their factory environment, job opportunities offered little more than minimum wage. This didn't offer much as recompense for moving home, nor were people optimistic about trying to sell houses in an area of high unemployment even if they wanted to, and having been made redundant from a factory "no-one thought would close" workers' confidence had been shaken about prospects of job-security anywhere else. All these factors made relocation impracticable, undesirable and risk-laden.

Thus the main problems for workers centred on the opportunities for employment in their locality. In their search for alternative employment the workers were not only hampered by their lack of verifiable qualifications but also perhaps by their own perceptions, which tended to underestimate the level of skill they had acquired over their working lifetimes. The comments of a forty year old interviewee with nineteen-and-a-half years' service highlight typical attitudes and fears:

"When the closure was announced, my first thought was, 'that's my house gone' ... I thought, 'I'm too old to get another job ... this is all I can do ... I'm going to have to retrain, that will cost money ... I won't have money ... I'm going to be on the dole ... it was the 'careers people' who got me thinking properly ... when he came in to help with our CVs ... he told me about the skills I was using ... computers and that ... and then I realised I might be able to do something ...."

This interviewee quoted went on to gain employment as a full-time hotel receptionist in 2008, but when interviewed in 2009 her hours had been cut to twenty per week to accommodate seasonal demand. She earned just marginally more than the hourly statutory minimum wage and for 20 hours' work she received £120.00 gross, out of which she paid £35.00 travelling costs before any other bills were counted. In her job as charge-hand at Burberry's she earned double that sum in 2007. In earning less than she had at Burberry she was in the same situation as 76% of respondents (to the 2008 survey) who had secured alternative work. As a single working mother of two, her low earnings – "my (17 year old) daughter working in ASDA earns more than me" – were supplemented by the system of working tax credits used in the UK <sup>8</sup> and said she "couldn't afford to do the job without it ...". As well as the issue of lower earnings, the arbitrariness of decisions and information about her working pattern caused her problems in managing life outside paid work. Though contractually her employer undertook to issue shift patterns one month in advance, in practice working patterns were given to her just one week in advance. Shifts ran from 7am–3pm, 10am–6pm, and 3pm–11pm, and it was quite normal to have to undertake 'back-to-back' shifts finishing at 11pm and starting work again at 7am.

"You can't plan anything ... I've just had to cancel a dentist's appointment because they've called me in for a shift ... and I can't make another appointment because I won't know what I'm working next week ...".

In order to keep her job she felt she had to be available for all shifts, and as a result she had to rely on her parents for help with the care of her 14 year old daughter, who she didn't want to leave alone at night. Though this interviewee said that she loved her new job, she was also unequivocal that without her parents' help she couldn't have coped with the unpredictability of her hours of work, and would not have been able to contemplate the job had her children been younger. Thus it was family support that allowed her to achieve any sort of balance, however delicate or imperfect, between her paid and unpaid working life, and without the intervention of a 'benefit' for low paid workers, (effectively a subsidy for low paying employers) she would most likely have been unable to work.

Arbitrary and unpredictable hours impacted particularly badly on one of our male interviewees, highlighting the vulnerable position of the unrepresented, low skill, low paid, worker of either gender when bargaining individually with an employer. Notionally employed at a local holiday camp on a forty hour a week job at the level of the national minimum wage, this interviewee had a job that was subject to seasonal demand. He worked anywhere between 45

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<sup>8</sup>The UK's welfare system pays a 'working tax credit' to workers earning below a certain threshold, as long as they work for sixteen hours or more.

to 65 hours <sup>9</sup>(or more) per week in summer, but in the winter his hours fell and he was likely to be dismissed pending the start of the new holiday season. He received his hours one week in advance but they were always subject to change on the day; in order to be available for work and save on travelling costs he lived in temporary accommodation on site during the summer period. He recognised that this unbalanced pattern of living would not have been possible for him had he been a family man; his status as a bachelor with no caring responsibilities allowed him to place his time completely at the employer's disposal, and he saw this as essential in order to keep his employment, and however imperfect the arrangement might be this allowed him to keep the security of his permanent home in the midst of his extended family and in a community where he knew everyone, which for him outweighed all other considerations.

Interviews with two women working as care workers further illuminated the impact of unpredictability and shift patterns. The first, a married mother of two, had problems as she was classed as a 'casual' worker which meant that both hours and income were not safeguarded by a guaranteed minimum and she received notice of her hours no more than one week ahead. As a worker hopeful of allocation to 'permanent status' which would afford her a guaranteed number of hours pay (16 per week at minimum wage), she was reliant on the support and goodwill of her line manager and therefore did not feel she had the scope to refuse any request to work. The only reason the family unit had been able to bear the unpredictability of her earnings was because her husband had been fortunate and had secured full-time, permanent work. The other care worker interviewed had two adult children and said that she loved her new job, which paid more than her old one at Burberry. She was given her hours one month in advance, and said that the hours and shifts were "fine" for her. Her daughter, a single mother of one child, had also gone into care work after being made redundant by Burberry. However, the day-to-day care of her child was now being managed around the shift patterns being worked by four adults. The interviewee, her two adult daughters and her husband, each played an active part in the care of the grandchild so that the women could accept duties like 'sleeping-in' at the care units where they worked. This was only possible, it seemed, because here there was a nuclear family working together to one end, to ensure good care of the child while underpinning the continued employment of his mother.

