

**THE WAREHOUSE REGIME IN MOTION: AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF RACE, EXPLOITATION AND RESISTANCE IN THE SHEFFIELD CITY REGION**

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**Declaration**

I, Joe Morris, confirm that the Thesis is my own work. I am aware of the University’s Guidance on the Use of Unfair Means ([www.sheffield.ac.uk/ssid/unfair-means](http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/ssid/unfair-means)). This work has not been previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, university.

**Acknowledgments**

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This thesis is for the pickers, packers, and push tray sorters—the hands that move the world unseen.

**Abstract**

This thesis contributes to an understanding of logistics political economy. It combines the circuit of capital, a multiscalar regime and the labour process with an embodied covert ethnographic exploration of two warehouses in the Sheffield City Region. Adopting a racial capitalism lens, it focuses on the UK's border regime and the Sheffield City Region's local labour market to develop an understanding of exploitation and resistance in two warehouses.

The research outlines the reproduction of a racialised reserve army in the Sheffield City Region. It shows that the combination of state immigration policy and local labour market conditions has disciplined and fractioned the working class in the Sheffield City Region. State immigration policy and labour market conditions have created two distinct micro-regions. The first is based in a former mining town, characterised by labour's reduced mobility; the other is in an inner-city neighbourhood characterised by a high degree of regional and international circulation. Management uses variation in workers' mobility power to create a racial division of labour, increase competition between migrant-refugee and non-migrant labour, and intensify production. However, these conditions also lead to resistance in the workplace, conceptualised as mobility-effort bargaining.

This thesis adds to the current body of literature by examining the interconnectedness of race and logistics political economy by arguing and illustrating how the state's disciplining of migrant, refugee and British warehouse workers provides capital with a flexible and disposable reserve army to establish their exploitation in production. Second, it restores labour to the centre of political economy by integrating the labour process and labour regime within the circuit of capital. The analysis of the two case studies of a third-party logistics firm and an international retailer with its own in-house logistics provides important insights into race and labour relations in the UK's logistics industry and its implications for labour and collective organisation.

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**List of Acronyms**

**3PL** Third Party Logistics

**AMT** Active Management Technology

**CEF** Coalfield Enterprise Fund

**CRT** Coalfield Regeneration Trust

**CTF** Coalfield Task Force

**DWP** Department for Work and Pensions

**EDI** Electronic Data Interchange

**EEA** European Economic Area

**FLT** Forklift Truck

**GPS** Global Positioning System

**HMO** Houses in Multiple Occupation

**IAC** Initial Accommodation Centre

**NAO** National Audit Office

**NCP** National Coalfield Programme

**NRPF** No Recourse to Public Funds

**ONS** Office for National Statistics

**PRP** Performance Related Pay

**RFID** Radio-frequency Identification

**SCC** Sheffield City Council

**SCR** Sheffield City Region

**SKU** Stock-keeping Unit

**SYMAAG** South Yorkshire Migration and Asylum Action Group

**SYMCA** South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority

**SYRLJ** South Yorkshire Refugee Law and Justice

**VTO** Voluntary Time-off

# CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Moved in Sheffield

In the early hours of December 15, 2021, nearly thirty subcontracted non-unionised immigrant, refugee and British 'Red Night Shift' workers demanding better pay and conditions refused to enter the private bus run by a labour recruitment firm that would take them to their place of work, - a warehouse located in the former industrial heartlands in the Sheffield City Region. British, Polish, Romanian, Syrian, Yemeni, Somali and Eritrean - White, Black and Roma workers - momentarily confronted the labour agency at the gates of a quiet industrial estate tucked close to a motorway junction. The young Polish agency officials, taken aback by what they saw unfolding, had no choice but to listen to the workers' demands, specifically that they would no longer accept wage penalties for late bus arrivals.

One of the workers - Adil, a thirty-year-old Yemeni Refugee, had worked in warehouses in the UK for the past three years. Labouring in different warehouses in the Sheffield City Region, recruited by different agencies, Adil had never managed to obtain a stable work contract with paid holiday and access to a pension plan, among other benefits that come with permanent work under the UK's labour regulations.

The recruitment agency officials received a call, and soon, an older British male agency official arrived, threatening the workers with being "removed from the list". "Think of your families this Christmas," he told the crowd as some began scaling the metal gates. Soon, Adil and the others entered the bus, and the journey to the warehouse began - though this time loudly discussing pay rates, comparing received bonuses, and translating this information for each other while playing catch with the pilfered thermometer gun[[1]](#footnote-1).

By the end of the 12-hour shift, the conversation between workers held in Arabic, English, and Slovak had evaporated. The earlier excitement of having gone toe-to-toe with the agency had dissipated. Adil and the others boarded the bus for the return leg to the motorway junction. They sat in silence, their bodies aching, eyes strained. Hoods up, the workers plugged into their phones and collapsed exhausted into their seats. The following morning, Adil and the others stood at the gates of the industrial estate. Under the pouring rain, Katrina – a young Polish agency official, declared that the bus journey (one hour each way) would now be paid in full.

The working life of Adil symbolises the plight of temporary subcontracted warehouse workers, whose ranks have swollen as the logistics industry becomes evermore 'flexible' and 'efficient'. The experiences of Adil and his colleagues provide a glimpse into the expansive global logistics industry. This sector is a vital artery in the modern global economy, deeply rooted in the art of moving goods across national boundaries, historically crafted for various purposes, including trade and, significantly, warfare (Cowen, 2014).

While many elements of contemporary logistics have a longstanding history, the last two to three decades have borne witness to a transformative "logistics revolution" that has reshaped the landscape of supply chain organisation on a global scale (Bonacich & Wilson, 2008: 22). Its scope now transcends mere cargo transportation and encompasses a spectrum of activities, including supply chain management, warehousing, and distribution. A defining feature of this is its seamless integration of technologies, strategic planning, and substantial physical infrastructure, all designed to ensure the uninterrupted flow of commodities[[2]](#footnote-2).

The logistics industry in the United Kingdom represents a substantial economic sector, making notable contributions to the nation's economic landscape and global trade. With an annual worth exceeding £139 billion (as of 2022), this sector contributed to 11% of the UK's non-financial business economy, where online retail increased on average from 19.2% in 2019 to 31.1% in 2022 (Logistics UK, 2022). It employs a substantial workforce, providing livelihoods to approximately 2.6 million people across the country, reflecting the vital role of this industry within the national labour market. Between 2015 and 2020, online retailers expanded their warehouse footprint by an increase of 614% (Savills, 2021).

The logistics industry encompasses a wide range of activities, including transportation management, warehousing, demand forecasting, and inventory control, all aimed at ensuring efficient production and distribution networks. A significant portion of these operations is handled by third-party logistics providers (3PLs), which contract with client firms to manage outsourced logistics services, allowing businesses to focus on core activities while optimising supply chain efficiency at the lowest possible cost (Gutelius, 2008; Coe, 2020).

This surge in the UK logistics industry developed amidst a perfect storm, driven by the impact of Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic. During the initial peak of the pandemic in April 2020, internet sales accounted for over 30% of total retail sales, marking a substantial 49% increase compared to the same period in 2019 (ONS, 2021a). Even as the pandemic relented, online retail sales continued to thrive, revealing a more permanent change in consumer habits (Wood, 2020).

Alongside the Pandemic, Brexit has significantly impacted the logistics industry in the United Kingdom. The new regulatory environment, shaped by the UK's withdrawal from the European Union (EU), has substantially influenced the movement of goods and labour supply (Alberti & Cutter, 2022). The disruption to supply chains caused by increased customs checks and paperwork has resulted in delays and bottlenecks at the borders, affecting the timely delivery of goods (Farrer, 2021). Moreover, the industry has grappled with new customs and trade regulations that have necessitated additional administrative and logistical efforts (Datta et al., 2020). Brexit has also introduced labour supply issues, as stricter immigration rules have made it more challenging for the logistics sector to source cheap labour from the EU (Logistics UK, 2022). In 2021, 38.8% of UK warehouse operatives were non-UK-born (ONS, 2021a).

In the UK, the logistics sector has traditionally grown within the 'Golden Triangle,' an area situated in the Midlands between Birmingham, Northampton, and Nottingham (Greenhalgh et al., 2021). This region is acknowledged as the primary cluster of Large Distribution Warehouses (LDWs), primarily attributed to the fact that 90% of the UK's population can be reached within four hours of travel time. Moreover, the area enjoys accessibility to strategic ports in the southeast of England (ONS, 2022). However, in the period spanning from 2010 to 2020, a new and previously undocumented concentration of LDW facilities, referred to as the "Northern Dumbbell," has emerged. This geographical area encompasses Leeds, Sheffield, Doncaster, Liverpool, and Manchester. Notably, during this time, the Northern Dumbbell has witnessed a substantial 44% increase in LDW floorspace (Greenhalgh et al., 2021).

The Sheffield-Doncaster corridor has been identified within the Northern Dumbbell as a strategic site for logistics developments. A report commissioned by the Sheffield City Council (SCC) recommends the delivery of an increase of 78.2 ha of LDW floorspace to balance supply-demand by 2039 (Iceni, 2022). It suggests the prevalence of brownfield sites, its strategic proximity to the motorway, freight connections to significant ports of entry (Felixstowe, Southampton and Folkstone), key domestic markets (Scotland's central belt) and access to local labour markets make the Sheffield City Region[[3]](#footnote-3) (from here; SCR) a key, multimodal hub location for logistics and distribution companies in the UK.

The SCR has been designated as a prominent site for logistics development, in line with broader national policies that aim to stimulate economic growth and promote industrial initiatives in the northern regions of the United Kingdom (Parliament. House of Commons, 2023). As part of this strategy, the government has introduced Enterprise Zones within the region, intended to attract investment and encourage economic development. These policies have heightened the SCR’s significance as a focal point for logistics operations.

In the SCR, more people are experiencing low wages and uncertain employment, which often includes being denied proper work rights and justice (Thomas et al., 2019). As of 2019, the SCR holds the title of the 'low pay capital of the UK,' (Thomas, et al, 2019). This designation is based on having the highest percentage of workers receiving low pay compared to other City Regions. The level of take-home wages is significantly influenced by the increasingly prevalent trend of 'casualised' employment. Since the 2008 economic crisis, Sheffield has seen a notable increase in precarious work, with above-average records of those in part-time employment, short-hour positions (working below 10 hours a week), and zero-hours contracts (ZHCs) (Thomas et al., 2019).

At the same time, precarity tends to be concentrated within groups that already encounter disadvantages in the labour market. The SCR is marked by a significant colour line that runs through the city, dividing the East from the West. In the West, the residential part of the city, which overlooks the East from a natural Plateau, gently folds into the countryside; in the East, the warehouses disrupt the Forge Valley as far as Rotherham. The East of Sheffield represents the 20% most deprived in the country, of which 73% of residents are from Minority ethnic backgrounds (Sheffield City Council, 2022a). Life expectancy is 8.8 years lower for men and 11.4 years lower for women in the East of Sheffield compared with the West (Sheffield City Council, 2022b).

The two firms analysed in this thesis are located in the SCR. FrictionCo is a large international retailer with an in-house logistics unit tied to the overarching retail operation with a partly unionised workforce and a diversified approach to outsourcing labour recruitment. The warehouse, operational since 2005, is situated in a former mining village known as 'Pit-Town,' positioned between Nottingham and Sheffield. Following the departure of much of the younger population as a result of the shutdown of the nearby mines, the town is currently inhabited by migrant workers from Eastern Europe. The workers of FrictionCo are primarily White Eastern European and White British workers residing in Pit-Town, as well as Black Refugee, Roma and White British workers commuting from Sheffield and Nottingham.

SeamlessCo, a third-party logistics (3PL) firm, represents an external service provider specialising in the management and execution of warehousing and distribution functions for a single Global Fashion Retailer (GloboFashionCo). It has a partly unionised workforce and an exclusive partnership with a single employment agency (RecruitNow). The warehouse is owned by a Logistics Real Estate firm (WareCore) and has been leased to SeamlessCo since 2018. The warehouse is located on brownfield land on the site of a former steelworks on the eastern edge of Sheffield City between Sheffield and Rotherham. The workers of SeamlessCo are primarily White Eastern-European, Black Refugee, Roma and British-Asian second and third generation. The workforce primarily lives in the neighbouring communities adjacent to the warehouse site – 'Forge Valley'.

## 1.2 The Approach

The experiences of workers such as Adil living and working in the warehousing sector in the SCR underscore the pivotal role of labour within this industry. Adil and his colleagues can be considered members of the new class fraction being consolidated into capital-intensive, large warehouses with vulnerable supply chains (Moody, 2017). This study aims to fill a significant gap in existing research by highlighting the lack of attention to the racial dynamics affecting this specific class fraction in the UK and within the SCR. This thesis is used to explore the experience of warehouse workers, using this experience as a gateway to understand the racialised local, national and global dynamics characterising the logistics industry and to explore the way processes of racialisation shape the employment relation in the warehouse labour process.

While scholars have studied migrant and ethnic minority warehouse workers within the US (Struna, 2015; De Lara, 2018), Italy (Benvegnu, 2018), France (Barbier et al., 2019) and Germany (Vgontzas, 2022; Kassem, 2023), this thesis focuses on hitherto unexplored racial forces in the UK that impact workers in production. It does this by acknowledging that most warehouse workers in the SCR are migrants and racialised minorities. It, therefore, considers race and immigration as a central analytic category of logistics capitalism, where up until now, the warehouse worker in the UK has been treated as a deraced and citizen subject, contrary to the empirical reality.

To explore the experience of warehouse work, theoretically, I argue that the warehouse offers a privileged vantage point from which to examine the combination of production and circulation in the self-expansion of capital. The warehouse serves as a privileged conduit in the transition between one part of the capitalist circuit and the next or as a cost cutter in linking the moments of production and exchange through distribution. As the source of this movement of value, it is labour power that serves as a commodity for employers.

However, current analyses of labour in UK warehousing, have failed to adequately address the central role of race and migrant labour power. That is, they have failed to take into account how disciplinary mechanisms shape warehouse workers labour power so that it becomes a desirable commodity for the UK’s logistics industry. For this reason, and to overcome this limitation, the thesis draws on the theory of Racial Capitalism (Robinson, 2000) to account for race and the exploitation of migrant labour in logistics. The exploitation of racialised migrant labour is viewed as the foundation on which capitalist production is based (Robinson, 2000; Virdee, 2014; Melamed, 2015).

Moreover, the process of racialisation has emerged as a significant contributor to the subordination of migrants (De Genova, 2023). This means that the production of social differences, including racialised differences, becomes how profits are maximised and secured through the entangling of the objective of profit maximisation with the social production of difference (Lowe, 1996), which hierarchically organises labour power (Roediger, 2007). Accordingly, a satisfactory analysis of the experience of warehouse workers in production requires considering the processes that lead to the disciplining of migrant and racially minoritised warehouse workers in the UK, before they enter the workplace, and an understanding of how these processes shape the social organisation of the labour process.

Therefore, to understand how racial capitalism operates, I employ neo-Marxist analyses of the state and society (Gramsci, 1971; Poulantzas, 1978a). This perspective challenges the narrow economistic interpretations of the warehouse labour process. On the contrary, this framework is used to understand the social organisation of production as developed economically, politically, and socially, meaning warehouse workers in the same position in the labour process may have diverse power differentials (Fox-Hodess, 2020; Fox-Hodess & Rebolledo 2020). In line with this specific standpoint, this thesis examines how the labour process is co-constituted by the state and society and how these power differentials impact the social organisation of production.

This is developed at multiple scales of analysis using a labour regime framework. Investigating the experience of work thus relies on investigating the production apparatus regulating the labour process (Burawoy, 1985). Within the national context, the thesis borrows from the Institute of Race Relations (Goodfellow, 2019; De Noronha, 2020; Ali, 2022) to ethnographically investigate how the UK's border regime, particularly the policies associated with the Hostile Environment and the migrant-welfare nexus (Vickers, 2019) in post-Brexit Britain, impacts workers’ mobility power (Smith, 2006). Here, I suggest that as the UK's border regime has become more complex, internalised, and heavily enforced, more scholarly attention needs to be paid to its specific operation and consequences for labour power. My argument is that focusing on immigration and welfare policies in the UK provides an essential means of theorising the experience of labour in the warehouse in ways that centre the state.

Second, developing a nested scalar approach to the labour regime (Smith et al., 2018), my work draws upon the Labour Geography tradition (Castree et al., 2008; Rainnie et al., 2011; Newsome et al., 2015). Thus, within the context of the national border regime, local regimes are understood as an expression of class struggle in a particular place (Pattenden, 2018) related to the distinctiveness of local labour markets (Peck, 1989). This is explored ethnographically through the constituent elements of reproduction and consumption locales (Jonas, 1996), understood as household structure, access to welfare and housing, social connections, and the informal economy within the SCR. Therefore, the thesis draws upon developments within feminist political economy conceptualising the reproduction of labour power within labour regimes (Baglioni, 2021). Here I connect formations of uneven racialised social reproduction and the labour process (Schling, 2022) through forms of potential workers’ agency understood through the mobility-effort bargain (Smith, 2006).

Therefore, by introducing this racialised multiscalar regime apparatus to the workplace, my research also adds to the lineage of Labour Process Theory, stemming from Marx's foundational exploration of the capitalist labour process (1990). Labour Process Theory is used to investigate the everyday struggles and informal bargaining practices on the shop floor and the subtle forms of agency used to cope with the demands of the warehouse. This tradition has developed a more nuanced understanding of labour power, encompassing mobility and effort power, or the 'double indeterminacy of labour power' (Smith, 2006). Therefore, I respond to the call to recentre labour within political economy (Newsome et al., 2015). This is achieved by moving beyond the confines of the point of production by analysing how national immigration policy and the organisation of the local labour market impact the uneven processes of the reproduction of labour power, and in turn, how this impacts the employment relation.

This multiscalar framing shows how employment conditions and the effort bargain have been forged through structural pressures and co-constituted by the economy, state and society (Poulantzas,1978a). In other words, I argue that to understand the experience of labour in the warehouse, labour power should be conceptualised not merely in economic terms, but also as a result of the state and society (Fox-Hodess, 2020; Fox-Hodess & Rebolledo 2020). The result is an analysis of the production process, not confined to the labour process, but the apparatus of production which traverses the global, national and local scales. Examined through the limits of workers' reproduction and the conditioning of workers' mobility power, this apparatus represents the particular racialised labour regime of the warehouse and the associated struggles or the politics of production (Burawoy, 1985) within the warehouse.

Therefore, my research contributes to work on the "Global Racial Logistics Empire" (Alimahomed-Wilson, 2019). This means situating studies of Racial Capitalism within the racialised national and local labour regimes in which the warehouse is embedded. In other words, the racialisation of labour relies upon differing social, political, legal and historical configurations of racial devaluation across various national and local labour market contexts (Hall, 1978). Thus, the racial demographics of the global racial logistics empire is composed of multiple localised racial regimes and citizenship rights. This thesis, therefore, situates the study of the UK's racial logistics regime as a "historically specific racism" (Knox & Kumar, 2023: 39) within the broader global racial logistics empire.

In order to understand the material and social conditions of warehouse workers and their production politics, the warehouse must be conceptualised within the circuit of capital and subsequently as a racialised regime, a specific set of labour relations, which crosses both productive and reproductive realms and intersects global, national level, regional, and workplace levels (Mezzadri, 2017). This multiscalar framing shows how employment conditions and the mobility-effort bargain have been forged through structural pressures and co-constituted by the economy, state, and society. Based on this perspective, this thesis investigates how workers experience the material and social conditions of work.

The main argument of this thesis is that the social organisation of the labour process and racialised state policies are intertwined. The state’s disciplining of migrant and racial minorities in the labour market triggers and stimulates their exploitation in production. The application of this theoretical argument to warehouse workers in the SCR suggests that the state’s disciplining of labour through processes of bordering shapes the effort-bargain in production.

This research, therefore, makes several contributions. First, this research makes an original theoretical contribution by combining racial capitalism framework with labour regimes and labour process theory. This framework allows me to investigate the racialising processes behind exploitation in warehousing and the disciplining of migrant and racially minoritised warehouse workers in the SCR.

Second, this thesis significantly advances the understanding of race and labour in the UK, particularly within the SCR. While existing literature has provided valuable insights into the experiences of migrant and ethnic minority populations concerning state immigration and bordering practices, particularly following the UK’s ending of the freedom of movement (Goodfellow, 2019; De Noronha, 2020; Ali, 2022), there is a notable absence of detailed and systematic investigations into how the border regime influences the social organisation of production in the UK.

Third, there has been a lack of research on the employment of migrant workers specifically in the SCR. Therefore, this study not only contributes to the broader discourse on race, state and labour, but also addresses a crucial gap in the literature by focusing on the spatial context of the SCR. By investigating the labour process within this regional context, the research engages with how capital develops location-specific strategies that impact the dynamics of exploitation and resistance in the workplace (See Fuchs et al., 2022).

Fourth, this thesis contributes methodologically to the existing literature through the utilisation of an embodied ethnographic approach. This approach uses the extended case method (Burawoy, 1998) which involves participant observation, or employment as fieldwork. This approach enables the exploration of the labour process in the warehouse from the workers own perspectives, providing authentic insights into their daily experiences. It allows for unfiltered information, unaltering the behaviour of workers and management, to better equip an understanding of the lived experiences and challenges faced by workers on a day-to-day basis. This provides in-depth insights into the social dynamics, informal networks, and unspoken norms within the labour process.

By shedding light on the working conditions, challenges, and potential for agency among warehouse workers, this research aims to equip trade unions and labour organisers with valuable insights and data to inform their strategies and advocacy efforts. Understanding the experiences of migrant and local workers within the logistics sector in the SCR is crucial in addressing their unique needs, promoting workplace solidarity, and crafting policies and campaigns tailored to the specific issues they face.

Moreover, this research also offers an opportunity to bridge the divide between various segments of the workforce, fostering a sense of unity and collaboration among different groups of workers. By uncovering commonalities and disparities in their experiences and potential sources of power, this thesis provides a foundation upon which trade unions and organisations can build inclusive and effective strategies. In essence, this research's contribution is not merely theoretical but practical, aiming to enhance the capacity of trade unions to advocate for improved conditions and workers' rights within the SCR and, potentially, across similar labour markets. This potential for real-world impact on the political landscape highlights the pertinence and utility of the research within the broader context of labour rights and organising efforts. This thesis is, therefore, not only an attempt to theorise the warehouse in the SCR as a regime, but also to understand how warehouse workers – often with limited legal-political rights and entitlements can improve their working conditions.

## Summary of Chapters

This thesis comprises eight chapters. After this introductory section, Chapter Two establishes the theoretical framework that underpins this study. First, I examine trends in the political economy of logistics. Second, I review approaches to labour process theory, highlighting the tendency within this literature to undertheorise the role of race. By addressing this gap, the chapter lays the groundwork for a more comprehensive understanding of how racial dynamics intersect with the labour process, particularly through uneven forms of the reproduction of labour power.

Applying this theoretical framework, Chapter Three contextualises this framework. This involves an examination of the UK's border regime, understood in the context of the Hostile Environment. Additionally, the border regime is contextualised at the regional scale, focusing on the conditions in the Sheffield City Region, including racial segmentation in the local labour market. This analysis reveals a notable rise in the informalisation of labour in the Sheffield City Region, where migrants and ethnic minorities are disproportionately involved in atypical and insecure jobs (Thomas et al., 2019). Furthermore, racialisation processes associating migrant workers with these jobs have been bolstered by state policies and discourses that carry racial undertones (De Noronha,2020). These national and regional conditions have worked together to reduce workers' bargaining power in the SCR.

Chapter four gives an account of the methodology and methods utilised in this thesis. It outlines the operationalisation of the theoretical framework in the field, explains the reasoning behind the methodological choices, introduces the central and sub-research questions, reviews the techniques employed, and scrutinises the researcher's personal engagement in the field, along with the research ethics. The chapter proposes the use of an embodied workplace ethnography that captures the lived experiences of labour in the workplace, while extending this experiential perspective by connecting it to broader structural forces (Burawoy, 1998) allows for a novel understanding of the logistics industry. This methodological approach equips me with the tools to move between the intimate experiences of labour in the warehouse and the macro-level political economy, offering a more comprehensive understanding of the intricate interplay between the two.

The empirical narrative starts in Chapter Five. Following the theoretical perspective that this study adopts; chapter five looks at workers' conditions of reproduction. It looks at the experience of warehouse workers in the context of the border regime and local labour market conditions. I analyse the impact of household structures, social connections, and informal employment on workers mobility practices (Alberti, 2014). These mobility practices are outlined in terms of geographical mobility within the SCR (regional and international circulation), job mobility between formal warehouse and agency employment and between formal-informal work. Within this analysis, I introduce a spatial comparison between two micro-regions in the SCR, that of Pit-Town and Forge Valley. This chapter provides the basis for the two following workplace case studies, which follow workers' variable (racialised) mobility power into the workplace, to understand how this influences the effort bargain.

In chapters six and seven, I take the reader into the warehouses of FrictionCo and SeamlessCo, outlining their physical layout, organisational structure and work environment. I focus on the workers’ experience of work, highlighting the forms of effort-bargaining taking place between different categories of workers. The aim here is to correct the treatment of the connection between race and class concerning the lived experience within the labour process (Phizelackea, 1990). In exploring the forms of resistance on the shop floor, production politics is understood as a racial politics of the warehouse.

In Chapter eight, I summarise the main points of the thesis. I start by highlighting the key findings, then discuss the main contributions, reflect on the political implications, and suggest areas for future research. The theoretical contributions primarily result from applying racial capitalism and labour regime analysis, allowing the study to highlight tensions in the warehouse labour process – understood as a 'racial production politics' within a labour regime of mobility-effort bargaining. The empirical contributions include a detailed analysis of the reproduction of the logistics racial reserve army in the SCR (Chapter five), the dynamics of exploitation in the warehouse labour process, and the forms of mobility-effort bargaining of workers (chapters six and seven).

On one of my visits to Pit-town, I had a conversation with a migrant-welfare advice official as I distributed my advertisement for research interviews. Upon discovering that I had arrived from Sheffield for the purpose of studying, Top of Form

'FrictionCo' and 'forms of resistance' of its workers, he sceptically replied: 'Well, good luck to you, Joe, but I don’t see how you’ll get much data – it’s a “keep your head down, and mouth shut kinda place”. The evidence of my research contradicts this vision shared by some critical academics, the general public and some in the labour movement. It shows that migrants, refugees, and British workers in the warehouses of the SCR can and do resist. In fact, I suggest that the combined effects of the UK’s border regime and the local labour market have not fostered the total acquiescence of warehouse labour.

# CHAPTER 2: CONCEPTUALISING WAREHOUSE LABOUR

## 2.1 Introduction

In the introduction, I highlighted the constituent elements of Logistics Political Economy and the Labour process. I highlighted the concern to explore the racialisation of labour in production and reproduction, which embraces the role of the state, and workers’ agency. In essence, I am exploring the experience of warehouse work within the circuit of capital and within the social and political environment. This includes a consideration of the state and society as an essential element to understanding workplace relations in the warehouses of the Sheffield City Region.

Therefore, the focus of this chapter will be threefold. First, I will conceptualise the warehouse within the circuit of capital, using the analytical currency of value in motion; introduce the Logistics Revolution and changes in relations in the supply chain. Second, I will, review approaches to the warehouse labour process. Here, following capital: capital relations in the supply chain I will review capital: labour relations in terms of value capture mechanisms. In reviewing these developments, particularly related to the intensification of labour, I suggest that this literature relies on universalising tendencies that lead to overestimating the effective outcomes of value capture, occluding the contested nature of the employment relation. As a result, I will introduce literature that focuses on racial and gender differences within the warehouse labour process and forms of agency with particular reference to the mobility power of migrant labour.

Following these discussions, I will explore the possibility that these debates may have the effect of isolating the labour process to supply chain relations; second, they overlook workers' conditions of reproduction; and third, they underestimate workers' agency. The implication is that the warehouse has been conceptually disembedded, and when state and societal relations are taken into account, they have proved inadequate in relation to an understanding of workers' conditions of reproduction. This has resulted in an over-estimation of the universal application of both ‘control’ and ‘value capture’ in the labour process. The aim is to introduce an understanding of exploitation within the labour process that does not occlude the contested nature or the existing social relations within the workplace[[4]](#footnote-4).

This brings us to the third section; the focus is to provide an outline of the theoretical and conceptual tools that will allow me to frame my study of the labour process in the regional and national context while conscious of processes of racialisation, social reproduction and workers' agency. Therefore, I introduce the theoretical and conceptual tools that underpin my study of the labour process. I introduce and discuss racial capitalism (Robinson, 2000) to explore the role of race and migrant labour in capitalist relations of production (Miles & Phizacklea, 1980), in relation to the economic realm but also shaped by society and the state (Poulantzas, 1978a). This offers a way of understanding the labour power of racialised class fractions in the UK. To complement this, I introduce bordering processes that are prominent in class fractioning, often disarticulated from national boundaries (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013; De Genova, 2017). Fourth, Feminist literature is introduced to highlight how the reproduction of labour power is an uneven process through these social and political forms of racial differentiation (Mezzadri, 2020). Fifth, the concept of production politics is introduced, referring to struggles between workers and management over the effort-reward bargain (Burawoy, 1985), while locating the varying levels of accommodation within the wider social structure (Cunnison, 1996). Together, these concepts are integrated into a labour regime framework.

The labour regime conceptualises the warehouse labour process within the circuit of capital. The labour regime and circuit of capital represent different analytical levels that can be applied to the same process. For example, aspects of the labour regime may be analysed in its own right, however, it is possible to view the labour regime through the lens of the circuit of capital. This allows for a focus on the value of labour power of warehouse workers and how it is impacted by the state and society without losing sight of exploitation in the workplace and the movement of value across the circuit of capital. Therefore, the labour regime allows for an analysis that situates the warehouse at the intersection of society and state without relying on universal notions of control or value capture. Thus, insights from, racial capitalism, social reproduction, and labour process theory will help to delineate a particular configuration of labour regime of effort bargaining in the warehouses of the Sheffield City Region. This framework is used to structure the following chapter.

Using this framework, Chapter Three will develop this debate further by exploring the social and political environment in which the labour process is embedded. I will review literature focused on labour market institutions and state intervention in the UK and the Sheffield City Region. Here, I will emphasise the role played by state immigration and welfare policies, understood as the border regime (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013). This chapter will move the conceptualisation of the warehouse labour process beyond a framework that isolates the economy from the social and political arena in which it is embedded. The implication is that the wider social and political environment can impact the experience of labour at the point of production.

## 2.2 Trends in the Global Political Economy of Logistics

This section begins with an understanding of the role of the warehouse within the circuit of capital. Second, it shifts gears, to focus on the rise of logistics, exploring the constituent elements of the logistics revolution. Together this framing of logistics highlights the importance of linking circulation to production, revealing how speed, cost-efficiency, volume, reliability, and flexibility of commodity flows are fundamental dynamics structuring the logic of circulation. Third, I touch on economic analyses of logistics, highlighting the New Production Model (Lichtenstein, 2010) and Value capture (Coe et al., 2007). This literature conceptually places the labour process within the competitive pressures in the circuit of capital (laws of motion) and changing relations between Retailers and 3PLs (Newsome et al, 2015). Here, I suggest several limitations related to GVC and GCC analyses. The suggestion is that a conceptual over-concentration on the supply chain may disguise the role of the state and the existing social relations in production. Therefore, at the end of this chapter, I turn to a set of literatures that centre the state, and regional differentiation, through the labour regime. I suggest these literatures, while incorporating a multi-scalar framework, pay lip-service to labour process theory, and have yet to fully incorporate labour process dynamics in the wider political economy[[5]](#footnote-5).

### 2.2.1 The Valves of Circulation

This section examines the critical role of warehouses within the circuit of capital, focusing on how they facilitate the continuous movement of value and enable the realisation of surplus value essential to capitalist reproduction. Central to Marx's theory of the circuit of capital is the idea that capital is not static but constantly shifting between various forms, including the commodity, productive, and monetary forms. This perpetual transformation and flow of capital creates a dynamic process that drives the circulation of goods, people, and credit within the capitalist economy:

While capital must on one side strive to tear down every spatial barrier to intercourse, i.e., to exchange and conquer the whole earth for its market, it strives on the other side to annihilate this space with time, i.e., to reduce to a minimum the time spent in motion from one place to another. The more developed the capital, therefore, the more extensive the market over which it circulates, which forms the spatial orbit of its circulation, the more does it strive simultaneously for an even greater extension of the market and for greater annihilation of space by time. (Marx, 1990: 184)

At the heart of this process lies the concept of value in motion, where capital is constantly moving, transitioning from one form to another. This value in motion is not an abstract notion but is embodied in the circulation of goods and services. It is in this context that the warehouse assumes a pivotal role. The warehouse functions as a key protagonist in transferring actual and potential wealth, primarily because it offers a means to expedite the circulation of value:

Capital is value in motion, and any pause or even a slowdown in that motion for whatever reason means a loss of value, which may be resuscitated in part or in total only when the motion of capital is resumed. 'When capital takes on a particular form –as a production process, as a product waiting to be sole, as a commodity circulating in the hands of merchant capitalists, as money waiting to be transferred or reinvested – then capital is 'virtually devalued'. Capital lying 'at rest' in any of these states is variously termed 'negated', 'fallow', 'dormant' or fixated (Harvey, 2018: 73).

However, commodities stored are not static; they undergo the passage of time and are influenced by environmental factors. As Marx (1990: 216) notes, "commodities decay and are subject to the damaging influence of the elements." Consequently, additional investments of constant and variable capital become necessary to counteract the devaluation resulting from decay and damage. While these investments may not generate added value, they serve to preserve the existing value within the commodities. Marx (1990: 217) explains, "The use-value is not increased or raised; on the contrary, it declines. But its decline is restricted, and it itself is conserved."

In *Capital* Volume II, Marx explains that storage, along with other circulation costs, forms part of what he terms "the costs of circulation." These costs include transportation, storage, and pure circulation processes. While these activities do not directly produce surplus value in the way production does, they are crucial for realising surplus value. Commodities must pass through various stages of circulation to be transformed back into money (M-C-M')—the completion of the circuit of capital.

Storage becomes necessary during periods when commodities are in a "fallow" state, awaiting their final sale. While this storage does not directly contribute to the value of the commodity, it represents a necessary cost that impacts the surplus value generated during the production phase. Instead of enhancing the commodity's value, these storage costs deduct from the overall surplus value by incurring expenses without producing additional worth.

Despite this deduction, the circulation processes that involve storage are crucial for the realisation of surplus value. Without effective circulation, capital would remain trapped in its commodity form, unable to complete the circuit back to its monetary form. Therefore, warehouses play a vital role in facilitating this circulation. They enable commodities to transition efficiently from production to the market, which is essential for realising the surplus value embedded within them. While the costs associated with storage do not create value, they are necessary to enable the transformation of commodities into realised surplus value.

Nevertheless, over the last five decades, the logistics industry's growth has fundamentally altered the role and purpose of the warehouse. This transformation is particularly evident in sectors such as fast fashion, where consumer demands for 24-hour access to products and instant gratification have shifted the focus from traditional warehousing to contemporary distribution centres (Hammer & Plugor, 2019). These distribution centres are designed to maintain the continuous flow of goods, playing a vital role in the just-in-time production model[[6]](#footnote-6). They no longer primarily serve as storage facilities but function as hubs for sorting and redistributing commodities.

The push for advancements in logistics is primarily driven by the goal to enhance the velocity of circulation (Bonacich & Wilson, 2008; Cowen, 2014). Capital aims to minimise turnover time by swiftly moving goods to the market, employing marketing strategies to boost sales, or expediting the production process. The underlying idea is that if a company can produce, distribute, and sell products more efficiently than its competitors, it can recover its initial investment and generate surplus value more frequently. In recent decades, major retail chains, exemplified by Walmart's "Everyday low prices," capitalise on slim profit margins through rapid turnover, utilising their logistical expertise as a key strategy (Bonacich and Wilson, 2008: 52).

Therefore, blockages and obstructions in the metamorphoses of value – the delay in the sale of commodities for money – are inimical to the reproduction of capital (Alimahomed-Wilson & Ness, 2018). While smoothness may be the preferred texture of the world economy, the warehouse is a site of multiple forms of friction in the circuit of capital caused by wide-ranging factors, including strikes and labour disputes, poor infrastructure and bureaucratic 'red tape'. At the same time, the uninterrupted movement of capital and its seamless transfer from money to commodity form and back, are the guarantors of profitability. The warehouse has played a critical role in this process, acting as the valves which store and connect moments in the circulation of capital and realisation of value.

The continuous acceleration of material flows, later redefined by Harvey (1990: 420) as "time-space compression," is not a random historical occurrence but an inherent aspect of capitalist development. Although capitalist firms have consistently aimed to hasten the movement of their commodities, the logistics revolution marks a significant juncture in this tendency. It represents a point where the attempts for shorter turnover times by firms culminates in the restructuring of the entire circulatory system.

The warehouse – or distribution centre, therefore, serves as a privileged conduit in the transition between one part of the capitalist circuit and the next, or, put more prosaically, as a cost cutter in the process of linking up consumer markets and creating new systems of production and their associated labour regimes. The chief contribution of the warehouse to the reproduction of capitalism lies in their acceleration and cheapening of turnover time (Orenstein, 2019)[[7]](#footnote-7). The warehouse has moved from a point of storage where its function was to conserve value to a point of distribution, where its purpose became one of reducing turnover time or, to put it another way, where its function was increasing the velocity in which the movement of value passes through interconnected moments of production, distribution, consumption, and exchange. The warehouse is, therefore, essential to the realisation of value generated in the moment of production. Therefore, value in motion reveals the role of the warehouse as a site in preserving value as it flows through the circuit of capital.

The following section changes gear to trace the development of the logistics revolution, a fundamental advance in the physical movement of goods and, thus, capitalist circulation's overall speed and efficiency.

### 2.2.2 The Logistics Revolution

If we consider circulation as the lifeblood of capitalism, and view warehouses as its valves, the intricate relationship between value in motion in the circuit of capital and the physical movement of commodities becomes apparent. Warehousing, as a crucial component of logistics industries, serves as a facilitator for the transfer of commodities from sellers to buyers, thereby enabling the realisation of value within the circuit.

The logistics revolution represents a transformative shift in the handling, oversight, and organisation of commodities. It plays a pivotal role in strategically moving goods with specific objectives, encompassing trade and, notably, warfare (Cowen, 2014). The past two to three decades have witnessed a noteworthy "logistics revolution" in global supply chain organisation (Bonacich & Wilson, 2008). This section outlines the logistics industry’s role in revolutionising the movement of commodities, exploring its dynamics, the strategies employed to mitigate friction, and the consequential impact on labour. By understanding the interplay between the circuit of capital and the logistics revolution, we gain insight into how the acceleration of value at the distribution phase, through the circuit is intricately tied to the more efficient movement of goods facilitated by these logistical advancements.

The logistics revolution is closely tied to the economic crises that affected advanced capitalist nations in the 1970s. Scholars have emphasised the connection between the logistics revolution and the recessions of the 1970s, resulting in the global reorganisation of production systems (Allen, 1997; Cowen, 2014). Preceding these crises, there were notable disparities in the development levels of capitalist production and distribution methods. Considerable productivity gains in manufacturing had resulted from Taylorist scientific management and wartime production, while retailing, transportation, and warehousing practices lagged behind in efficiency and modernisation (Cowen, 2014). Managers, prompted by the inflationary recessions of the 1970s, sought efficiencies in physical distribution, considering it as "one of the last remaining frontiers for significant cost savings" (La Londe et al., 1976: 5). Therefore, the economic crises during the 1970s acted as a catalyst for the transformation of logistics practices, marking the inception of the logistics revolution.

Technological innovations have profoundly shaped the logistics revolution. Information technology, communication systems, and automation advancements have been pivotal in optimising logistical processes. Innovations like barcoding, GPS, Electronic Data Interchange (EDI), and Warehouse Management Systems (WMS) have not only enhanced the coordination and tracking of goods but have also contributed to the reconfiguration of supply chains (Bonacich & Wilson, 2008)[[8]](#footnote-8). This technological shift has led to more precise monitoring of goods and labour, redefining how logistics is practised and, by extension, influencing the labour dynamics within the supply chain.

Advancements in computing technology made total-cost analyses, a vital aspect of supply-chain management, feasible. Swift comparisons of changing freight rates became possible due to improvements in data-processing power and modelling capabilities, allowing firms to optimise route choices, facility locations, and order quantities (Allen, 1997). More recently, the near-instantaneous collection and exchange of electronic point-of-sale data, facilitated by the internet and satellite communication technologies, have played a crucial role (Bonacich & Wilson, 2008). These modern techniques and technologies collectively created the necessary conditions for a comprehensive transformation of the logistics industry and the capitalist circulatory system.

Deregulation, particularly in the context of transportation, played a pivotal role in paving the way for the logistics revolution. The transformation of logistics as we know it today was not feasible until the deregulation of the transportation sector in the 1980s. In the UK, this policy shift unleashed a wave of competitive forces within the transportation industry. In the UK, the Conservative Government emphasised the need for a sustained deregulation program in the labour market to achieve the transition to containerisation, as stated in the document “Employment for the 1990s” (1988). This commitment was part of a broader economic restructuring in the 1980s, focusing on two dimensions of flexibility: wage flexibility and employment flexibility. The UK Conservative policy aimed to enhance the responsiveness of employment flexibility to wage flexibility by systematically eroding trade unions’ ‘monopoly’ power. These deregulation measures included breaking union power, individualising the labour market, and altering employment contracts (Turnbull, 1991)[[9]](#footnote-9).

Consumerism has acted as both a driver and a consequence of the logistics revolution. The increasing complexity of consumer preferences and the proliferation of product lines have been instrumental in shaping contemporary logistics. Evolving marketing practices have contributed to the diversification of consumer tastes, prompting Retailers to respond by implementing more intricate supply chain operations (Bonacich & Wilson, 2008). This synergy between consumerism and logistics is two-fold. On the one hand, the logistics revolution has enabled retailers to adapt to and exploit the intricate nuances of consumer demands by optimising their supply chains. On the other hand, the logistics revolution has encouraged consumerism by facilitating the efficient and timely delivery of various products. This relationship between consumerism and logistics highlights the symbiotic nature of their evolution and emphasises the pivotal role of logistics in managing consumer-oriented supply chains.

The logistics revolution has marked a shift in how goods move (Chua et al., 2018). These changes are evident in the evolution of supply chain management, which has grown increasingly complex and interconnected. Faced with economic crisis, the adoption of cutting-edge technologies, deregulation and shift in consumption practices have allowed for greater efficiency and precision in coordinating the flow of products from manufacturers to consumers.

### 2.2.3 The Global Value Chain Approach

The logistics revolution has ushered in a significant transformation in the supply chain dynamics, resulting in a notable power shift from producers to retailers. This shift has had a profound impact on the way goods are produced, distributed, and sold. While various retailers have embraced this transformation, one prominent example of this change is Wal-Mart, a global retail giant known for pioneering practices.

In the wake of the logistics revolution, retailers have acquired remarkable influence, positioning themselves as pivotal decision-makers in the supply chain. This newfound power allows retailers to shape the market by dictating what products manufacturers should produce and the terms at which these products should be supplied. This influence extends to considerations like when production should occur and, significantly, at what price point these goods should be offered to consumers (Bonacich & Wilson, 2008).

Retailers now wield the authority to determine the demand-side aspects of the supply chain. They possess crucial insights into consumer preferences, behaviours, and buying patterns, all facilitated by collecting and analysing Point of Sale (POS) data. With this knowledge, retailers can make informed decisions regarding product selection, pricing strategies, and inventory management. This gives them a competitive edge in meeting consumer demands efficiently and effectively (Lichtenstein, 2010).

In essence, the operational principles of this New Production Model revolve around the convergence of production and distribution into a unified entity. This evolution has played a pivotal role in amplifying the influence of retailers within the Global Commodity Chain (GCC) (Coe & Hess, 2013). Manufacturers operating within this model now synchronise production with real-time sales data closely monitored by retailers, effectively minimising excess inventory at any stage of the supply chain. This synchronisation has given rise to a pull system that attempts to integrate the entire supply chain seamlessly. This New Production Model places paramount emphasis on the comprehensive integration of the supply chain as a whole. It asserts that inter-firm relations are under the sway of those firms that have asserted monopolistic access to the consumer market.

Recent research using Global Commodity Chains and Global Production Networks frameworks underscores the significant influence of lead firms, particularly retailers, over Third-Party Logistics providers (3PLs) in the logistics industry (Gutelius, 2008; Coe & Hess, 2013). This power dynamic often confines 3PLs to specialised roles without strategic partner status. Distribution activities prioritise cost minimisation, leading to the over-commoditisation of the industry, where 3PLs are hired for short durations at the lowest cost (Vitasek et al., 2015). Subcontracting induces competition among contractors, with uneven power dynamics favouring lead firms. This dynamic results in short-term contractual arrangements, discourages technology investment, and affects lower-tier subcontractors and temporary workers (Coe, 2020). Despite offering value-added services, 3PLs compete in commoditised markets driven by cost reduction, shaping inter-firm relations based on short term contractual obligations (Gutelius, 2015; Vitasek et al., 2015).

Consequently, workers in the logistics sector find themselves entangled in a 'perfect storm' driven by globalisation (Coe, 2020). This encompasses the fragmentation of production, the advent of new logistics technologies, and the neoliberal deregulation affecting both general labour markets and the transport industry specifically (Coe, 2020). The outcome of these imbalanced power dynamics within the supply chain is the increasing dependence of third-party logistics providers on “the availability of low-cost labour and discouraged capital investments” (Bensman 2008: 15). This leads to a low level of surplus value capture at the distribution phase of the supply chain, which ensures low capital investment in industrial upgrading (Kumar, 2020). Instead, logistics relies on a low-road model (Bonacich & Wilson, 2008).

This contemporary logistics growth model, the low-road approach, has four components. The first involves increased contingency due to flexible production practices that create cheaper and more easily exploited labour through outsourcing, subcontracting, and temporary staffing (Gutelius, 2015). This results in a workforce that is vulnerable to poor management and difficult to organise (Gumbrell-McCormick, 2011). The second component is weakened unions, which have been under pressure due to changes in how goods are produced and transported in contemporary capitalism. The third component is racialisation, with workers who have limited rights and political power being disproportionately affected by deteriorating working conditions, both domestically and offshore. Employers often seek out racialised workforces to whom they can pay the lowest amount (De Lara, 2018; Alimahomed-Wilson, 2019). The fourth component is lowered labour standards, characterised by declining wages and working conditions, and is associated with all of the above processes (Bonacich & Wilson, 2008).

Concluding this section, it's crucial to highlight several key points. By examining the evolving nature of the Retailer-3PL relationship driven by the demands of the New Production Model, we observe that 3PLs are now faced with new expectations. These demands create a downward force, subsequently causing spillover effects in the competitive dynamics of the warehousing sector, resulting in a low-road growth model. However, literature using the GPN or GCC approach, which attempts to restore the territoriality of institutional and regulatory contexts, appears to suggest that the nature of this change is uneven when considering the supply chain is embedded in local markets, “warehouse jobs are, across the board, bad jobs; and that these bad jobs are the same, regardless of where they are located—even across national borders. However, labour strategy in warehousing is not a monolith” (Gutelius, 2008: 174).

Consequently, there are potentially misleading universal readings of value capture and control, which will become apparent as we move into the organisational level. The implication is that if ‘labour strategy’, meant here in terms of the organisation of the labour process, is not a ‘monolith’, what accounts for these differences in organisational strategy? What accounts for different management strategies to control and transform labour power in the warehouses characterised by migrant and ethnic minority workforces? The next section draws on labour process theory, which will allow us to understand the impact of supply chain relations on the organisation of production within warehousing.

## 2.3 Trends in Labour Process Theory

Our previous discussions have highlighted evidence suggesting Retailers are becoming increasingly involved in the labour process in the 3PL. To date, our deliberations have operated predominantly from a structural position, focusing attention on changing relations between capitals emanating from the introduction of New Production Methods. The section outlined retailers' concerns with preserving value in motion by containing costs and orchestrating competition through short-term contractual arrangements. This section aims to analytically ''follow through'' our discussions by focusing attention on the impact of the New Production Method on the capital-labour relation within the warehouse. The interest is to explore how this battle for value capture between capitals in the supply chain affects the organisation of the labour process, before highlighting the limitations of this framework, and ways forward.

In alluding to the notions of the Logistics Revolution and New Production Model concerning its role in the circuit of capital, we still need to explore the impact on the labour process at the more concrete workplace level. This next section will focus on competing interpretations of the logistics labour process, specifically in warehousing. First, the focus is on literature that positions the warehouse within the full circuit of capital and is subject to laws of motion, generally[[10]](#footnote-10). This literature focuses on control as a structural requirement of the system's inherent vulnerability. In light of the post-Fordist debate, this literature emphasises a shift away from Fordism that relies on notions of consent.

Under Fordism, labour processes were characterised by rigid, hierarchical forms of control, where coercion was a primary mechanism of management. Direct supervision, strict division of labour, and disciplinary actions were used to secure compliance, but over time, consent emerged as a key element through collective bargaining, union representation, and the formalisation of shop-floor agreements. Nichols and Beynon (1977) observed that during the post-war Fordist era, strong unions and high employment rates forced management to negotiate the terms of labour with workers, leading to a compromise equilibrium (Burawoy, 1985). This compromise was maintained by institutionalising labours’ voice in workplace regulations, ensuring some degree of worker consent.

However, Glucksmann(2009) challenges the universality of this consent-based model. In her ethnographic research on low-skilled female factory workers, she found that, despite the presence of union structures and formal agreements like the bonus system, coercion still dominated. The poor conditions and harsh disciplinary actions indicated that coercive forms of control persisted, especially in marginalised sectors where unions were weak or absent. Glucksmann (2009) argues that the compromise equilibrium failed to develop in many workplaces, especially in sectors like low-skilled factory work, undermining the assumption that Fordism always secured meaningful worker consent.

The second section, following on from our discussion in the previous section, reviews literature that positions the warehouse within this dynamic – but between capital: capital relations in the supply chain (Raworth & Kidder, 2009)[[11]](#footnote-11). This literature presents the labour process in terms of the opportunities presented to retailers to capture value in the supply chain (Newsome et al, 2015). In light of post-Fordist debates, this literature emphasises a shift away from Fordism that relies on coercion.

This shift is particularly evident in the rise of flexible accumulation and the breakdown of the post-war compromise equilibrium. By the 1970s, economic crises and intensified global competition led to the erosion of union power and the collapse of collective bargaining in many sectors, marking the transition from Fordist control based on consent to post-Fordist coercion. David Harvey’s concept of flexible accumulation (1987) highlights that the rigidities of Fordism gave way to decentralised, fragmented labour processes, where individualisation replaced collective agreements. In the private sector, union density and the scope of collective bargaining collapsed, reducing workers' ability to negotiate terms and conditions of employment.

This procedural individualisation allowed employers to bypass unions and rely on more precarious, flexible labour contracts. Coercion reemerged in more sophisticated forms, with workers subjected to constant surveillance, precarious employment contracts, and performance pressures (Vallas et al., 2022). This environment mirrors the conditions of market despotism, with workers facing intensified control, a return to insecure, competitive labour relations, and the disappearance of negotiated workplace stability that had characterised the Fordist era (Burawoy, 1985).

The third section will draw on a limited body of research that attempts to understand the labour process concerning its impact on prevailing racial and gendered divisions of labour. This section represents a conceptual re-focus on labour. While some literature focuses on new forms of control emanating from racial and gendered compositions (De Lara, et al., 2016) I suggest this literature fundamentally seeks to understand the contested nature of the labour process in warehousing.

This brings us to the fourth section. This section considers the contested nature of the warehouse more directly. I review literature that builds labour as an active agent into our discussions. The implication is that neither control nor value capture can be total within the labour process; while forms of coercion or consent may be predicated on the existing social relations in the warehouse, so must contestation. To unearth these issues of control, consent, and contestation, we must treat labour as an active agent and develop a framework that allows for an understanding of the existing social relations in the labour process. First, we must follow these dynamics previously explored into the hidden abode.

### 2.3.1 Mechanisms of Control

A large proportion of the literature has been explored with reference to the control regime (Dorflinger et al., 2020). In this way, mechanisms of shopfloor organisation have been implemented to tighten the control of labour powers' indeterminacy, particularly pertinent given the competitive pressures the warehouse is subject to, understood as velocity, efficiency, reliability, and agility of material flows (Danyluk, 2017). However, the emphasis on control places the control regime as the result of the need to limit the structural vulnerability of the warehouse in order to provide a seamless flow of material goods (See Dorflinger et al., 2020). Therefore, mechanisms of control are understood as a compulsory element of the warehouse's design rather than a means to capture value. Moreover, this set of literature discusses the extent to which the control regime encompasses a paradigm shift, representing movements away from or within Fordism that rely on notions of consent.

For Delfanti (2019), the argument rests on the premise that the warehouse is located at the intersection between production and consumption:

Commodities, which move across the globe to converge on the warehouse, where they rest for a few hours or weeks on its shelves, and then depart again to reach new destinations. Their movement must be seamless, fast, and efficient. Frictionless, as economists would put it. Workers are the most problematic factor in this equation, and thus must be carefully controlled and governed lest they generate friction, slowing down or even stopping the movement of commodities (Ibid, 2021: 22).

This heightens the dependency between organisations in the supply chain, rendering capital vulnerable to disruption. "Indeed, the flexible model built by Amazon is vulnerable. It relies on a few major bursts of activity, and those moments can be targeted to maximise the effects of a strike or walkout" (Ibid, 2021: 180). Therefore, seamless movement of commodities relies on JIT requirements, including the reduction in stocks, which leaves the warehouse vulnerable to endogenous and exogenous shocks which cause delays and disruption (Oliver & Wilkinson, 1989).

Delfanti (2019) argues that Amazon's fulfilment system is organised around bottlenecks that are crucial for the circulation of commodities: "Nothing can be delivered unless it is retrieved, packed, and shipped from the fulfilment centre. This can be put to tactical advantage to break down Amazon's supply chain" (2021: 181). As a result, Amazon workers are subject to a complete system of control over every aspect of the production process, suggesting that it remains central to maintaining the production system and that any potential for disruption must be stopped before it materialises (See Vgontzas, 2022). Consequently, we witness an intensification of control manifesting itself in several guises: ideological, algorithmic and through a heightened surveillance and monitoring system. Unlike debates within Japanisation (Oliver & Wilkinson, 1989), however, Delfanti (2021) offers a more critical stance which reveals the way the control regime can intensify labour.

First, the control regime relies on the warehouse's algorithmic system. Studies of the shopfloor in warehouses in Italy (Delfanti, 2019; Benvegnu, 2018), the US (Struna, 2015; Vgontzas, 2020; Lotz, 2022) and the UK (Gent, 2018) reveal the functionality of algorithmic management through handheld scanners. Amazon's adoption of 'chaotic storage,' where products are not systematically arranged, results in workers relying on algorithmic instructions delivered through their handheld devices, such as the Motorola MC3000. These devices integrate barcode scanners, motion and location tracking, and a display screen (Delfanti, 2019).

Handheld and wearable devices are integral for gathering productivity metrics, particularly assessing the 'pick rate' or product collection, and establishing rankings of workers individual performance (Gent, 2018; Struna, 2015; Newsome et al, 2015). For Instance, McClelland (2012) illustrates how managers in a major warehouse receive real-time updates on worker performance, with low scores triggering immediate alerts to managers (Kellogg et al., 2020; McClelland, 2012). For example, Delfanti (2019: 22) has shown how this data becomes a topic of discussion in managerial meetings, with managers occasionally sharing achievements like “Yesterday we had an exceptional productivity rate!”.

In the warehousing industry, the productivity metrics amassed by these devices not only influence performance rankings but also serve as a basis for informing supervisors about disciplinary actions. As supervisors increasingly rely on automated metrics and ranking algorithms, their management approach may shift towards giving praise, instructions, and feedback sessions to increase productivity (Struna, 2015; Gent, 2018; Delfanti, 2019). These disciplinary decisions are guided by individual performance scores, determining who should be terminated, essentially transforming management into implementing decisions informed by data analytics (Briken & Taylor, 2018).

Second, the control regime relies on an 'all pervasive' surveillance system. With the use of advanced information and communication systems, companies now have the ability to manage the movement of goods across global supply chains. This includes the deployment of algorithms, sensory equipment, robotics, and artificial intelligence. Consequently, the performance of every warehouse, viewed as a node in the supply chain, can be evaluated, and within the warehouse, workers can be comprehensively surveilled, directed and evaluated (Cowen, 2014).

Indeed, further ethnographic accounts have highlighted the apparent reality of surveillance in the warehouse. Gent (2018: 33), reporting on evidence from a food distribution centre, highlights what he calls 'managerial distantiation'. This refers to using technology, such as handheld radio data terminals, to create a sense of distance between workers and managers. This distance is created because managers can monitor workers' activities remotely without being physically present, and workers may feel that they are being watched and controlled by an impersonal system rather than by human supervisors. Here, Gent (2018) alludes to the idea that algorithmic control augments or replaces the traditional managerial or supervisory function. He concludes that this situation is leading to a new form of class struggle in which workers resist the algorithmic control of their work and seek to assert their autonomy and agency in the face of 'managerial distantiation'.

Second, shrouded in an ideology and a rhetoric that brands warehouse work as "cool and participatory" (Delfanti, 2019: 77), management strives to create a workplace culture that ensures workers' collaboration with the goals of fulfilment. Delfanti (2019) argues that the imperative of 'fun' operates as part of the social and ideological organisation of control, whereby workers are expected to participate in mandatory rituals at the beginning of a shift: "Workers might be asked to raise their hand and suggest a ‘success story’ in front of the rest of the team. Having one ready can be rewarded with a round of applause. Workers are expected to cheer, sing, or even dance. Managers often comment on team performance, and workers are implicitly required to celebrate" (2019: 76).

The suggestion is that workers are not only controlled by a pervasive digital arena but also through culture and ideology, which is forced to legitimise peer group surveillance. Here, workers become increasingly implicated in the process of their subordination.

The third aspect of the control regime explores how warehouses use surveillance systems within the labour process. Kanngieser (2013) draws on Foucault, suggesting that the warehouse's position in the circuit of capital has allowed for the strengthening of disciplinary forces in the labour process. Kanngieser highlights disciplinary measures through the increased utilisation of advanced management information systems, closely monitoring individual activities and implementing extensive surveillance on the shopfloor. These developments are perceived as contributing to an overarching and omnipresent control mechanism at the distribution stage. This vertical process of surveillance, combined with the scrutiny of work peers through Delfanti's (2019) participatory meeting rituals – could be seen as a horizontal form of surveillance through the installation of teamwork (See Sewell, 1998). Here, Kanngieser (2013) uses the notion of biopolitical governance through the use of technologies such as RFID, GPS telematics, and voice picking to regulate the movements and activities of workers in the warehouse. Consequently, these technologies create a system of surveillance which can be conceptualised as a disciplinary gaze at the heart of the warehouses labour process.

However, literature suggests that these workplace control mechanisms push back the frontier of control and, in such cases, lead to an intensification of work. Therefore, the suggestion is that control can be used as a mechanism for the more efficient extraction of surplus value. For instance, algorithms frequently heighten workload by intensifying monitoring, accelerating the pace, minimising workflow gaps, and extending work beyond the traditional workplace and hours (Felstead et al., 2016). There is a correlation between greater work intensity and algorithmic control, emphasising that workers are compelled to work rapidly, often needing to run to match the speed dictated by their handheld devices: “As you are loading an object onto the cart, the next one appears on the scanner. So, as you are loading your cart, you start moving, and as you are arriving, you already take a look at what you are to pick next; you don't stop, and then you look at the shelf. Is it a book or something else? In which area of the shelf is it?” (Delfanti, 2019: 10).

Thus, algorithmic control heightens workplace surveillance and monitoring opportunities, pinpointing workers' performance, meaning that their autonomy over their work is eradicated, ensuring workers are not left 'idle'. These processes play a central role in tightening the control apparatus of the labour process, denying worker autonomy and aiding in the process of work intensification.

However, despite this all-encompassing control, we are also provided with evidence of workers' survival and escaping work strategies. Indeed, Gent (2018) reports on workers' attempts and everyday tactics to make their jobs easier. These tactics include slowing down work, taking longer breaks, or finding ways to subvert or bypass the algorithmic management systems. However, these forms of everyday resistance and coping strategies are allied to the system of control in the warehouse.

This literature has presented, at times, a monolithic understanding of control in the warehouse labour process. Here, control is seen as a necessary requirement of the system's structural vulnerability, particularly with references to Foucault, whereby the warehouse becomes condensed into an arena of surveillance, rather than the extraction of surplus value. Here, control assumes the system's effective operation, not only in terms of the ability of management to implement strategic change unproblematically, but also in terms of the passivity of labour accepting without opposition an intensification of their work. Here, we can see the operation of consent as a requirement of this conceptualisation.

Therefore, Elliot and Long (2015) have introduced the notion of consent into the debate on the labour process in warehousing. The idea is to move from universalising notions of control, to studying the dynamics of the workplace that begins to consider the role of labour more adequately. For example, Elliot and Long (2015) focus on issues relating to workers’ consent in an account exploring a grocery distribution facility. Exploring Burawoy's (1979) notion of ‘Manufacturing Consent’, they suggest that, a workplace culture, framed in the language of 'racing', developed to garner increased consent for the conditions of production, thereby creating 'rate busters' who compete with one another on the shopfloor over their picking rates. Yet, the distribution facility exercises more control over the labour process compared to Allied management. In Manufacturing Consent (1979), Burawoy observed how workers at Allied transformed the production process into a game, organising their own work within management’s output targets. This ‘making out’ culture allowed workers some autonomy, contrasting with the rigid control exercised in the distribution facility. However, in this setting, workers had no involvement in production decisions, and their tasks were subject to individual monitoring, tracking, and evaluation. The labour process was almost entirely formalised. This difference, when compared with Allied, stems from where the informal culture occurred. At the distribution facility, the informal culture grew out of the digital arena according to data generated from the execution of tasks rather than within the execution of work at Allied. Therefore, the game developed in a way that was structurally detached from the execution of work, leaving workers with little autonomy. The suggestion is that workers become involved in their self-subordination.

Similarly, Vallas et al., (2022) seeks to further this agenda by looking at the actual dynamics of the workplace. In doing so, he locates his analysis within a post-Fordist agenda because of the particular aspects of control placed upon workers. Instead of advocating for a complete return to despotism, Vallas et al., (2022) portrays the warehouse as a complex system aiming to secure workers' consent to managerial authority. He identifies three predominant hegemonic mechanisms that resonate with different groups within the labour process. These consist of normative control, marked by the firm's favouritism toward and acknowledgment of workers who invest in their identity as "diligent workers," often promoting them to positions that confer a "trusted worker" status. Additionally, there is relational control, fostering a sense of obligation among workers who perceive their employment with the firm as a 'gift.' In this second example, we can begin to see the employment relation being shaped by workers vulnerable position in the labour market. Third, taking inspiration from Foucault (2008), there is governmental control, delineating a framework of rules and resources that shape the workforce, offering workers an illusion of individual choice.

In contrast to Elliot and Long (2015) who expose a meticulously structured set of labour control mechanisms aimed at securing surplus value while masking its presence, Vallas et al., (2022) unveils a diverse range of loosely connected mechanisms. Their varied nature implies a “pattern of managerial bricolage rather than a systematically organised ensemble” (Vallas, et al., 2022: 215). Although the warehouse leans on coercive labour control mechanisms such as algorithmic technologies and surveillance systems, Vallas et al., (2022) suggests that alongside these, there are subtler and more sophisticated sources of labour control beyond naked coercion alone.

The discussions of the control regime in the warehouse can be subdivided by those who find a monolithic control regime (Delfanti, 2019) to one that is defined by its flexible arrangement of control mechanisms (Vallas et al., 2022). Nevertheless, both literatures highlight the role of the active involvement of warehouse workers in engaging in their labour while simultaneously being subject to powerful technological systems of control. The suggestion here is that monolithic or not, this literature suggests a universalising control regime, which overestimates the effective operation of control imposed. The control mechanisms outlined above—algorithmic management, pervasive surveillance, and ideological control—are not simply tools for efficiency; they play a central role in maintaining the seamless flow of goods that Just-In-Time (JIT) production systems depend upon. These mechanisms ensure that the inherent vulnerabilities and dependencies of global supply chains are tightly managed, especially in a warehouse context where disruption can have cascading effects. By intensifying surveillance and control, these mechanisms extract greater productivity while limiting workers' autonomy, making them critical to understanding both the economic logic and labour dynamics within modern warehouses. This exploration of control mechanisms sets the stage for the subsequent analysis, where we will examine how these systems impact labour relations, workplace resistance, and overall changes in the production process.

Second, this literature conceptually masks the role of the firm's strategic intent to find cost savings (Rainnie, 1991). Instead, control is imposed as a defensive measure to contain friction (Delfanti, 2019). Consequently, the next section will explore the warehouse labour process, which is closely allied to the requirements imposed from the Retailer-3PL relation previously examined. Here, attempts are made to understand the labour process in the warehouse, which aims to remove workers' autonomy, invade porosity and intensify labour, thereby situating the organisation of the labour process in the warehouse as the result of the structural requirements to capture and to contain value. These variants will now be explored via performance management, highlighting work intensification in the warehouse. This extends to the deliberation of whether these changes amount to a paradigm shift within the warehouse away from a consent-making apparatus associated with Fordism and compares this with the Post-Fordist agenda set out by Vallas et al., (2022).

### 2.3.2 Mechanisms of Value Capture

The previous section reviewed the literature that conceptually positions the warehouse in the circuit of capital and focuses on control due to the system's inherent vulnerabilities. The section illustrated the total control system as a form of bricolage (Vallas et al., 2022) or monolithic control (Delfanti, 2019). The former relies on flexibly articulating coercion and consent to workers located in different places in the labour process. While careful not to overestimate the monolithic nature of the control system, it nevertheless assumes the effective operation of the system, not only in terms of the ability of management to implement change unproblematically but also in terms of the passivity of labour accepting without opposition – despite reference to individual resistances and coping strategies allied to the control regime (Gent, 2019). Therefore, both strands position control as totalising, if not universal.

This section reviews the literature on the warehouse labour process that conceptualises the warehouse within inter-firm relations explored previously (Raworth & Kidder, 2009). The focus here is on how the changing power relations in the supply chain between Retailers and 3PLs impact the labour process, that is, on Capital: Labour relations. The point is to explore how changing relations between capitals affect the value extraction process within the warehouse. In doing so, the section will outline performance management as the crystallisation of labour process change in the warehouse that responds to retailers' need for the flexibility, velocity, cost-efficiency, and reliability of commodity flows structured by the logic of circulation (Danyluk, 2017). Consequently, again, within this section, we are alluding to the conceptualisation of the labour process concerning relations of coercion and consent.

At the same time, the section will consider the partial nature of this conceptualisation. Exploring the analytical remit of these developments will allow us to consider the partial nature of exploring the experience of labour in the warehouse. It will highlight the limitations, suggesting that an overconcentration on structural dynamics in the supply chain may mask the existing social relations in the warehouse and working-class strategies that reshape the warehouse. As a result, the following section will review the literature that places greater emphasis on the racial and gendered composition of labour in the warehouse.

As previously explored, the recent academic discourse suggests the restructuring of the warehousing industry, which involves a 'new production model', integrates production, distribution and consumption under the Retailer's supervision (Newsome et al., 2015). The power dynamics between Retailers and 3PLs have been explored with a focus placed on contractual arrangements and Retailers' ability to capture value within the supply chain. The result of these pressures to deliver cost-savings and production targets, is such that 3PLs search for ways to achieve further cost savings and meet ever-demanding productivity quotas. This results in a new social organisation of labour used to reduce the indeterminacy of labour so that seamless movement of commodities through the warehouse can be achieved. In the following section, I review debates in the literature addressing the ways in which inter-firm relations impact the labour process through mechanisms of value capture.

A consideration of the access to savings in the extraction of surplus, as well as focusing on the mechanisms that legitimise this process, has led scholars to an analysis of performance management in the warehouse (Newsome et al., 2013; Benvegnu, 2018). Thus, in terms of understanding the warehouse labour process, the intention here is to turn to the literature on performance management in warehousing, which facilitates the extraction of surplus (directed and influenced by the retailer). In other words, this literature analyses the social relations of production in the warehouse, which conceptually facilitates an intensification of labour by meeting the requirements of the retailer – that is, containing value.

In academic literature, there are two distinct perspectives on performance management: optimistic and critical. Mainstream human resource management (HRM) literature emphasises creating a culture of continuous improvement for both organisational processes and individual employees' skills, behaviour, and contributions. Systematic performance evaluation, according to this view, aims to enhance organisational performance by concentrating on teams and individual workers. Within a competitive market environment, especially under market pressures, performance management is regarded as directing workers' efforts during the labour process to attain organisational performance indicators aligned to supply chain requirements.

However, critical studies express reservations about the effectiveness of optimistic accounts, particularly in the context of low-skilled and routinised work. These studies question the feasibility of such performance management forms in today's economic context. In highly competitive markets, achieving planned organisational targets takes precedence in the workplace. Consequently, performance management systems have become more stringent, incorporating standardised and closely monitored practices. This has resulted in heightened control and monitoring practices at the workplace level, leading to the strict identification of underperforming individuals who are pressured to meet required standards (Taylor, 2013).

A notable outcome of these practices is the use of objective criteria in comparative metrics and scales for evaluating individual performance. In British workplaces, a forced distribution method has been adopted, where managers must adhere to the required distribution of ratings across different percentage quartiles. However, criticism has been directed at this method for categorising a certain proportion of employees into lower percentiles, irrespective of their actual performance, and labelling them as underperformers. These more stringent performance management systems have been linked to adverse impacts on individuals' health, including work strain, stress, and emotional exhaustion (Taylor, 2013).

Studies have found that this gives rise to instances of overwork, work strain, and stress, contributing to widespread experiences of emotional exhaustion and work-related stress among workers (Taylor, 2013). Warehouses without union representation and under direct control from retailers have implemented rigorous performance management systems, indicating a type of labour subordination characterised by elevated levels of pressure, or ‘management by stress’ (Struna, 2015).

Studies exploring the introduction of assessment systems in warehousing, have highlight a consistent trend of diminishing discretion and autonomy in work (Newsome, 2010; Benvegnu, 2018; Gutelius & Theodore, 2019). This translates to a reduced capacity for workers to independently determine the speed and intensity of the work process, leading to increased subordination and a degradation of working conditions.

Research (Newsome et al., 2013) appears to agree further that the objective of such devices is, first and foremost, to invade the "porosity" of the work, reduce its "indeterminacy", and therefore, intensify the work, establishing mandatory productivity targets, making them visible and measurable, and monitoring them strictly. This is particularly effective, when a performance rating is tied to performance bonuses or transferring agency workers to permanent contracts (Benvegnu, 2018).

Performance management in warehousing also reveals the role of team leaders in the labour process. team leaders are also under scrutiny from senior management relating to their collated team performance metrics. In such cases, the competence of team leaders may come under scrutiny from senior management (Taylor, 2013). Therefore, the role of the team leader in warehousing goes beyond close monitoring of performance and attendance and involves the strict policing of individuals (Struna, 2015).

The concern here has been to review the literature that is derived from the analytical status given to value capture in the organisation of the labour process. However, in a similar vein to the previous section on control, we must move beyond the assumption that 'capture' can be imposed unproblematically on the labour process. Therefore, scholars have brought notions of coercion and consent into an understanding of value capture through the mechanism of performance management systems. This moves the analysis on from one which sees value capture as a process imposed from above, to one which struggled over.

For example, in privileging the battle for value capture between firms in the supply chain, Newsome et al., (2015: 25) suggests, "Employer attempts to remove worker self-activity, invade porosity and intensify the work process were all in evidence. The once necessary consent-making apparatus, regarded as a vital and valuable component in previous workplace regimes, had been ruthlessly abandoned". While the erosion of consent has led to workers reduced indeterminacy, invasion of the porosity of the work day and intensification of labour, it is essential to consider the prevailing racial and gender relations in production. Here, I suggest control or capture has thus far been understood as a blanket mechanism with comparable outcomes. I now turn to a set of literature that focuses more squarely on labour and the racial and gender divisions in warehousing. These literatures imply a tendency for capital to super-exploit racial minority, migrant and female workers. They also imply the ‘successful’ nature of capture or control may be related to the broader social and political environment, outside of the point of production and the supply chain.

### 2.3.3 The Value of Difference

The concern within this section is to draw on literature that attempts to understand changes in the labour process concerning their impact on prevailing racial and gendered divisions of labour. The broader point is that these literatures place more emphasis on the contested nature of the labour process. Moreover, while social difference has been explored in the warehouse labour process in a number of geographic contexts, none have thus far taken place in the UK.

The evidence supporting the racial organisation of the labour process is exemplified in the division of work tasks based on employee immigration status and country of birth. Jordhuis-Lier et al., (2018) illustrate this in their study, where Swedish workers predominantly picked and packed, while truck driving tasks were often assigned to migrants from Eastern Europe. This aligns with findings from Allison et al., (2018) in Southern California, where immigrant workers were more prevalent in packing roles compared to native-born workers, who were more commonly engaged in forklifting tasks, resulting in wage differentials and what Allison et al., (2018) describe as ‘super-exploitation.’

