Dissenting behaviours at work

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This issue of Work in the Global Economy presents three articles on the theme of organisational misbehaviour and its current expressions. They cover a broad spectrum including the contested nature of the unpaid working time of self-employed workers, the humorous undermining of digital technologies and the entanglement of misbehaviour with other resistance strategies by care workers. This brief introduction provides a context to dissenting behaviour at work.

In Capital Marx (1962: 189) writes about the ‘hidden abode of production’, which lies far from the ‘noisy sphere, where everything takes place on the surface’. Over 150 years of scientific research later, the labour process is less hidden and has been comprehensively analysed, yet research on labour still focuses on the visible and noisy aspects, placing institutionalised and collective resistances of workers in the spotlight. Although it is undisputed that the social reality of the labour process is not free of conflict and that management cannot govern as it pleases, contention and informal or individual resistances are far less frequently analysed. These are located in the shadows, far from the bi- or trilateral negotiations of institutionalised industrial relations or visible collective action. Workplace studies have identified a broad continuum of ‘repertoires of opposition’ (Bélanger and Thuderoz, 2010). The further one moves along the continuum towards informal and individual contestation, the smaller the body of knowledge about it. The articles presented here highlight and prompt discussion of this everyday micro-practice, part of the lives of workers.

Such organisational misbehaviour is not necessarily based on opposition to capitalist wage labour as such (Littler, 1982: 26–27). Nor is dissenting behaviour solely a reaction to managerial control of the labour process. The social reality of work is more complex and other motivations and social dynamics not directly based on control regimes are possible. Worker misbehaviour and dissent concerns individual and collective self-empowerment and assertion of agency and dignity. Workers strive for autonomy and therefore seek and create individual and collective spaces for themselves. Thus, such practices are not automatically linked to class conflict (Edwards, 1986: 7). However, they can be complementary, coalescing grievance to provide the basis for collective action (Friedman, 1977: 52; Ackroyd and Thompson, 2022: 271).

Renewed discussion of the topic is necessary for a number of reasons. Fresh impulses have been provided by the recently published second edition of Stephen Ackroyd
and Paul Thompson’s seminal work on organisational misbehaviour. The book and its concept of misbehaviour is a central point of reference for the articles collected here. In this text, misbehaviour is described as everything you do at work that you should not do or think (Ackroyd and Thompson, 2022: xvi). However, the need for fresh thinking and research is not driven just by conceptual innovation. The recent past has been marked by changes in the labour process that shape organisational misbehaviour. On the one hand, digital technologies allow for more comprehensive controls and work is subject to increasing subjectivisation and precarisation, so that the pores of the working day are compressed and labour agency is apparently restricted. In contrast, atypical forms of employment (ILO, 2016; Eurofound, 2017) and the erosion of institutionalised industrial relations have increased in recent decades (Arribas Camara and Cárdenas, 2022). As a result, while secondary power has become less important, primary power, expressed through industrial action and organisational misbehaviour, may become more relevant. Thus, social and structural conflicts in the labour process are less regulated and mediated, and may be more direct and overt. Furthermore, it is the subjective interests of workers that underpin conflict, which is expressed at the individual level (Nies, 2021). In addition to more comprehensive control, digitalisation opens up opportunities and instruments for autonomous agency (Heiland, 2021; Heiland and Schaupp, 2021).

In the first article, Milena Franke, Valeria Pulignano and Claudia Marà (2023) examine Belgium platform workers and their contestation of unpaid labour time. They show how workers providing food delivery and domestic services experience extensification and intensification of their working time, which is then only partially remunerated. In response workers try to reclaim control over their working time and income through various strategies of resistance and misbehaviour. The authors demonstrate that the reclamation of working time is a coping strategy and active form of resistance specific to self-employed workers.

The following article by Simon Schaupp (2023) likewise focuses on digital labour processes, examining the appropriation in technology in platform-mediated food delivery and manufacturing. In both examples, forms of algorithmic management exist. Schaupp shows how workers openly challenge these control technologies when management is absent. However, when managers are present, workers use subversive humour and irony to express their resentment. Thus, humour becomes a form of organisational misbehaviour, which on the one hand is an expression of the workers’ lack of power that management can ignore. On the other hand, humour proves to be a risk-free critique that undermines the dominant discourse and establishes a counterculture that may provide the foundation for further forms of resistance.

Finally, Donna Baines (2023) looks at organisational misbehaviour as a part of labour agency and examines the connections between different resistance strategies by predominantly female care workers in Canada during COVID-19. Based on labour process theory, Baines shows how workers establish a moral economy of ‘care’ as well as ‘restoring fairness’ in practice that may be defined as forms of misbehaviour alongside collective action. The values of care workers and the management regime thus offer points of reference for opposition. Baines shows that different forms of resistance arise from value-based identities, motives and meanings. Moreover, the various forms of labour agency, from misbehaviour to class-based actions, prove to be tightly interwoven and largely indivisible.
The articles presented here pick up on current developments and show that misbehaviour continues to exist and to constitute an important aspect of the everyday labour process. They engage critically with Ackroyd and Thompson’s work as well as offering other varied and complementary conceptual resources that illuminate contemporary dissenting behaviours. As such the texts can be a starting point for further comprehensive research and discussion of current manifestations of organisational misbehaviour, its specifics, and significance for workers and management.

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**References**

