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Building Back Better?: The Possibilities of Change and Role of the Union for the UK Film and Television Costume Workforce

Tiffany Bale[1]
Email: t.bale.1@research.gla.ac.uk

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic caused significant disruption for offscreen film and television workers in the UK. This article uses interviews (n=20) and audio diaries (n=6) with costume workers captured over the period of March to December 2021 to trace the relationship between the rapidly growing number of film and television productions in 2021 and costume workers' attitudes to the possibilities of positive improvement to their long-hours working culture. In the context of the vote in favour of strike action by the US film and television worker union, IASTE, and the increase in Instagram accounts that document some of the film and television industries' unfair and exploitative conditions, this article discusses the relationship between the current industry climate and workers' perceptions of their power to demand better conditions through unionisation.

Introduction

Offscreen film and television work has long-standing issues surrounding working hours, informal and unregulated hiring practices, a culture of bullying and harassment and a lack of workforce diversity (Nwonka and Malik, 2021; Swords et al., 2022; Work Foundation, 2020 etc.). When the March 2020 COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these enduring issues, they were felt even more keenly by workers (BECTU 2020a, 2020b; Film and TV Charity, 2020). Film and television workers in technical roles were among many cultural workers to have their livelihoods halted overnight (ibid). For many the shutdown brought their previous concerns around financial insecurity to the fore, especially when many did not qualify for government support and faced financial hardship (BECTU, 2020a). The film and television union, BECTU (Broadcasting, Entertainment, Cinematograph and Theatre Union), lobbied the government for better financial support for freelancers as well as organising various Zoom community building events, many with inherent ideal of returning to a 'better' film and television industry (ibid).

Fast forward a year to March 2021 and UK film and television production was beginning one of the busiest years that it had ever encountered (BFI, 2021; Brazanti et al. 2021). The struggles

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[1] Tiffany Bale is a PhD researcher at the University of Glasgow funded by the Scottish Graduate School for Arts and Humanities (SGSAH). Her research looks at the careers of women in UK film and television costume departments. Tiffany has recently completed data collection for her thesis entitled, 'Gender and participation in the UK's film & TV costume workforce' using interviews and work audio diaries. Prior to commencing PhD research, she worked as a costume maker in high-end television.

of lockdown and lack of government freelancer support, although not forgotten, became secondary to an overabundance of work, a shortage of crew members and reports of burnout (Brazanti et al., 2021; McNab, 2021). Concurrent to the intensification of work, 2021 also saw a rise in the number of Instagram groups run by offscreen workers which invited others to message in anonymously about their struggles with exploitative working conditions. The most notable account being @ia_stories, created by US lighting technician Ben Gottlieb, which has been credited in the press as providing the momentum needed for the IASTE union (International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees) in the US to threaten strike action over conditions in October 2021 (Baker-Whitelaw, 2021; Saraiya, 2021; Sakoui, 2021 etc.). In the UK context, there are now a number of similar accounts: (@britcrewstories, @shitmenintvhavesaidtome, @females_in_film).

From a research perspective, monitoring changes in a very fluid and transient freelance workforce remains consistently challenging. Although quantitative census data has been collected since the beginning of the 2000s by ScreenSkills, there still remain difficulties in building a representative picture of the film and television workforce and their conditions. For example, ScreenSkills censuses only capture those working on the census day, Ofcom's monitoring only captures those employed by the main UK broadcasters, Creative Diversity Network's Diamond data captures contributions made to the broadcasters involved within the reporting scheme etc. In the case of working conditions and less quantifiable markers of change, we are beginning to see some innovations, measures such as surveys of workers' mental health (Looking Glass Report – Work Foundation, 2020) and tracking surveys of workers' hours (The Time Project - Swords et al., 2022). Yet evidence of improvement remains mixed, with many reports noting a lack of change or even a worsening of conditions (Creative Diversity Network, 2022; Directors UK, 2018; Film & TV Charity, 2021).

