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LIVING WAGE SOUNDS LIKE DREAMING IN VAIN: EXPRESSION OF WORKING CONDITIONS ON THE PSYCHOLOGICAL WELLBEING IN THE INTERVIEWS WITH INDUSTRIAL WORKERS IN SERBIA

Abstract

This paper examines how working conditions within global supply chains influence workers' physical and psychological wellbeing, using the example of the textile and automotive industries in Serbia. The study's findings—revealing experiences of chronic exhaustion, anxiety, and a profound sense of fear, coupled with the self-discipline to managerial control and the erosion of solidarity—are contextualized within the political and economic transformations Serbia has undergone over the last three decades as a post-socialist state, thereby underscoring the mechanisms by which structural conditions constrain agency. Starting from the structural conditions that have placed Serbian workers in this position, the paper aims to elucidate how state–capital arrangements, characterized by global business models that turn states into dependent intermediaries, passivize the working class through the exhaustion of both body and spirit. Drawing on 95 semi-structured interviews analyzed through RTA and IPA, the paper highlights how working conditions in global supply chains colonize both bodies and minds, limiting the workers' lives to mere survival. Gendered expectations amplify this precarity, as women face the dual burden of industrial and domestic labor, while accepting the work for the benefits of independent income and mobility. Ultimately, the workers' narratives illustrate the collapse of imagination—an inability to envision alternatives beyond the present system, thereby explaining the absence of collective mobilization despite extreme exploitation. The paper argues that this loss of utopian potential is not merely a byproduct of hardship, but a fundamental psychological consequence of neoliberal capitalism that stabilizes the current order. By integrating sociocultural and critical psychological perspectives, the study calls for a renewed focus on the emotional and symbolic dimensions of labor exploitation and on restoring dignity, agency, and collective hope as central elements of workers' wellbeing.

Keywords

industrial workers, labor rights, global supply chains, critical applied psychology, unions

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Introduction

Ever since the media buzzed in 2016 about factory workers who were forced to wear adult diapers due to toilet break restrictions, the image has become a potent symbol of the dehumanization inherent in Serbia's industrial sector. Soon after, the Sloga Union began protesting with the banner "a worker is not a slave." Although no one actually wore diapers in that specific instance, research conducted by the Center for the Politics of Emancipation (CPE) in 2017, 2024, and 2025 across the textile and automotive sectors demonstrated that poverty wages, forced overtime, and pressure for maximum productivity lead to a vicious cycle in which workers' lives are reduced to working just to survive.

This paper is built upon 95 in-depth interviews, the same empirical material that informed the Center for the Politics of Emancipation reports on the automotive industry in 2024 and the textile sector in 2025.While the CPE reports rigorously map the objective dimensions of exploitation, highlighting a landscape defined by subsistence wages and systemic precarity, our paper shifts the focus toward the subjective dimension of labor, specifically, how these conditions are lived and perceived by the workers themselves. By exploring their narratives, we aim to understand the profound impact of industrial labor on their overall wellbeing and to examine how structural constraints manifest within their everyday agency.

We contend that the study of lived experience provides a necessary window into the complex relationship between external pressures and internal responses. Rather than viewing workers as merely passive, we analyze how the constant negotiation of exhaustion and survival reshapes their capacity for resistance and their ability to envision social change. In this sense, the emotional and symbolic dimensions of their experience are not just personal reflections, but critical sites where the power of global supply chains meets the limits of individual and collective agency.

Ultimately, while existing literature has extensively covered the legal and economic shifts in Serbia’s post-socialist transition, a significant gap remains in understanding how these structural forces reshape the inner lives of workers. This study aims to contribute to addressing the gap by offering a critical psychological perspective on labor exploitation.

The paper is structured to move from the structural to the subjective. We first establish the broader ideological and macro-economic framework that defines the current industrial landscape in Serbia. Following this contextualization, we detail our methodological approach and the specific labor conditions encountered during our fieldwork. The central part of the study is dedicated to analyzing the workers' narratives, focusing on how these external pressures are reflected in the workers’ minds. We conclude by synthesizing these insights to propose potential pathways for restoring collective agency and hope.

The Costs of Normalization: Global Supply Chains and the Making of a Peripheral Workforce

To understand the position of workers in the global supply chains on the example of the textile and automotive industry in Serbia it's crucial to outline the political and economic context of their employment. This means briefly reviewing the global political and economic trends of the last thirty years that have made Serbia’s economy entirely subordinate to foreign capital, with the employability of its

workforce completely dependent on its inclusion in the global supply chains of multinational corporations.

The fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War signified the final triumph of the neoliberal discourse, according to which capitalism, market economy, and liberal democracy represent the most efficient systems for organizing society. The paradigm shift, which began in the West in the seventies with the abandonment of Neo-Keynesianism, culminated with the adoption of the Washington Consensus[1] and the final dissolution of the Soviet Union, was rounded out and began to dominate global politics and economics in the early nineties.

According to Tony Prug (2023), this new order is characterized by three ideological structural premises that effectively eliminate any space for considering alternatives, not only in economic sciences but in political theory generally. The first ideological structural premise is the crowning of the capitalist mode of production as the most natural and efficient; the second is the erasure of deliberation on the role of the state and planning in theories of economic development; and the third is the omission of the significance of colonialism and imperialism for the development of the wealthiest states, on the one hand, and the underdevelopment of those situated on the map of colonial exploitation, on the other. Within the framework of these structural premises, the process of transformation of former socialist states and their complete integration into the global economy, designated by the term transition, began in the early nineties.

Simultaneously, the integration of the former Eastern Bloc countries and China into the global market, coupled with the financialization of the economy on a global level and technological advancements, made the 1990s a period of ideal conditions for the intensified concentration and centralization of capital in the hands of multinational corporations. Besides access to resources and new investment opportunities, this also meant the integration of a new contingent of workers into the global market. When the entry of major capital completely devastated the already weakened economies of former socialist countries, the workers who lost their jobs contributed to the rise of the reserve army of labour and the subsequent lowering of the price of labour globally. One of the causes for the rise in the global reserve army of workers in the nineties, in addition to de-agrarianization, was precisely the integration of the labour force from the former Eastern Bloc countries and China into the global market (Suwandi, 2019).

Considering the relationship between the state, large capital, and the working class under neoliberalism, Rastko Močnik (2011) observes two novelties. The first is that the state's relationship with capital has changed in such a way that it no longer protects individual capital existing within its state borders, but rather seeks to satisfy capital as such. The second is that the state becomes an apparatus through which transnational capital shapes and regulates the labour force. Simplified, this further means that the state ceases to be an instrument that can be compelled through internal political struggle to make concessions to the domestic working class. Instead, external economic compulsion reduces the state's role

[1] Coined in the 1980s and 1990s, the Washington Consensus refers to a set of specific economic policies that were consistently recommended to crisis-affected developing countries by Washington, D.C.-based institutions, namely the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, and United States Department of the Treasury.

in competing in lowering production costs by decreasing the price of labour and flexibilizing labour relations in order to keep the local labour market competitive.

