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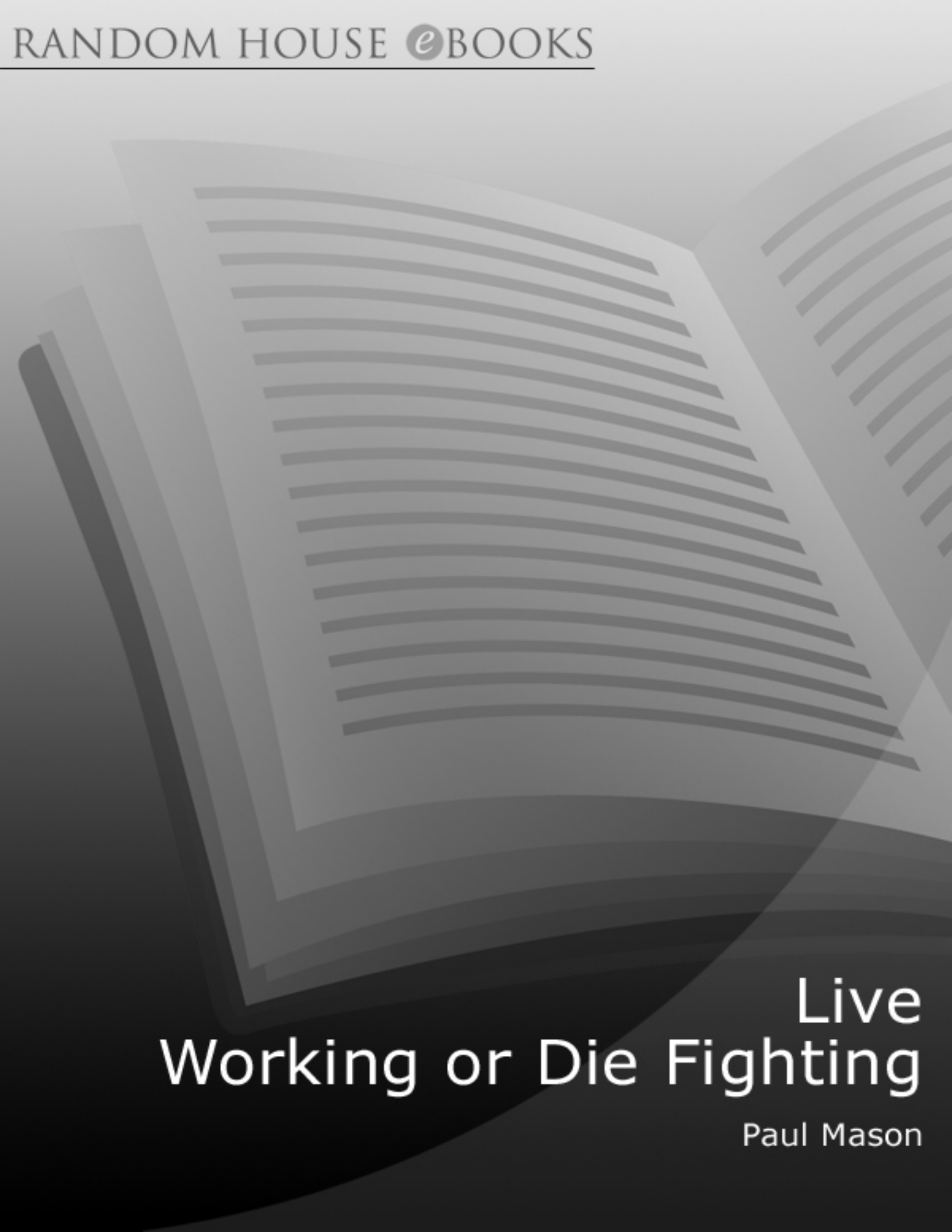

# Live Working or Die Fighting

Paul Mason

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# About the Author

Paul Mason was born in 1960 in Leigh, Greater Manchester. He is BBC *Newsnight*'s business and industry correspondent. He won the 2003 Wincott Award for business journalism and was named Workworld Broadcast Journalist of the year in 2004. He lives in London.

For
John Mason (1927–1986)

PAUL MASON

# Live Working or Die Fighting

## How the Working Class Went Global

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

# Introduction

A man is scrambling in the dark across the pits and trenches of a massive building site. He is a foreman on the Liverpool docks, a man reputed for toughness and clean living. It is a warm night in the summer of 1904. The next day, on this spot the city's business elite will watch the King lay the foundation stone of the new Anglican cathedral; history will record the pomp of the ceremony in deferential detail. But it will not record what happens tonight.