So far, organisations such as the BFI, broadcast monitoring bodies (e.g., Ofcom, Creative Diversity Network) as well as employers, have been the focus of industry and academic debate on who shares the responsibility for change. The data presented here would suggest that workers' attitudes to change and their capacity to intervene in their conditions should also be factored into the debate. Initial data suggests that workers are engaged and cognizant of the issues they face, and for many unionisation is offering an outlet to participate in progressive change. Rather than assessing intervention from a top-down perspective, this article takes a somewhat neglected idea of worker power and asks how workers think about their ability to intervene in their conditions through unionisation.

Starting at the point where many were returning to one of the busiest years in their film and television careers, this article references the context of disruption and increased online activity to explore the relationship between costume workers and their union in the post-industry-shutdown context. This article uses online interviews (n=20) and audio diaries (n=6) conducted with film and television costume workers to begin to unpick what, if anything, changed in workers' attitudes over the course of 2021.

The focus here is on workers' understandings of power, that is, workers' perceptions of their capacity to collectively intervene in the conditions of their work rather than the potential of one-off industrial strike action (Legault and Weststar, 2015). Taking a small-scale, qualitative approach to looking at the current attitudes and expectations of workers, this article is an exploratory study which uses the author's initial PhD findings.

Initial data suggests a workforce even more disillusioned with their conditions upon their return to work after the COVID-19 industry shut down, but not disengaged from changing them. With increasing online union activity both in the US and the UK, there is indicative evidence to suggest that workers are becoming increasingly vocal about improving their working conditions but remain uncertain about where to direct their energies.

Context: The cultural worker and ideas of collectivity

Within academic literature on cultural work, we have seen the end of celebratory discourses surrounding its egalitarian and emancipatory merits that were extolled by turn-of-the-century thinkers such as Florida (2002), Landry (2000) and Leadbeater (1999) (Banks and Milestone, 2011; Dex et al., 2002; Gill, 2002; Taylor and O'Brien, 2017, etc.). Academic research has made a significant contribution to debunking some of the myths the cultural industry tells itself around meritocracy and the prestige of working within it (Brook et al., 2020; Eikhof and Warhurst, 2012; Gill, 2002; O'Brien et al., 2016, etc.).

A significant amount of cultural work research output from the academy has centred on understanding and revealing the realities of cultural work; the exploitative hours, the financial insecurity, the discriminatory and informal hiring practices, and the worsening mental health crisis (Gill, 2014; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2010; McRobbie, 2002; Work Foundation, 2020; Ursell, 2000, etc.). In the case of the film and television industry, these systemic issues have visibly manifested themselves in the form of public legal cases (e.g., Weinstein and Saville), a lack of diverse and nuanced content onscreen (Creative Diversity Network, 2022; Habib and Choudry, 2018; Saha, 2020), and workers leaving the industry revealing noticeable crew shortages (ScreenSkills, 2022). Arguably, the problems have been pinpointed, the routes to solving them less so.

In the UK context, the relationship between the cultural worker and collectivism has been characterised as an antagonistic one (Dean, 2012; Conor, 2011; Saundry et al., 2007; Saundry et al., 2006). There are noted difficulties surrounding organising a highly mobile, atomised and precariously employed freelance workforce (Heery et al., 2004; Simms and Dean, 2015). Particularly in the case of cultural workers, moves toward collectivisation are seen as hindered by the ideological context in which cultural work takes place (McRobbie, 2002). The individualist and competitive nature of the cultural industries has been suggested as leading workers to shun unionism and forms of collective action in favour of individual prestige and recognition (Antcliff et al., 2007; Banks, 2006; Dean, 2012; Legault and Weststar, 2015). There is also the suggestion that the ideological underpinnings of cultural work lead workers to accept, and even expect, exploitative conditions (Dean, 2007; 2012; Hesmondhalgh and Percival, 2014). Rooted in feelings of gratitude for work, cultural work is viewed as a vocation as opposed to 'work', and workers often trade inferior pay for the hope of future work (ibid).