Racial disparities in warehousing are not confined to the organisation of the labour process; they extend to the work environment, influencing conditions related to specific workloads and contributing to physical and mental injuries. Hoppe et al. (2013), in a study of five warehouses on the Eastern side of the US, observed a correlation between ethnicity and issues related to health. Specifically, Latinx and African American workers in racially mixed warehouses experienced worse health outcomes in terms of lumbar problems than those in ethnically homogeneous warehouses. Additionally, evidence of exploitation in employment conditions surfaces in income disparities between ethnic groups, with Latinx workers earning less than their non-Latinx counterparts (Allison et al., 2018). Latinx workers perceived their comparatively low wages as fair, contrasting with the perception of higher-paid White workers (Hoppe et al., 2009).

Inequalities regarding employment conditions also manifest in the prevalence of precarious employment among immigrant and racialised warehouse workers via subcrontacted temporary labour agencies (Allison et al., 2018; Alimahomed-Wilson, 2019). Dorflinger et al., (2020) found these to contribute to a climate of competitiveness, while others have found that it places greater performance pressure on agency workers (Jordhus-Lier et al., 2018).

Various migrant groups are often assigned distinct tasks within warehousing. An example from a Norwegian study highlights that Swedes are primarily engaged in picking and packing tasks, whereas Eastern Europeans are often assigned truck driving responsibilities (Jordhus-Lier et al., 2018). These findings emphasize that pre-existing stereotypes about the capabilities of specific groups not only shape the organisation of work but also influence the conditions of the work environment. For instance, the perception of Swedish workers in Norway as hardworking, while not inherently negative, could potentially have adverse effects on their health. It was observed that Swedes, for instance, kept working while unwell instead of taking sick leave (Jordhus-Lier et al., 2018).

Gender further compounds the hierarchical organisation of the labour process in warehousing. Men are commonly assigned tasks involving machinery operation, truck and forklift driving, while women are often engaged in order picking and packing (Allison et al., 2018). Research findings point out that employers often assign tasks perceived as the most physically challenging to men (Hoppe et al., 2009). Gender-based wage gaps are apparent, with the distribution of work responsibilities contributing to these disparities (Loewen, 2018; Lindemann et al., 2018). Yet, there is also evidence indicating that men might receive higher earnings than women even when performing identical roles (Lindemann & Boyer, 2018).

These workplace divisions are rooted in preconceived notions about the nature of work tasks and the perceived capabilities of men and women in performing these tasks. Men are frequently assigned tasks seen by employers as the most physically demanding, while women are often allocated tasks thought of as physically 'light' (Loewen, 2018). This gendered organisational structure of work is linked to assumptions about the differing physical loads of tasks (Gutelius, 2015). For instance, Loewen's (2018) investigation of an online retail warehouse found that women were segmented into lower paying and lighter manual labour. This aligns with the idea that U.S. online retailing is expected to hire a larger percentage of women for order picking compared to traditional warehouses (Gutelius & Theodore, 2019).

Studies support the notion that men are more commonly assigned machine operation and truck and FLT tasks (De Lara et al., 2016; Loewen, 2018). The introduction of technology, rather than eliminating gender-based divisions, might exacerbate these divisions, reinforcing existing patterns of work organisation. Significantly, existing literature indicates that the gender-based division of tasks in warehouse work is likely to lead to distinct patterns of musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) for men and women (Flodin et al., 2018).

Working conditions also intersect with race and gender, with studies showing that immigrant women, Latinx women, and women of colour are positioned in subordinate roles within the warehouse (De Lara et al., 2016; Lindemann & Boyer, 2018; Alimahomed-Wilson, 2019). This subordination is apparent in workplaces, where migrant women earn less than male and female citizens. Furthermore, gender and language disparities among employee groups pose obstacles, hindering employees from effectively calling attention to issues concerning the physical capacity of work tasks (Gruchmann et al., 2020). However, there are instances, such as in Italian warehouses, where effective participatory organising efforts have been demonstrated despite ethnic and linguistic heterogeneity and limited knowledge of the local language (Cioce et al., 2022).

So far, this literature has suggested that racial and gender differences in warehousing are used to tighten mechanisms of control. They, therefore, reveal the strong interrelationship of commodification and exploitation deployed by employers to strengthen competitiveness and manufacture a comparative advantage in cheap labour. While this set of literature has focused on the racial and gendered production of difference in the warehouse labour process, this literature tends to focus on how these social relations enable capital to “super-exploit” (De Lara et al., 2016) its workforce. Therefore, the implication here is that the reduction in workers indeterminacy, invasion of porosity and intensification is not universal, but rather, is stratified by managers capacity to commodify particular racial and gender divisions. It is to literature that is concerned with the contested nature of the labour process that I now turn.

### 2.3.4 The Flow Perspective

The review of the current literature suggested that an overemphasis on the chain or network had resulted in a one-dimensional focus on universalising notions of value capture. Mechanisms of value capture are implemented in the labour process, with little attention given to the existing social relations in the warehouse or the fundamental tensions this brings. The concern of this section is to draw on an increasing body of literature that attempts to understand the contested nature of the labour process through labour mobility power (Smith, 2006). Value capture mechanisms implemented in the warehouse labour process are always contested. Therefore, we need to further an account of labour as an active agent in the labour process.

In this way, we can engage with a dialectical understanding of the labour process, which recognises the contradictory mix of control, resistance, and struggle that makes up the dynamics of the employment relationship. Understanding this dynamic, rather than an understanding of universal notions of capture or control, the analysis is widened to suggest that the introduction of value capture mechanisms is often partial and incremental, and their introduction into the warehouse is often contested and resisted. Consequently, understanding the warehouse labour process in terms of mobility struggles enables us to consider attempts to reshape and re-cast the dynamics of the employment relationship. In the following section, we move to consider the state's role in reproducing labour mobility power. First, however, we must examine mobility more concretely in the warehouse labour process.

Quitting has been expressed as a latent conflict between capital and labour (Edwards & Scullion, 1984). Chris Smith (2006) developed this further by exploring the conceptual parameters this can have on the employment relationship. According to Smith, the indeterminacy of work is twofold. First, it can be understood in the classic meaning, which defines the workforce as indeterminate because it specifies that the amount of effort to be extracted cannot be fixed before workers enter the labour process. Key to understanding the antagonism between employers and employees is that the employment contract cannot guarantee the amount of labour effort to be applied in the work process. The second dimension of the indeterminacy of work refers to mobility. The worker can, theoretically, terminate the contract with their employer. Worker mobility strategies and those implemented by employers that can be aimed at controlling mobility, meaning the turnover of the workforce is connected to the organisation of the labour process, the welfare system, and the labour market.

The pressure exerted by high turnover can produce managerial counter strategies with the aim of reducing the mobility of labour. For example, Smith and Zheng (2022), in a study of management strategies at two distribution centres in the south of England, found that the firm implemented an on-site employment intermediary, established coherence between permanent and agency workers, and limited the supervisor's authority in dismissals. These strategies aimed to reduce workers' mobility and make the workforce more predictable.

Conversely, capital can increase the interchangeability of the workforce in order to reduce their dependence on a workforce that has specific skills. Therefore, closely associated with mobility power is the notion of deskilling. In this way, Benvegnu (2018) found that in a local labour market with high unemployment, a 3PL firm in Paris was able to benefit from the high turnover of its workforce by maintaining an intensive labour process. In this way, it could sieve out workers who were physically unable to keep up with the demands of the work while relying on a young workforce to use the welfare state between production cycles.

From this perspective, Smith's double indeterminacy holds a dual nature (Newsome & Moore, 2018). The inclusion of agency workers may not only diminish the mobility power of directly employed workers but also reshape the work-effort bargain in favour of the employer. For example, the introduction of agency workers can create insecurity among directly employed workers and, as a result, normalise unpaid labour among employed workers as a result of this insecurity.

Moving away from managerial strategies of control, Delfanti (2019: 177) observes that the most definitive individual expression of resistance in the warehouse is the act of quitting. "Those workers who have employment alternatives, who have become terminally fed up with the warehouse pace or systems of surveillance, or feel they can no longer cope with management by stress, leave the warehouse in search of better opportunities elsewhere: a sort of bottom-up flexibility".

Indeed, integrating insights from labour process theory and the autonomy of migration perspective, Alberti (2014) reexamines the concept of 'mobility power' as a form of resistance against exploitative work, focusing on the direct responses of employees. Her findings reveal that while certain migrant groups find themselves stuck in temporary employment, others successfully navigate occupational transitions, enriching facets of their lives beyond the realm of work and embarking on new migration journeys. In contrast to conventional narratives surrounding migrants' integration into the labour market, migrant temporary workers leverage their transnational exit power to leave undesirable jobs and challenge employers' assumptions about their willingness to endure unfavourable working conditions.

In comparison with the warehouse workers in the Parisian metropolis, the migrant warehouse workers near Padua in Northern Italy experienced a relative increase in attachment to the firm, lowering their mobility differential (Benvegnu, 2018). This came from the 'family project', with many of the workers having young children or belonging to an older group of workers. This ensured that the possibility of a return to the country of origin and, therefore, international mobility was increasingly a remote possibility for many of the workers[[12]](#footnote-12). A key aspect of Alberti's (2014) mobility differential, shaping opportunities for occupational and transnational mobility, was the nature of the local labour market, social reproduction and national economic conditions. In Italy, these mobility differentials gave rise to an attachment to the warehouse, which later became central to the process of unionisation.

This evidence suggests we build a picture of the actual dynamics of the labour process, rather than an account of capital's intentions or management strategies. Indeed, by incorporating the notion of mobility power, the thesis can respond to Smith's (2006) call for academic inquiry to the indeterminacies for different categories of workers and how this can shape the labour process.

To close this section, it is necessary to repeat that mechanisms of value capture and control have so far been viewed as universal mechanisms. In order to understand how they impact the employment relation; we need to build in labour as an active agent (Thompson & Ackroyd, 1995) which takes into account the prevailing social relations in the warehouse. Therefore, using mobility struggles we can move towards understanding the contested nature of managerial mechanisms, how workers resist or consent, and how this impacts the prevailing racial and gender divisions in warehousing. Throughout this review, we have previously referred to supply chain relations regarding the incorporation of workers into capital's projects. By introducing mobility power, we can recognise the struggles associated with this incorporation.

What I am suggesting here is the notion that mechanisms of value capture are struggled over. The implication is that their 'successful' implementation in the labour process may rely on the state's ability to reconfigure the effort bargain in favour of the employer through disciplining labour (Baglioni, 2021). It is important to acknowledge here that previous literature has emphasised the role of workers' mobility power to reconfigure the effort-bargain and push back the frontier of control (Smith, 2006; Adham & Hammer, 2022). Therefore, I suggest that workers' mobility power may have an effect or create the opportunity for the 'successful' implementation of mechanisms of value capture and, in corollary, the seamless movement of value. By this, I mean the ability for retailers to extract value may rely on labours (in)ability to move between labour processes, between labour markets, and across national borders.

In many ways, this approach gives us the flexibility to explore the collision and the outcome between exploitation, meaning the intensification of the labour process and the prevailing social relations of production and mobility power of workers conditioned by the state. Moreover, this reference to a racial division of labour, and consequently a racial element of the organisation of the labour process, similarly seems an important additional dynamic in this process, one which has yet to have been explored in the context of the UK’s warehousing industry and one we will develop.

In closing this section, there are several important points to make. Our previous discussions have highlighted two strands in the literature. First, those who position the warehouse within the dynamic of the laws of motion tend to focus on control as a requirement of the vulnerability of the system. Control is presented as totalising but not universal. This form of control allows the warehouse to flexibly articulate control and consent to different workers at different times (Vallas et al., 2022).

Nonetheless, this still presents control in the warehouse as totalising. Second, literature has conceptualised the warehouse between relations in the supply chain governed by the laws of motion. This literature has identified workplace mechanisms as a result of the battle for value capture and concluded that the result is reduced indeterminacy, invasion of porosity and intensification (Newsome, 2010). However, they tend to ignore the role of workers in this process as an active agent while dislocating an analysis from the social and economic environment in which it is embedded.

Therefore, three significant critiques have been made regarding the conceptualisation of the labour process within an overarching search for value. The implication is that the New Production Method has allowed the dominant retailers to extend a search for value across inter-linked firms within the network, i.e., into the warehouse labour process. First, we suggested that while overcoming the autonomy of the labour process, it nevertheless privileges the chain, dislocating it from its socio-political context. More attention should be given to the interaction between this search for value within particular socio-political environments. The implication is that an overemphasis on the chain may mask the particular socio-political conditions required for their implementation.

Second, and in corollary, the literature tends to reify abstract labour while overlooking labour as an active agent. Therefore, value capture implies a universal tendency, something which is ‘done’ to workers. Workers make daily decisions that can affect how value capture operates in the warehouse. Consequently, labour must be treated as the ultimate source of value and as a subjective agent (Thompson & Ackroyd, 1995). Therefore, the particular conditions that affect labour power and, therefore, the implementation and ‘success’ of mechanisms of value capture that remain outside the Retailer-3PL relationship need to be understood. The implication is that these mechanisms are struggled over, but these struggles are shaped by the socio-political context in which they take place. The partiality of mechanisms of value capture is, therefore, configured on the basis of these conditions outside the supply chain, by which I mean State-Labour relations.

Third, while an increasing set of literature has focused on the racial and gendered production of difference in the warehouse labour process, this literature tends to emphasize how these social relations enable capital to 'super-exploit' (De Lara et al., 2016) its workforce. In the U.S., a body of scholarship has examined the racial dimensions of the logistics and warehousing sectors, particularly in relation to how racial hierarchies are embedded in labour practices. De Lara (2018) has highlighted how the logistics industry in regions like Southern California relies heavily on migrant labour and racialised employment practices. De Lara (2018) argues that race is not only a product of the logistics labour process but is a foundational logic structuring the industry, with racialised labour forces being subject to hyper-exploitation and precarity. Despite this, these workers have led organizing efforts across several U.S. cities to demand better safety and labour conditions, often facing retaliation and discipline as a result (Alimahomed-Wilson & Reese, 2020). To address this gap, the current thesis seeks to explore the reciprocal relationship between the logistics industry—particularly warehouse labour—and the broader socio-political context, focusing on how processes of racialization shape and are shaped by the industry. This includes examining the role of immigration policy and the uneven forms of labours’ reproduction. Therefore, my focus is on how race, particularly through state immigration policy, can discipline labour and impact the social organisation of the warehouse labour process in the UK.

The next section takes up these points (race, social reproduction and agency) to aid us in this process. It shows how their concerns can be incorporated into a labour regime framework within the circuit of capital and provides the context for the following empirical chapters.

## 2.4 Theorising Warehouse Labour

This section provides the overarching theoretical framework underpinning this thesis, offering a discussion on the relationship between race, social reproduction and agency before moving on to contextualise this in the specific labour regime in the UK and the SCR in the following chapter. While scholarly attention in logistics, and particularly within warehousing, recognises the workforces are predominantly migrant and racially minoritised workers, no studies have adequately theorised, race, social reproduction and agency as structuring logics of logistics, or warehousing in particular. Therefore, in this section, I set out a theoretical framework for understanding the experience of labour in the warehouse. This is contextualised in the following chapter through a multiscalar labour regime traversing national immigration policy, social welfare policy and the local labour market of the SCR. Therefore, while not directly employing a commodity chain framework, my approach provides "a glimpse into the chaotic social life within commodity chains, in regions defined by complex patterns of differentiation" (Mezzadri, 2017: 9).

The constitutive elements of the labour regime are discussed in terms of the race, social reproduction and agency. First, I draw on the Racial Capitalism tradition (Robinson, 2000) to explore the role of race and migrant labour in capitalist relations of production. This offers a way of understanding the experience of racialised class fractions in the UK (Miles & Phizacklea, 1980). To complement this, I introduce bordering processes prominent in class fractioning, often disarticulated from national boundaries (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013; De Genova, 2017).  This creation of difference is then developed through the prism of social reproduction, underscoring the necessity of incorporating social reproduction into analyses of labour relations to understand how subordination and exploitation intertwine (Mezzadri, 2017; 2020, Baglioni, 2021).

Lastly, I draw on a series of workplace ethnographies, including contributions from the Manchester School of Anthropology, Marxist sociological studies of manufacturing plants in Britain, and anthropological research focused on shop floor labour, plant activism, and community. This not only endorses participant observation as a valuable methodology, but also highlights how workers’ agency is deeply embedded in their everyday activities, concerns, and struggles across multiple contexts—state, home, and workplace. By focusing on production politics—understood as the ongoing struggle between workers and management over the effort-reward bargain—this approach provides a powerful lens for understanding how race intersects with the logistics industry. It allows for an in-depth exploration of how racialised workers navigate and resist the unequal power dynamics within warehouses, revealing the complexities of race and labour at the level of the workplace. This level of analysis is crucial in uncovering the lived experiences of workers, especially in the context of racialisation, and in highlighting how racial hierarchies shape both the labour process and worker resistance.

Using this theoretical framework, Chapter Three provides a contextual overview of the UK's multiscalar labour regime. Here, I examine how the UK's immigration policies, understood through the Hostile Environment and local labour market conditions in the SCR, are racially fractioning workers mobility power. It illustrates that the informalisation of the labour market in the SCR has increased, migrants are over-represented in low-paid and insecure jobs, and racialised state policies have reinforced processes of racialisation that associate migrant workers with these jobs. These national state policies and regional conditions, which racially fraction the working class, are used to analyse workers' experience in the labour process.

This section begins by summarising segmentation and dual labour market theory. While these mid-level theories provide useful insights into employer strategies for organising labour, they offer little understanding of the broader social relations that shape these divisions. Subsequently, I show how the racial capitalism literature sheds light on the processes of racialisation fundamental to the creation of surplus populations. It elucidates how racialised workers are systematically organised into a category of inexpensive and expendable labour, thus generating new grounds for accumulation. This is achieved through bordering processes that limit workers' mobility (Mezzadra & Neilson,2013). The following section outlines Poulantza's theorisation of the State to understand bordering processes as fractioning the working class along racial lines. Following this theoretical framework, I explore this process through a multiscalar labour regime, looking at the UK's immigration policies as active processes of bordering and contextualising this within the local labour market of the Sheffield City Region. The point is that these state and labour market relations are impacting workers mobility power and therefore the employment relation which is explored in detail in the ethnographic chapters.

### 2.4.1 Race

This section focuses on the role of race in structuring labour relations within the warehouse. Traditional approaches like labour market segmentation and dual labour market theory have been instrumental in explaining how labour markets are divided into distinct segments, each characterised by different levels of job security, wages, and working conditions. These theories emphasise how employers, or capital, strategically allocate workers to "primary" or "secondary" sectors, often based on perceived skill levels or educational attainment.

However, while these mid-level theories provide useful insights into employer strategies for organising labour, they offer little understanding of the broader social relations that shape these divisions. Specifically, they tend to overlook how systemic processes of racialisation and state policies contribute to the differential positioning of workers within the labour market. The divisions are not merely the result of market forces or individual characteristics but are deeply rooted in historical and structural mechanisms that perpetuate racial inequalities.

Labour market segmentation theory posits that the labour market is divided into distinct segments with different rules and conditions governing the matching of workers to jobs. These segments often mirror broader social divisions such as age, gender, race, and civil status, which in turn influence workers' bargaining power and mobility. Although employers do not necessarily create these social divisions, they frequently exploit and perpetuate them. As Rubery and Wilkinson (1994: 31) observe, segmented labour markets allow employers to tailor their labour strategies to their needs, often benefiting from a committed yet economically vulnerable workforce. For example, married women are often positioned in flexible yet low-paid jobs, effectively functioning as primary workers at secondary prices.

Segmentation theory evolved as an adaptation of dual labour market theory, which was classically formulated by Doeringer and Piore (1971). They describe the labour market as bifurcated into a primary and a secondary market. The primary market is characterised by high wages, good working conditions, stability, and opportunities for advancement, whereas the secondary market is marked by low wages, poor conditions, high turnover, and limited mobility. According to this theory, mobility between these segments is restricted, leading to persistent inequalities.

In the Doeringer-Piore model, dualism in labour markets is attributed to technical imperatives and industrial structure. Technological advancements in certain sectors create a demand for stable, skilled labour, leading to the growth of the primary sector. Conversely, the secondary sector remains flexible and provides labour during economic peaks, often through temporary or subcontracted workers. However, while this model recognises a dynamic interaction between sectors, it has been critiqued for oversimplifying the complex realities of labour markets.

The early proponents of dual labour market theory, such as Doeringer and Piore (1971) and Reich et al. (1973), introduced further distinctions within the primary market, acknowledging that not all jobs fit neatly into the primary or secondary categories. These theorists emphasised that segmentation is not merely a result of technical requirements but also a capitalist control strategy. Segmentation allows capital to maintain control over production by exploiting divisions within the workforce, such as race and gender, thereby undermining class solidarity.

Reich et al. (1982) extend this analysis by periodising segmented labour markets, linking them to broader waves of capitalist development. They argue that the world capitalist economy has undergone several long swings, each characterised by distinct forms of labour force development: initial proletarianisation, workforce homogenisation, and later, segmentation. This historical perspective highlights how labour market structures evolve in response to broader economic and political shifts, shaping workers' experiences and life chances.

Edwards (1979) further explores how segmented labour markets correspond to different forms of control within the labour process. For instance, in the subordinate primary market, workers are subjected to technical control, where the labour process is tightly regulated by machine-driven pacing and strict supervision. In contrast, the independent primary market operates under bureaucratic control, offering workers more stability, higher pay, and career advancement, but still governed by impersonal rules and procedures. This connection between the labour process and labour market segmentation highlights how control strategies are deeply embedded within broader economic structures.

Despite these contributions, the dual model of labour segmentation has faced significant criticism. It has been critiqued for being overly descriptive, partial, and sometimes tautological in explaining job allocation processes. While it identifies the existence of primary and secondary labour markets, it fails to fully explain the complex mechanisms determining how workers are assigned to different segments. For instance, Bluestone (1972) critiques the theory for neglecting systemic factors like racism and sexism, which play crucial roles in excluding certain workers from primary market opportunities. Moreover, feedback processes suggested by Doeringer and Piore (1971) and Gordon (1972) can be overly deterministic, implying that secondary workers are inherently predisposed to instability without adequately considering the broader social and economic forces at play.

Two primary conceptual challenges arise from the dualist framework: first, the theory struggles to comprehensively explain both the nature of jobs and the characteristics of workers (Sorensen & Kalleberg, 1981); second, it lacks a robust conceptualisation of how individuals are matched with their socioeconomic roles (Granovetter, 1981; Purdy, 1988). These limitations hinder a deeper understanding of labour market dynamics, particularly in relation to systemic inequalities such as racial discrimination. Minority ethnic workers, for example, may be disproportionately represented in secondary sector jobs not because of individual attributes but due to historical and systemic racism, which the dualist models fail to fully account for.

Moreover, the theory inadequately addresses the supply side of the labour market, often oversimplifying the relationship between labour supply and demand. Migrants, for example, are frequently categorised as typical secondary sector workers, without acknowledging the heterogeneity within this group or the impact of state policies on their labour market experiences. This oversight fails to account for the political processes involved in channelling specific social groups into different labour market segments.

State intervention plays a crucial role in regulating labour markets, influencing both the supply-side segmentation and overall labour market dynamics. Through immigration laws, work permits, and visa restrictions, the state directly affects the availability of migrant labour, shaping labour market segmentation. Even in neoliberal contexts, where states advocate for deregulation, they remain actively involved in labour market policies, continuously adjusting the social distribution of work (Weiss, 1998). This ongoing state involvement highlights the limitations of dualist models, which often overlook these regulatory and socio-political influences.

In summary, while dual labour market theory provides a useful framework for understanding the segmentation of labour markets, it remains limited in its ability to capture the complex interplay of factors such as race, social reproduction, and state intervention. These theories often offer a partial and deterministic view of labour market dynamics, failing to fully account for the systemic inequalities that shape workers' experiences. To move beyond these limitations, contemporary analyses of segmentation have sought to incorporate multicausal explanations, considering factors such as social reproduction, union politics, and the regulatory role of the state (Rubery, 1992).

These third-generation segmentation theories argue that the labour market reflects the structures of social reproduction and the divisions between waged and unwaged work. They emphasise that the domestic sphere and wage labour are deeply interconnected, with the family influencing labour market activity by conditioning and educating the young, supporting workers, and affecting income distribution within households. By recognising the complexities of production politics and the socially embedded nature of work, these theories offer a more nuanced understanding of labour market segmentation, moving beyond the simplistic dichotomies of earlier models.

Thus, to fully understand the dynamics of workplace relations and the effort bargain, it is essential to conceptualise these processes as shaped by the dynamic interaction between the state, labour market, race, and social reproduction. This broader perspective allows for a more comprehensive analysis of how workplace relations are negotiated and sustained in different contexts, highlighting the need to move beyond the limitations of traditional segmentation and dual labour market theories.

To address these limitations, I turn to the framework of racial capitalism, drawing on the work of Robinson (2000). Racial capitalism posits that capitalism inherently relies on racial hierarchies to generate surplus value. This perspective emphasizes that race is not just a demographic marker but a fundamental mechanism through which capitalist systems organise labour and extract value. Racialisation processes actively create and maintain a surplus population of racially minoritised and migrant workers who are rendered more exploitable due to their constrained mobility and limited access to rights.

Marx’s concept of the relative surplus population, also known as the industrial reserve army, is central to understanding the dynamics of capitalist accumulation and its impact on labour (Marx, 1990). In Capital, Marx argues that the accumulation of capital necessarily leads to the creation of a surplus population of workers, who are rendered superfluous or marginalised in relation to the productive process. This phenomenon arises not from a decline in the total demand for labour, but from the way technological advances and increasing productivity drive a wedge between capital and labour.

At the heart of Marx’s analysis is the law of the organic composition of capital, which explains how the rise in constant capital (the means of production, including machinery and technology) outpaces variable capital (labour power). As capitalists invest more heavily in machinery and less in human labour, the productivity of each worker increases, but the overall demand for labour diminishes in relative terms (Marx, 1990). This leads to what Marx calls the ‘general law of capitalist accumulation’: the more capital accumulates, the more a section of the working population becomes redundant or underemployed.

Marx (1990) notes that this process has a dual tendency. On one hand, capitalists seek to reduce the amount of variable capital they employ, substituting it with machinery to lower costs and boost efficiency. On the other hand, as accumulation continues, the same mass of capital can now control larger amounts of labour power, but with fewer workers. This paradox results in a growing segment of the population being absorbed into a precarious or unemployed status, thus constituting the relative surplus population.

The relative surplus population does not represent an absolute surplus of people but a structural phenomenon tied to capitalism’s need for a flexible, cheap, and disposable labour. Marx (1990) classifies this surplus population into various categories: the floating, latent, and stagnant populations. The floating population consists of workers cyclically hired and dismissed depending on fluctuations in production; the latent population refers to the rural workers who are drawn into urban industries during periods of expansion; and the stagnant population includes those who live in chronic underemployment or precarious conditions, often in the most degraded sectors of the economy.

This reserve army of labour serves a crucial function within capitalist economies. It creates downward pressure on wages, as those within the reserve population are often willing to accept lower wages due to their precarious circumstances. Moreover, it ensures that capital has a pool of workers to draw from during times of economic expansion, maintaining the flexibility and cost-efficiency of labour (Marx, 1990). Thus, the existence of a surplus population is not an accident or an anomaly of the capitalist system but an intrinsic part of how it operates, driven by the continuous need to reduce labour costs and increase profitability.

By integrating the concept of racial capitalism into the analysis, we can better understand how the state and capital produce and exploit racialised labour segments. This framework sheds light on how bordering processes and immigration policies function as tools for fractioning the working class along racial lines, thus facilitating the accumulation of capital. It also underscores the necessity of examining how these structural forces impact workers' agency, mobility power, and experiences within the labour process.

In the context of warehousing and logistics, this approach allows for a more comprehensive understanding of why migrant and racially minoritised workers are disproportionately represented in precarious, low-wage jobs. It moves beyond the surface explanations provided by segmentation theories to reveal the deeper, systemic factors that shape labour market dynamics. By doing so, it sets the stage for a more nuanced exploration of workers' experiences, which will be further examined through the lenses of social reproduction and agency in the subsequent sections.

Drawing on Marx's concept of 'disposability' in the reserve army (1990), racial capitalism argues that this disposability becomes embedded through social and political mechanisms of racialisation. Robinson's "Black Marxism" (2000) frames capitalism's evolution within a racialised European context, forming a racial capitalist system where race permeates material, structural, and ideological aspects (Kelley, 2017: xiii). In this context, capital accumulation intertwines with disposability, racism solidifying inequalities (Melamed, 2015). Under racial capitalism, labour hierarchies are established, generating the 'disposable labour' of the reserve army. Race legitimates the disposability of certain lives, creating new hierarchical orders among workers (Goodrich and Bombardella, 2016; Roediger, 2007). Structural and symbolic distinctions maintain stability, preventing a unified working-class consciousness (Leibowitz, 2003).

Capitalism globally establishes and exploits racial and gender differences (Roediger, 2019; Federici, 2004). Historically, race marked membership in the surplus population, designating bodies as disposable or burdensome (McIntyre, 2011). Racialisation has historically included or excluded bodies from standard economic activity. However, in alignment with Stuart Hall's perspective, there is a need to contextualise the racial surplus population within the specific racialised economic conditions. In essence, processes of differentiation are continually shaped and reconstituted by local socio-political contexts. While differentiation techniques have effects across social and political scales, they always manifest within and alongside specific local conditions (Hall, 2018).

While logistics operates in numerous spatial, political and regional contexts worldwide, we need to understand the production of racial differences in these contexts, with their own social, political, legal and historical circumstances. This also brings into question the configurations of 'white' devaluation of labour explored in the context of immigration to the UK.

Examining the dynamics of racialisation in the UK, my focus centres on the active 'construction of race' as a process. Here, the concept of 'race' diverges from static ideas of racial difference (Omi & Winant, 2015). Racialisation represents an ongoing process – the "formation of difference by ascribing specific characteristics and value to visible 'Others'," facilitated "through discourses and practices operating across diverse spatial scales" (McDowell & Christopherson, 2009). Racialisation, therefore, denotes a "collection of techniques and a configuration, entailing the disciplining and arrangement of bodies through gender, sexuality, dis/ability, and age" (Bhattacharyya, 2018: 1). Therefore, race shapes and is shaped by a multitude of embodied othering techniques, organising workers hierarchically and distributing precarity and social and economic rights, disparately across populations (Strauss, 2019; Gebrial, 2022).

Hence, to fully appreciate how the construction of differences for racialised workers' entry into the warehouse becomes a source of comparative advantage in the Sheffield City Region, we need a framework that considers processes of racialisation and how race is constructed as a source of comparative advantage in particular localities through the State. Indeed, as Sivanandan (1976: 21) reminds us, racism is typically delineated by “laws, constitutional conventions, judicial precedents, institutional practices' – all carrying the 'endorsement of the state.” This state racism solidifies discrimination for some and peril for others in the pursuit of economic exploitation. Therefore, an understanding of the racial imprimatur of the British State and how this relates to the particular context of the SCR is needed.

So far, we have established the link between surplus populations and racial capitalism, as well as emphasising the need to explore the particular socio-political context in which disposability is politically inscribed into bodies through processes of racialisation. Therefore, if disposability is political inscribed it is crucial to understand the theoretical underpinnings of the capitalist State itself before examining the actual forms through which processes of racialisation organise surplus populations in the UK and in the SCR.

Poulantzas contends that a prerequisite for capitalist relations of production and the dominance of the capitalist class is the presence of the capitalist State. Seeking to complement Marx's analysis at the mode of production level, he develops a 'theory of the capitalist state' (1978b). Addressing the question of why the bourgeoisie favours maintaining its dominance through the national popular State, Poulantzas underscores the separation of the State and the economic sphere under capitalism. While workers hold a subordinate position within production relations, they stand on equal legal footing. This equality imposes limits on capitalist control over workers, necessitating a distinction between those overseeing production and those governing the law. Without this separation, there would be no independent entity to uphold formal legal equality.

This separation is crucial for the ideological mystification that underpins the reproduction of the capitalist system as a whole. The State’s primary interest lies in maintaining the conditions necessary for capitalist reproduction rather than serving any individual capitalist. Left to their own devices, capitalists could inadvertently undermine capitalism through their competitive impulses. Thus, capitalists effectively outsource this organisational function to the State, which oversees the system in a manner that ensures profitability across various sectors—typically benefiting certain power blocs such as manufacturing or finance. The State does this because its legitimacy depends on maintaining formal conditions of equality before the law and ensuring a stable environment conducive to profitability. Consequently, capitalist relations of production hinge on those in control of production being unable to legitimately employ immediate violence to enforce their dominance.

Poulantzas, crucially, contends that the reproduction of capitalism hinges on the separation of economic and political power within the state apparatus. This separation is indispensable as it endows the system with legitimacy and empowers the State to act in the broader interests of capitalist reproduction, safeguarding the entire system's stability. Without this separation, individual capitalists might pursue their interests, posing a threat to the overall equilibrium of the capitalist structure. Poulantzas emphasises the concept of the State as not "an instrumental entity existing for itself, it is not a thing, but the condensation of a balance of forces" (1978b: 98). According to him, the State's nature at any given moment reflects the culmination of the ongoing class struggle. In this context, the State is not only a battleground where conflicting interests of labour and capital intersect but also the very terrain upon which this struggle is played out. Understanding the State as a dynamic entity shaped by the ebb and flow of class forces is paramount to grasping the intricate relationship between the State, race, and class in the context of capitalist reproduction.

Poulantzas suggests the State must not only prevent working-class centres of opposition from pursuing policies that significantly alter the State's modus operandi but also ensure that capitalists do not overreach in their efforts to control the production process. This delicate balance, characterised by an equilibrium between labour and capital, is central to Poulantzas’ conceptualisation of the State's role in capitalist reproduction. If these power dynamics, influenced by the operation of state apparatuses, predominantly favour capital, then the capitalist State plays a stabilising role in maintaining capitalist class dominance. This indicates that the State not only mirrors class relations but actively participates in shaping and influencing these relations.

In summary, Poulantzas contends that the presence of a state acts as a counterforce against inherent destabilisation tendencies within capitalist relations of production. The stabilisation, mediated by the state for the dominated classes, operates through various mechanisms. These mechanisms undermine the organisational foundation of the working class as a unified collective actor. This includes policy that create divisions within the working class based on factors such as race, gender, or immigration status that can serve to fragment the unity of workers. For instance, discriminatory immigration policies may pit migrant workers against non-migrant workers and pit different categories of migrant workers against each other.

As we have previously outlined, the warehouse labour process is predicated upon the production and negotiation of differences between and within migrant and non-migrant labour. Therefore, we need to understand how the State reproduces these differences before the worker enters the labour process. What is needed is an understanding of how the State is actively fractioning the working class through and between migrant and non-migrant categories. Poulantzas was correct in emphasizing that the State plays a role not only in shaping class relations but also in influencing race and gender relations (1978: 43).

As migrant labour is increasingly central to the operation of logistics, any analysis of logistics labour should also include an analysis of the reproduction of migrant labour as class fractions. In this sense, Poulantzas' conceptualisation can be complemented by the Racial Capitalism tradition, which, as I have outlined, focuses on the production and hierarchisation of difference in capitalist societies, and the creation of surplus populations.

Therefore, we need to understand the connection between class fractioning and racial domination. In other words, we need to understand the way State-mediated stabilisation is racialised and, therefore, how the State racially fractions the working class, acting in the interests of the stability or equilibrium of the system. For this, we turn to the Poulantzian-inspired British analysis of the State (Phizacklea & Miles, 1980) and further develop this through the autonomy of migration literature, which highlights the role of borders. The implication here is that the British State, through its immigration policy, and the active process of bordering (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013), is racially fractioning the working class.

Phizacklea and Miles (1980) analysed racialised social relations in Britain from a neo-Marxist perspective. Their work analyses the complexities of the working class and its heterogeneity within the capitalist social structure. Unlike the notion of a homogenous working class, Phizacklea and Miles (1980) argue that divisions arise due to the ever-changing nature of work and industries. They introduce the concept of "class fraction," highlighting the objective positions within class boundaries, shaped by both economic and politico-ideological relations. This approach recognises the diverse structural positions in economic, political, and ideological realms, emphasising their independent effects within these boundaries. Phizacklea and Miles (1980: 5) use the concept of class fraction to mean:  "an objective position within a class boundary which is, in turn, determined by both economic and politico-ideological relations ... class boundaries mark the objectively different structural positions in economic, political and ideological relations, but these relations also have independent effects within these boundaries".

Phizacklea and Miles (1980) analyse labour migration to Britain, emphasising its origins in the needs of an expanding capitalist system. They draw parallels with southern European labour recruited for western European economies. Upon arrival, migrants from the Indian subcontinent and the Caribbean underwent a racialisation process, influencing their access to skilled jobs. This racialisation, rooted in both racism and limited relevant skills, confined them to the manual and unskilled sectors of the working class. Discrimination further obstructed upward mobility, solidifying their distinct racialised fraction within the working class, who were concentrated in specific types of manual work characterised by unfavourable conditions and low pay (Phizacklea & Miles, 1980).

This framework provides a means of comprehending racially infused class divisions shaped by the heightened differentiation of migrant rights in Britain. In order to understand the differentiation of migrant rights in Britain today, we must look at how borders play a prominent role. Therefore, to understand how the British State produces racialised class fractions, we need to understand the role of Britain's immigration policy as it unfolds within borders and follows workers through their daily lives. For this I turn to an understanding of bordering and the multiplication of labour.

'Multiplication' involves increased division through the expansion of borders. This expansion of borders serves to differentiate migrants' entry based on various and hierarchised statuses. At the same time, it also refers to an increase in control that aligns with the intensified exploitation of labour (Neilson, 2009). For example, research has shown how the UK's deportation system (De Noronha, 2020) and the British border regime (Ali, 2022) have created hierarchies of citizenship in multi-status Britain. This creates distinctions within migrant populations and between migrant and non-migrant workforces based on the range of social rights awarded to different groups. These classifications augment migrant workers' exploitability in production.

The tradition emphasises the movement away from understanding the border under the juridical prism of the nation-state to a system that operates within national borders and follows migrants into labour markets, workplaces and communities. In this way, borders proliferate as they are produced "whenever a distinction between subject and object is established" (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013: 16). Hence, the term "bordering" refers to diverse processes involved in establishing boundaries and delineating distinctions, resulting in varied forms of inclusion and exclusion.

As internal borders become more pronounced and exclusions against non-citizens deepen, numerous multi-ethnic groups of young people are presently separated based on immigration and citizenship status. Therefore, borders follow people, meaning that racial differences are cross-cut by migration and citizenship status. De Noronha, in his ethnography of deportation in contemporary Britain (2020), describes this judicial terrain as 'Multi-Status Britain'. When considering warehouse workers with varying immigration statuses, it is crucial to highlight the central role of immigration control in understanding the labour process. Describing the UK as "Multi-Status" aims to prioritise immigration control in broader discussions concerning race and citizenship, emphasizing how immigration control contributes to the creation of racial distinctions and labour power hierarchies intersected by citizenship. According to Bridget Anderson, borders are, therefore, productive "the mark of a particular kind of relationship, one based on deep division and inequality between people who are given varying national statuses" (2009: 6). These have extensive consequences that are not simply restricted to crossing national borders.

The focus here, has been on comprehending how immigration controls in the UK reshape racial distinctions and hierarchies within the workforce. Additionally, the exploration extends beyond the legal perspective of the nation-state, acknowledging the pervasive nature of borders in everyday life and various contexts (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013; Yuval-Davis et al., 2019). As Balibar (2009: 104) reminds us, "[borders are] transported to the middle of political space, are implosive, infinitely elastic and in effect truly everywhere within the space of the nation-state".

This analysis critically examines the limitations of traditional segmentation theories in understanding labour relations within the context of the workplace. While these theories provide insights into how labour markets are divided, they often overlook the systemic processes of racialisation and state intervention that shape these divisions. Racial capitalism reveals that racial hierarchies are not just byproducts of market segmentation but integral to the functioning of capitalism itself.

The role of the state, particularly through immigration control, actively reinforces these divisions, creating a multi-status workforce where racialised and migrant workers face heightened precarity. Poulantzas’ insights into the capitalist state highlight how these mechanisms stabilise capitalist relations by maintaining distinctions that undermine class solidarity.

To advance our understanding, we must incorporate a framework of social reproduction, which elucidates how these inequalities are perpetuated through the reproduction of labour, beyond the workplace. By doing so, we can move towards a more comprehensive analysis that recognises the interconnectedness of race, social reproduction and the agency of labour.

### 2.4.2 Social Reproduction

Having established how race and processes of racialisation structure the labour market and define the hierarchies of exploitation within logistics, we now turn to the role of social reproduction in shaping the labour process. If racial capitalism highlights how bodies are racialised and organised into surplus populations, social reproduction theory complements this by examining how the daily and generational renewal of labour power is connected to these same processes of differentiation. Social reproduction activities—the unpaid and often invisible work of maintaining and replenishing the workforce—are not only essential to capitalist production but also reflect and reinforce racial, gender, and class inequalities.

This section explores how social reproduction is entangled with the construction of difference across both production and reproduction, examining how the burdens of social reproduction are disproportionately placed on racialised and migrant populations. By understanding social reproduction in relation to race, we gain a fuller picture of how labour is organised and stratified, revealing the complex ways in which exploitation in the workplace is rooted in broader social and economic structures.

As we have seen, labour process scholars have considered only briefly the question of race, addressing primarily race and gender differences as forms of labour control mechanisms in which to divide the workforce on the shopfloor and induce competition between different segments of the working class. In my view, labour process scholars would benefit from expanding their focus to encompass not only the dynamics of production but also the role of social reproduction, particularly in understanding how racial difference and migrant labour shape labour processes both within and beyond the formal boundaries of work. Incorporating an understanding of the forms through which racial difference is reproduced allows us to understand how reproduction is at the service of production but also constitutes a space from which different forms of resistances are forged.

In this section, following on from my discussion of racial capitalism and the reserve army of labour, I explore the reproduction of racial difference through the dimensions of social reproduction. Wearing the lens of racial capitalism, I flesh out the dimensions of social reproduction elaborated by Mezzadri (2020). I identify five corresponding areas where the externalisation of costs of social reproduction; the expansion of control and formal subsumption occur. In terms of the systematic externalisation of costs of social reproduction I examine how international migration externalises social reproduction costs for destination countries; analyse the role of migrant social networks in providing essential support and subsidising reproduction costs and investigate how limited access to welfare for migrants creates a tiered system of social reproduction costs. Second, in terms of the expansion of the control of the workforce beyond formal working time and the labour process I explore how racialised dormitory labour regimes and informal housing arrangements extend control over workers with different immigration status, beyond formal working hours. Finally, it will consider the expansion of formal subsumption of labour in the context of the informal economy. For each of these dimensions I identify the agency of labour.

By analysing these themes, this section aims to illuminate the complex interplay between race, social reproduction and labour processes, underscoring the necessity of incorporating social reproduction into analyses of production politics and labour relations. This perspective not only reveals the interdependencies between these spheres but also highlights the potential for resistance within and beyond the workplace, as well as the emergence of sites of resistance where workers organise and advocate for their rights, paving the way for a more comprehensive understanding of labour dynamics in contemporary capitalist economies.

Feminist theorists have made significant contributions by conceptualising social reproductive labour as essential to understanding the subordination of women within capitalism and the potential for resistance. Reproductive labour broadly encompasses activities necessary for daily and intergenerational maintenance of life, involving biological reproduction, sustaining the labour force, and providing care (Ferguson, 2016; Bakker, 2007). This form of labour, while often unpaid, is integral to society, economy, and political structures (Fraser, 2017). Silvia Federici, for example, argues that capitalism's rise depended fundamentally on the unpaid labour performed in domestic spaces, reinforcing gendered divisions and bolstering patriarchal structures that persist in society (Federici, 2012).

Historically, social reproduction and its relationship to production has evolved. Federici notes that medieval women in servile communities, while under patriarchy, were less economically dependent on men compared to capitalist societies where the shift to wage labour redefined women’s domestic roles as unskilled and marginal (Federici, 2004). Dalla Costa and James (1975) similarly trace how capitalist production’s move from household to factory separated men as wage labourers from family units, further isolating women and transforming domestic work into undervalued, invisible labour. This transition both consolidated patriarchal control and altered the power dynamics within families, marking a profound shift in the organisation and value of women’s labour.

Similarly, Dalla Costa and James (1975) discuss the change in the organisation of production, namely the transition of the centre of production from the home and the family in a pre-capitalist patriarchal society to the factory in a capitalist society. They argue that capital, which separated men from the family and turned them into wage labourers, created a fracture between them and all other wage-less proletarians (Dalla Costa & James, 1975: 10). Women, children and the aged, who do not receive wages and whose financial responsibility is on men’s shoulders, lost the relative power that came from the family’s dependence on their labour which was regarded as social and necessary (Dalla Costa & James, 1975: 5). With the transition to a capitalist patriarchal society, the nature of social reproduction and the conditions of women have changed substantially. Women have been isolated in the home, and forced to carry out work that is considered unskilled and focus on reproduction (Dalla Costa & James, 1975).

Social reproduction must be understood both as maintenance, rearing, and care of the workforce (Dalla Costa and James, 1975), and also as a condition and quality of life of subjects ‘at work and outside work’ (Mitchell et al, 2003: 433). Drawing from these perspectives, I use a notion of social reproduction as a general concept to describe the different daily activities individuals take care of and that compose the ‘fleshy and messy and indeterminate stuff of everyday life’ (Katz, 2002: 711). This focus highlights how racialised experiences influence the conditions of social reproduction, impacting workers' lives both inside and outside the workplace.

Bhattacharyya (2018) uses the concept of racial capitalism, which involves the differentiation of populations while integrating diverse economic activities into the logic of accumulation. This framework highlights how subjects are positioned across production and reproduction, work and non-work, with racial differentiation playing a key role. Social reproduction and the valorisation of differentiated bodies are crucial to primitive accumulation. Bhattacharyya emphasizes that analysing reproduction processes alongside labour processes reveals how they co-constitute social and work relationships (Mies, 1982).

Bhattacharyya asserts that reproductive activities are not fully subsumed into capital value, but formal access to social and financial resources remains influenced by state regulation and individual entitlements to social assistance and security. This perspective underscores that production requirements do not encompass all possibilities for remaking life (Bhattacharyya, 2018).

These debates on the value of reproductive vis-à-vis productive work, use and exchange value illuminate some of the fault lines between labour power and social reproduction. They reveal the importance of the value of social reproductive work as necessary for the reproduction of the commodity labour power, and these activities often fall on the shoulders of women and racialised migrants (Bhattacharyya, 2018). It is at the crossroad of these two spheres, the productive and reproductive ones, that it is necessary to understand how “capital organises and hierarchises human activities for the purpose of its reproduction” (Del Re, 2013: 112)

According to Mezzadri (2020: 38), the activities in the reproduction of life are interlinked with the labour processes in at least three ways: 1) through the ‘absorption of the systematic externalisation of costs of social reproduction’, for example cutting wages and social contributions and ‘importing’ migrants; 2) by expanding the control of the workforce beyond the formal working time and the labour process, as in the case of the dormitory labour regime; 3) through ‘the expansion of formal subsumptions of labour, made possible by the fragmentation and decomposition of labour processes worldwide’ (including for instance home work in sweatshops).

The first channel through which social reproduction directly co-constitutes value is through the role of labour migration. This process is fuelled by labour circulations, continuous industrial redeployment and early exit from the industrial army (Mezzadri, 2020). It works as a direct subsidy to capital.

Human geographer Cindi Katz (2002) theorised the role of international migration in reshaping social reproduction on a global scale. Katz highlighted how migration effectively transfers variable capital across borders. The process of reproducing labour in the country of origin—covering upbringing, education, and maintenance of the worker before and during migration—is typically borne by the family or the state in the country of origin. This arrangement supports the labour processes in the destination country by subsidising the costs of labour reproduction. Katz referred to this phenomenon as "a direct transfer of wealth from generally poorer to richer countries" (Katz, 2002: 710).

Recent research on informal labour in India (Mezzadri, 2017) emphasizes how rural-urban mobility and broader labour movements facilitate the externalisation of social reproduction costs. Migrant workers, by maintaining ties with their communities of origin, subsidise capital through their social reproduction strategies. For example, labour contractors in India facilitate the movement of partially dispossessed peasants between rural villages and urban centres, ensuring their survival while externalising the costs of their social reproduction to their rural communities. This creates a "social buffer zone" where migrants can rely on informal networks for child and elder care, health provisions, and housing, reducing the costs of their labour for employers (Mezzadri, 2017: 72–3).

In historical contexts, such as the Bracero program in the US and the guest worker programs in Europe, migration policies explicitly controlled the social reproduction of migrant labour. These policies often restricted family reunification to prevent the transfer of social reproduction costs to the host country. Burawoy (1976) noted how this separation was maintained by preventing migrants from bringing their families, ensuring that the costs of maintaining and reproducing labour were borne by the country of origin. This separation reduced costs for employers in the destination country by ensuring that the migrant's immediate family remained responsible for long-term reproductive and intergenerational costs.

Modern migration policies continue to control social reproduction through restrictive measures. For instance, in Malaysia, migrant workers on temporary visas are prohibited from marrying locals or fellow contract workers, and migrant women are not allowed to bring their families or get pregnant (Miles et al., 2022). Such policies ensure that migrant labour remains focused on production, free from reproduction commitments, thereby reducing the social reproduction costs for the host country.

In summary, these literatures have suggested that the externalisation of social reproduction costs through migration is a strategic practice that benefits capital by shifting the burden of labour reproduction to poorer countries or regions. This process is facilitated by policies that maintain a spatial and social separation between the productive and reproductive spheres, ensuring that the costs of reproducing labour are minimised for employers in richer countries.

Understanding social reproduction from the perspectives of capital and the state is crucial, but it is equally important to consider the subjective and cultural practices of migrants, which significantly impact the labour process. Migrants not only subsidise the local economy of their host country by leveraging transnational and local community resources but also migrate for various reasons beyond economic needs. These reasons include escaping oppression in their home countries and seeking spaces for appropriation and liberation. Thus, the diverse motives behind migration influence both transnational and local practices of social reproduction and mobility (Meardi, 2010).

Highlighting the social reproductive practices of migrants in relation to production does not imply reducing migration to purely economic processes, as migrants move for reasons beyond calculated cost-benefit analyses. Migration literature, Glick Schiller et al. (1995) and Conradson and Latham (2005), illustrates how transnational migrant networks, whether kinship or coethnic, support the social reproduction of migration. These networks facilitate initial migration and provide ongoing support in the destination country through activities such as providing information, accommodation, job opportunities, and emotional and financial support.

In the European context, Ciupijus et al. (2020) demonstrate the role of kinship and ethnic networks in facilitating migrants’ transnational mobility across labour markets in different member states. They argue that the drivers of such movements go beyond economic readings of labour market mobility, emphasising the role of kinship and ethnicity networks in shaping what they term 'mobility power' or 'transnational exit.' This perspective shifts the focus from the destination country to the transnational experience of relocation, which depends on the support of kinships, families, and communities rather than just the individual.

Maintaining family ties for both affective and economic reasons is essential in explaining the link between kinship and mobility. This means that maintaining strong family connections influences people's decisions to migrate, not just for financial reasons but also for emotional ones. Affective kinships—close, emotional ties within families—can make individuals prioritise staying connected to loved ones over purely economic opportunities. As a result, migration decisions may be guided by the desire to support family relationships or care for relatives, rather than solely focused on maximising financial benefits. This perspective emphasises the importance of social and emotional factors in shaping migration patterns. Ciupijus et al. (2020) highlight the 'actualisation of labour power' through mobility, which does not simply follow supply and demand laws. Labour intermediaries and migrant brokers are integral to the complex social processes occurring between the country of origin and the labour market of destination.

Alberti (2011) found similar dynamics among young Brazilian migrants in London's hospitality sector. These migrants used their limited income to support each other’s precarious lives, share resources, and build connections for future mobility. Such networks exceed purely economic aims, demonstrating that migration can create demands for non-market services and unpaid work essential for reproducing the transnational family.

Drawing from Marx's theory of social reproduction, Cravey (2005) highlights the interdependencies and tensions between production and reproduction. Migration externalises the costs of producing labour power while relying on support networks facilitated by transnational ways of living. Migrant networks lower the necessary labour time for future migrants and inspire new migrations, creating continuous tension in highly mobile lives.

The role of transnational families in supporting production systems, communities back home, and global inequalities has been explored by feminist geographers and migration scholars (e.g., Baldassar and Merla, 2013; Zontini, 2010). Cravey's (2005) work on North Carolina migrants theorises globalisation's impact on production and social reproduction, describing these as 'scaling up' and 'scaling down' processes. Migrants creatively adapt to the loss of household support systems and state-funded social provision, developing practices that become resistant spaces of social reproduction.

Hopkins (2017) examines the community space of the church for Filipino caregivers in Canada, highlighting the importance of psychological and informal support in the realm of social reproduction. These forms of support help workers recharge from exhausting work, find new accommodation, and access financial support. Such support networks demonstrate the need to distinguish between paid reproductive work and unpaid social reproduction, as they unfold in the real lives of workers.

Overall, Cravey (2005) concludes that the 'downscaling' of social reproduction costs from public to private spheres requires both separation and ongoing connection of migrant members with their diaspora communities and family across borders. This double view illuminates the wider role of social reproduction in the globalised economy, showing how the reproductive work of transnational families, the exclusion of migrants from social welfare, and their incorporation into the precarious economy support productive systems in the immigration country while reproducing migrant communities across borders. Therefore, the role of migrant social networks is viewed as providing essential support and subsidising the costs of social reproduction.

Some authors suggest that migrants may move for welfare reasons, given that Western European countries often have more robust welfare systems. Kvist (2004) discusses this in the context of the European Union enlargement, suggesting that East-to-West mobility could be seen as a means to access national welfare systems, sometimes even exporting benefits back to the home country. However, in most Global North countries, non-citizens are often excluded from welfare entitlements (Cohen et al., 2002). Border controls extend into social life by excluding immigrants and asylum seekers from social assistance and means-based benefits, thus outsourcing the costs of social reproduction twice: employers in destination countries benefit from 'ready-made' labour, while families and communities in the origin countries bear the burden of unpaid activities (often without state or employer welfare contributions such as pensions or social security).

The entitlement to social protections (including social contributions, health services, and social assistance) is a politically managed issue, often determined by legal categories (Anderson, 2009). Migrants, as non-citizens, epitomize the construction of the welfare state. Critical migration scholarship has shown that migration controls aim not only to regulate employment but also to maintain societal precariousness through varied categories of entitlement and 'deservingness' (Cohen et al., 2002). Vickers (2019) argues that immigration control and state welfare are dimensions of state intervention structuring the reproduction of waged labour vital to capitalism.

Most immigration systems, both in the Global North and South, allow migrants to bring their families if they demonstrate economic 'self-sufficiency' and do not become a burden on the welfare state, usually excluding them from public funds (Anderson & Hughes, 2015). Even within the European Union's common market, welfare restrictions on those who cannot prove 'active' labour market participation or perform only 'marginal' work show persistent differential access to state-supported social reproduction. Migration and welfare controls extend into disciplining migrant labour by enforcing precarious employment conditions, even for higher-skilled migrants, who may be forced to accept low-paid, insecure jobs to claim social benefits (Simola, 2018).

Limited research exists on the struggles, strategies, and demands of migrant workers regarding welfare benefits. However, literature does explore the intersection of migration and welfare controls, and the effects of welfare restrictions perpetuating migrant precariousness (Simola, 2018). This research highlights the need to expand understanding of migrant work in relation to welfare claims. For instance, research on seasonally employed migrants in Italy's hotel industry shows strategic use of unemployment benefits to survive non-seasonal periods and maintain transnational families (Iannuzzi, 2023). In the logistics sector, Benvegnù (2018) found that while French migrants use unemployment benefits to improve working conditions, Italian migrants, facing poorer benefits, have less mobility. Morad et al., (2022) discuss Bangladeshi workers in Italy's Fincantieri shipyards, showing how visa renewals affect job security and mobility.

Temporary work and dependency on welfare are necessary to survive high living costs and low wages, especially in global cities, thus reproducing precarious migrant labour (Paul & Yeoh, 2020). When state migration policies introduce new regularisation obstacles, migrants may seek different destinations. Morad et al. (2022) found that Italian-Bangladeshis in the UK navigate welfare benefits strategically to support family life, indicating complex factors beyond mere economic calculation in social reproduction. Migrant welfare strategies create labour supply intermittencies and a preference for part-time work, problematic for employers long-term.

Beyond welfare regimes, community-based social reproductive strategies can influence labour relations across economies. Brown (2019) illustrates how an agrarian subsistence economy in Laos subsidises social reproduction, permitting lower wages but granting workers more bargaining power. In Guatemala's Free Zone, indigenous Maya women manage labour turnover to regulate exploitation and reproduction needs (Goldín, 2011). These strategies should be seen as workers' options to control their lives, not just reactions to capitalist power (Goldín, 2011).

Bhattacharyya (2018) explores social reproduction as a potential space for resisting global capitalism. While sceptical about social reproduction's revolutionary potential, Bhattacharyya remains open to non-capitalist survival strategies emerging in this sphere. Understanding these practices' transformative potential in addressing oppression based on race and gender, both within and beyond workplaces, is crucial.

The second channel through which social reproductive realms and activities directly shape the process of labour surplus extraction, effectively expanding exploitation rates and hence directly participating in capitalist value generation is shaped across the many dormitories, industrial hamlets and urban enclaves where the global industrial proletariat sleep and rest before going back to work (Mezzadri, 2020).

While in some places, like China, the dormitory is a mammoth infrastructure resembling a prison-like barrack – shaping the whole labour regime in its own image (Pun and Smith, 2006) – in other places the dormitory is more like an informal housing arrangement inextricably embedded in local industrial labour relations. Ultimately, the labour regime is always “dormitory” (Burawoy, 1985), in the sense that the housing arrangements of the industrial labour force are always central to and co-constitutive of the work relations characterising a specific sector and locale. These regimes are contested terrains for migrant labour reproduction, potentially generating new sources of worker power.

Obviously, then, these arrangements may vary on the basis of distinct histories of colonial and contemporary exploitation. The symbiotic connection between realms of production and the construction of difference in workers daily reproduction ensures workers are differently located into the workplace, besides turning them into ever more compliant labouring subjects to varying extents (Schling, 2022).

Just-in-time management regimes orchestrate worker mobility to align with employers' needs, as described by Xiang and Lindquist (2014) in their analysis of Asian migrants in Southeast Asia. Labour intermediaries and migration brokers recruit migrants and accommodate them in dormitories, expanding the labour market to manage turnover and meet just-in-time demands (Smith, 2006). The COVID-19 pandemic exemplified state and capital control over migrant workers through dormitories, but historical examples, such as Japanese silk factories relying on migrant women workers (Tsurumi, 1992), also highlight these dynamics. In China, dormitory regimes immobilize labour to maximize its use in just-in-time production, amidst rural-to-urban migrations and a partially relaxed hukou system (Pun and Smith, 2006). Dormitory regimes enable employers to have labour readily available for increased overtime demands, integrating production and reproduction by relieving workers of family and housework responsibilities (Pun and Smith, 2006). This control extends to Europe, where posted workers are temporally mobile and often housed in substandard conditions, limiting their ability to build social resources (Engbersen et al., 2013). The dormitory system thus regulates labour performance by controlling the reproduction of migrant labour, a phenomenon also observed in Italian garment production (Ceccagno, 2017). This reconfiguration of space and time ensures the primary objective of value production for capital, often to the detriment of social reproduction (Smith and Winders, 2008).

Dormitories have been analysed as ‘total institutions’ due to their role in extending work hours and control over workers' lives, both at production sites and in their living spaces (Pun and Smith, 2006). These oppressive systems enforce curfews and maintain overt, punishment-oriented control, with dormitories often located within or near factory grounds and guarded around the clock (Ceccagno and Sacchetto, 2019; Ceccagno, 2017). The strict rules in these dormitories dictate living conditions and behaviours, blurring the boundaries between work and life more intensely than historical examples like Ford's sociological department.

In the case of migrant farm workers from Mexico and Central America in the US, they are housed in isolated and overcrowded camps, which increase their aggressiveness due to prolonged forced relationships (Kraemer Diaz et al., 2015). This spatial segregation is a powerful management tool to ensure a readily available workforce and to mitigate high turnover and wage demands (Pun and Smith, 2006). Similar patterns of seclusion are observed among agricultural migrant workers in southern Italy, who, despite formal freedoms, face de facto immobility and strict employer control (Piro, 2021).

In Cambodia, Chinese-owned construction sites use language barriers and segregated accommodations to prevent worker solidarity (Franceschini, 2020). Migrants from Asian countries often face restrictive migration policies in their destination countries, limiting their ability to choose or change employers and resulting in their isolation (Seo and Skelton, 2017). The sponsorship system in Persian Gulf countries similarly enforces socio-spatial segregation, with severe health consequences for migrants living in labour camps (Kamrava and Babar, 2012). For example, migrants in the UAE experience the "Dubai Syndrome," characterised by depression and thoughts of self-harm due to their harsh living conditions (Bruslé, 2012).

The role of ethnic and family networks in managing labour retention is complex and ambivalent. Management often relies on family members or people from the same place of origin to limit worker turnover. Pun (2005) highlighted that family bonds among coworkers enforce mutual obligations and control, thereby enhancing workforce retention. Ethnic enclaves and migrant networks can support job-seeking while also restricting job opportunities, particularly for undocumented migrants, as Xiang and Lindquist (2014) explain, family pressures often ensure that migrant workers do not overstay or change employers, aligning with state and agency plans.

Conversely, isolating workers from their community networks can be a strategy to limit their resourcefulness. Azmeh (2014) emphasised that international manufacturing firms favour dormitory labour regimes to cut social ties, thereby controlling the workforce. This is evident in Jordan, where migrant workers are recruited globally and placed in dormitories to satisfy US buyers' needs. Dormitory arrangements disrupt workers' social relationships and community ties, serving as a cornerstone of social control in the workplace.

In the Australian mining industry, employers have developed anti-social network strategies by replacing company towns with a "fly-in/fly-out" (FI-FO) labour regime (Manky, 2016). This model separates production and reproduction processes, weakening social bonds at work and in local communities (Ellem, 2016). Technological improvements and better transport connections enable long-distance commuting, pushing workers to longer hours and exposing them to substance abuse (Aroca, 2001). This spatial reorganization reduces workers' bargaining power by scattering them across the country, focusing more on personal lives than union activities (Vojnovic et al., 2016).

Transnational family dynamics and resources for social reproduction, alongside dormitory conditions and their coercive functions, influence workers' mobility and turnover rates. The reconfiguration of reproductive work through dormitories significantly impacts the labour process, solidarity, and workers' organization (Pun and Smith, 2006). Despite employers' efforts to limit workers' associational power through spatial seclusion and extended working hours, dormitories provide a space for hybrid class formations and conscientisation (Ceccagno and Sacchetto, 2019). These formations are not solely class-based but also incorporate gender and ethnic identities, as observed among China's mostly female migrant workers who develop class identity influenced by kinship, ethnicity, and gender (Pun, 2005). Research on Foxconn’s plants in Europe by Andrijasevic and Sacchetto (2016a) found that dormitories allow EU migrant workers to rebuild sociality, exchange labour market information, and develop a sense of agency.

Ceccagno and Sacchetto (2019) argue that instead of viewing dormitories individually, one should consider the multiplicity of accommodations available to migrants. The web of dormitories acts like a chessboard where migrants can move to find better conditions, enhancing their associational power. Living in cheap accommodation can foster solidarity among migrants, which can spill over into the workplace and lead to high labour turnover as a form of protest against the labour management regime (Smith, 2006). Charanpal Singh Bal (2016) noted that in Dubai’s construction sector, labour camps facilitated organising strikes due to the rapid spread of information among workers.

Pun Ngai (2005) argues that while dormitories serve capital interests by promoting high labour circulation and inhibiting long-term collective resistance, they also lay the groundwork for class formation and future class actions. The spatial restriction of labour in dormitories configures different degrees of labour mobility power, as evidenced in EPZs. In summary, dormitories and informal housing plays a complex role in managing mobility, social reproduction, labour control, and workers’ associational power. As a result, the extent to which workers housing is a space to extend control and turn workers into compliant subjects is ambivalent. Scholars have shown how they can effectively expand exploitation rates and hence directly participate in capitalist value generation and at the same time increase workers associational power through increased socialisation, bonding and information networks to effectively disrupt capital accumulation.

Finally, a third channel through which social reproduction co-constitutes value is represented by the role of informal labour. A number of studies on the informal economy claim that informal economic processes develop as a consequence of de-industrialization (Mingione 1983). These studies emphasize the gulf that separates formal and informal economic processes and the increasing marginality of those people involved in informal or illegal economic activities.

However, other studies stress the interdependence between formal and informal economic processes (Standing, 1989). They frame this interdependence in the context of capitalist restructuring. While, others frame it in the broader context of the relationships between capitalist and non-capitalist societies (Meillassoux 1981). Together, however, these authors claim that the exploitative potential of the informal economy arises from the fact that the informal economy comes to provide cheap, non-unionized, and flexible labour to main contractors in the formal economy.

For example, those scholars who recognise the connection between formal and informal labour in the process of value generation (Fortunati, 1995) consider the domestic and informal economy as a form of capitalist appropriation of unpaid female and child labour through bonds of kinship (Mezzadri, 2020). Hence participation in the informal economy can effectively expand exploitation rates and directly participate in capitalist value generation (De Neve, 2005).

Hart, (1973) shifts focus from macroeconomic processes to local, individual, and informal strategies of production within the family and community. His seminal work on Accra's informal economy (1973) challenges the Western notion of informality as marginal, showing its strong social networks, economic diversification, and personal freedoms (Hart 1973). Hart argues that terms like "unemployment" and "wage-employment" oversimplify the varied economic activities between formal and informal work.

Similarly, Pahl (1984) demonstrates that many UK workers engaged in informal economies are wage-workers, suggesting that informal labour is often voluntary, not merely a result of unemployment or poverty. Morris (1994) explores how cultural alienation drives generations of Pakistani migrants to engage in the informal economy as a community practice, while Stack (1997) highlights the stability and social networks of African-American families in Chicago's Flats, debunking stereotypes of disorganisation.

These scholars show how people combine formal and informal labour, questioning the strict distinction between them. However, they often overlook the exploitative potential of informalisation, particularly in reproducing capitalist relations in domestic settings. While informal labour can offer flexibility and mobility, it can also deepen exploitation, especially for migrant and ethnic minority groups, who are essential to capitalist value generation while navigating agency through social reproduction.

In this section, we have explored social reproduction, which can act both as facilitators and disruptors of capitalist accumulation by reducing and downscaling the social costs of reproducing and maintaining labour power. The objective was to illustrate how the racial reserve army of labour is reproduced and its impact on the labour process.

Following Mezzadri's (2020) dimensions, it identified five key areas where the externalisation of social reproduction costs, expansion of control, and formal subsumption occur. First, the externalisation of social reproduction costs is evident in international migration, where destination countries shift these costs to migrants' home countries. Migrant social networks play a crucial role in providing essential support and subsidizing reproduction costs, while limited access to welfare creates a tiered system of social reproduction costs for migrants. Second, the expansion of workforce control is exemplified by dormitory labour regimes, which extend control over workers beyond formal working hours through racialised dormitory and informal housing arrangements. Lastly, the role of the informal economy and its links with formal production, showed that informal labour can both obscure capitalist relations of production and labour’s real subsumption to capital, but also impact rates of exploitation more directly.

This section has demonstrated how the externalisation of social reproduction costs, the expansion of control mechanisms, and the relationship between informal and formal labour contribute to the reproduction of racialised labour. By examining how these dynamics play out within the labour process, we can better understand how racial and social reproduction intersect with workers' experiences and agency on the shop floor. This approach will help to contextualise the broader implications of racial capitalism and social reproduction in shaping labour processes and production politics.

### 2.4.3 Production Politics

It is to a consideration of production politics that we now turn. The concern with this section is to draw on a body of literature that attempts to understand production politics through a series of workplace ethnographies, including the contributions of the Manchester School of Anthropology, Marxist sociological studies of manufacturing plants in Britain and anthropological studies based on vivid and engaged ethnographies of shop floor labour, plant activism and community.

Thus far, we have witnessed how an understanding of the labour process can be complemented by problematising race, the state and social reproduction. The concern with this section is to review workplace ethnographies with reference to the impact of the prevailing social context, as well as racial and gendered divisions of labour. Additionally, this conceptualisation of the workplace operates from the premise that the extraction of surplus remains contested and that labour remains an active agent. Consequently, production politics is understood as a conflict between workers and owners/management concerning the effort bargain (Burawoy, 1979; 1985; Edwards, 1979; Cohen, 1987).

As we have seen, the labour process is not merely a backdrop for control or value capture; rather, it involves a contradictory mix of control, consent, struggle and accommodation, which makes up the dynamics of the employment relationship. The politics of production is therefore understood as managerial attempts to extract greater levels of effort, which are *always* contested by workers (Cohen, 1987). The point of this section is to stress that these dynamics are not confined to the workplace; rather, the workplace ethnographies offer what Roberts (1990: 10) calls “the factuality of first-hand experience” of workplace politics. This is both an endorsement of the participant observation methodology and an understanding that workers' agency is pragmatically entangled in their everyday activities, worries and struggles in the context of the state, home and workplace.

To begin, effort bargaining is realised through withholding full effort, contingent on some desired response from management (Roy, 1954). Finley's (1988) ethnography of longshoring provides a good example of effort bargaining. In this setting, he described how the workers had developed a normative arrangement with supervisors in which they received lengthy breaks but maintained output by having the remaining men on the crew cover for the absent workers: 'When you're on, you keep that hook going, you work. In a sense, we pay for our time off we do; when you come out of that hold, you're wringing wet because you know you got to put out because if you don't, now you're on the carpet. . ..' These remarks indicate that work effort is traded for time off. Foremen use the deal to get the job moving; as one describes, 'I tell them: "You've had your hours off, now it's time to go to work."' (Finlay 1988:106) This example illustrates giving extraordinary effort at work but giving it only conditionally.

It is important to understand how this structured antagonism in the workplace can be best understood. To begin with, Edwards and Scullion (1982) used the idea of relative autonomy to suggest that the workplace is a distinct site of analysis. Thus, for Edwards (1991), the patterns of control that emerge within the workplace depend in part on the activities of managers and workers in the immediate' effort bargain'. In, 'The social organisation of industrial conflict' (1982) Edwards and Scullion show how similar external situations can produce different internal outcomes due to the distinctiveness and peculiarities of particular management-worker relations.

In light of this, they examine the implications of managerial control strategies as discussed by Richard Edwards (1979). Using Edwards's three forms of control: simple, technical, and bureaucratic, Edwards and Scullion (1982) suggest that they are overly simplistic. For example, they show how the Clothing plants, which align closely with Edwards's ideal type of simple control, were not sweatshops and exhibited significant variation in managerial control, complicating broad characterisations. Instead, management employed a mix of control strategies, including paternalism, welfarism, and repression. Similarly, in the two engineering firms, which most closely aligned with Edwards' technical control due to systems of modern mass-production, the workplace relations and the struggle for control varied significantly.

Therefore, Edwards and Scullion (1982) suggest that the frontier of control is shaped by the interaction between employer strategies and worker strategies. For example, the control dynamics in the Small Metals Factory could not be understood without considering the craft-like forms of control developed by the workers and the strategic concerns that arose from them. Therefore, adopting a dialectical understanding of the struggle for control, the overall argument is that workplace activities must be related to the frontier of control to understand their significance in the context of conflict.

Here, Edwards (1991) is suggesting that control can be best conceptualised as emerging from a process of struggle confined to workplace relations. The implication here is that similar external contexts, for example labour markets, can create different internal workplace relations because of the distinctiveness of the internal workplace. Therefore, the patterns of control depend on the activities of workers and management over the immediate effort bargain.

To exemplify this, Beynon's classic Working for Ford (1984) describes in graphic detail an account of the struggle over the frontier of control, that is, efforts by workers to bargain over the speed of the line, together with their tactics for doing so. His portrayal is of a workforce perpetually on the brink of striking, constantly engaging in defiant acts of disobedience and minor sabotage. Sometimes, through sheer stubbornness, workers managed to prevent speed-ups and regain some control over the production line. However, these victories were limited and temporary. Workers had no influence over car market demand or company investment decisions, which ultimately determined their working conditions. Their leverage was also critically limited by their lack of skills, making them easily replaceable.

Later, in a chemicals factory, Nichols and Beynon (1977) identified several features of 'ChemCo' that militated against the kind of assertive bargaining practised at Halewood. These included the character of the workforce (a less militant history in the region), the technology (output on assembly lines depends much more directly on workers' immediate efforts than is the case in process factories, and there are many more opportunities to bargain about the pace of work), and the managerial strategy (ChemCo management had a much less abrasive and confrontational style than Ford). The links between work groups and unions were also different. At ChemCo, unions were kept away from the factory floor and were, to a degree, 'incorporated' by management. At Halewood, there was a close and mutually supportive relationship between the workgroup and the workplace trade union.