Guided by a worker from the site, the docker digs a hole and buries a tin time capsule just below where the foundation stone will be laid. It contains articles from obscure labour newspapers and a message written in the flowery script and language of the self-taught working man. It says:

> To the Finders, Hail! We the wage slaves employed on the erection of this cathedral, to be dedicated to the worship of the unemployed Jewish carpenter, hail ye! Within a stone's throw from here, human beings are housed in slums not fit for swine. This message, written on trust-produced paper with trust-produced ink, is to tell ye how we today are at the mercy of trusts …[1]

Trusts were then what global corporations are today: powerful companies with a finger in every pie, held

responsible for all the poverty in the world by some, all the progress in the world by others. Slums we still have – one billion people live in them – and though they are more than a stone's throw from the rich cities of Europe and America, thanks to blogs, television and mobile phones the contrast between squalor and wealth is just as obvious to us as it was then.

Then, as now, there was an anti-corporate movement, and it was global. Its agitators spread their message on the street corners of slum districts, in the steerage cabins of migrant ships. It boycotted unethical goods, got its head broken on demonstrations and lived an alternative lifestyle that shocked mainstream society. This was the labour movement in the years before fists replaced flowers as its main symbols. Its true history has been buried as deep as that Liverpool docker's time capsule; its narratives, heroes and epics have been lost or, worse, simplified beyond meaning.

That history needs to be rediscovered because two sets of people stand in dire need of knowing more about it: first, the activists who have flooded the streets in Seattle, Genoa and beyond to protest against globalisation; second, the workers in the new factories, mines and waterfronts created by globalisation in the developing world, whose attempts to build a labour movement are at an early stage. They need to know what happened to the original labour movement during its long upward sweep not in order to relive it or piously to 'learn lessons' from it. They need to know, quite simply, that what they are doing has been done before, where it can lead and what patterns of revolt, reaction and reform look like when you view them over decades. Above all they need to know that the movement was once a vital force: a counterculture in which people lived their lives and the main source of education for men and women condemned to live short, bleak lives and dream of impossible futures.

I have written this book to tell that story. There is no attempt to be comprehensive; I have just picked out some of the major events that happened during the great advance of the first hundred years, followed by the crisis and catastrophe of the inter-war period.

Because the first 150 years of industrial capitalism took place in countries that were mainly white and produced trade unions that were largely male, this is a story mainly about white, male workers in Europe, America and the Far East. Because it relies on memoirs, oral histories and the work of academics who themselves rely on these sources, I have concentrated on countries where such sources are accessible and trustworthy. I have not given any more than a rough sketch of the situation in mainstream politics in each chapter; if you want to know more about Louis-Napoleon, Franklin Delano Roosevelt or Giovanni Giolitti, just type them into Google and press 'Enter'.

For a long time a book like this seemed to me unnecessary. When there were strong labour movements in Europe, America and the Pacific based in stable communities with an oral tradition, everybody knew the basic history. The workers I grew up with in an English coal and cotton town seemed to have been – as George Orwell wrote – 'born knowing what I had learned, out of books and slowly'. Nobody needed a book that explained the basics then. And in any case, all the best stories had been told, I thought.

I was wrong. Leigh, the town where I grew up, was not so different in the 1960s from how it was when my grandfather went down the pit in 1913: it was a world of white manual workers, devout Sunday marchers for Catholicism and Methodism, brass bands, rugby and the annual Miners' Gala. It is totally different now: twenty years of globalisation have shorn away most of what was permanent and certain. The miners' union was destroyed, manufacturing has moved to China, and if you look for the

union activists now you will find them mainly in education and local government. The labour market in which workers from Leigh compete starts at their doorsteps and ends at a bus station in Bangalore or a slum in Shenzhen.

A culture that took 200 years to build was torn apart in twenty. There is no point mourning that but it means the new working class of what campaigners call the ‘global south’ is being born unconscious of the stories of the past. And the anti-globalisation movement is not in any shape to supply the narratives – its oldest legend tells of a day in Seattle in November 1999.

Today, in place of a static local workforce working in the factories and drinking in the pubs their grandfathers worked and drank in, a truly global working class is being created. This is happening for a number of reasons. First, because since the collapse of communism the whole world’s workforce has shared the experience of working in a market economy: there is no longer an ‘iron curtain’ dividing workers into two completely different ways of living. Second, practice in the workplace is becoming standardised across the globe: the quality circle in a UK car factory discusses the same things as one in China; the work involved in making a Big Mac is the same in Sheffield and Shanghai, even if the wages and human rights are different. Third, with the emergence of global union federations there is the beginning of cross-border collective bargaining. Finally, by pitting the low-waged workforce of the developing world against the high-waged workers of Europe, America and Japan, globalisation has forced labour organisations to think internationally, even if they are slow to act internationally.