Followingly, the capacity for cultural workers to act collectively to alter and improve their conditions has been theorised as somewhat limited (Blair, 2009; McRobbie, 2002; Saundry et al., 2006; Ursell, 2000). As a result of an insecure job market facilitated by informal hiring practices, and the disciplining power of reputation, i.e., the fear of not being hired again if one were to speak out about maltreatment or poor conditions, many workers are silenced or disinclined from voicing their experiences, particularly in the case of women and those from

marginalised backgrounds (Coles and Eikhof, 2021; Gill, 2014; Grugulis and Stoyanova, 2012; O'Brien, 2015).

Nevertheless, there have been isolated examples of collective action amongst cultural workers in the UK, namely, Equity theatre actors in the early 2000s and the chorus of the English National Opera in the mid-2000s (Dean, 2007; Simms and Dean, 2015). In 2005, there was a partially successful campaign by television workers creating the 'TV Wrap' petition which directed public attention to unpaid working cultures (Percival and Hesmondhalgh, 2014). Accordingly, there have been a number of studies into cultural workers' relationships to unionisation and their (limited) potential to take collective action against their employers (Dean, 2012; Weststar and Legault, 2019; Saundry et al., 2007; Simms and Dean, 2015).

In particular, Saundry et al.'s (2007) research into the online forum of television workers, 'Water Cooler', investigated whether online groups had the potential to re-ignite collectivist action and provide a sense of solidarity that would have otherwise been found in union membership. The authors pointed toward the anonymous nature of the forum as part of the draw, as well as the opportunity to bypass certain hierarchies and bureaucracies involved in dealing with the trade unions (Saundry et al., 2007, p. 183). The forum had some success in campaigning and raising the consciousness of exploitive conditions, forming the group 'TVWrap' to put pressure on production companies to improve long working hours cultures. Yet, the authors noted how the group alone lacked the organisation needed to deliver actual outcomes, and hence had to rely on members within the group who were also union members for the industrial relations insight (ibid., p. 186). The authors remained sceptical of the online network's capacity to develop into something more substantial.

Although the forum could not produce outcomes without the help of more 'traditional' forms of organisation, the limited success of the forum arguably offers insight into firstly, how many workers were trying to connect with one another through the means of the internet, and secondly, it provides indicative evidence that online forums offer the starting point for greater awareness of exploitative and unfair conditions. In the context of 2021, over a decade on from the TV Wrap campaign, perhaps now is an important moment to ask, what has changed?

Method

This article uses data collected for the author's PhD thesis on the careers of women costume workers in UK film and television in conjunction with monitoring the public Instagram accounts set up by film and television workers (@britcrewstories, @females_in_film, @ia_stories, @bectucostumebranch, @shitmenintvhavesaidtome). The primary data was collected through the use of Zoom interviews (n=20) and audio diaries (n=6) between March 2021 and January 2022. The interviews averaged one hour and were semi-structured with questions relating to participants' career histories, their positive and negative experiences of work and their reflections on the direction of their industry.

The audio diaries were intended for those who were currently working on a production to capture their real-time experiences of film and television work and to allow participants space to elaborate on thoughts that might have been missed in the Zoom interaction. If participants consented to take part, they were asked to record Whatsapp voice messages at a frequency

of once per week for four weeks. It was hoped that this would be a short enough timespan that would ensure participant retention and would not be a significant time commitment. Participants were given 4-5 prompts in a reminder message each week, for example, 'Did you have any notable interactions with costume colleagues or events that have stayed with you?', and 'Have you had any further thoughts about the interview questions?'. It was emphasised to participants that the recordings did not have to be a time-consuming task and that diaries only need be a few minutes long.

In January 2022, catch-up interviews were offered to all those who had participated in the interviews and audio diaries to ask about how their year of work had played out. Six participants (three of whom had participated in the audio diaries) agreed to take part in a catch-up interview and these interviews took place on Zoom in January 2022. Again, these interviews lasted for about an hour and focused in more detail on participants' experiences at work, with time for reflection on the changes to their work over the course of the year.

All participants were currently working in film and television costume departments or had worked in film and television accumulatively for a minimum of one year. The low threshold for eligibility was aimed to capture a wide sample of participants with varying experiences, including those who had begun a career in costume and then had left. Initially, the call for participants was advertised on costume Facebook groups which did not yield significant interest. As the author had previously worked in costume departments, ex-colleagues were then asked to partake, and the remaining sample was found through snowballing.