It was in this context that the economic and political reality of all former Yugoslav states was formed during the so-called transition process. The working class became progressively cheaper, unprotected, and without an alternative in sight. However, this process did not occur without its ideological “explanation”. In a context where the Cold War ended with the widely accepted proclamation that capitalism, market economy, and liberal democracy are the most efficient systems for organizing society, the transition process, in the dominant narrative, was viewed as a move to a higher phase of socio-historical development. A prerequisite for this transition was a society's readiness to discard, reform, or improve the “backward” or inadequate elements of the previous social order and to work constantly on removing all obstacles that ultimately lead to the desired outcomes. Accepting this path also confirmed that the “socialist experiment”" had failed the test of time and should be forgotten, re-evaluated, and overcome. Post-socialist countries entered the capitalist order with a certain historical anomaly, which the transition process was meant to correct. Transition itself became a series of political, economic, and social reforms designed to catch up with those states and societies that had not experienced the “slip” into socialism. Liberal democracy and capitalism were established as the norm, and the transition process became the “process of normalization” for post-socialist societies (Buden, 2008). The crisis that accompanied the collapse of one social order, the fall in living standards, impoverishment, rising inequality, and wars was seen as a side effect of the transition's complexity. The narrative gave this crisis a “teleological meaning” (ibid.) by framing it as a necessary step toward overcoming socialism and achieving the promised prosperity of a capitalist future. This hegemonic narrative remained untouched by all the negative consequences, largely because all unfavorable outcomes of the transition were interpreted (and are still interpreted) as a result of the historical backwardness of socialist societies relative to developed capitalist ones.

In that sense, the narrative about the inevitability of transition and privatization was not disrupted even by the numerous strikes and outbursts of worker dissatisfaction in the period from 2000 to 2009 in Serbia, when the largest number of strikes was recorded in privatized companies (Novaković, 2017. pp. 230). Instead, both the government and the new owners considered the workers who protested to be opponents of reforms and investors. (ibid.) On the other hand, the working class itself was disoriented: on one side was the narrative of privatization as the only successful solution, and on the other was the stark reality where production was not starting, and neither wages nor contributions were being paid in privatized enterprises. It was unsurprising that workers often demanded the existing privatization be reversed to seek a replacement owner. The prevailing opinion was that foreign companies made better employers than the new local businessmen (Music, 2012. pp. 49).

Although the long-term hope for the benefits of privatisation was shattered after the 2008 global economic crisis and began to shift the demands of workers and unions towards opposing privatization (Music, 2012), the global economic crisis also had a disciplining effect on the working class (Novaković, 2017). According to Nada Novaković, referring to IMF data, 250,000 workers in Serbia were left without a job in 2012 alone. Two decades after the wars of the nineties, the ongoing crisis and decline in living

standards have made the minimum wage a relative concept and labour rights violation acceptable for the sake of simply having a job.

This situation among the labor force has also had a detrimental impact on union power. While the causes of union weakness in Serbia are multifaceted and cannot be attributed to a single factor, their power is primarily defined by the structural position of both labor and the state within the global distribution of capital and power. In a context where the state aligns itself with foreign investors and decision-making power is concentrated in corporate headquarters rather than local production outposts, the reach of trade union organizing is severely limited. Wages are often predetermined through agreements between the state and investors, while the constant threat of relocation looms once these contracts expire. Consequently, beyond their lack of objective power, unions rarely opt for radical action, constrained by the persistent fear of losing even these precarious jobs.

In order to employ its population, the state began to more actively "offer itself" to foreign capital, further lowering labour costs and adopting labour legislation to serve the interests of MNCs. In 2014, for instance, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce exerted significant pressure on the Serbian government to erode fundamental labor protections (ITUC, 2015). This was part of a broader trend of legislative capture, evidenced by the government's adoption of eighty percent of the recommendations put forward by the Foreign Investors' Council (FIC), which effectively allowed foreign capital to dictate the terms of employment and draft labor laws directly in favor of employers (ITUC, 2018). On the other hand, in 2016, the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Serbia ran paid advertisements on CNN marketing the domestic workforce as 'high-skilled, low-cost' to attract foreign investment[2]. Although the ad was eventually withdrawn, the Development Agency of Serbia's 'Why Invest in Serbia' publications continue to promote a 66% saving on net wages relative to the EU-27 average as a key comparative advantage (Development Agency of Serbia, 2024). This was, of course, a favorable situation for MNCs, but it seems that even below-poverty-level wages (Ljarja & Musiolek, 2020) are not a good enough lure for investment. To beat the competition from neighboring countries in the region, Serbia offers, depending on the amount of the investment, substantial benefits for MNCs. This incentive structure is designed to minimize operational costs through a 15% corporate tax rate and a 10-year tax holiday for large-scale projects, alongside significant labor-related perks such as wage subsidies and exemptions from social contributions. Furthermore, the state facilitates growth via free zones that provide duty-free trade and VAT exemptions, while leveraging a network of free trade agreements with the EU and other global markets to ensure preferential access for foreign-owned enterprises (Development Agency of Serbia, 2025). In certain instances, these financial incentives, when calculated as a total amount per employee, have reached six-figure sums per worker, further illustrating the state's aggressive strategy and systemic desperation to attract foreign capital[3]. This economic desperation is most visible in the specific types of

[2]The video of the advertisement is available here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bd9XPLKxrrk , accessed February 20, 2026.

[3] For instance, a major foreign investor in the chemical industry received €14.4 million in state aid for an expansion project valued at approximately €93 million. Despite committing to hire only 100 new workers, the subsidy amounted to over €144,000 per employee, marking one of the highest per-capita government grants recorded to date.

investments Serbia attracts. These are predominantly efficiency-seeking, characterized by low-tech manufacturing and labor-intensive processes. Such projects typically occupy the lowest tiers of global value chains, where the primary objective of multinational corporations is to minimize production costs rather than to foster local innovation or high-skilled development. Left with few alternatives within the global market, the state is compelled to provide cheap labor and further cementing its position at the periphery.

The textile and automotive industries serve as primary examples of this structural subordination. While the survival of the textile sector, as a fundamentally low-profitability sector, within global supply chains depends almost entirely on the continuous suppression of labor costs, the automotive sector in Serbia is defined by its absolute dependence on foreign capital and its restriction to routine assembly operations. While Central European states integrated into global supply chains during the peak investment waves of the 1990s and 2000s, focusing on complex automotive components, Serbia remained on the periphery due to a decade of sanctions and international isolation. In this way, both sectors in Serbia embody a structurally defined, subordinate position that offers limited opportunities for 'spillover' effects into domestic companies. Within this existing constellation, these industries remain trapped in a cycle of low-skilled labor, providing a clear lens through which to analyze the vulnerable position of workers on the global periphery.

Methodology of the CPE & CCC Research

The data analyzed and presented in this paper comes from the two bodies of research which examined working conditions of factory workers in industries in Serbia: in the automotive industry (2024), and in the textile industry (2025). Both studies were conducted by the Center for the Politics of Emancipation (CPE), a Belgrade-based non-governmental organization that focuses, among other areas, on labor conditions within global supply chains[4]. Clean Clothes Campaign (CCC) network[5] conducted its first survey of labor conditions in Serbia's textile industry in 2017[6]. These 'Country Profile' studies are part of a broader effort by the CCC network to map systemic labor rights violations in the textile industry, aimed at advocating for improved working conditions within the global supply chains of international fashion brands. Building on the established CCC methodology for in-depth worker interviews, CPE conducted a comprehensive study of the working conditions in the automotive industry in 2024 and followed up with an updated country profile on the textile sector in 2025. Worker interviews were conducted between November and December 2023 for the automotive industry, and from April to June 2024 for the textile industry. The research for both studies in Serbia was led and coordinated by the CPE,

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Source Nova Ekonomija, available here: https://novaekonomija.rs/vesti-iz-zemlje/prosecna-subvencija-po-zaposlenom-2020-godine-dostigla-30000-evra, accessed February 20, 2026.

[4] For more details on the organization's work, visit: https://cpe.org.rs/

[5] More information on the activities of the Clean Clothes Campaign can be found here:https://cleanclothes.org/ (Accessed 14th April 2026, 14:04)

[6] Published as a "Country profile" here: https://cleanclothes.org/file-repository/livingwage-europe-country-profiles-serbia and subsequently here: https://www.jstor.org/stable/26427180 .

with a team of outsourced field interviewers consisting of sociologists, psychologists and political scientists.