Objectively, the global working class exists. Subjectively – in the minds of the people on the factory floor – things are more complicated. In the global south, millions of peasants and shanty dwellers are being sucked into the exhilarating and brutal world of wages, overtime, company dormitories

and consumer capitalism. They are going through what the first generation of factory workers went through, but in an economy where information flows like quicksilver and consumer culture is global.

In trying to document the lives of this new global workforce I've met Chinese workers crippled because of inadequate safety standards; I've met Bolivian miners working in conditions worse than my grandfather's generation would have tolerated; I've met Indian garment workers who recognise the labels on the sportswear they are finishing but have no idea who their employer is, or when they're getting paid.

This book sets their stories alongside those of previous generations. The aim is not to draw crude parallels or preach about 'lessons of the struggle' but to show how scrappy and unresolved history is when you are living it in the first draft, and how you have to stand back to make sense of it. Right now in London there are Somali, Kurdish and Brazilian migrant cleaners trying to form unions inside the headquarters of investment banks, but they are still having trouble with the city's geography, let alone its history. They have no idea that the Irish and Jewish migrants who lived in the same streets 100 years ago had to fight the same kind of battle, or how they won. And why should they? Amid relentless change we can no longer rely on word of mouth, family, tradition and community to keep working class history alive.

As a journalist I've learned that the story you uncover when you listen to people is always more interesting than the one you thought you were after. If you do this with workers' history you get startling results. You find that Lancashire cotton workers at Peterloo, the first ever industrial workforce, discovered nearly every type of organisation and tactic seen during the next 200 years. You learn that the 'doomed' silk weavers of Lyon were not fighting a hopeless battle against mechanisation but

defending a highly efficient network economy. You find that the revolutionaries of the Paris Commune were really just boring union officials, opposed to strikes. You realise that the Jewish Bund – an organisation that disappears from official Marxist history after 1903 – went on to create one of the most highly developed working class cultures ever seen.

If there is a recurrent theme amid all this, it is control. Politically, the labour movement has debated strategy in terms of reform versus revolution. Practically, to the frustration of advocates of both approaches, workers have been prepared to go beyond reform but settle for less than revolution. Once you understand the deep desire for control within the workplace and for the creation of parallel communities within society, you understand the dynamics, and the limits, of the rebellions narrated here. The great discovery of the grass-roots worker activists was this: that 'power' was just as big a question as 'class'. It was a woman with a rifle from the slums of Montmartre who warned the world 140 years ago:

> There are millions of us who don't give a damn for any authority because we have seen how little the many-edged tool of power accomplishes. We have watched throats cut to gain it. It is supposed to be as precious as the jade axe that travels from island to island in Oceania. No, power monopolised is evil … [2]

I decided to end the historical part of this book at the year 1943, with half the workers of the world living under fascist dictatorships, the other half in alliance with American capitalism or Stalinist communism. By then, many of the individuals Orwell described as the 'flower of the working class' had been cut down, if not by fascism then by Stalin's secret police or as casualties of war. When the international labour movement revived after 1945 it

was a different creature. For the next four decades trade unions and socialist parties commanded a place at the decision-making tables of the Western democracies, but much of the gut anarchism and self-taught romanticism you will meet among the people featured in this book was gone.

To me the experience of labour's great upward surge, when the ideologies of republicanism, socialism and anarchism jostled amicably across the tables of working class bars, seems more relevant to the present than the experience of 1945–89. But there is no law of history that says the new workers' organisations in the global south have to repeat the long process of organisation and self-education we saw in the 19th century. They may fast-forward, and create the most developed, advanced and modern forms of organisation from scratch. They may also fail.

If a new global labour movement does emerge then the stories in this book will turn out to be the prehistory of the working class. The white male rebels gazing out from 100-year-old photographs will be seen as precursors of a much bigger, multi-ethnic movement centred on India, China and Latin America which communicates by text message in real time and in which women are the majority. But that is not inevitable. It is possible that, among the world's new workforce, the will to organise will prove weaker than the combined strength of market forces, autocratic governments and the dream of getting rich; writing this book has reinforced my view that there is no such thing as the 'unvanquishable number' Shelley fantasised about in his famous poem on Peterloo. If the new labour movement fails to thrive and the old one continues to decline, the least we can do is preserve the story of those who built the original.

Like the man who buried that message on a summer night in 1904. At the time all he'd done was sell socialist newspapers, get himself arrested for street corner

speeches and jump ship in Montevideo in pursuit of teenage kicks. He thought at the time that trade unionism was a ‘played out economic fallacy’. But he would go on to organise the strike that for the first time bridged Belfast’s religious divide; he would paralyse Dublin at the height of Ireland’s biggest ever labour conflict. He would be sentenced to ten years in New York’s Sing Sing prison for ‘criminal anarchy’. He would warn his judges that ‘the ways of the broad highways have been my ways and I have never been encompassed by walls’. His name was Jim Larkin. The labour movement turned him from a studious, romantic nobody into a figure that could demand a hearing from the leaders of powerful nations.