Although the sampling criteria was left as open as possible with the hopes of capturing a diverse sample, the majority of participants came from a similar, socio-economic and racial background. The majority of participants were white, arts university educated women with caring responsibilities. Most participants had varied career backgrounds ranging from 2 to 40 years. At the time of interviewing the majority worked entirely in film and television.

There were added ethical considerations due to the entirely online nature of the research. There was the possibility that in some cases, personal traumas from COVID and increased financial insecurity may render some individuals unwilling or unable to share their work experiences as they had yet to process the trauma experienced during 2020 (Ravitch, 2020). Flexibility and attentiveness to the participant was key here. When discussing the lockdown period, I would begin with: "Is it alright to talk about...?", in order to give the participant the option to decline. The available literature suggested strategies to aid such research, such as providing participants with an easy way to leave the call, and ensuring clarity in information provided before the interview such as how long the interview was likely to last (Hewson et al., 2016; Nosek et al., 2002). In terms of the practicalities of consent forms, adjustments were made to allow participants to paste a picture of their signature or use an e-signature (O'Connor et al., 2008).

The multiple method approach of the project was a response to the constraints imposed by conducting research solely online, but it was not without its merits. Arguably, its value lay in its ability to be flexible and capture participants' experiences over the course of a year. The film and television workforce is notoriously difficult to research due to participants often having to change interview times due to work commitments. The audio diaries offered practical innovations over other approaches in the field due to its simple nature and requiring less of a time commitment from participants, in turn resulting in all participants completing

their four diaries. In terms of the content of the data gathered, audio diaries offer real-time insight into the psycho-social demands of film and television work and have the capacity to track small-scale changes over time. The combination of methods was particularly suited to this piece of research, as it offered insight into the shift in workers' attitudes as the film and television industry underwent rapid change.

Findings

Changes for workers since returning to work after lockdown: Expectation vs. reality

Initial interviewing began in March 2021, at this time the number of productions filming was beginning to drastically increase in response to inward investment from streaming services and an increase in demand for content sparked by the 2020 lockdowns (BFI, 2021; Brazanti et al., 2022; ScreenSkills, 2022). Participants described how they were receiving an unprecedented number of phone calls with offers of work. In the famine-to-feast context of freelance work, some participants' thoughts seemed to be turning to the increase in power and market desirability of workers. Some were predicting a rise in workers' expectations of what they were willing to accept in terms of hours and pay.

> "And because of that [industry shutdown], I think there is now starting to be a shift in the way that people work, and because we're in a world now where crew now get dictate to productions, we are in the…we are now in a more powerful position. We can say that this is what needs to happen, whereas before everyone was too scared to say anything in case, you know, they get sacked or lost their job or get a bad reputation which isn't the case anymore."

> (Lucy*, mid to senior costume worker – 10+ years' experience)

At this point in early 2021, participants were beginning to see some changes to what had been accepted as 'normal' working practices. For instance, those who were computer-based in costume managerial roles were being given the option to work from home on certain days, and some productions were allowing workers to work part-time on a regular basis[2]. Additionally, the offer of job-sharing was becoming an increasing occurrence within costume departments[3].

As Lucy mentioned, there was the suggestion amongst some participants that the disciplinary power of reputation had lessened, and it was becoming more acceptable for workers to leave contracts before they had ended if they were offered more favourable terms on a different production. An occurrence that had also been noted by ScreenSkills prior to the industry shutdown (ScreenSkills, 2019). But for other less senior colleagues, the disciplinary power of reputation still factored into their decision-making, and those with less regard for reputational damage, like Lucy, tended to be those in more senior positions who were in high demand.

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[2] Daily work (dailies) on a 'daily contract' had been common prior to COVID-19 shutdowns, but daily work was often arranged on an ad hoc, last-minute terms. The part-time work mentioned here refers to regular part-time employment for workers contracted for the entire length of the production.