Participants

The majority of the 95 interviewees (70%) were female workers (see below Table 1), and it reflects the gender proportion in the workers' population (especially in the textile industry). An average age of an interviewee was between 35 and 45 years, the youngest one being 19 years old and the oldest 56. A portrait of a "typical" (most common) interviewee would be a woman in her late 30s or early 40s, living in a village or a small town in a remote area in Serbia, graduate of a secondary school, with limited or no training outside the industry, having worked in the industry on average 5 years, married, with two or more children.

Table 1

Distribution of Interviewees by Industry, Gender, and Age Group

Industry	Gender	<20	21–30	31–40	41–50	51–60	Total
Textile	Female	1	6	13	14	5	**39**
Textile	Male	0	1	5	0	0	**6**
Automotive	Female	0	2	8	9	4	**23**
Automotive	Male	0	7	15	5	0	**27**

Note. Values indicate the number of interviewees in each age group by industry and gender.

Data Collection

The interviews were conducted in villages and remote towns in Serbia, the places where workers live, and where most of the factories they work in are located. They were conducted in person, lasted for 1.5 hours on average, were not recorded but the interviewers noted down workers' quotes in the questionnaire next to the topic addressed at that point in the conversation. These quotes are the primary unit of analysis of the findings presented in the article.

The interviews were anonymous as the workers feared speaking to the researchers due to possible retaliation by the factories' management. It is a notable point to highlight the degree of this fear which greatly obstructed the recruitment of potential interviewees. In most factories who have an active and functional union, its representatives mediated the communication and introduction of the field researchers to the workers. In other cases, workers' were approached through private connections and snowballing

method. Workers asked for repeated reassurances of their anonymity and as well as insight into the researchers' notes. In some factories it was not possible to get a single worker to consent to an interview, after numerous attempts.

Instrument

The questionnaire CPE used originally consists of 10 blocks (see Appendix B). It was not necessarily filled in the order of the questions presented. The interviewers followed the themes put forward by the workers in the conversation, and only afterwards referred back to some specific questions which might not have been initially addressed in the conversation. Not all of the questions are explored in the paper, rather we have selected a few that prompted more reflections and narrative sharing from the workers interviewed, as detailed in respective chapters. However, in our understanding and analysis of the workers' responses to selected questions we are considering their inputs from the entirety of the interview, giving us a more complete picture of their situation, perspective and options. Any dissonant narratives were hence analyzed in reference to that person's demographic data and work experience.

Working Conditions in the Automotive and Textile Industry

Research in both sectors has demonstrated that labor rights violations, ranging from workplace harassment and discrimination to the disregard for health and safety standards, are structural phenomena rather than isolated incidents. The following sections present findings across several key categories, specifically working hours, wages, and the cost of living, which serve as the primary indicators for analyzing the position and wellbeing of workers, the central focus of this research.

Working hours

The research reveals a shared structural logic where working hours are dictated entirely by the volatility of global orders, often pushing the workweek far beyond the legal 40-hour limit. In the textile sector, this exploitation is driven by a combination of psychological pressure and logistical coercion—such as factory transport being tied exclusively to overtime schedules—forcing workers to stay due to fear of job loss. In contrast, the automotive industry exhibits more extreme physical demands, with 'marathon' shifts reaching up to 76 hours a week. While textile workers are often trapped by management pressure, automotive workers are subject to the relentless tempo of the assembly line, where 12-hour shifts are common. In both cases, the worker's time is treated as a completely flexible resource, cementing Serbia's status as a provider of the longest-working, yet most vulnerable, labor force in Europe.[7]

Wages

The wage structure in both industries is designed to keep workers just above the legal minimum, with a heavy reliance on 'variable' income that shifts the risk of global market fluctuations onto the workforce. In the automotive sector, the average net salary of 70,000 RSD is highly dependent on bonuses

[7] According to Eurostat data, workers in Serbia work 5 hours more per week than the European Union average. In 2024, the average workweek in Serbia was 41.3 hours, with Turkey being the only country where people worked more. See more here:https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/w/ddn-20250514-1 (Accessed 14th April 2026. 14:04).

and overtime, which account for one-third of total earnings; consequently, any drop in orders directly results in a significant pay cut. Similarly, in the textile industry, while the average payout is 65,000 RSD, the contracted base wage is much lower (approx. 50,000 RSD), meaning workers rely almost entirely on performance bonuses to stay above the poverty line. In both sectors, earnings fall drastically short of what workers define as a 'living wage' (estimated at 107,000 RSD in the automotive sector, and 122, 666 RSD in textile sector), illustrating a system where labor is not only low-cost but systematically underpaid to the point where even full-time employment cannot satisfy basic needs.

Living standard

The research in the automotive industry reveals that the average household income (136,000 dinars) barely covers the estimated costs for basic necessities (133,000 dinars), leaving households with virtually no financial safety net. These costs include only essentials like food, housing, and hygiene, notably excluding expenses for culture, recreation, and vacation, which 90% of respondents cannot afford anyway. Food is the dominant financial burden, consuming 45% of the total household budget, a percentage significantly higher than national averages. This tight balance confirms the precarious economic reality where most workers' households live constantly at the margin of subsistence.

Based on Engel's Law, the findings indicate that worker households are fundamentally dependent on overtime and bonus earnings to avoid falling below the subsistence level. With food costs accounting to 45-53% of the salaries (depending on the overtime), the households fall into a category (50-59%) where income barely satisfies daily expenses. The data strongly suggests that the average contracted salary alone traps workers in poverty, forcing them to rely on maximum overtime, often above the legal limit, just to achieve a minimal standard of living.

Analytical Approach

For the purposes of this article, we analyzed interview data that were gathered for different research aims (as described in the section *Methodology of the CPE & CCC Research*). As we wanted to go one step further from the description of the working conditions provided in the CPE & CCC research, we decided to try to understand the main themes in the workers' narratives on their working conditions and how the workers make sense of their position. Ultimately, we believed that the two questions should contribute to understanding the possibilities and limits to workers' resistance in the labour shaped by global supply chains.

Firstly, we wanted to understand what the main themes and patterns of meaning in the workers' narratives exist, which is why we used Reflexive Thematic Analysis - RTA (Braun and Clarke, 2019). Any worker's response in the original CPE & CCC research that included a reflection on the question or topic (as opposed to a simple factual response - numerical, or yes - no response) was included in the analysis. The unit of the analysis was a quote of a single worker, and 303 such quotes were included in the RTA. The quotes were initially organized per sections of the CPE Questionnaire used in the original research (see *Appendix B)*. Each unit of analysis was coded separately in regard to the main theme it entailed.

After understanding the main emerging themes in the narratives, we wanted to understand how the workers made sense of their position - how their responses to the CPE Questionnaire are organized in a story. For this purpose, we used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis - IRA (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009), with critical interpretation in regard to the political and economical context the specific interviewee was embedded in. Specifically, the interpretation of a specific quote was analyzed by taking into consideration all of the responses to the questionnaire of the worker. This means when understanding the meaning we also referred to the interviewee's demographic data in the original questionnaire (mainly their age, gender, socio-economic status and previous working experience), and by reading the other quotes of the specific interviewee in the data set for IPA. Combining these three points of data on each interviewee when conducting IPA: the specific quote, their demographic data from the original questionnaire and the other quotes of the same interviewee, we were able to point down distinctions and similarities between stories different workers tell to make sense of their experience in the factories. With all of the data points on the interviewee, we asked ourselves what purpose this quote serves - what it does (what is its function, consequence and relationship to other themes).

An example of the data set and how it was organized for the two analytical processes is provided in Appendix A.

The *Findings* section that follows offers an overview of the main themes sourced from the data. Within each of the themes, we provided an interpretation of how the theme fits the overall workers' story and what purpose it serves in the sense-making process.