Today the arms of his statue spread out above the main thoroughfare of Dublin, its fingers forked like black lightning. His story is part of a national legend and needs no retelling. But the stories of thousands like him have been lost. Most of them were driven by the same simple sentiments scribbled into the note he buried. It ends:

> In your own day you will, thanks to the efforts of past and present agitators for economic freedom, own the trusts. Yours will indeed, compared to ours of today, be a happier existence. See to it, therefore, that ye too work for the betterment of all, and so justify your existence by leaving the world a better place for your having lived in it.

That message still lies where it was buried. It was addressed to the kids in combat trousers protesting outside a Nike store in Seattle, to the rake-thin teenagers sewing trainers in Cambodian sweatshops and to migrant cleaners resting their exhausted heads against bus windows as dawn breaks in London. Few of us can imagine what that message cost to write, in terms of hardship and self-sacrifice. Or the joy experienced on those rare days when

the downtrodden people of the world were allowed to stand up and breathe free.

# 1. Rise like lions

The Peterloo Massacre, Manchester, 1819

> Rise like lions after slumber
> In unvanquishable number!
> Shake your chains to earth, like dew
> Which in sleep had fall'n on you:
> Ye are many – they are few
>
> Percy Bysshe Shelley
> 'The Masque of Anarchy', 1819

## Shenzhen, China, 2003

When they came into the room the guys were sheepish and so was I; every one of them was missing a limb. I had dragged them across the city to meet me in this tatty rooming house because, for a Western journalist, going to Longgang – an industrial suburb of Shenzhen – is only possible with a government minder. And they did not want to meet one.

> 'I was loading cotton into the front of a mattress machine when somebody at the back switched the power on,' Cao Xian-yi tells me, indicating the stump of his arm to complete the story. 'There were only twelve skilled workers left – all the rest were new recruits. Some of them knew nothing about the job.'

Yuan Yun-zu was making electronic circuits when the machine he was using fell on him. His left hand is missing. With compensation and physiotherapy he might get another job but, like many of the workers injured in China's small private factories, there was no insurance to cover his accident. He is, like the others, a migrant – one man on the road along with 150 million others. He could go back to his village, but he doesn't want to:

> It's hard enough for a healthy person to find a job; how do you think it is for a disabled person? In the countryside I couldn't do farm work any more, and if you open a shop in the countryside, it's very difficult to survive, as the economy is terrible there.

Li Qi-bing had been working for 12 hours without a break, making plastic flowers, when a machine sliced his leg off below the knee:

> The factory hadn't bought insurance for us. We took the factory to the law courts, but they refused to hear the case. We had to go to the Labour Bureau for arbitration, but the Labour Bureau refused to hear us. We were kicked around all over the place, like a football. Nobody looked after us.

They were all young, they were all migrants, they were all sacked. They are part of the new Chinese workforce which has been scraped together so quickly and cheaply that, in the space of 20 years, it has changed the world. Yet they have so few rights and so little freedom of expression that the world has hardly heard from them.

Disabled sweatshop workers from Longgang turned to Zhou Li-tai for help. In the absence of trade unions or a factory inspectorate with teeth, this compensation lawyer was on a one-man mission to clean up the city. But in 2002

the authorities revoked Zhou's licence. He had launched a legal action on behalf of women who objected to compulsory body searches at the factory gate. Zhou, a self-taught former worker, is blunt about the causes of Longgang's high industrial injury rate:

> First, old equipment. Second, the workers don't get training. Third, they're exhausted because of long overtime. Finally, lack of government regulation. In the labour market, supply is greater than demand. It's much easier to attract workers here than it is to attract employers. The local government is keen to develop the local economy. As long as they keep the employers happy and they continue to invest, they don't care about the benefits of the workers at all.

In any other developed industrial economy workers would have the right to do something about this situation: they would be able to negotiate, collectively or individually, to strengthen their position. But only 10 per cent of Chinese migrant workers have ever seen a contract of employment. And, says Zhou, the official trade unions are part of the state:

> The Chinese workers' union behaves like a part of the government, not a union. The union's money comes partly from government, partly from the employers. On top of that, a union rep is still an employee of the company and if he does something wrong he'll be sacked.

Twelve years in jail is the standard punishment for trying to form a free trade union. For workers, basic rights like accident insurance or being able to refuse overtime become scarcer the further you go from the big, shiny factories and the nearer you get to the backstreet

sweatshops. And the political rights that would allow them to voice their thoughts about all this are non-existent. Democracy has been off the agenda since the massacre in Tiananmen Square in 1989, and the Chinese middle class has, for now, lost interest in pursuing it.