[3] The author's forthcoming PhD thesis contains more analysis of job-sharing measures in costume work.

> "I've been told that people talk, and you know if you leave something early or you know, you're not loyal to them and you don't stick out or stay on the job with them, that they probably won't want you, and they'll probably dissuade other people from wanting to work with you as well…"

> (Klara, costume trainee – less than 5 years' experience)

Participants' perceptions of power were often differentiated by their level of seniority, but at the beginning of the interviewing period, there was a consistent sense of optimism at all levels. Participants were keen to return to work, and their optimism seemed to be largely a response to some production companies offering job shares or free on-set childcare to entice workers, as well as more general ideas of attitudinal change on behalf of workers. But this sense of optimism was not to last. The audio diary quoted below captures one participant's experience of returning to work part-time and how her attitudes to part-time work changed over the course of the diaries[4].

> "Yeah, all in all, so far so good I think. I'm a little bit apprehensive to see how it continues, especially while I'm only part-time and not full-time because it does feel very kind of, in-out. But yeah, I think, I think the problem is it's very much new territory for a lot of people because the nature of our industry - you just don't really ever see part-time."

As the production progressed the realities of working part-time were not living up to the participant's expectations:

> "I didn't know what days of the week I was going to be working until Friday last week, so I felt a little bit frustrated that, although we're only working part-time, there was sort of an expectation of us to be available whenever within the working week, at the drop of a hat. Which was going to frustrate - it was frustrating me a little bit cause I just thought it's a little bit unfair, if you're only paying somebody for two days a week to expect them to just be available, you know, people might want to take on other work to subsidise their income."

> (Martha, mid-level costume worker – 5+ years' experience)

Although the participant had been cautiously optimistic at the beginning of the diaries, the 'last minute' culture of film and television production companies had not changed. She was still expected to keep days free in case she was needed at short notice.

Participants were keener to focus on what they could control inside the costume department. On returning to work many hoped for a change in the behaviours of their fellow costume workers, such as not adhering to a culture of presenteeism, to letting workers know schedules as soon as possible so that they could arrange childcare and to being more open to job-sharing measures. Yet even with such intentions, as the participant quoted below notes, these were often thwarted by wider structural conditions.

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[4] This particular participant requested to send audio diaries every two weeks as opposed to every week. Due to her part-time schedule, she felt she had little to say after two days of work per week. Here, flexibility was key, and it was agreed that in this instance diaries over the course of eight weeks would be better suited.

> "...on the job I'm on at the minute from the beginning we were like: 'we've got to be kind to ourselves, we've come out of a pandemic, if you can go home early – do it.' Whereas before it was, like you know, if you even dared say, 'I'm gonna go because I've got nothing to do,' you would be really, you know, people would not look too kindly onto it. Whereas now it is much more like: 'no cool, you got nothing to do, why on earth would you be here?' But, you can't do it because you're doing two or three peoples' jobs...with the best will in the world I'd love to get home early one day, but there's always so much to do because of the lateness from production, the information comes late, you're doing two or three peoples' jobs, and then you just get frustrated because it's like it's all very well saying, 'let's be kind to one another,' but actually the reality is you can't because you, you still do have a job to do."

> (Maria, mid to senior costume worker – 10+ years' experience)

As 2021 continued and participants were experiencing a worsening of conditions due to a shortage of workers and decreasing timeframes to complete work, there was a growing air of disappointment. The issue of long hours was known long before the disruption caused by the COVID-19 lockdown (BECTU, 2017), but there appeared to be an added level of disappointment for some participants. There had been and continues to be notable deaths of film and television crews throughout the UK and US due to unsafe working conditions often as a result of worker tiredness or inexperienced crew (Stiles and Sakoui, 2021; Rawlinson, 2020). The majority of participants felt that their disappointment and struggles could be talked about between other trusted members of the department, but there was very little suggestion that participants could be open about their struggles outside of the department.