Findings

Working Conditions and Workers' Bodies

In order to offer a contextualized understanding of the workers' narratives on their experiences, we firstly analyze their perception of physical conditions of their working arrangements that have the most significant effect on their physical and psycho-social wellbeing. The following words of a worker speak on the connection between the two:

"There are many factors that affect working conditions. I, for instance, work and feel like I'm in a can. I cannot see if it's day or night, I don't know what the weather is like outside. Not every part of the factory is like that, but still. It affects one's mood, depression, and a lot of women here complain about being in that state. Or how they call it - the great sadness." (Q1[8])

With overtime being a standard in the factories included in the research, the workers would spend 8-10 hours per day in the same posture, repeating the same movements ("operation") for 5 to 6 days per week. The factory spaces are overcrowded, with poor ventilation and temperature control, with temperatures during summer months up to more than 40°C (104°F). In most factories, the workers are allowed short scheduled collective breaks lasting in total up to 30 minutes. Their use of toilets is monitored, timed and sanctioned:

[8] The numeration refers to the original quote text in Appendix C.

Poor diet is common among workers, with frequent intestinal problems, headaches, fevers, high blood pressure and common season flu. Most workers treat these physical symptoms with over the counter drugs, and continue to work fearing retribution if they take sick leave. In some villages, local medical practitioners are said to be instructed by the factory management not to "allow" the workers to have a sick leave.

If a worker is delegated to a different operation, it would be done as a form of punishment (usually for taking sick leave or refusing to work overtime), with short or no training on how to perform the operation or manage a machine, leading to frequent injuries. Injuries can also occur due to high intensity of work[9] (with the norms increasing and the available time decreasing), tiredness (which leads to lack of attention and sleepiness) and general stress and anxiety. Described conditions have even more severe consequences on the physical health of older workers. Some of the interviewed workers have acquired chronic debilitating conditions by working in the factory, and although in the interviews there were no death cases reported that happened on the production line itself, there are cases of fatalities right after the shift..

In workers' narratives, such physical conditions and consequences to their physical health have been described with anger and, even though not normalized, it's accepted as a part of unchangeable reality:

"If one faints, they [a supervisor or a management staff member overseeing the work in the factory] splash some water on her face and get her back to the production line, they used to take blood pressure before but not anymore. And only if they can't get her up, they call an ambulance." (Q2)

Unlike detrimental effects to mental wellbeing, physical consequences, including chronic illnesses and injuries, are more readily observed, acknowledged and shared in a narrative. Also, workers' expectations of a response to such physical states and traumas is more standardized than those to mental traumas and consequences for mental health, which are not so openly and clearly communicated.

"At the beginning of my working here, the ambulance would come two or three times per week. Now less so, but they do come. A colleague of mine had a seizure, due to stress. Some have fainted. When I started working, I had to take a benzodiazepine pill (an anti-anxiety drug) before I came to work. You never know who will yell on you." (Q3)

We now turn to exploring the consequences on the workers' mental health and minds, as well as ways of coping, in the following chapter.

Working Conditions and a Workers' Psycho-Social Wellbeing

"I saw some colleagues, especially when they just started working, crying almost the entire time." (Q4)

[9] The intensity of work is defined as the quantity of output expected for a period of time: for example a worker must sew in a zipper on a pair of jeans in 2 min.

Building on physical consequences, there are some key elements in the working conditions that in workers' narratives are connected to their psycho-social wellbeing: mobbing, humiliation, surveillance, unpredictability of working hours and lack of workers' community and solidarity. In general, these lead to prevailing feelings of fear, anxiety, with some workers also speaking of depression, lack of motivation and resignation, while only a few express anger that prompts them to take action to change the situation. One worker stated: *"Stress and crying, you have to cry at least two-three times during the work day. Everyone's taking sedatives."* (Q5) When asked why they think there is not more collective action to change, most workers say a. they fear losing their job, pointing out that they cannot find another option or b. that they do not believe a change is possible (with some giving examples of past attempts and punishments for those who dared to try).

Even though these are prevailing narratives, there are a few dissonant voices among them. They come either from individuals who have since left the work at the factories (permanently or for months long sick leaves) or have accepted the system's values and put all the blame on themselves or the other workers (which is elaborated in the chapter *Alternatives - (im)possibilities of post-capitalist imagination*). The treatment of workers who opposed the system testify that the attempts to change have led to the individuals feeling isolated, punished, forced to leave or considered quitting as their only remaining option. This is another form of "individualization" (as compared to collective action) among workers, where every person is left to find a coping mechanism on their own.

"We have grown distant from each other. We are not connected anymore, we barely speak to each other. I think that's the result of the factory management insisting that we all "mind our own business", there is no community, how can there be any resistance then?" (Q6)

It is also worth noting what the workers point out regularity of paycheck (even though too low to cover their life expenses), having their paycheck paid to their bank account (and not in cash) and having public holidays as days off (even though this is not always the case and these days might be taken out of their total number of annual leave) as benefits of the factory work. This testifies to them perceiving some basic labour rights as a "privilege" and any form of predictability is highly valued. The majority of workers would say that besides these "benefits" there are no real good sides to their work, and that the allure of the work place is only in constraint to other options for employment in the job market which are worse.

We now turn to exploring these patterns and emotions that are embedded in them.

Constant Uncertainty and Fear - Burnt Out and Afraid

"You live day to day, there is uncertainty for the kids, for the family. You can never get a break." (Q7)

The most prevalent feeling present in all worker's narratives is fear - and especially fear of losing their job. This fear has an existential quality and hence it is prioritized over all other hardships that a worker endures at their work place. The dominant narrative of "no other option", perpetuated in the general society, is reflected in worker's words, with an anxious note that it may "get worse". This

dominant narrative has been present in the society after the wars that followed the collapse of the Yugoslav state, and the following "transition period" to neoliberal capitalist system characterized by mass layoffs. These fears are especially exacerbated in women for whom this employment is a form of independence, and especially older women who due to intersectional detrimental effects of ageism and patriarchy have even fewer options on the today's job market.

These fears also come up in interviews when tackling the topic of organizing strikes - with reasons as to why there are not any and what are expected results and, especially, consequences of such actions. After several unsuccessful attempts to strike, many feel they are led to believe the change is not possible. Following are a few of the most common workers' answers on their perception of possibility of an organized strike and change:

"In this company you are just a number which they will erase with one move without blinking. People know that. There's no strike, because then there is no bread." (Q8)

"After the strikes or other protests, something changes for a bit, but the change is lost the following month. They brought the people to a point where they don't have the strength to fight for their own rights anymore." (Q9)

"All of us came to this factory when we were too young, right after the (NATO) bombing. It was the second factory to be opened in our town and we were in such a desperate need for employment that it was - just be quiet, head down and work, it is good as long as there is any work. And I guess it just stayed the same…" (Q10)

In general, workers tend to think that by staying in the factory they are saving themselves and their families from a worse life situation. Reflecting on their labour rights and human rights being violated in the described working conditions: namely, right to safety (from injury and harassment) becomes unachievable for many workers. This reflection is inhibited by the all encompassing fear and makes imagining alternatives almost impossible[10].

The described existential fear and never ending anxiety are also shown in the workers' narratives when discussing their options to cover any unexpected costs (weddings or funerals, broken house appliances etc.) None of them state they are able to cover such costs and have different means of managing like using credit cards, loans which get them further in debt, or just skipping to provide for anything that is deemed not essential, a category continually renegotiated. This is another aspect that is especially hard for single mothers.