The scale of what is happening is hard to comprehend, even standing in the middle of a factory complex like BYD in Longgang. Only from the aerial photograph in reception can you see that BYD consists of five giant units, identical and virtually windowless. Between them are sparse concrete thoroughfares along which components and managers are ferried in customised golf buggies. The site is dotted with neat tropical shrubbery, washed in sunlight, and feels deserted. Then, on the stroke of noon, without any signal, 17,000 workers stop work and go to lunch.

They don't march in step like they do in the sweatshops – this is a showcase factory producing for Western brands whose managers have corporate social responsibility pledges to maintain. But they do march in line: single file from the blocks to the main queue, five deep once they've joined it. The queue builds to 100 metres long, then 200 metres – a wide ribbon of bright blue uniforms. Ninety per cent are women aged 17 to 24 ('Men fight too much,' says the company secretary). As the workers squeeze together towards the canteen barrier they hold up ID cards bearing barcodes and digital photos to be scanned.

They live in dormitories, two to a room, and eat three meals a day in the canteen; they are scanned in and out of every sector of the site. This system is not a hangover from communism but has been introduced during the last 20 years, as China's economy has been marketised. It is known in China as 'modern management'. As Lancashire factory owners found in the 1800s, a live-in workforce brings two advantages: it can be paid less and disciplined more easily. The average wage is the equivalent of £40 a month. 'Live like a family, play like a team, work like an

army' is the company motto, and since the vast majority would be lucky to take home £40 in a whole year back in their villages, that is what they do. In this single plant, they produce one in seven mobile phone batteries in the world.

Dong Zhen-zhen, an 18-year-old woman, has worked all morning in the 35-degree heat of the battery-charging plant. It's not production line work – the new recruits do that, with red-shirted supervisors peering over their shoulders. Dong, together with three or four hundred others, runs between racks of batteries being charged, checking them, stacking them, slotting in the next batch. She is from a village:

> I'm from Da Sheng in Anhui province. I knew Shenzhen was developing fast so I decided to come to Shenzhen. I've been to a lot of places before that. I worked in Changzhou and Zhouhai, in electrical factories. They weren't as good as this. This factory is better. I couldn't see any future in the other places: here it looks like a garden.

What Dong Zhen-zhen has lived through, ten million Chinese peasants every year will have to endure for the next thirty years simply for China to maintain its planned rate of economic growth. The push factor is rural poverty. You can feel the pull factor when you look beyond the uniform at Dong herself. Like everyone else she's wearing flip-flops, but like everyone else's they are personalised: hers have a Disney character printed on the blue plastic strap. She's wearing a plastic ring, the kind a Western child might get out of a bubblegum machine. Like others she's got a stick-on tattoo, a harmless gesture of revolt just high enough up her arm for the uniform to cover it. Hers is a butterfly; others prefer cartoon characters. If she goes out it will be on a Sunday afternoon rather than at night. There's a midnight curfew and a six-day working week. She

will, if she can afford it, wear Western-style shoes and clothes on her night off. There's a mass consumer market now, with prices targeted so that if she manages to save half a month's salary she can buy a pair of kitten heels meticulously ripped off from a Jimmy Choo design.

Becoming a worker means acquiring new ways of living – new disciplines and new freedoms. However tough it is for Dong Zhen-zhen she's the first woman in her family with money enough to worry about high-heeled shoes and, like the maimed men from the sweatshops, she sees this as a one-way journey.

But there is a kind of laid-back discontent in the air; you can feel it when you walk the streets of Gangxia West, a working class district in the heart of Shenzhen City. It has slums, street life and, if you peer down the backstreets, sweatshops. It is a concrete warren of ten-storey tenements where families live forty to a block, sometimes with the welding rods of an unofficial factory arcing and fusing on the floors above. The shocking thing is not the state of the buildings but the fact that they are rarely more than two metres apart. In most alleyways you can stretch your arms to touch both sides and the darkness makes it difficult to tell where the public space of street ends and the private space of families begins. If you are a stranger you probably don't want to find out.

In 1980 Gangxia was a field. Through its cracked sidewalks and collapsing drains it is easy to see what lies below – nothing but red earth. Gangxia's archeology consists of a single layer one foot deep, the Deng Xiaoping dynasty. Deng decreed that Shenzhen should be a rule-free frontier town for China's new capitalists. In less than three decades it has become the workshop of the world. Surrounded by glittering skyscrapers Gangxia already looks like a relic.