As the year progressed my attention turned to questions of whether participants' sense of disappointment could precipitate into moves toward collectivity. Some participants were keen to draw attention to the Instagram activity of film and television workers in the US. During the course of 2021, an increasing number of Instagram groups were created by film and television workers to anonymously post about their working conditions. Inspired by the Instagram account, @ia_stories, created by US lighting technician Ben Gottlieb, there are now a number of accounts within the UK context where workers message in anonymously about poor conditions, maltreatment or harassment (@britcrewstories, @shitmenintvhavesaidtome, @females_in_film). The messages are anonymised and many of these accounts now feature hundreds of experiences, some of which require trigger warnings and reference serious mental health issues. These accounts have curated an important data source for film and television worker research and throughout this article have formed an important real-time litmus test of worker attitudes and experiences. As noted in Saundry et al.'s (2007) study of the TV Wrap petition, the use of online anonymous platforms by television workers to air grievances is not a new phenomenon and neither is awareness of long hours cultures. But importantly, this wider online context was forming the backdrop to increasing discourse around the need for change, coupled with an unprecedented demand for film and television crews in the UK.

> "I think people are starting to recognise like, I don't know if you followed the IATSE stories page on Instagram but everybody messaging in going: 'This is a fucking job and I'm killing myself to do it. What for? Why? The passion? I stopped being passionate about this a long time ago it's just something that pays the fucking bills.

> So, I think yeah, it is the shift where people recognise it is a job. We're not…It's not a fucking hobby."

(Clare, mid-level costume worker – 5+ years' experience)

Research has traditionally understood the ideological underpinnings of film and television workers as atomised, self-serving individuals allured by the promise and glamour of film and television work (Blair, 2009; Ursell, 2000). Yet, the participants of this study generally held contrasting attitudes to work when compared to wider cultural worker research. Although the majority of participants noted how they loved their job, there was far less suggestion that participants were somehow infatuated or blindly self-deceiving of conditions. They recognised their work as 'real' work; they understood their work as their main source of income, the object that filled the majority of their working hours, and therefore held the attendant expectations from that *work*. Participants' attachment to their work differed from the ideas of the unflinchingly devoted cultural worker, and as the industrial terrain of film and television work shifted, I began to explore questions of collective power.

Costume workers and the union: participants' perception of their power

Even amongst the most optimistic participants, there was uncertainty about *who* had the power to bring about change. This was based on some participants' implicit understanding that those who could truly alter working patterns and conditions were the amorphous, distant production companies often based in the US, or the broadcasters who determined budgets for productions. There was also the suggestion that the industry was some sort of uncontrollable entity that had too many moving parts with opaque practices and far-away companies that retained power. Participants' hope for the future remained somewhere between the desire to remain optimistic for the sake of their own career survival, to entirely pessimistic. Any minor improvements in recent months were more often linked to the scarcity of crew as opposed to any moral imperative on behalf of production companies.

When it came to questions of collective worker power and unionisation, there was a mix of perspectives. Many noted how the costume branch of the BECTU union had been an important source of support during the original lockdown in pressuring production companies to pay for furlough, as well as lobbying the government to extend its income support schemes for PAYE-freelancers (BECTU, 2020a). There were a few noted stories of successful use of union pressure, especially when it came to furlough payments.

> "There was an argument about the pay. We went to the union, we got everyone an extra day's pay because we said, 'the day that you sack us cannot be considered a day of notice – it has to start the next day.'"

(Bridget, senior costume worker – 20+ years' experience)

Some had also found the costume branch of the union a form of social support during the isolation of lockdown making them feel less isolated as well as informing members on the protocols of returning to work through their regional Whatsapp groups.

> "I think the union, they, they saved my life during lockdown because I was de-spirited rather than desperate – I didn't know what to do or how to get help or anything, so I did lots of courses. You know I did health and safety and mentoring. I was Zoomed out by the end, like being a COVID supervisor and then haven't necessarily come in useful, but yeah, they kept the network still, you know, close-knit. They were great."
>
> (Diane, senior costume worker, 20+ years' experience)

Although a highly positive development in the form of career and mental health support, participants' attitudes about the wider impact of the union remained sceptical. Some suggested that the union's power to bring about significant change to conditions was limited because of persistently low membership numbers within the branch.