"I tell my doctor that I take the drugs he prescribed for my thyroid. But of course I don't take them regularly, they are too expensive." (Q11)

The third major contributing factor to the feelings of fear is constant surveillance of workers' behaviour, which serves to sustain obedience and demotivate protests. The surveillance used in the factory is a pressure put through various vicarious forms: measuring outputs live, timing toilet time, breaks and

[10] See chapter *Alternatives - (im)possibilities of a post-capitalist imagination.*

any other absence from the production line. These measures have also made some workers turn from other colleagues, to not engage in communication and "mind their own business", further contributing to feelings of isolation and hopelessness. Following words of a textile factory worker illustrate how the high intensity of production and segmentation of work process imposed by a MNCs affect a person working within it and crumble on their relationships:

"I have distanced myself, I've withdrawn to my own world because of the situation in the factory, because of all these women, they think one thing, say another, do something completely else. There is no consistency, I don't understand it and I cannot influence anything. Why would I care what the whole production process looks like… We don't have an opportunity to see what happens because we don't have access to all parts of the factory. You have to stay at the sewing machine when the bell goes off, and you don't have the time nor the possibility to talk to your colleagues who work further down the line. I can only get up to go to the toilet, I cannot talk, for me that time is lost, and I have a norm[11] to fulfill." (Q12)

It is not uncommon that the means used to make the workers scared, obedient and distanced exacerbate to include forms of mobbing and psychological abuse and violence. These forms include but are not limited to: daily, continuous and constant yelling, insults, demeaning and threatening remarks and behaviours. Some workers experienced shame while retelling how they were treated by their supervisors. The forms of mobbing and psychological violence fall on a continuum: from demeaning "rewards" for producing over projected target, to demeaning remarks (being called stupid or incompetent in front of everybody), to threats (being moved to a more difficult, more dangerous or less paid position, taking away bonuses, threats of being fired), and even one report of a witness to suspected sexual exploitation of a female worker by a manager. These measures combined lead to many workers sharing they had accepted the illegal claim as a norm, self-disciplining on the cost of their own health or wellbeing of the family, feeling they have no other choice. This process paves the way for further fragmentation of the workers' community, leading not each of them to "fend for themselves" but also to attribute any weakness, vulnerability or low performance rate on an individual shortcoming, rendering the systemic conditions that make the workers sick, tired, demotivated, scared and distanced from their own work - invisible.

"For the 2000 pieces of jeans we made, we each got a Snickers bar. I've never taken one. You give me a chocolate bar, and make me work 10 hours a day, it is humiliating. I'll buy him (the CEO) two bags of chocolates just to let me go home after 8 hours of work." (Q13)

"If I feel unwell, I go to the toilet and wash my face. There's nothing to be done, I came there to work, not to lie around. Some women go too far with taking sick leave." (Q14)

With no accountability for the exploitation, abuse and violence perpetrated by the management, it is important to note that interviewed workers state they trust no one, and hence expect no response from

[11] A quota is a standardized amount of labour or product that needs to be produced in a specified amount of time, and is usually measured according to an average worker's output. If the quotas are too high for most employees, it is safe to conclude that the problem are not workers' capabilities but the quota itself. The quota must satisfy several criteria: to represent the time in which a worker, under normal conditions, can fulfill a certain operation without reaching labor abuse and stepping over the threshold of normal exertion; match the average activity of most workers and must be defined in a way that it is possible to achieve during the contracted working hours.

the societal system (governmental institutions - labour inspections, designated ministries and governmental agencies, even local doctors who would not allow sick leave) to protect them and amend the working conditions. The observation is in line with the second of the two novelties put forward by Močnik (2011), which highlights the decreasing role of state as a regulatory mechanism for the capital. The decrease is observed in several modes such as weakening existing labour legislation framework: either by downgrading existing protection mechanisms for workers; by introducing new legal tools to legalize harmful practices and by not observing implementation of existing legal protecting mechanisms. The workers are left isolated and left to fend for themselves: *"Nothing can protect me in there"* (Q15). This deeply undermines their personal sense of safety, leaving the workers feeling anxious as if they are "constantly in harm's way" - to either their physical integrity or psychological wellbeing. Even though all workers are treated in the same way, this seems to have led some workers to feel that they are all alone *against everyone*.

"This woman fainted as we were entering the factory, and the bell (to start work) had already rang. Colleagues were jumping over her so they wouldn't be late for the production line - if you are 3 minutes late, you have to work 30 minutes longer. To this day she keeps telling me how grateful she is that I stopped to help her." (Q16)

The only dissonance in the narratives on this point is noted in the narratives of the workers of a few factories in which there is an active and functional union. Only a minority of workers have a clear understanding of a union's role and mandate, as well as expectations stemming from it: *"Union should educate workers and empower them to problematize certain things", (*Q17). Even though the majority thinks that a union is not powerful enough to change anything substantially. Some workers still value its mere existence as it gives them a sense of community and protection: *"You feel more secure. You have someone to ask for help when they harass you."* (Q18)

On delving deeper into the topic of the possibility of making a change, we turn to the theme of how the workers perceive and speak of their own agency.

Agency and Self Perception

Through discussion of organization of the factory work and decision power, the workers addressed how they see their own role in this process. In all factories included in the research, workers were not consulted at any point on how the production should be run. A few workers stated this exclusion as problematic as they believe they would be able to contribute to a better production organization due to their professional experience in the factory. Also, they shared being included in the organization of work would help them feel *seen and acknowledged* for their contribution. Yet, the majority stated they do not have the knowledge or the high enough position to have a say, neglecting their working experience on the job and giving up their voice to the imposed hierarchy. All interviewed workers, including those who feel they should not have a say in the organization of the factory work, say the organization is not efficient and fair.

"They (the management) tell us how to do the job, which is normal, they are above us." (Q19)

The second practice that influences workers' self perception on the job is their ability to meet assigned targets. In all factories there workers are assigned targets as a measure of their performance, but the effect is significant in the factories where this target is not collective but individual. On a daily basis, a worker gets assigned a target by her supervisor that she must reach for the day. If she fails, she undergoes public humiliation and threats of being fired. Interviewed workers are aware of the systemic obstacles to reaching these targets, calling them "unreasonably high", especially after being moved from one operation to the next (as a form of punishment) without being provided training and allowed time to master the new operation. Yet, in their retelling of these cases, the workers seem ashamed, on the brink of tears, some angry, and all in need to justify their performance in front of the interviewer.

These are the aspects of the workers' experience who in their perspectives answer more fundamental questions: who holds the power, what kind of power over you they have. With feeling they are invisible, not valued, replaceable and worthless, most workers share feelings of hopelessness and resignation and portray an example of learned helplessness among workers.

Learned Helplessness, Hopelessness and Resignation - I am Just a Number

"Why would I be afraid of getting fired, when anyway all that I can get at this job is cancer."
(Q20)

At the intersection of the prolonged effect of organization of work that breaks their bodies and drains their minds, in an atmosphere of constant fear and tension, some workers seem to succumb to numbing their bodies and minds as a method to survive the daily reality to which, they feel, they have no choice. These workers get up every day to spend most of their waking time at work where any form of disobedience and resistance being systematically punished, with constant threat of humiliation, pay cut or losing their job lingering over their minds, and witnessing or being a victim to normalized psychological abuse. Workers speak of "not caring anymore", "feeling sick of themselves" and witnessing colleagues crying at work, leading them to the conclusion that they are just individuals that the system can dispose of and, more importantly, that cannot do *anything* to change the system.

"You take Bormazepam[12]. When you go to work, you sit in the front because you feel suffocated, you sit next to the driver so you can jump out. And when you head home, you sit in the back, letting go of the burden. There were anxiety attacks, there was crying." (Q21)

Even in the minor aspects of the work in which the workers are seemingly offered a choice, they are aware it is an illusion - a choice that is not really accessible. An example of this is organized transportation - which leaves after 10 hours of work, not 8, so even the workers who refuse to work overtime have to spend the time at the factory waiting for the transportation, as they cannot provide for another form of it. Other examples include too short breaks so the workers feel they need to choose whether they have a coffee, eat, or have a smoke, and daily meal allowance not being enough to cover a snack, let alone a meal.