Beynon (1984) characterises these disputes over effort as the frontier of control (Goodridge, 1975). He therefore, located the effort bargain within the social and bureaucratic organisation at Halewood. While recognising the agency of labour, little time is given to locating the effort-bargain within its social context.

Similarly, Burawoy's study of shopfloor politics at 'Allied' (1979) suggests that the workers consent to produce as long as they can turn production into a kind of game through which they can overcome boredom at work. Paradoxically, the extraction of surplus value operates through the workers' very informal culture and subjectivities. Burawoy demonstrates how workers managed to subvert senior management's intentions and exercise covert discretion over their labour's intensity. In doing so, they consented to the factory regime and drove themselves to higher output. A key element was the shop floor culture of "making out," where workers produced more than the target quota for their shift, earning a proportionate bonus. "Making out" became an obsession on the shop floor, a constant topic during breaks, and a measure of self-worth and the worth of others. However, it wasn't just the extra money that motivated workers. The game itself helped reduce fatigue, pass time, relieve boredom, and demonstrate competence to oneself and others. As a result, workers intensified their efforts and colluded with management to produce surplus value.

To play the game successfully, operators needed the cooperation of auxiliary workers to supply materials and check calibrations. However, because auxiliary workers are not direct producers, management was reluctant to employ enough of them. This caused delays for operators, which affected their ability to "make out" and led to friction between operators and auxiliaries, as well as among the operators themselves, who had to compete for the auxiliaries' attention. A conflict that should have been between workers and management (like at Jay's (Lupton, 1963)) was transformed into one between workers. Hierarchical domination turned into lateral antagonism due to the way work was organised.

This exemplifies one of Burawoy's main theoretical claims: "Consent is produced at the point of production, independent of schooling, family life, mass media, the state, and so forth" (1979: xi). According to Burawoy, "Variations in the character and consciousness that workers bring with them to the workplace explain little about the variations in the activities that take place on the shop floor" (1979: 202). However, these studies relate the politics of the workplace to divisions of labour on the shop floor and discount the relevance of social factors (i.e. gender, ethnicity, age or religion) that the workers bring to the shop floor.

However, the contribution to industrial sociology made by five workshop studies in the 1950s shows that the workplace must be looked at as a point of articulation in the wider society rather than as an isolated social system. Therefore, the effort-bargain or "varied patterns of accommodation" (Cunnison, 1966) observed in the different studies can be related to the social structure of their particular social contexts. These workplace ethnographies relate the differences in bureaucratic organisation and the distribution of gender divisions to the pattern of accommodation developed over the effort-bargain. The implication is that external influences affect the extraction of surplus within the labour process.

The Manchester factory studies looked at social explanations for the diverse patterns of behaviour which led them to problematise the workers behaviour in terms of the productive system. The social context was introduced to understand workplace relations and in particular to explain the reasons why informal group control over output may or may not exist. This included 'close-knit relations' referring to community relations outside the workplace between workers and managers, in terms of the geographic location of community and kinship relations and 'social factors', which included trade unionism, sex and domestic roles, social class and ethnic and religious affiliation.

This conceptual development was applied to Cunnison's (1966) study of two waterproof garment factors, the traditional Dee and the modernised Wye, revealing different bargaining practices and relative levels of acquiescence over wages and effort. In Dee's, each worker had a privately set wage goal or target and spent a lot of effort each week trying to achieve it; to this end, workers engaged in individual bargaining with the manager about piecework prices and the allocation of work, which Cunnison termed, "aggressive individualism". Workers were indebted by amounts from two days to two weeks' wages.

Thus, workers' aggressive individualism at Dee was explained by the close-knit nature of relations between workers and management in the community, where kinship ties crossed worker-managers. Moreover, because of the low level of capitalisation, skill level, and education, workers on Dee's shop floor could aspire to become owners of small sub-contracting workshops. Thus, there was no strict division between work benches. Therefore, Dee's social context emphasised common positions among workers. The division between workers and managers was softened by the possibility of workers starting their own businesses. There was no formal differentiation between workers except by occupation, providing a weak basis for collective action against management. The manager used personal discretion in work allocation, fostering a competitive, individualistic attitude among workers and a lack of specific worker interests. The conflict between manager and worker was settled individually due to the undifferentiated productive system and close-knit relationships.

However, at Wye Garment Company, Lupton (1963) was faced not with the expected collective restriction of effort, according to the cluster analysis, but with female workers who acquiesced with the standards of output set by management. Wye Garments was larger than most firms in its industry, and employed over 3,000 workers. Unlike other firms, Wye proofed its own cloth and diversified into non-garment production. The firm reorganised some departments using time-and-motion techniques from management consultants.

Wye's social context differed from Dee's close-knit system. Wye's managers were often from outside the town and industry, with higher education and aspirations beyond the industry. The introduction of scientific management required specialist qualifications, making Wye less part of a close-knit relational system. Wye Garments moved away from the traditional make-through production method and instead used a work-studied system with differentiated work roles. Workers were divided into teams, each responsible for a complete garment, but each member performed only limited operations. This system increased workforce differentiation, limiting shop floor promotion to management. The predominantly female workforce faced a barrier in the internal labour market.

Wye Garments sold in the same market as Dee, and faced similar cost pressures due to market fluctuations. However, Wye's larger size and diversification cushioned these pressures. Shopfloor management had limited discretion, adhering to the production plan set by the work study team. The same small, weak, local trade union operated at Wye as at Dee but was less effective at Wye. The union-negotiated piecework price list was ineffective under Wye's new production system, and the union did not help with worker complaints.

At Wye, all workers except one specialist were women, while all managers were men. This created a different dynamic compared to Dee. Wye's productive system, with its teams of interdependent workers, might have encouraged informal groups, but this did not happen. Workers did not challenge management collectively or individually but accepted their situation fatalistically.

Lupton explains this acceptance in economic terms, citing high labour costs, fierce price competition, and weak union support (1963). He also highlights the significant social factor of gender roles, with men in management and women as workers, reinforcing authority lines and mirroring familial and sexual authority dynamics.

The importance of gender in production was highlighted by Wilson's (1963) study of Avalco, the light engineering factory. Here, a similar but more willing compliance with management standards occurred on the shop floor. Wilson examined worker behaviour against three sets of social relations: the industrial organisation, social classes, and the organisation of family life. She used these three social systems to select the major social positions to be taken into account in the analysis of shopfloor behaviour. In this way, workshop behaviour was linked with major social patterns in society. Moreover, particular attention was given to the position of women in domestic organisation. In doing this, Wilson drew attention to the position of women in the family as one variable, interacting with others, which is important for understanding shopfloor behaviour. Taking the three systems above — industrial organisation, class and family organisation — Wilson showed how these systems tended to divide the workshop at Avalco socially into two groups: male middle-class managers on the one side of the bench and female working-class assemblers on the other. In a number of cases, it was demonstrated that the sources of authority which the manager wielded over the girls, and conversely, their acquiescence to his demands, were partly familial and sexual in nature (Wilson, 1963).

The study at Kay's (Cunnison, 1966) produced another example of collective control over output: a practice known as the 'cutters' log'. Here, control was exercised by a joint agreement between management and the union representing the workers. Output and earnings varied weekly according to an agreed sliding scale matching different rates of output with different rates of earnings. A point on the scale was decided each week; it depended on the amount of work available. The decision was reached after consultation with the union, but management had the final say. The scale was regressive: when more work was available, the cutters worked at a faster pace and were paid at a slightly less favourable rate per unit of output. Overtime was, by agreement, worked only when sufficient work was available.

The women at Kay's behaved differently. They worked on different jobs from the men and were paid in a different way, by straight piecework. They made sporadic attempts to control output in order to achieve short-term objectives. A group of women on the same job or section would exercise collective control when the job was changed, and a new piecework price was to be set, holding back on output until an increase in the piece rate offered was obtained. Cunnison (1966) also observed the exercise of collective control when the women of one section were attempting to get a new employee moved to another section. Cunnison named this "crisis-group control". Thus, between crises, the women attempted to maintain their earnings at their accustomed level. Individual standards were not set by management, but standards for the section as a whole were.

Cunnison (1966) relates differences over the effort-bargain to what she termed term as 'domestic organisation' to cover positions of men and women in the family system and rights and duties attached more generally to the different genders. Cunnison showed that the interaction in production is an important point of articulation between reproduction and industrial organisation.

Examining the five studies, several major differences in the modes of reaching accommodation become evident. The most commonly discussed difference is whether levels of output and/or earnings are subject to workgroup control or are arrived at by individual action. Informal work groups that control output tend to set their own standards, effectively influencing management's standards as well, since management often monitors past performance to set these benchmarks. A second key interest is the degree to which workers challenge or acquiesce in management's ideas of appropriate standards for earnings and output. Informal work groups typically assert their own standards, whereas individual action can range from aggressive opposition to compliant acquiescence. Third is the extent to which accommodation is reached through interaction in terms of productive roles or gender roles.

Overall, the Manchester factory studies set the workshop in its social context. As a result, the control over workers' efforts and wages was theorised as a process of social accommodation between management and workers. This pattern of accommodation is situated in the social context. Thus, the structure of the social context itself is a major determinant of the type or character of the pattern of accommodation. More specifically, they show how the pattern of gender divisions in relation to the industry can be related to the type and degree of accommodation which has emerged at the point of production.

Therefore, the picture emerging from the factory ethnographies suggests that factors external to the given point of production, in terms of the social context, can impact the process of value extraction within it in terms of the negotiation over worker effort. As we have seen in Cunnison's (1966) and Wilson's (1963) workplace ethnographies, male and female workers may have different perspectives on the division between home and work, their work groups, and the proper nature of shop floor relations.

More recent workplace ethnographies have developed this theme to show that gender is central in the experience of wage labour. Sometimes, gender-based forms of identification lead to successful strategies of workplace resistance. For instance, Westwood's (1985) ethnography of 'StitchCo', a garment factory in the British Midlands, and Elizabeth Dunn's (2004) monograph on Alima-Gerber, a recently privatised Polish baby food factory, show how women workers challenge the dehumanisation of work through feminine rituals and narratives that domesticate and resocialise their labour and workplaces.

In the case of 'Anarchomex', the middle-sized Mexican electric factory described by Salzinger (2004), the 'macho' display of the young, unskilled male workforce became a form of workers' self-organisation. Moreover, Salzinger reveals how gender identities are sometimes shaped or solidified in factory employment. For example, she found in the aptly named "Anarchomex" its chaotic lack of discipline, manifested in constant flirting and "macho" displays. Management was partly to blame for this situation, not only because of its bureaucratic, impersonal, and ineffective labour regime but also because it insisted that "maquila jobs are women's jobs." However, the company had to employ a significant number of men who, unsurprisingly, felt a continuous need to prove their masculinity. While there was some continuity with behaviours outside the factory, inside, "macho-ness" took on an exaggerated form as young men responded to their challenging work situation. This illustrates that gendered identities are not fixed when workers enter the shop floor but are instead shaped and reinforced on the job.

Similarly, Westwood (1984) demonstrated how jobs at a hosiery factory in the English Midlands encouraged the acceptance of conventional gender roles among its largely female workforce. Westwood emphasises that home and workplace are interconnected and form part of a single world. However, the situation she describes is ambivalent. On the one hand, the home/workplace divide is subverted by the domestication of shop floor space, on the other hand, shop floor culture idealises marriage, motherhood, and domesticity, viewing them as an escape from the relentless grind of factory work.

In some instances, however, the factory's disciplinary regime relies on blurring the production/reproduction distinction. In a similar vein to the study of Dee (Cunnison, 1966), in the electronics factory in southern China described by Lee (1998), kinship obligations and local loyalties were crucial in controlling the predominantly female labour force. These identities play a key role in recruiting workers, assigning tasks, setting wages, transmitting skills, granting promotions, and organising dormitory life. Young female workers were monitored by brothers, male cousins, senior kinswomen, or others from their native place. These overseers often feel responsible to the management for the women's compliance, as they helped secure their jobs.

A similar situation is described in Pun Nagi’s (2005) account of another factory in the same urban area (Shenzhen). Ngai’s (2005) ethnography challenges Burawoy's (1979) claim that the attitudes and values workers bring from outside are largely irrelevant to production relations, a claim suggesting a clear separation between production and reproduction. Rather, both studies, like the Manchester factory studies before it, emphasise gender and kinship as organising principles of shopfloor control. Moreover, consent is manufactured through consumption practices, as the women reconcile themselves to the hardships of their factory jobs by aspiring to be consumers, dreaming of consumption even as they work. Moreover, these ethnographic studies of China's wave of industrialisation suggest this was based on the exploitation of migrant labour from the provinces who were kept in a constant state of job insecurity through restrictive migration and ethnic policies (Ngai, 2005).

Race as a central theme in workplace ethnographies has resulted in a relatively small number of workplace ethnographies dealing with predominantly minority workforces. This is somewhat surprising given the employment disparities suffered by minority employees (Tuch & Martin, 1991).

Industrial ethnographies of Brazil reveal that the Brazilian working class is profoundly fragmented along racial and ethnic lines in spite of the country's dominant myth of racial democracy. Guimaraes et al.'s (1995) ethnography of the petrochemical industry in the state of Bahia shows how the traditional fragmentation between skilled (tecnicos) and unskilled (peoes) labourers reproduces both regional distinctions between urban and rural workers and racial ones between black and white workers.

Indeed, Friedland (1971), in a study of migrant agricultural workers in America's northeast, reveals how the racial composition of workforces is significantly related to the level of cooperation with management. The role of racial tension in undermining cooperation in a mixed-race workforce is evident in the following exchange between minority pickers and their Anglo foreman: 'You know you've got it, you're loaded. You make a fortune off poor people.' 'How do you know? I've got a big family to take care of.' And Red replied, 'For what you make a week, you could take care of ten big families. We're poor, and we've got nothing. You're rich, and you've got everything.' (Friedland 1971:55) The ethnographer describes how the workers later became agitated about picking cherries from tall trees because of the wind and the danger of falling from precarious ladders: "They complained how much they hated cherry picking and started slowing down. Several people were beating the trees with sticks, trying to knock cherries down rather than pick them. This was done quite violently as if they hated the trees and were trying to kill them" (Friedland, 1971: 78).

Racial tensions can also play a role in undermining cooperation in service occupations. In a study of domestic workers, Rollins (1985) notes how covert racial tensions can fuel informal resistance:

I remember one Sunday morning, this woman told me to scrub her kitchen floor on my hands and knees. I got mad at her. . .. So, I got a whole lot of ammonia and . . . just poured it over the floor. And then half wiped it up. . .. That floor looked bad for two or three days. I wouldn't wash it 'cause I told her I'd already scrubbed it. . .. She had wanted me to get on my knees and scrub it. And I wasn't thinking about getting on my knees and scrubbing it. And, after that, I could just mop it up, and it would look nice. No, my knees weren't made for walking all over the floor (Rollins 1985: 14).

Developing this notion, Ram's (1991) ethnographic study of shopfloor relations in small firms within the West Midlands clothing sector identified a managerial practice termed 'negotiated paternalism.' This practice emerged from a combination of market pressures, racism and the low status of women in the family, resulting in a highly negotiated workplace environment (Ram & Holliday, 1993).

Ram (1991) found the issue of 'mistake rectification' operating under piece-rate payment systems at two different companies in similar labour market contexts. In company B, the piece-rate system was a permanent feature, causing machinists to remain on piece rate even when switching jobs. Conversely, in Company C, machinists were often put on a day rate when they changed jobs. Consequently, Company B machinists made more mistakes when performing tasks outside their specialism, attempting to navigate the rigid piece-rate system. These mistakes were not intentional acts of resistance but rather an outcome of the payment system, as workers tried to maintain stable earnings. This behaviour reflects an attempt to adjust the effort bargain. In company B, 'making mistakes' was a rational method for machinists to exercise control over their earnings, highlighting their effort to achieve a stable relationship between work and effort.

In a critique of Richard Edwards's (1979) sequential typologies of control and in Rainnie's (1989) study of the clothing industry, Ram (1991) challenged the simple, direct and often harsh controls found in small clothing suppliers as being shaped by the highly competitive, uncertain markets and small supplier dependence on large retailers. While his cases were in even smaller firms without such dependence, it could be argued that the difference simply lay in the structure of competition. However, the key variable in Ram's study is the ethnicity of the owners and employees. Community connections, local (immigrant) labour markets and, in some instances, family ties combined to shape the effort bargain and supervisory structures that were primarily informal and trust-based. For example, in discussing the relationship between the labour market and ethnicity, Ram (1991) reveals how management experienced a 'shortage of labour', which is understood as a shortage of particular workers required to tolerate the particular forms of work organisation and low wages. Therefore, the ethnographic study reveals how ethnicity in the workplace is not just a resource for management but rather can constrain management. Therefore, such relations appeared to act as a considerable constraint on the enforcement of work discipline, meaning that ethnicity is a significant mediator of control practices and managerial regimes.

The workplace ethnographies in this section show that the experience of work under capitalism is more complicated, rich and socially embedded than would appear from dual labour market segmentation theories, which underplay the interconnections between the effort bargain, the state and workers' social reproduction. The ethnographies highlight the 'dual nature' of work, one connected to the workers' racial, gender, generational, ethnic and religious background and the other impersonal, based on bureaucratic and productive norms.

Therefore, to close this section, it seems important to stress that workplace ethnographies have emphasised the impact of the social context on the fundamental tensions within the employment relationship – understood here as production politics. Indeed, in focusing on the “the factuality of first-hand experience” (Roberts, 1990: 10) of workplace politics, the ethnographic studies in this section suggest that production politics need to be placed conceptually within the wider social context. Indeed, in focusing on the existing social relations in the factory, scholars have suggested that issues of control, consent and accommodation over the effort bargain are mediated by relations outside the factory setting.

Importantly, I am not suggesting a unilinear understanding of control related to the organisation of the labour market, nor am I suggesting that workplace politics be confined to manager-labour relations. Rather, the contested nature of work remains central within a wider social context. Therefore, I am suggesting that production politics takes place in a social environment within the context of changing relations between the state, labour market, social reproduction and labour.

## 2.5 Conclusion

We started this section by highlighting Marx's theory of surplus populations. I introduced the Racial Capitalism literature to reveal how surplus populations are produced through processes of racialisation. Highlighting a contextual view of racial capitalism (Hall, 1978) showed how the racialisation of labour relies upon differing social, political, legal configurations of devaluation across various labour market contexts. Therefore, I sought a theoretical framework that would allow me to explore the particular political construction of racial difference in and through the State – that could be applied to the UK and the Sheffield City Region. In this way, I turned attention to a theorisation of the State to understand how disposability is politically established in particular bodies through processes of racialisation.

According to Poulantzas' Neo-Marxist perspective, class and workers' labour power is socially and politically determined. Therefore, an adequate analysis of the experience of labour can only be understood by looking at the interplays between the economic and political spheres. In this regard, the contribution of Miles and Phizacklea (1980) proved crucial in allowing me to describe the objective positions of migrant workers within a class boundary, which [are], in turn, determined by both economic and political relations. This offered a way of understanding racialised class fractions in the UK produced through state immigration policy.

The chapter then drew on the autonomy of migration literature to highlight the role of immigration policy on the racial class fractioning of migrant workers as a process of bordering (De Genova, 2017). Pertinent for this thesis, I drew on the notion of internal borders that categorise migrant workers beyond the juridical prism of the nation-state and follow them into the local labour markets, homes, and workplaces. Here, the suggestion is that while borders continue to categorise migrant labour by citizenship or de facto legal or political position, borders also mark migrant workers by their differential inclusion in social welfare systems. This means we need to understand the form through which the state 'lets in' migrant workers rather than simply excluding them.

Following on from my discussion of racial capitalism and the reserve army of labour, I explored the reproduction of racial difference through the dimensions of social reproduction. Wearing the lens of racial capitalism, I fleshed out the dimensions of social reproduction identifying areas where the externalisation of costs of social reproduction; the expansion of control and formal subsumption occur. By analysing these themes, this section aimed to illuminate the complex interplay between race, social reproduction and labour processes, underscoring the necessity of incorporating social reproduction into analyses of production politics and labour relations. This perspective not only reveal the interdependencies between these spheres but also highlighted the potential for resistance within and beyond the workplace.

Finally, a discussion of production politics emphasised the impact of the social context on the fundamental tensions within the employment relationship. Indeed, in focusing on the “the factuality of first-hand experience” (Roberts, 1990: 10) of workplace politics, the ethnographic studies in this section suggested that production politics needs to be placed conceptually within the wider social context. Indeed, in focusing on the existing social relations in the workplace, scholars have suggested that issues of control, consent and accommodation over the effort bargain are mediated by relations outside the factory setting.

Consequently, the next chapter will situate this discussion within the context of how the State creates racial class fractions by hierarchizing mobility power across multiple scales. It will begin by examining the UK’s national immigration policies, which delineate migrant labour based on their citizenship status and varying levels of inclusion in the welfare system. This analysis will then be framed within the local labour market of the Sheffield City Region (SCR). Finally, the chapter will introduce a discussion on the labour regime to synthesize these elements.

# CHAPTER 3: THE UK’S RACIAL BORDER REGIME

## 3.1 Introduction

The theoretical framework established in the previous chapter necessitates an examination of the intricate relationships between race and labour, which manifest in diverse forms across various societies: migrants’ subordination in production varies across national boundaries and between regional contexts. This is because, processes of racialisation vary across different regions; therefore, they are likely to manifest in the labour process in diverse ways. Grounded in the theoretical premises of the thesis, this chapter provides an overview of the UK’s immigration policies, while contextualising this by providing an overview of the local labour market in the SCR. It further provides an overview of two distinct micro-regions in the SCR.

The first section illustrates the UK’s immigration policies (that impact migrant and refugee workers' labour power before they are 'welcomed' into the warehouse) (De Genova, 2017; 2023). The point is not to run through the UK's history of immigration policy but to identify particular policies that directly impact workers' labour mobility power[[13]](#footnote-13). The section traces the proliferation of internal border controls, mainly through three key policy developments associated with the 'Hostile Environment': the 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act, the Immigration Act 2014 & 2016 and the Immigration Policy Post-Brexit[[14]](#footnote-14). This is connected to migrant and refugee workers' differential inclusion through access to state welfare, including social care, housing and benefits.

The second section will contextualise the UK’s immigration policies by looking at the main characteristics of employment in the SCR. Drawing upon data collected from diverse statistical sources, I argue that migrants are disproportionately present in precarious, non-standard employment, facing discrimination in terms of both remuneration and social entitlements.

Overall, in this chapter, I will contend that the SCR's logistics industry derives its competitive edge primarily from the extensive utilisation and subjugation of migrant labour, influenced by the state's immigration policies and the dynamics of the local labour market which disciplines workers through the limits of their reproduction (Burawoy, 1976). In short, in the SCR, the states immigration policies, coupled with the local labour market shapes the mechanisms for the class fractioning of the working class and the appropriation of their surplus value in the warehouse.

## 3.2 The Hostile Environment: The National Border Regime

The widening rights gap based on immigration status is exemplified by the expansion of internal British border controls under the 'Hostile Environment'. Originating during the Labour government's tenure (1997-2010) and solidified during the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition (2010-2015), the Hostile Environment encompasses an array of immigration controls deeply embedded in societal structures, making access to essential services dependent on proper documentation.

Legislation such as the Immigration Acts of 2014 and 2016 mandates individuals to prove their immigration status for vital services, including work, healthcare, education, housing, and more (Ali, 2022). These controls extend across public and private sectors, involving institutions like schools, employers, landlords, and banks. Non-compliance leads to fines, accompanied by broader policing practices, including raids, detentions, and deportations targeting those without proper documentation.

The 2014 Immigration Act marked a pivotal moment, expanding border controls into everyday life, reflected in collaborations between the Home Office and the DVLA (ICIBI, 2016). Repercussions included revoked driving licenses, investigations into marriages, and charges on migrants using the NHS.

While ostensibly targeting undocumented migrants, the Hostile Environment's impact extends to specific demographics, notably those from oppressed countries and the working-class (Vickers, 2019). This leads to a pervasive climate of suspicion towards individuals fitting the perceived 'migrant' profile, resulting in the broader targeting of racialised minority workers.

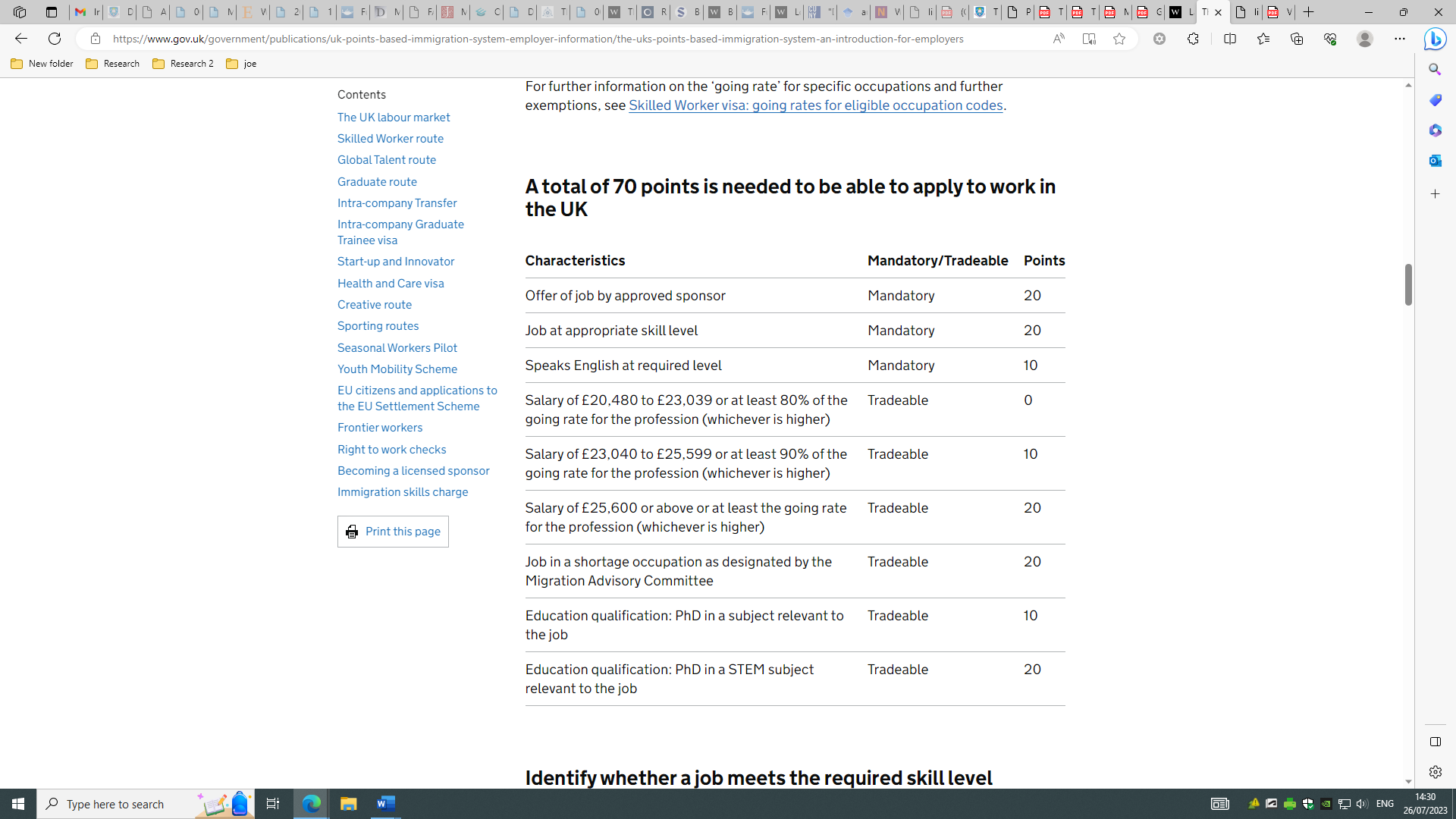
As Phillimore and Sigona (2018) articulate, the Hostile Environment shifts the burden of proof onto non-white and non-British individuals, entrenching border controls into everyday life. It transcends traditional borders, becoming omnipresent within society. The following section explores the legal and policy context of migrants' rights in the UK and the significant changes post-Brexit before looking more specifically at welfare entitlements.

### 3.2.1 Extending the Boundary: Post-Brexit Changes to the Border Regime

In the aftermath of the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union, significant shifts occurred in the legal and policy landscape governing the rights and entitlements of migrants. This section analyses the post-Brexit changes to immigration policy, with a particular focus on the termination of the free movement of EU workers into the UK. This development prompted divergent perspectives within the discourse on migration. Some viewed it as an opportunity to address concerns about the potential deregulatory impact of migration on employment standards, potentially countering a perceived 'race to the bottom' (Goodwin & Milazzo, 2017). Conversely, there were apprehensions that Brexit might lead to a relaxation of regulations, positioning the UK as a model akin to Singapore, emphasising competitive advantages through differentiated labour protection standards (Woolfson, 2017). As we explore these dynamics, it becomes crucial to understand the implications of these changes on the broader welfare entitlements of migrants and refugees in the UK.

The UK’s immigration legislation, effective since November 2020, adopts entry criteria hinged on skill levels and occupational demand. Under this 'point-based immigration system,' applicable to both EEA and non-EEA workers, regulations encompass employer sponsorship, a stipulated minimum salary of £26,200 (with exemptions outlined in the Government's shortage occupation list [SOL]), and a mandatory English language proficiency test (Home Office, 2020). A total of seventy points is needed to be able to apply to work in the UK. In December 2023, the Home Office announced a proposal to increase the skilled worker visa minimum salary to £38,700, although this was later revised to £29,000 in Spring 2024 with a subsequent increase to £38,700 although the government has not outlined a specific timeframe for this adjustment.

**Figure 1: The UK's points-based immigration system**



*(UK Government, 2023)*

After the UK's exit from the EU, significant changes have transpired in the residency rights of EEA citizens, bringing them in line with regulations applicable to non-EEA citizens residing in the UK. The EU Withdrawal Act 2020 signified the end of free movement rights for EEA citizens, ushering in a revised points-based system governing their entry and residence, which includes the attainment of indefinite leave to remain (ILR). Introduced in 2020 to regulate settlement in the UK, the EU Settlement Scheme offers two statuses upon successful application: settled status and pre-settled status.

1. **Settled Status:** This status is granted to individuals who have continuously lived in the UK for five years before December 31, 2020.
2. **Pre-settled Status:** Granted to those who have not resided in the UK for five consecutive years. Successful applicants can transition to settled status after five consecutive years of UK residency.

For non-EEA nationals, settlement under immigration law involves obtaining either indefinite leave to remain (ILR) or limited leave to remain (LLR) after five or ten years of lawful residence (Gov, 2023). The Points-Based System (PBS) for economic migration enables applicants to qualify for ILR after five years of lawful residency. Moreover, specific categories, such as refugees, individuals with humanitarian protection, migrants with proof of UK ancestry, and spouses of settled persons, are eligible for ILR after five or ten years of lawful residence (Foblets & Carlier, 2022).

Since 2012, the UK government has set a financial threshold for British citizens seeking to bring a non-EU spouse to the UK, requiring an annual income of at least £18,600, with additional financial requirements for children. The probationary period for spouses was extended from two to five years, ostensibly to assess the genuineness of the relationship. This extension means that if a couple separates within the five-year period, the migrant spouse loses the right to claim settlement independently (Gov, 2023).

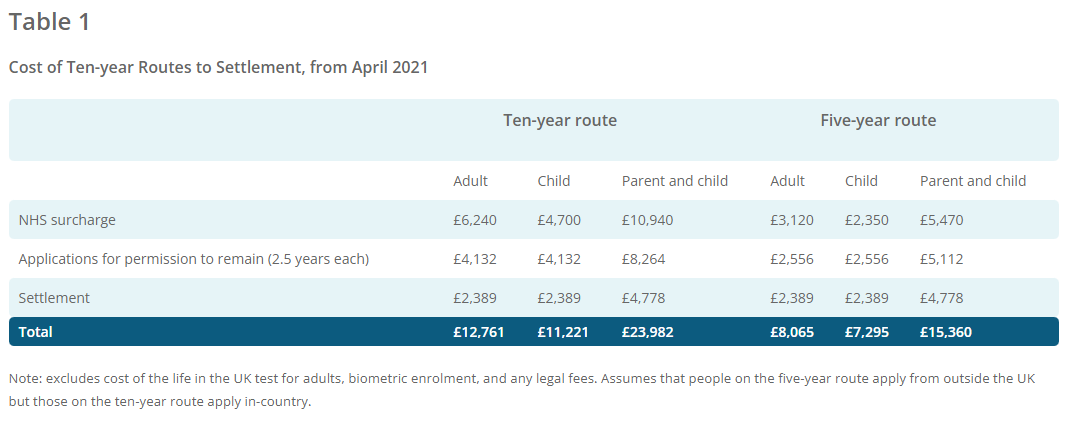
Notably, in December 2023 the UK government initially proposed elevating the income threshold to £38,700. However, this proposition was subsequently reversed, and the revised threshold, to be brought in in Spring 2024, was set at £29,000. Although the Home Office indicated an eventual increase to £38,700, no specific timeframe is provided. Under the initial £18,600 threshold, approximately 75% of individuals could afford to facilitate the reunion of family members. Conversely, if the threshold were set at £38,700, only 40% would be financially capable (Goodfellow, 2019). Statistics from 2023 indicated that nearly 70% of employees working in the UK earned less than the revised income threshold, marking a stark increase from the 25% observed under the prior threshold of £18,600 (Gov, 2023).

The cost of settlement, including NHS surcharge, can total £23,983 for a parent and child on the ten-year route and £15, 360 on the five-year route. Moreover, continuous residence must be adhered to for ILR and is broken when an applicant is absent for more than 180 days in any 12-month period without permitted reasons. In these cases, the applicant must start the application process from the beginning, including all payments (De Noronha, 2022).

Currently, there are 170,000 individuals on the 10-year route to settlement (McKinney and Sumption, 2021). This specific route is designed for individuals who do not fully meet the requirements for permission to remain as outlined in the Immigration Rules but have immediate family ties or long-term connections to the UK. Denying them permission to stay would breach either their own or a family member's rights under Article 8 of the Human Rights Act. Migrants granted Limited Leave to Remain (LLR) based on their Article 8 rights are automatically placed on a 10-year route to settlement. This may be due to their partner being a British Citizen or having lived in the UK continuously for seven years without meeting the requirements for the five-year settlement route, often related to not meeting the minimum income threshold of £18,600 per year.

A recent survey highlighted the significant impact of the 10-year route, coupled with the cost-of-living crisis, on household budgets. 62% percent of respondents reported struggling to afford utilities (including electricity, heating, water, and internet), while 57% faced challenges covering the cost of food. Many also expressed difficulties with housing, travel, and childcare expenses, leading to a situation where they were unable to renew their applications (Mort, et al., 2023).

**Figure 2: Cost of Five-year and Ten-year route**



*(UK Government, 2023)*

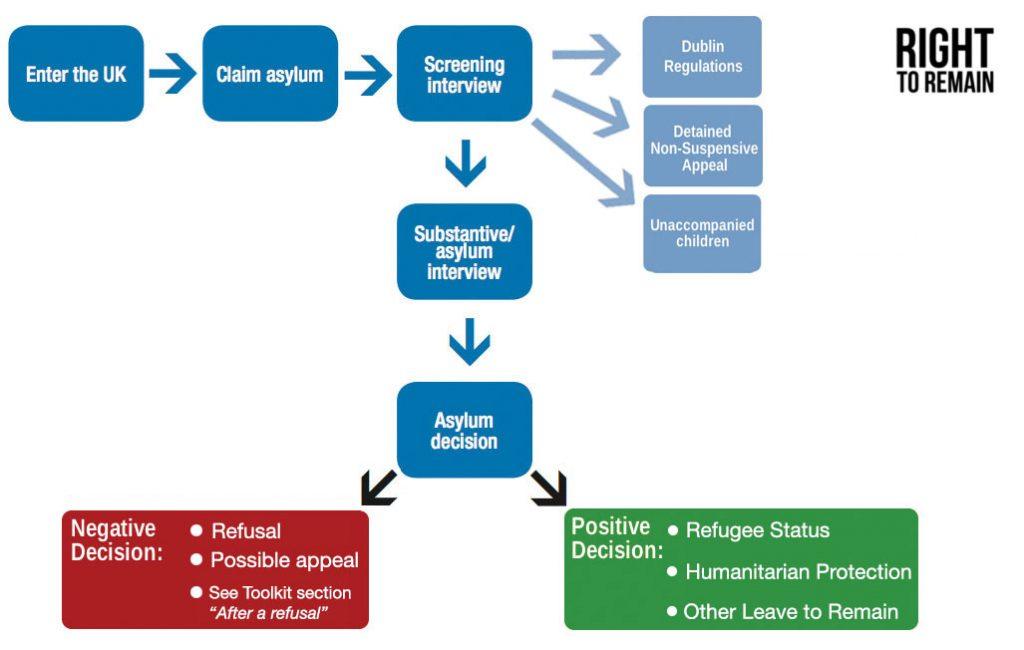
A substantial structural shift in the UK labour market is marked by the end of free movement and the implementation of the post-Brexit migration system. The revised system has eliminated the previous two-tier approach, now applying uniform rules to new migrants irrespective of their country of origin (excluding Ireland). This change has led to a notable decline in EU migration and a concurrent rise in non-EU migration (Portes, 2023). These changes to UK immigration policy have also restricted recourse to public funds of those migrants seeking ILR.

The subsequent section looks at the connection between the legal status of migrants and refugees in the UK and their varying access to the welfare system, under recourse to public funds. This will begin by focusing on the asylum process. This exploration will concentrate on the welfare entitlements of asylum seekers, providing insights into their access to social benefits within the framework of the asylum process as they move from Asylum Seeker to Refugee status. Subsequently, the following section will broaden the discussion to encompass the broader spectrum of welfare entitlements of migrants and refugees in the UK, including social benefits, housing and social care.

## 3.3 The Asylum Process and Welfare Entitlements

This section provides a simplified overview of the asylum application process, using flowcharts and detailed descriptions. It aims to familiarise the reader with the process before an understanding of recourse to public funds and the welfare system generally. The asylum application is complex, and the Home Office encourages immediate claims upon arrival. The accompanying flowchart (Figure 3) outlines the journey from applying for Asylum to the initial decision.

**Figure 3: The Asylum Process**

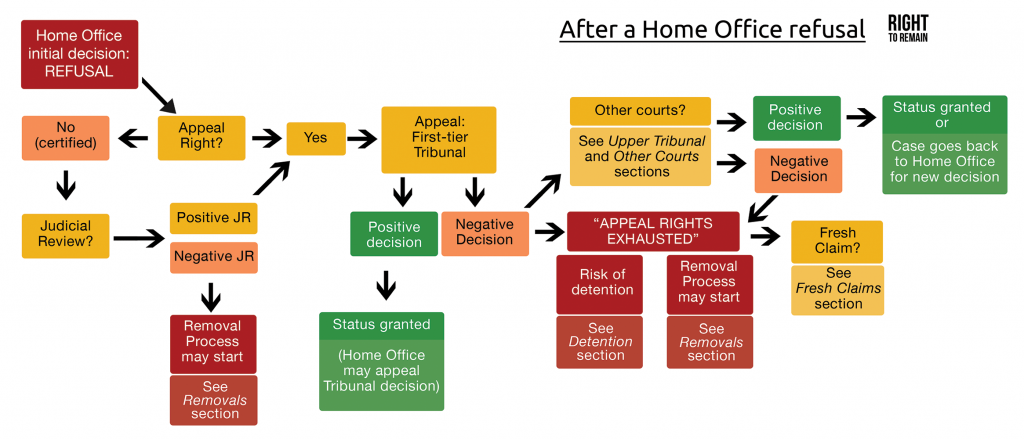


*(Right to Remain, 2020)*

These stages face scrutiny for minor inconsistencies, often viewed as potential forgeries. Applicants with "clearly unfounded" claims may face detention, while those deemed destitute enter the dispersal system (Right to Remain, 2020). Legal representation is only provided during substantive interviews, where 42% of applicants may face refusals (gov.uk, 2019).

Following the initial refusal, the process becomes complex. Some individuals lack the right of appeal, resorting to Judicial Review as their only legal recourse (Yazici, 2021). Appeal deadlines are 14 days, and criminal convictions can lead to rejections. Those granted appeal rights can challenge decisions at the First Tier Tribunal and the Upper Tribunal. Failure at the Upper Tribunal results in "Appeal Rights Exhausted," exposing individuals to detention or deportation.

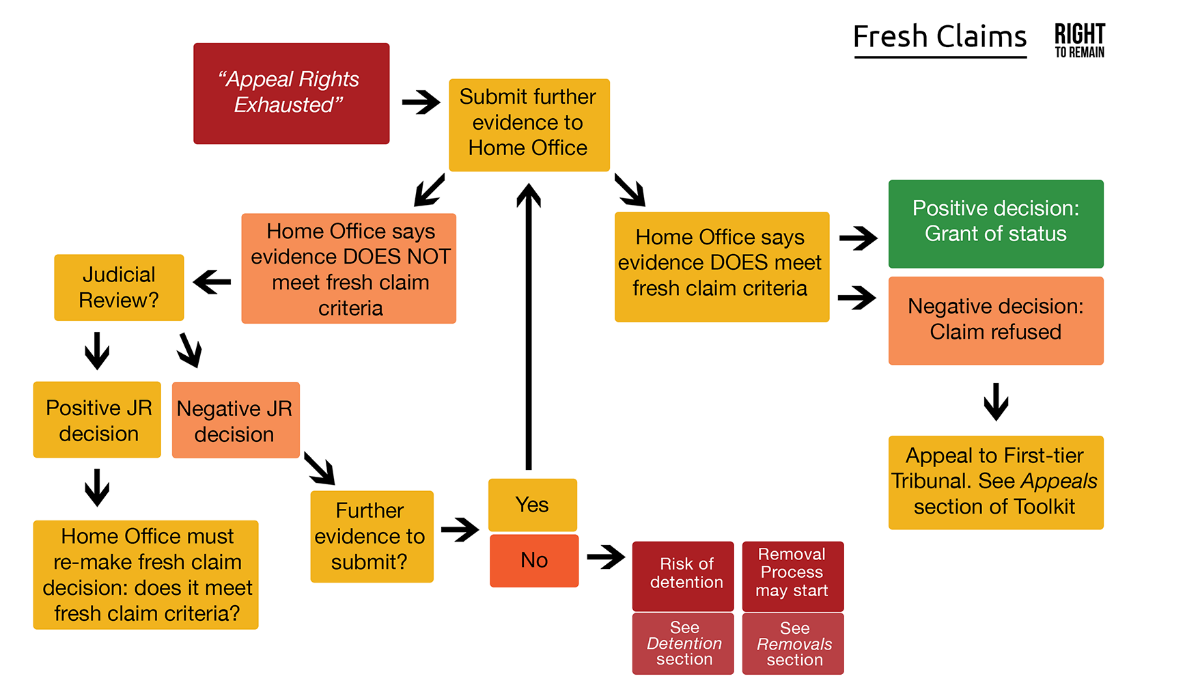
**Figure 4: Following Refusal**



*(Right to Remain, 2020)*

After exhausting appeal rights, individuals may submit further evidence at the Further Submissions Unit (FSU) (Right to Remain, 2020). Further submissions undergo a legal test, constituting a fresh claim if they meet the criteria. If accepted, the process recommences from the "initial decision" point. Rejection may lead to challenges via Judicial Review (Figure 5).

**Figure 5: Fresh Claims Process**



*(Right to Remain, 2020)*

This overview sets the stage for a more detailed examination of welfare entitlements of asylum seekers. At the core of this examination is the Home Office's provisions under section 95 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999, which encompass housing and financial support for individuals who have initiated the asylum-seeking process. This support mechanism becomes accessible to those who lack accommodation and are unable to meet their essential living needs.

During the Labour government (1997-2010), restricting access to welfare was seen as a way to reduce asylum applications (Darling, 2022). During this period, mainstream benefits access was rescinded, and assistance for asylum seekers at risk of destitution was instituted under Section 95 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999. Individuals considered destitute, lacking accommodation and funds for living expenses, qualify for S9 support under the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999. The support consists of weekly payments, intended solely for essential needs, excluding travel and communication costs. In 2000, this support was set at 69% of Income Support, distributed through vouchers (Vickers, 2019).

In 2023, S95 payments amounted to £40.85 per week for adults, equivalent to 41% of the 2024 Universal Credit payment and 23% of the relative poverty line.Extra payments are provided for individuals with dependent childrenTop of Form

. Over almost 23 years, S95 payments increased by £5.31. The purchasing power of £35.54 weekly payments in the year 2000 would be £60.89 in 2023. The cash system replaced the voucher system in 2002 for those on S95 support, with payments initially received from the Post Office. Pre-paid debit cards (ASPEN) were introduced in 2017 for S95 recipients, managed by Sodexo, became usable at cashpoints and shops accepting visa payments, but not for online purchases (Yazici, 2021).

Upon receiving any form of leave to remain, individuals enter a 28-day move-on period. Throughout this period, they continue to receive support payments while being tasked with securing accommodation, obtaining a national insurance number, seeking employment, and applying for eligible welfare benefits (Hynes, 2011). Given the time required to get social housing, gather funds for a rental deposit, find employment, acquire a national insurance number or access social benefits, this move-on period exposes many to a condition of destitution (Phillips, 2006).

Notably, not everyone granted Discretionary Leave is entitled to public funds. In cases where a No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) condition is imposed, individuals are ineligible for mainstream welfare benefits. However, there is an avenue for appealing this decision. Families holding Discretionary Leave and facing destitution in the transition period may receive accommodation and financial assistance according to Section 17 of the Children Act 1989 from the local authorities Children’s Social Care Department (NRPF Network, 2016). This section of the Children's Act 1989 establishes a duty to protect and enhance the well-being of any child deemed in need within their jurisdiction (Yazici, 2021).

Overall, the change from seeking asylum to obtaining refugee status marks a critical juncture, where individuals are often left in a precarious state. While the National Asylum Support Service (NASS) provides essential financial and housing support during the asylum process, the successful acquisition of refugee status is accompanied by a significant change in circumstances, granting access to public funds. However, the inherent challenges of this transition can render refugees in a precarious and potentially destitute position. The subsequent discussion will shift focus to scrutinise the broader welfare policies affecting migrants and refugees, shedding light on the systemic factors contributing to vulnerabilities and stratification of rights and entitlements within the United Kingdom.

## 3.4 The Stratification of Rights and Entitlements

This section extends the examination of the British State, specifically concentrating on social welfare. It posits that the growing imposition of conditions, coupled with enduring patterns of varied inclusion, has heightened labour discipline and established circumstances conducive to more pronounced exploitation. This builds on the previous section examining the State's role in regulating (internal) borders. Having outlined how the Immigration Acts of 2014 and 2016 entrenched border checks into everyday life, as well as changes to immigration policy post-Brexit and the Asylum process, I now focus on the stratification of rights and entitlements of migrants (EEA and Non-EEA) and refugees in the UK based on their legal status.

This section discusses social care, housing, and the benefits system. Within each domain, borders delineate individuals' entitlements, fostering a racialised class fragmentation that engenders varying conditions of exploitation. As a result of this stratification of rights, different groups are subject to different vulnerabilities and levels of destitution (Mayblin and James, 2018: 391). I relate the stratification of rights to levels of immobility of migrant workers in the labour market or their mobility differential (Alberti, 2014). Therefore, I argue that national immigration policy creates groups of migrants with different labour market leverage, or ‘mobility bargaining power’ (Strauss & McGrath, 2017) based on their differential inclusion in social welfare systems, restricting their mobility[[15]](#footnote-15). Here, I will focus on the welfare domains of the Social Benefits System, Housing and Social Care.

### 3.4.1 Bordering and the Benefit System

Under Labour's New Deal in 1998, significant changes were made to non-means-tested welfare support. The introduction of 'work-focused' interviews in 2001 for Income Support claimants set conditionalities for complete benefit receipt. In 2008, Incapacity Benefit was replaced by the Work Capability Assessment (WCA) and the Employment Support Allowance, integrating work-related activities. The outsourcing of the WCA to for-profit companies Atos and later Maximus occurred. In 2017, the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities criticized the British Government for its failure to uphold the rights of disabled people.

Single parents experienced limitations on Income Support entitlement, including reductions in the age threshold for the youngest child and the implementation of a two-child limit in 2016 for specific means-tested benefits. The digital 'Universal Jobmatch' system, initiated in 2012, monitored job-seeking activities, obligating unemployment benefit claimants to prove they spent 35 hours weekly preparing for work. The 'workfare' approach, requiring compulsory participation in IT skills and CV development courses under threat of benefit loss, supplied coerced labour at no cost until the end of the Work Programme in 2017 (Vickers, 2019).

Labour's New Deal brought benefit sanctions, allowing benefits to be suspended if 'reasonable employment' was refused. Reports surfaced of sanctions for missing Job Centre appointments due to conflicts with job interviews, illness, or bereavement (Lansley & Mack, 2015). Though appeal rights existed, a freedom of information request revealed an 80% refusal rate target for staff assessing the first stage of appeals (Vickers, 2019).

The rollout of Universal Credit began in 2013, substituting in work and out of work benefits by six means-tested benefits. Even those in paid employment, around 3.2 million people, were included (Brewer et al., 2017). Individuals working fewer than 35 hours per week were subjected to work-focused interviews. Non-compliance led to payment deductions, with sanctions reaching £70 a week for three months on the first infraction, six months for the second, and three years for the third (Vickers, 2019).

Notably, workfare policies were not uniformly applied, leading to differential access and treatment for migrants. A study of 400 migrants in the UK found that while 91% were paying taxes and National Insurance contributions, only 17% claimed any form of benefits despite low wages (Datta et al., 2007). This disparity was attributed to a complex eligibility system based on immigration and residency status. The introduction of 'earned citizenship' further intensified this system, restricting benefits for migrants and exacerbating their economic vulnerability (Dwyer & Scullion, 2014).

### 3.4.2 Welfare Entitlement

The UK's social security system covers welfare and employment benefits, social housing, community care, minors care, and education. Notably, it has become more restrictive, especially towards overseas residents lacking 'residence' or 'right to reside' qualifications. Following the UK's exit from the EU, both EEA migrants and non-EEA migrants under immigration control are barred from claiming means-tested benefits until they acquire settled or pre-settled status. This is due to a 'recourse to public funds' restriction tied to their leave conditions, requiring indefinite leave to remain. By the end of December 2021, around 2,440,450 people had obtained temporary pre-settled status, with additional grants expected as the Home Office addressed a backlog of 315,300 applications. An estimated 2,151,270 individuals still held pre-settled status, although some had upgraded to settled status (Fernandez-Reino and Sumption, 2022).

Pre-settled status, unlike settled status, doesn't serve as proof of the 'right to reside,' a prerequisite for accessing public funds. Although pre-settled status holders can access benefits, certain conditions apply, such as proving the right to reside through family ties, caring for an educated child, or demonstrating work continuity. While pre-settled status grants the right to stay in the UK, it doesn't automatically provide the right to social assistance without proving an additional right to reside (Gov, 2023).

Migrants on the five- or ten-year routes, regardless of EEA or non-EEA status, face No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) and lack access to mainstream benefits. Exceptions may be granted through Home Office representations or a 'change of conditions' application, which lifts NRPF in cases of destitution, child welfare concerns, or exceptional financial circumstances. However, awareness and support issues hinder some from pursuing this avenue (Mort, 2023).

This section highlights the varied impact of benefit rule changes on migrant workers, with a blurred distinction between EEA and non-EEA access to social welfare. Both groups now require Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR) to access public funds, a process taking five or ten years, depending on the route. EEA citizens pre-dating January 1, 2021, can apply for settled or pre-settled status, but the right-to-reside test for pre-settled status acts as a restriction on social benefits for already precarious migrants.

### 3.4.3 Bordering and the Housing System

From the 1970s, there has been a consistent decline in state-supported council housing, primarily due to the 'right-to-buy' policy allowing tenants to purchase their council houses with substantial state subsidies (Malpass, 1990). This has resulted in a significant transfer of publicly funded housing into private ownership, with restrictions preventing councils from reinvesting the proceeds into new housing projects.

In response to the 2008 financial crisis, the government initiated the 'Right to Buy Reinvigoration,' which increased available subsidies. In 2013, the coalition government cut housing benefits for council or housing association renters deemed to have a 'spare' bedroom, pushing many into the private sector. The Housing and Planning Act 2016 further curtailed the security of tenancies for council houses, limiting them to five years (Vickers, 2019).

Migrants' distinct inclusion in social housing exposes them to a higher likelihood of overcrowding, homelessness, and, particularly for racialised minority groups, reduced access to social housing, often leading to concentration in substandard private rentals (Vicker, 2019). Contributing factors include eligibility restrictions, the necessity for temporary housing and prevalent poverty Top of Form

affecting the ability to pay deposits (Pemberton et al., 2014).

Restrictions were placed on the local authority housing and homelessness assistance for ‘third country nationals’ by the Borders, Citizenship, and Immigration Act of 2009 (Vickers, 2019). The 2011 Localism Act empowered councils to narrowly define their housing obligations, often requiring a 'local connection' to the area. This act directly discriminated against migrants, newcomers, and those with disrupted residence due to circumstances like women's refuges or refugee dispersal (Vickers, 2019).

Introduced in England, the Immigration Act 2014 linked the 'right to rent' to immigration status, and applied it to all private landlords and introduced restrictions. During the initial eighteen months, immigration enforcement teams entered 10,000 homes, issuing 401 landlord referral notices for renting to migrants lacking the right to rent. Subsequently, the Immigration Act 2016 increased penalties for landlords. An investigation indicated that 55 percent of landlords would be less inclined to rent to non-EU individuals under this legislation, and 43 percent would be less inclined to rent to those without a UK passport (RLA, 2017).

### 3.4.4 Refugee Dispersal and Housing

Refugee dispersal has led to a distinctive form of housing differentiation, initiated by the 1999 Refugee and Asylum Act introducing the dispersal system. This approach mandated the distribution of asylum seekers across various regions and cities in the UK rather than allowing them to settle at their discretion. Launched in April 2000, dispersal aimed to alleviate the perceived 'burden' on London and the Southeast, transforming housing asylum seekers into a profitable venture that shapes public policy perspectives, emphasising the profitability of asylum accommodations (Darling, 2022).

Beyond economic considerations, dispersal has played a role in addressing perceived threats to 'social cohesion' by physically segregating refugees based on their status and connections. This separation occurs precisely when refugees are forming new relationships (Hynes and Sales, 2009). The policy also seeks to prevent the visible concentration of asylum seekers in one area, continuing efforts to avoid clustering racialised minorities as seen in previous dispersal schemes (Zetter et al., 2005).

Fundamentally a housing-led policy, dispersal aims to spread the housing burden and alleviate pressures on diminishing social housing stocks in London and the Southeast. This involves creating new dispersal areas to generate revenue by renting out their challenging-to-lease social housing inventory and decreasing overall expenses for the public budget (Darling, 2022).

However, the selection of areas for dispersal often overlooked social and economic infrastructure, existing community networks, and resources to support asylum seekers and refugee settlement. This resulted in cutting off refugees from essential support systems and relocating them to areas with insufficient social provisions, a lack of qualified lawyers, and exposure to racism (Briskman & Cemlyn, 2005). The most dispersed regions in England include the Northwest, Yorkshire, and the Humber, with some of the receiving local authorities ranking among the most deprived in the country (DCLG, 2019).

Asylum seekers typically receive initial accommodation in Initial Accommodation Centres (IACs), predominantly hostels providing full-board meals and basic toiletries. Although designed as a short-term solution, delays often result in individuals staying for several months before dispersal (Right to Remain, 2020). The conditions in IACs have faced extensive criticism for their substandard quality (Home Affairs Committee, 2017). Conditions in asylum housing have been heavily criticised for issues like water leaks, fire hazards, mould, rats, cockroaches, and bedbugs. A survey revealed numerous problems, including dirty accommodations, broken furniture, and limited positive interactions with housing staff (Migrant Voice, 2023).

In summary, these housing policies have marginalised migrants and refugees, forcing them to the edges of the housing market and often subjecting them to overcrowded or substandard conditions, ultimately restricting housing options for working-class, racialised minorities, migrants and asylum seekers, impacting their mobility and employment opportunities.

### 3.4.5 Bordering and Social Care

NHS services, initially accessible to all residents in Britain regardless of nationality, underwent changes with the introduction of charges for overseas visitors by the Labour government in 1977. Further amendments in 1988 and 2006 shaped the regulations, but it was in 2004 that the principle of free access for those 'ordinarily resident' in Britain shifted (Vickers, 2019). The amendments introduced secondary healthcare for undocumented migrants and refused asylum seekers.

The landscape of healthcare access for migrants continued to evolve with the Immigration Act of 2014. The definition of 'ordinarily resident' was altered to necessitate indefinite leave to remain, and a surcharge was introduced for non-EEA individuals requiring definite leave to remain. Failure to pay this surcharge resulted in automatic visa refusal (DHSC, 2018). In 2023, the UK Government announced a 66% increase in the Immigration Health Surcharge (IHS), raising it from £624 to £1,035 per person per year. By 2017, healthcare providers were mandated to check patients' eligibility for free NHS treatment at the point of delivery and charge ineligible individuals 150% of the actual cost (Cassidy, 2018).

Concerns regarding data sharing between the Department of Health and Social Care and the Home Office are a key element of the hostile environment. Frequently, this information was shared without the awareness or consent of patients or healthcare practitioners, resulting in immigration enforcement actions against nearly 6,000 individuals in 2016, creating an environment where migrants felt reluctant to seek help for health problems (Liberty, 2018; Vickers, 2019). The broader impact of such policies extends beyond healthcare, affecting the overall well-being and access to essential services for migrant populations.

**Table 1: Stratification of Migrants Welfare Rights in Post-Brexit Britain**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Recourse to Public Funds** | | |
| **Immigration Status** | **Benefits** | **Housing** | **NHS and Social Care** |
| Non-EEA (5- or 10-year route) | NRPF (Council support for those with ‘Care Needs’ or a child under 18 years) | NRPF (Council support for those with ‘Care Needs’ or a child under 18 years) | £6,240 (10-year route)  £3,120 (5-year route) |
| Non-EEA (with ILR) | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| EEA (5- or 10-year route) | NRPF (Council support for those with ‘Care Needs’ or a child under 18 years) | NRPF (Council support for those with ‘Care Needs’ or a child under 18 years) | £6,240 (10-year route)  £3,120 (5-year route) |
| EEA (Settled Status) | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| EEA (Pre-Settled Status) | Yes (Conditional on proving Right to Remain) | Yes (Conditional on proving Right to Remain) | Yes (Conditional on proving Right to Remain) |
| Asylum Seeker | NRPF (NASS Support) | NRPF (NASS Support) | Yes |
| Refugee | Yes | Yes | Yes |

Source: Author’s Own.

## 3.5 Structuring Racial Class Fractions Through Welfare Entitlement

Racial and Ethnic studies in the UK have suggested that the Hostile Environment and processes of Racial Bordering represent the racialised restriction of movement and as a form of migrant dispossession (Goodfellow, 2019, Ali, 2022; De Noronha, 2022). In this way, the Hostile Environment functions to immobilise and dispossess Britain's migrants through everyday racial bordering. This form of racial bordering actively produces a hierarchy of citizenship (Ali, 2022), ultimately affecting labour dynamics and conditions.

This chapter has argued that racial bordering acts not only through citizenship in the production of multi-status Britain (De Noronha, 2022) but this is experienced through differential inclusion and access to social welfare systems. Migrants find their welfare rights stratified and contingent on immigration status, resulting in a selective process that perpetuates unequal treatment and discrimination, not only between migrants and 'natives' but also within the migrant population itself (Bolderson, 2010). Particularly in the context of asylum, migrants encounter restricted access to public services while awaiting the outcome of their applications.

The outlined policies effectively establish a state-sanctioned framework conducive to the exploitation of cheap, racialised labour. Many immigrant workers in the UK are compelled to toil under sweatshop-like conditions within the secondary and informal labour markets. Additionally, the differential inclusion of immigrants within welfare systems, spanning social care, housing, and benefits, influences their mobility bargaining within the labour market, restricting their ability to move between employers (Strauss & McGrath, 2017). The termination of free movement further amplifies the costs associated with return migration, dissuading migrants from returning to their home countries due to fears of being unable to re-enter the UK (Portes, 2023). This multifaceted impact underscores the systemic challenges faced by immigrants and refugees in the UK.

The State’s immigration policies develop racial class fractions within the working class. Within the racial class fraction, bordering processes create hierarchies of citizenship, leading to the stratification of rights and workers' differential inclusion in welfare systems. As a result, migrant workers have a lower capacity to mobility bargain than citizen workers. Moreover, within the racial class fraction, different migrant and refugee workers have different capacities to bargain.

### 3.5.1 The Racialisation of Refugee Labour in the UK

The experiences of refugees in the UK demonstrate the compounded vulnerabilities faced by migrants under restrictive immigration regimes. Refugees and asylum seekers navigate the labour market in a context shaped by immigration policies, socio-legal constraints, and economic imperatives, all of which exacerbate their precarious position within the workplace.

Clayton and Vickers (2019) highlight the importance of understanding "dominant temporalities" in the working lives of refugees and asylum seekers in the UK. Their study critiques the binary distinctions in migration discourse, such as "free vs. forced" migration, and focuses on the politics of time that shape refugees' inclusion or exclusion from national economies. In the UK, asylum seekers experience strict temporal regulations that prevent them from working until their claim is processed, creating prolonged periods of stasis that impede their ability to participate in society. This temporal delay not only impacts their financial independence but also shapes their mental health and long-term aspirations.

While some migrants experience rapid transitions into paid employment after gaining refugee status, they are often unprepared for the labour market, particularly due to a lack of UK-based experience and the sharp contrast between the prohibition from working during the asylum process and the immediate compulsion to secure employment (Clayton & Vickers, 2019). This creates a paradox where newly recognised refugees are thrust into a labour market that demands rapid adjustment, but their previous experiences and qualifications are frequently devalued. Additionally, they are often directly channelled into precarious, low-paid jobs through jobseeker support personnel, which further compounds their economic marginalisation (Vickers, 2014). Many refugees find themselves trapped in precarious, low-paid jobs that do not reflect their skills or prior work experiences, further compounding their economic marginalisation.

The concept of precarity is crucial in understanding the labour experiences of refugees, as explored by Lewis et al. (2015). The authors argue that neoliberal labour markets, coupled with restrictive immigration policies, create conditions of hyper-precarity for refugees and asylum seekers. This term reflects the compounded vulnerabilities experienced by migrants, which extend beyond employment into broader aspects of life, including housing, healthcare, and social relations. Refugees in low-wage labour markets are often subjected to exploitative conditions, intensified by their socio-legal status and the immigration regimes that stratify migrant rights.

Refugees, particularly those working in sectors like construction, care work, and cleaning, face high levels of insecurity and exploitation, often through subcontracting chains that obscure their rights (Lewis et al., 2015). This fragmented employment structure means that refugees are frequently competing for insecure jobs in sectors socially constructed to attract marginalised groups, exacerbating their vulnerability to coercive labour practices.

Waite (2017) examines the exploitative conditions faced by asylum seekers and refused asylum seekers, particularly those who are pushed into "survival work" due to their destitution. UK immigration policies, particularly the Immigration Acts of 2014 and 2016, have created a hostile environment that criminalises irregular work and restricts access to housing, healthcare, and financial resources. This erosion of rights has left many refugees and asylum seekers in situations of hyper-precarity, where their lack of legal status or formal rights renders them vulnerable to severe exploitation.

Refused asylum seekers, in particular, are often driven into the informal economy, where they face significant risks of exploitation in sectors that are largely unregulated. Waite's (2017) interviews with asylum seekers revealed that many are forced into exploitative labour arrangements after their asylum claims are rejected, driven by desperation to support their families or fund legal appeals. These individuals frequently lack the power to challenge abusive conditions due to their fear of deportation, perpetuating a cycle of vulnerability and exploitation.

The UK's asylum system, characterised by restrictive labour rights and hostile policies, has created spaces of hostility for refugees seeking work (Waite, 2017). The state-enforced exclusions from the formal labour market mean that many refugees and asylum seekers must navigate precarious, often illegal, work arrangements that expose them to further risks, including poor working conditions, long hours, and underpayment.

Both Clayton and Vickers (2019) and Waite (2017) highlight the gendered nature of refugee labour experiences. Female refugees, in particular, face significant challenges in balancing work and family responsibilities. Many women are trapped in low-wage, flexible jobs that demand long hours, disrupting their family lives and creating additional barriers to social integration. These gendered sacrifices are compounded by the pressures of migration, as women often anticipated improved living conditions for their families, only to encounter precarious employment that limits their upward mobility.

The intersection of gender, race, and immigration status creates specific forms of marginalisation for refugee women, particularly those with caring responsibilities. These individuals frequently experience heightened levels of exploitation in sectors such as domestic work, care, and cleaning, where the demands of flexible employment clash with their familial obligations. This reflects broader patterns of structural inequality in the UK labour market, where racialised and gendered divisions of labour are reinforced by immigration policies and market dynamics. The literature on refugee labour in the UK highlights the interplay of temporal regulation, precarity, and exploitation in shaping refugees' experiences in the labour market.

### 3.5.2 The Racialisation of Roma Labour in the UK

The racialisation of migrant labour extends to other marginalised groups, such as the Roma from Eastern Europe. While refugees face distinct socio-legal constraints and precarity in the UK labour market, the Roma encounter similar yet uniquely racialised experiences of marginalisation. The migration of Roma from Eastern Europe to the UK, particularly following Slovakia's accession to the EU in 2004, reflects a complex interplay of racialisation, and socioeconomic challenges.

Grill’s research (2012) illustrates how migration has altered social hierarchies within the Roma community. In the UK, many Roma migrants have achieved improved socio-economic status, finding better job opportunities and accessing services unavailable in Slovakia. This shift has transformed their community's understanding of success, with many now aspiring to stable employment and social integration, contrasting sharply with their previous experiences of marginalisation and limited prospects in their home country. Grill (2016) further explores the economic strategies that Roma migrants adopt in their new environments. Rather than fully integrating into the formal UK labour market, many Roma engage in informal economic activities, such as horse trading and moneylending, which align with their traditional practices. This preference for autonomous work reflects a broader struggle to maintain cultural identity while resisting pressures to conform to mainstream economic norms. Grill’s analysis underscores how Roma migrants adapt their economic practices to the new socio-economic landscape, while simultaneously preserving important elements of their cultural and social structure.

Crucially, Grill (2018) introduces the concept of "migrating racialisations" to explain how Roma migrants are differentiated from other Eastern European groups. Unlike other migrants from the region, the Roma are subjected to unique racial and cultural stereotypes that persist even after migration. Drawing on Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence, Grill examines how these racial hierarchies are internalised by Roma migrants, with some adopting preferences for lighter skin and attempting to conform to dominant societal norms as a way of navigating the racialised expectations placed upon them. Despite the temporary alleviation of some stigmas associated with migration, the Roma continue to face significant racial and class-based challenges in the UK, often finding themselves at the bottom of both the socio-economic and racial hierarchies.

Further highlighting the racialised treatment of Roma migrants, Yıldız and De Genova (2018) examine how EU policies and public discourses have contributed to their marginalisation. In particular, they note how the Roma have been conflated with broader anti-migrant sentiments, a phenomenon that intensified in the context of Brexit. This has led to increased criminalisation and exclusion of Roma communities, even as official EU efforts claim to promote social inclusion. Yıldız and De Genova (2018) argue that the homogenisation of Roma identities in public discourse obscures the diversity within Roma communities, thus reinforcing racialised perceptions that perpetuate their marginalisation.

The specific impact of Brexit on the Roma community is explored by Martin (2021), who reveals how new immigration requirements have exacerbated the precarious status of Roma migrants. Brexit has not only intensified their vulnerability in the labour market but has also disrupted family life and long-term aspirations. Fears of deportation and uncertainty about residency status have created widespread mental distress among Roma migrants, further compounding their marginalisation. Despite these challenges, Martin (2021) notes a strong sense of agency within the Roma community, as they continue to navigate these uncertainties in a bid to secure their future in the UK.

In addition to these economic and social challenges, Humphris (2017) examines how Roma identity is racialised in interactions with the UK welfare state. Bureaucratic processes and changing residency rights have contributed to discriminatory practices. Frontline workers, such as social workers or welfare officers, may unconsciously rely on negative racial stereotypes about Roma when determining the level of support provided to them. This reliance on stereotypes can lead to biased decision-making, resulting in Roma migrants receiving less assistance or facing additional scrutiny compared to other groups. This form of everyday racism not only affects the accessibility of welfare services but also reinforces the broader structural barriers that Roma face as they attempt to integrate into British society.

Together, these studies illustrate the persistent racialisation and marginalisation of Roma migrants in the UK. The racialisation of Roma labour in the UK is deeply intertwined with broader socio-economic and political factors that shape their experiences as migrants. The literature reveals that Roma migrants face distinct challenges, including systemic marginalisation, informal economic participation, and enduring racial stereotypes. Despite their attempts to adapt and assert agency, structural barriers such as immigration and welfare practices continue to exacerbate their vulnerability. Together, these dynamics underscore the persistent and complex racialisation of Roma labour in the UK.

In the next section, we move to the local scale to examine how the stratification of rights and entitlements to welfare play out within a particular local labour market. In particular, this section will examine the segmentation of the local labour market. The contention is that the combination of the UK’s immigration policies that limits the mobility of refugee and migrant workers combined with the SCR’s local labour market, further restricts their mobility power and capacity to mobility-effort bargain.

## 3.6 Bordering Decay: The Political Construction of the Sheffield City Regions Local Labour Market

Having examined the macro context of the UK's national border regime, I will now examine the consequences of these connections on the Top of Form

Sheffield City Region’s local labour market. Having introduced the political forces that shape workers mobility in the previous section, I now turn to explore how they are reshaping workers mobility power in the context of the local labour market. I will analyse the relationship between the Hostile Environment and the SCR’s local labour market. Relying on data collected from several statistical sources, I contend that migrants are disproportionately found in precarious, non-standard employment, experiencing discrimination concerning compensation and social rights. As I have shown, migrant workers are differently included within the labour market due to the stratification of rights exercised by the UK's immigration policies. This stratification of rights plays out within particular local labour markets by limiting migrant and refugee workers' mobility power, tying them to a particular locale. This way, the SCR's labour market and migrant and refugees' mobility power is politically established (Wells, 1996).

The theoretical framework developed in the preceding chapter necessitates an examination of the intricate interconnections between race and labour. These relations are constructed through diverse mechanisms in varying societal contexts: migrants’ subordination in production varies across national boundaries and between regional contexts. This is because, processes of racialisation vary significantly across different regions, implying that they are likely to shape the labour process in unique ways. Following the theoretical foundations of the thesis, this chapter provides an overview of the SCR in order to contextualise the states national immigration policies.

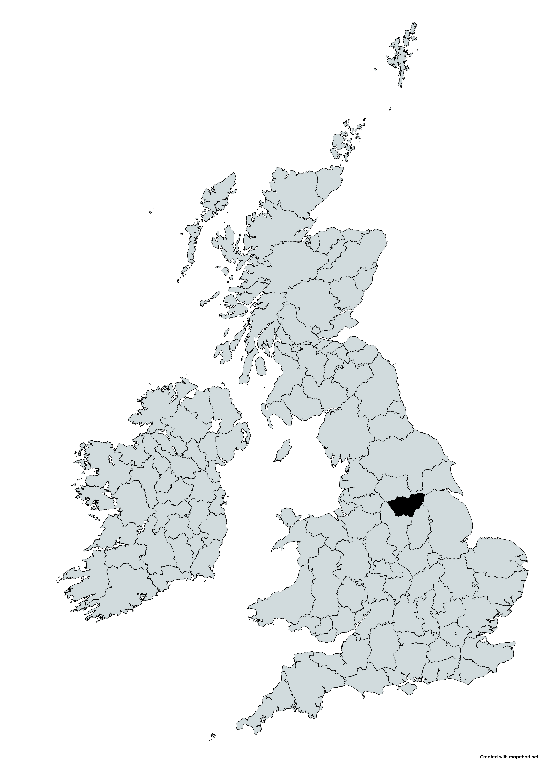
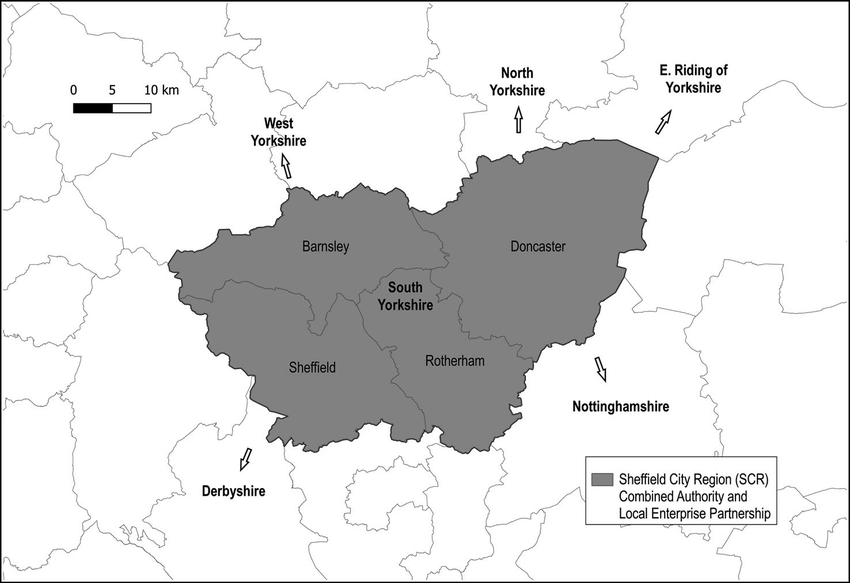
In the first section, I will show how migrants are overrepresented in atypical and insecure jobs in the SCR. Within the following section, I will present two micro-regional spaces within the SCR. I will show the variation in the labour market of the SCR, between Forge Valley, an inner-city area and Pit-Town a suburban village on the periphery of the Sheffield City. Overall, I will suggest that the primary driving factor behind the competitiveness of the UK's warehousing industry is the extensive exploitation and subjugation of migrant labour. In short, in the Sheffield City Region, the disciplining of migrant labour through state policies, the political construction of the local labour market and the uneven forms of social reproduction, shape the employment relation.