But in the evening it pulsates with life. Every available storefront is a shop – pots and pans, a hairdresser, a bar,

fruit and vegetables, children's writing books. Every available step becomes a seat for men and women in T-shirts, chatting, smoking or watching football on TV. There are few old people here; it is a district of teenagers and young adults. On any 50-metre stretch of the narrow main street there will be over a thousand people. You are never more than three or four feet away from somebody else.

In just 20 years Gangxia workers have built a community as tightly knit as in the fearsome slums that terrified English social reformers during the Industrial Revolution. The big difference is the total absence of a political public space. There is a chalk mural in Gangxia extolling the virtues of the People's Liberation Army, but nothing else. The public arena, such as it exists, is the mobile phone network or the Internet cafe, where each PC has a sticker on the monitor warning that 'subversion' is a crime.

But Gangxia people are street smart. In November 2001, when the authorities made a sweep, they confiscated ten television modulators which, they said, were being used to broadcast 'underground TV networks' with foreign content. Three years later the *Shenzhen Legal Daily* revealed that, yet again, unofficial TV networks had been busted in Gangxia, with 'more than 10,000 subscribers'.[1] And everywhere there is graffiti with the telephone numbers of people selling fake IDs: on the walls, on telephone boxes, on scaffolding. Migrants need a fake ID to get and keep a job in the city even though it is Chinese government policy that they should move off the land and get that job.

The new Chinese workforce has so far done everything its predecessors did except organise trade unions and fight for its political rights. Although there has been a wave of workplace protests, these have been mainly in the old factories of the Chinese rust belt, in the north, as market forces closed them down. Workers in the old state industries were once a privileged class with nurseries, hospitals and decent housing; the party and the state-run

factory looked after them from cradle to grave. As their lifestyle has died that of the export-sector workforce has been created. Young workers in places like Shenzhen have been too busy making their own future to worry about anybody else's troubles. But this is changing.

The DeCoro plant in Longgang is the biggest sofa factory in the world. In October 2005 the Italian bosses at DeCoro cut wages by 20 per cent. A ten-man delegation from the workforce complained and had their ID cards confiscated. A sit-down protest at the factory gate escalated into violence. Workers claim Italian managers punched and kicked them. Three were hospitalised. Then all 3,000 workers went on strike, shouting, 'Stop violence, restore justice, protect our human rights!'[2] They were dispersed by riot police. It was not the pay that angered them – skilled workers here can earn the equivalent of £70 a month – it was the attitude of foreign managers.

The Chinese industrial workforce is now the biggest in the world. In the years since Tiananmen Square management styles have been draconian in the knowledge that every act of resistance can be labelled as a 'threat to social order' and severely punished. Shenzhen's workers are to global capitalism what Manchester's workers were 200 years ago. What they do next will shape the century.

## Manchester 1819

It was 8 a.m. on Monday 16 August. The factories stood silent and in the weavers' cottages the looms were still. For Samuel Bamford, a weaver in the Manchester suburb of Middleton, the key thing was to avoid any excuse for violence. The employers feared the new industrial workforce and today would be the most decisive day in its history. At the appointed time

> not less than three thousand men formed a hollow square, with probably as many people around them, and, an impressive silence having been obtained, I reminded them that they were going to attend the most important meeting that had ever been held for Parliamentary Reform.[3]

They set off for Manchester marching in battalions of 100 and with a three-tier command structure. This was the opposite of a mob; it was a highly disciplined demonstration dressed in its Sunday best, with all but the elderly forbidden to carry traditional walking sticks.

> First were selected twelve of the most comely and decent-looking youths, who were placed in two rows of six each, with each a branch of laurel held presented in his hand, as a token of amity and peace; then followed the men of several districts in fives; then the band of music, an excellent one; then the colours: a blue one of silk, with inscriptions in golden letters, 'Unity and Strength', 'Liberty and Fraternity'; a green one of silk, with golden letters, 'Parliaments Annual', 'Suffrage Universal'; and betwixt them, on a staff, a handsome cap of crimson velvet with a tuft of laurel, and the cap tastefully braided, with the word '*Libertas*' in front.[4]

This was the cap of liberty – the international symbol of republicanism made popular by the French Revolution, which the British army had just spent the best part of 30 years in combat with. It was like unfurling the hammer and sickle in 1950s America.

Columns like this headed towards Manchester from sixteen of the surrounding towns while the city's workers left their factories and lined the streets. When Bamford's contingent ran into another, amid sun-dappled woodland,

‘We met – and a shout from ten thousand startled the echoes of the woods and dingles. Then all was quiet save the breath of music; and with intent seriousness we went on.’[5]

They were going to hear a man called Henry Hunt advocate ideas considered impossible at the time: votes for all, annual elections and the scrapping of import controls designed to keep food prices high. The movement’s leaders were middle class professionals but its members were overwhelmingly manual workers and their families, 100,000 of whom assembled around the wooden platform in St Peter’s Field, Manchester. Here a collection of lawyers and journalists sat in expectation of Hunt’s arrival. This was the biggest crowd Manchester had ever seen.