[12] Bromazepam is an anti-anxiety pill.

"*When I have something to bring from home, I bring it, when I don't, I don't eat. Luckily the stomach doesn't have windows so you can't see that it's empty."* (Q22)

Having explored the effect of the factory work conditions on how the workers feel and think about themselves, we now turn to their narratives on how the work influences their social connections with people outside work.

Social Wellbeing - Family Life, Friends and Time out of Work

In response to the interview question on how the work affects their personal life, the workers used words such as "devastating", feeling "exhausted", "drained", "overstimulated" so they tend to either isolate themselves or "lash out" at their close ones. The quality of relationships with their family members suffers, they feel angry or numbed most of the time. They stop talking to their spouses, cannot spend quality time with their children, lose touch with their friends. Many workers point out that it is not just due to being tired and overstimulated physically, but that the detrimental psychological effect that gets accumulated, lingers on and they cannot recover from. The narratives include referencing "taking factory work home" - either through obsessively complaining to relatives, or by constantly in fear of notifications and messages from the management. These out of hours messages refer to mistakes, threats for low performances or even notifications on the prolonged working hours for the next day or week. Added to constant overtime, the workers are left with no time nor strength nor will to do anything else but sleep. The consequence of this is another closed door to explore and reflect on alternatives - either to the job or the life it dictates.

"I come home irritable, tired, and there are a lot of responsibilities at home. Then everything is transferred onto my children, I can't even talk to my kids, I just need to be quiet until I collect myself. I'm dead when I get home. My social life is nonexistent. If it was just physical exhaustion that would be ok, you put your feet up and rest for half an hour. But this is mental exhaustion, you can't rest from that." (Q23)

Even though these patterns run through all workers' narratives, it is noticeable that female workers share more on additional workload they face outside the factory: house chores, raising children, looking presentable and doing emotional work in their families. In the following chapter we explore how gender mediated the consequences of psycho-social wellbeing of female factory workers.

Gender - Pushing Through Double Burden to A Sense of Independence

As the working conditions deteriorated and the salaries decreased, the two industries in which the examined factories work have seen an increase in the proportion of female workers. This "gender flight" is a well documented trend in labour studies showing that men tend to leave for better paying jobs, and the places get filled in by women who have fewer employment options. This was particularly evident in the narratives of the middle aged and older women, with lower degrees of education and living in remote areas. These women were particularly adamant to share their appreciation for the "opportunity" they were given with the factory employment, as it gave them their first (and sometimes the only) source of feeling

independent and competent. Towards the end of the interview, after detailing all exploitative factors at work, when asked about her work satisfaction, a female textile worker said:

"For me it's good, having the transportation organized means a world to me, I have never learned how to drive a car, how would I get to work from this village? This is my first job, no one would hire me before without work experience. I am 40 years old, and for the first time I can afford to buy my own underwear, menstrual pads, so I don't have to ask for money from my husband. I hope this work lasts for 15 more years, until I am eligible for retirement. Others can go find a better job, if they can. I haven't even tried to, I have the transportation, everything's there, I am safe, I am not targeted by the male colleagues." (Q24)

On the other side of the age spectrum, the younger female workers are more often subjected to sexual abuse and harrasment by senior male managers. These forms of violence were only implied in some of the interviews, with a few interviewees sharing examples they witnessed, which ended in the abused worker having to leave the job.

Certain work conditions are particularly difficult for single mothers to manage and endure. Having to constantly work overtime, usually without prior notice but on the day of, penalties for taking sick leave or asking for a day off leaves them feeling they are "pushed to neglect" their children's wellbeing.

"*Here's my typical working day: I go to bed at midnight or half past midnight and get up at 5 again. The house is in complete disarray, I barely maintain basic hygiene, when I have a day off I use it to clean up. When I work for 8 hours per day, I can make it somehow, but now when it's 10 hours a day I cannot manage. I used to help my older daughter with homework a bit, play with the younger one. Prepare some food. Now, I don't have the time for any of it, and for what? I drop her off at the day care at 6AM and take her at 5PM. I barely see her. I know they (the management) call you up for this dreadful "meeting" after a sick leave, so when my daughter is sick I still take her to day care, I am afraid of being singled out at work."* (Q25)

Regardless of their age, all female workers are expected to perform unpaid domestic labour on a daily basis. When asked about how the work affects their private life, the female workers were unified in their assessment of a degrading effect: each female worker shared they cannot manage to perform all domestic tasks due to feeling exhausted and burnt out. Male workers' narratives did not include any mention of tasks related to home maintenance, cooking and child care. None of the female workers questioned this gendered divide of domestic work, and many were ashamed to share with the interviewer how they feel they are "failing at it", "letting down" their spouses and children, or showcasing examples of "untidyness" around their home.

Although this is not by all means a new finding, nor is it specific to industry female workers, it is worth noting down as another layer of work that contributes to the overwhelming feelings of physical and psychological exhaustion of female workers. For a few workers who shared that they had had some help and support in domestic labour, it was usually provided from other female family members. This is

another example of societal role being transferred to individual women and their network of support by other women, instead of providing societal systemic support (like day care embedded in factories).

"If it had not been for my mother-in-law and my mother to bring me home made food for lunch I don't know if my children would eat; the house was never so untidy as during my time there (at the factory), three batches of laundry just laying thrown at the bed, we were always in "chewed up" clothes." (Q26)

Some female workers also mentioned occasional acts of solidarity among women working in the factories - from minor ones like sharing a joke, to sharing food or medicine, to providing first aid when collapsing at "the production line". However small, these acts of solidarity have a rebellious quality in a system so extremely exploitative that leaves no mental nor physical space for rest, connection and being human. This is also proved by the acts of solidarity being sanctioned or even punished by the management, and consequently the workers training themselves to turn their head when a coworker is in need. Enduring the working conditions which leave them no physical nor mental capacity to change their position, the female workers feel alienated from their work, yet continue to exhibit their agency in other personal matters that feel important to them. Hence, they make sense of staying in a job like this in order to be able to provide for their family, to create better opportunities for their children, or to obtain means for their own independence and mobility.

Alternatives - (im)possibilities of post-capitalist imagination

The systemic exploitation with any resistance being punished, makes the workers accept degrading working conditions as normal and, more importantly - the only possible. The extent of the acceptance is shown in the narratives of the workers not only as "state of the facts" but as a practice of constant self-discipline and self-surveillance in order to stay obedient and follow the rules. Unexpectedly, this pattern did not show primarily in the responses on the possibilities of organizing a strike as the fear was a clear reason for not pursuing action. It did show, however, when an opportunity arose during the interview to have a critical stance on established practices in factories - not being included in the organization of work, not being paid enough to cover basic needs, expected to constantly work overtime, being yelled at or insulted. All the demeaning practices were not only endured, but also not seen as problematic in the first place. This is a step further to prevent any workers' action to change as they are not even reflecting on the factors that shape their position.

"I cannot talk (with colleagues), to me that is lost time and I have a target to reach." (Q27)

"It happened to me to feel sick during shift too, but I was embarrassed to say so and be accompanied out in front of everyone, so I pushed through." (Q28)

This has further contributed to the divide among workers, facilitated by different treatment and the rush to be "closer" and "in favour of" the management. Some workers tend to look "up the hierarchy" fighting to climb the ladder, at the cost of neglecting the possibilities of solidarity among peers and its potential for driving change.