### 3.6.1 The Sheffield City Region’s Labour Market

The Sheffield City Region (SCR) encompasses Barnsley, Doncaster, Rotherham, Sheffield, and Markham Vale in Derbyshire. The geographic location for this study is referred to as the Sheffield City Region (SCR). However, it is important to note that during the course of this research, the administrative designation of SCR was replaced by the South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority (SYMCA). This change occurred in June, 2021, following developments in local governance aimed at consolidating regional authority under the new combined authority structure. Although the SCR designation is no longer in use, I continue to refer to it throughout this thesis for consistency, as it was the formal designation during the period of fieldwork. Where relevant, the term SCR should be understood in the context of this transitional period, reflecting the institutional framework that existed at the time of data collection and analysis.

Defined by its industrial heritage and economic marginalisation, the SCR is distinguished by unique work-based cultures and identities. The region's narrative is woven with socio-economic marginalisation (Etherington, 2016), and intra-regional inequalities (Mackinnon, 2020). With a well-established history of migration to and from the area, including racialised minority communities, their numbers, though limited compared to certain regions of Britain, are often concentrated around the region's industrial centre and specific migration-dependent industries (Searle, 2010). Despite these historical intricacies, the SCR is commonly associated with northern white masculinity, a label closely associated with its industrial past (Charlesworth, 2000).

**Figure 6: The Sheffield City Region**



*(Adapted from Gherhes, et al., 2022).*

### 3.6.2 Sheffield’s Industrial Decline

Between the 1970s and 1980s, the British Steel Corporation (BSC) encountered formidable challenges, with a staggering reported loss of £2,846 million and a substantial reduction in its workforce from 252,000 to 166,400. This era witnessed extensive restructuring, characterised by mergers, plant closures, strikes, and workforce reductions. Emerging were joint ventures between the BSC and the private sector, symbolically named 'Phoenix' after the regenerating Greek mythological bird. The collaborative efforts of the BSC and Prime Minister Thatcher resulted in over 52,000 job cuts, a capacity reduction of 1 million tonnes per annum, and the decentralisation of pay bargaining.

Following this, in Sheffield, the unemployment rate surged from below the national average of 4.1% in 1978 to 15.5% in 1984 (Thomas et al., 2019). Thatcher's privatisation initiatives in the steel and coal industries intensified closures of factories and pits, leading to a contraction of Britain's manufacturing base by 1.7 million workers (24%) between 1979 and 1984.

In 1971, nearly 50% of Sheffield's workforce was in manufacturing (compared to 31% nationally). By 1984, this percentage had dropped to just 24%. Remarkably, by 2018, only 9% of Sheffield's workforce remained in manufacturing (Thomas et al., 2019).

Sheffield’s industrial decline, the 2008 recession, and austerity measures of the Coalition government, have left a lasting impact on economic growth in the SCR. Among the foremost challenges confronting the SCR and similar major industrial cities in the North of the UK is the predicament of demand deficiency, including aspects like job density, defined as the ratio of jobs in an area to the working-age population (16-64) residing in that specific region (Thomas et al., 2019).Top of Form

The impact of austerity, implemented through spending cuts, has disproportionately affected regions with traditional industrial structures, reinforcing the shift toward a low-pay, low-skill economy. From 2012 to 2018, employment in public administration and defence, including local government and the civil service, declined from 15,000 to 12,000. Sheffield's public administration and defence sector stands out with above-average pay rates and a 75:25 full-time/part-time ratio, indicating the loss of not only jobs but also full-time, higher-paying positions crucial to the local economy (Thomas, et al., 2019).

An evaluation by the National Audit Office (NAO, 2018) on the financial landscape of devolution reveals a substantial decline of approximately 49.1% in real terms in government funding for local authorities from 2010-11 to 2017-18. This corresponds to a 28.6% real-terms reduction in 'spending power' (NAO, 2018). In Sheffield, this translates to cumulative cuts amounting to £460 million over nine years from 2010 (Thomas et al., 2019). Furthermore, deindustrialised regions like the SCR have borne a disproportionate impact from welfare reforms and benefit cuts, with far-reaching consequences for economic and employment growth (Etherington & Jones, 2017).

The SCR exhibits a notable disparity in employment rates between White British and ethnic minority residents, a trend persistent throughout the 2008-2018 period. This reinforces findings from earlier research that identified Sheffield as having the second most substantial White-BAME unemployment gap among all local authorities in England and Wales (Thomas, et al., 2019). The employment rate for ethnic minorities in Sheffield consistently lags behind the national average for the same period. Notably, ethnic minority workers in Sheffield are predominantly concentrated in the service sector. Additionally, a significant proportion of ethnic minority workers occupy SOC9 Elementary jobs, contrasting sharply with White British workers. Conversely, there is a strikingly low representation of ethnic minority workers in SOC1 roles such as managers, directors, and senior officials compared to their White British counterparts (Thomas et al., 2019).Top of Form

### 3.6.3 Unemployment, Education and Social Deprivation in Forge Valley

The SCR is marked by a significant colour line that runs through the city. Forge Valley represents a combination of electoral wards in the inner city of Sheffield. Combined, these wards represent the 20% most deprived in the country, of which 73% of residents are from Minority ethnic backgrounds (Sheffield City Council, 2022a). Life expectancy is 8.8 years lower for men and 11.4 years for women in Forge valley compared with the rest of the city (Sheffield City Council, 2022b).

Census data reveals the following statistical characteristics of families in Forge Valley. Regarding ethnicity, 38% are Asian, of which 33% are Pakistani, 15% are White British, and 10% are Black. 53% were born outside the UK, with 23% born in the EU8. 50% of households have English as their primary language, while 25% have no household member with English as their primary language. Census data reveals that Forge Valley has a high population turnover, with those moving in more likely to be between 15 and 44. Household composition shows that 18% of households comprise lone parents with dependent children. 11% claim unemployment benefits against the national average of 3.9%, and Youth unemployment claimants make up 16.7% against the national average of 5%. Single-parent households with Universal Credit (UC) make up 30% of all UC claimants, 27% of UC claimants receive private housing entitlement, and 5% receive social housing entitlements. 40% of households rent their homes from private landlords, 24% from social landlords, housing associations or the council. 17% of households are overcrowded, with 9% of housing vacant. Moreover, 5% of households have no central heating, and 25% of households experience fuel poverty (ONS, 2022).

The average annual household income is £20, 537, compared with £28,925 in Sheffield as a whole and £31,905 nationally. 55% of adults of working age are economically inactive. The 'Unemployment to 'Available Jobs' ratio, meaning the total number of people claiming unemployment benefit (Jobseekers Allowance) divided by the total number of job vacancies notified to Jobcentre Plus expressed as a ratio, is 38 in Forge Valley, compared with three nationally (ONS, 2022).

Together, these survey findings indicate that new migrants, refugees and BAME communities are overrepresented in areas experiencing multiple deprivation. The evidence provided by official statistics by the Sheffield City Council and census data shows that households in Forge Valley consist of a high percentage of lone parents with dependent young children living on welfare entitlements. Moreover, the low levels of labour-related security in the community are much worse compared with the workforce of the West of the City region. Evidently, Sheffield’s reinvention of entrepreneurial governance and a new industrial revolution in advanced manufacturing has continued to leave large segments of Sheffield’s population behind.

### 3.6.4 Unemployment, and Social Deprivation in Pit-Town

Pit-Town is located on the fringe of the Sheffield City. Between 1981 and 2004, Pit-Town's County experienced a substantial loss of 13,700 male jobs within the coal industry, accounting for 20% of all male employment in the region (Beatty et al., 2020). This decline in the coalfields triggered social and economic challenges, leading to the Coalfield Task Force (CTF) formation in 1997 under the governance of Tony Blair's New Labour government. The CTF acknowledged the unique difficulties faced by these areas, highlighting concentrated joblessness, physical isolation, inadequate infrastructure, and severe health problems (Coalfield Task Force 1998: 10).

The latest available data from 2017 sheds light on the demographic and socioeconomic landscape of Pit-Town (ONS, 2017). This analysis offers a comprehensive overview, encompassing population trends, ethnic composition, and the repercussions of EU migration. Furthermore, it reveals the changes in age distribution over the past few decades, providing a contextual backdrop for comprehending the impact on labour relations for its residents.

As of the most recent available data in 2017, Pit-Town's population stands at 11,750, reflecting an increase of 865 individuals since the 2011 census. Notably, the population has exhibited relative stability, fluctuating from 10,000 to 11,000 since 1981 (Centre for Towns, 2018). The demographic composition of Pit-Town is predominantly white British, with only 5.2% of its population belonging to other ethnic groups, contrasting sharply with the national rate of 20.2% (ONS, 2017).

While obtaining specific data on EU migration in Pit-Town poses challenges, at the broader county level, the region has 6% of its population born in the EU (excluding the UK). Poland emerges as the predominant country of birth within this demographic, contributing to 16% of all foreign-born residents in the county (ONS, 2017). Between 1981 and 2011, Pit-Town's population witnessed a notable ageing trend. The segment aged 65 and above saw a substantial increase of 28.3%, while those under 16 and between 16 and 24 experienced declines of 20.1% and 24%, respectively (Centre for Towns, 2018).

Pit-Town's electoral division has a low unemployment rate of 1.7%. However, it has a notably low economic activity rate, at 63.7%, well below the national average of 69.9% (ONS, 2019). The apparent contradiction between unemployment and economic activity figures in Pit-Town can be attributed to 'hidden' unemployment, a phenomenon often observed in former industrial areas (Beatty et al., 2022). In these regions, individuals are frequently redirected from unemployment statistics to sickness benefits, masking the actual employment challenges and not adversely affecting official unemployment rates (Beatty & Fothergill, 2016; Foden et al., 2014). This is evident in the county's economic inactivity rate, where 43.8% are classified as long-term sick, significantly higher than the national rate of 22.9% (ONS 2017).

Examining occupational distribution, the county exhibits below-average numbers in Soc 2010 major groups 1-3 and 4-5, encompassing professional and skilled occupations. Conversely, it has above-average figures in major groups 6-7 and 8-9, including service, sales, and elementary occupations (ONS 2017). Furthermore, average pay in the district falls below the national average and is among the lowest in the county at £11.82 per hour, compared to the national average of £14.36 (ONS 2017).

Regarding deprivation, Pit-Town stands out as the most deprived area within its county (ONS, 2017). At the ward level, the distribution reveals that two of Pit-Town's five wards fall within the 30%, two within the 20%, and one within the 10% most deprived wards in the UK (Indices of Multiple Deprivation, 2015). Furthermore, Pit-Town exhibits considerably poorer performance than the rest of the county across various deprivation indicators, encompassing child poverty, adults lacking qualifications, and life expectancy (ONS, 2019). Top of Form

In summary, the economic and social challenges of the Sheffield City Region reflect the deep impacts of industrial decline, austerity, and a shift toward lower-wage, lower-skill employment. Forge Valley and Pit-Town each face distinct yet interrelated difficulties. Forge Valley, characterised by high rates of economic inactivity, social deprivation, and a high proportion of ethnic minority and migrant populations, exemplifies the enduring inequalities left by structural changes and economic restructuring. Conversely, Pit-Town’s economic profile reveals an ageing population, hidden unemployment through high sickness benefits rates and a predominance of low-wage occupations, stemming from the coal industry’s decline. Examining these dynamics through the lens of labour regimes offers insight into how broader political and economic forces influence labour control, and resistance beyond the immediate workplace context.

## 3.7 The Labour Regime

The concept of a labour regime provides a valuable framework for understanding how external political and economic forces shape the extraction of surplus within the labour process. Crucially, the dynamics of labour control and resistance are not confined to the workplace alone. Instead, as Roberts (1990: 10) emphasises, workplace ethnographies reveal "the factuality of first-hand experience," offering insight into how workers navigate and resist the complex interplay of workplace politics, state policies, and societal pressures. By grounding this research in the lived experiences of workers, we can better understand how agency, understood as the effort-bargain is pragmatically entangled in their everyday activities, struggles, and interactions with broader structural forces, such as immigration policies, welfare entitlements, and local labour market conditions.

The work of Burawoy (1979;1985) offers a critical lens to examine labour regimes, particularly by expanding the scope of labour control beyond the workplace to include the broader politics of production. In contrast to earlier works like Braverman’s (1974) focus on deskilling and control within the labour process, Burawoy sought to understand how different forms of consent in the workplace are manufactured by considering the interplay between the workplace and the national political apparatus.

Burawoy’s concept of factory regimes positions the labour process within a larger context where state intervention, market competition, and the reproduction of labour power converge. He argued that the role of the state in providing social safety nets, enforcing employment regulations, and enabling collective bargaining rights is essential in shaping the dynamics of labour control. The state's role is not just regulatory; it also mediates labour-capital relations by mitigating the impact of harsh workplace practices through welfare provision and regulatory frameworks.

Burawoy’s analysis highlighted four intersecting dynamics that shape factory regimes: the labour process, the intensity of market competition, the conditions for labour’s reproduction, and, critically, state intervention (McKay, 2018). From these, he identified various types of factory regimes that exemplify how control and consent are produced in different contexts. His typology includes despotic regimes, where workers receive little to no state support, leaving their social reproduction to employers; hegemonic regimes, where welfare states provide robust support systems and strong unions bolster workers' power; and hegemonic despotism*,* a hallmark of neoliberal globalisation, where the expansion of capital undermines labour standards and wages through market-driven pressures.

Burawoy’s work continues to be influential because it bridges the micro-politics of the workplace and the macro-politics of the state, revealing the co-constitution of workplace regimes by both national labour market policies and broader political-economic structures. This perspective has proven useful in studying labour regimes across various contexts, including the logistics sector in Europe (Dörflinger, Pulignano & Vallas, 2020). In warehousing, this approach has been used to focus on the influences of institutional and market-based, forces on the labour process, explaining the varying levels of workers' power and the types of class compromise in production. This perspective underscores that the warehousing and logistics industries are intricately linked to institutional dynamics of labour relations. These dynamics involve specific institutions that impact workers' collective organisation, encompassing the resources and capabilities developed through trade unions and collective bargaining arrangements (Doerflinger et al., 2020).

In the 1990s, research on labour regimes evolved significantly as economic geographers sought to highlight the distinctive qualities of local labour markets. Earlier perspectives had often regarded labour markets as homogenous and national, largely overlooking spatial diversity. However, new approaches began to emphasize that labour markets are embedded within local contexts, with unique dynamics that differ across regions and subnational spaces (Peck, 1989; Hanson & Pratt, 1992). This shift introduced a spatially aware lens, illustrating how local factors actively influence the structure and characteristics of labour regimes.

According to Peck (1996), this local differentiation stems from two primary sources. First, labour market dynamics are driven by specific intersections between labour demand and labour supply within a given locale. Second, local labour markets are shaped by geographically distinct institutions, which vary in terms of their structure and function, influencing the regulatory frameworks and practices that govern labour in those areas. These factors combine to create what Peck describes as a "geographically specific institutionalisation of labour market structures, conventions, and practices" (1996: 266), providing unique contexts in which labour market strategies and power dynamics unfold.

In this context, Jonas (1996) introduced the concept of the local labour control regime (LLCR), which he defined as a historically contingent and territorially embedded set of mechanisms that govern the relationship between production, work, consumption, and labour reproduction within a specific local labour market. Unlike Burawoy’s factory regimes, which primarily focused on workplace control, Jonas’ LLCR framework emphasised a broader, more dynamic set of social relations that shape labour control at the local level. These mechanisms are enacted through networks of locally distinct institutions and reciprocal social relations, encompassing not only workplace dynamics but also the household, civil society, and state institutions.

One of the key contributions of the LLCR framework is its attention to the inherent contradictions of capitalism, particularly the tension between the spatial mobility of capital and the need for specific investments in localities. While capital can be mobile and fluid, it often requires stable local conditions to maximize profits. This tension drives the development of relatively stable, though fluid, local regimes. Jonas highlights that LLCRs are not static entities but are continuously shaped and reshaped by forces of domination, control, resistance, and repression at multiple scales (Jonas 1996: 329). Importantly, LLCRs reflect the ways in which local labour markets are integrated into broader national and global production systems, with the specificity of local conditions influencing the mobility of capital investments.

Subsequent research in the logistics sector has built on Jonas’ work. Fuchs et al (2023) use the concept of local labour control regime to consider the socio-cultural contexts and regulatory settings that shape labour relations in specific locations. Their study identifies a research gap in understanding spatial differences within local labour control regimes, particularly between inner and outer metropolitan areas. In inner metropolitan warehouses social control mechanisms such as self-organisation overshadow technological control, while in outer metropolitan warehouses technological control and digital surveillance takes precedence. The research identifies grey areas where technological and social control intersect, suggesting that labour control is not uniform across different contexts. Overall, labour control practices across different warehouse settings are influenced by local conditions and corporate strategies.

More recently labour regime analysis has evolved, aiming to integrate global dynamics while renewing attention to the construction of social differences. This phase responds to the heightened economic globalisation and the proliferation of global value chains (GVCs) across various sectors (Coe et al, 2007). Scholars have emphasised the international nature of the forces shaping national, local, and workplace labour regimes (Pun & Smith, 2007). Overall, this phase emphasises the need to understand labour regimes as, “historically formed, multiscalar phenomena resulting from struggles over local social relations and lead-firm contracting practices within global production networks” (Smith et al., 2018: 556).

In particular, feminist global value chain (GVC) approaches have brought gendered labour regimes to the forefront, emphasising how they are integrated into global production structures in a mutually constitutive manner. Here, the focus is on how labour regimes not only exploit workers but also create and reinforce differences, particularly along gendered lines, to sustain global capitalism. Social reproduction refers to the ways in which daily life and labour power are reproduced, including unpaid care work, household tasks, and other forms of invisible labour that are vital to the functioning of capitalist economies (Baglioni & Mezzadri 2020).

For example, in addressing the ‘labour gap’ in GPN’s Baglioni (2021) uses the concept of local labour control regime to integrate labour control and social reproduction, highlighting how the household is a critical site for both reproducing labour and disciplining workers. Baglioni (2021) emphasises that the home plays a vital role in the capitalist process, mediating the relationship between individual workers and the broader labour market, particularly through gendered and racialised dynamics. The analysis reveals that the disciplining of labour is not confined to workplaces but extends into households, where gender roles and class relations are continuously negotiated and contested.

A key illustration of this is the concept of the dormitory labour regime, pioneered by Pun Ngai and Chris Smith (2006) in their study of export-oriented electronics production in post-socialist China. They argue that this regime exemplifies a new form of labour system that merges productive and reproductive spaces, placing control over both in the hands of capital. Dormitories located near factories not only lengthen the workday but also give corporations direct control over workers' social reproduction, which includes their living conditions and personal time.

This work-residence fusion serves to blur the lines between the workday and private life, effectively compressing "work-life" boundaries to suppress the development of autonomous labour communities and institutions that might improve conditions or foster collective organising. The dormitory labour regime showcases how control over social reproduction is central to labour discipline in global capitalism. By embedding workers in spaces where they are constantly available for labour, capital exerts almost total control over their time and activities, thus maximizing production efficiency while minimizing opportunities for resistance.

Labour regimes have also shed light on how race plays a central role in structuring labour control. Scholars such as Webster (1985), Munoz (2008), and Sallaz (2009) have demonstrated that labour regimes are not race-neutral but deeply embedded within the racial hierarchies that sustain capitalist accumulation. These scholars have examined how race-based divisions of labour—reinforced through workplace hierarchies, hiring practices, and informal networks—become mechanisms of control and value extraction. For instance, Munoz (2008) weaves together an analysis of state- through immigration, labour market, gender and race to create variation in labour regimes.

Schling (2022) comes closest to weaving together all of the factors that create variation in labour regimes. Through an examination of temporal-spatial dimensions of Czechia’s dormitory regime. Using the cases of Foxconn and Panasonic investments in Czechia, she focuses on the social reproduction of a migrant workforce to argue that the “dormitory labour regime is not geared solely towards the production of commodities, but presents a terrain of struggle over the very (re)production of labouring subjects within changing local conditions and geographies of global production” (2022: 277). Through an examination of differentiated citizenship rights, migration flows and corridors, and social constructions of foreignness, Schling (2022) highlights the racial character of the dormitory regime.

Despite the considerable strengths of the expanding Labour Regimes framework, there is a noticeable oversight in its attention to the workplace as a critical locus for surplus extraction. In the expansive field of recent labour geography, there remains a lack of emphasis on the dialectical examination of management strategies, labour indeterminacy, and the effort bargain in production. For example, the concept of the local labour regime, (Jonas, 1996; Pattenden; 2019) while mediating inter-firm governance with labour geography has largely failed to explore the notion of the workplace regime.

While much of the labour regime literature focuses on mechanisms of control, this research re-centres the analysis on labour agency, specifically through the lens of production politics and the effort bargain. Labour regimes are not solely determined by management strategies; workers actively reshape them through their own actions and resistance (Cohen, 1987). By bringing together insights from race and social reproduction and labour geography, this research emphasises how workers' agency is shaped by the intersections of these factors. Rather than viewing workers as passive victims of labour regimes, this analysis foregrounds their ability to resist and reshape the terms of their exploitation. This agency is not exercised in isolation but is deeply embedded in the broader racial, social, and geographical structures that define labour regimes in warehousing.

The labour regime framework, as re-conceptualised in this research, integrates place-based dynamics, racial hierarchies, social reproduction, and labour agency. By incorporating these elements, this approach provides a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of how labour regimes operate within the global economy. This research contributes to labour regime framework by emphasising not just the mechanisms of control but also the central role of labour agency in shaping these regimes. Through this lens, we can better understand the complexities of labour exploitation and resistance in contemporary capitalism. In exploring this through the factuality of firsthand experience, I aim to connect the lived experiences of warehouse workers to broader structural forces, highlighting how national state policies and local labour markets, intersect to shape labour conditions, exploitation, and resistance in the workplace.

Consistent with the theoretical perspective of this research, this chapter has examined the fundamental characteristics of labour and race relations in the context of the UK's immigration policies and the Sheffield City Regions (SCR) labour market. A key focus has been on understanding labour's bargaining power not only as an economic relationship but also shaped by state policies. In particular, the chapter has argued that migrant labour plays a pivotal role in shaping labour's ability to negotiate its terms of work. The processes of immigration control (i.e., "bordering") and the precarious conditions of employment for migrant workers are closely linked. This relationship is captured through the concept of mobility-power, which highlights how restrictions on the movement of migrant workers affect their capacity to bargain for better wages, rights, and working conditions. In this way, state control over migration serves to weaken labour’s collective bargaining power by limiting mobility and reinforcing vulnerability in the workplace.

In the Sheffield City Region, migrant labour has been over-represented in logistics employment, concentrated in low-paying and labour-intensive sectors and housed in areas experiencing high levels of deprivation. The Hostile Environment can be understood as a process of bordering, which carves out racialised migrant workers from certain social and welfare rights, often by redefining categories of inclusion and exclusion. Focusing on benefits, housing and social care, I have demonstrated a range of practices to construct new kinds of borders that act to differentially include migrant workers. Bordering practices can operate subtly with the primary goal of limiting access to a system to a carefully chosen category of individuals. This is frequently accomplished through bureaucratic measures involving the redefinition of categories – such as citizenship, workers, habitual residence, pre-settled, and settled status – effectively excluding certain individuals from insider status and inserting a border between them and full access. These processes of bordering carry significant implications, escalating the pressure to accept work under lower wages, in unfavourable conditions, and with reduced job security. The alternative is often perceived as even less desirable. Moreover, such processes disrupt resistance by keeping individuals preoccupied with pursuing employment and individualise the responsibility for each worker to enhance their appeal to employers.Top of Form

In this chapter, I argued that refugees' and migrants' ability to access social and economic rights related to employment is affected by the structure of the local labour market. I traced how immigration policy regulates refugees' mobility from the national to the local level. This multiscalar labour regime, therefore, creates different "degrees of 'inside' and 'outside'" (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013: 208). The range of variation in access to social welfare programmes leads to unequal treatment of refugees and migrants who hold different legal statuses.

## 3.8 Closing Comments

In closing this chapter, I will reiterate the main concerns and outline the research questions. These first three chapters have been concerned with asserting the need to ensure the role of the state, race, social reproduction and agency when considering the organisation of production in the warehouse, located within the full circuit of capital.

The discussion of the warehouse labour process highlighted two strands in the literature. First, those who position the warehouse within the dynamic of the laws of motion tend to focus on control as a requirement of the vulnerability of the system. Control is presented as totalising but not universal. This form of control allows the warehouse to flexibly articulate control and consent to different workers at different times (Vallas et al., 2022).

Nonetheless, this still presents control in the warehouse as totalising. Second, literature has conceptualised the warehouse between relations in the supply chain governed by the laws of motion. This literature has identified workplace mechanisms as a result of the battle for value capture and concluded that this represents an industry-specific shift away from Fordism as a mode of production (Newsome, 2010). However, they tend to ignore the role of workers in this process as an active agent while dislocating an analysis from the social and economic environment in which it is embedded.

Therefore, three significant critiques have been made regarding the conceptualisation of the labour process within an overarching search for value. The implication is that the New Production Method has allowed dominant retailers to extend a search for value across inter-linked firms within the network, i.e., into the warehouse labour process. First, we suggested that while overcoming the autonomy of the labour process, it nevertheless privileges the chain, dislocating it from its socio-political context. More attention should be given to the interaction between this search for value within particular socio-political environments. The implication is that an overemphasis on the chain may mask the particular socio-political conditions required for their implementation.

Second, and in corollary, the literature tends to reify abstract labour while overlooking labour as an active agent. Therefore, value capture implies a universal tendency, something which is ‘done’ to workers. Workers make daily decisions that can affect how value capture operates in the warehouse. Consequently, labour must be treated as the ultimate source of value and as a subjective agent (Thompson & Ackroyd, 1995). Therefore, the particular conditions that affect labour power and, therefore, the implementation and ‘success’ of mechanisms of value capture that remain outside the Retailer-3PL relationship need to be understood. The implication is that these mechanisms are struggled over, but these struggles are shaped by the socio-political context in which they take place. The partiality of mechanisms of value capture is, therefore, configured on the basis of these conditions outside the supply chain, by which I mean State-Labour relations.

Third, while an increasing set of literature has focused on the racial and gendered production of difference in the warehouse labour process, this literature tends to focus on how these social relations enable capital to “super-exploit” (De Lara et al., 2018) its workforce. Limited scholarly exploration contemplates the theoretical frameworks of migration and race as foundational logics structuring the logistics industry, and no research has been conducted in the UK.

To bridge this gap, this thesis investigates the reciprocal relationship between the logistics industry, particularly warehouse labour, and socio-political context through the dimension of racialisation, incorporating constitutive processes like immigration policy. That is, “the production of labour in the abstract, or labour ‘in general,’ depended nonetheless upon concrete productions of socio-political difference, particularly the branding of race” (De Genova, 2023). Therefore, my focus is on how the racial production of difference, particularly through state immigration policy and the local labour market, can discipline labour, how this is used by capital to extract surplus value and how workers respond through mobility-effort bargaining. These three dimensions are outlined in the research questions below understood as discipling, exploitation, and resistance. Now, we must move our attention to operationalising these research questions within a suitable research methodology.

**Table 2: Research Questions**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Main RQ: How do warehouse workers experience their labour in the Sheffield City Region?** | | |
| Chapter 5.  [Reproduction] | **Disciplining the Racial Warehouse Reserve Army.**  Labour Regime: (National border and Local Labour Market). | **Sub Research Questions:** |
| 1. How does national state policy influence labour conditions in the warehouse? |
| 1. How does the local labour market influence labour conditions in the warehouse? |
| 1. What mobility practices are in evident? |
| Chapter 6 & 7.  [Production] | **Exploitation: Expediating Value in Motion**  Racialised mechanisms of value extraction.  Labour Process Theory. | 1. How are the mechanisms of exploitation in the warehouse experienced? |
| 1. How does this experience differ according to workers mobility power? |
| **Resistance: Disrupting Value in Motion**  Racialised resistance strategies.  Labour Process Theory. | 1. How do warehouse workers resist these mechanisms? |
| 1. How does warehouse workers mobility differential shape the form of that resistance? |

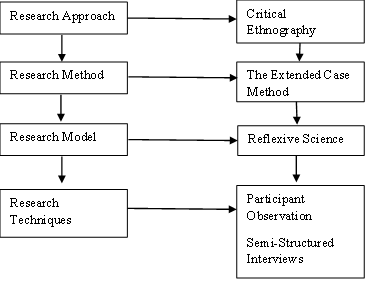
# CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY: THE EXTENDED CASE METHOD AND THE EXPERIENCE OF WORK

## 4.1 Introduction

The preceding chapters have considered the theoretical landscape surrounding the study of the warehouse labour process, particularly the dearth of attention given to race, the state and workers' agency. The analysis has revealed a noticeable gap, as these theoretical discussions have yet to be enriched by exploring how racialised institutions and policies impact warehouse workers' experience in production. This chapter bridges the theoretical insights from the literature review with a methodology designed to address this gap. By foregrounding the experience of workers, it seeks to provide a perspective that accounts for their lived experiences and the agency they exercise in confronting the multifaceted challenges posed by racialised state policies and labour exploitation in the warehouse.

In recent years, political economy literature has grappled with what can be termed as its 'connectivity problem' – the challenge of forging a coherent connection between the labour process, or the micro-level dynamics of labour, and the intricate web of global capital, manifest within networks and scalar systems of economic integration and production, or 'labour regimes' (Baglioni et al., 2022). Within this context, the need for a robust methodological framework has emerged, one that can effectively explore how these political and institutional dynamics that, “bind capital and labour in the form of antagonistic relative stability in particular times and spaces” (Baglioni et al, 2022: 1) are experienced within the realm of production. What is missing from the debate on warehouse work is the perspective of the worker. That is, how do workers make sense of, interact with, and resist their conditions of work?

This chapter provides an overview of the methodology used for this research, presenting how the theoretical frame outlined in the previous chapters was operationalised in the field. In line with Burawoy's (1998) framework, I will look into the dimensions of 'approach,' 'model,' 'method,' and 'technique.' This framework will facilitate a transition from the overarching philosophical stance to the intricate micro-practices involved in the collection of research data. By 'approach', I refer to critical ethnography; by 'model', I refer to the model of science as a reflexive model understood as my relationship to the social world. By research 'Method', I am alluding to the way the research is carried out, specifically Burawoy's extended case method (1998). This approach involves extending from social processes to theory for its refinement[[16]](#footnote-16). The goal is to bridge the understanding between the circuit of capital, state policies and the organisation of labour by placing the ethnographic study within political economy, while acknowledging my position in this process. Lastly, techniques refer to the specific tools employed for data collection. In my research, this included participant observation and interviews. This is presented graphically below.

**Figure 7: Methodology**

(Adapted from Burawoy, 2009).

I will begin by explaining why I chose ethnography and in particular, covert ethnography, in my study. Second, I will offer an outline of the ethnographic "extended-case method," which combines participant observation, and in-depth interviews. Next, I will establish the connections between my theoretical framework and research design, outlining the main and sub-research questions. This ethnographic approach was deemed the most suitable for comprehending class and racial dynamics within production from the workers' standpoint. Aligned with the theoretical framework, this method facilitated a nuanced understanding of how social, political, and economic structures intersect in shaping the experiences of warehouse workers.

In the subsequent section, I will delineate the geographical scope of the research area and provide detailed reasons for its selection. Subsequently, I will analyse my research techniques and highlight key aspects of my participant observation. Working alongside the workers proved to be a crucial research technique, as did conducting in-depth interviews, which enriched and broadened my analysis. These methods enabled me to capture the firsthand experiences and perspectives of warehouse workers in their own words. Next, I outline my positionality, successes and failures in the field and reflect on the limitations of the research method. Lastly, I explore the research ethics of the fieldwork. Through the use of multiple research methods and active involvement in the workplace I gained a profound understanding of warehouse workers' experiences, the socio-political context, and the dynamics of class and race within the workplace. To better understand the complex dynamics within warehouses, it is essential to adopt research methods that capture the depth and intricacies of workers' experiences. Traditional research approaches, such as surveys or structured interviews, often fall short in environments where informal, subtle, and sometimes hidden behaviours shape the day-to-day interactions and organisational life. This is particularly relevant in industrial settings like warehouses, where managerial control is pervasive and resistance to exploitation may manifest in less visible ways. Given these challenges, ethnographic research emerges as a powerful tool, offering an immersive approach that allows for a nuanced exploration of workplace cultures and power dynamics.

**4.2 Methodology: Critical Ethnography**

Ethnographic studies—particularly those in industrial settings—have long been lauded for their ability to provide rich, in-depth insights into organisational life. As Bernard and Ryan (1998) argue, ethnography allows researchers to observe formal organisational structures and the emergent, subtle behaviours that define workplace cultures. Ethnographers can witness actual behaviours in their natural settings, often inaccessible through surveys or interviews. This is particularly important in environments where managerial control is tightly enforced, such as warehouses, as workers' informal interactions may reveal hidden forms of resistance that would otherwise go unnoticed (Scott, 1985).

Warehouses, especially in the UK and other globalised economies, are often multicultural, multiethnic, and multilingual spaces where a diverse workforce from various national, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds interact daily. These environments can pose significant challenges for researchers who rely solely on surveys or structured interviews. Language barriers between researchers and workers may limit access to certain voices and experiences, further marginalising non-native speakers or workers from ethnic minority backgrounds (Smith, 2001). In such cases, ethnographies provide a unique advantage by allowing the researcher to engage with workers through shared experiences, capturing informal interactions that might be overlooked. This immersive approach facilitates access to experiences of workers who might otherwise remain hidden or misrepresented in traditional research methods (Lugosi, 2006). Moreover, ethnographic methods enable the collection of non-linguistic forms of data, such as body language, behaviours, and interactions, which are critical in understanding workplace dynamics (Smith, 2001). These non-verbal cues often reveal underlying tensions, resistance, or accommodations that may not be fully expressed in spoken language, particularly in environments where workers may feel constrained or cautious in their verbal expressions.

Ethnographies offer more profound and more nuanced descriptions of organisational life than are typically available in data derived from survey questionnaires (Smith, 2001). By their very nature, surveys create somewhat artificial interactions that separate reports of behaviours and attitudes from the settings where these behaviours naturally occur. These settings give the behaviours or attitudes their meaning (Edwards, 1992). In diverse and multilingual workplaces, surveys may inadvertently impose researchers' middle-class, often monocultural, values onto subjects, guiding them down predetermined lines of questioning that do not account for the workers' lived realities. Respondents are often further constrained by prescriptive options for their answers, severely limiting their ability to tell their own stories in their own words (Singleton & Straits, 1999). This can result in research that reproduces racialised or class-based social structures, where the voices of ethnic minorities or migrant workers are either silenced or distorted by the limitations of conventional methods.

Additionally, it's important to note that individuals do not always provide fully accurate or comprehensive accounts of their experiences during interviews (Smith, 2001). Whether due to social desirability bias, fear of repercussions, or simply the limitations of memory and self-reflection, interview responses may not always align with actual behaviours or events. This is particularly true in workplaces like warehouses, where employees may feel reluctant to criticise management, expose sensitive information, or disclose informal coping strategies in a formal interview setting.

Ethnography, allows for direct observation of workers' actions, interactions, and responses to management in real time, providing an opportunity to verify and cross-check what people say with what they actually do (Smith, 2001). This method enables the researcher to capture inconsistencies between self-reported experiences and lived behaviours, offering a more comprehensive and accurate picture of workplace dynamics. By embedding themselves in the daily rhythms of the workplace, researchers can gather data that goes beyond verbal accounts, shedding light on the more subtle, often hidden, aspects of labour and resistance that interviews alone may miss (Smith, 2001). This combination of observation and interaction ensures that ethnography can provide a richer, more nuanced understanding of organisational life, particularly in industries where management control and surveillance may shape workers' willingness to speak openly.

This ethnographic approach allows researchers to witness the complex, everyday negotiations of power, identity, and resistance in multicultural workplaces like warehouses (Calvey, 2017). These interactions are often subtle, reflecting the overt pressures of managerial control and the racial, linguistic, and cultural dynamics that shape worker experiences. Observing such dynamics in real-time is one of the critical strengths of ethnography, allowing the researcher to produce a more accurate and inclusive account of organisational life. This is particularly critical in workplaces where ethnic minority and migrant workers may use informal, non-verbal, or culturally specific strategies to resist or cope with managerial control, which are difficult to capture through more traditional research methods.

To build on the strengths of ethnographic immersion in understanding the complexities of warehouse labour, it is important to acknowledge that certain organisational settings may present additional challenges for researchers attempting to capture authentic worker experiences. In highly controlled workplaces, such as warehouses, overt research methods may influence the behaviour of both workers and management, potentially obscuring the very dynamics the researcher seeks to observe. Workers, aware of being studied, might alter their behaviours, particularly in contexts where managerial oversight is strict and resistance is subtle (Smith, 2001). In such situations, covert ethnography becomes a valuable tool, allowing the researcher to access hidden forms of interaction and resistance that may not surface in more transparent research approaches (Lugosi, 2006). The decision to adopt covert methods, while ethically complex, is often justified by the unique insights it offers into the lived realities of workers operating under intense surveillance and control.

The decision to employ covert ethnography, specifically through participant observation as an employee in the warehouse, was driven by several key factors. Gaining employment and working as a hidden participant observer was not only a practical necessity—since entry cannot otherwise be gained with management's knowledge—but also the most effective method for capturing the authentic workplace dynamics that underpin labour processes.

Gaining entry without management's knowledge is particularly important in warehousing due to the nature of power dynamics and the highly controlled environment that often exists in these workplaces. Warehouses are characterised by strict hierarchical control, with management closely overseeing worker productivity, behaviour, and interactions. If management were aware of a researcher's presence, they would likely attempt to manage or stage what is visible, presenting an idealised version of the workplace. Workers, under pressure or fear of reprisal, might be less inclined to speak openly or act naturally in front of someone perceived as affiliated with management. This would significantly limit the researcher's ability to access genuine, unfiltered data, particularly on sensitive issues such as worker resistance, informal labour practices, and racialised divisions (Smith, 2001).

In warehousing, where high worker turnover, exploitation, and strict productivity quotas are common, it is essential to observe the everyday realities that workers face without the distorting influence of management trying to shape the narrative. Covert ethnography ensures that these aspects of the labour process, which are often hidden or misrepresented, can be uncovered and studied in their natural context (Lugosi, 2006).

Moreover, as Hodson and Sullivan (1995) argue, covert entry into a workplace without the knowledge of either management or workers speeds up the process of gaining acceptance from coworkers and management. This quicker integration ensures that I will be able to observe natural interactions and behaviours, minimising the disruptive effects caused by overt research. Workers and management are less likely to modify their behaviour when unaware of being observed, a crucial condition for accurately studying worker agency and managerial control.

This ethnographic approach is deeply rooted in organisational studies, and covert ethnography, in particular, has a long-standing tradition within labour process research. While the famous Hawthorne studies conducted at the Western Electric Company in Chicago during the 1930s primarily relied on experiments and interviews, their findings are relevant for justifying the use of covert ethnography (Roethlisberger & Dickson, 1939). These studies highlighted the "Hawthorne effect," wherein individuals alter their behaviour when they are aware of being observed, often resulting in skewed or unreliable data (Schwartzman, 1993). The effect demonstrated that when workers know they are being studied, they may modify their actions, potentially masking the informal practices and genuine dynamics that shape workplace life.

In this study, the decision to employ covert ethnography, specifically through participant observation as a worker in the warehouse, was driven by the need to overcome this challenge. Warehouses are tightly controlled environments where both management and workers may behave differently under overt observation. Given the prevalence of informal practices, including subtle forms of resistance, coping strategies, and the influence of racial divisions, covert ethnography allows for the observation of these dynamics in their authentic form, without the distorting influence of the Hawthorne effect.

The Chicago School of Sociology expanded ethnographic approaches to study formal and informal organisational characteristics based on this tradition. Factory studies in the US (Roy, 1954) and UK (Lupton, 1963 & Cunnison, 1966) emphasised the significance of informal workplace cultures. This theme has persisted in more recent studies of industrial settings such as machine shops (Burawoy, 1979), longshoring (Finlay, 1988), and automobile assembly (Graham, 1996; Rinehart et al., 1997).

Covert participant observation, as employed in my research, allows for a more authentic portrayal of workplace dynamics, as it minimises the likelihood of altering participants' behaviour due to awareness of being observed. This is particularly crucial in environments where power dynamics and informal interactions play significant roles. As noted by Mumford (1959), the use of ‘concealed participant observation’ in her study of dock canteens in Liverpool and a factory in France was chosen specifically to prevent significant disturbances to group behaviour and attitudes. She argued that this method enabled her to gather data through participation in the groups’ day-to-day experiences, providing a clearer and more accurate understanding of the social dynamics at play.

In contrast, non-covert ethnographic methods, such as open observation or interviews, may inadvertently introduce biases or lead participants to modify their responses based on the knowledge that they are being studied. By conducting covert ethnography, my research aims to circumvent these limitations, allowing for the collection of data that reflects the true nature of workplace interactions and relationships without the influence of observer presence.

As a "complete participant" (Gold, 1958), covert ethnography allowed me to engage fully with overt and hidden social interactions in the warehouse, facilitating deep immersion without altering natural workplace behaviours. This method is particularly valuable for examining how workers navigate the technologies of managerial control, such as surveillance and performance metrics, which are prominent in these workplaces. Workers' subtle acts of resistance to these mechanisms—embedded in routine interactions—are often challenging to capture through traditional research methods. Gottfried and Sotirin (1999) argue that covert observation is essential for identifying these patterns in real-time, offering a better understanding of worker agency.

The growing body of contemporary ethnographies further supports the rationale for using covert ethnography in my research in various workplace settings, including call centres (Woodcock, 2017; Woydack, 2019) and the gig economy (Badger, 2022). These studies reveal how immersion in the workplace can uncover the intricate social dynamics that define workers' experiences and responses to managerial authority. In warehouse settings, where work is often fragmented, and tasks are highly repetitive, covert ethnography becomes crucial for observing how workers cope with managerial control and surveillance pressures. Workers' informal strategies to resist control are often enacted subtly—through non-verbal behaviours, slight deviations from protocols, or informal exchanges with colleagues—which can be captured effectively through covert observation. This approach is essential, as overt observational methods may not fully reveal the nuanced interactions and coping mechanisms employed by workers in response to the pervasive pressures they face.

For instance, the work of Gerald Mars (1982), an industrial sociologist, provides valuable insights into why covert ethnography is particularly relevant in environments characterised by high levels of surveillance and control. In his account of pilferage in the hotel industry, Mars (1982) described how waiting staff employed various "fiddles" to supplement their wages. One specific example involved a waiter who, under the guise of ordering coffee, would only request one cup from the kitchen and then split it between two cups for customers. This act of deception, made possible by the waiter’s collusion with kitchen staff, illustrates how informal strategies emerge in response to workplace dynamics. Such behaviours may not be disclosed or discussed in interviews or overt observation due to the fear of reprimand or the internalisation of institutional norms regarding acceptable conduct.

Similarly, Ditton (1977) undertook covert participatory research into worker behaviour at a medium-sized factory-production bakery in the south-east of England, fictitiously named the Wellbread Bakery. Supported by American industrial sociologist Donald Roy, who had also used covert observation to study non-productive behaviour in the workplace, Ditton analysed bread salesmen ‘fiddling’ portraying the ordinariness of fiddling as part of a bread salesman’s daily life. Ditton's data which was largely collected on Bronco toilet paper - underscores the value of covert ethnography in revealing behaviours that would otherwise remain hidden from formal scrutiny.

By employing covert ethnography, my research aimed to uncover similar subtle forms of resistance within the workplace. These forms of resistance, while often overlooked in conventional studies, reveal the complexities of worker agency in negotiating their roles and identities within the framework of managerial oversight (Spicker, 2011). Covert observation allows for the direct verification of behaviours and interactions that may not be accurately represented through self-reports or structured interviews, which are often shaped by social desirability biases and the conscious or unconscious filtering of experiences. By immersing myself in the daily operations of the warehouses, I can capture these informal dynamics, providing a richer understanding of the interplay between control and resistance.

However, it is essential to acknowledge the limitations of covert ethnography. Knights (1987: 205) emphasise that the researcher may face difficulties engaging in extended social interactions with other workers in many labour processes, especially those characterised by atomisation and fragmentation. This is especially true in warehouse settings, where workers are often assigned specific roles or tasks. For instance, Chinoy (1955), in his ethnographic work on an assembly line, found it challenging to communicate with colleagues due to the nature of the work. Nevertheless, as Badger and Woodcock (2019) suggest, these limitations can be mitigated by complementing covert observation with interviews, enabling a more comprehensive analysis of workers' experiences.

While covert ethnography provides critical insights into the hidden dynamics of workplace culture, it is important to recognize that the method's focus on specific, often micro-level interactions may limit its ability to contribute to broader theoretical frameworks. The richness of qualitative data gleaned from covert observation can illuminate the nuanced ways in which workers navigate power dynamics, but without a systematic approach to integrating these findings into existing theoretical structures, the insights may remain isolated and underutilised. Consequently, to bridge the gap between the micro-level observations afforded by covert ethnography and the macro-level theories that seek to explain them I turn to Burawoy’s extended case method.

Burawoy's "extended case method" serves as a framework for this research, bridging the gap between ethnographic observation and theoretical development. Rooted in participant observation, this approach aims to contextualise everyday experiences within broader historical and extra-local frameworks (Burawoy, 1998). Unlike traditional ethnographic methods, which primarily generate insights, the extended case method critically engages with existing theories, using the case study as a tool to refine and develop theoretical understandings. Drawing from Gramscian Marxism, Burawoy's method emphasizes the production of consent within the labour process and seeks to identify inconsistencies or deficiencies in prevailing theories.

The first step in employing the extended case method involves identifying a case and an appropriate theoretical framework. In this study, the case is the warehouse industry in the Sheffield City Region (SCR), while the theory centres on racial capitalism, particularly how the intersections of race, class, and economic exploitation shape the labour process and workers' experiences. This framework allows for a deeper analysis of how state immigration policies and the nature of commodities affect racialised workers within the warehouse sector. The second step entails examining people's lives within this context, utilizing the theory of racial capitalism to chart empirical phenomena while reflecting on its applicability. My participant observation of warehouse workers enables an understanding of their lived experiences within this framework.

The final step of the extended case method involves rebuilding or re-articulating the theory based on the collected data to address inconsistencies and refine the analysis further. Through firsthand experience in warehouse work, I can assess whether the existing theories align with the research aims and explore potential refinements for deeper insights. This approach highlights that ethnography can facilitate the development and evolution of theoretical frameworks that resonate more closely with the realities observed in the field.

In this study, focusing on the warehousing industry in the SCR, the extended case method harnesses ethnographic participant observation and interview techniques to illuminate the labour process. By shedding light on workers' experiences, this approach prompts a reconsideration and reconceptualisation of the labour process and the politics inherent in warehouse work. Thus, while ethnography may not lend itself to traditional hypothesis testing, it provides a critical lens through which to refine existing theories and develop new understandings of complex workplace dynamics.

In this study, I embraced a reflexive approach, employing embodied participant observation and ethnographic interviews as outlined by Burawoy (1998). The extended case study method, according to Burawoy (1998: 5), involves the application of reflexive science to ethnography, transitioning from the 'micro' to the 'macro,' grounded in existing theory. This method primarily focuses on refining broad theoretical concepts at the macro-level of social structure through comprehensive micro-level studies conducted over an extended period.

The essential aspects of the extended case study method include the shift from observer to participant, extending observations temporally and spatially, accounting for the geographical and historical context of the field, and advancing theoretical frameworks (Burawoy, 1998: 23). Following this method, the research questions for the study were formulated through a combination of deductive and inductive processes. Initially, the deductive approach shaped the research questions, derived from the theoretical framework employed. Subsequently, during the field research, data collection, and analysis phases, an inductive approach was employed to further refine the research questions.

By immersing myself in the world of research participants through participant observation, which involved actively working in the field, and spending time with them both inside and outside the workplace, I gained a profound understanding of their lives and perspectives. This approach facilitated a nuanced exploration of the experience of exploitation and resistance in the warehouse, allowing me to understand beneath surface-level binaries and uncover multiple processes, interests, and identities (Burawoy, 2000: 28).

The selection of the method is grounded in the theoretical framework of this thesis, which understands that the labour process is co-constituted by the economy, society and the state (Gramsci, 1971; Poulantzas, 1978a) and a Racial Capitalism theoretical perspective (Robinson, 2000) that understands the production of difference is foundational to the accumulation of capital. This approach was used to answer the main research question, 'How do warehouse workers experience their labour in the Sheffield City Region?'. Therefore, this thesis attempts to centre how the production of difference shapes the employment relation in the warehouse, which has so far only been treated as a 'sub-plot' within the UK logistics industry (See Phizacklea, 1990).

I consistently linked my observations and findings with the existing body of theory and literature throughout the fieldwork, maintaining an ongoing dialogue between theoretical perspectives and empirical evidence. The theoretical framework not only shaped the research questions but was also influenced by my on-the-ground observations and experiences. Throughout participant observation, my aim was to address the questions outlined in the table below.

**Table 3: Research Questions**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Main RQ: How do warehouse workers experience their labour in the Sheffield City Region?** | | |
| Chapter 5.  [Reproduction] | **Disciplining the Racial Warehouse Reserve Army.**  Labour Regime. | **Sub Research Questions:** |
| 1. How does national state policy influence labour conditions in the warehouse? |
| 2. How does the local labour market influence labour conditions in the warehouse? |
| 3. What mobility practices are in evident? |
| Chapter 6 & 7.  [Production] | **The Social Organisation of Work: Expediating Value in Motion**  Racialised mechanisms of value extraction.  Labour Process Theory. | 4. How are the mechanisms of exploitation in the warehouse experienced? |
| 5. How does this experience differ according to workers mobility power? |
| **The Social Organisation of Work: Disrupting Value in Motion**  Racialised resistance strategies.  Labour Process Theory. | 6. How do warehouse workers resist these mechanisms? |
| 7. How does warehouse workers mobility differential shape the form of that resistance? |

From the outset, my research aimed to position me as a witness to the untold stories within the warehouse, with the overarching goal of contributing to the transformation of the social and material conditions of warehouse workers – even if in a very small way, by informing trade unions and worker organisers of the power dynamics within the workplace to develop stronger organising practices. Following my own working history, I had experienced and seen the inner workings of the warehouse and the physical and mental impact this has. Hence, right from the beginning, I approached my research as an ongoing process rather than a product. My intention was to make a meaningful contribution to the challenges faced by the individuals I was studying. Moreover, I wanted to present the thesis from the participant's own perceptions. This meant organising the investigation around workers' own standpoints. This approach would allow me to partially dismantle the divide between subject and object, not solely through intellectual endeavours but also through active and practical involvement, specifically, by engaging in acts of solidarity.

In the face of reports of employment abuses of predominantly migrant workers in warehousing in the UK (BHRC, 2023), the development of a thesis alone didn't feel like an adequate response to address these injustices. Consequently, I pursued a more inclusive research approach. The financial support for my PhD afforded me the privilege of actively participating in practical solidarity initiatives (advocacy, welfare and advice) with warehouse workers, migrants and refugees, alongside more theoretical work. Therefore, I was guided by ongoing debates between activism and the academy. In particular, methodologies are built upon the recognition that all research inherently carries political dimensions (Feagin et al., 2001). In alignment with this perspective, the objective of this work is to actively engage with and complement the ongoing knowledge-production initiatives of labour (Angry Workers, 2020; Woodcock & Badger, 2019).

With this engagement inevitably comes an accusation of a lack of objectivity. Informed by Gramsci, Edward Said presented a clear dichotomy for intellectuals: they could either 'speak truth to power' or operate 'in the service of power' (Said, 1993). While articulating truths to those in power is crucial, an equally significant task involves active engagement of labour in the research process. The tendency for theorists to discuss oppressed groups without involving or consulting them, treating them merely as objects of analysis, reflects a perpetuation of hierarchical, elitist, and colonial legacy inherent in Western academic institutions' histories (Haraway, 1988).

Taking inspiration from Freire (1993), my aim was to scrutinise and engage in direct discussions on exploitation and resistance with workers. Therefore, while this tradition may 'speak truth to power' and that this 'truth' be spoken to people in ways the people can understand, my concern is that it is not enough for critical intellectuals to engage in the social realities of the people and present this in a language they can understand. Instead, the critical ethnographer should present this 'truth' from the insights and experiences of those engaged in and facing the brunt of capital. In this way, my role as a critical ethnographer can be summed up by "learning while walking, and speaking while listening" (Cleaver, 1994).

## 4.3 Research Method

### 4.3.1 Multi-Sited Case Studies

This research adopted a multi-site approach to data collection and analysis, enabling it to overcome the narrow fixation on individual workplaces, which may result in a single case study being "comparatively weak on causal analysis and on what kinds of generalisation can be drawn" (Edwards, 1991: 11). By examining two distinct warehouses, this study enhances the analytical robustness and potential generalisability of its ethnographic findings, particularly within a specific industry context. However, the primary goal of ethnographic case studies is not necessarily generalisability in the statistical sense. Instead, they seek to provide comprehensive insights into social phenomena. As Hammersley and Atkinson (2019) explain, ethnographic research is judged not by the same criteria as quantitative research, such as external validity or replicability, but by the richness of its insights, the rigour of its theoretical argumentation, and its contribution to understanding social processes in depth.

Potential criticisms of the case study approach often focus on the issue of external validity, particularly the limited ability to generalise findings from a small number of cases to a broader population. While this concern is legitimate for quantitative studies, ethnographic research derives its value from the depth of understanding it provides about particular social contexts. As Mitchell (1993: 211) argues, generalisability in ethnography depends not on the representativeness of the case but on the "vigour of argument and theoretical reasoning." The strength of this research lies in its ability to illuminate the nuanced dynamics within specific settings rather than offering broad statistical generalisations.

The case study method has been debated, often in discussions surrounding the merits of qualitative and quantitative research methods (George & Bennett, 2005; Feagin et al., 1991). Despite these debates, there is a broad consensus that case study research allows for rich, in-depth, and detailed data collection, enabling conceptual validity, generating new hypotheses, and exploring causal mechanisms (George & Bennett, 2004; Feagin et al., 1991). Using a case study in this project allows for a multifaceted exploration of a single phenomenon—warehousing and labour relations—providing depth and nuance that previous studies may lack. The case study method, utilising observations, interviews, and research diaries, helps capture participants in their everyday, natural work environments. This approach enables a deeper understanding of the workplace and its dynamics, offering new insights that can contribute to existing knowledge of labour processes, racial capitalism, and workplace organisation.

By integrating the extended case method with a multi-site approach, this study seeks to overcome certain limitations tied to the specificity of single-site research. The empirical aspect of this research is structured around a single-case design, where the logistics industry—specifically, warehousing in the Sheffield City Region (SCR)—serves as the focal case. Within this broader case, two distinct warehouses are used as embedded units of analysis, allowing the research to explore multiple situated contexts and their implications for labour processes, worker experiences, and management practices.

Selecting a suitable case study site that addresses the critical concerns of the research can be challenging (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). In this instance, the decision to focus on the SCR and its logistics industry is justified by several key criteria, as outlined by Yin (2014: 63). This approach is appropriate when the case study serves one or more of the following purposes: testing established theory, addressing unique circumstances, representing a typical case, offering revelatory insights, or enabling longitudinal analysis. The justification for this research design is twofold.

First, it thoroughly examines prevailing theories, particularly in relation to labour regime analysis. The study employs a Racial Capitalism framework to analyse the labour processes within the warehouse industry, contrasting this approach with race-neutral analyses found in current critical studies on UK warehouse work and employment literature. The Racial Capitalism framework is instrumental in scrutinising the role of racial difference in shaping warehouse employment dynamics, offering a theoretical contribution rooted in the Black Marxism tradition (Robinson, 2000). In this way, my case study challenges race-neutral interpretations. It helps pioneer a framework for understanding the racial politics of the warehouse, contributing to the development of a critical theory of the labour process.

Second, the case illustrates contemporary trends in the logistics industry, both in the UK and globally. The SCR serves as a typical deindustrialised labour market, which has seen significant growth in logistics capital, particularly following the establishment of the SCR Enterprise Zone. Similar patterns of logistics growth can be observed in other Enterprise Zones across the UK and in Europe (Lavissiere & Rodrigue, 2017). More broadly, the relocation of logistics capital to deindustrialised labour markets characterised by low wages, high unemployment, and a largely ethnic minority workforce is a global phenomenon, evident in countries such as the United States, Italy, and Germany (ITF, 2020).

While this research primarily focuses on the UK context, the patterns it observes resonate with global logistics trends. This highlights the transnational nature of the industry's shift towards cheaper labour markets, as corporations seek to reduce costs and maximise profits by exploiting vulnerable, often marginalised labour forces. Therefore, the insights gained from this study extend beyond the specifics of the SCR and offer valuable perspectives on the broader socio-economic impacts of the logistics revolution on labour markets and local communities. Despite the localised focus, the case study's theoretical relevance contributes to a global understanding of these dynamics.

Critics may argue that focusing on just two warehouses limits the scope for generalisation and reduces external validity. However, as Hammersley and Atkinson (2019) contend, the strength of ethnography lies not in its capacity for statistical generalisation but in its ability to provide detailed, context-specific insights into social processes. The value of this study lies in its exploration of the localised dynamics of warehouse labour, which sheds light on broader theoretical concerns related to labour regimes and racial capitalism. By focusing on the detailed examination of two distinct warehouses, this research can unpack the specificities of different labour processes and management practices within the SCR, that speak to wider trends in logistics political economy.

The two warehouses studied—SeamlessCo, a third-party logistics (3PL) firm, and FrictionCo, a vertically integrated in-house logistics unit—offer a compelling foundation for a comparative case study, revealing how distinct operational models shape labour processes, management strategies, and organisational structures within warehousing in the SCR. Comparative case studies provide valuable analytical leverage by enabling researchers to uncover variations across cases and understand how these variations reflect broader systemic dynamics. According to George and Bennett (2005), comparisons across cases are particularly useful for developing theories and identifying patterns that may be generalised across contexts or understood as context-specific influences. This study leverages such comparisons by examining the employment relation between a 3PL and a vertically integrated model but also how recruitment and labour management choices differ, providing unique insights into labour relations in the warehousing industry.

In addition, Hammersley (1992) argues that comparative analysis is instrumental in uncovering analytical leverage, or the power to understand hidden dimensions of organisational behaviour and worker-management dynamics by exploring diverse contexts. This study exemplifies such leverage by highlighting differences in recruitment practices: SeamlessCo’s partnership with a single employment agency which contrasts with FrictionCo’s multiple-agency approach, illustrating how recruitment strategies reflect underlying organisational philosophies and labour management priorities. These contrasts shed light on labour flexibility and labour control.

Through the concept of “multiple situatedness” (Ragin, 1987), this study further expands comparative analysis by engaging with the unique social, economic, and structural contexts that define each warehouse’s employment relation. Ragin (1987) notes that comparative case studies help researchers identify configurations of factors, allowing for a more nuanced view of complex causation across cases. Here, the study investigates how SeamlessCo and FrictionCo’s differing locations, organisational structures, and workforce compositions influence their labour relations and management practices. By examining these "situated contexts," the study reveals underlying power dynamics and interactions between workers and management that are specific to each logistical model, offering a richer understanding of how labour relations are shaped in the logistics sector.

Finally, Yin (2014) and Stake (2006) emphasise that comparative case studies enhance methodological rigor by allowing for cross-case validation, strengthening findings by confirming patterns across different scenarios. By employing the concept of "multiple situatedness," this study investigates how distinct conditions within each warehouse—shaped by factors such as location, market position, organisational structure, and workforce composition—create varied social and economic dynamics. This methodological framework allows the research to engage with the intricacies of labour relations and management practices in a comprehensive manner. By examining these situated contexts, the study uncovers the complex power dynamics and interactions between workers and management, offering a richer understanding of the logistics industry in the SCR.

**Table 4: Warehouses and Agencies**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Warehouse** | **Agency** |
| FrictionCo | FreshJob |
| OptiRecruit |
| BestRecruit |
| TalentLink Solutions |
| Precision Staffing Solutions |
| SwiftStaff Recruiters |
| SeamlessCo | RecruitNow |

### 4.3.2 Case Study Selection and Geographical Research Area

Several strategic considerations and practical limitations drove the selection of warehouses within the SCR. These choices were influenced by a complex interplay of factors that aimed to capture the diverse labour dynamics within the industry, particularly during the challenging context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Within the Extended Case Method (ECM) framework, the conceptualisation of a 'case' assumes the role of a theoretical construct representing a unit of analysis. In the context of this thesis, the two distinct warehouses are emblematic of a singular 'labour regime.' Consequently, the research attempted to investigate these two workplaces in conjunction, treating them as components of a unified labour regime. Although these warehouses may exhibit dissimilar operational characteristics on a surface level, they were intentionally selected due to their overarching similarities. Specifically, their shared location in the UK facilitated an in-depth examination of the national institutional context. At the same time, their proximity within a deindustrialised local labour market enabled the focused exploration of local determinants. Furthermore, their integration within the fast fashion industry and their common aversion to labour unions collectively contributed to their inclusion in the study. This selection process, therefore, necessitated the research to adopt an approach that presents both warehouse cases within the same local labour market, characterised by a comparable composition of the workforce.

First, the SCR was chosen because of its recent growth as a logistics cluster. Between 2010 and 2020, LDW floor space in the region increased by 44.1% (Greenhalgh, 2021). The logistics sector is the sixth largest employer in the region, employing 10,000 workers (Thomas et al., 2019). Second, Sheffield is the UK's 'low pay capital,' a status shaped by the interplay of deindustrialisation, financialisation, and austerity. These factors have collectively shaped a local labour market characterised by low wages, minimal skills, and precarious working conditions. Third, precarity in the SCR is concentrated among migrant and minority ethnic groups (Thomas et al., 2019). However, no existing studies specifically address the intersection of the logistics industry and the employment of migrants and refugees in the SCR or the UK. Therefore, my intent is to address this gap in the literature through this research.

However, in line with the comparative case model (Stake, 2006; Ragin, 1987), the two firms, SeamlessCo and FrictionCo, both located within the SCR, were chosen as case studies due to their distinctly different operational models within the logistics sector. SeamlessCo, operating with a single employment agency, represented a concentrated and streamlined approach to labour management. In contrast, FrictionCo's collaboration with multiple recruitment agencies exemplified a more diversified and decentralised labour strategy. This diversity in operational models offered an opportunity to investigate how different approaches to labour management impacted the labour process, efficiency, and workforce dynamics, shedding light on the nuances of labour relations within the industry.

The selection of these two logistics firms allowed for examining variations in workforce composition across two micro-regions within the SCR. The distinct recruitment strategies and location in the SCR could result in differences in workers experience. This divergence provided a unique lens to explore how workforce composition intersects with labour processes, wage structures, and working conditions.

Moreover, SeamlessCo and FrictionCo represent two distinct business models within the logistics industry. SeamlessCo, as a 3PL (Third-Party Logistics) provider, operates as an outsourced logistics partner for a single retailer. On the other hand, FrictionCo is a retailer with its own logistics operations. This diversity allowed me to explore and contrast the labour dynamics between a dedicated logistics provider and a company that manages its logistics in-house. Analytically, this comparison will contribute to a broader understanding of the effects of organisational structure on labour relations, offering insights into how different configurations of logistics management impact worker agency and the potential for resistance within the workplace.

This comparative framework is especially significant in light of existing research, which often associates outsourced logistics (like the 3PL model) with poorer labour conditions, lower job stability, and fewer worker protections compared to in-house logistics operations (Harrison, 2018; Lambert, 2008). By comparing SeamlessCo and FrictionCo, this study can assess whether in the example of these two cases, outsourced logistics indeed have more precarious labour conditions, while also exploring the specific mechanisms through which outsourcing might influence worker rights and conditions.

More practical considerations also marked these considerations. This included ease of access to the two warehouses. This included gaining employment during the Covid-19 pandemic. These companies have entry-level positions that are relatively accessible to job seekers, including those with limited industry-specific experience. The logistics industry often relies on temporary and seasonal workers to meet fluctuating demands. The presence of such employment opportunities at SeamlessCo and FrictionCo allowed me to access the warehouse in the run-up to Christmas and during the January sales. Moreover, the high employee turnover in these two firms means the constant availability of job openings. In practical terms, these two firms offered quick employment and access.

These practical considerations, meaning the ability to gain employment and ease of access to both firms, are pivotal factors in the selection process. This decision was underpinned by an understanding of the specific challenges and circumstances confronted by warehouse workers, many of whom are migrant workers. One of the core rationales for selecting cases where employment could be readily secured stemmed from recognising the inherent difficulties that migrant workers face when seeking employment, particularly within local labour markets characterised by low pay and high unemployment. Migrant workers, who may encounter linguistic, cultural, or legal barriers, frequently grapple with hurdles when seeking job opportunities. In light of this, selecting warehouses where employment was relatively accessible assumed particular significance.

By opting for cases that represented a level of accessibility to employment, the research design aimed to mirror the real-world experiences of migrant workers in the local labour market. This choice acknowledged the challenges faced by this group in finding work opportunities. It sought to create a research environment aligned with the pragmatic difficulties the study's participants often encountered. The selection of case studies in the form of these two warehouses, chosen for their relative ease of employment, was driven by an understanding of the unique challenges migrant workers face within the SCR. This approach facilitated a more realistic and insightful exploration of these workers' labour experiences. The selection strategy was, therefore, a deliberate and methodologically grounded choice to ensure that the research findings would be firmly rooted in the lived realities of the participants. In the following section, I will provide a chronological narrative of research development, detailing the evolution of the methodological approach and the practicalities involved in academic research.

## 4.4 From Theory to Practice: Pallet-jacks to PhD

My interest in the political dimensions of the labour process in logistics began to take shape Top of Form

through my direct work experience. Employed as a warehouse operative in a leading garden and leisure retailer in a former mining town in the UK, this provided me with a solid grounding in the techniques of management control from the point of view of labour and the overt and covert resistance strategies of my colleagues. I then took up warehouse jobs across Europe (Amsterdam, Copenhagen and Berlin), spending my time among itinerant migrant workers following the rhythm of the working visa system. This solidified my understanding of the labour process in logistics, the institutional variations that impact the labour process and the experience of the migrant warehouse worker.To paraphrase Bill Haywood, a prominent American labour leader and founding member of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), I may have never read Marx's Capital, but I had the marks of *logistics* capital all over my body. As a result, motivation for this thesis was developed on the shopfloor rather than an academic pursuit or 'gap' in the literature, although this would come later.

An MSc course on comparative labour organisation laid the foundation for a solid grounding in the Varieties of Capitalism framework. However, I was dissatisfied with the nature Top of Form

of the literature because it tended to isolate the study of institutional variation from the experiences of the workers themselves, thus neglecting labour's agency and the assumption that different economic models may be beneficial without examining the lived reality. This framework contrasted with my experiences in warehousing, particularly of the migrant experience in Nordic Economies, and the role played by migrant workers in rider-led unions such as 'Radical Riders' and semi-autonomous structures within a union framework such as 'FNV Young'.

My wish to broaden my theoretical and political knowledge of the labour process led me to apply for the PhD at the University of Sheffield. Courses on Race, Immigration and Borders and ethnographic research method, provided me with the kinds of theories (Racial Capitalism and Labour Regimes) that was required to integrate labour process theory with a broader institutional political economy analysis, and with an understanding of the methodology of participant observation, enabling an exploration of the labour process from the workers' perspective and facilitating engagement with them beyond the workplace.

Gaining entry to the two warehouses posed a considerable challenge. The initial research was planned to take place in February 2021. Following the Covid-19 pandemic, this was delayed by nine months. In November 2021, I made contact with the recruitment agency for FrictionCo. The following day, I picked up my high-vis, paid for my steel-toe-caped boots from the agency and received a fifty-minute training and induction course in Health and Safety. Thus, accessing the workplace covertly and without the formal consent of the owner, managers or recruitment agency. I commenced working 12-hour day shifts in the loading bays, typically four days a week, under the guidance of Polish team leaders. I ended my employment at FrictionCo after six weeks, having worked in two departments: loading and sortation.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, I fly-posted an advertisement for online interviews at key locations in various languages (English, and Polish, See Appendix 1). This led to several interviews with workers and allowed me to identify the most common employment agencies and warehouses in the area. Moreover, the disappointing but understandable responses to my requests for help from local MPs and trade unionists during this time convinced me that the best way to access the warehouse was to walk into the recruitment agency and ask for a job. Forge Valley, characterised as a working-class neighbourhood with a reputation for "urban deprivation," high unemployment rates, and immigration, appeared to be the most fitting location to initiate my job search.

This led me to wander the canals, where the red-brick former rolling mills have been gutted and replaced by storage units on the riverbanks. During one of these walks, I saw two workers wearing high vis, casting stones into the lock. Recognising the agency's name printed on their backs, I asked them which warehouse they were employed in. The next day, I walked into the recruitment agency cabin at the SeamlessCo site and asked for a job. I was given an electronic device by the recruitment agency to sign several documents and had copies of my passport taken. I was told by Joana, a young Polish recruitment official, that I would start work the next day. During my five weeks at SeamlessCo, I worked eight hours a day, for five days a week, as a 'picker'. During this time, I was slowly accepted into the world of the workers, made up of jokes, informal hierarchies, and conflict.

For most of the research, I lived in Forge Valley, composed of dense terraced housing built as part of Sheffield's interwar council estates. During this time, the British worker's perception of me as a 'Reyton' began to consolidate.The ‘Reytons’ are young, aged between 20 and 27, male British-Yemeni second and third generation. They worked in SeamlessCo, live in Forge Valley, and have a familial occupational history in the Sheffield Steel trades. I refer to them collectively as the ‘Reytons’, local slang for "a right one". This term was used to refer to one another in the warehouse.

At the beginning of my research, walking through Forge Valley, I was stopped, followed, chased, and threatened. Through the Reyton's, I could walk freely in Forge Valley and access the late-night Shisha bars. In these areas, drugs are dealt, prostitutes are employed, and informal jobs are distributed in the neighbourhood. Thus, I was slowly immersed into the experience of the warehouse and its community, walking and cycling to work in the shadow of the development of the 'logistics hub' on the site of the former steelworks.

During this period, my involvement extended to attending the Union branch for FrictionCo in Pit-Town. Nestled discreetly amidst the rows of redbrick houses, positioned directly behind the town's central square, the former prefab town council, now housing the worker's centre, remained almost entirely concealed from casual view. The presence of economic unionism manifested itself through the archival resources, newspaper clippings, and posters of the Miners' strike that adorned the back wall. In person, it was represented by the former miners and NUM members who constituted the branch committee. Conversely, the spirit of community unionism found expression in the prominent Kotwica symbol drawn on the whiteboard beneath the heading 'FrictionCo – A Changing Situation' and through the migrant welfare advisory service[[17]](#footnote-17). These two facets of labour organisation frequently clashed during meetings, reflecting more deeply rooted perspectives on capitalism, encompassing issues of commodification and exploitation. Within the context of my thesis, I argue that these two dimensions are intrinsically intertwined and should not be separated. It is imperative for trade unionists, welfare advocates, and migrant support organisations to acknowledge the dual nature of labour.

Importantly, during this time, I was able to gather information on the broader context of the challenges migrant warehouse workers face while learning this from those organising migrant workers in FrictionCo. During this period, I decided to focus the thesis more squarely on workers' mobility power. I recognised that I had had privileged access to warehouses of 'multiplied labour' (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013) embedded within a particular local labour market marked by deindustrialisation (Beatty, 2022). Exploring the research on the logistics labour process, I realised there were few academic case studies of how migrant workers' mobility power interacts within the warehousing industry, in the UK and within 'sunset' regions. Table 5 sheds light on the progression of academic research and active engagement in solidarity efforts chronologically.