But it was not the first radical demonstration of that summer. In July the people of Birmingham had held a mass meeting that had sent waves of fear through the English aristocracy. They had not only called for the right to vote but actually taken a vote there and then. Most big cities were not recognised on the voting maps but Birmingham had elected a ‘legislative attorney’ – an unofficial Member of Parliament for a seat that did not yet exist. It was a declaration of intent. Now the authorities feared Hunt was going to repeat this stunt in Manchester. They had banned one meeting, a week before, and stood ready to disperse this one if anybody mentioned voting.

It was hot. Hunt arrived at the platform and began to speak. He was a cult figure among the Manchester working class; at radical Sunday schools monitors wore lockets with his portrait around their necks instead of the traditional crucifix. But when Hunt started speaking, Samuel Bamford did something that working class activists will often do when called upon to listen to a long speech on a sweltering day. He headed for the pub.

> I proposed to an acquaintance that, as the speeches and resolutions were not likely to contain anything new to us, and as we could see them in the papers, we should retire awhile and get some refreshment, of which I stood much in need, being not in very robust health. He assented, and we had got to nearly the outside of the crowd, when a noise and strange murmur arose towards the church. Some persons said it was the Blackburn people coming, and I stood on tiptoe and looked in the direction whence the noise proceeded, and saw a party of cavalry in blue and white uniform come trotting, sword in hand.[6]

This was the Manchester Yeomanry, a civilian posse recruited for the purposes of putting down working class unrest. In preparation for action their sabres had been sharpened, as had their courage; they had spent the morning in a bar. Thanks to a contemporary radical newspaper we know the name and occupation of every one of the 101 men who took part in the charge. The most common job title is publican; there were thirteen bar owners in the saddle that day. The regiment's eleven mill owners and seven butchers also stand out.[7] It was the city's business mafia on horseback. Hunt told the crowd to give them three ironic cheers. The terrified magistrates, observing from the window of a nearby house, interpreted this as 'most marked defiance'. The horsemen pushed through the crowd. The magistrates marched forward through a tunnel made by two lines of constables. They arrested Hunt and several others on the platform, all of whom went quietly.

Now the Yeomanry, whose horsemanship was suffering under the influence of drink, got into trouble. Surrounded by the crowd, punches, bricks and sticks were thrown. The magistrates decided the Yeomanry were 'completely defeated' and called for the regular troops who had been

put on standby in the backstreets. The 15th Hussars, veterans of Waterloo, formed up and charged. The charge, wrote one officer who took part

> swept this mingled mass of human beings before it; people, yeomen and constables, in their confused attempts to escape, ran one over the other; so that by the time we had arrived at the end of the field the fugitives were literally piled up to a considerable elevation above the level of the ground.[8]

Through the cloud of dust, onlookers saw sabres rising and falling. Samuel Bamford was on the receiving end:

> For a moment the crowd held back as in a pause; then was a rush, heavy and resistless as a headlong sea; and a sound like low thunder, with screams, prayers and imprecations from the crowd-moiled, and sabre-doomed, who could not escape.[9]

Within ten minutes the field was clear. Bamford remembered that the 'sun looked down through a sultry and motionless air'.

> Several mounds of human beings still remained where they had fallen, crushed down, and smothered. Some of these still groaning, others with staring eyes, were gasping for breath, and others would never breathe more. All was silent save those low sounds, and the occasional snorting and pawing of steeds.[10]

The streets of Manchester were filled with wailing people running in the direction of the towns they had come from, 'their faces pale as death and some with blood trickling down their cheeks'.[11]

The newspapers named it the 'Peterloo Massacre' in a satirical reference to the presence of Waterloo troops. By

modern standards it was unspectacular: eleven killed, 400 injured including 140 by sabre cuts. The news arrived in London two days later and by 5 September had reached the man who would immortalise the event in English literature.

As a place of self-imposed political exile, the Italian port of Livorno was not a bad choice for Percy Bysshe Shelley. He had set himself up on a terrace from where he could hear peasants singing and a water-wheel creaking, while, at night, fireflies glowed. It was in this romantic setting that he opened a package of London newspapers sent by express post in which Peterloo and its political aftermath were described. With a 'torrent of indignation … boiling in my veins' Shelley began writing *The Masque of Anarchy*, which he completed in 12 days and posted immediately to his publisher.