"If you don't have any work at the moment, you can't just stay there doing nothing, it is up to you to find something to do, you can't go fetch water, or stealthily eat a candy, or laugh… You have to go down the (production) line and look for work, take other women's batches. I cannot fight with other women and lower their performance." (Q29)

There were only a few dissonant voices to this narrative, coming from younger, educated workers, some active in a workers' union, but most of whom have since left the job in the industry. With the a stark power imbalance between the management and the workers, no collective identity and support (even in the factories where union existed they were yet to negotiate a collective contract), with individualization of work process (individual targets, high intensity of work and no communication among workers), and with dominant narratives that every step out of line portray as a sign of individual weakness, not being able to even imagine a different system serves as a mechanism of mentally surviving the system, by fitting in it seamlessly. The price is one's own agency, physical and mental wellbeing but also - giving up reflecting possibilities for change.

The interviewed workers were directly asked to give their estimation of a living wage - a wage that would suffice for a dignified living, not mere surviving. The question proved difficult to answer for most and impossible for some, which opened further conversation about horizons of reflection and imagination of a different life and work. They stated that not having that *experience* (of having a salary that covers their life expenses) they cannot *imagine* how much it would be and how they would live differently. This influenced their relationship to rest, free time, mobility, but also normalized working several jobs to make ends meet.

"I have never had enough so I wouldn't know how it is." (Q30)

"Living wage sounds like dreaming in vain, because it's not doable." (Q31)

In these conditions of the burden for a worker's body and the mind, perception of vacation seems like a particularly indicative point. Most workers would say they hope for more hours per day or an additional day in the week to stay at home and rest, and leaving for a vacation is considered an unattainable or sometimes, unnecessary luxury, as none of them can afford to leave the place where they live and work. Skewed horizons of possible change have limited the workers' needs to bare necessities to reproduce their physical and mental resources on a daily basis to be able to go to work on the next day again. They cannot afford, not just financially but also psychologically, to dream of more.

"I haven't even considered taking a vacation, I would rather stay at home and save up." (Q32)

"That sounds to me like Yugoslavia. When I would go to the sea with mum's company in July, and my dad's in August. My children are 8 years old and I have never taken them to the seaside. I wish they could have a part of the childhood that I did." (Q33)

On this point a few dissonant voices emerged, but mostly could not formulate a clear vision and pathway to change, yet provided a general notion that a worker should be respected and paid enough to lead a dignified life.

Conclusion and Path Forward

After the end of Yugoslavia and the thirty years of political, social, and economic reforms that ensued, industrial workers in Serbia find themselves confined to exploitative systems within foreign companies operating in global supply chains. This integration into the free market as a field of cheap labor serves as a litmus test for global power relations; the structural conditions shaping employment in Serbia are not limited to post-socialist transition but powerfully determine the lives of millions across economically dependent countries worldwide. While this integration is often presented as an opportunity for development, the reality is that the power of multinational corporations derogates people's lives in the pursuit of profit. Within this context, our paper has sought to elucidate the mechanisms through which this systemic exploitation fundamentally reshapes the inner world of the working class. We demonstrate that the degradation of labor is not merely a material condition, but a psychological outcome; the structural subordination of the Serbian economy has created a landscape where the exhaustion of the body is a prerequisite for the passivization of the spirit.

Our findings illustrate how the "flexibilization" of labor and the constant fear of losing one's job to a worker elsewhere willing to accept even lower wages do not only extract profit but colonize the workers' psychological landscape. By exploring lived experiences of "the great sadness" and chronic anxiety, we explain how exploitation on the periphery functions to reshape the worker's subjectivity. The self-discipline to managerial control and the dual burden of domestic and industrial labor carried out by female workers produce a state of learned helplessness that stabilizes the neoliberal order from within. This is where the systemic injustice of global capitalism is most potent: it does not just demand labor; it actively engineers a psyche of survival, turning the fear of relocation of production into a permanent internal regulator.

Most significantly, our research points to a systemic "collapse of imagination"—the erosion of the utopian potential of the working class. We argue that when exploitation successfully colonizes the mind, the future becomes an unthinkable luxury, thereby explaining the absence of mass mobilization even under extreme conditions. Consequently, we contend that incremental adjustments are insufficient; only fundamental systemic changes can address this crisis. Restoring the dignity and wellbeing of the Serbian workforce requires a dismantling of the state-capital arrangements that treat the worker's inner life as a disposable resource. The primary agent of this change cannot be the state, which is currently a complicit partner. The demand for dismantling these arrangements must be spearheaded by authentic trade union movements and new political forces that reject Serbia's role as a peripheral zone of cheap labor. Mass mobilization and the politicization of the workplace must be accompanied by both institutional and extra-institutional struggles aimed at breaking with colonial economic policies and restoring sovereignty to the people over their own labor and lives. Only through such radical systemic transformation can the cycle of structural despair be broken, restoring the possibility of a future defined by collective hope and genuine agency.

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Appendix A - An example of a data set for analysis

No. of the quote	Interviewee no.	CPE Questionnaire section	Quote	Context information	Code - tag	Theme (RTA)	Meaning (IRA)	Chapter in the article
3	15	Organization of Work	There is always so much material pending to be processed, much more than we can manage in one shift alone, and we constantly get e-mails with different instructions on what to prioritize, which causes confusion.	The factory assigns individual targets to workers on a daily basis, and the workers who do not meet their targets, are punished (by reducing wage, being reassigned to a more difficult operation or being fired.)	Workload, urgency, confusion	Pressure and fear	I can never complete work, I cannot rest and I don't know what's coming next.	Constant Uncertainty and Fear - Burnt out and Afraid

Appendix B - The Structure of the Questionnaire and Indicators

Following is a summary of a structure of the questionnaire used in the CPE's research, with a set of indicators per each of the 10 sections. It is important to note that although the questions might be formulated in a more technical way, they were followed up by asking for interviewees' opinion on the practice referred to by the question. The article has used more of these comments in the analysis, and less the answers to more technical aspects of working in a factory. For example, the workers were asked to explain the process of *how* the production is organized in the factory in which they work. But they were also asked if they think this process is adequate, if they had been consulted in the process, and if they think they should be. The full questionnaire consists of more than 250 questions.

Section 1. Introduction and Demographic Information (age, gender, education, family members, household income)

Section 2. General Information about the Factory (the product, work organization, number of workers, relations with the management, HR procedures, gender and age of workers and others)

Section 3. Employment Policies (type of contracts, duration and stability of contracts, procedures for hiring new staff)

Section 4. Working hours (regular and overtime, changes in the working hours, holidays, annual leave, day off, affordability of mobility for holidays, sick leave, free time, commute and transportation, breaks during shifts, use of toilets etc.)

Section 5. Salary (amount, changes, calculation, norms, salary range between workers and management, bonuses and cuts, meal allowance, holiday bonuses, penalties, household expenses, unexpected costs, the amount for a living wage)

Section 6. Occupational Health and Safety - OHS (physical conditions, workers' assessment of level of safety, trainings, inspection, medical care, casualties, discrimination, mobbing)

Section 7. Unions (activities, mission, use, perception, strikes - domains and goals)

Section 8. Labour Legislation (workers' self-assessment on how knowledgeable they are about the Labour Law, their experience with violations, inspections and courts)

Section 9. Just Transition (the workers perception of the effect of climate change on their work and working conditions and health consequences, any existing mitigation measures)

Section 10. Concluding remarks (messages to the factory management, to unions, to the government, and to the public, level of overall work satisfaction, possibilities for change, workers' perception on how the work affects their private life)

Appendix C - The Original Quotes in Serbian

Q1. „Mnoge stvari utiču na uslove rada. Ja, na primer, radim i osećam se kao u konzervi. Ne vidim da li je dan ili noć, ne znam kakvo je vreme napolju. Nije u svakoj hali tako, ali ipak. Utiče na raspoloženje, na depresiju. Puno žena se žali na to stanje. Ili kako one to zovu, velika tuga."