**Table 5: Key Research Events Timetable**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Date** | **Research Activity** |
| March 2021 | Fly-Poster. |
| April 2021 – October 2021 | Initial Semi-Structured Interviews (Online/Telephone). |
| June 2021 | Initiated contact with the Workers’ Centre. |
| July 2021 – October 2021 | Welfare Campaign at the Workers’ Centre, (Head Office). |
| October 2021 – December 2021 | Migrant Advice Campaign at the Workers’ Centre (Regional Office). |
| November 2021 – February 2022 | Attended FrictionCo Union Branch meetings (Regional Office). |
| November 2021 – December 2021 | Conducted Semi-Structured Interviews with FrictionCo Employees. |
| November 2021 – December 2021 | Employment at FrictionCo. |
| January 2022 – February 2022 | Employment at SeamlessCo. |
| June 2022 – August 2022 | Conducted Semi-Structured Interviews with SeamlessCo Employees. |
| June 2022 – November 2022 | Data Analysis. |
| November 2022 – December 2022 | Unite Education: Workplace Representatives Course. |
| February 2023 | Presented initial Research Findings. |
| April 2023 | Final Writing up Period. |

The next section outlines the research techniques employed and the related ethical considerations. The research was conducted in two phases in part as a response to make the research ‘Covid Secure.' Phase one took place from March 2021 and consisted of ethnographic interviews. These were initially conducted online and by telephone. As the lockdown ended, interviews also took place face-to-face. Phase II took place from November 2021 and consisted of participant observation at two warehouses in the Sheffield City Region.

## 4.5 Research Techniques

### 4.5.1 Phase I: Ethnographic Interview

The research utilised in-depth, semi-structured interviews to prevent the establishment of a hierarchical dynamic between the researcher and the interviewees (Oakley, 2015). This method facilitates an exploration of "the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience" (Seidman 2013: 10). Furthermore, these interviews with warehouse workers sought to piece together migration histories, and employment histories in their own words, and their interpretations of these experiences.

These interviews highlight the subject's viewpoint, prioritising the process over mere information gathering. This interactive approach essentially facilitates the exploration of the informants' experiences, thoughts, and feelings. Furthermore, these interviews provided a space to converse over matters that might not be openly addressed in public. Overall, the use of semi-structured, in-depth interviews played a crucial role in deepening the analysis of warehouse labour, gaining an understanding of the perspectives of the research subjects, incorporating diverse voices, and obtaining additional information.

Ethnographic interviews were employed as an initial exploratory method to enrich the data collection process and firmly anchor it in the lived experiences of warehouse workers. These interviews adhered to a semi-structured format strategically designed to bring essential themes to the forefront. These overarching themes encompassed workers' perceptions of the labour process, interactions with management, encounters with systems of control and conflict, involvement with labour unions, migratory movements and living conditions.

Practically, the interview topics were not strictly confined to a predetermined order. This open format was intentionally adopted to permit an exploration of the identified themes, as it sought to mitigate the unintentional introduction of biases into the data through leading questions. An open format granted interviewees greater agency in determining what they chose to reveal, and which facets they emphasised within my overarching framework (Bryman, 2012). Doing so facilitated a collaborative process of knowledge generation, aligning with research demonstrating that the co-production of knowledge particularly empowers the voices of socially marginalised individuals (Hardy, 2010)[[18]](#footnote-18).

Interviews with workers were conducted through a multifaceted approach. Initially, phone interviews played a significant role, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic. This method provided an avenue to sustain and advance fieldwork while adhering to the restrictions imposed by the national lockdown. The second mode of interviews occurred at the workers' centre located in Pit-Town, offering a dedicated and familiar setting for participants to engage in discussions. However, this introduced some research bias, as those participants at the worker's centre were all union members. In contrast, the number of official union members at the workplace was relatively small. Therefore, to offset this research bias, a third approach involved conducting interviews in various locales across the SCR, typically in cafes or pubs selected by the participants.

The identification of these interview participants was facilitated through poster advertisements distributed in communities proximate to the warehouses. These posters were in English and Polish. These initial contacts were subsequently leveraged through a snowballing technique. This approach proved challenging in terms of finding workers willing to allocate their leisure time to discuss the issues they confronted in their work.

Worker interviews followed a structured progression, starting with the collection of essential background information. Initially, participants were asked to identify their employing company, specify their official job title, and explain their contractual arrangements. Subsequently, they were prompted to provide a comprehensive account of a typical workday, starting from their arrival at the workplace and concluding with their departure. Moreover, they were encouraged to reflect upon potential variations in this routine across different timeframes, including daily, weekly, monthly, and annually. Building on this, questions probed into the realm of labour control and interactions with managers and agency staff. Topics included shift patterns, working hours, department size, and interpersonal relationships with colleagues.

As the interview progressed, conversations turned towards their living arrangements and migratory movements. This involved questions relating to their immigration status, how long they had been in the UK and the SCR, and their movements between workplaces, between homes and between communities. This often yielded highly valuable insights due to the substantial variation in individual workers' circulatory movements and the connection to their overall experience in the warehouse.

My familiarity with both warehouse work and visa systems played a pivotal role in this context, as it facilitated the display of internal expertise encompassing the intricacies of, on the one hand, the production process and the nature of warehouse work experiences, and on the other, the UK's immigration system. Leveraging industry-specific language contributed to establishing trust with the participants, subsequently enabling access to more sensitive data concerning the conflicts that frequently arose between workers and management and their movements across Europe.

Conversations related to workplace conflicts often evoked strong reactions from the respondents. By fostering a sense of trust, participants were more inclined to discuss these matters candidly. This, in turn, led to the emergence of insights into workplace conflicts, shedding light on issues such as intensification, instances of bullying, racism and covert acts of resistance. It also led to conversations regarding workers' movements in Europe, the impact of Brexit on their mobility and conversations on the extra costs faced by migrants in the UK. Many workers genuinely appreciated the opportunity to engage in discussions about their experiences. On a couple of occasions, these interviews lasted over two hours. The interview participants were all agency workers of FrictionCo or SeamlessCo. All of the interviewees were migrant workers with different immigration statuses. Some had worked at the companies for several years, although most were relatively new.

The interviews were transcribed in their entirety, with anonymisation applied to safeguard the identities of all participants, including the names of the warehouses and employment agencies. This approach was adopted to uphold the integrity of the research and ensure that participants would not face any adverse consequences stemming from their involvement. The data collected from these interviews underwent a systematic coding procedure, with thematic categories emerging organically from the conversations, aligning with the overarching research objectives.

Chapter 5 explicitly uses interview data, which forms the foundation of empirical analysis. In this chapter, I explore key themes related to workers' lived experiences, drawing directly from their accounts to examine their living conditions. These interviews serve as primary evidence to analyse the intersection of national policies and local labour market dynamics, further supported by participant observation data of the two workplaces in chapters six and seven.

**Table 6: Interview Participants**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Name** | **Warehouse** | **Employment Agency** | **Nationality/ Ethnicity** | **Immigration Status** | **Contract** | **Age** |
| Mike | FrictionCo | FreshJob | British/White | British Citizen | Temporary | 25 |
| Tezza | FrictionCo | FreshJob | British/White | British Citizen | Temporary | 22 |
| Graham | FrictionCo | FreshJob | British/White | British Citizen | Temporary | 40 |
| Anton | FrictionCo | RecruitNow | Polish/White | Settled Status | Temporary | 43 |
| Agnieszka | FrictionCo | RecruitNow | Polish/White | Settled Status | Temporary | 40 |
| Denis | FrictionCo | BestRecruit | Nicaraguan/ Mestizo | Refugee | Temporary | 34 |
| Saanvi | FrictionCo | RecruitNow | Indian/Asian | Student Visa | Temporary | 23 |
| Absar | SeamlessCo | OptiRecruit | British/Asian | British Citizen | Temporary | 51 |
| Imran | SeamlessCo | OptiRecruit | British/Asian | British Citizen | Temporary | 23 |
| Antonela | SeamlessCo | OptiRecruit | Argentinian/ Mestizo | Partner Visa | Temporary | 30 |
| Lionel | SeamlessCo | OptiRecruit | Argentinian/ Mestizo | Work Visa | Temporary | 31 |
| Jonas | SeamlessCo | OptiRecruit | Lithuanian/ White | Settled Status | Temporary | 26 |

One of the significant challenges encountered during this study's initial data collection phase was the limited access to certain worker groups within the warehouse setting. The research aimed to gather insights from a diverse workforce comprising individuals of various nationalities, ethnic backgrounds, and linguistic abilities. However, the practical realities of conducting interviews with workers posed a considerable obstacle, particularly when attempting to reach a substantial portion of the workforce.

The first limitation revolved around language barriers. While attempts were made to provide interview opportunities to a broad spectrum of workers, it became evident that language was a significant impediment. A substantial segment of the warehouse workforce consisted of Roma and refugee workers who had limited English. The language divide emerged as a critical factor, making it challenging to conduct interviews due to linguistic differences.

Some researchers rely on translators to facilitate interviews, which, while valuable, introduce additional interpretive layers that could affect the immediacy and authenticity of workers' narratives (Cant, 2019). These interpretive layers may lead to nuanced meanings being lost or altered, affecting the richness of the data and complicating accurate representation (Temple & Young, 2004). Language differences in research contexts have been noted as particularly impactful on data quality, as they can hinder the capture of subtle expressions, emotions, and cultural idioms that are essential for understanding participants’ lived experiences (Van Nes et al., 2010).

These barriers have become a focal point for researchers studying migrant labour. For example, van Doorn and Vijay’s (2020) research among migrant workers underscore the need for linguistically sensitive research methodologies to ensure inclusivity and prevent the marginalisation of migrant perspectives in both empirical studies and advocacy efforts. Employing culturally attuned methods can be instrumental in capturing the full scope of workers' experiences, thereby enriching the data and providing a more comprehensive understanding of migrant workers’ realities (Birbili, 2000).

Furthermore, cultural, and social factors contributed to the reluctance of some workers to participate in formal interviews. Some workers, particularly those from marginalised backgrounds, may have had past experiences or preconceived notions that made them hesitant to engage in interviews. For example, they might have held reservations due to apprehensions surrounding formal research, language difficulties, or concerns regarding how their responses might be interpreted or utilised (Condon et al., 2019).

### 4.5.2 Phase II: Participant Observation

Participant observation was used to understand power dynamics, unveil exploitation and reveal resistance strategies (Smith, 2001). These themes necessitated going beyond exploratory interviews; they needed to physically experienced first-hand. Participant observation at two warehouses in the SCR played a pivotal role in my fieldwork, providing a deeper comprehension of the complex social reality. This method allows insights into events that might otherwise remain obscured (Devereux & Hoddinott, 1993: 32). Engaging in fieldwork through actual employment granted me access to firsthand experiences, fostering a corporeal understanding of the environment in which warehouse workers are embedded (Prentice & Whitelaw, 2008: 62).

By working alongside warehouse colleagues, sharing their challenges and enduring the physical demands of the job, I established stronger connections within their communities. This immersive approach allowed me to witness and be accepted into their world.

In the practice of participant observation, it is crucial to maintain a balance between involvement and detachment, enabling intellectual reflection on the observed setting (Bernard, 2017: 372). Distancing and disembodying are integral aspects of conducting in-depth participant observation and engaging in critical analysis (Prentice & Whitelaw, 2008). Recognising the risk of internalising my informants' perspectives, I consistently reflected on my role, ensuring a balanced and objective interpretation of my observations and findings.

Therefore, the fieldwork unfolded in two distinct stages. The initial stage involved semi-structured interviews conducted with workers. These interviews were deemed instrumental in providing an additional stratum of in-depth insights, extending beyond the immediate observations and experiences of the researcher, particularly as a fact-finding mission before participant observation was conducted (Johnson, 1990; Spradley, 2016). Second, participant observation within the labour process was conducted.

At the beginning of Phase II, I joined the worker's centre with the informed consent of the organisers. This involvement included help with the welfare advice campaign and, subsequently, with the migrant welfare campaign in Pit-Town[[19]](#footnote-19). During this time, I attended the FrictionCo union branch. These meetings served as invaluable sources of insider information, offering insights into labour process conflicts and industry issues. Additionally, these meetings provided a platform for members to determine protest strategies and community actions. These meetings at the workers' centre constituted the primary means by which the union offered support to individual workers, addressing casework that encompassed disciplinary procedures, grievances against managers or employers, and other employment-related matters. My observations, interactions, and conversations with workers and union organisers at this site complemented the "dirty data" collected during participant observation in the workplace.

Participant observation took place at two warehouses. At FrictionCo, I was employed for five weeks in the run-up to Christmas. At SeamlessCo, I was employed for five weeks during the January sales. I was employed by an agency at both warehouses (OptiRecruit for SeamlessCo and RecruitNow at FrictionCo). During this period, I also had several formal interviews with warehouse firms across the SCR but settled on SeamlessCo and FrictionCo for the reasons stated above.

Work at FrictionCo involved 12-hour shifts four days a week on the loading bay and subsequently in the sortation room. The work at SeamlessCo involved 8-hour shifts five days a week as a 'picker'. This enabled me to gain a comprehensive perspective on the industry, affording insights that would have remained elusive through alternative research methods. Data collection during these shifts entailed observations of facility conditions, workforce size, worker attitudes towards managers, supervisors, agency officials and colleagues, task organisation within the labour process, and managerial and agency officials' interactions with workers.

### 4.5.3 Fieldnotes

Throughout my employment at both firms, I maintained a detailed work diary, chronicling my day-to-day experiences within the workplace. This diary served as a foundational resource, enabling dialogues with my supervisors. These interactions facilitated the exchange of findings, thoughts, and perceptions related to the ongoing operations and dynamics in the warehouse. Moreover, these daily observations contributed to discussions within the workers' centre and provided a valuable reflection source for revisiting and refining my understanding of the organisation of production.

The diary's format adhered to the structure of compiled scratch notes (Sanjek, 1993). Initially, I recorded these notes in a small jotter pad and, on one occasion, directly onto my body; however, I later transitioned to using my mobile phone for notetaking during my shifts at both warehouses. It is worth noting that mobile phone use was prohibited on both companies' shop floor. Nevertheless, many workers retained their phones in defiance of these rules, albeit at the risk of formal reprimands. Notably, at SeamlessCo, random searches were conducted during entry and exit from the shopfloor, with workers occasionally being subjected to searches that revealed the presence of unauthorised items such as phones, confectionery, and knives. Fortunately, I had become friends with Ahmed, a security officer at SeamlessCo. Ahmed often facilitated my entry with my phone while also allowing Dave (a recent migrant from Hong Kong) to enter with his supply of sweets.

Consequently, these small acts of solidarity increased my confidence to use my phone for notetaking. I took notes on my phone during opportune moments such as restroom breaks, during lunch intervals, and while commuting on the agency bus. Subsequently, I organised and synthesised these scratch notes into a diary after the culmination of each shift. This occurred either directly following my shift's end or the next morning[[20]](#footnote-20). This method allowed for systematically documenting my daily experiences and observations in the warehouse.

The warehouse workers, typically agency workers, have a precarious relationship with their employment. I, however, did not have to rely on my labour in the warehouse for my survival. This reduced precarity offered a degree of flexibility and autonomy in the warehouse. This allowed me to reduce my overall effort in production and explore the different aspects of the warehouse. While being careful not to impact other workers' ‘picking rate' or 'time off task', it allowed me to explore the break rooms, smoking areas and areas of the shopfloor where workers take their breaks (without walking all the way to designated areas) and develop relationships. This tactic was also used to explore management and the agency's disciplinary process[[21]](#footnote-21).

However, it is crucial to note that my activities within the warehouse necessitated a delicate balance between this 'exploration' and the potential influence on younger workers. If I discerned that my behaviour was inadvertently affecting the younger workforce by diminishing their work output, I would promptly cease my exploratory activities to mitigate any adverse consequences that they might incur.

### 4.5.4 Data Analysis

The primary data for this study came from participant observation, supplemented by in-depth interviews with workers, creating a rich foundation for understanding workers experiences of the logistics industry in the Sheffield City Region. To begin the analysis, I transcribed all interviews into password-protected Word documents, which were stored securely on my personal, password-protected laptop. Once transcribed, the interview data was uploaded into NVivo software for systematic analysis.

My analytical framework was developed from the literature, in particular that, workplaces should be understood as points of articulation within the broader societal context, rather than as isolated social systems (Cunnison, 1966). This perspective encourages a holistic understanding of the labour process, emphasizing that the behaviour of workers and management often reflects a mode of social accommodation between their conflicting aims and objectives.

This theoretical lens was particularly relevant for examining how workers negotiate their efforts in response to management's expectations. The varied patterns of accommodation and effort observed in different warehouses can be linked to the specific social structures and contexts surrounding them. For instance, differences in bureaucratic organisation and the distribution of racial divisions may significantly influence the nature of accommodation or bargaining over labour effort. This understanding guided my analysis, prompting me to explore how these dynamics manifested in the experiences of warehouse workers in the Sheffield City Region.

The initial analysis stage involved creating a set of broad codes, guided by the research questions and relevant literature on labour dynamics, racial capitalism, and labour process theory. These codes were structured around several key topics explored in the interview guide. At the national policy level, one set of codes focused on the influence of national immigration policies, welfare access, and regulatory frameworks that shape labour conditions in warehouses, addressing the first research question (RQ1). A second set of codes captured local labour market dynamics, examining employment patterns, wage disparities, and the role of informal economies, which were significant to understanding workers' experiences within the warehouse (RQ2).

Further codes examined workers' mobility practices, including geographic, social, and occupational mobility, and how these practices influenced their employment conditions (RQ3). The mechanisms of exploitation experienced by workers were also a central theme, with specific attention given to issues such as wage theft, precarious work arrangements, and racialised dynamics in labour allocation (RQ4). In addition, codes explored how workers’ mobility power, defined by their ability to move within and across job markets, shaped their experiences of exploitation (RQ5).

Moreover, the analysis included codes that focused on the mechanisms through which workers resisted these exploitative practices, including both formal and informal strategies, collective action, and individual coping mechanisms (RQ6). Lastly, codes were developed to investigate how variations in workers' mobility differentials influenced the nature and effectiveness of their resistance efforts (RQ7). Together, these thematic codes provided a structured approach to analysing the complex experiences and practices of warehouse workers in the Sheffield City Region.

After thoroughly reading the transcripts, I identified recurring themes and patterns extending beyond the initial coding structure. This prompted the creation of a second layer of 'sub-codes,' which captured more specific aspects of the data, such as participants' attitudes towards their work, expressed political views, emotional responses, and aspirations for the future. These sub-codes were also colour-coded to ensure clarity and organisation. I paid close attention to both patterns of similarity across different participants' accounts and notable divergences in their experiences.

In the next phase, I integrated my participant observation notes, gathered from two different workplaces, into NVivo. These notes were also colour-coded according to the existing set of codes and sub-codes. Additionally, new codes were developed to account for workplace-specific dynamics that emerged during my observations. The integration of observational data allowed for a more comprehensive analysis of how different themes intersected, providing insight into the complexities of the workers' experiences.

I then conducted a cross-sectional analysis with the specific goal of examining how various themes and factors intersected both inside and outside the workplace. The aim of this analysis was to identify underlying connections and potential causal relationships between workers' lived experiences at work and in their broader social environments. By weaving together insights from interviews and observations, this analysis illuminated the interplay between individual narratives and systemic forces, enhancing the understanding of the dynamics within the labour process.

### 4.5.5 Reflexivity and Positionality

A significant factor influencing the validity of the research findings is the researcher's "positionality" in terms of their biographical background, ethnicity, and class. It is essential to acknowledge that the observations and interviews were conducted by a white-British researcher. This background inevitably shaped the interactions and responses of the participants involved in the study. While it is impossible to alter these inherent characteristics, it is crucial to consider their potential influence when evaluating the research findings.

Nevertheless, these constraints pose fewer challenges within the extended case method compared to more positivistic qualitative approaches like grounded theory. This is attributed to several factors. Firstly, the researcher's theoretical perspectives and biases are explicitly disclosed at the commencement of the research. Secondly, any disturbances to the social context due to the researcher's involvement are not treated as undesirable noise that jeopardises reliability and must be minimised. Rather, they are considered as introducing "perturbations" that can potentially enrich the research process (Burawoy, 1998).

During my employment at FrictionCo, my identity as a white-British individual inadvertently placed me in a position of favour in the eyes of both the agency officials and the managerial staff. This unintentional positioning resulted in a more positive perception of my role and ability, granting me preferential treatment from the managers and agency officials. Consequently, this favoured status facilitated my access to training opportunities and led to more favourable working conditions, including a transition from the loading department to the sortation department in FrictionCo.

Recognising my status as a favoured individual yielded valuable insights into the strategies managers and agency officials employed to organise the social hierarchy among warehouse workers. It allowed for an examination of the criteria used to distinguish workers who were held in higher esteem and the corresponding differential treatment they received. Conversely, this examination also shed light on those individuals who did not enjoy favoured status and the treatment they received. This comparative analysis between my experiences and those workers who were evidently not considered favourites unveiled the intricate dynamics underlying the dispensation of rewards and recognition within the workplace.

In the initial discussions with the welfare and rights support officers at the workers' centre, I was given the impression that my status as a white British worker might have facilitated initial interactions with other workers, potentially setting me apart from the predominantly non-English speaking migrant workforce. However, as I observed the presence of several other white British workers within the warehouses gradually diminished the novelty of this aspect. Additionally, the highly structured and regimented nature of the labour processes within the warehouse environment discouraged casual curiosity among workers. Instead, it fostered a prevailing atmosphere of suspicion towards one another.

Consequently, being a white British worker, particularly while working in the loading bay of FrictionCo, began to mark me as a figure of suspicion rather than as someone driven by genuine curiosity. This perception was articulated by Alec, a Polish worker at FrictionCo, who described another white-British worker he met in the Loading Bay, "He was a boss-man, he didn't walk like us, he didn't talk like us. He spent a few weeks in each section, constantly asking questions. I knew something was not right straight away, and then, one day, he vanished, just like that. Never saw him again."

On my first day at SeamlessCo, I immediately started picking items. At times, the rhythm of the beeping hand scanner, the local radio station and the monotony of the picking process clouded my mind so much that the only way to grapple with the intense boredom of picking was to increase the intensity of my work effort. It reminded me of Baldamus (2013), who proposed that tasks characterised by high labour intensity and repetition prompt workers to naturally increase their productivity as a way of combating boredom. Of course, I knew this was a management tactic, and yet I still felt compelled to increase productivity in response to already strenuous working conditions.

Breaking out of this haze, I quickly realised that I may have been picking on the wrong floor. ‘Ground Zero’ was a blur of movement; trolleys fast-paced, disappeared around picking aisles as quickly as you noticed them[[22]](#footnote-22). The next day, I started to pick on the floors above; here, picking rhythms slowed to a crawling pace, workers stood around chatting, and managers engaged in direct supervision. Here, I could slow my picking rate and be more rigorous in observing the production process and developing relationships with workers. On these floors, I learnt, following the Reytons, how to modify my work pace "to make rate, but not give a shit".

During the initial period of employment, I tried to get to know the setting, production process and the workers. Within warehousing, this can be an almost Sisyphean task. The organisation of production deliberately limits workers' understanding of their function within the warehouse while also limiting the social interactions on the shop floor. As a result, I had to remove myself from work, observing the natural rhythms, flows and stoppages that develop on the shop floor. Identifying these would allow me to engage with workers naturally within moments between the perpetual motion of workers' movements.

I maintained a friendly demeanour, but was quick to identify workers who would happily engage with me. The combination of the limited time for fieldwork and high employee turnover meant I had to quickly adapt and develop rapport with a number of workers quickly. Developing relationships with a number of workers of different nationalities and backgrounds allowed me to overcome the isolation of the ‘high churn model’ (Struna, 2015).

My fieldwork consisted of more than just building trust and solidarity; it also presented significant challenges. Despite my background as a white male researcher with experience in the logistics sector, breaking down initial barriers was not straightforward. Building and sustaining trust with research subjects is a gradual and continuous process. Despite spending extensive time with the workers, there were moments when I sensed a lack of trust. One instance of this occurred during my third week at FrictionCo. At the time, I worked in the sortation department with the Polish and Roma women. In particular, the Polish women on the line had taken the time to teach me the ropes and were speaking freely in my presence. During one shift working between Jo and Agneskia, I was approached by the white-British supervisor, who handed me a brown envelope in silence. Inside the envelope was an invitation to the 'People's Forum', which I had earlier expressed an interest in joining. Later that shift, Jo asked me whether I would be attending and what the Forum would be about. She seemed worried and asked me not to tell them that she had been badmouthing the company. For the remaining days working on the line, I was unable to completely reassure her that I was not an informer. Besides, when I informed her that the People's Forum was cancelled because of ‘supply chain issues’, she nodded and returned to work, choosing a section of the line one or two desks apart from me.

Fieldwork encountered a distinct challenge linked to the rigorous working conditions in the sector. The bodily encounters of a fieldworker formed a pivotal element of the research process and contributed significantly to the evolving knowledge (Okely, 2007). These encounters were essential for gaining understanding and conducting analysis. In both warehouses, the working environment was characterised by noise, dust, and a lack of fresh air. The Loading Bay in FrictionCo and the picking chambers in SeamlessCo were cold and lacked sunlight, requiring me to work on my feet for up to 12 hours a day. My body's experiences and limitations played an integral role in my research on the shop floors. There were days when exhaustion and a depletion of enthusiasm were palpable, as illustrated by the following quote from my fifth day working at SeamlessCo:

I find myself utterly exhausted. My body aches, especially my legs and my back. I’m so tired, I’m finding it hard to stay engaged with my surroundings. The physical weariness is overpowering my interest and curiosity. I realised today that I now have the red eyes and sluggish movements of workers that I observed and noted in this dairy on my first day. (Field Diary 28/11/2021).

Throughout this research, a commitment to reflexivity has been upheld, emphasising a deliberate self-awareness of my impact on the study cases. The objective of this self-awareness is to strategically harness any potential disturbances arising from my presence and transform them into assets that enhance the depth and intricacy of the research. In summary, my positioning as a white-British individual conducting an investigation into migrant workers within the logistics sector underscores the imperative for reflexive scrutiny of how my own background might have exerted an influence on the responses and interactions of the research participants. Acknowledging these influences and incorporating reflexivity as an instrumental tool yielded a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the research findings.

## 4.6 Ethics

In order to have an in-depth understanding of the labour process within the warehousing industry, this study was conducted in two distinct phases. The first phase involved semi-structured interviews with employees and employed overt disclosure, while the second phase adopted covert participant observation through actual employment within two warehouses over three months. As such, it is imperative to address the ethical considerations that guided both phases of this research.The security and safety of the workers guided my approach to both phases of the research process.

### 4.6.1 Phase I: Overt Disclosure and Interviews

During the initial phase of this study, overt participant observation and interviews were conducted. The principle of informed consent, a fundamental element of ethical research, was closely observed. Participants in this phase were explicitly informed about the research's objectives and the researcher's role. Informed consent forms were distributed to all participants, who were provided with a clear explanation of the study's purpose, potential risks, and the voluntary nature of their participation. Participants were free to decline involvement or withdraw from the study at any point without adverse consequences.

Protecting the privacy and anonymity of all participants was a paramount ethical concern. The data collected in phase I was anonymised to ensure that no individual could be identified in any research output or publication. Confidentiality was maintained throughout this phase to preserve the participants' privacy and to protect their identities. Anonymity was used to hide the identity of the workers, warehouse firms and agency recruitment firms. The worker interviewees were assigned numerical codes to safeguard their identities, and any identifying information was expunged from the texts. Pseudonyms have been employed in the thesis to represent these individuals.

### 4.6.2 Phase II: Covert Participant Observation through Employment

The second phase of this research involved covert participant observation in two warehouses, a methodological choice justified by the need to avoid influencing observed labour dynamics. Spicker (2011) argues that covert research, despite ethical concerns, can be methodologically essential when overt disclosure might alter participant behaviour, especially in organisational settings where natural, unmediated interactions are the focus. Similarly, Calvey (2008) advocates for a “situated ethics” approach, emphasising that covert methods are often necessary when traditional, overt approaches would compromise the validity of the research. This phase thus employed a "limited disclosure" strategy, where the degree of information shared was carefully adjusted to maintain data authenticity without fully compromising participants' autonomy. This flexible approach was implemented to ensure data collection remained unaffected by behavioural changes, allowing for an accurate capture of labour processes within the warehouses, while protecting the participants true identities. (Spicker, 2011; Calvey, 2008).

To mitigate ethical concerns, stringent safeguards were applied to uphold participants' privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity. All individuals were assigned pseudonyms, and the identities of co-workers, supervisors, and organisations were protected to prevent any possible repercussions. This protective measure is aligned with the ethical imperative of nonmaleficence, prioritising participants' well-being while allowing the research to proceed without exposing them to potential harm (Calvey, 2008). In the warehousing context—where transient and often precarious employment is common—there was a heightened risk that overtly disclosed research goals could jeopardize workers’ job security, particularly if management interpreted the study as a politically motivated attempt to promote labour organisation. Thus, covert observation became essential for acquiring unfiltered data and for shielding workers from potential management retaliation, an approach consistent with Spicker’s (2011) argument that covert methods may be necessary to preserve research integrity and participant security.

The covert stance adopted in this research preserved the workers’ job security while upholding the core ethical principle of minimising harm. The warehousing sector, marked by high turnover and short-term contracts, required discretion to avoid influencing worker-management dynamics and ensuring workers’ livelihoods were not placed at risk. Informing employers of the research’s true objectives could have raised undue concerns and potentially led to the termination of employment contracts, making non-disclosure an ethical priority.

Moreover, the process of gaining employment required navigating additional ethical complexities. To secure positions in the warehouses, I submitted a modified CV omitting my initial PhD study. While potentially ethically contentious, this omission did not result in any displacement of other job applicants nor created undue advantages, given the high turnover typical of warehousing roles. Unlike some covert research approaches that involve fabricated identities (Ehrenreich, 2001), this research leveraged my actual occupational history in warehousing to minimise deception. By presenting my genuine identity as a former warehouse worker, I reduced the need for fictitious narratives, aligning with Calvey’s (2008) suggestion that minimising deception in covert methods enhances research authenticity. This previous experience allowed for an authentic integration into the workplace without raising suspicion, fostering trust with colleagues and thereby facilitating the collection of genuine, unaltered data.

The combination of my warehousing background and limited disclosure fostered an authentic research environment where workers interacted with an individual sharing their occupational experiences. This approach, echoing Lugosi’s (2006) perspective on incremental disclosure, highlights that gradual, contextually appropriate transparency is often the most ethical path in settings where full disclosure is impractical. Colleagues were able to relate to me based on shared occupational experiences, which minimised the perceived distance between the researcher and the participants and enabled a depth of engagement otherwise difficult to achieve in highly structured workplaces.

Both research phases—characterised by overt disclosure in Phase I and limited disclosure in Phase II—were subject to ethical review and received approval from the University of Sheffield Ethics Review Board (See Appendix 3). The ethical review carefully examined each phase’s framework, endorsing the two-pronged approach as ethically sound in light of the study’s specific context and objectives. Throughout, participant welfare and privacy were maintained as a top priority, aligning with a nuanced ethical stance that emphasizes both methodological rigour and a commitment to safeguarding participants' interests.

This two-phase design enabled a thorough investigation of labour dynamics in the warehousing sector, balancing ethical considerations with methodological requirements. By integrating informed consent in Phase I with, covert participant observation in Phase II, the study ultimately upheld an ethical commitment to participant well-being while achieving an authentic exploration of the labour process in a notoriously hard to reach sector.

## 4.7 Conclusion

This chapter has clarified the methodological approach used in this study, detailing the progression and implementation of field research. The research incorporated ethnographic participant observation and interviews, with ethnographic data meticulously recorded in a field journal that documented observations acquired through participant observation of the labour process. This method emerged as the most suitable approach to operationalise my theoretical framework, which underscores the intricate interplay between economic, social, and political elements in shaping (racial) disparities and their impact on exploitation and resistance.

Engaging in employment as a form of fieldwork offered a unique opportunity to gain deeper insights into the labour regime, the dynamics of exploitation and resistance in the workplace, and the nexus between immigration policies and the labour process. Engaging actively in the production process and daily routines of warehouse workers, while sharing in the emotional, mental, and physical aspects alongside them, proved invaluable for immersing myself in their world and comprehending their lived experiences.

In addition to these methodological components, reflexivity is a guiding principle throughout the research. It serves as a reflective tool that reinforces my commitment to understanding the worker's standpoint and mitigating potential biases. By consciously navigating the phases of overt and covert research, I can remain attuned to my influence on the study and the workers’ lived experience.

In summary, the field research proved to be an exceptionally enlightening experience, enhancing my comprehension of exploitation and resistance and racial dynamics within the warehouse. Consistent with the theoretical framework of the study, it provided valuable insights into the intricate interplay between state immigration policies and how workers perceive and navigate the conditions of employment. This comprehensive methodological framework, underpinned by critical ethnography and coupled with the extended case method, a single case embedded design, and ongoing reflexivity, aligns itself distinctly with the lived experiences of the worker. It offers an exploration of the warehouse labour process, acknowledging the workers' perspective as a central and invaluable point of reference in this sphere of employment while moving from theory to the workers’ standpoint in order to refine and extend. In the next chapter I begin the ethnographic portion of this thesis. It develops an understanding of workers’ variable mobility in Forge Valley and Pit-Town, before using this to explore the workplace dynamics in chapters 6 and 7.

# CHAPTER 5: NAVIGATING THE RACIAL TERRAIN: REPRODUCING (IM)MOBILITY IN THE SCR

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## Introduction

It was early morning, before sunrise, at the bus stop in Forge Valley. I met Omar and Abdi. Approaching them, Abdi shows me his phone. It's a message from the agency. "Hi Team, due to low volume today, we are offering holidays; if you are interested, please send us your employee number! Thank you, Allstar Recruitment". I noticed Gebrial and the other Slovak-Roma checking their phones and showed Ali the same message.

Sat outside the SK Potraviny (grocery store), we watched the cars passing down Palmers Street, the headlights bouncing off the reflection of the asphalt. We feared another text from the agency, wondered whether enough workers had taken voluntary holiday and contemplated the prospect of losing out on another day's pay. Suspended between work and unemployment, between citizenship and non-citizenship, between night and day, we must have looked like ghosts waiting in limbo. (Field Diary, November 2021)

This chapter serves as a prelude to the following two chapters, which take the reader into the two warehouses. To comprehend the experiences of warehouse workers and their role in the movement of value within the circuit of capital, this chapter examines how these workers are reproduced, thereby illuminating the connection between production and reproduction (Mezzadri, 2017). It explores how warehouse workers experience the state mechanisms that discipline workers' mobility, shedding light on the creation of differences in mobility practices (Alberti, 2014) between various fractions of the working class.

In the preceding chapters, I argued for understanding labour power through its double indeterminacy, shaped by the state and economy (Smith, 2006). Within this framework, the political and legal regulations controlling labour mobility, are seen as a means of producing difference (De Genova, 2023). This involves categorising labour into diverse groups, serving as a central element in subordinating labour to the demands of capital accumulation. These state mechanisms were contextualised within the local labour market of the SCR. Therefore, I am exploring the experience of warehouse workers' reproduction in the context of the political construction of the local labour market in light of their impact on shaping workers' mobility power.

To explore this experience, I adopt a multiscalar regime analysis (Smith et al, 2018). This framing of mobility power is complementary to both contemporary ethnography and labour regime analysis on the role of place, race, and social reproduction in the formation of workers mobility power and the "work-residence" systems that merges productive and reproductive spaces (Pun & Smith, 2007; Andrijasevic, 2022; Schling, 2022). Expanding on labour regime analysis, I incorporate the role of household structures, social networks, and the informal economy in developing workers mobility skills (Alberti & Sacchetto, 2024)[[23]](#footnote-23). This addition extends scholarly discussions on social reproduction (Baglioni & Mezzadri, 2020), shedding light on how these elements impact the mobility power of warehouse workers.

I situate the analysis within two micro-regions within the SCR of Pit-Town and Forge Valley, emphasising the importance of considering distinct scales and spaces within the broader context of racial capitalism and the circulation of capital. Therefore, the chapter extends labour regime attention to social reproduction (Baglioni & Mezzadri, 2020) by highlighting ways that sites of consumption, reproduction and local labour markets (Jonas, 1996), as well as the household (Baglioni, 2021) are crucial sites in which the production of different mobilities are constructed, and workers develop mobility skills.

The chapter primarily explores how the mobility power of warehouse workers is perpetuated through the influence of state immigration policies, welfare policies, and the dynamics of two micro-labour markets within the SCR. Building on Jonas (1996), I examine the effects of local state policies in two specific micro-labour markets, emphasising local housing policies and refugee dispersal policies. The goal is to analyse their influence on warehouse workers' mobility opportunities and strategies (Alberti, 2014). The combination of state policies and the structure of the two micro-regions within the local labour market both constrain and increase the mobility power of warehouse workers in the SCR.

In Forge Valley, the interplay of the micro-labour market, the commodification of housing and welfare and refugee dispersal policy, has led to the fractioning of workers mobility power. For second and third generation British workers and Eastern European workers, this, in turn, has facilitated the development of localised self-help initiatives, extensive social networks, extended households and informal economies used to leverage their mobility. For refugees, dispersal policy has resulted in a lack of social connections and increasing dependency on seasonal warehouse employment. Overall, I suggest Forge Valley can be understood as a ‘circulation zone’, whereby the differential inclusion in social provision and fluctuation of the logistics industry las led to regional and international circulation of its inhabitants.

Meanwhile, for White-British and Polish workers in Pit-town, the structure of the micro-labour market, welfare, and immigration policy has fostered the formation of unstable, conjugal family units with few social connections. Thus, different mobility practices are formed not only regarding juridical immigration status but also concerning these two micro-regions. Overall, I suggest Pit-Town can be understood as a ‘static zone’, whereby these national and local factors have combined to reduce the overall mobility of its inhabitants.

The culmination of this multiscalar regime analysis reveals a complex interplay of factors that shape and differentiate workers' mobility power. It reveals how Refugees, EU migrants, White-British and British long-established racialised minority workers navigate these national state and regional dynamics and negotiate their mobility practices within specific micro-regions. The result is the emergence of different racial class fractions, each understood through their unique mobility practices (Alberti, 2014).

As a prelude to the forthcoming chapters on the warehouse labour process, this chapter lays the foundation for understanding how the production of racial difference in the SCR is shaped through the state and the economy at multiple spaces and scales. Through this lens, we unravel the intricate connections between racial capitalism, the state and mobility power within the circulation of capital. This sets the stage for a deeper exploration of shopfloor dynamics in the subsequent chapters.

While the experiences of the warehouse workers presented here offer important insights into the dynamics of racial and class divisions in Pit-Town and Forge Valley, it is necessary to recognise the limitations of the data. The analysis is drawn from a small sample of workers, emphasising depth over breadth in line with ethnographic principles (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019). While their stories reflect broader trends, they may not capture the full diversity of experiences within these regions. Therefore, the findings should be seen as indicative rather than exhaustive, acknowledging the partial nature of the evidence presented.

The workers in this chapter are representative of the composition in the two warehouses, made up of British, Migrant and Refugee workers from Forge Valley, based in Sheffield and Pit-Town, based on the periphery of Sheffield. The chapter is split between six ethnographic portraits of warehouse workers I have met during my fieldwork. These portraits are introduced and framed by their migration to the SCR and their living conditions in Forge Valley and Pit-Town, respectively. In doing so, I reflect on these worker's mobility power and particular mobility practices concerning their migrant/refugee/citizenship status, their access to formal and informal labour within the micro-labour market, their household structure, and their social connections. In essence, the chapter renders the intimate linkages between the state and workers' mobility more transparent, shedding light on the reproduction of the warehouse's racial reserve army in the Sheffield City Region. I will begin with local housing policy and the impact of refugee dispersal in Forge Valley before introducing the workers.

## 5.2 Forge Valley

I make my way up towards SeamlessCo through Forge Valley. It is late November and cold. Despite this, children's clothes are hung out to dry on hedgerows between terraces. I pass “The Penguin” pub, its windows boarded up. An upturned black bin outside its front door, still smoking from a fire, lit in the early hours. I continue through the "Flower Estate", where drug dealers operate small "cannabis farms" in the closed pubs that have not yet been sold to private developers, and joyriders populate Blast Lane, Donetsk Way, Cotton Mill Row, and Scargill Croft. I pass the Methodist Church, doubling as a warm bank[[24]](#footnote-24) and "Johnny Rocko's Boxing Club".

On Palmers Street, the 1960s social housing developments are scattered in between rows of former steelworkers' terraces. The small maisonettes, orange bricked with flat rooves, are thick with smog from the motorway viaduct, which passes a stone's throw away, its concrete two-storey deck forming a barrier to the logistics cluster on its opposing side. (Field Diary, January 2022)

*Housing in Forge Valley*

In 2006, discretionary powers were granted to local authorities for the regulation of privately rented homes through "selective licensing" (SL) schemes. Under SL schemes, landlords in designated areas must obtain a license, permit inspection, and undertake necessary maintenance to meet minimum housing standards. The associated fees typically amount to around £600 for a 5-year license. Implementation of SL schemes requires consultation with local stakeholders, and only some local authorities have adopted them thus far (Dawson et al., 2020).

From 2014, SL was introduced in Forge Valley. In 2018, 22% of the houses in Forge Valley were empty. Moreover, SL inspections displaced 107 people through overcrowding. In 2018, 20% of the houses in Forge Valley were still inhabited above maximum occupancy (Greenwood, 2018).

Area-specific selective licensing has transformed Forge Valley and created a fission and fusion of extended households. The initial inspection programme dispersed individuals in extended households into several empty dwellings, which then became sites of transitory households[[25]](#footnote-25). Due to the considerable quantity of vacant houses in Forge Valley, these residences have been transformed into stable households, accommodating kin or groups of unrelated adults, with or without children, for extended durations. Besides, the dispersed individuals sleep in empty houses during the day and live in them by night when they return from the warehouses in Sheffield's East End. The end of Selective licensing in Forge Valley in 2019 has seen a return of landlords taking repossession of HMOs. This has precipitated a return of extended households, overcrowding and the re-grouping of warehouse workers in parental homes.

The end of selective licensing and economic constraints lead individuals to forego residing in these houses, prompting them to return to parental homes for financial support. Despite having jobs in the warehouse and engaging in informal transactions within the community, residents of Forge Valley find it challenging to fully cover the costs of their upkeep. Consequently, they opt to re-group in parental and kinship homes.

Another contributing factor to the prevalence of empty houses in Forge Valley is the transient nature of residency. The Roma population, maintaining a significant level of international mobility between Forge Valley and Slovakia, adjusts its movements in response to the fluctuations in the logistics labour market. This mobility further contributes to the temporary nature of housing in Forge Valley.

Presently, there exists a union between the flexible and seasonal nature of employment in the warehouses and the empty terraced houses and overcrowded HMOs that serve as accommodation for the casual and flexible logistics workforce in Forge Valley. At the same time, the rundown council flats, boarded-up residences, and abandoned Victorian buildings in Forge Valley serve as the spaces where the logistics workforce is reproduced – where individuals live, establish households, and navigate their daily lives (Baglioni, 2021). The juxtaposition of these spaces highlights how the conditions of production and reproduction are intertwined, demonstrating the influence of economic structures on the living conditions of the workforce. This convergence sheds light on the broader socio-economic dynamics that shape workers' experiences in Forge Valley, illustrating the intimate linkages between the spaces of production and the spaces where the workforce is reproduced (Pun & Smith, 2006). Having introduced Forge Valley through its housing policy, I will now describe the impact of dispersal policy, before introducing the warehouse workers living in Forge Valley.

*Dispersal in Forge Valley*

In 2019, Sheffield had 800 people on S95 support (Sheffield City Council, 2022a). Mears Group manages asylum accommodation in Sheffield. Mears Group tended to locate accommodations on the city outskirts, characterised by low-cost housing and limited transport links to the city centre (Greenwood, 2017).

Mears Group relies on leasing properties from private landlords, including houses, flats, and HMOs. Licensing of HMOs is essential, and in Sheffield, around 1,300 asylum seekers are housed, with approximately 300 properties currently in use. Mears Group pays less to landlords than G4S, leading to non-renewal of contracts by many Sheffield landlords. Consequently, 600 to 900 asylum seekers find accommodation in West Yorkshire hotels (Symaag, 2017).

Asylum seekers must report regularly at specified reporting centres. Travel time has no upper limit, and failure to attend can result in penalties, withdrawal of asylum support, fines, criminal records, or even imprisonment. Reporting has been used to pressure individuals into the 'Voluntary' Assisted Return and Reintegration Programme (VARRP) (Matthews, 2016). Next, I introduce the warehouse workers living in Forge Valley. I show their living arrangements, social connections, informal economies, and their mobility practices.

### 5.2.1 The Reytons: Abdi and Omar

This section introduces the first racial class fraction – 'The Reytons'. The Reytons were young, early to mid-twenties, male, second and third generation British-Yemeni. They worked in SeamlessCo, located a walkable distance from Forge Valley, an inner-city neighbourhood in Sheffield. The Reytons exercised a degree of job mobility between informal and formal employment, between formal employment in logistics and regional mobility between households in the SCR, while the form this mobility took was often individual.

I argue in this section that these individual responses and opportunities to exercise mobility were constructed in response to the racial organisation of the local labour market in Forge Valley and the state's welfare and housing policies to satisfy the requirements of capital and its reliance on just-in-time flexible, casual, and cheap labour. As a result, the Reytons relied on short periods of welfare benefits, signed up to multiple agencies in the SCR, relied on work in the informal and illegal economy of Forge Valley and used extended households and kinship networks across the SCR and extensive social connections to frequently move between jobs in warehousing in the attempt to look for better labour conditions. It is important to distinguish between informal and illegal activities. According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO), the informal economy refers to legal economic activities that are not regulated by the government or formal institutions (ILO, 2002). However, the ILO explicitly excludes illicit activities, such as drug dealing, from its definition of informal work. Admittedly, some informal entrepreneurs may deliberately conceal their activities from public authorities to evade taxes or bureaucratic regulations. Furthermore, in the case of informal wage workers, it is often the employer—rather than the worker—who fails to comply with labour legislation or pay payroll taxes (Perry et al., 2007). Additionally, many informal wage workers are employed by formal firms, either directly or through subcontracting arrangements. For the purposes of this thesis, I adhere to the ILO's distinction and categorise drug supplying as an illegal activity rather than informal work.

Abdi and Omar were the first workers of SeamlessCo I met. It was my first day working at SeamlessCo in January 2022 when I spotted them sitting on the banks of the Forge Valley canal after the end of my shift. They were wearing their high-vis with "Allstar Recruitment" printed in black lettering running across their backs. Abdi and Omar were in their early twenties and lived in Forge Valley. Both British-Yemeni, Abdi could trace his family's migration to Sheffield through his grandfather, who first arrived in Sheffield in the 1950s, finding work in the steel industry. They both commuted to SeamlessCo via the tram, which that morning had been shut down due to a murder in the centre of town. As a result, Abdi and Omar had walked the four km from their home, making them late for their shift.

When I met them, Abdi and Omar discussed the agency's reaction. Abdi argued that it "doesn’t matter what the agency throws at you" (in terms of penalties for tardiness), while Omar was debating whether to steal a bike so he "won't be made late by some asshole with a blade". Abdi and Omar's mixture of indifference and feeling compelled to make check- in, mirrored their often-contradictory attitudes and reactions to the control regime in the warehouse. The point is that these attitudes are forged in the neighbourhood of Forge Valley. While I worked in SeamlessCo and lived in Forge Valley, I saw Abdi and Omar most days during this period. Given our time with each other, I had more field notes for Abdi and Omar than anyone else.

*Pizzeria Clandestino: Experiencing Discrimination*

Abdi and Omar had booked the upstairs of a dessert café in the centre of town to watch the world cup final. Rather naively, it struck me as odd to watch the final in a dessert café rather than a pub, prompting me to question Abdi about the choice of venue. "We do not feel safe in those kinds of pubs, especially with football fans. We can watch the match in peace with our families here," Abdi explained. Listening to our conversation, Nahuel, an Argentinean international who had recently become employed at SeamlessCo, interjected, pointing at a conspicuous black eye. "This was from the semi-final", he shared matter-of-factly. "I was watching it with my sister, but some English guys overheard us speaking Spanish and attacked us. That's why we made the decision to book this place," he explained.

Later that evening, I persuaded Abdi and Omar to visit Pizzaria Clandestino, a downtown pizzeria—a hub of migrant workers—which sold cheap pizza and cheap Sardinian lager. After a round of orange juices and Margarita pizzas, we returned to Penson Street to catch the bus to Forge Valley. Amid the routine flow of public transit, English passers-by, fuelled by hostility, directed racial slurs at Abdi and Nahuel, "niggers go home."

This incident laid bare the not-so-subtle undercurrents of racial discrimination woven into the daily lives of my colleagues, extending beyond the workplace and into public spaces. The bus stop became a vulnerable space where the unfiltered reality of racial prejudice hung in air. Afterwards, as we departed the bus in Forge Valley, Abdi reflected on the emotional toll of these confrontations. "I've decided to avoid the town centre now," he admitted.

Back home in Forge Valley, I could not fall asleep that night. The man's image at the bus stop was always in my mind. I knew too well that the warehouse workers experienced racial discrimination at work. However, it was probably the first time I had witnessed such blatant racism with my co-workers, as a lived experience. I felt a sense of guilt for taking them to Pizzaria Clandestino. I had not expected such racially motivated assault, or perhaps I was careless.

As I spent more time with Abdi and Omar outside of work, I realised that they rarely ventured into the town centre and spent most of their free time in small dessert cafés in Forge Valley. In short, Abdi and Omar felt compelled to stay within the limits of an invisible border surrounding Forge Valley. The Forge Valley residents were not only subject to racial discrimination when they left the perimeters of Forge Valley, but Forge Valley itself was racialised by those living outside of it. Speaking to Bryan, a White-British supervisor at SeamlessCo, when I mentioned I lived in Forge Valley:

I drove through that ghetto last week, and the area is in a sorry state. When I was working as an environment consultant, we had a food factory that attracted a load of rats; although the owner took precautions, the rats had become too numerous to handle; the only solution was to knock the factory down and rebuild – and you know what? It worked a treat. I'm not comparing people with rats, but a potential solution must be to knock the area down and repopulate it with decent people. (Field diary, Janaury, 2022).

The residents of Forge Valley, before entering the warehouses, were thus casually and often violently dehumanised, judged not only by the colour of their skin but also by their living arrangements.

As Rogaly (2020) notes in his analysis of the logistics and food processing sectors in Peterborough, “the association of the job with the status of being a ‘migrant’ is a form of racialisation” (Rogaly, 2020; 79). A similar dynamic is identified by Schling (2022) in the Czech car manufacturing industry, where “the segregation of working-class Bulgarians and Romanians into low-waged factory work and dormitory housing creates racialising articulations of foreignness and class status” (Schling, 2022: 286).

I suggest that not only is there an ideological distinction between British citizens and migrants/refugees as a racialised foreign subject, but also, the distinction was made based on skin colour. In Forge Valley, Polish, Roma, Pakistani and British-Yemeni like Omar and Abdi's distinction from white-British workers was grounded in the materiality of Forge Valley as a socio-spatial internal border of racial segregation. Forge Valley thus became a mode of locating difference – of being violent, unhygienic and exhibiting social disorder, in turn characterising the people living there. Such racialising designations of Forge Valley and its residents serve to justify attempts to maintain separated systems of social reproduction for migrant, refugee and non-white British workers on the one hand and white British workers on the other. As well as sorting them into low-wage, low-skilled, dangerous, dirty and precarious work in the warehouse.  As a result, workers like Abdi are reluctant to venture outside their community. His social presence in the wider region was made undesirable, reproducing the very disposability and hyper-flexibility of labour power that the warehouse seeks to construct.

*Extended Households*

Abdi and Omar were rarely seen apart. Following a shift in SeamlessCo, we would often walk together back to Forge Valley via the old train line, making sure to avoid 'old Pats' Doberman that guarded the scrap yard at the entrance of Steel Street. During these walks, we would talk about living in Forge Valley, about how we could put together enough money for a deposit on a flat, and about Abdi's desire to move out of his parent's home.

Abdi lived with his parents in a two-bedroom private terraced house featuring a small, unattended garden. Omar recently moved in, although it is common for him to 'sofa surf' between friends' homes in Forge Valley. Omar also tells me that he had spent time in the 'empties' along Donetsk Way but had to move out when the landlords moved back into Forge Valley following the end of the council's area-specific licensing. When Omar stays, he sleeps in a small attic room and so the house can provide an extra bed for friends in the neighbourhood. Abdi's mother and father tolerate Omar coming to stay because of the extra income it brings. Besides, Omar's father splits his time working nights as a delivery driver for TNP Supply Chain Solutions based in Pontefract. When Abdi's father returns in the morning, Omar usually makes himself scarce and finds alternative places to hang out during the day.

A constant source of conflict between Omar and Abdi's father is the knowledge of Omar's involvement in the drug trade controlled by the local Yemeni bosses. Nevertheless, during the evenings following his shift at SeamlessCo, Omar returns to Abdi's home and sets up camp in the attic. There exists an unspoken agreement between Omar and Abdi's father that Omar must not be around the familial home when he arrives back from work.

Omar tells me that following the end of selective licensing in Forge Valley in April 2019, the landlord forced him out of his home and moved in with Abdi and his parents, initially occupying the attic room. Following Abdi's cousin moving to Forge Valley from Leicester in search of work, Omar was moved to the rusting Bedford Van with a small heater powered by a big generator, which occupied the front lawn outside the two-bedroom terraced house. Omar much prefers this setup, which gives him more freedom to come and go as he pleases and avoid confrontation with Abdi's father. He tells me he often spends time in Rotherham, staying with his cousin. This allows him to find work in the warehouses surrounding Rotherham.

The extended household arrangement between Abdi, Omar, and Abdi's family serves as a strategic mechanism to enhance the workers' mobility power. Living together provides economic benefits. Abdi's parents, accommodating Omar's stay, receive extra income, a crucial supplement to their household finances. This cohabitation model extends beyond the conventional family structure, allowing for flexibility and shared resources. Omar's living situation is fluid, from being displaced from his previous residence due to changes in housing regulations, and now taking refuge within the extended household. This arrangement offers him a place to stay and allows him the flexibility to move between locations, optimising his mobility for work opportunities in the surrounding areas, such as Rotherham. The shared living space thus allows Omar the flexibility to move between warehouses in the SCR.

The combination of capital's imperative for flexible and just-in-time labour aligns with the state's facilitation of Omar's hyper-mobility. The absence of the state in local housing regulation has led to the increasing reliance on young workers such as Omar on extended households in Forge Valley. The extended household serves as a tool for manoeuvring between local labour markets and becomes a pivotal force in reproducing the adaptability demanded by logistics capital. Thus, the interplay between the demands of flexible labour sought by capital and the orchestrated hyper-mobility within extended households underscores a symbiotic relationship, where the state, through the absence of local housing policies has led to a reliance on extended households and contributes to the very flexibility that aligns with the demands of the warehouse for flexible, just-in-time labour. Therefore, reproductive processes including the structure and organisation of the household acts both to facilitate the needs of capital (Baglioni, 2021), and at the same time, provide workers’ such as Omar an opportunity to develop and share mobility skills (Strauss & McGrath).

*Sugar Town: The Informal Economy*

In the heart of Forge Valley are a series of dessert Cafés. Abdi, Omar and I spent our free time here. In these communal spaces, socialisation extended beyond mere leisure; it functioned as a conduit for job opportunities and, in some instances, illegal transactions. The Reytons were unfamiliar with the concept of 'leisure' in contrast to 'work' due to financial constraints that prevented them from staying unemployed. Abdi explicitly told me, illustrating on a menu, that every day without work incurred expenses of up to £45 for electricity, food, and heating.

Consequently, the Reytons refrained from squandering time and money at home. Instead, they spend their free time in several dessert restaurants, Shisha bars and Johnny Rocko's Boxing Club in Forge Valley. Sugar Town, open until 2 pm, provided the Reytons with a warm and cheap place to socialise[[26]](#footnote-26).

Gathering in restaurants, bars, and boxing clubs serves to secure employment. Notably, some of the Reytons utilise venues like restaurants and Shisha bars to cover their drug deals. Omar, for instance, allocates £20 for leisure activities, such as playing slot machines, placing small bets, and purchasing energy drinks from local shops and restaurants during his days off from SeamlessCo. However, Omar does not perceive his time at these establishments solely as leisure. He invests significant time in small transactions, job searches, and networking with local entrepreneurs, scrap, and drug dealers.

During one night at Sugar Town, I told Omar I was in need of a new phone. Omar suggested I check out the electrical shop in Forge Valley. I explained that I had already visited the shop and found the phones overpriced. Surprisingly, the following week, Omar informed me that he had visited the shop and asked them to find a good-quality phone at a discounted price for me. Despite my reservations, Omar later revealed that they had identified the perfect phone for me, described as 'posh, black, with 64GB', and it was available at the shop for £100 in cash. Realising that Omar had arranged for an illicit acquisition, I became uneasy and claimed that I did not urgently need the phone. This incident initially created some tension between us, but eventually, it was overlooked, thanks to Omar's entrepreneurialism.

Abdi and Omar frequently supplement their incomes from SeamlessCo by engaging in additional informal jobs. This includes jobs like interior decorating, demolition, and landscape gardening. They secure these jobs by leveraging their kinship or social connections with local subcontractors, frequently networking within locations like Sugar Town. For example, Abdi started working with his uncle's construction business after leaving his job at SeamlessCo. Moreover, Omar occasionally accompanied them when they had "a big job on".

The Construction industry officially employs 64,000 construction workers in Sheffield (Hill, 2016), but the actual employment scale is believed to surpass the official statistics. Notably, the Reytons were often engaged in informal work within the construction industry between working in the warehouses. Given the industry's dependence on seasonal and part-time employment, the construction sector is often a valuable supplementary source of income for the Reytons.

The demand for building, gardening, decorating, and painting skills is primarily driven by middle-class homeowners in the western suburbs of Sheffield, while the city council subcontracts re-landscaping projects. Consequently, the construction sector depends on expansive social networks and various forms of labour organisation, including subcontracting, piecework, and daily labour.

In the absence of the job centre in Forge Valley, Abdi and Omar, when looking for informal work to complement their work in SeamlessCo or during periods of unemployment, utilise their social connections within the dessert cafes and restaurants of Forge Valley. In essence, the informal economy in Forge Valley, manifested in communal spaces like Sugar Town, serves as a nexus where socialisation, economic exchanges, and job-seeking efforts converge. In these spaces, workers strategically utilise their time and resources, leveraging informal networks to economise their daily lives and actively negotiate and enhance their labour power within a complex economic landscape. The blurring of lines between leisure and economic pursuits exemplifies how Abdi and Omar use the informal economy, allowing them to navigate the local labour market. With a lack of employment opportunities outside Forge Valley, the Reytons are pushed into the informal economy due to the flexibility of employment in SeamlessCo. The informal economy facilitates the outsourcing of workers reproduction to small businesses in Forge Valley.

*The Reyton's Regional Industrial Circulation*

The Reytons relied on periods of welfare benefits, signed up to multiple agencies in the SCR, relied on work in the informal and illegal economy of Forge Valley and used extended households and kinship networks across the SCR and extensive social connections to frequently change jobs in the attempt to look for better labour conditions.

Abdi, relied on moving between friends and family households. When I met him in March 2021, he had started work at SeamlessCo and had been employed for five weeks. Following a delayed payment, he moved across the SCR, finding work outside Rotherham in another warehouse. Abdi was employed here for two months, living with his uncle, before returning to Forge Valley, where he worked cash-in-hand in his uncle's construction business while receiving state unemployment benefits. He returned to SeamlessCo in October.

Omar had similar movements across the SCR in search of work. Omar had previously lived in the 'empty' houses in Forge Valley following Sheffield City Council's Selective Licensing of HMOs which displaced him through local regulation of overcrowded households and worked in several unregulated jobs. Following the end of selective licensing in Forge Valley in April 2019, the landlord forced Omar out of his home. He moved in with Abdi and his parents, initially occupying the attic room. Following Abdi's cousin moving to Forge Valley from Leicester in search of work, Ali was moved to the rusting Bedford Van with a small heater powered by a big generator, which occupied the front lawn outside the two-bedroom terraced house.

This regional industrial circulation was based on a number of factors. First, the commodification of the welfare system, forced the Reytons into the informal economy and extended households in Forge Valley. For example, minimum wages in the warehouse and the cost-of-living crisis forced the Reytons back into the family home. As a result, the costs of running an independent home pulled the family and extended networks back together. This created movements between achieving independence and their dependence on the family home. Besides, when Abdi was threatened with sanctions, he attended a 'job fair' meeting organised by the jobcentre with speakers from the agency employed by SeamlessCo. Therefore, the workfare regime provided the Reytons with the economic compulsion to work at SeamlessCo.

Second, the Reytons often live in extended households. Extended households typically involve multiple family members pooling resources and providing mutual support. This led to greater financial stability and resilience in the face of economic challenges. Additionally, the presence of extended family members offered a broader network for job-seeking and access to informal work opportunities, further enhancing their mobility power (Andrijasevic & Sacchetto, 2016b). Abdi's household required the pooling of resources from family members and friends such as Omar and flexible household arrangements to allow Abdi and Omar to find work across the SCR. In fact, in Forge Valley, because of the seasonal and flexible labour available in the warehouses and the low level of support through the welfare system, the Reytons reside independently for brief intervals, periodically returning to their parents' homes when assistance is required.

Third, the Reytons, living in Forge Valley relied on additional income in the informal economy. The low level of wages, flexibility and seasonal nature of warehouse work made them rely on unregulated, cash-in-hand, and sometimes illegal transactions. This reliance on informal economic opportunities increasingly penetrated their social lives and commodified their friendship relations. Social time and work time became increasingly blurred. When the Reytons were not working in SeamlessCo, they worked in informal economic opportunities. When objectively socialising, they were building social alliances or social capital and networks of informal economic transactions in the absence of viable alternatives. In Forge Valley, the combination of low wages, living expenses, and workfare compels warehouse workers to engage in the informal economy. Consequently, the Reytons resort to informal economic strategies like petty capitalism in the construction and scrap sectors, as well as involvement in illicit activities such as the drug trade for their means of reproduction.

Fourth, the Reytons benefitted from extensive social connections in Forge Valley, which significantly influenced their mobility power (Ciupijus et al., 2020). These connections were valuable resources for accessing job opportunities and information about the labour market, particularly the informal economy. These wide social networks provided emotional and logistical support during job searching, contributing to their overall mobility power and adaptability.

The depiction of Abdi and Omar and their frequent transitions among various companies and industries and between formal and informal employment illustrates 'mobility practices' employed as a coping mechanism with the warehouse industry (Alberti, 2014). Abdi and Omar were able to exercise their mobility power because of the structure of the micro-local labour market in Forge Valley with multiple warehouse firms in the area; their strategic use of unemployment benefits; their reliance on family and kinship networks to move across the SCR and their social connections in Forge Valley, which together, allowed them to reduce their overall dependence on warehouse employment during seasonal fluctuations in the logistics industry.

As a result, Abdi and Omar lived in a state of flux between dependency and independence, driven by the seasonal fluctuations of the logistics industry and their strategic use of benefits, informal work and extended households. They developed their mobility skills by extending households and relying on state welfare to pool resources and provide mutual support, partly shielding them from the market's volatility. Therefore, Omar and Abdi’s internal industrial circulation directly co-constitutes value through their movements in and out of formal employment in the warehouses of the SCR. These movements are sustained through extended households, social networks and strategic reliance on welfare, while their circulation functions as a direct subsidy to logistics capital (Mezzadri, 2020).

### 5.2.2 Vytas

Vytas is 31 years old, originally from Lithuania. Vytas lives in Forge Valley and works in SeamlessCo. Vytas' unique position and mobility is shaped by the specific challenges and opportunities presented by welfare and housing policies in Forge Valley. This section unravels the ways in which welfare and housing policies play a pivotal role in shaping his experiences within the labour market. By examining the interplay between mobility and welfare and housing policies, Vytas' experiences provide valuable insights into the formation and characteristics of his racialised class fraction, illuminating the nuances that distinguish it within the broader social landscape of Forge Valley.

Vytas was born in Taurage, Lithuanian, close to the border with the Kaliningrad Oblast and not far from the Baltic Sea coast. His father worked in Kaunus in the construction trade, leaving Taurage in 2001 and leaving his older sister and mother at home. Vytas trained as a painter and decorator at his local training vocational centre in Taurage and worked with his father in Kaunus for several years. After moving in and out of jobs with contacts made by his father with local tradespeople, at 24, Vytas decided to move to England where he could better support his mother and father financially.

Since moving to England, Vytas has predominantly worked in warehouses because "they seem to be the easiest to get, you don't need too much training". His first job in England was as a warehouse operative in Peterborough. After working there for four years, Vytas decided to move to Sheffield. Vytas found the work in Peterborough dull and wanted the opportunity to live in a "bigger city with more employment opportunities". Besides, he had earned enough in the four years for his father to return to Taurage, where he now runs a small painting and decorating business.

Today, Vytas works at SeamlessCo and lives within walking distance of the warehouse in Forge Valley, in a privately rented terraced house along Donetsk Way. Vytas lives with four Polish men (all employed in various warehouses in the SCR). Vytas tells me he gets on with his housemates "just fine", but there is little time for socialising given everyone’s production schedules. The house has four bedrooms, with the living room turned into a makeshift fifth bedroom, leaving a narrow galley kitchen as the only communal space.

Vytas' room is small, the smallest in the house, with a single bed pressed against a gas wall heater, an old Baxi Brazilia 8000, which he tells me no longer works. He tells me he spends his free time playing The Beatles records on his Bush Classic record player, placed on a chair at the bottom of his bed. Next to the chair is a pine desk with various figurines placed delicately onto a world map. Several pairs of running shoes are carefully placed on a low shelf next to folded work clothes. Vytas tells me he spends time outside of SeamlessCo on his real passion, athletics training. It is his dream to one day work full-time as a personal trainer.

Vytas works 48 hours a week, split into four 12-hour day shifts at SeamlessCo. When he is not working at SeamlessCo, Vytas works as a training contractor at the Gym in Forge Valley, delivering specialised training programmes as a personal trainer. Vytas currently works this second job eight hours a week, split into four 2-hour sessions. Vytas took up this second job not only because it was his passion but because the wages from the warehouse were not enough to cover his expenditures. "I can't really afford to cover my rent, bills and food just on the warehouse work. I came to England so I could make my family more financially secure, so I send a lot of the money home, at the end of the day I needed to take up a second job just to cover my costs". Due to the intensity of work in SeamlessCo, Vytas is considering giving up his training programme, "The biggest problem at SeamlessCo is the intensity of the work, you can't physically do it. After eight or twelve hours my legs are broken which means I can't do any training".

Vytas does not have much free time and says he does not socialise with anyone. He says he feels isolated, not only because of the work which doesn't leave time for developing relationships, but because he is Lithuanian and feels like an outsider both at SeamlessCo and in his home. "Sure, the other guys can speak English, but after working 12-hour shifts, they just fall back into Polish, because its more comfortable for them, I don't blame them, there are not many Lithuanians living here". Besides, Vytas uses his time outside the warehouse with a second job. "That's all I do really, work, either at SeamlessCo or Athletics training, I just hope I can keep both going…I just go to work, really".

In March 2021, Vytas gave up his second job at the English Institute of Sport. "I couldn't do it anymore, they were making us hit ridiculous targets [at SeamlessCo], I'm a fit guy, and at the end of the day I couldn't even think about delivering a lesson or even moving from my bed".

In May 2021, Vytas was beaten on West Street in Sheffield's City centre, outside the Walkabout bar. Targeted on account of being "foreign", he was punched in the face, knocked to the ground and kicked in the head and torso until blood gushed from a cut above his temple. I met Vytas a week later, his eye socket still cut and bruised a yellow-brown.

Following the beating Vytas had had enough of SeamlessCo, besides he knew that his days were numbered because of SeamlessCo's partial automation of picking, "Every day it was less and less [pickers] on ground zero [picking floor], I knew my time was up". He was eventually dismissed for confronting one of his superiors. "At SeamlessCo you cannot even speak to the supervisors, if you have a problem, something is wrong for example a barcode is not working so you can't complete the pick – I would go to the supervisor and say it's not working – they would just dismiss me, they didn't care, if you go to them with a problem, they don't want to hear it, you can get fired for it, that's what happened to me. They don't want workers who can think and fix problems – they want drones who never speak".

Despite being a UK resident, Vytas did not consider applying for social welfare. Instead, Vytas quickly found another job in a warehouse close to Forge Valley through his housemate. "It was like a test. I knew [the warehouse] needed workers because Anton works there and said I could get a job there, so I confronted my supervisor to see what would happen; in the end, it didn't matter that I was fired because I knew I could get this [other] job". With a new job, Vytas is hoping to kickstart his personal training again. "At least now it's more manageable, I feel I can negotiate more on my hours or switch [shifts] with other workers, and it's not so intense, I have time for my athletics training".

During the COVID-19 lockdown, Vytas navigated the challenges of cramped living conditions within his HMO on Donetsk Way. The restrictions imposed by COVID-19 accentuated the limitations of the shared space, intensifying the strain on the already close quarters. Vytas, like his housemates, faced heightened anxieties regarding health and safety. "We weren't allowed to go outside, but we still had to go to work; it was like hell". The police presence outside the HMO, enforcing lockdown measures, added an extra layer of unease. The fear of potential repercussions for violating regulations and the cramped living environment created a sense of vulnerability and apprehension, affecting not only Vytas's daily life but also his mental and emotional well-being.

The residents of Donetsk Way in unlicensed HMOs, including Vytas, have grown accustomed to one another, establishing shared routines, conversations, and a collective perspective on life amid warehouse employment. Vytas emphasises the importance of independence, recognising the potential for relationships within the household to evolve over time, but underscores the necessity of friendliness, acknowledging that maintaining positive relations is crucial to finding improved employment conditions. The dynamics within Vytas's HMO in Forge Valley reflect a blend of camaraderie, individualism, and occasional tensions, contributing to the extended household's complex social connections and workers' mobility patterns within the Sheffield City Region. Here, the deregulation of the housing market in Sheffield has forced Vytas into an overcrowded HMO. However, the dense social connections developed through extended households provide its residents with the social capital required to increase their mobility power and bargain for improved conditions within the warehouse (Ceccagno & Sacchetto, 2019).

In Sheffield, Vytas' mobility power is shaped by various factors. Although he has access to the welfare system, he chooses not to rely on it, instead opting to navigate economic challenges through warehouse work. This access, however, still plays a role in his mobility power, as it provides a potential safety net during periods of unemployment or low income. Nonetheless, the commodification of welfare exerts economic pressure, compelling individuals like Vytas to remain in the labour market, even if they do not actively utilise welfare benefits.

Second, the commodification of housing in Forge Valley, means Vytas is part of an extended household, sharing his living space with other individuals employed in Sheffield's warehouses. This household structure enhances his mobility power by fostering mutual support and pooling resources. It provides financial stability and expands his network for job-seeking. The example of Vytas moving between warehouses also reveals how living together in HMOs allows workers to develop social capital, which has ‘spill over’ effects for the employer (Bal, 2016) – allowing Vytas to seek employment with better conditions.

Vytas's story illustrates the exercise of "migrant mobility practices" (Alberti, 2014) within the micro-local labour market of Forge Valley. His ability to move between different jobs reflects a broader utilisation of mobility power. Vytas leverages the structure of the local labour market, and reliance on social networks developed in living spaces to reduce dependence on warehouse employment during seasonal fluctuations.

### 5.2.3 Ali

Ali is a refugee residing in Forge Valley and working in FrictionCo, originally from Eritrea, he represents a distinctive racialised class fraction within the reserve army in Sheffield. His journey reflects the intricate intersection of migration challenges, seeking asylum, and the impact of specific welfare and dispersal policies (Lewis et al; Clayton & Vickers, 2019). As an asylum seeker navigating the complexities of the welfare system, Ali's experiences contribute to the distinctive nature of his racialised class fraction. By examining his mobility within Forge Valley, we gain valuable insights into how welfare, housing and dispersal policies shape the movements and opportunities of refugees, ultimately influencing the mobility bargaining power (Strauss & McGrath, 2017) of this specific class fraction in the local labour market.

I first made contact with Ali in March 2021 when he responded to one of my flyers put up at the Bus Stop in Forge Valley. Over the next few weeks, we would stay in regular contact before deciding to meet in person. We arranged to meet at his home along Donetsk way in Forge Valley – a two-bedroom terrace privately rented accommodation with one housemate.

Meeting Ali for the first time, he spends thirty minutes describing his "survival ritual" in detail, which he repeats after every shift at FrictionCo. Ali begins his day by leaving his house at 5:30 am walking three km to the industrial estate where the agency bus takes him to the warehouse. The bus arrives at FrictionCo for a 7 am start and leaves at 7 pm, arriving back at the industrial estate at 8 pm. Ali walks back to his home in Forge Valley, arriving at his house around 9 pm. At 9 pm the nearest supermarket in Forge Valley closes, so instead Ali shops at the local Tesco express, the only supermarket open at that time, and another 1.5km each way.

After walking from the warehouse to his home via his local Tesco Express, he immediately weighs himself. He notes his weight in a small jotter he keeps in the kitchen. He says he will spend the rest of the time eating and drinking. "Otherwise, I lose 1kg a day. When I started, I was losing 1kg a day in weight. So, I have to up my diet and eat and drink a lot of milk, so I can keep healthy". After noting down his weight and drinking a litre of milk, he takes a bath to "soothe my muscles so they can keep moving the next day". Ali works shifts, four on, four off, 12 hours a day. He tells me how the pace of work is "not so bad", but at the end of the second day, his arms and legs would ache so badly that he could not lower himself into the bath.