It has been described as 'the greatest poem of political protest ever written in English'.[12] Its final verse, which begins 'Rise like lions after slumber', has entered the culture of the British labour movement. When the firefighters went on strike against the Labour government in 2003, 'Rise Like Lions' was the slogan they printed on their union T-shirts. But the victims of Peterloo did not have the chance to hear Shelley's poem. Amid a welter of prosecutions that saw both Hunt and Bamford jailed, most radical publications closed and mass meetings banned, Shelley's publisher deemed it unwise for the poem to see the light of day; it did not appear until 1832.

For all its greatness, *The Masque of Anarchy* has one major flaw: Shelley knew nothing about the working class movement that had organised the Peterloo demonstration. In Shelley's heart-rending descriptions of its economic misery the working class appears as a naive mass, noble in poverty but too poor to think; demoralised by the scale of the injustice they faced, incapable of going beyond passive resistance without exchanging 'blood for blood and wrong

for wrong’. Shelley’s view of the working class dictated the course of action he advocated:

> And if then the tyrants dare
> Let them ride among you there,
> Slash, and stab, and maim, and hew,—
> What they like, that let them do.
> With folded arms and steady eyes,
> And little fear, and less surprise,
> Look upon them as they slay
> Till their rage has died away.[13]

This was the same strategy of passive resistance being advocated by Hunt and Bamford in the aftermath of the massacre. But it was being rejected as early as the night of the 16 August itself.

In New Cross, a slum area of central Manchester, the Hussars formed a ‘strong night picket’ to maintain order:

> As soon as it had taken up position a mob assembled about it, which increased as the darkness came on; stones were thrown at the soldiers, and the Hussars many times cleared the ground by driving the mob up the streets leading from the New Cross. But these attempts to get rid of the annoyance were only successful for the moment, for the people got through the houses or narrow passages, from one street to another, and the troops were again attacked, and many men and horses were struck with stones.[14]

After ninety minutes of this the troops opened fire. An infantry company fired three volleys, leaving four rioters seriously wounded. By the next day Manchester was a city under military occupation: ‘The streets were patrolled by military, police and special constables; the shops were

closed and silent; the warehouses were shut up and padlocked; the Exchange was deserted; the artillery was ready.'[15]

Despite this there were riots again on 17 August, not just in the city slums but in the nearby towns of Stockport and Macclesfield, where one policeman was killed. On 19 August there were clashes in New Cross and 'on the 20th the mob of this locality fought a pitched battle with the cavalry'.[16]

Bamford, an opponent of physical force, described the atmosphere in industrial suburbs in the days following Peterloo:

> I found when I got home, that there had been general ferment in the town. Many of the young men had been preparing arms and seeking out articles to convert into such. Some had been grinding scythes, others old hatchets, others screw-drivers, rusty swords, pikels and mop nails; anything which could be made to cut or stab was pronounced fit for service. But no plan was defined – nothing was arranged – and the arms were afterwards reserved for any event that might occur.[17]

The meekness and intended pacifism of the working class at Peterloo were central to Bamford's legal defence when he was tried for sedition and became accepted facts among socialists in the mid-century, who saw the Peterloo generation as political beginners, naively attached to their middle class leaders. Shelley's poem did not help, surviving while the press accounts faded and perpetuating the idea that the movement assembled at St Peter's Field was simply a vast crowd of disorganised workers.

Closer examination of the sources reveals a different truth: in the months leading to Peterloo the workers of the Lancashire cotton industry built a network of organisations

so sophisticated that they foreshadowed anything achieved by the labour movement in the next 200 years.

**‘Human nature in its worst state …’:** So what was new about the men and women at Peterloo? The answer is more complex than the fact that they earned wages or operated machinery. There were in fact two kinds of worker present: weavers like Bamford who did piecework at home on hand-powered machinery, and spinners who worked in factories. The key to understanding the terror they inspired among the upper classes is the alliance they formed. The spinners were the first modern ‘proletariat’; the weavers an older working class elite whose privileged lifestyle was in decline. Until they jointly adopted democracy as their slogan, it had seemed like a lost cause to the middle class lawyers and journalists who dreamed of it.

The cotton spinners of 1819 were the first workers to experience the impact of a system in which they did not control the speed and process of production. Once cotton spinning was mechanised it moved from the home to the factory, and men replaced women as the core of the spinning workforce. As the machines got bigger, the skill of tending them became more complex and more highly paid. The final brick in the wall was the replacement of water power by steam, which allowed factories to increase in size and to be built in towns instead of next to village streams. By 1800 a core skilled workforce of adult male spinners existed, supplemented mainly by children recruited from orphanages, who were ‘indentured’ to factory owners and made to live in dormitories.

Coercion, in many forms, was the defining feature of the new industrial work. Labourers had been pushed off the countryside by laws abolishing common land. Poverty had been criminalised. The new poor were compelled by poverty to put their children into orphanages, from which work in a factory in Lancashire seemed like liberation.