> "Yeah, yeah, I think in costume we tend to be underrepresented. Um, people don't, a lot of people don't join the union and won't join the union, and I don't quite understand why that is particularly a costume thing. Because other departments, for example, makeup and hair are like really strongly unionised and they've got a really good deal because of that, you know, because they're strong and they don't undercut other people, you know they are, you know, a unified workforce and because of that they have really good deals, you know. For some reason costume doesn't work in the same way, it feels more fractured. There's a lot more people working at home in their basement or their shed making costumes, or you know, and I think because of that it sometimes feels like we're not such a community as we could be."
>
> (Melanie, senior costume worker – 20+ years' experience)

Generally, despite the initial increase in perception of individual worker power and demand for their work, costume workers conceptualised their capacity to change their own working conditions as limited to either leaving a job or through small-scale interventions within the department. Noticeably, when talking about the expectations and demand for workers, Lucy, one of the more optimistic participants, did not frame her increase in 'power' in terms of being able to negotiate hours and conditions. She framed it within the terms of not accepting a job. During our catch-up interview, Lucy talked about how she had chosen to leave a job not long after our initial interview. After being promised 'normal' working hours, (generally understood as 8 am – 7 pm on weekdays), when she received the schedule, she was told she would be working mainly weekends and night shoots. She noted:

> "Well, I wouldn't have taken on that job with a child if that's what it was...and you're thinking, 'God, did nobody learn anything from what we've been through [COVID-19 lockdown] about how important it is to do both?'"
>
> (Lucy, mid to senior costume worker – 10+ years' experience)

Lucy's case would seem to suggest that her perception of her power remained limited to moving between jobs that offered better conditions rather than asking the production company for better conditions. Arguably, leaving is an act of resistance in itself, but also seemingly a short-term solution to systemic problems. Lucy's perception of her individual solution to long hours seems to resonate with McRobbie's prediction that cultural workers can 'only find individual (or 'biographical' as Beck puts it) solutions to systemic problems (Beck, 1997)' (McRobbie, 2002, p. 519).

Despite participants' ambivalence or scepticism of the power of the union, at the time of interviewing the costume branch was becoming increasingly vocal about its dissatisfaction with the Pact/Bectu TV Agreement – an agreement signed in 2017 between BECTU and Pact, (the trade association representing the commercial interests of UK independent film and television producers), that was intended to improve working hours (Pact/BECTU, 2017). In particular, the union was gathering momentum around the requirements for 'Prep and Wrap'. Written into the contracts of costume workers is the amount of time they are expected to give before and after production without pay in order to prepare actors and supporting artists for filming. The majority of participants tended to work 10-11 hours a day and, depending on the production, were expected to work between 30 minutes to one hour either side of the day as free labour to accommodate prep and wrap (BECTU, 2021).

The costume branch of BECTU had been vocal about the amount of free labour given to production as this particularly affects departments that work outside of shooting hours such as costume and hair and make-up – generally women-dominated departments. In a series of letters to Pact, BECTU had raised concerns about the unfairness of forgoing pay for what would be considered 'work'. One participant who was more active in their branch notes how the gendered nature of union membership was affecting how seriously their concerns were being taken.

> "A lot of the kickback about hours and things, you know with BECTU at the moment is coming from the male [dominated] departments, but it's really frustrating because we've been complaining about that for, not complaining...so I mean, we have been complaining, but you know, we've been trying to do something about that for years and like the minute the sparks [lighting department] speak up, it's like suddenly they're being listened to, and it's like, why have you been ignoring us for such a long time? Really frustrating. And suddenly because it affects a grip or a spark. This is not news to me..."
>
> (Natalie, senior costume worker, 10+ years' experience)

There is limited scope within this article to explore the gendered nature of union membership, but it is important to note that gender plays an important role in union participation (Galt, 2020; Baker and Connors, 2020). The majority of participants were fully aware of the gendered nature of their issues, and why some within the union might not consider their voices as important as their male counterparts[5]. The participant below noted how without the widespread consensus from other branches of the union and the cooperation of production companies, she believed their likelihood of success would be limited.