My understanding of Ali's life came mainly from our informal discussions, yet he tended to dive into elaborate, dream-like narratives during our conversations, occasionally involving fanciful elements. Recognising the need for more precise information about dates and details, I proposed that we meet for a coffee in Sugar Town. However, interruptions by Omar and other younger workers prompted us to quickly relocate to Ali's home. Here, Ali offered a clearer, though still somewhat jumbled, overview of his life.

Ali first arrived in the UK in 2017. Born to an Eritrean father and an Ethiopian mother in Addis Ababa, Ali moved to Eritrea after independence. After serving conscription from the Sawa military camp at the age of seventeen in Northwest Eritrea, he escaped the military and the protracted war with Ethiopia.

In 2014, Ali obtained a fake identification paper, and caught the bus to an army checkpoint in Teseney. Through the checkpoint, Ali made his way across the Sudanese border. Picked up by Sudanese military he was taken to a United Nations refugee camp, which became a magnet for human traffickers. Leaving, he made his way to Khartoum and then to the Libyan border. Finally, reaching Tripoli before being crammed onto a boat leaving for the Italian shoreline. In Italy, he was taken to Milan by the Italian authorities, spending time with the Eritrean diaspora. Joining a group of Eritreans leaving for Calais, he boarded a lorry as it crossed the English Channel, before making his way to Lunar House, London to claim asylum.

In the UK, the Home Office found Ali an IAC (Initial Accommodation Centre) in London, before being dispersed to Urban House, the accommodation centre in Wakefield. Ali received support payments from Section 95 throughout this period, as outlined in the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 (ASAP, 2016). This support included accommodation, provided on a mandatory, non-negotiable basis, and weekly support payments amounting to £37.75 (gov.uk, 2019). The weekly payments were facilitated through pre-paid debit cards known as ASPEN cards, administered by the multinational company Sodexo. While these cards could not be used for online purchases, they were accepted at all shops honouring Visa payments and could be utilised at cash points.

Upon the granting of Ali's leave-to-remain status, he entered a 28-day move-on period. Within the 28-day move-on period, Ali faced the tasks of securing accommodation, applying for a national insurance number, finding employment, and applying for welfare benefits. The time required for benefit access (six weeks for an initial payment during the fieldwork period), obtaining employment, acquiring a national insurance number, and gathering funds for a rental deposit or registering for the social housing waiting list contributes to a state of destitution for many during this transition. Ali sought assistance from ASSIST (Asylum Seeker Support Initiative Short Term) to navigate these challenges. ASSIST supported Ali by finding him private accommodation and opening a bank account[[27]](#footnote-27).

Ali claims that he was lucky to find employment straight away at FrictionCo. "It was so easy, compared to the [asylum] process. I walked in [to the recruitment centre] one day, and then I was working the very next day; there is a lot of work here [Sheffield]. It is very easy to find".

Employed as a temporary agency worker, Ali takes the private bus organised by the agency to and from FrictionCo. Ali's job is to load and unload cages and stillages off the back of lorries. He works alongside Roma, African and Middle Eastern colleagues, some of whom are also with refugee status. Ali takes his breaks alone and has not made any friends despite working at FrictionCo for six months. The high turnover rate, minimal break times, multiple languages and the pace of warehouse work have made it difficult to establish relationships.

Ali has limited social connections in Forge Valley, which constrains his mobility and opportunities. This restricted network is a direct result of the UK’s dispersal policy, reducing his access to job prospects and vital labour market information. Furthermore, with few social contacts, Ali has limited access to informal work opportunities that the Reytons heavily depend on. His experience in the asylum process has also shaped his expectations, leading him to feel grateful for his position at FrictionCo, despite the physical strain it causes him.

### 5.2.4 Gebrial and Marian

Gabriel and Marian are a Roma couple from Slovakia living in Forge Valley and working in FrictionCo. They emerge as a distinctive class fraction within the reserve army in Sheffield. Their narrative is intricately woven with layers of migration, and the impact of welfare policies including the dynamics of pre-settled status, creating a unique class fraction. Unlike Vytas, Gabriel and Marian's experiences are shaped not only by Eastern European migration but also by the specific challenges posed by the racialisation they encounter as members of the Roma community (Grill, 2016, 2018; Yildiz & De Genova, 2018).This section unravels the intricate ways in which welfare policies and racialisation interplay to influence the experiences of this Roma couple. Navigating the nuances of pre-settled status adds an additional layer creating a distinctive position within the broader racialised reserve army of Sheffield. By understanding Gabriel and Marian's journey, we gain profound insights into how welfare, housing, and racialisation of the Roma community mould the movements, opportunities, and unique challenges faced by this specific class fraction within the local labour market in Forge Valley.

Gebrial is one of a group of young Roma workers from Slovakia who arrive at FrictionCo on the private agency bus from Sheffield. Gebrial first came to the UK with his partner Marian in 2015, when they were 21 years old. Gebrial resided in what he explained to me as a single-room house constructed by his father in Bystrany, Eastern Slovakia[[28]](#footnote-28). The dwelling lacked running water, and they had an unauthorised connection to the electric grid. During winter, the house was heated by burning wood that Gebrial gathered from the nearby woods.

Gebrial and Marian arrived in the UK with the help of Gebrial's' brother, who had lived in Forge Valley for four years (now living in Leeds). They stayed with friends in Forge Valley, and Gebrial found work in 'Drive n Shine', a hand car wash (HCW) on Donetsk Way. In 2016, Gebrial's Mother and Father joined them in Forge Valley, renting a home owned by the manager and owner of Drive n Shine. Soon after his parents arrived, the family started working for FrictionCo via the labour agency 'Allstar Recruitment'.

Due to Marian's on-going health problems, she could no longer continue to work at FrictionCo and the couple spent time between the UK and Slovakia, where she received medical assistance. The couple had a child in 2021. Gebrial and Marian applied to the EU settlement scheme (EUSS) in January 2021, receiving pre-settled status. Despite living and working in the UK for five years, a six-month return to Slovakia during Marian's illness means they did not reach the eligibility criteria to qualify for settled status. Gebrial and Marian do not have automatic right to welfare and healthcare under pre-settled status. To claim welfare, you must prove right to reside. Pre-settled status does not provide this automatically; rather, this can be proved by three months of continuous work if earning more than £184 a week. At the time the research was carried out, Gebrial, despite having worked in warehouses in the UK for five years, had not yet been at work continuously for three months – meaning he was not eligible for the 'right to reside' and therefore could not claim benefits.

Surviving on £384 per week in Sheffield is a challenge for Gebrial. Nevertheless, he takes pride in successfully supporting his family. Marian, formerly employed at FrictionCo, cannot work due to illness. She assumes the primary responsibilities of caring for the child and managing the household. Additionally, Marian holds pre-settled status, and the low wages she would receive from warehouse work would not adequately cover childcare expenses.

Gebrial and Marian were unable to access welfare benefits due to their unsettled immigration status, which forced them to secure a privately rented home with other extended family members. To make ends meet, they leaned on their social connections within these extended households, registered with multiple employment agencies, and relied on informal work in Forge Valley during periods of downturn in the logistics industry. Gabriel initially worked for their landlord, who also owned the hand car wash at one end of Forge Valley, before eventually finding employment at FrictionCo. As a result of the seasonal fluctuations in the logistics industry, Gebrial and Marian frequently moved between the UK and Slovakia.

Gebrial and Marian did not access welfare, which was a significant challenge affecting their mobility power. The absence of this safety net made them more vulnerable to economic hardships and limited their ability to negotiate favourable employment terms. As a result, they faced greater pressure to accept any available job opportunities, leading to lower job security and income instability.

As a result, Gebrial and Marianlived in extended households in Forge Valley and pooled resources. This household structure increased their mobility power. Extended households typically involve multiple family members pooling resources and providing mutual support. This led to greater financial stability and resilience in the face of economic challenges. Additionally, the presence of extended family members offered a broader network for job-seeking and access to informal work opportunities, further enhancing their mobility power.

In Forge Valley, families and housing exhibited flexibility as adaptive measures to structural socio-economic factors. The design of state welfare policies promoted the separation of family members. In contrast, the structure of the labour market and the cost of living encouraged the reorganising of family members into extended households. This meant that for the Reytons, the movement away from the family home was often transitory, in line with the length of employment in the warehouse. In contrast, the Roma experienced this dependency based on their particular life cycle.

For instance, Gabriel and Marian could not prove their right to remain and could not access welfare benefits. Consequently, upon the birth of their child, they relocated to an extended household with family members, preventing them from establishing an independent household in Forge Valley. The need for additional care and the desire to distribute fixed living costs (such as gas, electricity, water, and rent) among several members prompted the extended family to unite. Gebrial and Marian's exclusion from the welfare system prompted the reconnection and pooling of resources, bringing individuals together under the same roof. This led to flexible household arrangements to address the often-cyclical needs of its members. Notably, residents in Forge Valley typically live independently for brief periods before periodically reuniting with their family homes when assistance is needed. This can be due to life cycle events, such as in the case of Gebrial and Marian, related to care needs or as a response to flexible work arrangements and periodic unemployment, as observed with the Reytons.

Therefore, welfare and internal bordering policies, combined with flexible warehouse employment, have increasingly extended households and made workers rely on extended networks for reproduction. In Forge Valley, this was made possible through local housing policies. The end of selective licensing for landlords by the local authority, which regulated standards and housing conditions, led to the re-emergence of overcrowding in Forge Valley. Combined, these welfare, local housing policies and flexible employment in the warehouses created the cyclical movement of Gebrial and Marian into extended households, often overcrowded, increasing their reliance on family and kinship networks.

Gebrial and Marian, retained a twin dependence with Slovakia, moving between Forge Valley and Slovakia during seasonal downturns in warehouse work[[29]](#footnote-29). For example, Marian and Gebrial left Forge Valley during the summer months before returning to find employment in FrictionCo in the late autumn. During late spring/early summer, airport shuttle services and telephone numbers are advertised in Slovak in the windows along Forge Valley's streets.

For the Roma in Forge Valley, these extended and flexible household arrangements relied on expanded social networks (Ciupijus, et al., 2020). These dense social networks were required to engage in the informal economy and dense web of local productive exchanges. These horizontal social ties in Forge Valley allowed the Roma to survive during seasonal downturn in the warehouses. Therefore, the Roma population in Forge Valley uses its extensive social connections, which can significantly influence their mobility power. These connections serve as a resource for accessing job opportunities and information about the labour market.

Although Gebrial was proficient in English, many of the Roma in Forge Valley are not. Challenges in accessing language classes add to the precarious situation for the Roma (Payne, 2019). This challenge affected migrants across various categories of migrants, which is influenced by disparities in funding entitlements associated with their immigration status. For many of the Roma, this lack of confidence in English proficiency resulted in their concentration in the warehouse where language skills were less crucial, typically offering lower wages and less job security.

The Reyton's connections across the SCR individualised their mobility practices. Their movements were individual and fluctuated through the temporal needs of the warehouse. In comparison, Gebrial and Marian’s movements were collective and based on the welfare and care needs of which state policy had excluded them. Therefore, their mobility practices, both internationally and between warehouses, were collective and based on the reproduction of their extended household rather than as individuals. Therefore, the type of mobility control impacted the form of mobility practice (Adham & Hammer, 2022). For example, the Roma faced mobility control through the role of the state through their systematic exclusion from welfare. This, alongside the housing and labour market in Forge Valley, led to collective forms of mobility practices. In comparison, the Reyton's mobility was controlled through the employment relation and the independence of state benefits, resulting in individual mobility practices.

As a result, Gebrial and Marian relied on the pooling of resources in extended and overcrowded households in Forge Valley. Their exclusion from state welfare conditioned their dependency and reliance on FrictionCo. However, their access to informal work, mutual support in the home and circulation between Slovakia and the UK partly shielded them from the market's volatility.

These warehouse workers in Forge Valley have responded to state immigration and welfare policies and seasonal variations in the logistics industry by relying on informal exchanges, extending their households, and developing large social networks. As a result, these workers in Forge Valley circulate between formal and informal production, between households in the SCR and between Forge Valley and Slovakia. These movements perpetuate cheap, just-in-time warehouse labour for logistics capital. On a macro-economic scale, state immigration and welfare policies heighten the dependency of workers on formal employment in the warehouse. Faced with limited options, these workers are compelled to supplement their low wages in the logistics industry with informal, sometimes illegal activities and adopt highly flexible mobility practices facilitated by extended households and social connections across the SCR. Therefore, this section has shown how these worker’s experience and react to the process of uneven and racialised forms of social reproduction (Balginoi, 2021; Schling, 2022) and the potential for workers’ agency, expressed in terms of mobility power. Next, I discuss the mobility of some workers residing in Pit-Town and offer a comparison between the workers of these two micro-regions.

## 5.3 Pit-Town

FrictionCo is located in a small town on the outskirts of Sheffield. Similar to numerous former mining villages near Sheffield, Pit-town drew wage workers from Sheffield and Nottingham after the closure of its mines, particularly when the council homes of former miners were privatised and sold at discounted prices (Pattison, 2021). The local mine's closure resulted in the depletion of Pit-town's younger population and the closure of pubs, and shops, subsequently transforming it into a dormitory town for incoming commuters (Beatty et al., 2022).

At the heart of Pit-town lies a central area comprised of two parallel roads that converge at a large town square. Surrounding this square are several shops, including a café, a Polish shop, a betting shop and newsagents. The Station Hotel stands red-bricked on the main road and has been converted into an HMO. Despite the closure of the British Legion Centre, the two main roads are lined with red poppies, evidence of a resurgence over the past decade of militarism in the town.

At both the beginning and end of each road, a CCTV camera monitors residents' movements. On one side, Polish FrictionCo workers gather near the miners' wheel—a replica honouring the original structure that once stood in this location. Along the main road leading to the train station, individuals walk their dogs or visit the local post office amidst the clamour of cars and lorries speeding towards the M1. The Miners’ Workingmen's Club, a modernist building from the 1960s, continues to attract elderly ex-miners on weekends but sees limited participation from the Polish community. Apart from FrictionCo, the other two major employers in the area are situated outside of Pit-town—a supermarket distribution centre and a garden furniture distribution centre on the outskirts of the neighbouring town, along with a food-processing factory located fifteen miles from FrictionCo.

### 5.3.1 Graham, Mike and Tezza.

Graham, a 57-year-old white British man from Sheffield, works in waste disposal in FrictionCo's loading bay. After marrying Amanda, he remained in Sheffield, relying on unemployment benefits for two years. Subsequently, he secured employment at RJB Mining, where he formed a romantic relationship with Sarah, a local nurse. Subsequently, Graham moved to Pit-Town, married Sarah, and purchased a new three-bedroom house for £90,000. Graham and Sarah have one child, Theresa or 'Tezza', who works in FrictionCo with her boyfriend Mike. Tezza is 22, and Mike is 25. Graham is very proud that his daughter is in a stable relationship with a 'hard worker' like Mike. Mike is an FLT driver in FrictionCo. Mike originally got the job at FrictionCo through the jobcentre.

Graham asserts that he has devoted any free moment in the last two decades of his married life to his family. Top of Form

Primarily, he dedicated most of his weekends to DIY projects on his house and garden. Building an out-house in the garden, that Tezza uses as her own free space.

In 2012, when Graham faced redundancy at RJB Mining, the family's income experienced a significant decline. While Graham and Sarah previously shared a yearly income of £45,000, it plummeted to £21,000. Upon Graham taking up bank work in residential care, their income rebounded to £35,000. However, this was still insufficient to cover the mortgage, which was surpassing rental levels because of the negative equity of the house. In 2013, Graham decided to leave his job in care and started working at FrictionCo. Graham could now work full-time, increasing the family's dual income.

Graham and Sarah split up a few years ago and are now divorced. Since their separation, Graham has described life as "pretty awful." He is grappling with expenses his single income cannot cover, leading him to apply for Universal Credit. Consequently, Mike has moved into the house to provide additional support.

Graham no longer feels inclined to visit the miner's welfare, given his current employment at FrictionCo, as he believes he has little in common to share with his ex-mining workmates. Additionally, the Great Northern pub, a place Graham frequented, has been converted into a homeless shelter, and the Hotel has become a HMO. The profound isolation he now experiences in Pit-town primarily contributes to Graham's unhappiness. Without Sarah and her financial and emotional support, the family life that once filled his days have vanished.

On New Houghton Street, where Graham resides, heavy traffic is constant due to its connection between several significant villages, such as Pit-town, and a major A road leading to the M1. In Graham's living room, the cacophony from passing cars is so pronounced that conversations require shouting, and watching television demands high volume. The persistent traffic noise, the distance to the lone shop open after 6 pm (petrol station), and the lack of familiarity among residents on the new housing estate contribute to the challenges and collectively turn homes like Graham's into fortresses, reinforcing a heightened sense of intimacy among household members.

With the closure of the local pub, the families in Pit-town tend to seclude themselves within their homes. Graham, who used to travel to shopping centres or leisure parks in the region, now opts for online shopping, further diminishing leisure time spent outside the home. Additionally, familial breakdowns and sudden unemployment result in disruption to their households.

The closure of traditional social venues and the lack of communal spaces in Pit-Town contributes to Graham's isolation. The breakdown of familial and social networks affects his emotional well-being and limits potential job opportunities (Walkerdine, 2010). The dearth of social interaction in Pit-town negatively impacts the prospects of securing new employment (Byrne, 2002). This is because not only do personal connections enhance the likelihood of finding formal employment, but they also play a crucial role in engaging in the informal labour market, mainly reliant on the building up of local social connections. Therefore, unlike the workers’ interviewed in Forge Valley, where the workers’ responded to flexible labour through extending their reliance on social networks and building of social capital within the household, for Graham, familial breakdowns on his working-class estate means disarray and, ultimately, dissolution, largely attributable to the absence of strong social networks.

### 5.3.2 Szymon and Anna

Szymon aged 45 and Anna aged 37, are originally from North-East Poland. They live in Pit-Town and both worked in FrictionCo for seven years. Szymon recalls his first impression of Pit-Town, “When I first arrived here it was a completely dead town. You walked into the town square and all the shops were boarded up. It was worse than where I had come from. I couldn’t believe it; it was a complete ghost town. That’s what a lot of them don’t understand, we have revived this town”.

Szymon described to me the impact that Brexit has had on the town. Overhearing conversations outside a local store, he encountered negative perceptions about Polish workers taking away jobs, “one day I was overhearing two women chat outside the supermarket. They were talking about Brexit. They were saying how the polish workers had taken their jobs and ruined their town. Then the one turns to me, there was no way that they knew I was Polish, winked at me and said, of course she’s never worked a day in her life.”

After working in FrictionCo for seven years, Szymon and Anna bought a Food truck selling Pierogi which they set up at a local farmers market on Sundays and in the centre of Pit-town on Saturdays. Because of this, Szymon and Anna say there were able to move away from employment in FrictionCo. Anna trained for a PGCE and now teaches at the primary school in Pit-town. While Anna retrained and focused on the Food truck, Szymon continued to work at FrictionCo for another two years, before finding work at an independent welfare advice bureau.

Anna, reflecting on her decade-long stay in Pit-Town, tells me there’s no way she will leave the UK or even Pit-Town, although she’s increasingly concerned about her vulnerability post-Brexit. Having arrived in the UK when it was part of the EU, she initially felt a sense of security. However, the decision to leave the EU has left her in a precarious position as an immigrant without British citizenship.

Szymon's and Anna’s employment trajectory reflects a degree of adaptability and mobility. However, their prolonged presence in Pit-Town reveals the constraints imposed by the dominance of the warehouse in the local labour market. Limited employment alternatives, exacerbated by the decline of other industries, curtailed their mobility and contributed to the entrenchment of migrant workers within the warehouse sector. Today, the familial ties and establishment of roots in Pit-Town further reduce the mobility of Polish workers, particularly for women (Duda-Mikulin, 2022). As they forge connections and start families, the prospect of uprooting becomes less tenable. The impact of Brexit adds another layer of uncertainty, as Szymon and Anna navigate residency and citizenship concerns.

## 5.4 Conclusion

This chapter has illustrated the class fractioning of the racial reserve army in the SCR through the racialised and uneven processes of social reproduction and the consequential potential for agency, in terms of workers mobility differentials. Through ethnographic portraits of these workers,I explored their different mobility practices concerning the UK's national immigration and welfare policies, local labour market conditions and spatial variation within the SCR. This analysis will illustrate how the social reproduction of workers in the labour market impacts the power dynamics within warehouses. Providing a backdrop for the upcoming chapter, the central argument is that workers mobility bargaining power (Strauss & McGrath, 2017) shaped by the state and local labour market, can impact managers ability to convert labour power, and workers capacity to mobility-effort bargain. First, however, I will reiterate the main findings and provide a comparison of the two micro-regions. It is important to note that the limited number of interviews conducted may affect the generalisability of these findings, and further research would be necessary to draw broader conclusions about the experiences of all workers in these areas.

First, Forge Valley is racialised. The inhabitants of Forge Valley that were interviewed were subjected to racial discrimination when they left the perimeters of the community, reinforcing their disposability, regarding the temporal needs of the warehousing sector. For the Reytons, the workfare system, the high costs of living and the lack of affordable housing in Forge Valley, particularly following the end of selective licensing, had forced them back into the parental home and into the informal economy. As a result, through periodic use of welfare and involvement in the informal economy, they were able to utilise social and kinship networks to develop hyperflexible mobility practices.

These mobility practices took two forms. First, they were able to engage in regional industrial circulation between warehouses in the SCR. In particular, Abdi’s kinship connections allowed him to move between households and access formal warehouse employment in nearby Rotherham. Second, they engaged in mobility between formal and informal employment. This informal employment in the drug trade, and informal employment in the building sector was leveraged through the social connections made in ‘Sugar Town’ and provided the Reytons with income during downturns in the logistics industry. Therefore, the build-up of social capital in Forge Valley allowed the Reytons to lessen their dependence on SeamlessCo. However, these state mechanisms reproduced the Reytons disposability and hyper-flexibility of labour power.

Second, for EU workers with settled and pre-settled status, classed segmentation as unskilled, low-wage, and disposable warehouse workers was reproduced through the racialising organisation of the labour market in the Sheffield City Region (SCR). This results in a form of internal bordering within Forge Valley. While settled status might be expected to guarantee equal legal standing, the racialisation of Roma workers as outsiders or ‘rats’ justifies their precarious employment through work agencies and normalises Forge Valley as a socially segregated site of containment, central to the warehouse's mechanisms of value extraction. As Schling (2022) argues in the context of export factories, the labour of these workers may be valued at specific times for production, but their social presence is rendered undesirable. This same logic applies in Forge Valley, where the precarious and hyper-flexible labour power that the warehouse seeks to construct is reinforced by the marginalisation of Roma workers.

This is evidenced by Gebrial and Marian’s mobility practices. Their mobility practice took the form of international industrial circulation between Forge Valley and Slovakia, primarily moving during downturns in the logistics industry. This mobility practice also entailed their inability to achieve parity legal status with British workers (only gaining pre-settled status). In effect, Gebrial, Marian, and their family existed in a state of limbo with continuous residence in the UK as a precondition for settled status. As a result, they were forced into the informal economy (hand-car-wash) and into extended households.

Third, the example of Vytas revealed how the commodification of housing and welfare and the structure of the micro-labour market in Forge Valley significantly shaped his mobility power. As a response to the fluctuation of the logistics industry and the end of selective licensing, the households in Forge Valley are extended, and resources are pooled together. As a result, Vytas, living in a HMO utilised social connections and social capital in the home to engage in intra-sectoral mobility bargaining (Ceccagno & Sacchetto, 2019). This represents a collaborative and strategic effort by workers within a specific industry to collectively negotiate and make decisions that enhance their mobility, career prospects, and overall position within the logistics industry.

Fourth, the asylum process and dispersal policy, integral components of the refugee experience, profoundly impact refugees' mobility power and their ability to navigate their new social and economic landscapes in Forge Valley. The protracted nature of the asylum process led to prolonged uncertainty for Ali, curtailing his ability to plan and severely restricting his geographical mobility—the dispersal policy, mandating resettlement in specific locations, further compounds these challenges.

The deliberate placement of refugees such as Ali in areas with limited economic opportunities curtailed his access to diverse employment options and undermined his mobility bargaining power within the job market. Consequently, refugees such as Ali may find themselves compelled to accept suboptimal working conditions, fostering a sense of economic vulnerability. Additionally, the dispersal policy disrupts social connections, scattering individuals across different locales and inhibiting the formation of cohesive refugee communities. This isolation deepens the challenges of integration and diminishes the collective capacity to advocate for improved working conditions. In this way, the asylum process and dispersal policy contribute to a confluence of factors that subjectively mould refugees into a workforce more accepting of precarious employment conditions while limiting their social capital and impeding their mobility within the SCR.

Overall, Forge Valley illustrates distinctive domestic arrangements emerging in response to state immigration policies, welfare policies, labour market deregulation, housing market deregulation, and seasonal fluctuations in the logistics industry. While formal employment in the warehouse secures capitalist profits, it does not guarantee the reproduction of workers. Consequently, labour market deregulation facilitates the casual employment of these workers in the local informal economy. This relaxation of labour market regulations has fostered an environment conducive to informal employment, with small local business owners (Hand-car-wash, drug dealers and landlords) capitalising on this scenario. The workers, in turn, may find themselves in less secure, informal employment arrangements due to the increased flexibility offered by deregulation. At the same time, the local petty capitalists benefit from a more adaptable and less regulated labour market. These warehouses rely on networks of small informal production activities that allow for the reproduction of its reserve army in Forge Valley. The informal transactions and dense social connections in Forge Valley (while formally separate from the formal labour market (Hart, 1973), allow for British and Albanian local entrepreneurs and petty capitalists to command the labour of the Roma workers like Gebrial and Marian and the informal labour of the Reytons through informal relationships cultivated in places like Sugar Town. The informal market allows the Roma to survive during downturns in logistics and increases the Reyton's mobility between labour agencies and warehouses throughout the SCR.

Forge Valley is thus characterised as a ‘circulation zone’. This means the interviewed workers in Forge Valley engage in a number of mobility practices to find work and improve their working conditions. This includes regional mobility, international mobility and formal-informal employment mobility. I have argued that the conditions of the local labour market of the SCR, shaped by immigration, welfare and housing policies have created these distinct mobility practices among warehouse workers in response to these socio-economic factors. The nature of employment opportunities, the youthful demographic, welfare and housing policies, all contribute to the tendency of workers utilising their social connections in the community and in the household to engage in mobility practices. Similarly, the people of Forge Valley rely on highly flexible strategies to cope with logistics employment's seasonal and temporal fluctuation. This includes the reliance on the informal economy, the movement within the SCR in search of employment (Reytons) and the movement between the UK and Slovakia (Gebrial and Marian). From the employers' viewpoint, this industrial circulation serves as a valuable mechanism, as it maintains a circulating workforce while simultaneously reproducing a reserve army that remains relatively close, fulfilling a crucial need for an industry characterised by seasonal fluctuations (Mezzadri, 2020).

In comparison, Graham, Mike, and Tezza, as well as Szymon and Anna, who work and reside in Pit-town, lack extensive social networks and live in nuclear families on ghostly housing estates in isolated ex-industrial villages. Unlike workers in more connected areas, they cannot depend on the informal economy, broad social connections, or multiple logistics employers for their livelihoods. Instead, they are reliant on a single firm and one employment agency, which heightens their dependency on a combination of wage labour in logistics and in-work benefits within a captive local labour market.

These workers have low mobility bargaining power. For example, Graham's loss of social capital came at the expense, initially, of a gain of economic capital. Graham and his wife combined their dual income to purchase a new house on a recently developed estate situated on former mining land, experiencing rapid growth in the housing market. Initially, the residents experienced economic independence in Pit-town, enjoying a more affluent lifestyle with access to cars, education, and conspicuous consumption, in contrast to those in Forge Valley. However, they do not have the social safety net utilised by the Reytons in Forge Valley, so their capacity to withdraw from the labour market is significantly restricted. Consequently, their survival relies entirely on selling their labour power to capitalists, and the lack of social connections makes them particularly vulnerable to disruptions caused by fluctuations in the warehouse and familial breakdowns.

Second, for Szymon and Anna, who both have settled status, have now lived in Pit-Town for over ten years, have started a family and feel firmly rooted to their life in Pit-Town. Therefore, the changes to immigration policy, and the end of freedom of movement for Polish workers has led to the rooting (Rogaly, 2020) of workers, particularly those with familial responsibilities. Here I am underscoring the length of time migrants have spent in Pit-Town as a potential contributory factor in their behaviour within the workplace (Bauder, 2005).

Overall, in Pit-Town the ending of freedom of movement, the length of time spent in the UK and familial responsibilities have combined to discourage the mobility of workers. For example, in residential suburbs like Pit-Town, housing privatisation and the dependence on welfare for English and Polish workers incentivised wage earners to purchase council homes. This encouraged the formation of nuclear households in ex-industrial villages and estates on Sheffield's periphery, like Pit-Town. Nevertheless, the isolation of the workers in Pit-Town, reduces their social connections and fragments their families because of a reliance on the warehouse, subject to seasonal fluctuations. As a result, the workers in Pit-Town do not engage in mobility practices compounded by the lack of formal employment opportunities in the town. As a result, Pit-Town can be considered a ‘static zone’ resulting in workers heightened dependency on FrictionCo and immobility within Pit-Town.

While the provision of housing and welfare in the UK has reduced these workers' overall mobility power, this had contradictory impacts within the Sheffield City Region. As a response to local conditions, including the segmentation of migrant labour in the labour market in the SCR, this has established the appropriate structural conditions for aggregating human and economic resources in Forge Valley, increasing its members intra-regional and international mobility (Ceccagno & Sacchetto, 2019; Piro, 2021). UK immigration policies, coupled with the commodification of housing and welfare policies and the historical structure of the local labour market, these workers are forced to extend families, re-group in overcrowded homes, increase social connections in the neighbourhood to allow them to survive during seasonal and temporal fluctuations in logistics by pooling together resources. Therefore, the living conditions in the SCR become crucial not only in maintaining, managing, and controlling a workforce but also can also contribute to developing forms of workers' mobility bargaining power. Furthermore, living together in HMOs can facilitate solidarity among workers, as living together translates into struggling together (Piro, 2021).

This chapter has contributed two key insights to the development of a labour regime framework. First, following Alimahomed-Wilson (2019) and Schling (2022), it has focused on the uneven social reproduction of labour, by centring on the reproduction of differentiated (racialised) labour. Drawing on feminist contributions, the analysis emphasizes how household structures play a crucial role in shaping workers’ mobility and dependence. This perspective underscores how the labour regime functions through the household, which can either enhance or restrict workers' mobility (Baglioni, 2021, Mezzadri, 2020). Second, by conceptualising labour regimes as nested scales (Smith et al., 2018), the chapter reveals how racialisation operates across different levels of analysis. For instance, the temporal demands of just-in-time logistics in SCR warehouses intersect with varied immigration statuses shaped by the UK’s border regime, alongside local labour market conditions, such as household structure, social networks, and informal economies. This nested approach illustrates how racialising dynamics within labour regimes are shaped both by structural forces and by the micro-level social reproduction processes in Forge Valley and Pit-town.

The next section will analyse the labour process. It shows how managers attempt to convert the capacity to work into actual work. Therefore, the focus is on labour as a commodity which recognises its indeterminacy. The purpose is to recognise the state’s disciplinary mechanisms in both workers capacity to act (creating surplus value) and managers attempts to put that labour into motion.

**Forge Valley**

Photo 6: Forge Valley: Warehouse under Construction.

Photo 4: Forge Valley: Steelworks.

Photo 3: Forge Valley: ‘Donetsk Way’.

Photo 2: Forge Valley: Canal.

Photo 1: Forge Valley: Police on Patrol.

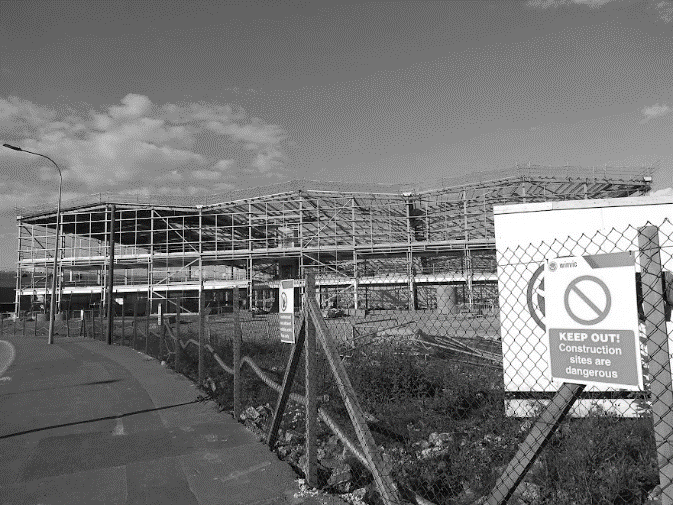
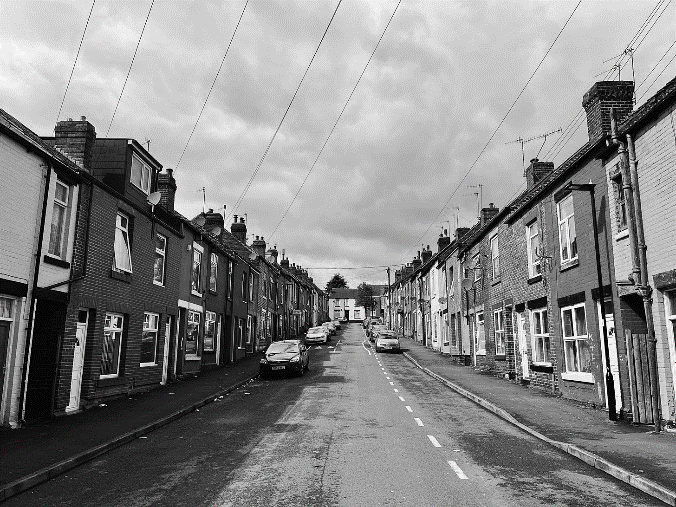


Photo 5: Forge Valley: Boarded-up Housing.

# CHAPTER 6: FRICTIONCO

**MAIN INFORMANTS**

SORTATION DEPARTMENT; SORTER TWO

**Jo**: Belt Sorter [Polish] **Marcin**: Supervisor [Polish]

**Elena**: Push-Tray Sorter [Roma] **Tomasz**: Agency Official [Polish]

LOADING DEPARTMENT; LOADING BAY C

*The Loading Gang (The Sheffielders)*:

**Ali**: Loading [Black Eritrean] **Jaco:** Supervisor [White South-African]

**Gebrial:** Loading[Roma] **Jan**: Team Leader [White Polish]

**Graham**: Waste Management [White British]

**Filip**: Waste Management [White Polish]

**Mike**: FLT Driver [White British]

**Tommy**: Trainer [White British]

## 6.1 Introduction

Having taken a necessary detour to understand the social reproduction of warehouse workers in Forge Valley and Pit-Town, and outlined the role of the state, and the labour market in the racial fractioning of workers variable mobility practices, I now turn attention to the first firm; FrictionCo, located in Pit-Town. Here, we will pass the high perimeter fence and the security checkpoint into the hidden abode of production, where commodities are loaded, unloaded, unpacked, and repacked.

This chapter will focus on the social organisation of the labour process in FrictionCo. It explores how management uses the conditions in the local labour market to organise production. The state’s disciplining of labour, explored in the previous chapter affects workers’ mobility power, labour power and bargaining position. This will be highlighted in the social and occupational structure of FrictionCo, the allocation of training, the racial construction of power, the racial division of labour and the informal segregation of facilities. The chapter analyses these internal dynamics of the workplace and traces processes of change brought about by these conditions outside the immediate point of production. The result is the production of difference in the labour process, linked to workers' racialised and differential mobility power.

Second, the chapter will outline how this racial fractioning at the point of production interacts with managers' attempts to convert the potential to work into actual work. That is, how managers attempt to intensify the work process. I will indicate how intensification of work disproportionately impacted racialised migrant, refugee and female migrant workers. The result is a more significant invasion of porosity in the working day, reduction of workers' indeterminacy and intensification of work for male refugee and Roma workers and female Polish and Roma workers. Intensification will be analysed regarding the combination of temporal flexibility linked to managers attempts to achieve greater coordination between labour supply and production requirements (Beynon, 1984; Chun, 2001; Gottfried, 1992; Heyes, 1997; Wood, 2020) and performance management used to extract more significant levels of effort (Newsome et al., 2013; Benvegnu, 2018). Here, I will highlight the role of the recruitment agency. In this way, an analysis of the 'triangular relationship' (Gottfried, 1992; Vosko; 2000), meaning the relationship between management, recruitment agency and labour, can reveal how the close monitoring of performance and temporal flexibility in FrictionCo is directly linked to the agency's role in assigning shifts, payments and wage deductions. I call this the 'performance-scheduling' nexus.

Third, in recognising the dual character of the labour process, the chapter will outline how workers respond to these mechanisms. Intensification in the labour process was not seamless but open to friction. Managerial attempts at extracting greater levels of workers' effort was always open to conflict. Therefore, the chapter reveals how different class fractions responded to intensification in the workplace through mobility-effort bargaining. This includes workers' subjectivity. I argue contra Burawoy (1979) that the way workers internalise and respond to the intensification of labour is not only predicated on the technical organisation of labour in the warehouse but also their relative bargaining power mediated by forms of uneven social reproduction.

Therefore, the chapter analyses how management and agency officials intensify the labour process, extract more significant levels of effort and invade the porosity of the workday. Second, it shows how race is produced at the point of production and how managers and agency officials use this to create competition and intensify labour in the warehouse (Roediger & Esch, 2014)[[30]](#footnote-30). The chapter also reveals how these racial categories are retranslated in daily work relationships and worker interactions. Finally, it aims to show how workers internalise and respond on the shop floor to workplace intensification through mobility-effort bargaining.

The chapter is split into three sections, which follow my narrative account of working in FrictionCo. First, I outline the workplace's main physical features and introduce the racial and gender division of labour across departments. Second, I take the reader into the loading department, analyse the racial fractioning within the department, the managerial mechanisms used to intensify the work process, and how workers responded. Third, I introduce the second department, 'sortation'. I analyse the racial and gendered division within the department, introduce managerial attempts to intensify work and reduce 'unproductive' working time and analyse the sortation workers' ‘game-playing'.

The approach examines how the structural and social position of racial class fractions in the labour market are situated within the process of managerial mechanisms used to convert the potential to work into actual work. These strategies to intensify labour and the wage-effort bargain it produces are analysed to reveal how the varied patterns of accommodation can be related to the particular social context (Cunnison, 1966). That is, how the warehouse workers' position in the UK and the local labour market plays out within these dynamics on the shop floor and how the confluence of these factors forecloses and creates opportunities for workers to respond, at times unleashing contradictory pressures which undermine manager-agency attempts to control labour and intensify production.

## 6.2 The Formal Organisation of Labour

### 6.2.1 The Shop Floor

FrictionCo is surrounded by a chain-linked fence topped with barbed wire. High-vis vests are tied to the fence, ripped, and lie loosely against the steel wiring. Video cameras atop the enclosure follow our movements as we enter the gates individually. A high-pitched buzz breaks the silence as we access the electronic turnstile with our individual key cards. Entering the damp portable cabin-cum-breakroom – a sign on the door, written in English and Polish – "We reserve the right to conduct searches" greets us.

I was sent to work in the loading bays on my first day. Only after spending some time in the warehouse did I begin to discern the racial and gendered division between the Loading and Sortation departments and their respective workers. Initially, the seemingly chaotic and incomprehensible activities on the loading bays contrasted with the sortation department's ordered, routine, and mundane tasks. Adapting to the noise, temperature, dirt and rats on the shop floor took several weeks. Consequently, I will commence by detailing the shopfloor, and throughout this chapter, I will explore the significance of this division and its impact on the warehouse's operations.

The shopfloor has two primary entrances (Figure 8), one at the front of the warehouse, next to the shopping centre complex, and one to the rear, accessed via a bridge over the A road between the derelict shipping containers. The front entrance provides access to the offices. It is exclusively utilised by the White British managers, White British and Polish supervisors, and White British office workers, whereas the other leads into the mezzanine and is used by the agency workers.

As the agency workers file into the warehouse, they each run to the nearest check-in point and use the fingerprint identification system to check-in. From here, the Polish women sortation workers drop off their lunch in their designated lockers before crossing the mezzanine hall, a wide-open space that acts as the heart of the warehouse's circulation system. The male Roma and Refugee loading bay workers are directed to a Polish agency worker, who checks them in again individually before descending into the loading bays below.

The workers in the sortation and loading departments experience distinct temperature and noises on the shop floor. The noises generated by the cross belt and twin push tray sorter in the sortation rooms are consistent and loud, yet rhythmic. In contrast, the loading bay produces irregular and sharp bursts of noise, which are reflected and amplified in the expansive space. Despite their potential for suddenness, the first type of noises is deemed reliable and familiar due to their regularity and tone. Conversely, the noises from the loading bay, characterised by distressing high-pitched tones and unpredictable patterns, remain unsettling.

Regarding workers' health, the former noise may lead to deafness, while the latter can contribute to stress and elevated blood pressure (Tung, 2023). A curiosity was that the loaders often wore earplugs, whereas this was an uncommon practice in sortation, where workers relied more on verbal exchange as opposed to body movements to communicate. As will be discussed later, this perceived lack of need for health and safety regulation in sortation, as opposed to loading, further emphasised the dividing lines between the departments and the workforce as a whole.

Sounds and temperatures traverse the shopfloor, establishing connections between workers and their respective tasks while simultaneously giving rise to division among departments. This generates areas marked by contrasts, conflicts, and negotiations. Illumination across the shopfloor is unevenly dispersed, with the loading bays in a dimly lit environment punctuated by feeble lights on the low ceilings above each loading bay. The sunlight from an open loading bay penetrates this darkness at certain times. By contrast, the sortation department has no windows. It is filled with bright artificial light from high ceilings.

In the loading bays, the absence of adequate lighting renders dirt and dust seemingly intrinsic, blending seamlessly into the environment. Conversely, in the sortation department, artificial light reveals dust as distinct particles scattered around the conveyor belt. This divergence in visibility prompts sortation workers to be more attentive to dust while loading workers prioritise concerns related to temperature. The contrasting attitudes toward air circulation reflect varying levels of environmental volatility and divergent perceptions of cleanliness. Without natural light and fresh air from an open window, sortation workers must actively create air movement[[31]](#footnote-31).

In contrast, loading workers, whose focus revolves around the loading bay's temperature, seek to minimise it during winter and enhance it during the summer. The sortation workers remove clothing before their shift, with COVID-19 masks enforced by team leaders and agency officials. During winter, the loaders put on as much clothing as they can, with hats, gloves and hoodies, according to the climactic conditions, yet masks are not strictly enforced, often dangling from a worker’s ear, perched under their nose, or hanging from their back pocket.

Perceived through the senses, the technical system undergoes a sensory transformation, extending and melding its boundaries into undulating waves of light, warm expanses featuring lofty ceilings and industrial fans. This coexists with the cavernous underbelly of the loading bay, characterised by dust, grime, and biting air. Workers situated at various points in the production process experience and interpret sounds, lights, and temperatures in distinct ways (Burawoy, 1979). This technical segregation between departments is inseparable from a racial and gendered division within the workforce.

### 6.2.2 The Workforce

Who are the logistics operatives, team leaders, and supervisors who labour in FrictionCo? Who works in the loading department, and who works in the sortation department? Let me briefly introduce the workforce involved in the sorting, processing and delivery of goods from the warehouse.

The warehouse workers of the loading bays have different migratory, economic backgrounds and live in different locations within the SCR compared with the workers of the sortation department. The workers of the loading bay are all male, predominantly Roma, from Slovakia and Refugees from Eritrea and Somalia. Their migration status in the UK is predominantly refugee and pre-settled (temporary residence). Many have recently arrived as migrants to the UK within the last five years. They live in the nearby cities of Sheffield (Forge Valley) and Nottingham and commute to FrictionCo via the private agency bus. The women who arrive on the agency bus are Roma, who live in Forge Valley and work the push tray sorters in the sortation department; the male workers labour in loading gangs on the loading bay. All of them are employed by the labour agency (RecruitNow) on temporary contracts. None are in the Trade Union. I will refer to the workers I worked alongside with in the loading bays and commuted to and from Forge Valley as "The Sheffielders." This group includes male workers residing in Forge Valley who work in the loading bay, representing a diverse mix of ethnicities and nationalities, including Eritrean and Slovakian backgrounds.

The Sortation department workers are predominantly White Polish women. They live in the town where FrictionCo is based (Pit-Town), many having moved there up to fifteen years previous. The recruitment agency employs many, and few have permanent contracts despite often working at FrictionCo for over six years. Most women work in the sortation department or jobs such as cleaning or catering. The male Polish workers, work as team leaders and supervisors. Most Polish women in sortation have settled status, meaning they automatically have the right to reside and entitlement to welfare.

The third group of workers are White British workers. They are drawn from the ex-mining communities surrounding FrictionCo, including Pit-Town. These workers are more likely to be on permanent contracts and work as Forklift drivers (from here; FLT), supervisors, trainers and engineers. They also almost exclusively make up the white-collar data analysts located at the same site as the warehouse. The data analysts are often hired through a specialised programme, exclusively for recent graduates. Accommodation is provided in Pit-Town for these analysts. The White British workers on the shopfloor have a family occupational history of coal mining, residential stability, and kinship networks within the warehouse.

Therefore, the technical division between departments also represented a racial and gendered division. The following section outlines the production process and how the two departments interact. Second, the formal organisation of labour is outlined, revealing how the wage structure and access to training create this racial and gendered division between these two departments.

### 6.2.3 The Production Process

FrictionCo acts as the centralised distribution centre for coordinating the flow of goods from its five subsidiary chains. FrictionCo primarily serves to calibrate production and consumption patterns through various operations. The fundamental categories of these warehouse activities encompass:

1. Receiving: Involves unloading goods and preparing them for storage, which may also encompass processing returns.

2. Put-away: Encompasses the movement of goods to their designated location within the warehouse.

3. Storage: Involves holding goods until the customer requires them.

4. Picking: Encompasses the selection and assembly of orders per item, case, or pallet. This may also include final assembly, labelling, or packaging.

5. Shipping: Involves preparing orders for shipment and loading goods.

The production process is split between the Sortation (Figure 9) and Loading departments (Figure 10). Here, I describe the production process to deliver individual consumer purchases.

(1) When a full lorry is docked in the loading bay, Jan, the Polish Loading Bay team leader, directs the loading gang to receive and unload the stillages and cages. (2) The Sheffielders, making up the workers of the loading gang, remove the cages and stillages from the docking section, scan the cage/stillage and place them into lines of six, according to the correct specification tag. Empty cages are removed and taken to the voice-picking section, and rubbish is taken to Graham (British) and Filip (Polish) in waste management. (3) Mike (British), the FLT driver, will pick up the cages and stillages and take them to web processing, where each cage/stillage will be scanned and processed. From here, Mike will deliver the items to put-away, where they will be stored on shelves by a team of British and Polish male VNA drivers (very narrow aisle pallet racking). (4) The voice-directed pickers (male and female Polish and British workers) will take an empty cage/stillage and begin their picking route through the warehouse. Once the picking route has ended, the whole cage/stillage is taken to an industrial lift between the sortation and loading departments. (5) On reaching level 1 of the warehouse, the full cages/stillages are lined up next to the sortation belt. Elena and the Roma women on the push tray sorters will scan and sort the items onto trays before placing them onto the conveyor belt. (6) Jo and the Polish women on the belt sorter wait for products to be delivered down one of their shoots, to be bagged and processed before being thrown onto the lower conveyor belt. At the end of the lower conveyor belt, the delivery sorters (male, British and Polish) divide the processed items into large cardboard boxes based on the type of delivery, e.g., next-day delivery and by courier service. (7) Once complete, these boxes are taken back down the lift onto the lower floor of the loading bay. (8) Back on the Loading Bay, the loading gang, made up of the Sheffielders, scan and place the whole cage/stillage onto outbound lorries.

Several aspects of the production process warrant attention. The loading bay worker’s rhythm depends on Jan and the other team leaders directing the loading gangs to the docked lorries in the loading bay. The rhythm of the sortation workers is determined by the number of items on the conveyor belt and, therefore, by the pace of other departments and the rhythm of the market. Moreover, the ability to restock FrictionCo's stores 'just-in-time' is an essential competitive feature of FrictionCo. Nevertheless, in the loading department, this means production is often unpredictable. In the loading bays, labour cannot be reduced to individual visible and measurable performance levels like in sortation. Instead, it relies on the performance of collective gangs of workers to fluctuate their effort depending on the presence of lorries docked in the loading bays.

In essence, FrictionCo has developed an `assembly line' that weaves its way through the physical contours of the building. Thus, 'idle capital' has been largely removed from this process. Several engineering teams and 'flow-room' technicians are allied to the primary production lines of the loading and sortation departments to support the flow of material goods. The assembly line, thus, aims to speed up throughput and reduce lead times. Thus, an effective, highly flexible, but essentially de-skilled work process across the shopfloor was essential to ensure reduced lead times. However, the way this manifested was subject to a racial and gendered division of labour on the shop floor.

Before outlining how this process manifested in both departments, I will outline how management appeared to construct this racial and gendered division through its formal authority, wage structure, and training, based on workers’ accounts and observations. While my ethnographic research was focused on the experiences of workers, the evidence suggests these control mechanisms were shaped by local labour market conditions. However, it is important to acknowledge that without direct interviews with management, my understanding of their motivations and strategies remains interpretive, relying on the observable effects of their actions as experienced by workers.

### 6.2.4 Formal Authority

Each department has a supervisor (Polish or British male). Beneath the supervisor are team leaders (Male and Female Polish). There are three team leaders for each shift in loading bay C (Morning/Day/Night) and two team leaders for each shift in sortation 2/3 (with each team leader dedicated to either belt sorter two or three). The team leaders report to the department supervisor directly. The team leaders in the sortation department report production and disciplinary matters to the agency officials (Polish, male and female), who are highly visible on the shopfloor of the sortation department but not the loading department. In the loading department, the team leaders and their supervisors control disciplinary and production matters, with no agency officials present in the loading bays. A social distancing team patrols the canteens and reports to the health and safety supervisor, as does the fire safety team. The training team (White-British) reports to the agency officials to coordinate the training programme and induction of new employees (see figure 11).

Three themes related to FrictionCo's formal structure will now be emphasised. First, the Polish team leaders within the loading departments wield a more extensive discretionary authority, sharing comparable formal authority with the agency officials in the sortation departments. Second, from a technical standpoint, the operations of the sortation and loading departments follow a sequential and interdependent structure. Production initiated at the 'end' of the process can commence only after completing those undertaken at the 'start.' The pace of these activities is contingent on the labour force within each department; for example, if there is a hold-up or blockage in the loading bay, the belt sorter in the sortation department will have nothing to sort, similarly if there is a breakdown of the belt sorter, the outbound loading department will have nothing to load. Third, the racial division of labour exists both between departments and within departments. It exists between the loading and sortation departments, with the Sheffielders working in loading gangs, whereas Polish women work in the sortation department. Within the sortation department, workers are divided between Polish women on the belt sorters and Roma women on the push-tray sorters.

### 6.2.5 Recruitment

Recruitment was outsourced to several agencies, and certain patterns emerged in the hiring process. Male workers, often from nearby cities, were commonly placed in the loading bay and sortation department, while Polish women from Pit-Town tended to be recruited for roles with more opportunities for overtime. Workers in both groups were not expected to have prior experience or qualifications.

The different recruitment agencies fragmented the workforce into Roma and Refugee male workers from Forge Valley in the loading bay and Female Polish workers from Pit-Town in the sortation departments. Many Polish workers were recruited locally, where they lived, through informal kinship networks. This fragmentation between agencies and departments was also reflected in the wage structure.

### 6.2.6 Wage Structure

"But what does it pay?" I ask the agency official inside the portable recruitment cabin. "Just sign here", she replies, thrusting an electronic tablet in my face. "It's the same for everyone, very democratic, £9.50 an hour."

At first glance, the 'democratic' nature of the wage structure in FrictionCo reflects no apparent economic divide between the workers of the sortation and the loading departments. Additionally, if we consider the bonus system, the company's wage structure does not change. The wage structure differentiates based on time of shift and age, with higher wages for VNA and FLT drivers. Recent increases to the wage and the bonus system had been made shortly before I started work. Additionally, an extra hour's pay was added to the Sheffielders' wage for travel time shortly after I had finished working at FrictionCo.

The agency workers in the sortation and loading bays were paid £9.50 an hour. This amounted to a net wage of £15,505 a year, £1,299 a month, or £300 a week if working full-time (37.5 hours a week). Nevertheless, on closer examination of the bonus system, the wage structure of FrictionCo differs between departments. In the sortation and loading departments, the workers are offered bonuses connected to their being at work, clocking in on time and correctly clocking out and back in for break times; this amounts to £160 for December and £100 for January, unrelated to age or shift pattern[[32]](#footnote-32). This increases the net pay of a full-time day worker in the sortation and loading department from £1,299 a month to £1,459 in December and £1,399 in January, an increase of almost 11% during peak times.

FrictionCo is therefore divided along the dimension of loading and sortation in terms of real income. The Sheffielders’ struggled to make the clock in time due to the bus's lateness and the agency officials' interference. Moreover, as I will show later, the discretionary power of the team leaders in the loading bays and their direct reporting of disciplinary issues to agency officials allowed the agency to circumvent the Sheffielders' wage bonus. Besides, the fact that some sortation workers earned 11% more than the Sheffielders in the Loading Bays widened the conflict between the two departments. The Sheffielders also spent up to three hours a day commuting from Forge Valley.

In contrast, the sortation workers lived near the warehouse, often fifteen minutes walking distance away. This also meant the sortation workers were available for overtime work, which they could negotiate with the agency. This was evidenced by the number of green vests (morning shift) among the sortation workers during the afternoon shift (blue vests). Overtime was not available to the workers in the loading department.

Nevertheless, regarding real income, FrictionCo fragments the workforce between the sortation and loading departments. The fact that some of the Polish women in the sortation department earned 11% more than the Refugee and Roma workers in the Loading department led to the division between two departments, which was retranslated as a racial and gender division.

**Table 7: FrictionCo Wage Structure and Bonus**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Shift: Monday – Friday** | | **Shift: Weekend** | |  |
| 23 and Under | Over 23 | 23 and Under | Over 23 | VNA Driver |
| Day | £9.25 | £9.50 | £9.40 | £10 | £11 |
| Evening | £9.50 | £10.25 | £9.90 | £10.50 | £11.50 |
| Night | £10 | £11 | £10.40 | £11 | £12 |
| **Bonus** |  | |  |  |  |
| January | £100 | |  |  |  |
| February | £160 | |  |  |  |

### 6.2.7 Training

FrictionCo's main specialist training is the 'manual handling training'. This applies to everyone and is conducted for each new employee. Non-specialist training is then conducted within each department. This made it harder for agency workers to be moved between departments, reducing the firm's functional flexibility. For instance, the lack of training on the loading bays reduced some of the workers’ mobility in the warehouse. Without official training in the loading bays, they could not be moved to another department.

Moreover, training further consolidated managers authority over the workers by allowing them to choose which worker would undergo the training. In practice, workers were often eager to receive training, which enhanced their autonomy on the shop floor. However, in actuality, very little formal training was taking place, particularly in the loading bays, and when it did, it became the subject of controversy. Workers in the loading bays linked the lack of training opportunities directly to the unwillingness to address workplace discrimination based on race.

It was late afternoon before Jamie, one of the White English trainers, reiterated the fundamental health and safety principles. Taking me down from the mezzanine into an empty space between sortation and loading, Jamie, obviously bored and frustrated that he had to conduct another training with just one new employee, went through the manual handling training with me. Here, I was quickly shown how to lift a heavy box, use a Stanley blade, and assemble and disassemble cages and stillages.

Jamie then took me down to the loading bay, explaining that I would start working. "The loading bay acts as an apprenticeship here; if you can prove you can work here, you'll be able to work anywhere in the warehouse". When I later asked him who I needed to talk to to change departments, he shrugged, "Maybe the agency, maybe a team leader, but don't worry, you won't be here that long". In fact, I wasn't and was later moved to sortation, but the Sheffielders in the loading bay who had long served their 'apprenticeship' were not so lucky. Many had been working there for months.

It was a whole week later until Darren, another White English trainer from a nearby mining town and son of a coal miner, realised that I had not received the whole training and health and safety induction. "Everyone has the right to a guided tour; actually, you can have three of these; you just need to request it. Just don't get lost here; too many get lost in the system. [FrictionCo] would prefer it if every new employee turned up already trained".

Asking him why he thought this, Darren replied, "Well, it's a cost-cutting thing, to be honest. Not many people stay here for very long, especially in loading, so they hope they can save a bit of money by not training everyone; it makes my life more difficult, though, especially with the type of workers we get…you don't mind working with foreigners, do you?"

"No, I replied, why do you ask?"

Darren continued, "No reason, just we don't get that many English workers anymore, not that I have to train anyway. Makes my job harder, with the language and stuff, as long as the gypsies don't nick anything, they're alright by me." Before starting the tour, Darren got hold of a few more new Roma employees who hadn't had a tour of the warehouse, "these are going to be trouble, I can tell," he whispered to me before we set off.

At the end of the tour, Darren decided he would “tick some training off the list for me”. This involved Darren teaching me how to operate the loading bay panel doors and the electronic ramp. After talking me through the process, he let me have go. Completing the process to a sufficient standard, Darren asked me to repeat the process several times. After the third time, I told Darren I thought I had a handle on the operation. "Sorry", he said, "I know it's a pretty standard task, but you wouldn't believe how many times I've had to run through it with some of these monkeys".

At the end of the training, Darren told me he would be around later in the week if I needed another warehouse tour or if I wanted to complete more training. "Better to pick up bits of training here and there; you're a warehouse operative; this means you have to know the different processes in the warehouse so we can send you where you're needed".

Speaking with Gabriel, one of the Roma workers, who had been on the tour with Darren, I asked him if he had had any training. He told me that he knew how to operate the doors because he had been working here for two weeks but also worked here a couple of years ago. I asked him whether Darren or another trainer had shown him. He said, "No, I just picked it up following the others".

The training is largely informal and entrusted to the White British Trainers. No worker has a fixed job officially assigned to them; to access certain jobs in FrictionCo, employees will implement different strategies predicated on building social capital in the warehouse to avoid 'getting lost' as Darren put it.

In practice, the Sheffielders had acquired crucial skills vital to production. However, these were not officially acknowledged within the grading and wage system or the racial power structure on the shop floor. Frequently, these "tacit" skills were developed by the Sheffielders as they undertook tasks that employers were hesitant to recognise formally. Thus, the Sheffielders often had informal training and the knowledge needed to work in various departments of the warehouse, which they often informally trained new white employees, like myself, who then were moved to better, less physically demanding roles in sortation or even to those who later became team leaders and supervisors. This led to resentful remarks from the Sheffielders, expressing frustration with comments like, "We know how to do it better than them (new white recruits), but they'll be taken to sortation, and then pretty soon, they'll be team leaders." The racial distribution of power permitted White British and White Eastern Europeans to claim skills they didn't possess while denying the Sheffielders the acknowledgement of their existing skills. Simultaneously, it ensured that these skills were effectively utilised. Consequently, Roma and Refugee workers found themselves confined to the loading bay, unable to receive official training essential for other roles within the warehouse.

From the point of view of labour, the formal organisation of production at FrictionCo appeared to segment the workforce between the Refugee and Roma workers of Forge Valley in the loading bays and the female Polish workers of Pit-Town in the Sortation departments. This segmentation seemed to be facilitated through formal authority, recruitment practices, wage structures, and official training. Workers' experiences suggested that the prejudices of British trainers, invoking racialised imagery, may have contributed to the devaluation of the Sheffielders and blocked their access to the internal labour market (See Webster, 1985).

The following section provides a narrative account of my experiences working in loading bay C. I will offer an overview of the loading bay production process, explore the observed racial divide within the department, and discuss management’s apparent efforts to intensify production and reduce worker indeterminacy, as perceived through the workers' experiences. I will also examine how the workers responded to these pressures.

## 6.3 Loading Bay C: The Team Leaders’ Empire

I spent my first two weeks working my 'apprenticeship' in the loading bays – an immense space on the ground floor of the warehouse – learning how to deal with its dangers, productive rhythms, sounds, smells and changing qualities of light. Learning the correct way to load and unload, learning how to avoid the sharp metals of broken stillages, how to pass cages to a workmate without the team leader seeing, how to 'run' a stillage at the correct pace over a ramp to keep it from toppling over and how to avoid a scolding from Filip, a one-eyed Polish man and self-appointed 'manager' of waste management. I learned when to work, when I could take a rest, and how to steal back time by going 'walk-about' with Gebrial and the Roma workers.

Labour in the loading department cannot be linked to measurable performance targets. As we will see, labours indeterminacy in the loading bays far exceeds that of the sortation department. The rhythm of production on the loading bays is discontinuous, giving workers natural breaks between loading and unloading of each lorry. Therefore, managers are unable to standardise effort[[33]](#footnote-33). Moreover, the nature of loading and unloading itself, which relies on the teamwork of each loading gang, means effort cannot be individualised. The loading bays' physical layout also affords a spatial setting, offering employees opportunities for some degree of discretion, autonomy and mild appropriation of space to renegotiate the frontier of control (Goodrich, 1975). Therefore, I found little understanding of what would be regarded as an 'acceptable' level of effort on the loading bays. The spatial design of the warehouse, which rested upon the vast underbelly of the loading bays, harboured many places to hide from supervisors and team leaders. With no official measurement of accountability, once in the loading bay, this led to variable degrees of discretion over effort levels between workers, especially between the Roma and Refugee workers. Therefore, the managers of FrictionCo attempted to close down this production indeterminacy on the loading bays without resorting to the quantifiable measuring of performance targets, which could not be implemented because of the nature of the hand-operated, team-centred and fluctuating rhythm of the production process.

In response to the production indeterminacy on the loading bays, FrictionCo appears to rely on several control strategies aimed at reducing workers' indeterminacy, managing shift flexibility, and intensifying work (Nichols, 1980). This section moves from the experience of the labour process to discuss the observable methods used to maximise employee performance and efficiency. While direct interviews with managers or agency officials were not conducted, the section analyses the form of control in the loading bays based on workers' experiences and observed practices. It explores how management and agency officials seemingly attempt to intensify production and outlines the role of the team leader in these efforts. Additionally, the section expands on the concept of flexible scheduling, revealing how it appears to contribute to the intensification of work by enhancing the discretionary powers of agency officials and, importantly, the team leaders on the shop floor[[34]](#footnote-34). However, it is important to note that the motivations behind these strategies remain speculative and are interpreted through the lens of workers' perspectives.

Finally, it reveals how the loading bays are divided between two groups of workers: Refugees and Roma. The response of each group to intensification is partly related to each group's dependency in the local labour market, linked to their immigration status, and length of time in the UK, or embeddedness in the local labour market (Bauder, 2005). Therefore, the intensification of work is analysed as the outcome of struggle, modified by the ability of each group in the loading bay (Roma and Refugee) to exercise some control over the effort bargain. Therefore, the loading bay is looked at as the point of articulation in wider society (Cunnison, 1966).

In this section, I explore how work intensification on the loading bays is legitimised and reinforced through racialised discourses observed on the shop floor. In everyday interactions, I encountered a recurring assumption among certain workers and supervisory figures that manual labour on the loading bays is ‘dirty,’ ‘unsafe,’ and ‘donkey work’ designated for ‘cage monkeys.’ Such language appears to categorise and racialize the nature of work itself, with tasks often perceived as more dangerous or undesirable implicitly assigned to specific groups. Based on my observations, these dynamics seem to align with the broader labour market’s construction of race, situating the most vulnerable workers in the most challenging and hazardous roles. Consequently, these practices reduce workers’ ability to negotiate their roles and shape expectations about the physical and mental capacities associated with racialised bodies. This, in turn, influences workers’ efforts, subjective perceptions of work, and the social relations among migrant groups within the loading bay. In effect, racialised labour dynamics on the loading bays foster competition among workers and may contribute to heightened work intensification.

First, I will outline the racial construction of power observed in the loading bay. Second, I will examine how managers and agency officials appeared to increase work intensity by reducing indeterminacy and enhancing monitoring of workers in the loading bays. This approach to control is evident in practices like the 'double check-in,' which emerged in response to workers' attempts to reclaim time and space by moving around the loading bays. The double check-in underscores the team leader’s role in enforcing compliance and managing workflow, as observed in their control strategies. These practices seem to function as mechanisms to maintain productivity and order, though it’s important to note that these interpretations are drawn from worker accounts and participant observation rather than direct statements from management. The implementation of the double check-in illustrates how team leaders exercise autonomy in managing the loading bay, shaping the experience and expectations of workers on-site. I then discuss the concept of team leader autonomy to explain how such control strategies are enacted within this context.

The third section reveals how workers responded to the double check-in. It assesses the impact this has on workers' earnings, effort and the sociability between the Refugees and Roma in the loading bay. I will show how two racialised groups within the loading gang internalised differently the nature of this intensification related to their mobility power (Smith, 2006) and mobility bargaining power (Strauss & McGrath, 2017). Finally, I will show how the division on the loading bays led to two different responses and two competing politics of production. Overall, outcomes generated from the 'double-check-in' diverge from managerial expectations. In this case, the double check-in reduces labour costs for the agency and increases workers' effort and teamwork. However, this was bought at the price of somewhat collectivising the struggle over working time and decreasing the effect of the division between the Refugees and Roma within the loading gang.

### 6.3.1 A Normal Day in Loading Bay C

After checking in with the agency official in the mezzanine, I cross the 'link' that connects unit A with unit C, which provides a clear view of the docking yard from above. Looking out over the yard, I can see the lorries lined up, waiting to be unloaded in the short pause between night and morning shifts. I need to be quick; the Polish agency official will have called in the payroll numbers to the Polish team leaders in the loading department, and they will be waiting for us on the shop floor. Passing the overflow of cages that block the one-way system, the Sheffielders and I make our way down the stairs to loading bay C. Immediately, the temperature drop hits me, and the change in industrial sounds and the artificial light on level one dissolves, revealing a dark wide-open space. VNAs appear from around hidden corners, and the sound of their horns pierce the cavernous underbelly of the warehouse. Entering Loading Bay C has the distinct feeling of going underground.

Jan, one of the team leaders in loading bay C, is not hard to find. At 6'6", you can spot him from above the cages and stillages. Reaching him, we pass on our payroll numbers, and he checks us off his list received from the agency official. "Ten, we're going on break", he says, "all of us today", he emphasises slowly[[35]](#footnote-35). The Sheffielders then huddle around; it's cold this morning; the inside of the loading bay is covered with melting snow, making it slippery underfoot.

The activities in loading bay C are fairly routinised. On the first day, without instruction, the shop floor can be seen as a maze of fast-paced, irregular, and random body movements. Only as you get used to the productive rhythms of the loading bay do you discover routines and fixed actions demarcated between different groups of Sheffielders and different spaces on the shop floor. After passing on your payroll number to Jan and receiving your break time there is little instruction.

A lorry will dock in one of the loading bays; the group of Roma workers will hold off as much as they can before Jan notices and shouts, "23C". This can take a while because it is impossible to notice a docked lorry without looking through the 30cm wide windows on the loading bay. Therefore, the team leader and refugee workers will patrol the area close to the loading bay, checking for docked lorries. Around six of the Sheffielders will head to loading bay 23C, while four will hold back and make a line between the docking bay and the empty space between the team leader's desk and the empty cages. The tailgate is lifted by one; another moves the electric ramp. A third will enter the lorry, gloves off to find more purchase on the ratchet strap. Once this is removed, the fourth and fifth member tie the open ratchet to the inside of the lorry. The sixth member removes the pallet jack at the front of the lorry putting it to one side.

One member then starts by taking out the middle cage/stillage. If you're lucky, the cages have been put in backwards so you can steer from the back once the cage is removed from the front line of three. The cage is then pushed over the ramp at just the right speed. Too quick, and the next person in line cannot control the weight of the cage; too slow, and the cage can topple over, crushing the next person in line. These cages are then pushed down the line until the last Sheffielder scans the cage and arranges them back-to-back in rows of six, ready for collection from the FLT. This all occurs at an extremely high pace. The person at the front, inside the lorry, will dictate the speed. The Sheffielders may be spaced anywhere between 2 and 12 metres away from each other. Short spacing will occur nearest the bay, where the cage has to be turned and then directed; the longer spacing occurs towards the back of the line, which is arranged in lines of six. Therefore, physical exertion is democratised, with the heaviest work, that of directing the initial momentum of the cages created by the workers at the front of the line spaced closest together, and the workers at the back of the line spaced further apart, using the momentum to guide the cages.

Those Sheffielders with the most experience will stand either at the front of the line or at the back with the scanner. You have to pay particular attention in the middle of the line. Here, the cages move the quickest. They have gained momentum from coming down the ramp, and the distances between workers are usually still small due to the need to change the cage's direction. Therefore, before passing one cage to the next in line, your eyes must concentrate on the cage coming down the ramp[[36]](#footnote-36).

Unloading an entire lorry with eighty full cages can take up to twenty minutes with ten workers. There will often be two or three lorries docked simultaneously, meaning more work and longer unloading times. Lorries will also dock with empty cages, stillages, and rubbish that needs to be unloaded. This process frees up space in the loading bay. When loading bay A has little floor space to receive full cages, the loading gang will fill a lorry with empty cages and send it across the inbound docking yard to loading bay C. In loading bay C, the Sheffielders will unload the empty cages and line them up on any available floor space. Therefore, most of the time is spent loading and unloading empty cages, sending them back and forth across the docking yard.

This process runs twenty-four hours a day. The Sheffielders load and unload these full and empty cages for eight hours a day until the next shift of Sheffielders arrives. By the end of the shift, the full cages must be in lines ready for the FLT. Empty cages must be collapsed and taken to the start of the picking section. Jan will take a photo of the empty shopfloor and send this to Jaco, the loading bay supervisor. This occurs at five p.m. when the cold wind circulates the shopfloor and darkness extends across the docking yard. “It is the most enjoyable part of the day”, according to Ali, “once the floor is empty, we get to leave and can get some sleep on the bus”.

### 6.3.2 "Cage Monkeys" in Loading Bay C

The Sheffielders in Loading Bay C were all Refugee and Roma male workers. The team leaders were all Polish and male. The FLT drivers in the loading bay were all White-British. This section reveals how the racial construction of power operated in the loading bay (Von Holdt, 2003).

Mike, the White English FLT driver, and Jan, the Polish team leader of loading bay C, were chatting about the bottleneck between the sortation and loading departments. Here, completed picking cages and stillages were lined up next to the industrial lifts, ready to be taken to the sortation department, but the lift can only manage six cages at a time. Many cages were beginning to block the one-way road system, blocking Mike's FLT route to and from the web-processing department. In order to stop the blockage, Mike suggested that the 'Sheffielders 'run' a cage each to loading bay A (where more lifts were available). After contacting the team leader in loading bay A via radio to confirm available space in the lifts, Jan agreed but suggested that Mike take the cages blocking the road himself with his FLT as this would be 'ten times faster'. Mike declined, arguing, 'The cage monkeys should get used to this kind of 'donkey work". For the next two hours, I and six other Sheffielders ferried cages from loading bay C to loading bay A. Each time, they took around 15 minutes to move a single cage across a distance of 400 metres before returning to bay C and starting the process again.

The discussion between Mike and Jan above provides a glimpse into how the racial structure of power appeared to operate within FrictionCo and the loading bays. It suggests that any migrant worker was often perceived as subservient to any White-British individual, regardless of their position within the formal hierarchy. This observation indicates that not all White-British workers held managerial roles; however, they seemed to retain the authority to issue instructions to migrant workers, even those in higher positions. It is important to acknowledge that this interpretation is based on a specific interaction and may not capture the full complexity of power dynamics across the entire workplace.

The discussion between Mike (White British) and Jan (White Polish) highlights this. Jan is Mike's team leader. In the discussion, Jan asks Mike to move the cages with the FLT. However, Mike angrily tells Jan to order the 'cage monkeys' to do this. While the Polish employees such as Jan are increasingly promoted to supervisor and team leaders, my experience in the warehouse and the discussion above reveal similar dynamics to Burawoy's (1972) study of the Zambian copper mines. Following the process of 'Zambianisation' in the 1960s, the mine managers were forced to promote the Black Zambian workers to positions of authority in line with African Advancement. However, whether these promoted Black Zambian workers ever achieved real power within the production hierarchy was called into question by Burawoy, who named this process an 'upward floating colour bar'; the colour bar might float upwards, but it never disappeared, therefore leaving the racial order in the mines untouched.

At FrictionCo, there is a consistent trend of promoting Polish workers residing in Pit-Town to the position of team leaders and supervisors. However, the higher managerial roles within the company are still predominantly occupied by white British employees. Jan told me, "There has been improvement; now we [Polish] are supervisors; when we first came here, it was only British supervisors. You see the Roma and Black workers; they are just in the position we were ten years ago."

Hence, in the context of a changing labour market in the SCR discussed previously, White Polish male employees are appointed to higher positions - specifically supervisors and team leaders. This is reflected in the length of stay of Polish migrants in Pit-Town, "[t]he longer immigrants remain in a country, the more they adopt the habitus of the non-migrant population" (Bauder, 2005: 712).