Several interviewees referred to having a 'family within the factory' such was their level of connection with fellow workers. This community and its proximity to their homes favoured workers struggling to balance responsibilities inside and outside work, and it seemed that local management accommodated a range of caring responsibilities on an informal basis. An interviewee who was unemployed as a result of her inability to find appropriate work to accommodate her family role explained,

"We didn't earn a lot and we had to work hard .... But I had a job where I was near to home ... I could cope with all the commitments in my private life ... if my mother was taken ill all you had to do was say, and there'd be a car there to take you home quickly ... that was local managers I think, not Burberry ... I don't know if they knew what was happening, but people were sympathetic to your problems ... I'll never get a job like that again ...".

Redundancy disrupted work-life balance across the board. For the unemployed and retired respondents in our study, the premature curtailment of their earning ability and occupation had left a legacy of distress and relative financial hardship. The interviewees still seeking work had been in and out of different kinds of employment, and this included those who had suffered periods of ill health, which some attributed to "loneliness", "isolation" and "depression", commenting that they no longer saw many of their friends. Redundancy had brought little but disappointment and a sense of having been betrayed by their employer; they felt they had little prospect of alternative work, were demoralised and stressed by the process of 'job search' and lived with the constraints of a considerable drop in income with which to support any alternative distractions. Interviewees, in their late fifties and early sixties who were not engaged in job search were, with one exception, similarly concerned about their fate. Rather than enjoying the leisure of 'early retirement', several interviewees broke down and wept as they recalled their long careers at the factory and the loss of their roles and contacts with fellow workers. A married couple with 83 years' service with

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<sup>9</sup> These hours would be unlawful under the UK's Working Time Regulations.

Burberry's between them, said In the year immediately following the plant closure they had tried to distract themselves by taking short holiday breaks, "we would have gone off our heads otherwise ...", but the redundancy money hadn't been enough to continue financing those sorts of trips, "... we can't do that now, we have to be careful ...". A lifetime of relatively low paid work could not finance a deferred balance of leisure in enforced retirement.

## **CONCLUSION:**

In this paper we have considered work-life balance for the relatively low skilled and low paid. Empirical findings provide additional insight into the challenges that different groups face in achieving a satisfactory integration of their work and non-work lives in a context of disadvantaged communities and poor job prospects. We examined the ways in which a group of former Burberry workers was affected by redundancy, and focused on their subsequent experience in the labour market and in their family, community and social lives. While we acknowledge that for some workers across this study, the end of one employment meant that life changed for the better, the majority of our respondents reported feelings of loss long after the shock of redundancy might be expected to have faded, and in the context of limited alternative labour market opportunities it was evident that the prevailing structural and institutional forces presented constraints that limited their capacity to shape their own worlds (see Edwards and Wajcman, 2005: 13–14). This was the case where new forms of employment were characterised by low skill, precariousness and variability, often with irregular hours and patterns of work arbitrarily determined by employers, so that the boundary between work and leisure time blurred. But it was also evident for older workers where redundancy effectively meant the premature end of participation in paid employment, and the legacy of low pay left limited funds to enable enjoyment of a 'deferred balance' of leisure at the end of a life filled with work.

Though this is a small scale study of a particular event in one small community, we argue our findings have relevance for the experience of the low paid in adverse employment conditions. The outcome of the study is some insight into the challenges that face individuals seeking to carve out meaningful non-work lives and successful work-life integration in circumstances that have been forced upon them by the exiting of a key employer from a community. We conclude that it is difficult to support work-life balance at any point in a worker's lifetime where it is characterised by relatively low pay, low bargaining power and little scope for choice over patterns of work. It is clear that redundant workers with few financial resources and fearful for their economic futures in a tight labour market may be forced into patterns of work that they would not ideally choose. Here, work-life balance depends on family and community networks of support in accommodating the basic demands of life outside work, as low pay cannot allow caring responsibilities to be transferred or 'bought-in'. Our findings highlight issues of wider relevance for the work-life debate, particularly as the longer term employment effects of the latest crisis of capitalism begin to bite and the social condition of the unorganised, lower paid worker becomes increasingly vulnerable to the arbitrary exercise of the employer's power over the terms and conditions of work.

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