> "So um, I think it needs money and it needs people to physically make, like people need to pay to make the hours shorter. That's the only thing that it's gonna be, and I don't think even BECTU...I think it's got to be a film wide demand, like every department has to ask for better hours, same pay, better hours."
>
> (Maria, mid to senior costume worker, 10+ years' experience)

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[5] There is a wealth of literature surrounding the gendered dimension of union membership (Colgan and Ledwith, 1996; Kirton, 2005; Kirton and Healy, 2013 etc.) that I hope to return to with reference to ideas of solidarity and shared experience in future research outputs, here the focus remains on the shifts in costume workers' attitudes to change.

At the time of writing this article, the discussion about 'Prep and Wrap' had seemingly reached a head and BECTU branches as a whole had decided to withdraw from the Pact/BECTU TV Drama Agreement (Goldbart, 2022). Below was posted on the BECTU Costume Branch Instagram on 21 March 2022.

> "Costume & Wardrobe Branch – Action Required!
>
> Due to unsatisfactory negotiations, Bectu branches have decided to give notice to withdraw from the Pact/Bectu TV Drama Agreement.
>
> We have 6 months to negotiate a satisfactory agreement that will address the length of working day and a better life/work balance or leave the TV Drama Agreement.
>
> Having seen what IATSE managed to achieve last year, we want to form a working group to help spread the word and to gather support for our case. If you have a few hours spare each week and interested in finding out more, please DM or email bectucostumewardrobe@gmail.com to find out more."
>
> (The post below first appeared on the BECTU costume branch Instagram (@bectucostumebranch) on 21 March 2022)

Perhaps this statement by BECTU is a precipitation of these worsening conditions, or perhaps this is a fleeting moment in the long-running saga of film and television industrial relations. It is difficult to comment on the direction of these events as they are currently unfolding; they could be a symptom of a fluctuating job market or a sustained attitudinal shift on behalf of workers. It is important, however, that workers are recognising and sharing their struggles both online and in private conversations. Notably, the context of the US situation seems to be resonating in the UK. Regardless of the outcome of these developments, this article demonstrates that these conversations need to be observed and are worth returning to.

Reflection on a developing situation

In the case of most participants, the awareness of their own precarity pre-dated the shutdown of industry, but the COVID-19 pandemic has arguably served to emphasise the toll of long hours cultures, as well as raise their expectations for a better work-life balance.

This initial exploration into costume workers' ideas of union power suggests that in the case of these participants, understandings of their capacities to intervene in conditions remains limited to leaving a job. Despite participants' scepticism about the wider impact of union membership, the participants of this study generally held their union in positive regard for the localised impact it has had on their individual careers. Notably, participants' attitudes ranged from feelings of powerlessness in the face of amorphous production companies, to strongly held ideas about the increase in workers' power to dictate terms and conditions. There are some initial indicators that discontent is being increasingly vocalised and recognised both online and in the department.

The developing nature of the situation makes it difficult to predict the chances of union success in altering long hours cultures, but this article makes the case for paying close

attention to workers' attitudes for future film and television worker research. Whilst acknowledging that not all workers will feel that they are in a position to affect change or have the capacity to speak publicly because of the aforementioned structural conditions that silence or disincline them, the data here suggests that workers can be understood as one of many components in the equation of change.

Change can take place in small-scale mediated negotiating, slow chipping away at old systems of 'how things are done', or change could come in the form of a visible event such as a result of industrial action or the threat of it. Or we could think of change in terms of isolated examples of good working practice where workers exercise their limited agency to affect conditions within their department. So far, industry organisations such as the BFI, employers and the role of broadcaster monitoring (e.g., Ofcom, Creative Diversity Network) have been the focus of industry and academic debate on who has the power and responsibility to bring about change (Newsinger and Eikhof, 2020; Eikhof, 2020; Wreyford et al., 2021). Rather than continuing to conceptualise change as something entirely brought from an external body, or prefacing change on more research, perhaps we as researchers should be re-centring the power of workers and their capacity to act collectively.

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