The changes in the workforce composition have implied a twofold process: first, Polish migrants have been promoted to supervisory positions in the management hierarchy, while they have been replaced by Roma, international migrants and refugees. Together, the Polish, Roma and Refugees still represent a racialised outsider (Virdee, 2014), within the production process, with White British workers retaining overall power. For example, workers frequently question the authority these new supervisors and team leaders hold. Indeed, Mike's refusal of his team leader's instruction to use the FLT to carry the cages across to loading bay A shows how the white British workers have retained power over their White Polish superiors.

The process resembles Burawoy's concept of the "upward floating colour bar" (1972). However, rather than being based on skin colour, in this case, power operated on the indigenous/migrant binary given the power relation that remained between Polish and British workers. Indeed, Mike often left his FLT to 'help out' on the loading bays, instructing the Sheffielders to load/unload particular bays. This meant the refugees and Roma believed Mike held a senior position in the loading bay and were quick to obey his directions when, in fact, he was employed by the same labour agency on a temporary contract as an FLT driver. Although Mike earned more money than the Sheffielders, he held no official position of authority over them, unlike Jan.

Hence, the connection between the racial structure of power and managerial authority is intricate. However, not all White British or White Polish men were managers, supervisors, or team leaders. Nevertheless, many of the White British male workers gave instructions to migrant and refugee workers. Moreover, on the loading bays, at least, White British workers had the 'right' to ignore their White Polish Team Leaders. Consequently, there existed an absence of a distinct line of managerial authority or job demarcation – as applied to the Sheffielders. On the Loading Bays, the White British men made the rules, and the Sheffielders obeyed them, no matter how arbitrary.

Moreover, the racialisation of refugees and Roma, as exemplified by the derogatory term "cage monkeys" used by English and Polish workers, has profound and detrimental effects on the targeted groups within the workplace. This dehumanising language not only reflects deep-seated prejudices but also perpetuates harmful stereotypes that can significantly impact the experiences and well-being of the refugee and Roma workers.

Referring to refugees and Roma individuals as "cage monkeys" devalued their labour, reducing their identity to an animalistic and derogatory label. Such dehumanisation reinforces the idea of these workers as inferior, perpetuating an "us versus them" mentality among English and Polish workers. The use of racialised language reinforces existing barriers to the integration of refugees and Roma individuals within the workplace. It signals to these workers that they are not accepted as equal team members, hindering their ability to participate fully in workplace activities, social interactions, and decision-making processes. Next, I will outline the observed practices in the loading bay that appeared to reduce indeterminacy and intensify worker effort.

### 6.3.3 Intensification in Loading Bay C: The 'Double Check-In'

My apprenticeship in the loading bay starts upstairs in the mezzanine. It is here where the Sheffielders are designated to particular departments. The Sheffielders gain access to the warehouse by using a fingerprint identification system, which links their name, fingerprint, and employee transaction data every time they enter the warehouse. Second, an agency official greets the agency worker, who checks their payroll number against their list. From here, the agency officials will let the agency workers know which department they are working in that day. Despite every Sheffielder knowing exactly which department they will be designated; the agency worker checks each worker's payroll number individually before assigning them to the loading bay (male) and the push tray sorters (female).

FrictionCo has introduced another layer of monitoring to reduce workers' indeterminacy on the loading bays – a double, personalised check-in - with the team leader of the specified department. The male Sheffielders will head towards the loading bay from the mezzanine, checking in with their Polish team leader. The team leader will take the payroll number of each agency worker and radio the Polish agency official in the mezzanine to let them know who has arrived, who hasn't, who has arrived on time and who is late.

This double personalised check-in of payroll numbers has introduced a new layer of supervision to close workers' indeterminacy operating outside of the electronic fingerprint identification. This creates a personalised employer strategy to monitor the Sheffielders’ attendance in the loading bay, stopping the Sheffielders from going 'walk-about' at the start of their shift. This grants considerable power to the agency, allowing them to potentially wield their discretion in ways that could inflict substantial hardship on individual workers.

Two weeks into my time at FrictionCo, I noticed a change in our routine. Now, greeting us in the mezzanine were both an agency official and a loading bay supervisor, Jaco. He stood with us, prepared to escort us directly to our assigned department. This new arrangement meant that we were taken straight to the loading bay, and we could no longer take our lunches to Canteen A. Instead, we had to store our meals in the locker room, requiring us to exit the warehouse through the search area just to retrieve them. This process ate into our already limited twenty-minute unpaid break.

As a result, the Sheffielders faced a difficult choice: retrieve their food from the lockers and risk losing their bonus, or take their break in the loading bay, preserving their bonus but going without food. I observed that the majority of the Sheffielders opted for the latter, often eating their lunches on the bus to and from the warehouse. "Eat and sleep when you can," Jamie advised me, as he downed his second Monster Energy drink.

At the start of the shift, the Sheffielders (1) check in on the fingerprint identification system. (2) Check in with the agency official. (3) Are escorted to the loading bay by the supervisor. (4) Check in with the team leader. They (4) check out the fingerprint identification system at the break. (5) check in on the fingerprint identification system after the break. (6) At the end of the shift, check out on the fingerprint identification system. (7) Pass through security, where each worker is scanned.[[37]](#footnote-37)

This personalised attendance monitoring is used alongside the electronic fingerprint check-in for payments, bonus accrual and late fines. Being late by 10 minutes will result in a 10% wage deduction on that hour and invalidate any monthly bonus accrual. Because of the personalised nature of the check-in, the system is open to negotiation. The agency officials can use it to penalise workers by invalidating their bonuses, changing shift times, and even terminating employment. In order to understand how the double check-in operated, we need to understand the role of the agency and team leaders.

### 6.3.4 The Agency

RecruitNow, the primary agency providing workers to FrictionCo's Loading Bay, operated directly within the warehouse premises. Within this setting, agencies played an active role in labour management, overseeing the quality, quantity, and timing of work performed by agency workers. Agency officials were tasked with allocating the agency workforce based on FrictionCo's requirements. Workers expressed the significant influence agencies held over their employment, acknowledging that agency officials essentially acted as their bosses, determining whether they would return to work and the specific assignments they would undertake.

The agency officials, typically Polish speakers due to the linguistic preferences of the workforce, played a crucial role in supervising agency workers' performance and providing them with designated uniforms, colour-coded to identify their agency and shift. This involvement of agency officials sheds light on the complex dynamics of control exerted over the workers by the agency. While traditional employment relationships often delineate managerial responsibilities to the firm and legal obligations to the agency, at FrictionCo, from the workers point of view, these boundaries were blurred, particularly in the management of agency workers' performance, especially in sortation.

In the Loading department, the triangular employment relationship (Vosko, 2010) operated through the concept of "double check-in," allowing agency officials to intensify work by reducing worker indeterminacy and increasing efficiency in the loading bays. This experience highlighted the nuanced distinction between "manager-controlled flexibility" and "manager/agency-controlled flexibility," recognising agencies' substantial influence over workers' contracts.

The power dynamics of agency officials in the warehouse significantly impacted workers' employment prospects. The double check-in was seen by the workers as a tool for monitoring punctuality and administering bonuses or penalties. Agency officials, often perceived to be on good terms with management, were believed to influence workers' chances of getting permanent contracts. Simultaneously, the workers had the perception that the agency refused to employ certain workers on various contracts and therefore, confined them to less lucrative positions or even lead to dismissals. The agency officials thus played a pivotal role in shaping workers' perception of employment trajectories and experiences within the warehouse.

### 6.3.5 The Team leader

While providing information about how workers perceive the agencies' use of the double check-in, the focus has primarily been on labour time through the checking and monitoring of attendance. However, it is essential to understand how that time is utilized in the warehouse. Therefore, one must follow the workers into the loading bay to observe how the double check-in affects their commodity labour power. This involves an overview of the loading bays and how team leaders operate with a degree of social and spatial autonomy from the broader management structure. This autonomy appears to enable team leaders to exert significant control over the loading gangs. Based on my observations, I will outline specific interventions made by team leaders to intensify workers' efforts, which arise from an ongoing struggle over worker effort.

When Jan, the Polish team leader, took his lunch break, the Sheffielders—having already completed our break—seized the opportunity to rest. We knew we could get away with it as long as we returned and looked busy before Jan came back. While Ali, a refugee, continued unloading a docked trailer from 23C, Gebrial, the other Roma worker, and I quickly slipped away. Some of our colleagues went outside for a smoke in the docking yard, while others vanished upstairs into one of the warm break rooms. However, Jan returned to the loading bay five minutes early that day. As we made our way back, he cursed at us, saying, “You can’t just do whatever you fucking like here.” He pointed to his radio and added, “Take twenty minutes off my time, and I’ll take twenty off yours.”

On the surface, the double check-in could only account for workers' attendance in their designated department rather than through the extraction of greater levels of effort. However, once in the loading bay, this agency official's power was extended and operated through the team leader, who used it to extract greater levels of effort. Therefore, some of the workers perceived the team leader to exercise a considerable influence over the payment of wages and bonuses and the issuing of fines for the Sheffielders in loading bay.

This resulted from the loading bays being socially and spatially isolated from the rest of the warehouse (Figure 11). The agency officials never set foot in the loading bay. The only contact was exercised through the team leaders and agency officials' radio to relay the agency workers' attendance and punctuality. This was used to threaten the workers and extract greater effort over the Sheffielders once they arrived in the loading bays.

Bonuses would be awarded based on punctuality; failure to arrive at the loading bay on time would result in a wage deduction. Therefore, the monetary rewards and punishments – based on supplementary payments (bonus accrual) owed to the agency worker by right – had to be bargained for, enhancing the team leader's power on the loading bay. As one worker put it as we raced down to the loading bay to check in on time: “We have Jan [team leader] today, he'll set it right, it doesn't matter if you're a couple of minutes late, he'll make sure he tells the agency we got here on time…the others though…just make sure you're there on time, some of them really take the piss you know, one minute late, and they'll take that as a deduction”.

Therefore, because the agency official never sets foot on the loading bays, the power owed to them through their ability to terminate employment and issue bonuses and wage deductions is relayed to the team leaders. The team leaders operate the loading bays as their own personal fiefdoms. They set the loading gangs to work through the threat of issuing individual workers as absent or late to the agency officials, who can issue fines and potentially terminate their contract. Therefore, the Sheffielders became vulnerable to the team leader, who could use this position to threaten workers and increase their efforts.

Following the Sheffielders tendency to go 'walk-about' in the loading bay, Jan and the other team leaders on the loading bay decided each loading gang would take their break times at the same time as their team leader. Because the Sheffielders had different shifts to the team leaders, this meant taking their lunch/dinner break sometimes only one hour into their shift. This meant working a shift continuously following the break for up to seven hours, breaking the legal requirement of six hours of continuous labour. Asking Jan about the change, he stated, "Yeah, we just had to bring that in; we had to stop everyone going walk-about; it just wasn't fair to some of you that actually stay and work properly".

The loading bay team leaders at FrictionCo wielded significant power over the Sheffielders by having the perceived authority to issue wage deductions and penalties. Positioned at the forefront of production, these team leaders constantly oversaw work tasks on the loading bays. The Sheffielders experienced continuous supervision, ranging from passive observation to active guidance and occasional intervention. This form of supervision included intrusive elements, as team leaders resorted to threats, harsh language, and various forms of abuse to drive and intensify the pace of work.

The autonomy of team leaders in the loading bays can be explained by the loading bay’s spatial and social isolation. Within FrictionCo, loading bay team leaders were granted substantial autonomy in directing production. Managers and supervisors held them responsible for coordinating loading gangs to accomplish assigned tasks within specified time frames. The methods by which team leaders coordinated loading and unloading were mainly left to their discretion, with their ability to extract work from the loading gang determining their continued employment.

This autonomy resulted in a relatively independent set of class interests for team leaders, distinct from those of workers and management. While profit motives and concerns over pay and working conditions mattered to team leaders, they were primarily focused on how these factors affected their job security. The team leaders faced the ongoing challenge of eliciting work from the workers, a critical aspect of determining their employment status. Jan, a team leader, exemplified this concern by intervening in loading gangs to prevent unauthorised breaks.

In this case, the reduction in workers' indeterminacy was driven by Jan's interventions rather than managerial strategies. Jan's actions included the reordering and collectivising of break times, a move made possible by the broad autonomy granted to team leaders by management. This autonomy generated relatively independent class interests for the Polish team leaders, diverging from those of both workers and management. Jan's interventions, such as reordering break times and the perceived power to implement coercive measures like fines and wage deductions, reflected his interest in reducing workers' autonomy to ensure efficient production.

### 6.3.6 The Impact of the Double Check-In

This had several impacts on the workers in the loading bay, including earnings, increased intensity of effort and increased socialisation, which brought greater cooperation and teamwork in production. It also retranslated lateral tensions into a hierarchical conflict between workers and team leaders. Therefore, the technical organisation of production in the loading bays also helped to insulate management and agency officials from these hierarchical conflicts that took place between workers and their team leaders.

Workers in the loading bays complained that the double check-in was having a negative effect on their ability to receive bonus payments. First, the 'double check-in' made it harder for the workers in the loading bay to earn bonuses. Not only did they have to check in on time to the fingerprint identification system (at the start and end of the day, and at the start and end of each break time), but they also had to check in on time with the agency official in the mezzanine, and the team leader in the loading bay. While the check-in times were standardised by the fingerprint identification system (e.g., a leeway of 2 minutes was given to avoid fines and deductions), there was no standardised 'late' check-in with the team leader. Therefore, the continuation of a worker's bonus became dependent upon the team leader's discretion. Not only did this make it harder for workers to earn bonuses, but it became harder to avoid wage deductions.

The double check-in was, therefore, an attempt to close workers' indeterminacy in the loading bay and, at the same time, secure greater levels of effort, which linked payment and bonus accrual and wage deductions outside of the formal fingerprint identification, leaving it to the implementation of agency officials and team leaders' collaboration. Essentially, the Sheffielders' ability to 'go walk-about' at the start and during their shift is reduced through the power the agency has to remove workers from their 'list, ' meaning to terminate employment. Moreover, the intensification of their labour is linked to the spatial and social isolation of the loading bays, where the agency workers' power is deferred to team leaders. The team leaders can use this deferment to intensify the work in the loading bay through threats of non-payment, the withholding of bonuses and the issuing of wage deductions through communications with the agency.

The direct intervention of the team leader to stop 'walk-about' had the effect of collectivising the loading gang, which had previously been split between Refugees and Roma. Following Jan's direct intervention, the loading gang took their breaks together, more often in the same break room. Previously, breaks were individually staggered. The loading gang in loading bay C ate, smoked, joked and played cards together, despite communication problems.

In the loading bays, the intensification of work was aided by increasing the arbitrary power of agency officials. Agency officials were understood to use their discretion over scheduling and wage deductions and fines to reduce workers' indeterminacy by increasing workers' effort and invading the porosity of the workday. Workers in the loading bay could experience a loss of income if they were late to check-in. However, because of the social and spatial isolation of the loading bays, the team leaders of the loading bays were deferred this power to intensify work through closely monitoring the loading gangs, using threats to coerce the Sheffielders into work. This created an arena for the team leaders to control the production in the loading bays and subject workers to labour abuses. The check-in became open to negotiation and allowed the team leaders to use their own discretion to discipline certain workers and favour others. A benefit to the agency of this mechanism of discipline was the deferment of power. This deferment was especially beneficial, as traditional despotic methods of control could be seen to be operated at the team leader's discretion when it was the agency/manager who retained the ability to achieve flexibility.

### 6.3.7 'Walk-About'

The double check-in enhanced management and the agency officials' control over attendance and effort in the loading bays. The ability for workers to go walk-about was severely restricted, given that workers' bonus accrual, wage deductions and continued employment hinged on their punctuality. This new arrangement and extension of control reduced the propensity for workers to 'walk-about', reducing their production indeterminacy, invading the porosity of the workday and intensifying effort.

However, a second consequence following the double check-in did not act in favour of management. Team working in the loading bay had not proved effective through peer pressure at reducing the rate of walk-about. Instead, it increased lateral conflict between two groups of workers, with different propensities to walk-about (discussed later). However, the meaning of walk-about was transformed under the double check-in. Previously walk-about had been initiated on an individual basis to gain respite from the intensity of loading. This operated as a zero-sum game, whereby the more individual workers on walk-about increased the level of effort expended by those who had remained. Under the double check-in, the coercive mechanism of threatening workers with wage deductions and dismissal through attendance recording meant individual walk-about was eroded.

The loading gang now took official breaks collectively and enforced materially. Before introducing the double check-in, walk-about was understood as an expression of workers retaining autonomy individually. It was the manifestation of workers' individuality, a way for workers to individually reduce their effort to gain a moment of relief from the intensity of the loading bay. However, this had consequences for workers who remained at the Bay. The double check-in undermined this individuality by forcing workers to take collective official breaks. In their efforts to avoid wage deductions for continued employment and to gain respite from the intensity of loading, workers would avoid individual unofficial breaks, taking them collectively. This increased the sociability of the loading bay workers and led to the loading gangs collectively modifying the pace of work. As Gebrial told me, "You can't just go and mess around like we used to. Some of this shit we used to get up too [shakes head with a smile], now you just can't get away with sneaking off…. We still got to slow down sometimes though….it has to be done together, cause they [Jan] is always watching".

Lateral tensions produced by walk-about between workers were replaced by hierarchical grievances directed at the team leader from the loading gang. Therefore, while management was able to reduce individuals' propensity to walk-about, this had the unintended consequence of increasing hierarchical conflict between workers and team leaders. These shared grievances in the loading gang provided the basis for greater cooperation and sociability of the loading gang.

Moreover, double check-in increased informal cooperation between workers previously divided over the zero-sum game of individual walk-about. As a result, the double check-in increased the efficiency of team working in the loading bay due to increased socialisation during collective break times. In effect, individual walk-about was replaced by collectivising work pacing. Moreover, the double check-in insulated hierarchical conflict to team leader-worker conflict. Workers expressed tension through dissatisfaction with their team leader rather than with the agency official or management.

### 6.3.8 Two 'Philosophies of Work' in the Loading Gang

So far, I have outlined the racial construction of power in the loading bay, described the observable strategies used by management and agencies to intensify production, and examined the effects these dynamics had on the development of collective resistance among workers. The following section looks more closely at the loading gang and the emergence of two pre-eminent social profiles, which express a different 'philosophy of work' as Ali puts it. The first is the group of primarily East African Refugees, subjects of social devaluation mechanisms, whose members are placed at the bottom of the symbolic and material hierarchy and are relegated compliantly to the hardest tasks within the loading bays. The second is the group of male Roma employees who express a more adversarial position on the loading bay and use their social networks to form bonds to renegotiate the effort bargain. It is important to note that I do not wish to homogenize either of these groups; within them exist diverse perspectives and experiences that shape their approaches to work. However, the following sections reveal how these two groups interacted in the loading bay, how they reacted to work intensification through the 'double check-in', and how this affected their propensity to 'walk-about' and renegotiate the wage effort bargain.

When referring to the philosophy of work, I am encompassing a blend of job-related knowledge, migration history, and the state of dependency within the labour market. Ali terms all these elements as 'philosophy of work,' and they can be succinctly summarised within the workers' propensity to go 'walk-about' and retain some autonomy over their labour. For Ali, his experience as an asylum seeker and refugee means he interprets management's attempts to intensify work differently than Gabriel. Where Ali responds to intensification through acquiescence, Gebrial responds through direct negotiation of the effort bargain, largely related to workers' differential mobility power (Smith, 2006) and the length of time they have spent in the UK (Bauder, 2005). The following two sections show how Ali and Gebrial respond to this intensification and the double check-in. Moreover, it shows how the tension between two groups of migrant workers over individual walk-about was retranslated into hierarchical team leader-worker conflict over the effort bargain following the team leader's intervention.

*Ali*

Ali loads and unloads cages and stillages from the lorries in loading bay C. Ali is a 30-year-old Eritrean Refugee and father of two sons. Ali has worked for FrictionCo for six months. This was his first official job in the UK after receiving his refugee status, leave-to-remain and the subsequent loss of asylum support.

Despite working in the same department and subject to the same control mechanisms, Ali has a very different "philosophy of work" that's different to "those others that come here to mess around", as he puts it. By 'those others', Ali refers to Gebrial and the group of young Roma workers, who are part of the same loading gang in loading bay C. Ali often complains about the ill-discipline of the Roma in the loading bay. In fact, Ali told me, “They cut corners, smoke in the bays and have no respect for Jan”.

Despite experiencing chronic back pain, Ali says he enjoys his job. When the lorries are docked, he is often the first to the bay and cannot understand why his Roma colleagues try to take a few seconds' break between loading. "This is much better work than I've had before; I love it here; the work is always here, and the food [in England] is great. Much better than before."

I join Ali as we lift a particularly heavy cage over the side of the ramp. After pushing it down the ramp and along the bay to a colleague, he comments, “They [agency officials] won’t come down here to check on you, but somehow, they’re always watching,” before disappearing into the back of the lorry.

I turn on the spotlight and direct it down the near-empty lorry, following Ali's movements as he struggles with the final ratchet strap; the light refracted through the small window of the open bay, Ali's shadow unrestrained against the wall. Finding purchase, Ali shoves the cage towards the open doors; I step back and help it on its way down the line, but this time, it's gathered enough momentum to make it over the ramp on its own. My hands merely guide it towards Gebrial, who is sitting in wait on top of a broken stillage. "Why are they not here to work?" Ali nodded towards Gebrial, who still hadn't moved from his position atop a broken stillage. "It is not fair. I stay all day here, and sometimes there are not enough people to help [unload]".

Here, Ali referred to the agency officials' power on the loading bay, while not physically present on the bays, he nevertheless recognises their power inhabited by the team leader. For Ali, this deferment of power to the team leader meant he was always first to a loading bay, the first to the dock leveller and the first to unlock the ratchet clamp.

The agency's control over scheduling led to experiences of insecurity for Ali in the loading bays. As Ali explained: "You must make your [check-in] times. You must run to make it. Otherwise, they will pay you less or that could it be it [employment terminated]."

Through its tightening of attendance monitoring, the agency wielded the authority to cause distress to specific workers. This involved penalising workers through wage deductions or termination of employment. The control exerted by the agency over flexible scheduling granted discretionary power over labour time and extended to the commodity labour power.

This created fear among workers: if they displeased their team leaders, they believed their hours would be cut or their schedules altered. This instilled fear among workers, as any dissatisfaction expressed towards their team leaders could result in reduced working hours or altered schedules. As Ali put it when asked why he was first to unlock the ratchet strap: "Because I have to keep moving. Jan has to know I'm good at this job".

Therefore, agency-controlled scheduling provided the agency with discretionary power over labour time. The organisation of production, which afforded a spatial and social isolation of the loading bays, meant team leaders used the agency's flexible scheduling to enhance their control over the commodity labour power of Ali. As a result, Ali increased his efforts in production to avoid wage deductions and retain his employment. As a result, the double check-in closed Ali’s production indeterminacy through tighter attendance monitoring at the start of shifts and the start and end of breaks. It also increased his efforts in production.

Accordingly, Ali grew increasingly frustrated with other loading bay workers who were more likely to 'walk-about' between loading. Due to loading relying on the teamwork of a given loading gang, the more workers on walk-about increased the efforts of those who remained in the bay for fear of team-leader reprisal. This increased worker tension, specifically between those who used walk-about to take unofficial breaks and those who didn't. This bred tension between two different workers' philosophies' and translated into tension between Ali and Gebrial.

*Gebrial*

Gebrial is one of the Sheffielders, who works alongside Ali in the loading bays. Gebrial is one of a group of young Roma workers from Slovakia who arrive with Ali on the private agency bus from Forge Valley. Gebrial, a popular worker among the Roma, told me that he chose to smoke cannabis outside in the loading bays before his shift; this was not only to relieve his chronic back pain but to take his mind off any potential covid symptoms.

Meeting Gebrial on my first day, he asked if he could purchase cannabis from me; after admitting that I didn't have any to sell, he would jokingly repeat his request at the start of most shifts. He would often do or say something to make me or others blush and get everyone laughing at someone's expense. This was mostly done in a spirit of good fun, but it had a bit of an edge. Behind Gebrial's warm smile and infectious laugh, there was an anger and a certain coldness not only toward me but towards everyone. He would often ridicule others in the loading bay with homophobic taunts. Latterly, he would invite me to join the group of Roma workers in the loading bay, where smoking was strictly prohibited but loosely accepted by Jan and the other team leaders. During this time, I learned of Gebrial, and several of the Roma worker's concerted efforts to walk-about.

One Friday, I joined Gebrial and his friends on a smoke break at the end of the loading bay. Gebrial and the others were overlooking the bay, watching the lorries depart from across the yard. Red, tired eyes framed with grey faces gazed on, not noticing me as I sat down.  Gebrial explained that some of the others were growing frustrated with Jan, the team leader. Their frustration grew out of not being paid their bonus and being hit with unfair wage deductions, which they blamed on Jan for having his 'favourites'. Because of this, Gebrial and the other Roma explained that they could not take individual informal breaks. If they were caught going 'walk-about, Jan would be "straight on the radio to the agency".

Dissatisfied with the current arrangement of effort and rewards and faced with heightened work demands, Gebrial sought to exert influence where he could – by decreasing his effort. In the absence of an internal labour market and with the implementation of wage deductions linked to attendance monitoring, Gebrial aimed to avoid constant exhaustion. His daily resistance in the workplace manifested as a strategy known as work pacing, an informal approach to limiting output. This tactic involved simulating and adjusting the physical exertion of labour based on periods of supervision and non-supervision.

The work pacing strategy was not entirely clandestine or disorganised. The Roma workers adopted an opportunistic approach in organising it. The strategy revolved around several unspoken principles: 1. Intensifying work and simulation during periods of team leader supervision to showcase hard work. 2. Conserving workers' physical energy during low or non-supervision periods through informally coordinated slowdowns. 3. Actively demonstrating to team leaders that work has been accomplished during non-supervision periods.

During supervision periods, the Roma workers consciously worked at a faster pace to give the impression of quick and efficient work. Experienced workers often provided guidance and instruction to less experienced colleagues and each other during these periods to ensure the entire group appeared industrious. In contrast, during non-supervision periods, workers significantly reduced their efforts. This aspect of work pacing is referred to as "slow working," where, within their group, workers intentionally slow down the pace and intensity of work by consciously restricting the amount of energy expended on designated tasks. Once again, this coordination is opportunistic and informal among the workers.

### 6.3.9 Concluding Remarks: Race Management and The Despotism of Time in Loading Bay C

The above discussion has demonstrated the racial division in FrictionCo and within the loading bay. It has suggested that refugee and Roma workers are subject to the dirtiest, most physical and dangerous jobs in the loading bays. Managers and agency officials seem to exploit workers' racial status to influence the division of the workforce across various departments. In the loading bays, I observed practices that suggested efforts by management and agency officials to intensify production. However, this unleashed contradictory pressures which acted to undermine the basis of that control and overcome lateral tensions between racial fractions within the loading bay.

Given the social and spatial isolation of the loading bays, workers were subject to a 'double check-in system'. This had the effect of discouraging workers from wandering, often referred to as 'walk-about.' Under this system, Sheffielders were required to check in with an agency official in the mezzanine hall and again with the team leader on the loading bays, in addition to using an electronic fingerprint system. This approach had the effect of reducing workers' indeterminacy by imposing fines and threatening dismissal for late check-ins. However, this strategy was perceived as inadequate, leading supervisors to begin escorting workers to the loading bays, which further constrained their autonomy. Additionally, the intervention of team leaders resulted in communal break times rather than staggered ones, effectively limiting opportunities for workers to engage in 'walk-about.

The workers in the loading bay attempted to retain their autonomy, subject to managerial attempts to intensify work and reduce indeterminacy by seeking to retain the freedom of walk-about by coordinating work-pacing. Because of the way control over time had been established in the loading bay, however, this meant that workers attempted to control their effort, which became increasingly collective on the loading bays. Therefore, the form of walk-about (individual or collective) was changed by introducing the double check-in, which attempted to reduce workers' indeterminacy.

Before the introduction of the 'double check-in, ' 'walk-about' was an individual act regarding the reclaiming of autonomy, a means by which workers could individually hide in the bays, smoke, and check their phones to rest from the intensity of the loading bay. Because of the teamwork involved in loading, this led to lateral tensions between workers who were blamed for being lazy and idle. This was particularly significant in creating the internal fraction in the loading bays between two sets of workers with different ‘philosophies of work’ related to their dependency in the local labour market, migration history as well as age. For example, Ali was much less likely to 'walk-about'. He often blamed Gebrial and the Roma for being 'lazy' and using walk-about to alleviate the intensity of loading. This was influenced by their immigration status, varying conditions of dependency in the labour market, as well as factors such as age differences and family responsibilities.

The double check-in, which brought with it collective break times, undermined this individuality by encouraging the two sets of workers to engage with each other. Workers were now told to take breaks together, increasing inter-worker socialisation. This led to workers coordinating work pacing in the loading bay. This change progressively displaced lateral tensions in the loading bay produced by individual 'walk-about'. Workers express this through grievances with their team leader. Therefore, while the agency and management reduced workers' indeterminacy through the 'double check-in' and collective work breaks, this came at the cost of increasing hierarchical conflict and greater sociability between two racial class fractions.

Ali and Gebrial experienced 'walk-about' and intensification differently. Before this intensification, the workers were divided between two significant groups who shared two different 'philosophies of work'. The Refugees and the Roma. These two migrant/refugee categories interpret the intensification of work differently due to their position in the labour market, age differences and familial responsibilities and their capacity to mobility bargain.

Ali was coerced into expending greater levels of effort through the authority of the team leader (see Figure 11). This gave the team leaders on the loading bay significant power to extract increased levels of effort because of their position as a mediator between the Sheffielders and the Agency officials. This meant Ali interpreted the team leaders as having a range of traditional coercive mechanisms at their disposal for reducing workers' indeterminacy, invading the porosity of the workers' shifts, and intensifying their work. This amounted to withholding payment bonuses, overtime allocation, and control over promotions and contracts. In this way, Ali viewed the team leaders of the loading bay as wielding significant power over their earning potential and continued employment. Therefore, Ali was initially less likely to go 'walk-about' due to his 'philosophy of work', which included the nature of dependency and reduced mobility power.

Gebrial and the Roma, on the other hand, read the agency officials' non-presence in the loading bay as a chance to reclaim time and space by going 'walk-about', taking their breaks in the loading bays, smoking in the docking yard and hiding between cages. Therefore, because of the teamwork needed to load, lateral tensions between workers going on individual 'walk-about' were re-composed as lateral tensions between two migrant groups with two different 'philosophies of work', related to their immigration status and mobility bargaining power.

This shows, firstly, that FrictionCo uses the state's construction of migrant hierarchies, linked to differential workers' mobility power, to provide a compliant racialised reserve army of labour. It uses this compliant army to labour in the warehouse's most physical and back-breaking jobs, in which workers' indeterminacy cannot be individualised and monitored through performance indicators. Instead, it relies on the state's racial construction of power, which it redeploys in the social world of the warehouse, to fragment the working class between and within departments, relying on workers' structural vulnerability in the labour market. The migrant and refugee workers were deemed crucial to meeting these demands. However, this created contradictory responses from labour, where attempts at intensifying work in the loading bay were achieved at the cost of hierarchical grievances and greater sociability in the loading gang, overcoming tensions produced by divide-and-rule tactics and their different conditions of dependency in the local labour market.

Second, it shows that workers were able to engage in effort bargaining (Hammer & Adham, 2022). The Gebrial responded to intensification through regulating his effort in production. While Ali, whose ‘philosophy of work’ was conditioned by his experience of the asylum system, intensified his labour and worked through break times. Therefore, the labour process must be looked at from as a point of articulation in the wider society rather than an isolated social system (Cunnison, 1966). Indeed, varied patterns of accommodation in the loading bay can be related to the social structure of the particular social context of the SCR.

## 6.4 The Sortation Department

This section describes a normal day in sortation department 2 of FrictionCo. The section describes FrictionCo's process of sortation and its system of control during a particular intensive moment in the lead-up to Christmas. It reveals how this intensification operated in real terms. This section discusses the views of the Polish women in the sortation department, their views of the Roma women who worked next to them on the push tray sorters and their views of the loading gangs who operated physically and metaphorically 'beneath' them. It also discusses the performance-scheduling nexus, which bred an atmosphere of intense pressure and individual competition. This is reflected in the workers' game of 'Stealing Sections', used to maintain performance rates and monitored closely by the agency.

### 6.4.1 A Normal Day on Sorter 2

A typical day on sorter two began in the 'hiring hall'. Once the Sheffielders had clocked in, met with the agency official and assigned tasks, workers would pass the mezzanine to their respective departments. After working in the loading bay for two weeks, I was assigned to a different department. Liam and I, both White British, were told to start in sortation two. We left behind the Sheffielders of the loading bay as their payroll numbers were ticked off and I heard Ali cursing the young agency official.

The Sortation department was located next to the mezzanine. High ceilings with artificial light and industrial fans lined the gangways. The noise is constant and loud, however no-one in sortation two wears earplugs, and none were on offer from the company. There are several different jobs in sortation. Belt sorter, push-try sorter and delivery sorter are the most common, however there are number of workers controlling the flow of cages and stillages at the lift from the loading bay, these workers make sure there is a constant supply of goods moving between the loading bay and the push-tray workers. The Roma women almost exclusively work as push-try sorters, working in teams of two or three. Polish women and some Polish and English men work as belt sorters, while delivery sorters are exclusively male. During my time in sortation two, I worked primarily as a belt sorter but also as a delivery sorter at the end of the line.

FrictionCo has nine belt sorters, each located on the first floor, above the loading and picking departments. They all converge on the mezzanine, where the deliveries are processed before being redirected to the ground floor, ready for consignment. Belt sorters two and three operate consecutively whilst connected by the lower conveyer belt. This allows all sorted products to be dispatched to the delivery sorters at the end of the line. Each belt sorter is 60 metres long, meaning that the sortation department stretches over 140 metres, taking several minutes to walk from one end to the other. Each belt sorter has 60 stations, 30 on each side. Thus, in the sortation department that I worked, home to sorters 2 and 3, there were 120 workstations for belt sorters.

The push tray sorters are at the start of the line on both sorters 2 and 3. Once cages and stillages are brought up from the loading bay via the three lifts, they are scanned and moved into lines adjacent to the sorter. These lines stretch the entire department length, often blocking the one-way system that has been operational since the outset of COVID-19. The cages and stillages are directed towards the push tray sorters. A worker moves these cages up the ramp to the push-tray sorters; all the while, another worker moves cages along, making sure no gaps appear in the line of cages. The push tray sorters work in teams of two or three and are stationed next to the top conveyor belt. The first push tray sorter will open the cage/stillage and scan the selected item. Once scanned, the item code will appear on the screen next to them and specify the correct tray to be dispatched. The second push-tray worker will handle the item, locate the correct tray and dispatch the item onto the upper conveyor belt. Once the item is on the conveyor belt, the push tray sorter will automatically identify the correct station, open its tray and use gravity to slide the item into the correct chute ready for the belt sorter.

A belt sorter station is subdivided into eight chutes. Once the belt sorter has a complete chute, the worker will scan the bag, tag the items, and dispatch the bag onto the lower conveyor belt. The lower conveyor belt takes the items to the end of the line. Here, the items are pushed down another chute, at the bottom of which the delivery sorters are stationed. Here, the delivery sorters scan each bag; the scanner will reveal a code corresponding to a large cardboard box positioned behind them. The delivery sorters throw the scanned items into the correct box and scan the box. There are seven boxes, each assigned to a particular delivery company. Once the box is full of bagged items, workers from the mezzanine collect the box using a pallet jack, taking the box to another set of lifts before it is sent back to the ground floor, ready to be dispatched. The push tray sorter allows a combination of small and large items to be sorted on the same machine, meaning jewellery and trainers can be sorted, bagged and dispatched together. The conveyor belt moves at speeds up to 1.3 m/s, meaning a capacity of 2,500 trays per hour.

After signing in with the agency official in the mezzanine, I enter sorter 2/3. The morning shift workers have already started (at 6:20 a.m.). By the time the Sheffielders arrive, it is already 8 a.m. At the supervisor desk that sits in between sorters 2 and 3, I check in with the supervisor, giving my payroll number. The supervisor assigns me a station. At the supervisor's desk, two computers monitor the push tray sorter. It identifies the workstations that have been assigned, full and empty chutes and the speed at which the belt sorters are processing the items. The supervisor will glance at their screen before assigning me a workstation. Workstations highlighted in red indicate a build-up of items in a chute. I will be assigned to a workstation in red in order to increase the processing rate at that particular section. Next, I will sign in using my payroll number and fingerprint identification on the computer screen. Picking up a hand scanner, I will scan the hand scanner into the computer so it is now registered under my name and payroll. The following is a step-by-step account of the belt sorter process. (I wrote these in my notes after my last day of work).

1. Go to the assigned desk make sure everything is in order and complete: Four piles of different size bags are laid out on the workstation; the printer is loaded with paper; the label printer is correctly and fully loaded; cardboard boxes have been put together and are stored on top of the workstation; several free items are stored in the chute for special promotions; a rubbish bag is Sellotaped to the workstation; extra bags are available; scissors and Sellotape are present.
2. Identify and scan the complete chute when the green light comes on at the workstation.
3. Take each item from the complete chute. This can be up to 20 different items. Scan each item, ensuring they correlate to the items now shown on the hand scanner.
4. Place the items into a mailing bag. If the items are too big, use a cardboard box.
5. Select 'print' on the hand scanner. Wait for the invoice to be printed on the printer below the station and wait for the delivery label and barcode to be printed from the label printer.
6. Fold the invoice, placing it inside the mailbag with the items. Close the mailbag, sealing it shut.
7. Stick the delivery label on the centre of the mailbag.
8. Place the item on the lower conveyor belt.
9. Scan the empty chute for completion.
10. Move on to the next chute and repeat the processes 2-9.

This process will be repeated hundreds of times during each worker's shift. The supervisor assigns each worker a break time at the start of their shift. Unlike in the loading bay, the sortation workers' break times are staggered. This allows for continuous production. When a sortation worker takes their 30-minute unpaid break, the remaining workers must provide cover. This means that from 8:20 onwards, sortation workers are constantly covering for their workmates two hours into the workday. This involves taking control of two or three workstations or 27 chutes at any one time.

### 6.4.2 Race and Gender at the Point of Production

Working conditions in the sortation departments are intense. For the White Polish women, products come down the chutes rapidly, and the women simultaneously bag, tag, and pack the items into boxes before throwing them onto the conveyor belt below. The Roma women, working in pairs on the Push-tray on a slightly higher level, work slightly slower because the speed of the conveyor does not dictate their work. Instead, items lined up in cages are scanned and placed onto the tray before being placed onto the conveyor belt.

My initial view of the sortation department was positive. I had made it out of the loading bays, where physically demanding labour was coupled with the intensity of the surveillance from the team leaders. The sortation department was clean, bright, and airy, and I was looking forward to taking my contractually obligated breaks with other workers. Moreover, a low whisper of voices under the conveyor belt's hum led me to believe I was entering a more casual and cordial work environment than the loading bays.

As I entered my second and third weeks working the line, it became apparent that coercion is a central feature of work organisation in the sortation departments. I witnessed supervisors and agency officials making their rounds, often standing very close behind the women, hugging them and making inappropriate hand gestures. Most Polish women looked uncomfortable with these interactions; many would tend to shrink as agency officials passed by.

Jo, a Polish woman living in Pit-Town, was training to be a supervisor when I joined. It was her job to show me the ropes for my first two days. As we got to know each other, I began asking her about the role of the agency officials and pointed out some of their inappropriate behaviour. To my surprise, Jo, who had been very relaxed with myself and the other women around us in hitting our performance rates, was somewhat nonplussed by the line of questioning. At first, she did not understand what I meant by inappropriate behaviour. Explaining to her that I felt the agency officials were often heavy-handed and that there were indications of sexual harassment, she explained, "Well, this is what it's like in here; you have to play along sometimes; it can be just a bit of fun". I asked her further why she felt she needed to 'play along', and she told me, "We have the best shift in the warehouse; there can be competition to get this shift, and I would like to keep it"—many of the Polish women on the line combined full-time work with caring responsibilities. The 6 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. shift was highly sought after, allowing the women, many of whom had young children, to juggle these responsibilities. Therefore, women’s control was organised around the sexual division in the warehouse and the home (Pollert, 1981).

Not only did a tight local labour market determine the Polish women’s employment, but their familial responsibilities also attached them to FrictionCo which often led them to forsake job opportunities in other sectors. The Polish women in the sortation department had often been working there for five or six years. Many of these women were still employed by the labour agency. This lack of stability yet long agency tenure of these women was founded on the fact that FrictionCo’s location and the agencies shifts allowed for the integration of the women’s work life and family life. Speaking to Jo and others on the line, it quickly became apparent that working at FrictionCo allowed them to attain a balance between having an independent income and fulfilling their commitment to their children and families.

A conversation with Jo, illustrated this point.

It’s because I get to walk to and from work. I live just fifteen minutes away. There’s no other employer in this town. It’s hard to find another job in [town], but it doesn’t matter because of [FrictionCo]. I can finish my shift, walk fifteen minutes back to my house with my friends. We all live in the same area. I’ll usually be back by three. Then I can get ready for my son to come back from school at 3:30. I do any shopping that needs to be done, and then make dinner for us. I’m really used to this routine. I do all the cleaning then, after dinner, make my sons lunch for school the next day and make my breakfast, so it’s ready for me when I wake up at 5am. That leaves enough time in the evening to play with my son, most of the time we watch TV, so we can learn English. I’m taking English lessons at [FrictionCo], but my son needs to improve, I know one day he will be fluent, so it’s just easier, if I could get a job outside of [town] I wouldn’t take it. Even if it was for more money, I would have to take the bus, and it could take one hour there and one hour back. Working here allows me to have that extra time in the day. I get to work with my friends, and the hours let me spend time with my son, I don’t know what I would do if they ever changed my shift. (Field Diary, December 2021)

Many of the White Polish women on the line felt like they were performing a balancing act. They must garner sufficient attention from the agency officials to remain in favour (thus securing shifts to be worked around reproductive labour) while at the same time avoiding being harassed too much. This created a situation where the Polish women felt pressured to surpass each other in flirtatious interactions. This flirtation often came in the guise of make-up, body language and clothing.

The appearance of women in the sortation room and the utilisation of makeup for engaging with supervisors and agency officials are also influenced by racial dynamics[[38]](#footnote-38). Based on my observations on the shop floor and discussions with women, supervisors, and agency officials, it was evident that more attention was directed towards White Polish women compared to their darker-skinned Roma counterparts. This dynamic fostered competition among female workers. Speaking to Elena, a young Roma woman, she told me, "They [Polish women] will always get the contract because they always get the attention".

Perceptions among female workers highlight a paradoxical relationship between attention, job security, and sexual harassment. While White Polish women may feel a sense of heightened job security due to increased attention, they also contend with elevated levels of sexual harassment. Conversely, Roma women experience comparatively less harassment but harbour concerns about diminished job security. This dichotomy reflects the complex interplay of attention, workplace security, and the distinct challenges faced by women of different racial backgrounds. These ideals of beauty are entangled with skin colour. The belief commonly held by White Polish male agency officials is that lighter-skinned women are more beautiful. Jo internalised this and told me, "I wouldn't feel right working here without it [make-up]; I get up early to make sure I look like this." Jo was quite shy when I first met her; this was one of the first comments she made while maintaining eye contact. She was proud of and took great care of how she looked.

From my observations, it was often the younger White Polish women, such as Jo, who conformed to such beauty standards and were promoted to positions of team leader and supervisor. The differential treatment of women based on skin colour and the promotion of women sexualised by agency officials and managers served the purpose of labour control.

In essence, the rivalry between Roma and Polish women is employed to fragment the workforce regarding job stability, allowing managers and agency officials to assert control on the shop floor. On the other hand, sexual harassment provides a means for managers and agency officials to feel a sense of power, countering their feelings of powerlessness in their roles, and serves as a method to affirm authority over female workers, preventing them from stepping out of line. Therefore, the sortation department was internally divided, but it was also divided from the loading bay. Next, I analyse the Polish women’s views on the loading bay workers and how this was internalised as a racial and gendered division of labour.

### 6.4.3 "Back from the Ghetto?"

“Back from the ghetto?” said Agneskia when she encountered me at the entrance of break room A one Friday at 11:30 a.m. Agneskia and Jo ate their packed lunch around a table in a well-lit, open room overlooking the loading bays. They had moved the COVID-19 plastic table divider to one side and hurriedly ate their sandwiches, barely pausing between bites. Red, tired eyes fixed my gaze, registering a blend of astonishment and delight. “Why is it you take your break down there?” Jo asked inquisitively. Agneskia laughed, half choking on her sandwich. “Have you decided to come play with us today?” Jo, ignoring Agneskia, went on, “it is better if you take your breaks with us, you are not the kind to be spending time down there”.

The jokes, smell of hot food, loud music, bright lights, sofas, and wide-screen TVs strongly contrasted with the breaks of the Sheffielders in the loading department[[39]](#footnote-39). In fact, Jo and Agneskia were able to clock in and out during their 20-minute break time and eat their lunch, whereas the Sheffielders spent their breaks smoking on the bays and generally trying to find somewhere to sit down and rest. Unlike the loading bay break room, which is located seven minutes’ walk away from the loading bay, the sortation workers' break room is located next to the sortation department.

The Polish sortation workers were broadly conscious of their perceived higher status in the company. Most of them had worked in the company for several years. They accepted the agency's pay rates and the intensity of the work on the line because the shift patterns often allowed them to be home in time to care for their children. During the fieldwork, I often took turns taking breaks within break room A with the sortation workers and in the loading bays with the Sheffielders. Soon, Jo and Agneskia became accustomed to my presence in the breakroom and gradually opened up to me, discussing their thoughts on the different workers and departments in FrictionCo.

“They lack discipline”, said Agneskia, referring to the Sheffielders in the loading bay. “Sometimes you can see them wandering around sortation, who knows where they are supposed to be”. She continued, “Only because they stand in front of the loading bays, smell the fumes and get a few scars, they think they are above it all,” said Jo. When I replied that the loading bay is a tough job and that many workers go without taking breaks, Agneskia disapprovingly rebuked me, “They get their breaks in between loading; it's not like sortation, which is constant work. They can mess around between each loading.”

For the women on the line in the sortation department, the nature of their job, which is labour-intensive, demands consistent effort, minimal external sensory stimulation, and avoids engaging in hazardous activities. For the Sheffielders in the loading bays, the job requires a discontinuity of effort and a kind of osmotic relation with danger, physical strength and "hard" work (Rivoal, 2020). In the loading bays, then, there are performances of masculinity that can be expressed through contempt for danger and non-compliance with health and safety[[40]](#footnote-40).

The sortation workers consider the loading and unloading of goods to be the worst and most dangerous department in the warehouse. On the other hand, the loading bay is considered a job with relative freedom, related to the inconsistent rhythm of loading and unloading goods. This means the Sheffielders can retain a certain amount of autonomy in their work. As a result, the loading bays are devalued and constitute the real "dirty work" in the warehouse (Hughes, 1962). They rely on the labour of the most vulnerable workers to operate its floors.

The sortation workers have internalised this racial construction of power. By referring to the loading bay as a 'ghetto', Agneskia reinforces the racial segregation between departments. In this way, managers have successfully used constructions of race to produce divisions in the warehouse to intensify work. The sortation workers' own subjectivities are invoked (Burawoy, 1979). Jo and Agneskia's views of the loading bay workers mirrored managers concerns to organise power relations on the shopfloor.

Therefore, managers have constructed and reproduced notions that male Refugee and Roma workers bodies that are particularly well suited to the labour of the loading bays. Moreover, state policies that are both racialised and exclusionary, as previously discussed, deprive refugees and Roma of specific rights. Despite appearing race-neutral, these policies exhibit racialised characteristics. Throughout history, immigration has consistently served as a prime avenue for accessing inexpensive labour. Immigration and welfare policies function as a means of social control. The construction of migrants into those with access to social and welfare rights and those without creates varying levels of dependency in the labour market. As a result, managers and agency officials have a greater capacity to intensify work for certain groups of workers. For example, by threatening workers with pay deductions and shift changes, they withhold workplace rights from a segment of workers who possess restricted social, political, and economic rights within the larger society.

The division between the 'dangerous' and 'physical' work of the loading bay and the 'constant' and 'boring' labour of the sortation department was interpreted by Jo and Agneskia in terms of the racial and gender division between workers. This racial and gender division between migrant workers, internalised by the Polish women in the sortation department, was used by managers as a justification for the intensification of work in the loading department. However, the Sheffielders in the loading bay were not the only workers subject to intensification. The sortation workers were subjects of such coercive mechanisms. Finishing their sandwiches, Jo and Agneskia rushed back to the electronic fingerprint identification system. I noticed that their clock-out time has barely passed ten minutes. The next section explores the experiences of workers in the sortation department including the increasing of effort on the line, the reduction of workers indeterminacy and the invasion of the porosity of the workday.

### 6.4.4 The Anatomy of Performance-Scheduling

“Just make sure you hit your rate”, Jo explained as we re-entered the sortation department. “Your rate is fine for now, but by your second week, you need to be hitting at least 20% more than you currently are", she shouted above the sound of the sorting machine.

This section highlights the degree to which performance-scheduling secures the intensification of work in the sortation department, meaning the invasion of the porosity of the working day and reducing labours indeterminacy. In particular, the section will illustrate how establishing mandatory productivity targets, making them visible and measurable, and monitoring them strictly (Newsome, 2010) alongside the labour agency control of scheduling and shift design (Wood, 2016) in the sortation department provides the agency with a powerful way of obtaining control through coercion. Explicitly, the performance-scheduling nexus provides the agency with a straightforward, easily accessible, and untraceable method to intimidate and penalise specific workers by assigning them less favourable hours and shifts. It requires workers in sortation to hit ever-increasing targets while also requiring workers to maintain the agency officials' favour (operating through flirtatious games and rituals).

This section, therefore, examines how the agency's control of scheduling and the implementation of performance management influence coercion in the sortation department, impacting both working time (scheduling) and workers' effort (performance). In the following section I will demonstrate how the coercive system intensifies the Polish women's effort on the line and reduces their production indeterminacy. This has the effect of creating an individualistic, competitive and low-trust atmosphere between workers on the line. First, performance-scheduling, will be outlined. Second, the response of workers in terms of how they adapt to, respond to, and resist the introduction of such tools.

### 6.4.5 A 'Low Performer' on the Line

By the second week of working in the sortation department, I had fallen behind the others. My rate hadn't improved from week one. Twice during the shift, the agency official circulates the sortation department. These rounds are conducted by the officials from 'Recruit Now', the agency that hires most of the Polish women from Pit-Town. Each time, the agency official tells you your performance rate and the rate you should be hitting. This is done individually. While there is a generalised rate to hit, many workers are given individual targets depending on how long they've been employed at FrictionCo or the rate at which they are currently working.

Consistently not hitting my target, I have been labelled by the agency as a 'low performer'. Jo tells me low performers won't be in line for permanent contracts, better shift allocation or upward mobility. This means the agency has the power to define the terms of employment.

In the sortation department, agency officials monitored performance closely, which appeared to have a disciplining effect on the workers on the line. In the absence of incentives to achieve the necessary performance levels at FrictionCo, the agency seemed to rely on more direct forms of coercive control to meet performance targets. This included the introduction of close supervision on the production line, with agency officials taking responsibility for ensuring that specified performance levels were attained. As a result, performance scheduling was implemented, and workers who were unable to meet their production rates or exceed them were categorized as low performers, which often led to shifts in their work schedules. Performance scheduling led to the invasion of the porosity of the workday, reduced workers' indeterminacy, and intensified work. As Jo put it, "You have to keep up your rate, that's how you keep your shift, just keep on top of your rates".

The agency was free to cause hardship to particular workers by merely changing their shift times, creating conflicts with childcare responsibilities if they didn't meet the required performance rates. Alternatively, the agency could decrease workers' income by reducing their hours or enhance working time instability and unpredictability. As proposed by Heyes (1997), managers not only exerted control over workers during their time at the workplace but also held considerable sway over their home lives, as explained by Agneskia, "When you're not up to par, they keep switching up your hours every time you show up for work and messing with your days off. It feels like they've got a hold on your life because they decide when you work, any day they want, making it tough to plan anything".

The agency's authority in managing performance schedules grants agency officials significant control over workers' lives, closely tied to their efforts. This instils fear among workers as they worry that failure to meet performance standards could result in reduced hours or schedule changes.

### 6.4.6 Stealing Sections; Maintaining Rate

In order to hit your rate, Jo explained, you need to occupy more than one station at any one time. In the sortation department, break times are staggered throughout the shift. When one line worker leaves for their break, another worker must cover their station. This means that although a sortation worker has been assigned to a single station, they may cover up to four other stations. Because KPIs are informed by the sortation workers scanner, rather than the station, the more stations are covered, the more the workers can increase their individual performance rate.

When I began to work in the sortation department, I was unable to cover more than one extra station. I often complained to my colleagues that the intensity of work was difficult enough without having to provide cover. The workers around me, however, did not complain about providing cover; instead, given that the internal labour market was open to White Polish workers, they saw it as a game to achieve higher performance rates.

According to Burawoy (1985), workers in industrial organisations engage in "games of production" as a response to boredom, with the concept of "making out" being central to this discussion. Industrial psychologist Baldamus (2013) suggests that these games temporarily alleviate the monotony of work. Continuous and repetitive tasks can lead to boredom, prompting workers to seek relief through informal activities. In this context, the indeterminate nature of workers' efforts becomes intertwined with their subjective experiences of boredom. As workers strive to alleviate this monotony, their efforts may inadvertently increase.

Burawoy argues that management's absence from the shop floor is strategically beneficial, allowing workers to establish their own effort levels and rules for these informal activities. In Burawoy's analysis, Baldamus's findings underscore the idea that workers' games serve to legitimise the rules of capitalist production. Two primary activities emerge in this framework: piecework and the sensation of "traction." Unlike a game, traction refers to the feeling of being propelled forward by the inherent inertia of an activity, providing a momentary escape from boredom. As the production process becomes more fragmented, workers increasingly rely on piecework and rhythm to counteract monotony, which may lead to a loss of control over their efforts and experiences in the workplace.

In the sortation department, workers engage in fast movements accompanied by jokes and conversations. The contagious nature of speed and pressure spreads among workers, fostering a shared atmosphere. Jo and Agneskia exemplify this through coordinated movements, challenging each other and incorporating humour into their work. The workers' response to boredom, characterised by jokes, games, and close interactions, enhances their productivity.

This discussion is significant because it highlights how informal activities and sensations, such as traction, function as coping mechanisms for workers in monotonous production environments. These coping strategies ultimately shape their experiences of work and influence their relationships with management. In the sortation department, workers like Jo and Agneskia engage in fast movements accompanied by jokes and conversations, creating a shared atmosphere that not only alleviates boredom but also boosts productivity. Their informal camaraderie acts as a buffer against the pressures of their work, allowing them to navigate the demands of the production process while simultaneously enhancing output.

In contrast, the loading bay relies on more rigid managerial control to enforce productivity standards, limiting opportunities for informal interactions among workers. This distinction is crucial; while the sortation department’s informal coping mechanisms empower workers to exert some agency in their work, they also serve the interests of management by driving higher output levels without direct oversight. Whereas in the loading bay compliance is enforced through direct oversight rather than informal social dynamics. The implication is that different approaches to productivity within the warehouse can lead to varying experiences of exploitation and agency among workers.

Jo and Agneskia left the break room ten minutes before their official break time ended to "make rate"[[41]](#footnote-41). Therefore, as we returned to our station from break, an argument broke out between Agneskia and a Roma colleague. Unfortunately, I couldn't follow that exact exchange, but asking Jo about the argument later, she explained:

"Agneskia was just annoyed that she stole her station. I know the agency wants you to cover all the sections, especially when we're on break, but when we come back, you're supposed to return to your own station." She continued: "But she refused to go back; she said someone else was now using hers, and it wasn't fair".

This wasn't the only argument that I witnessed in the sortation department. Several times, arguments broke out over station 'ownership'. The high-performance rates monitored by the agency, which acted as a control mechanism given their ability to control schedules, meant workers on the line competed to achieve ever higher rates in order to keep their production schedule or earn internal promotions. This led to the common practice of 'stealing sections.'

Stealing sections was encouraged by the agency officials and supervisors. It provided cover when workers left for their break and allowed for continuous production. Sortation workers left their break early not only to keep their production rates up but also to maintain control over their section. Workers spent much time carefully organising their assigned section, making sure everything was in order and complete. A shabby section could result in poor performance rates[[42]](#footnote-42).

Therefore, workers were coerced in hitting high performance rates, which had the effect of reducing their indeterminacy, invading the porosity of the workday and intensifying production. This resulted in lateral conflict between two sets of workers in the sortation room who competed with each other to maintain different sections and thus retranslated into a racial division in sortation room between Polish and Roma women on the line.

### 6.4.7 Concluding Remarks on the Sortation Department

The KPIs monitored by the agency in the sortation department had the effect of increasing workers' effort, reducing their indeterminacy and invading the porosity of the workday (Newsome, 2010). This granted a considerable amount of discretionary authority to the agency, enabling agency officials to potentially cause distress to individual workers who couldn't 'make rate' in sortation by identifying them as 'low performers' and threatening to alter their shifts, particularly to clash with childcare. Therefore, workers tried to hit and go over their productive targets by intensifying their effort on the line, stealing other workers' sections to maintain the rate and working through breaks.

Nevertheless, operating within the confines of meeting KPIs and fulfilling staffing requirements, the agency officials could also give certain workers better shifts, including the shifts they wanted. This had the effect of women flirting and acquiescing to their sexualisation on the shop floor. Unsurprisingly, this was perceived as operating according to favouritism, with the White Polish women, who wore make-up and flirted with the agency officials, preferred to the Roma women when it came to internal promotions and permanent contracts.

This section, focusing on the sortation department of FrictionCo, has demonstrated that the despotism of working time (through the Performance-Scheduling) has increased workers' effort, reduced their indeterminacy and invaded the porosity of the workday. The despotism of working time increased the arbitrary power of the agency officials who used performance targets to design their working schedules. This caused misery for women workers who had to increase their efforts to reach the required performance level. If they could not reach the required performance levels, workers were disciplined by scheduling them to work shifts that clashed with their child-care.

Therefore, the monitoring and standardising of workers' efforts could be seen as directly related to the workers' contract. For example, the workers continued employment becomes dependent upon the worker achieving their performance targets. This allowed managers to rely on direct methods of control to increase effort. As a result, the agency official was charged with ensuring that the required performance levels were met. Increasing performance, therefore, did not operate through incentive schemes or even formal disciplinary action but rather through the agency's ability to punish working mothers by changing shifts if they did not meet the required performance. This mechanism was therefore gendered, because of its reliance on the workers double burden (Pollert 1981; Glucksman, 2009) and racialised because of the prevailing racial division of labour within sortation. This racial division of labour increased competition between Polish and Roma women, whereby each would attempt to increase their productivity by ‘stealing sections’.

## 6.5 Concluding Remarks on FrictionCo

Overall, FrictionCo operates within a context of increased mobility and industrial circulation among workers in Forge Valley, juxtaposed with the immobility and heightened dependency of Polish and British workers in Pit-Town. Within this dynamic, workers' varying mobility and bargaining power play a significant role in the construction of a racial division of labour in the warehouse. In this division, warehouse managers and agency officials implement specific control mechanisms that reflect not only the physical and technical layout of production but also the capacity of workers to engage in effort bargaining.

Labour control in FrictionCo is enforced and maintained by taking advantage of workers' immigration statuses, gender, and racialised variable mobility power in the local labour market. The state plays an important role by limiting workers' reproduction through bordering practices that differently include workers within the welfare system. Moreover, spatial differences within the local labour market allow FrictionCo to recruit and racially divide workers associated with their position within the SCR.

Within this racial and gender division, male refugees and Roma workers from Forge Valley are positioned against Polish women in Pit-Town. Many Polish women in the sortation department have worked at FrictionCo for several years, often balancing job responsibilities with young families, which affords them a certain degree of ‘fixity’ in the local labour market (Rogaly, 2020).

For the Polish women, their economic vulnerability through their lack of employment opportunities in Pit-Town and temporary employment is combined with the performance management system (Newsome et al., 2013). Here, agency officials monitor key performance indicators (KPIs), including the productivity levels of individual workers. Bringing together flexible scheduling and performance management has serious consequences for workers. It gives the agency official a powerful mechanism to reduce workers' indeterminacy in the labour process. Scheduling performance thus brings its own disciplinary regime instigated by the agency official, who identifies 'low performers' and 'flexes-down' at their own discretion to ensure required levels are obtained. The result is the intensification of work.

In the Sortation department, the use of women’s double burden became a lever for enforcing shift changes, contributing to an environment of work intensification. In this context, scheduling performance operated in a way that individualised effort among workers and fostered a competitive atmosphere on the production line.

In the loading department, the agency delegated its power to the team leaders, who operate as a go-between, using this position to threaten and discipline its workforce. In the loading department, work intensification was reached by team leaders' close monitoring and direction of the loading gangs. This had the effect of collectivising effort, increasing socialisation between workers and team-working. In this way, intensifying work divided the workforce between the loading and sortation departments. Where the intensification of work through the triangular relationship (Vosko, 2010) created an individualistic and competitive atmosphere in the sortation department, it created a more cohesive and collective one in the loading department.

The employees in the two departments primarily interpreted this contrast through a lens of racial and gendered difference. For example, for the loading bay workers, the White women workers of the sortation sector earned more than them and had 'safer jobs' (meaning permanent contracts) and 'more boring jobs'. Meanwhile, Jo and Agneskia in the sortation department thought the loading workers performed 'dangerous' and 'dirty' jobs. Within each department, the team leaders and supervisors fostered the fragmentation between the departments. Jaco and Jan often commented on the 'Donkey work' of the loaders. At the same time, the supervisors in the sortation department commented on sortation as 'easy' and 'clean' work (See Elson & Pearson, 1981).

This portrayal aligns with the workers' understanding of the racial and gender divide between the loading and sortation departments, wherein the former is predominantly composed of refugees and Roma men. The latter consists mainly of White Polish and Roma women. The workers' perception of the racial and gender distinctions between the departments did not lead them to accept the strategies employed by the managers unquestionably. The reduction in autonomy in the loading bays was questioned by Gebrial, but not Ali. Therefore, some Roma workers were able to exercise a degree of control over the effort-bargain by taking advantage of walk-about. In contrast, for Ali, influenced by his limited opportunities for social mobility and his subjectivity shaped by the asylum process, often displayed varying levels of compliance, sometimes expressing a higher degree of adherence to workplace expectations.

However, the introduction of measures that had the effect of intensifying labour, also appeared to decrease the social divisions between workers within the loading bay, creating a space for the development of a shared class interest among the two class fractions.

In the sortation department, the repetitive 'boring' and constant job on the line, controlled through performance scheduling, was accepted because the shifts allowed the Polish Women to complete their reproductive labour and, due to the nature of the local labour market which offered minimal alternatives. As a result, management and agency officials were able to intensify work on the line and pump out more surplus.

My general point is that the state has created conditions conducive to the exploitation of a new racialized reserve army of labour, which is subjected to the intensification of work in the warehouse. This situation has led to efforts to eliminate unproductive time and maximize productive effort. However, the labor control mechanisms employed to achieve this vary according to the technical organization of each department and the different levels of labour power (both work effort and mobility effort). Consequently, the mobility bargaining power of the class fractions in each department also differs. The various mechanisms aimed at intensifying work in the sortation and loading departments further contribute to disconnecting the social relations between these racial class fractions.

The following chapter transitions to the shop floor of SeamlessCo, exploring how workers' experiences of effort-bargaining and compliance are shaped by the varying social structures within the local labour market. It will examine whether these dynamics reflect similar patterns to those observed in FrictionCo, particularly in relation to how racialised conditions influence workers' behaviour and interactions in the workplace.

**FrictionCo.**

Photo 8. Docking Bay (Inbound).

Photo 7. Clocking out (Mezzanine)

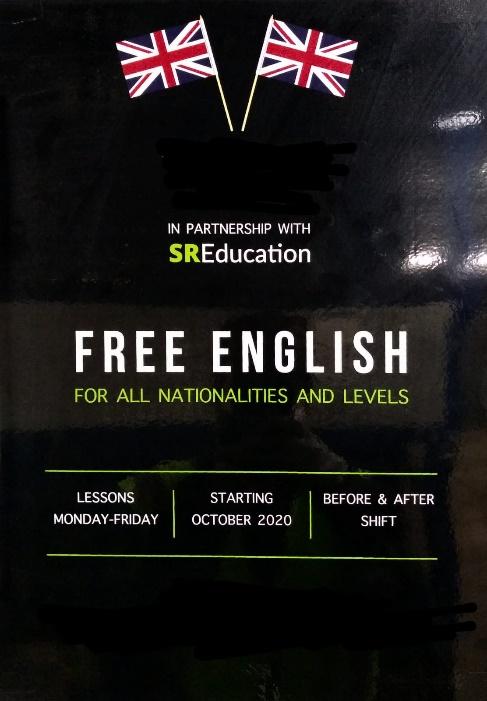


Photo 10. English Lessons.

Photo 9. Unit C.





Photo 12. Sortation Station.

Photo 11. Cloakroom.



Photo 14. Loading Bay C.

Photo 13. Voice-Picking aisle.



Photo 16. Crossing the entrance bridge.

Photo 15. Clock-in station (Loading Bay C).



Photo 17. Automation under construction.

Photo 18. Warning! Thief at work.

**Figure 8: FrictionCo: Ground Floor**

\*Sortation: Level 1

Voice -Picking

Unit A

Unit B

To the Bridge and Car Park

Docking Docking Yard:

Canteen B

Loading Bay A

Loading Bay C

Unit C

Unit C

nteen B

Canteen B

Loading Bay B

Docking Yard: Inbound

Loading Bay B

Loading Bay B

Mezzanine: Clock in/out

Unit C

Search Area

Agency Office

Staff Entrance

To Pit-Town

**Figure 9: FrictionCo: Sortation 2**

W.C.

Industrial Fan

Push Tray Sorters

Supervisor Desk and Equipment Bay

Stairs to Loading Bay C

Belt Sorters

Belt Sorters: Agnieszka and Jo

Picked Items

Accessed by ramp to top conveyer belt

Product Movement

Access to lower conveyer belt

Conveyer belt

Clock in Desk

Agency Official

Belt Sorters

Delivery Sorters

Hygiene Station

Cage Lifts to Loading Bay C

**Figure 10: FrictionCo Loading Bay C**

Road System

To Web Processing

Cage Lifts to Sortation 2

Loading Team Leader Desk: Jaco

To Break Room C

Automated Picking (Under Construction)

Voice-Directed Picking Ailes

Loading Bays

Empty Cages (For Picking)

Full Cages ‘Sixes’

Waste Cages

Broken Cages

FLT Driver: Mike

Product Movement

FLT Driver

TNA Driver

Loading Gang: ‘The Sheffielders’

From Web Processing

Voice-Directed Order Picker

Clock in Desk

To Sortation 3

TNA Driver

Waste Management: Graham and Filip

Picked Cages

**Figure 11: Organisation Chart: FrictionCo**

# CHAPTER 7: SEAMLESSCO

MAIN INFORMANTS

PICKING CHAMBER 1:

**The Pickers:**The ‘Reytons’: Addy, Naseem and Omar (British Yemeni)

Xenon (South Sudanese)

Simon ‘Picking Champion #1’: (Polish)

Dave’, Kit and Chi: (Hong-Kong)

**Team Leader**: Olivia (British)

**Agency Official**: Andrezej (Polish)

**Security Officer**: Bahir (Kashmiri)

“Fuck Picking- Fuck SeamlessCo.”

Graffiti in Picking Chamber 1, Level 5 Toilet.

## Introduction

This chapter examines the social organisation of the labour process at SeamlessCo, focusing on how state mechanisms—particularly bordering policies—and local labour market conditions shape the effort-bargaining practices of workers. It explores how these dynamics influence compliance levels and strategies for negotiating work effort within the workplace. Additionally, this chapter provides a comparative analysis of SeamlessCo and FrictionCo, both operating within the same national and local labour market, illustrating how unique workplace contexts shape contrasting patterns of worker accommodation. By focusing on the effort bargain, this chapter reveals how specific organisational practices and structural conditions impact workers’ capacity to negotiate their labour.

In the first section of this chapter, I describe the organisation of labour and the physical layout of the shopfloor, guiding the reader into the warehouse and presenting them with a sensory experience of the warehouse. In the second section, I examine observable practices within managerial and agency efforts that appeared to intensify the labour process by squeezing surplus value from the structure of the workday and increasing the pace of work. Rather than speculating on managerial intent, this analysis starts from the fundamental contradiction in capitalism: the dialectical struggle between labour and capital (Cohen, 1987). Therefore, in the third section, I examine how differences in workers' mobility power influenced their bargaining leverage within the warehouse, shaping the degree to which their labour could be commodified (Smith, 2006). Here, I describe the racial division of labour in the warehouse and within the picking department. In the final section, I show how some workers used their mobility power to reduce their effort and reshape their politics of production.

Overall, varied patterns of effort-bargaining on the shopfloor can be related to the particular social context (Cunnison, 1966). Unlike FrictionCo, this was not represented by racial and gendered segmentation between departments but operated informally within departments. This reinforced the prevailing racial division of labour found in the labour market (Ram,1991). Ultimately, in SeamlessCo, workers capacity to effort-bargain is related to workers' differential mobility power, thus giving rise to a racial division of labour.

### 7.1.1 The Journey to SeamlessCo

Sat outside Sugar Town, in Forge Valley, warehouse workers dressed in high-vis congregate on the pavements laughing and joking, kicking empty bottles into an invisible goal. Finishing my coffee and placing the empty cup into an overflowing bin, I pluck up the courage to talk to a small group on the fringe who were passing out cigarettes. As I reach them, I offer my lighter to the nearest, who obliges with a slight nod. I ask them where they work, under the pretence of being unemployed. "SeamlessCo" came the reply. "They", pointing to the other group, who I now noticed wore a slightly different colour high-vis "work at another warehouse". The group were Roma and only the one who had accepted my lighter took it upon himself to speak. "Twenty minutes south warehouse", he says, pointing down Donetsk Way, "twenty minutes north another", he recounted, turning round and pointing in the opposite direction, grinning as he did, so the oddity of his geographical approximation was not lost on either of us.

SeamlessCo is situated in Forge Valley in Sheffield. This contrasts with the West of the city, where the suburbs flow into the countryside. In Forge Valley, the steelworks punctuate the land as far as Rotherham. Between the steelworks, evidence of a new industry is scattered between the old. Giant, faceless and grey, the distribution centres and warehouses tower over the 19th-century rolling mills covered by Japanese knotweed.

I leave the house at 5:30 a.m. Proceeding on my bike, I cycle past 'GloboFashionCo' high street retailer, passing sympathy flowers laid out in front of its doors following the recent murder of a teenager on Sheffield's busiest high street. From here, I continue to the Sheffield Riviera, taking a shortcut onto Blast Lane, which passes underneath the abandoned railway bridge connecting the 'Riviera' with Forge Valley and beyond. From here, I follow the canal which runs adjacent to the river. My eyes remain fixed on the path ahead to dodge any broken glass (twice in three weeks, I've had a puncture). As I near the Forge Valley industrial estate, the abandoned 19th-century red brick mills give way to 20th-century recycling plants, distribution centres and scrap metal yards. Along the A road, the sounds of heavy industry and lorries connecting with the motorway at the junction collide and are amplified by the long thoroughfare that connects the city centre with its out-of-town shopping centre.

Passing in front of the empty Bessemer House on Jenkin Street, I follow the twin-black corrugated steel-clad sheds of the steel firm, which impose themselves over Forge Valley. Here, I have the road to myself. Picking up the pace, as the cycle track ends and I'm forced into the middle of the road, I turn past the retail business park, leaving several trade union and TATA Steel offices behind me to my right. To my left, the skeletons of temporary shelters erected at the COVID-19 testing site stand bowed, their polyester shelters ripped and moulding, their steel frames long since lifted for other use.

The empty, contaminated land dotted with bars and ingots closed in by high barbed wire fencing extends back towards the dual carriageway where I pass the bridge separating Forge Valley from the industrial estate. Beneath the bridge, the canal courses through the invisible Top of Form

divide between the Eastern European, Roma, Pakistani and Yemeni communities of Forge Valley to the North and the White British community in new housing estates to the East. Crossing this divide, a row of massage parlours, Chai shops, Vape stores, and a closed community centre unfold from view.

As I round a corner, voices emerge at 'Carbrook Concrete Ltd'. A fire is already going in the front yard, and the employees surround it, sipping their morning coffee from the 'Rag n Bone' café next door. Here, I begin to see SeamlessCo employees line the long road which descends towards the grey box warehouse at the end of the road. At first, sporadically, and then, as I meet the junction at the marina, a heavier flow of employees appears, easily identifiable by the agency workers' high-vis and permanent employees' SeamlessCo embossed fleeces. I watch them sprint from the tram, barely stopping to look when crossing the busy A road.