Q2. „Koja se onesvesti oni je malo umiju i vrate je, ranije su merili pritisak, sad ne. A ako baš ne mogu da je povrate onda tek zovu hitnu."

Q3. „Hitna je na početku dolazila maltene 2 puta, 3 puta sedmično. Sad manje, ali dolaze. Koleginica je imala epi napad, i to je od stresa. Bilo je padanja u nesvest. ja sam na početku morala da pijem bromazepam pre nego što dođem na posao. Ne znaš ko će da te zaskoči."

Q4. „Videla sam neke koleginice, posebno kada tek počnu da rade, kako skoro čitavo vreme plaču."

Q5. „Stres i plakanje, moraš da otplačeš u toku radnog vremena minimum dva-tri puta." "Svi piju lekove za smirenje."

Q6. „Otuđile smo se sve. Nismo više povezane, jedva da komuniciramo. Mislim da je to rezultat toga što u fabrici insistiraju da svaka gleda samo svoja posla, nema nikakvog zajedništva, kako onda može da bude otpora?"

Q7. „Živiš od danas do sutra, neizvesnost je i za decu i za porodicu. Nemaš nikad predah."

Q8. „U ovoj kompaniji ti si samo broj kog će jednim potezom da obrišu ne trepnuvši. To ljudi znaju. Nema štrajka, jer onda nema hleba."

Q9. „Nakon štrajkova ili drugih pobuna, često se nešto malo koriguje, ali se već sledećeg meseca vrati na staro. Doveli su ljude do situacije da više nemaju snage da se bore za svoja prava."

Q10. „Svi smo došli u ovu fabriku previše mladi, odmah posle bombardovanja. To je bila druga firma koja se otvorila u Valjevu i toliko nam je trebao posao da je stvarno bilo samo – ćuti, sagni glavu i radi, dobro je kad ima šta da se radi. I valjda je tako i ostalo."

Q11. „Kažem doktoru da pijem to što mi je rekao da pijem za štitnu žlezdu, ali naravno da ne pijem redovno, kad je preskupo."

Q12. „Ja sam se distancirala, otišla sam u svoj svet zbog situacije u firmi, zbog svih tih žena, jedno misle drugo pričaju, treće rade. Nema doslednosti, ne razumem, ne mogu da utičem ni na šta. Zašto bi mene zanimao ceo proizvodni proces… Nemamo priliku ni da vidimo šta se dešava, jer nemamo pristup svim halama. Ti moraš da sedneš za mašinu kad ti zvoni zvono i nemamo vremena ni mogućnost da pričamo sa koleginicama na drugom radnom mestu. Mogu da ustanem samo do toaleta. Ne mogu ni da pričam, jer je za mene to vreme izgubljeno, a moram da dostignem normu."

Q13. „Za 2000 komada koje smo izbacili, dobiješ Snickers čokoladicu. Nikad nisam htela da idem da uzmem. Dao si mi čokoladicu, a ostavljaš nas po 10 sati, ponižavajuće mi je to. Kupiću mu (direktoru) dve kese čokoladica samo da me pusti u pola 3 da idem kući."

Q14. „Ja izdržavam, odem do kupatila umijem se, nema ko da mi pomogne... nema tu pomoći ja sam došla da radim a ne da se razvlačim. Imamo neke žene koje preteruju sa tim bolovanjem."

Q15. „Ne može tamo ništa da me zaštiti."

Q16. „Žena je pala u nesvest na ulazu u halu, nakon što se oglasila sirena. Koleginice su je preskakale da ne bi zakasnile na liniju i gazile su po njoj; ako zakasniš tri minuta, dužna si da odradiš trideset. Meni se ona i dan danas zahvaljuje što sam stala da joj pomognem."

Q17. „Da obrazuju radnike i da ih ohrabre da problematizuju određene stvari."

Q18. „Osećaš se sigurnije. Imaš kome da se obratiš za pomoć kada te maltretiraju."

Q19. „Oni nam kažu kako treba da radimo što je i normalno oni su iznad nas."

Q20. „Što bih se bojao otkaza, kada ionako mogu samo da dobijem rak na ovom poslu."

Q21. „Piješ Bromazepam. Kad ideš na posao, sediš napred jer imaš osećaj da te nešto guši, sediš do vozača da možeš da iskočiš, a kad ideš kući sediš pozadi, rasterećen. bilo je i gušenja i plakanja."

Q22. „Ne znam, kad imam šta da ponesem od kuće, nosim, kad nemam, ne jedem. Sreća pa stomak nema prozore pa se ne vidi da je prazan."

Q23. „Dođem kući nervozna, umorna, a obaveza kući ima mnogo. Onda se sve preliva i na decu, ne mogu ni da razgovaram sa decom, samo da ćutim da dođem sebi. Ja sam mrtva kada dođem kući. Društveni život ne postoji. Da je u pitanju fizički odmor još bi i bilo ok, digneš noge i odmoriš se za pola sata. Ali ovo je psihički umor, od toga ne možeš da se odmoriš."

Q24. „Dobro mi je, meni taj prevoz znači više nego išta, ja ne znam da vozim, kako bih ja ovde iz sela išla na posao? Ovo mi je prvi posao, niko nije hteo da me zaposli bez iskustva. Imam 40 godina, prvi put mogu sebi da priuštim da kupim donji veš, uloške, da ne moram da pitam muža za pare. Volela bih da traje dok ne napunim 15 godina, dok ne napunim staža. Nek nađu bolje ako može. Ja se nisam ni trudila da tražim bolje, imam prevoz, sve mi je tu, bezbedna sam niko me ne dira od muških."

Q25. „Evo kako meni izgleda svaki dan: legnem oko 12 pola 1, ustanem u 5 opet. Kući svaki dan haos jedva održavam higijenu kad dodje slobodan dan gledaš da očistiš. Kad je 8 sati radno vreme i ok je, kad je 10 sati ne stižem ništa. Ranije sam sa starijom ćerkom malo oko domaćeg, malo se mlađoj posvetim. Pa onda i spremi nešto da se jede. Sad ništa ne stižem, zapustila sam i njih i sebe, i za šta? Ostavim dete u 6 ujutru u vrtiću uzmem je u 5 popodne. I ne viđam je. Znam da sledi taj užasan razgovor posle bolovanja, pa kad mi je dete bolesno ja ga ipak šaljem u vrtić jer otkud znam sve gledaju."

Q26. „Da nije bilo svekrve i majke da mi donesu šerpe ne znam da li bi mi deca jela, kuća mi nikad u većem haosu nije bila nego dok sam radila tamo, tri mašine opranog veša samo bacim na krevem, išli smo sažvakani (neopeglani)."

Q27. „Ne mogu ni da pričam, jer je za mene to vreme izgubljeno, a moram da dostignem normu."

Q28. „Dešavalo se i meni da mi muka ali mi bilo glupo da zovem da me vode kroz fabriku pa sam istrpela."

Q29. „Ako nemaš nikakvog posla ne smeš da boraviš tako bez nikakvog posla, moraš da nađeš, ne smeš da se šetaš po liniji da odneseš vodu, kradom jedeš bombonu, ne smeš da se nasmeješ... Idi traži po liniji još posla, otimaj se oko bala. Ne mogu da se otimam sa drugim ženama da im skidam njihov performans."

Q30. „Ja nikad nisam imao dovoljno da bih znao."

Q31. „Zvuči mi kao uzaludno sanjanje, jer je neizvodljivo."

Q32. „Nisam ni pomišljala na odmor, radije bih da budem kući i uštedim."

Q33. „Zvuči mi kao Jugoslavija. Kad sam u julu išla na more sa maminom, a u avgustu sa tatinom firmom. Moja deca imaju 8 godina i nikada ih do sada nisam odvela na more. Volela bih da vide deo detinjstva koji sam ja imala."