## The Shopfloor

There are two main entrances to SeamlessCo. The first, through an electronic gate opened by workers' key cards, leads to a damp portable cabin with broken lockers, tables and chairs, a couple of broken vending machines that spit dust instead of coffee granules and a smoking area at the back squeezed between the cabin and a skip overflowing with barbed wire. The second entrance leads straight into the warehouse, next to the agency offices, training room and canteen. A large metal sign at the entrance reads, ‘403 days since last reportable incident' underneath 'Right to Search All Who Enter'. Bags are stuffed into lockers, phones and sweets are hidden in pockets, high-vis vests are put on, and hoods are thrown over heads.

Most of the workers at SeamlessCo use the former entrance. Its entrance is far closer to the main A Road, and a short walk across the busy docking yard leads straight into the picking chamber, meaning the time between clocking in with their key cards, reaching the AMT desk, and logging in is significantly reduced. The latter is reserved for the agency officials, managers and team leaders, who are not subject to such time constraints.

I head to the check-in point, where I use my key card again. Bahir, the Kashmiri security guard, waves me through with a nod[[43]](#footnote-43). I take three minutes to walk from the check-in to the AMT (Arm mounted terminals) desk in Picking Chamber 1. I pass outbound to my right, while a vast area of the warehouse is cordoned off to my left with signs reading 'automation construction in progress'. Unlike FrictionCo, entering SeamlessCo is like entering a single container; no walls or gates separate each department, meaning there is more fluid movement of workers and managers between different spaces on the shop floor.

The workers of SeamlessCo perceive different kinds of noises as they navigate towards the picking chamber. Passing security into the main chamber, a giant hollow echo reverberates under the constant motion of the conveyor belts. Here, the noises are regular, low and rhythmic, whereas, entering picking chamber 1, the conveyor belt's low grown is enveloped by the deafening sound of the radio.

The use of music in the picking chamber was relatively new, as Simon ‘picking champion #1', liked to tell me, "Imagine what it was like before we had music, just the sound of the metal trolleys screeching along the floor, now it's like we have an extra heartbeat to pick to". The radio playing on loudspeakers dispersed at regular intervals throughout the picking chamber is regularly interrupted by Gary, one of the Polish team leaders. Announcements are made at random intervals during the day, "Welcome, blue team, to your first shift of the week; we thank the red team for their hard work and effort. The picking rate is at 72; they have absolutely smashed it; let's see what Blue Team can do; I know you guys can go even higher".

Contrary to Simon's observation, I have never managed to align the speed of my picking to the sound of the radio. The random interruptions on the loudspeaker became distressing as individual workers are called out for team meetings. The distressing tonality and their unpredictability created a sense of dread that never allowed me to completely loosen control over my body and mind and pick to the rhythm of the radio. A hum follows the sudden stoppage of music as Gary inserts the microphone. When the music stops, pickers stop what they are doing immediately and look up, as if looking at the speakers above them requires their complete visual attention. With the cutting of the radio, hearts beat slightly faster, and stress is heightened. Pickers’ shoulders are tensed, listening for their name to be called. Those who don't speak English listen intently to the alien sounds, waiting for the familiarity of a name or number that they can recognise. Sounds remain unrecognised, names are not called, shoulders are relaxed, the radio clicks back, and picking continues. These noises circulate along the picking chamber, connecting pickers with their arm mounted terminals (AMT) and the AMT with their body movements, but also creating abrupt and stressful interruptions that heighten the pickers' sense of dread and dislocate the workers' bodies from the rhythm of production.

The distribution of light across the shopfloor is sporadic and uneven. The picking chamber is completely closed off from the outside. The warehouse has no windows. Instead, artificial light is directed from the ceiling. In the picking chamber, motion detectors are used so that lights oscillate along the picking aisles, following the movement of each picker. The pickers’ surroundings are intermittently illuminated by sharp beams of artificial light surrounding them and following them down a picking aisle. The picker walks into the darkness, and the artificial spotlight plays catchup, illuminating everything around them. Nevertheless, for that millisecond before motion is detected and light is triggered, the picker stands in darkness and feels free of the searchlight. The artificial uniformity that lights up the pickers’ route heightens the sense of complete exposure.

Because of the artificial light, dirt and dust are clearly distinguishable. Dust can be seen around the SKU shelves, under and between each picking box[[44]](#footnote-44). As a result, workers tip the box towards them to reach inside instead of pulling the box off the shelf horizontally. This leaves the picker with a head full of dust that has collected between the SKU shelf and the picking box. In terms of health and safety, this raises the risk of a box slipping from a shelf and potentially overwhelming the picker with its weight.

To shield themselves from dust tarnishing their clothes and the cold stiffening their bones, pickers opt for dark clothing, including hoodies and coats. Dave wears his parka and pulls on the drawstring tight, along with his face mask; only his eyes are distinguishable. The Reytons wear joggers that they tuck into their socks so the cold air cannot pass up the leg. Many of the refugees wear woolly hats and gloves. Xenon pulls his hat down over his ears so that his "ears don't become icicles and fall off." Most importantly, though, the item of clothing on every picker’s mind is their shoes. "You'll go through them in a couple of months," said Abdi, pointing at my trainers, "it's an investment getting these," he said, pointing to a new pair of sketchers, "Yeah, they look a bit shit, but they will last, and at the end of the day you won't have to soak your feet".

Sensuously perceived, the technical system creates dark corridors with loud music, crossed with dust and cold air. These dark spaces are interrupted and dissolve under the artificial light that follows the pickers' body as it moves through the picking aisles, and Gary's abrupt intermissions on the loudspeaker halt the radio and interrupt the flow of the pickers' movements.

### The Workforce and the Racial Division of Labour

As demonstrated in Appendix 4, the employees at SeamlessCo exhibit distinct occupational, residential, economic, and migratory backgrounds compared to those at FrictionCo. However, there is some overlap between the 'Sheffielders' in the loading bay in FrictionCo with the SeamlessCo workers. The average age of the workers in SeamlessCo is younger than that of FrictionCo. Most workers in Picking Chamber 1 are second and third-generation British Yemeni, in their early twenties. Most live in Forge Valley, located within walking distance from FrictionCo. Their educational credentials and qualifications are minimal, although some attend a Post-92 University. The British Yemeni workers often have a rich family history of working in the Sheffield steel industry and maintaining long-term residential stability in Top of Form

Forge Valley. These 'second' and 'third' generation migrants are male and female. I refer to the group of young men as 'The Reytons'. In the methodology, I reflect on my experience of 'becoming' a 'Reyton'.

Second, there are Roma workers who live in Forge Valley, a number of male refugees from East Africa and the Middle East, the majority of which work the night shift, a number of Eastern European, mainly Polish and Lithuanian workers and a number of recently arrived migrant families from Hong Kong[[45]](#footnote-45).

In SeamlessCo, the 'pickers' are all agency workers contracted to RecruitNow. They live in Forge Valley, a walkable distance from the warehouse, are both male and female and are made up of the Reytons, Roma and refugees. The Polish workers in the warehouse work as agency officials for RecruitNow; as lift marshals within the picking chamber, and male Polish workers work in outbound, some with permanent contracts with SeamlessCo. The White-British workers have permanent contracts and work as team leaders in the picking department and as managers of the three departments. Within the picking department, Roma and Refugee pickers operate on the ground floor referred to as 'ground zero'. The Reytons worked predominantly on floors five and six.

### The Production Process

SeamlessCo, a vast multinational logistics provider catering to various countries, operates as a third-party logistics (3PL) firm. Serving as an external service provider, SeamlessCo specialises in overseeing and implementing warehousing and distribution operations exclusively for a Global Fashion Retailer (GloboFashionCo). It has a partly unionised workforce and an exclusive partnership with a single employment agency (RecruitNow). The warehouse is owned by a Logistics Real Estate firm (WareCore) and has been leased to SeamlessCo since 2018. SeamlessCo specialises in offering outsourced logistics solutions within the fashion sector. SeamlessCo provides e-commerce fulfilment and returns management for GloboFashionCo. SeamlessCo represents a third-party distribution centre, as opposed to the integrated logistics of FrictionCo.

When I gained employment with RecruitNow in January 2021, SeamlessCo was in the process of restructuring the physical layout of the warehouse. The warehouse was being restructured into four sequential operations. These operations would feed into each other. The first was receiving. This department would feed the (semi-automated) picking chamber, including put-away. The picking chamber would feed dispatch, while a fourth department would handle returns. In essence, SeamlessCo was attempting to create an 'assembly line' that would weave its way through the physical contours of the building. The aim was to remove idle capital in the form of inventory. The key objective appeared to be that the physical restructuring was aimed at accelerating the throughput rate within the production process and reducing the number of workers in the picking department. As a result, the warehouse resembled a construction site during my employment. Large sections of the warehouse were under construction, meaning the picking chamber was assembled vertically over six floors.

During my time of employment, there were three chambers in the warehouse. Chamber 1 (the only picking chamber) has six floors, each identical in its layout. Chamber 2 is located on the ground level and includes processing aisles and outbound and inbound delivery. Chamber 3, the so-called 'empty chamber', is under construction as SeamlessCo constructs its automated picking, inbound and outbound chambers. Here, I describe the production process for a picker in picking chamber 1.

In the picking chamber, the process of production stays constant for each pick and is as follows:

1. When entering the warehouse, the Picker will use their individual key card to pass the electronic turnstiles.
2. The picker will clock in on the RFID reader using fingerprint identification. Now they are 'on the clock'; at this point, Utilisation rates are recorded.
3. The picker will enter Chamber 1, heading straight to the AMT desk, where they pick up their hand-held AMT scanner, swapping this with their individual key card.
4. The picker will log into their AMT scanner using their personalised password. At this point, efficiency rates start recording.
5. The picker will choose a floor to start working on and retrieve an empty trolley.
6. The paper picklist attached to the trolley is scanned.
7. The check string of the first picking location is shown on the AMT.
8. The picker takes the trolley to the correct picking location, scanning the check string of the location shown.
9. The picker scans the SKU barcode on the correct item.
10. The picker scans the container ID assigned to the slot number on the trolley, shown on the AMT, placing the item in the correct container.
11. The AMT reveals the next location ID.
12. Once the trolley 'run' is complete (as shown on the AMT screen), the picker takes the trolley to the trolley drop off (if on the first floor) or to the (Polish) 'lift marshalls' stationed at one of the industrial lifts along the east flank of the picking chamber if on floors 2-6.
13. The picker takes a new trolley and starts a 'run'.
14. If there is an incorrect SKU or the bar code is not scanning, the picker takes the item to one of the three (White-British) team leaders stationed along the middle aisles of the floor they are picking on. The TL prints a new SKU bar code, and the picker continues his run.
15. The final pick must be no more than five minutes from the end of the shift. The picker returns the AMT scanner to the AMT desk, receiving their individual key card.
16. The picker queues for the fingerprint identification RFID reader to check out.
17. Once checked out, the picker goes through security, using their individual key card to open the electronic turnstile; security picks workers randomly to search.
18. The pickers cross the busy docking yard, heading into the portable cabin, collecting their items from the locker.
19. The individual key card is used to unlock the turnstile gate.

Several aspects of the production process can be emphasised. First, picking chamber 1 is divided into six floors. The trolley 'run' starts on the ground floor. Here, each trolley is empty. A trolley may be completed on the ground floor but will likely continue its 'run' on another floor. If this is the case, once the 'run' is finished on the ground floor, the picker takes the trolley to the lift Marshall, who sends the trolley to the floor above for another picker to continue the 'run'. Each time the trolley is sent up a level, it is closer to completing its 'run'. This means the higher the floor, the fewer items will need to be picked for each trolley.

Moreover, the ground floor has double the number of locations, given that half of the ground floor has smaller SKU shelves, with smaller items such as make-up and jewellery. This means that the space and, therefore, time taken to move between each picking location is greater the higher the floor you are on. For example, a trolley on the ground floor will average 80 picks per hour. By the time the trolley has travelled to the third floor, the average total picks will have decreased to 40 picks per hour. When the trolley reaches the sixth floor, the average picks will be down to 15 per hour. Therefore, not only does it take longer to complete a run on a higher floor because of the greater distances travelled between picks (efficiency), but the time taken between completed 'runs' is also increased the higher the floor you go (utilisation, meaning; time off task). This means the higher the floor, the harder it is to hit set utilisation and efficiency targets. As Simon told me, "You are wasting your time on level 5. You will never be able to hit your targets up there; it just can't be done; you're better off on level 1".

This has a curious effect on the racial division of labour inside the picking chamber and on each floor. For example, why do the Reytons only work on the fifth and sixth floors (effectively giving up on reaching their KPIs?) Why do the Refugees and Roma work on the first floor? How does management stop the 'trickle up' of the Reytons to the higher floors and redirect workers to the first floor when next-day delivery trolleys are located solely on the first floor? To understand this, I will first outline managers and agencies' attempts to interfere in this process, thereby intensifying production and removing 'idle' time in the picking chamber. Second, I will outline how managers' and agency officials' ‘success' in intensifying production in the picking chamber results in a racial division of labour between floors. Third, I will outline how workers responded to these attempts to intensify and remove indeterminacy in the labour process, relating these instances of mobility-effort bargaining to workers' uneven forms of social reproduction.

## 7.3 Performance-Scheduling

Management uses two distinct measures of individual performance. The first, 'efficiency' measures the speed at which workers operate. The particular efficiency target or 'rate' increases the longer the worker has been employed at SeamlessCo. For example, during the first week, the efficiency target is 40 picks per hour. This increases to 60 picks per hour in week two. By week three, workers' targets are set at 70 picks per hour and remain at this rate. Monitors display each worker's rate and percentile ranking, accessed only by team leaders and agency officials. The team leaders can send prompts via the scanner to individual workers to increase the worker's performance metric. These are sent by total shift average or picks by hour.



*Photo 19. AMT Message; night average Photo 20. AMT Message; Recorded Picks*

The second performance metric is ‘utilisation,’ which SeamlessCo defines as the total time spent picking on the automated material handling system (AMT) by a colleague, along with unallocated time, such as extended breaks or toilet breaks. Utilisation measures the minutes during each shift when workers demonstrate no measurable productivity. Typically, the system allows a five-minute window during which inactivity is not flagged. For example, if the shift ends at 22:00, the last scan on an SKU must be no earlier than 21:55. Moreover, once this period elapses, the digital clock commences, tallying the minutes each worker remains uninvolved in productive activities. Utilisation levels exceeding an hour may lead to immediate termination, while even smaller durations can result in disciplinary action. The utilisation metric intensifies workers' awareness that they are digitally connected to their tasks and must consistently remain engaged in work. The team leaders can send individual prompts regarding utilisation to remind workers of final scanning times.



*Photo 21. AMT Reminder.*

### 7.3.1 Constrained Autonomy and Uneven Bargains

Here, the question remains: Who measures this performance data? In SeamlessCo, authority is split between two centres: management and agencies. They both act as conduits and interpreters of this performance data. Each department has a supervisor (Polish or British male). Beneath the supervisor are team leaders (male and female Polish and British). The picking department has four team leaders on each floor, each in charge of around 15-20 Pickers. Moreover, security officers circulate the shopfloors, taking photographs of workers and performing random spot-checks.

Regarding formal authority, each (White-British) team leader in the picking department is responsible for their team of fifteen to twenty pickers. Team leader meetings are organised individually. "I hate it; it's like torture," said Dave in the queue one morning for the AMT. "You know it's coming; you just don't know when it will be, today, tomorrow, maybe not until next week; that means we can't relax; maybe we could if we knew when it was, then when they message you, it's already too late".

The team leader meetings were a source of great stress for the pickers. During the induction, pickers are informed that team leader meetings occur weekly. However, by the end of our second week at SeamlessCo, neither Dave—who started at the same time as I did—nor I, had attended a team leader meeting. At the start of my third week, I received a message on my AMT to "report to TL desk G45". Receiving the message, I made my way through the maze of picking aisles, carrying my trolley. Quick calculations were made in my head about my efficiency targets; my last hour was recorded at 42% efficiency; since then, I must have upped my rate, but I knew I was still well below the expected standard.

My team leader, Olivia, was twenty-six, British, and had worked at SeamlessCo for less than a year. The performance of the 15 pickers in the team is averaged, giving the team leader an overall performance rate. Therefore, team leaders will compete over obtaining pickers with high efficiency and utilisation rates.

The team leader retains considerable input over the task direction of their team in the warehouse. For example, the team leader decides who they put on individual tasks. These individual tasks usually entail put-away and are not subject to the same KPIs as pickers. As Olivia put it, "once your scores are good and I know I can trust you, I will give you some other jobs where you're not monitored big brother style". The pickers’ attempts to increase efficiency and utilization rates are to “win more freedom,” as Omar put it, and be redeployed on the shop floor to tasks not subject to the same targets, with more autonomy. However, pickers knew that if their picking rates were consistently above average, team leaders were less likely to redeploy them to other roles in the warehouse. Omar told me, "You need to be quick, but not too quick, just quick enough".

Team leaders were competing with other team leaders and so needed to keep their team average up. As Olivia liked to say, "Just remember, your numbers are my numbers". For example, Simon (picking champion #1) was never chosen for put-away tasks despite being one of the most experienced on the shopfloor. This meant those chosen for jobs where you're not “monitored big brother style” were reserved for those who may have average picking rates which were "just quick enough", according to Omar, rather than those who consistently top efficiency and utilisation charts and were "too quick". Given the existing information asymmetry, this was a difficult and delicate balancing act.

This highlights the delicate balance workers must maintain to navigate management expectations while safeguarding their access to less monitored roles. Such dynamics exemplify the ongoing negotiation of effort and autonomy within the workplace, illustrating how workers strategically manage their labour to enhance their bargaining power in an environment where performance metrics dictate opportunities for greater autonomy.

This interplay between speed and autonomy resonates with the concept of effort bargaining, where workers assess how much effort to exert based on the incentives presented by management (Cunnison, 1966). In environments where productivity is closely monitored, such as at SeamlessCo, employees like Omar, deliberately modulate their output to avoid the repercussions of being too productive, which could lead to tighter scrutiny and fewer opportunities for less monitored roles (Burawoy, 1979).

The effort bargain at SeamlessCo is intricately linked to the organisation of the labour process and the management of efficiency data. Workers in the picking department strategically navigate the demands placed upon them by team leaders, utilising efficiency data to balance their output. This dynamic reflects a nuanced understanding of effort bargaining. Rather than participation given in return for a level of job security (Thompson, 2003), or financial rewards, in the picking department effort was modulated in response to the opportunity to engage in less monitored tasks that offer greater freedom and discretion in their work. Consequently, the drive for autonomy shapes their work behaviour; employees consciously modulate their performance to avoid being categorised as either inefficient or excessively efficient, which could lead to increased scrutiny and a loss of the more autonomous roles they desire. This contrasts sharply with the experiences at FrictionCo, where the primary form of bargaining revolves around pay, indicating a significant divergence in the labour strategies employed across different organisational contexts.

Team leaders strategically utilized performance metrics to intensify the pace of work, amplifying the pressure on individual workers, while workers such as Omar responded by carefully balancing his output. However, as we will see in the next section, agency officials leveraged this data to impose temporal flexibility as a disciplinary measure. The use of performance data became a tool not only for heightened work intensity but also for exerting control over workers' schedules.

### 7.3.2 Agency Controlled Flexible Discipline

New agency recruits undergo two training days at SeamlessCo. The first day provides information on the company, rules and regulations. Strange slideshows of the Burj Khalifa lit up in the colours of GloboFashionCo are shown, followed by flashy videos of corporate marketing campaigns and games of hangman (using only company language) to pass the time. Many of the workers, I find out, have worked here before but would rather sit through training again, "believe me, it gets even worse", says Omar, swinging on his chair, having nodded off during the presentation on manual handling. The second training day is a practical of the picking process.

Finishing my break on the second day, I head back to the on-site agency conference room to pick up my lunch and find several new recruits sitting down, waiting patiently for their first day of onboard training to begin. The silence is broken by a skirmish outside next to the security check-in. I see Bahir attempt to wrestle with an agency worker, "Don't fucking bother working here; these guys take the piss", shouted Omar throwing his high vis at Andrezej, the agency official. Andrezej, shrugging his shoulders, enters the training room and does a quick headcount, "only fifteen of you, well I can't blame you", he says. Then, calling another agency official, "Hey Darren…Darren, we've only lost four on the first morning; that's the best yet!".

Later that day, Addy tells me that Omar had been sent home early, and police had been called after Omar pulled a knife on Bahir, "Yeah, it's tough, you know? They're always watching those numbers, and you can't help but feel the heat. Miss a beat, and suddenly, your hours are up in the air. I've seen folks sent home early just because they couldn't keep up. So, you end up pushing yourself, trying to hit those higher rates just to stay off the radar".

### 7.3.3 Temp-to-Perm: Contractual Control

Dave stood by me in the queue for the AMT, and over the next six weeks, we got to know each other. We shared a locker because most lockers were so damaged that there weren't enough for every worker. We often shared food, with Dave often only bringing a bag of sweets to last the eight-hour shift. We had a specific relationship that would not develop in another place. My presence as a researcher and the demands of the warehouse's production logic jointly shaped our relationship. Our relation seemed to further the Marxist axiom that production relations are, by nature, social relations.

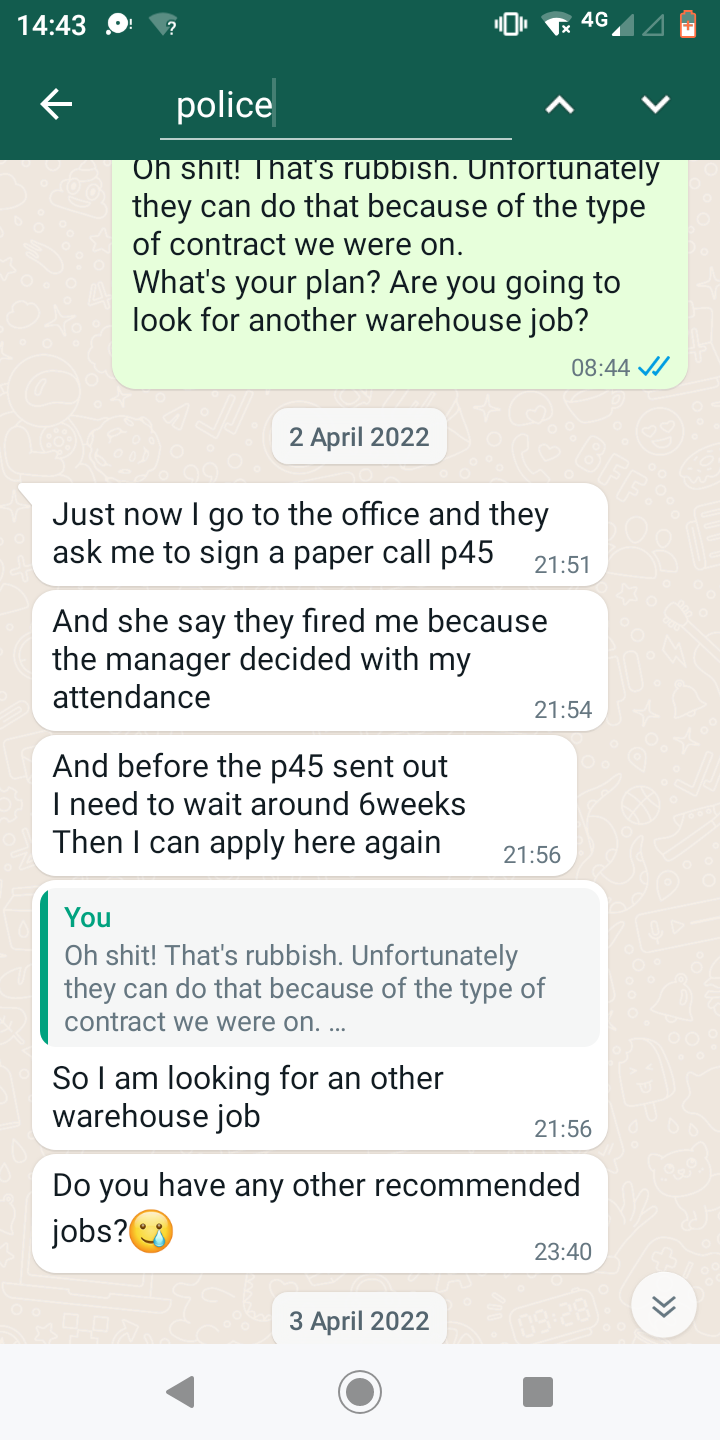
Dave was hired in December 2021, a couple of months before me, to work as a picker in Chamber 1. Round-faced, with a floppy black fringe framed by rounded glasses and a facemask. At twenty-one, this was his first job in the UK, having arrived from Hong Kong with his family days before – his mother Chi and his older sister Kit (who also worked in SeamlessCo). After keeping very quiet for the first week, he started to open up to me. We discussed Chinese politics, the differences between Chinese and English work culture, the stresses of working at SeamlessCo, problems with his landlord, and his dreams of becoming an accountant and supporting his family. Mostly, though, Dave wanted to compare targets. "What [efficiency %] are you working at? Why so low? We have to make a higher rate. When we get the [permanent] contract, we won't work this hard, I know".

Dave had worked over the Christmas period, but then in January, "they dropped me, told me I didn't need to come in anymore, then I got a text just last week, said there were some positions available again, so here I am." "Then a couple of days ago", he continued ", I'm halfway through a run, and my TL taps me on the shoulder, says I can go home; I say I don't want to go home, she says “well, you got to go home… I'd paid for travel to get here; what's the use in coming in? It costs me more to come into work for a couple of hours than sitting at home". Not losing his breath, he continued, "It's all right if you're a quick picker. But, like I said, my average is 40; my TL told me to go down on level 1 to increase my rate, but it's no use; it's my back. Besides, they make you jump through hoops for the [permanent] contract; there is no way I'll be given it".

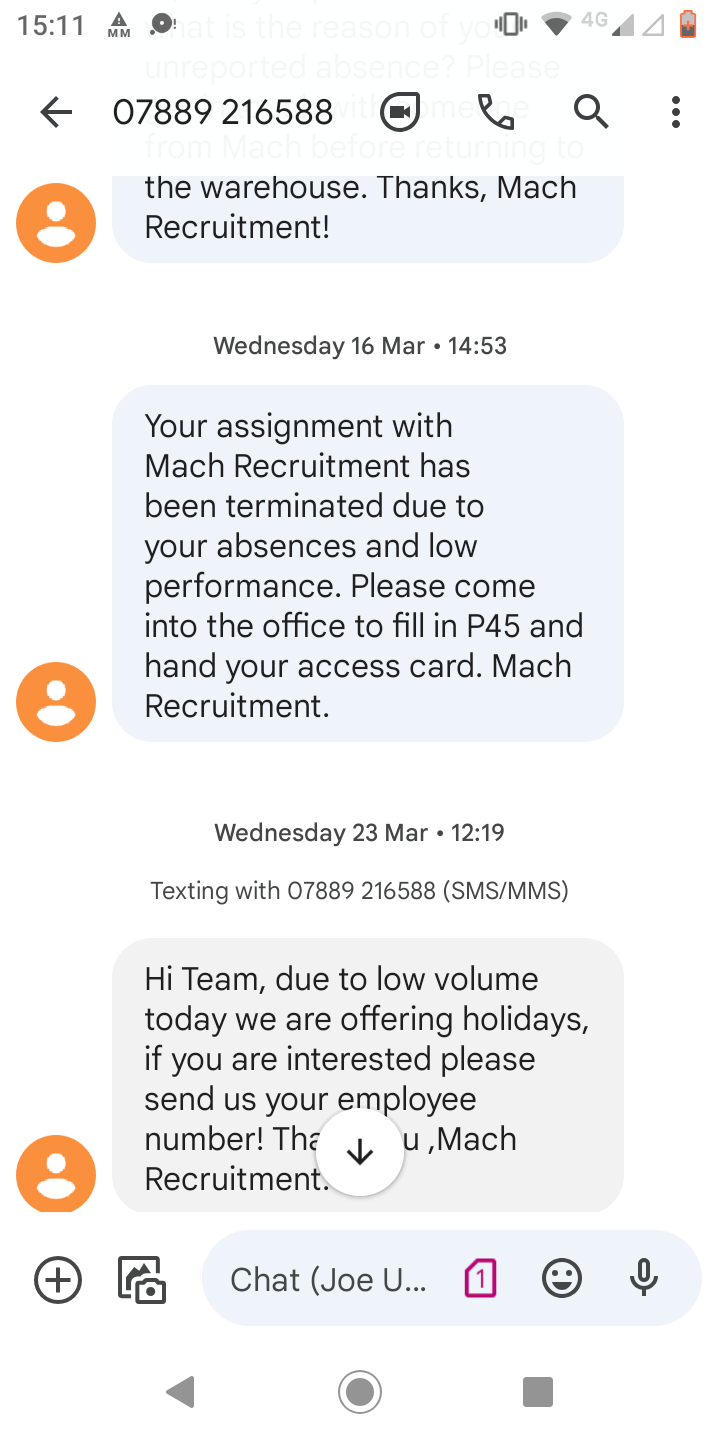
Dave highlights several issues relating to the interaction of flexibility and performance in SeamlessCo. First, the fluctuations in consumer demand and the precarity of the temporary contract means the agency officials are free to cause distress to specific workers through numerical flexibility at certain times of the year. Dave was flexed down following the January sales. Second, he was flexed during his shift, which was the result of being unable to hit performance targets. This creates fear among workers: if they are unable to hit performance targets, their hours are cut.

Third, the permanent contract hangs over the heads of the agency workers. Team leaders make constant references to the semi-mythical permanent contract, "Just improve your utilisation; your efficiency isn't bad; just keep going, and you'll get that contract, no worries". In fact, the permanent contract never appeared. Of those twenty new recruits I trained with during the first two days, only nine remained by the time I finished six weeks later. None had received a permanent contract, despite promises of permanent contracts after four weeks. Every meeting with Olivia, my team leader, I asked about permanent contracts, and each time, I received the same response was, "Just improve a little here, improve your utilisation, maybe don't go to the toilet as much, not everyone becomes permanent; I will put forward those I can trust because once they are permanent, they are my problem, not the agencies. It will be me who has to fill out all the ROC's"[[46]](#footnote-46). Shortly after my fieldwork, Dave texted me that he had been fired from RecruitNow (Figures 12 and 13).

**Figure 12: WhatsApp Message**



**Figure 13: RecruitNow Text Message.**



Dave's narrative not only unveils the struggles faced by agency workers but also exposes a system where the quest for a permanent contract remains elusive, creating a breeding ground for the intensification of labour. The precarious nature of Temp-to-Perm employment, marked by sudden shifts in demand and stringent performance targets, amplifies the vulnerability of workers like Dave. The perpetual postponement of permanent contracts, coupled with vague criteria for attainment, manifests a power dynamic where workers continuously strive for an increasingly unattainable ideal. This perpetuation of uncertainty serves as a catalyst for heightened productivity of workers who attempt to 'make rate' for permanent contracts.

### 7.3.4 Voluntary Time Off

"If you are part of the red team, you may come down to the AMT desk to clock off; this is an opportunity to leave early. I repeat, if you are a member of the red team, you are allowed to go home early."

Gary had barely finished the announcement when the sound of running feet could be heard. I watch the Reytons discard their trolleys where they are and make a run for the stairs, tearing the AMT from their arm. "Let's get out of here!" I hear Addy shout above the noise, followed by Naseem's "woop, woop" as he jumps down three sets of steps.

Voluntary time off not only diminishes workers' wages but also offers opportunities highly prized by the Reytons. SeamlessCo strategically presents its requirement for temporal flexibility as a benefit, allowing workers the option to utilise it to alleviate the monotony of their labour. Asking Omar about taking VTO, he said, "You have to take it when you can, it's just so boring in here, like, I can't stand it; when I'm here, all I can think about is being anywhere else". He went on, "I know I'm not getting paid, but I just can't stand it anymore; you do the same over and over again until I think I can't stand it no more, then I got to get out. I got to be anywhere but here".

SeamlessCo exploits the alienating nature of its warehouse positions, employing VTO as a safety mechanism to secure flexibility in staffing levels. This approach encourages workers to synchronise their actions with the company's financial objectives. Thus, VTO was a highly valued part of the Reyton's everyday working lives.

Following the excitement of the VTO announcement, I see Dave and Xenon continuing to pick. "I just can't understand it," said Dave, "Why would they want to leave? They don't get paid if they leave, right? So why would they choose to leave? By the time you pay for travel, it just doesn't make economic sense. I just can't understand it".

In fact, seeing the line of workers at the AMT for VTO, there was a noticeable trend of young male and female, British, Pakistani and Yemeni workers. The Slovak-Roma, Refugees and new migrants such as Dave hadn't even bothered to look up from their AMT and continued to pick. Some, like Dave, had decided to stay because it didn't make "economic sense", others, because of their lack of English, had simply mistaken the announcement for a general red-to-blue shift welcome announcement.

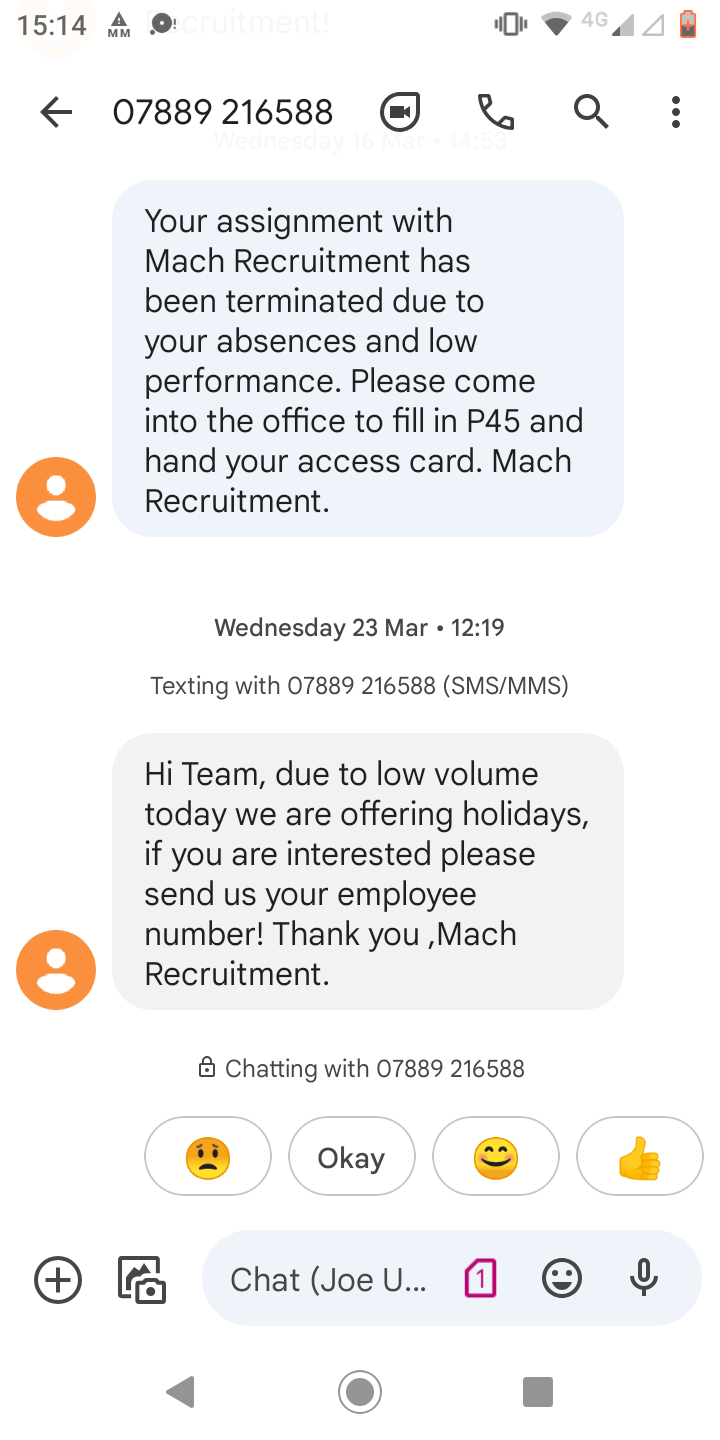
It was just twenty minutes later, following the VTO and the partial emptying of workers from the shopfloor, that a second announcement was made. "Picking rate has now increased to 75%. Let's get it done, guys; we need these items out of here," came the call from Gary. This became a typical sequence in SeamlessCo. First, an announcement was made to flex down the labour force, knowing that the Reytons would take this opportunity, of which many had particularly low efficiency and utilisation rates and could often be found chatting in corners of the warehouse and at the end of picking aisles. This was followed by an announcement increasing the picking rate for the majority of refugees, Roma and new migrant workers who were left.

Following this second announcement, Xenon sought me out on the shopfloor, parting with his trolley (something I rarely saw, so I knew he was serious). "Can you believe it, they get rid of people, now increase the rate…did I hear it right?" In this instance, VTO had the effect of modifying a labour force, thereby creating one that is more compelled to hit higher picking targets. VTO had the effect of achieving temporal flexibility of a particular segment of the workforce that is generally less productive and less compelled to hit high performance and utilisation rates. Instead, SeamlessCo can rely on a smaller workforce whose condition of dependency leaves them at the mercy of the pick rate. This suggests that SeamlessCo can attain temporal flexibility through coercive methods that rely on workers having different relative conditions of dependency.

The utilisation of Voluntary Time Off (VTO) at SeamlessCo emerges as a mechanism not only for achieving temporal flexibility but also for influencing the productivity and compliance of the workforce, revealing an inherent racialised dimension. The racialised pattern of temporal flexibility becomes evident in the differential responses to VTO, where factors such as language proficiency and economic dependency contribute to the diverse reactions observed on the shop floor.

Furthermore, the subsequent announcement of an increased picking rate targets the remaining workforce, predominantly comprised of refugees, Roma, and new migrant workers. This sequence, of flexing-down followed by an increased picking rate, underscores the strategic use of temporal flexibility to manipulate a labour force that varies in productivity levels. By relying on workers with different relative conditions of dependency, SeamlessCo achieves temporal flexibility, while the intersection of VTO and intensified picking rates reveals the racialised nature of temporal flexibility. In its pursuit of operational efficiency, the company exploits the varying vulnerabilities and dependencies of its diverse workforce, resulting in a stratified approach to achieving flexibility.

**Figure 14: RecruitNow Text Message**



### 7.3.5 Wage Structure; Performance Related Pay and the Racial Quality of Variable Wage Theft

At SeamlessCo, performance-related pay supplements the weekly wage. Bonuses are structured based on efficiency levels; for instance, achieving 90% efficiency in a week earns a £20 bonus, 95% efficiency results in a £40 bonus, and reaching 100% efficiency provides a £60 bonus. This PRP is only available to pickers. To qualify for PRP, Utilisation must be equal to or above 80% for the whole week. No accidents caused by the employee during the week, no live disciplinary warning on file, picker locks (missed picks) must be equal to, or below six for the week. No unauthorised absences for the week. It is virtually impossible to achieve PRP every week. Of those I spoke to in the warehouse, only Simon (Picking Champion # 1) was achieving PRP consistently. As a result, shopfloor activities were dominated by the concerns of achieving efficiency and utilisation rates not to achieve PRP but to avoid dismissal.

In SeamlessCo the workers do not control the bonus system. The workers are unaware of the overall level of utilisation or efficiency they are operating under[[47]](#footnote-47). This lack of knowledge made my initial time on the shop floor exceptionally challenging. I navigated through the overwhelming amount of coded information and instructions, primarily focused on the interplay of the speed and accuracy of picking and the bonus system. Initially, I aimed to decode and follow the different efficiency and utilisation targets, however this was difficult because they were hidden from the workers’ view. The team leaders monitored efficiency and utilisation targets, but these were only shown to workers during team leader meetings, which could be as much as three weeks apart.

Moreover, team leaders would reveal targets if they were not being met, for example, in the ‘red zone’, meaning that KPIs had fallen below the control standard. Therefore, I had to check in with my team leader daily to see if my targets were being met for bonuses (they weren’t). Therefore, understanding the production process centred on achieving targets not to qualify for bonuses but to keep out of any ‘red zone’, which would leave one vulnerable to being ‘flexed’.

The pickers consisted primarily of refugees, Roma, and ethnic minority workers (the Reytons). They worked in SeamlessCo's most demanding department—the picking department. The picking process was broken down into individual steps, each requiring careful attention. Although the tasks may seem mundane, the work of a picker is never automatic or instinctive. It requires the worker to think, to process and to calculate constantly. The pickers occupied one position in the warehouse and, therefore, became adept at only one work process. Many pickers knew no other work process beyond their own.

Of the pickers’ work process, many knew nothing of the meaning of the words shown on the AMT. Many of the Roma and refugee workers could not read or speak English. Therefore, they follow the instructions of the layout and force themselves to recognise the English letters and words. The graphics, letters and arrows would automatically be stored in the pickers' minds. Once the picker sees them, they react instinctively without hesitation, press the corresponding button, or move to the correct picking location. The production cards given to workers during training are of little use; each minute process becomes the mnemonic of the next. Typing '2313' into the AMT is known only because of what proceeded it rather than its individual function and utility. Each process contains within it the next process so that workers simply remember and follow what came before.

Dave, (who had limited English) explained to me how he was forced to remember the process. "I couldn't ask again because the team leader was nowhere around; they only show you once. The first time I saw those [production cards], I was worried and didn't know what it meant, so I just copied it down and made sure I knew what to do at each part in the sequence; now it's in my mind, I don't need them".

Understanding the picking process and interaction with the AMT as a sequence rather than its actual function creates a multitude of problems for the picker. It is likely to lead to an increased level of mistakes, particularly leading to picker locks (missed picks). Although Dave had a conversational level of English, he struggled to read English. Many of the recent migrants and refugees had a similar or worse level of English, which increased the chance of losing bonus payments.

Missed picks occur when the picker misidentifies the correct picking location or when an item is in the incorrect SKU location. Simply following the picking process will mean the picker will miss the notification showing on the AMT that the last scan was incorrect while they continue to pick. This will appear on their record as a 'missed pick'. Six of these in the same week will result in the disqualification of performance-related pay bonusses.

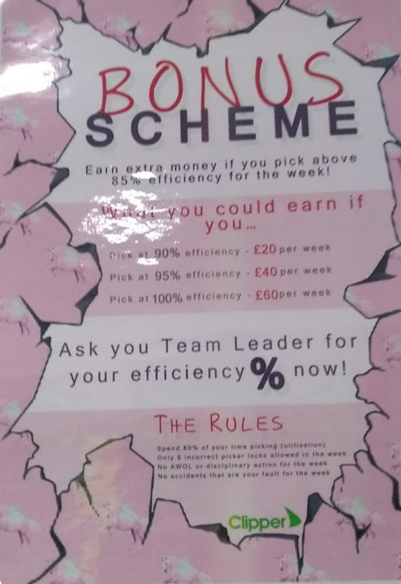
The production cards were only available in English. While Van Oort (2023) has documented the way biometric scanners almost exclusively operate in employers' interests and made workers prone to wage theft in 'just-in-time' retail, the different levels of interaction and understanding of the production process in SeamlessCo led to different outcomes for different sets of workers. While those often-new migrant and refugee workers interacted with the AMT as a mnemonic sequence, this provided the basis for a particular form of wage theft, the theft of variable wages (Cole et al., 2024), through the denial of performance-related pay[[48]](#footnote-48).

**Figure 15. Production Cards**

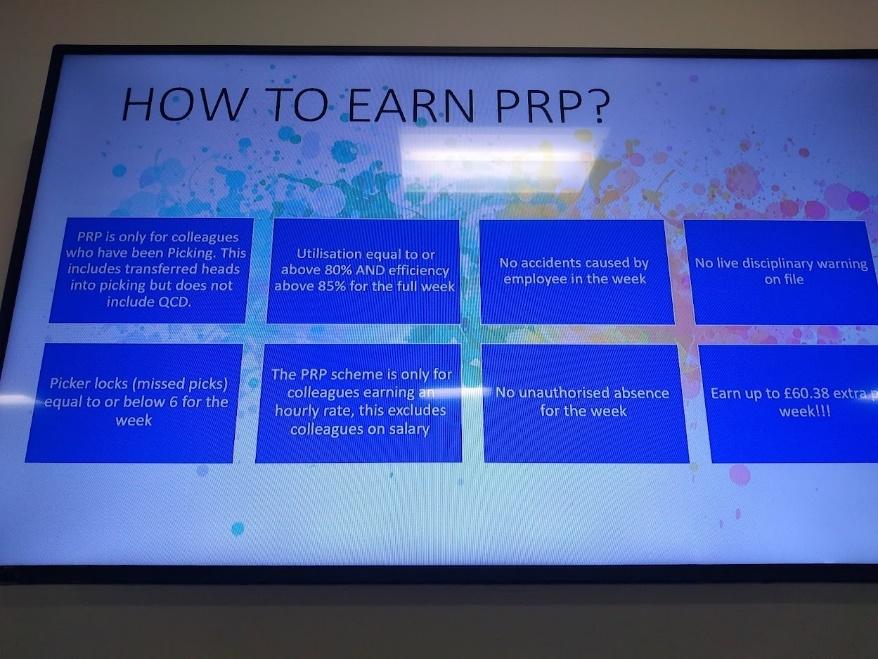


Therefore, how this actual degradation manifested within the picking department highlighted some important distinctions regarding the impact of wages. First, the use of AMTs for picking reinforced the prevailing racial division of labour in the warehouse. Within SeamlessCo, there was a prevailing division of labour based on race. The Reytons, Refugees and Roma were mainly concentrated in the picking department as pickers, regarded as unskilled, with Eastern European and British workers commonly designated as team leaders, agency officials, and lift marshals. These represented more skilled work areas, and the lift marshals worked with more workplace autonomy than the pickers. Regarding pay, the pickers, more likely to speak no English, were vulnerable to variable wage theft.

**Photo 22. Bonus Scheme**



**Photo 23. PRP Information Board**



In his recent studies of the retail sector, Wood (2016; 2020) has constructed a comparative study of two prominent retail chains in the US and the UK. He finds that management increasingly uses algorithmic systems to predict variations in consumer demand, enabling management to adjust staffing levels on short notice despite the hardships such methods impose on workers' lives. Such just-in-time scheduling practices endow managers with a highly coercive device of labour control ("flexible discipline") since they can cut the hours and earnings of workers, they deem insufficiently compliant. It is important to note that third-party logistics companies often confront unpredictable fluctuations in consumer demand that generate even greater pressures for temporal flexibility than Wood (2020) found in his study of two retail chains.

In SeamlessCo, flexible scheduling relies not only on the use of technologies for predicting consumer demands, as Van Oort (2023) shows in her ethnographic portrait of 'just-in-time retailing', but by the measurable standards of individual workers' performance. Therefore, predictions in consumer demand are not only matched with a prediction of the labour necessary to complete such fluctuations, but individual labours performance. Moreover, agency officials monitor this performance data. Therefore, not only are agency workers subject to last-minute shift changes or told to go home before a shift has finished, but their continued employment and the avoidance of being 'flexibly disciplined' (Wood, 2020) rely on their ability to hit designated and transparent performance rates. This results in workers attempting to hit higher and higher rates to avoid being flexibly disciplined.

To conclude, the shopfloor is divided into two centres of authorityTop of Form

: that of Olivia, the team leader, employed by SeamlessCo and Andrezej, the agency official, employed by RecruitNow. The agency and management utilise performance data as a crucial tool for worker assessment, directly tied to the disciplinary measures implemented to ensure compliance and enhance production efficiency. The convergence of these two sources of authority underscores the intricate dynamics at play, where performance evaluation becomes a pivotal aspect in shaping the work environment. Next, I will show how this develops into a racial division of labour in the picking department.

## 7.4 Discussion of Targets in 'Little Chernobyl'

'Little Chernobyl' was a small cabin outside the warehouse and used as a breakroom. Tables and chairs were organised so workers could not sit as a group. A large clock was hung over the entrance of the door. Here, workers shovelled in their food, smoked cigarettes and discussed their work.

At 1 pm, the pickers have a thirty-minute unpaid break. At the break, the Reytons come together in 'little Chernobyl'. As Abdi described, "Nothing here works, and besides, the coffee machine is toxic".This ironic connection between the broken microwaves, the coffee quality, and the nuclear incident became a shared joke among the Reytons, turning their daily struggle for a decent cup of coffee into a symbol of the warehouses' challenging conditions. It also reinforced the separation between the Eastern European workers and the Roma and refugees. The former was often the first to the breakroom, able to take the warmest areas (away from the open door) and use the kitchen appliances. The latter, much more likely to take their breaks in the warehouse or appear in the breakroom late (to hit efficiency targets), were thus resigned to the edges of the breakroom. The breakroom, therefore, was often symbolically the domain of Eastern-European workers, recognised through the calculated irony and desultory comments of the Reytons.

One day, Addy remarked on Simon's picking rate. According to Addy, Simon is very selfish when he works because his efficiency rates are well-above anyone else in his production team. This remark was echoed by Omar, who, taking long drags of his vape in front of us, claimed that, “all the Polish are selfish because all they care about is picking targets”. Naseem joined the conversation, adding that the Polish workers were “making us look bad”. This sentence reminded me that Olivia, my team leader, often used Simon's picking rate as a required measurement for other workers.

The issue of picking targets had become a contentious point in the daily conversations within "Little Chernobyl." The Reytons, represented by Addy, Omar and Naseem, staunchly opposed pushing for high-efficiency rates. Their perspective was grounded in the belief that achieving exceptionally high targets wouldn't increase their chances of securing permanent contracts.

Exhaling a puff of smoke, Omar emphatically declared, "We ain't getting no permanents anyway, so why bother breaking our backs for these targets?" This sentiment resonated with many in the breakroom, who saw the pursuit of high picking rates as futile in the context of their precarious employment status.

The racial dynamics in play were hard to ignore. The Reytons believed that the Eastern European workers, mainly the Polish, were more inclined to meet or exceed these demanding targets. Whether accurate or not, the perception was that the Eastern European workers, by consistently achieving high picking rates, were positioning themselves favourably for permanent contracts.

This racial division of labour, fuelled by management's emphasis on individual picking rates as a benchmark for performance, created an environment where workers from different backgrounds found themselves at odds. The Reytons felt that the management's expectations were unrealistic and disproportionately advantageous to their Polish counterparts. The fear of being exploited and the scepticism about the prospects of securing permanent positions intensified the resistance to pushing for higher targets among the Reytons.

In essence, the management's strategy of setting high picking targets contributed to the racialised division of labour, fostering a sense of competition and resentment among workers. The Reytons, rather than seeing the targets as a pathway to job security, perceived them as a tool used to exploit their labour without offering commensurate benefits. This further deepened the divide between workers.

Most days, the Reytons push together the tables in little Chornobyl. They sit around the tables vaping, drinking coffee, discussing boxing, the new recruits at SeamlessCo and watching the actions occurring beside them: Polish workers, such as Simon, playing games on their phones, Dave, Kit and Chi hurriedly eating their lunches, Xenon picking up his coat, before returning immediately to the shopfloor.

“Did you see Simon's rate this morning?” Addy asks Omar, “Too high,” answers Omar, “They will never learn”. During their breaks in little Chornobyl, Addy, Omar, and Naseem often complain about Polish workers' high picking rates and plan new work avoidance methods. Intimate and contemplative, their breaks in Little Chornobyl reveal their constant worries about performance and how this was refracted through racial divisions within the picking department.

I have shown how the Reytons read work intensification through a racial division of labour in the picking department. In the next section, I show how workers responded to this intensification. I show how performance-scheduling reduced workers indeterminacy, invaded the porosity of the workday and intensified labour for the workers on ‘ground zero’. Then I show how some workers were able to retain some autonomy through the effort bargain. Finally, I demonstrate that the narratives of workers concerning the intensification of labour are influenced by factors external to the point of production.

## 7.5 Workers on ‘Ground Zero’

The workers of SeamlessCo have a heightened perception of time, which they link with distance needed to travel across the shopfloor. Each time SeamlessCo imposes a mechanism to measure an individual worker's performance, the worker re-evaluates this in terms of time taken between each measure. This is often broken down into minute units of time. For example, the run from the tram to the electric gate is known as 'the six-minute'. The electric gate through the cabin to the second electronic gate into the picking chamber is called '3 to 5 minutes' (depending on the random search), from security to the AMT – 1 minute'. As a result, the workers constantly complain about the pace of the work. For this reason, the structure of the workday revolves around workers constantly timing themselves to regain minutes, sometimes seconds, in which they can stand still, lean, sit down and take a breath. Thus, the warehouse imposes a temporal system of control.

I met Simon (Picking Champion #1) during one break time. His picking rate was consistently the best; he topped the leaderboards in efficiency and utilisation. His performance matrix was used as a standard by the team leaders. "Why can't you be like Simon?" "This is what you should be aiming for, like Simon", Olivia would tell me. Simon was twenty-six and Polish; he was tall and skinny. While working, he wore a bandana tied around his neck and lifted over his mouth and nose; I'd never seen someone move so fast handling two trolleys at a time.

"How long have you been working here?" I asked him as I sat down opposite; Dave, following me, slid into the chair next to Simon. "Two," said Simon, not looking up from his phone, apparently disinterested in Dave's and mine attempts at conversation. "Two days?" said Dave. A shake of the head came the reply. "Oh, two weeks then", followed Dave. Such was the turnaround of labour in the warehouse; Dave hadn't comprehended that some of the workers belonged to a contingent employed for longer than a couple of weeks. Becoming visibly exasperated by our questioning, Simon paused his video and looked up for the first time, revealing a heavy-set brow and sunken eyes. "Two years," he said. "You really don't know me, do you?" he said. "I am the best picker in this warehouse; I am picking champion number one!" "Everyone knows the best pickers. I guess you two are new to this".

Simon became an important contact for his knowledge of the warehouse, the "tricks of the trade", by which he meant shortcuts and tricks for optimising individual efficiency and utilisation rates. His short stint as team leader "hadn't suited him" because he preferred to "stay busy with his feet and hands". In fact, I found out from Olivia, my British team leader, that Simon had been demoted because his picking speed was needed to "clean up" picking runs that hadn't been completed. "We needed him elsewhere; he was just too good to be wasted as a TL". In this sense, he acted in a similar way to Amazon's safety pickers, which "clean up" any missed outbound picks (Vgontzas, 2022).

Thus, most of the Polish workers were employed in relatively more involved and varied work. While Simon was used as a safety picker, most Polish workers who were not team leaders or agency officials were used as lift marshals. The lift marshals' movements between floors and responsibility for housekeeping on their picking floor allowed Polish workers some level of autonomy to escape and carve out some space for themselves within the work process. This gave the Polish workers the ability to resist, escape, and reshape the excessive demands of an intensive work process. As Simon boasted, "I'm allowed to go anywhere, my rate is so high that they need me to clean up, I get to choose what I do because I know what I'm doing". Therefore, the intensification of work in SeamlessCo affected workers differently. This is exemplified by Xenon’s experience.

Xenon, a nineteen-year-old refugee from South Sudan, spent the break times showing me his rap videos. In the background of the videos, I saw familiar locations along the Forge Valley canal, the terraced housing along Jedburgh Street and the closed community centre on Upwell Road that connects Forge Valley with the motorway. “Moving cases, display location, we here for the duration”, went one as he rapped in front of the old railway line, the stone stained black by the old furnace. More confident and outspoken than Dave, Xenon told me of his dream of becoming a security guard. His lyrics contradicted his views of working at SeamlessCo: "This is just temporary, it's good for now, but I won't be here long…one day I'll be a security guard, I will have time to play football'.

Xenon worked solely on the bustling grounds of level 1, colloquially referred to as 'ground zero' within the picking department. Here, ground zero is a hive of activity, with refugees and Roma workers navigating the labyrinth of products with almost choreographed precision. The atmosphere is tense with urgency as workers move swiftly to meet demanding efficiency targets.

As workers dart through the aisles, picking items, the very nature of their labour becomes a negotiation between personal aspirations for stability and the harsh realities of the labour market. Amidst the frenetic pace of activity on ground zero, I engaged in conversations with Xenon, a refugee whose tireless movements mirrored the urgency of his words. As he navigated the maze of products, he shared insights into his motivations and the symbiotic relationship between his immigration status and his approach to work.

With a furrowed brow and a hurried tone, Xenon confided, "I have to work fast, you know? I need to get a permanent contract." The 28-day move-on period for refugees left little room for complacency, pushing him to exert himself beyond the norm. "If I don't hit the targets, they might not keep me. I need the security," he added.

In response to my inquiry about his breaks, Xenon admitted, "I don't really take them. Breaks mean less picking time. I can't afford that if I want to stay here." The breakneck speed of his work, coupled with the sacrifice of rest intervals, painted a poignant picture of the lengths to which he was willing to go to secure stability in an environment defined by impermanence.

The experience of Xenon on ground-zero underscores the profound impact of labour intensification on individual workers, particularly those with limited mobility power and precarious positions in the labour market. The nexus between state policies, the structure of the labour market, and labour effort becomes evident in the challenges faced by refugee workers like Xenon.

The labour process on level 1, also known as 'ground zero,' created an environment of direct control, demanding fast-paced and intensified labour from workers. Xenon, alongside fellow refugees and Roma workers, grapples with the inherent pressures of this setting. His responses to these challenges reveal a strategic connection between his labour efforts and his immigration status. In light of state policies like the 28-day move-on period, Xenon's mobility power is significantly constrained, pushing him to channel his efforts into achieving high productivity rates.

This analysis elucidates the intricate interplay between state structures, labour market conditions, and individual mobility power, shaping the strategies employed by workers in response to their specific circumstances. These overarching dynamics deeply influence the intensification of labour, the pursuit of permanency, and the negotiations within the warehouse. Xenon's story serves as a poignant illustration of how state policies shape the mobility power of workers, subsequently influencing their labour power within the Sheffield City Region.

## The Reytons’ Effort-Bargain

As I immersed myself in the bustling environment of the warehouse, my ethnographic lens turned towards a distinct group of workers, the Reytons. Navigating the labyrinthine aisles stacked high with boxes, I observed a peculiar pattern emerging. The Reytons, with an uncanny ability to navigate the intricate web of logistical chaos, exclusively confined their labour to the fifth level of the picking department**.**This spatial strategy was not merely a coincidence but a deliberate choice. The Reytons strategically avoided the frenzied pace of the lower levels, where productivity targets loomed large. Instead, they found refuge in the quieter realms of level 5, shielded from the ever-watchful gaze of the supervisors and the relentless pressure to meet efficiency targets.

As my fieldwork progressed, I also sought refuge in the upper floors. Here, the Reytons stood and chatted, unbothered by the efficiency rates. Leaning against a pallet, I struck up a conversation with Omar as he meticulously inspected the items in his cart. In response to my inquiry about his exclusive work in level 5, he shared a sly grin and responded, "It's our sanctuary, mate. Here, we can dodge the team leaders, avoid the incessant targets, and just get on with the work without being hounded every minute."

As we continued our conversation, it became evident that their choice of level wasn't arbitrary but a tactical manoeuvre to minimise interactions with team leaders, granting them a respite from the incessant scrutiny that characterised the lower levels. Omar explained, "You see, the team leaders are like hawks on the lower levels, watching every move. Here on 5, we can breathe a bit, take breaks when we want, and avoid the constant pressure to hit those ridiculous targets."

Level 5 had become the Reyton's clandestine refuge, where they gathered to share jokes about their intentional efforts to reduce their overall effort. 'Five', as they called it, was their sanctuary for plotting subtle resistance against the relentless demands of the warehouse regime. Their conversations echoed a shared sentiment of autonomy and strategic evasion, creating a space where they could navigate the demands of the labour process on their own terms.

The success of the Reytons' effort bargaining hinged on the nuanced nature of efficiency targets. Unlike ground zero, where products were densely packed, making it imperative to meet rigid targets, level 5's spaced-out product arrangement allowed for a more subjective evaluation of targets. Team leaders on level 5 were often more lenient, understanding the inherent challenges of reaching high-efficiency rates due to the layout. During one meeting with my team leader, Olivia, she pointed towards the screen at my efficiency target, "that's not good enough", she said, then hesitating slightly, "Oh hang on, I've seen you on 5 a lot… that is fine then, for 5, that's fine".

This subjective evaluation became a strategic advantage for the Reytons. Knowing that team leaders on level 5 were less likely to issue official warnings for falling below targets, the Reytons strategically positioned themselves on this floor. The spatial layout of products allowed them to negotiate a more flexible approach to efficiency rates. This flexibility was a temporary advantage, contingent on the specific spatial organisation of the picking department located across different floors.

As the picking department transitioned to a single-floor structure, the space for negotiation over performance targets diminished. With products closer together, akin to ground zero, targets became less negotiable. The success of the Reytons' mobility-effort bargaining was thus context-specific, relying on the unique conditions of level 5 and the more lenient evaluation of efficiency targets by team leaders in that specific spatial setting. It became evident that the Reytons, possessing a unique form of hypermobility in the labour market, strategically deployed these spatial tactics to reduce their effort in the production process. Their ability to seamlessly transition between warehouses and alternate between formal and informal employment granted them a certain degree of autonomy.

In conclusion, the Reytons' mobility-effort bargaining in the warehouse, particularly on '5', reflects a sophisticated negotiation strategy within the spatial confines of their workplace. By strategically choosing their work location, predominantly on '5', and retreating to "Little Chernobyl" during breaks, they navigate the spatial dimensions of the warehouse to reduce the intensity of their labour. The ability to reduce effort emerges as an outcome of their negotiated mobility. By strategically positioning themselves and utilising communal spaces for informal negotiations, the Reytons carve out a degree of autonomy within the warehouse.

## Variable Mobility Power; Variable Effort

In the preceding section, I have demonstrated that the Reytons are able to disconnect their effort from efficiency targets, while Refugee and Roma workers tend to strive to meet and sometimes exceed these targets. This differentiation is reflected in the physical structure of the picking department and contributes to a racial division of labour. However, it is important to clarify that the racial division of labour is not simply or directly caused by ‘racial state policies’ alone. Instead, workers' experiences of the labour process are shaped by a complex interplay of factors, including their immigration status, mobility power, and local labour market conditions.

While state policies—such as bordering practices and access to social benefits—do play a role, they intersect with other factors, such as workers' individual circumstances (e.g., family responsibilities, language barriers, or living conditions) and the spatial structure of the local labour market. Thus, the racial division of labour arises not from a single, deterministic cause but through the cumulative effects of these multiple forces, which influence workers' mobility power and their positioning within the warehouse hierarchy.

In the next section, I will explore how workers' variable mobility power, shaped by external factors like state policies and labour market dynamics, influences their effort in production and contributes to patterns of accommodation or resistance.

*(A) The Reytons*

In contrast to Xenon who strives to meet and surpass efficiency targets, the Reytons demonstrate a form of hypermobility that influences their effort within the production process. This hypermobility is characterized by their ability to move between various warehouses and to alternate between formal and informal employment. The Reytons' regional mobility is supported by their extensive social networks, extended family homes, and strategic use of welfare, which collectively provide them with a safety net.

However, it is important to note that this reduced effort is not solely a consequence of their mobility power but also the result of broader structural factors. The Reytons' ability to disengage from intense productivity demands is shaped by a combination of factors, including their personal circumstances, access to informal work, and the flexibility offered by their social networks. This gives them a form of leverage in the workplace, where the immediate pressure to meet efficiency targets is mitigated by the knowledge that alternative opportunities are available.

Thus, rather than simply "reducing effort," the Reytons' variable engagement with the production process reflects how state policies, labour market conditions, and social networks together influence the ways workers navigate their employment options. Their position within the labour process is not solely determined by their mobility power but also by their broader economic and social resources, which make their labour less susceptible to the rigid demands of SeamlessCo.

*(B) Xenon*

In contrast to the Reytons' hypermobility, Xenon, a refugee worker, grapples with distinct challenges influenced by his low mobility bargaining power. This constrained mobility results from state policies, specifically the refugee dispersal system and the stringent 28-day move-on period from asylum seeker to refugee status. These policies significantly limit Xenon's mobility within the broader labour market due to the lack of established social connections in Forge Valley.

The restrictions imposed by state policies heighten Xenon's dependence on the warehouse for employment. In a bid to secure a permanent contract, Xenon channels his efforts into meeting and surpassing production targets. The porosity of the workday, symbolised by Xenon working through lunch breaks, underscores his commitment to achieving these targets. This intensified effort is rooted in the constrained mobility imposed by the state and labour market conditions.

Xenon's subjectivity is intricately entwined with his asylum and migration experience, significantly impacting his approach towards production targets. His journey to the UK, marked by hardship and uncertainty, casts his current employment in the warehouse in a different light. Having endured a challenging period, securing a job provides Xenon with financial stability and a sense of independence, offering a degree of agency in his life.

This newfound agency shapes Xenon's perception of the demands placed on him within the warehouse. While the labour conditions and the pressure to meet challenging production targets might be objectively demanding, his subjective experience frames them differently. The contrast between the difficulties he faced during migration and the relative stability he gained through employment influences how he views the challenges at work.

The state's influence on Xenon's mobility power extends beyond the workplace, shaping the dynamics of his labour. With limited options outside the warehouse, Xenon becomes more susceptible to the intensification of labour and experiences less indeterminacy in his work. The interplay between state policies and labour market constraints intricately weaves into Xenon's experience of work, underscoring the intricate relationship between the state, the labour market, his mobility power and the effort exerted in the production process.

*(C) Roma*

In contrast to the hypermobility of the Reytons, the Roma workers in SeamlessCo experience a constrained mobility power shaped by the interplay of state policies and the local labour market. With pre-settled status, they find themselves excluded from accessing universal credit unless they can prove the right to reside, a bureaucratic hurdle exacerbated by language barriers. This dependency on work is a critical factor influencing their variable effort in production.

The racialised local labour market in Forge Valley further restricts the employment opportunities available to the Roma workers. Faced with these challenges, many Roma workers engage in international industrial circulation, moving between the UK and Slovakia. During their stays in the UK, particularly in the SeamlessCo warehouse, they are more likely to exert considerable effort in production. Both economic necessities drive this heightened effort, as they often have families to support. The international circulation of the Roma workers, coupled with the impact of state policies and the local labour market, thus intricately shapes their effort within the production process at Forge Valley.

Thus, workers' efforts in production change according to the different ways the workers experience the state and labour market. In this section, I have shown that the worker's variable effort in production varies according to their objective position in the labour market (informal economies, social connections, industrial regional and international circulation) and subjective (migration narrative) factors. The evidence in this section suggests that intensification is not a blanket mechanism. Instead, managerial strategies of intensification affect workers differently and have multiple outcomes. The combination of performance management and flexible scheduling disproportionately affected workers with limited mobility power. Importantly, racialised state policies and labour market conditions interact to shape workers' mobility power, which in turn contributes to the formation of a racial division of labour in SeamlessCo. However, this division is not the result of a single factor, but rather emerges from the complex intersection of state policies, local economic conditions, and workers' social and migratory positioning within the labour market.

## The Racial Division of Labour and Commodification of Time in the Picking Department

The division of labour in the picking department, particularly between those on Ground Zero and those on the higher levels, reflects a racialised pattern that is influenced by workers' differing levels of mobility bargaining power in the labour market. While this division aligns with racial and ethnic distinctions, it is shaped by a complex interplay of factors, including workers' access to opportunities outside the warehouse, their immigration status, and local labour market dynamics.

The Reytons working on levels five and six complement their wages in SeamlessCo with a variety of informal transactions and informal jobs in Forge Valley. Aware of the seasonal nature and precarious employment at SeamlessCo, they built social connections in Forge Valley to overcome reliance on the logistics industry. This income, pulled together in their extended households and formal employment in SeamlessCo, is complimented with informal work and wage work subcontracted locally in the building and gardening trades, as well as strategic use of welfare and regional industrial circulation between warehouses in the SCR. As a result, their formal labour in the warehouse is tightly linked to their social capital in Forge Valley. Thus, the Reytons, subject to racialisation in the local labour market and restricted to formal employment in warehousing around Forge Valley, are coerced into precarious strategies to survive. The social capital of Forge Valley is embedded in migrant and British-Yemeni social networks, in privatised and extended households and HMOs and in informal labour markets.

Overall, this translates into relatively higher mobility power of the Reytons compared with their colleagues. The result is the Reyton's ability to disentangle the rhythm of production from their own conditions of dependency. Labouring in levels five and six allowed the Reytons to achieve respite from the intensity of picking on ground-zero. Besides, the limited direct control of supervisors on these levels allowed the Reytons to reduce their efforts and, at times, disregard efficiency targets. This manifested in late-check ins, soldiering and wasting-time.

In contrast to levels five and six, 'Ground Zero' was the sole domain of 'rate busters'. Here, most Roma and Refugee workers attempted to hit their targets, achieve pay-related bonuses and gain the notice of team leaders in their attempts to gain permanent contracts. For Xenon, this manifested in the invasion of the porosity of the workday. His breaks were often not taken in their entirety, if at all. Xenon's dependency on SeamlessCo was heightened through his lack of social capital and social connections in Forge Valley and by his recent change in immigration status (asylum seeker-refugee). As a result, a combination of the 28-day move on period and his dispersal to Forge Valley, Xenon lacked the social safety net and hypermobility of the Reytons constructed through social connections, thus surviving entirely on selling his labour to logistics capitalists.

Overall, this translates into lower mobility power compared with his colleagues. The result is that Xenon was unable to disentangle the rhythm of production from his own condition of dependency. Labouring on Ground-Zero, subject to direct control from team leaders and agency officials, meant Xenon often worked through breaks to hit production targets.

The Roma also mainly worked on Ground-Zero to hit high productivity targets, and like Xenon, they were more likely to be employed on the night shift. Living in Forge Valley in extended households, many of the Roma migrated between Slovakia and Forge Valley during downturns in the logistics industry. As a result, many still had pre-settled status, which required an eligibility test for access to universal credit. The low level of English meant many of the Roma were unaware of this condition. As a result, their international industrial circulation heightened their dependency on employment at SeamlessCo. Moreover, the treatment of employment at SeamlessCo as seasonal meant they were more likely to view their employment as temporary and, thus, more likely to exert greater effort on the job. Faced with the impermanence of their positions, the Roma workers intensified their labour, driven by a sense of urgency to maximise their earning potential during their limited stay and the hope that their increased effort would secure a contract extension.

Additionally, the perception of work as temporary can influence workers' motivations to advocate for improved conditions. When employment is seen as transient, the inclination to invest time and effort in initiatives aimed at long-term improvements may diminish. Workers might prioritise immediate financial gains over the pursuit of sustainable changes, given the uncertainty surrounding the duration of their stay in a particular job or location. In summary, the industrial circulation between Slovakia and the UK has fostered a labour force that views SeamlessCo as temporary employment, prompting attempts to hit performance targets and maximise performance related pay.

In conclusion, the informal segmentation within the picking department between the Reytons, Polish workers, and Roma and Refugees reflects broader patterns within the labour market, shaped by workers' differing mobility power. This segmentation is influenced by a combination of racialised labour market structures, social networks, and workers' varied access to alternative employment opportunities This racial division is enforced informally by management at SeamlessCo. While the Reytons despise the Polish workers for rate busting, they fostered no ill will towards the Roma and Refugees. This was because they believed the Polish workers had access to permanent contracts and job mobility.

The Roma and Refugees often feel pressured to achieve high productivity rates in order to secure their employment and increase their chances of gaining permanent contracts. However, these experiences can vary within and across these groups, shaped by individual circumstances, migration experiences, and varying levels of job security. They attempt to accomplish this by rate-busting. This is manifested through break time working. As a result, Polish workers ramp up their productivity by hitting greater rates. Thus, workers consistently work against their class interests to retain managers' attention. However, the Reytons consistently ignored efficiency rates, in part due to their hypermobility and multiple revenue streams built within the social connections in Forge Valley.

The result was that management strategies of intensifying the labour process through a combination of performance management and flexible scheduling were experienced differently by the racial class fractions in the warehouse. The state's influence on the labour market in the SCR appeared to shape the conditions within the warehouse, impacting how work was socially organised. The evidence suggests that the broader labour market conditions influenced the way workers were organised in practice.

As a result, workers with limited mobility power were often found in the most demanding and intense departments of the warehouse, such as picking. In the picking department, the racial division of labour allowed managers to treat the labour power of different class fractions as distinct commodities, with some workers' labour power being valued less or subjected to more intensive exploitation. This enabled managers to assign the most strenuous tasks to those groups whose labour they could extract the most value from, often due to their limited mobility power.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, we explored the nature of effort bargains within the warehouse at SeamlessCo. The labour process in this setting is significantly influenced by efficiency controls and data management, fostering an organisational culture that prioritises heightened picking rates. This environment is characterised by a strong emphasis on performance metrics, where workers are continually assessed based on their output.

A critical theme we identified is the coercive mechanism of "performance-scheduling." This approach combines temporal flexibility with rigorous monitoring and quantification of established effort standards, compelling workers to consistently strive to meet escalating targets to avoid flexible discipline. Management and agencies leverage performance data not merely to enforce compliance but to reduce hours and earnings based on individual performance outcomes (Wood, 2016). This method eliminates the ambiguity often associated with flexible despotism, as disciplinary actions become clearly linked to workers’ efficiency. Consequently, competition among workers intensifies, with individuals striving to achieve efficiency targets, which ultimately enhances the extraction of surplus value.

We then examined the bargaining dynamics that emerge within this high-pressure environment. Workers navigate the pressures of performance metrics while seeking to maintain a manageable pace that affords them greater autonomy. This effort bargain is fundamentally tied to their capacity to negotiate the intensity of their effort in response to managerial expectations. Workers strategically adjust their output, aiming to secure roles that are less monitored and provide greater autonomy in the labour process.

However, the analysis reveals that the effort bargain is inherently uneven within the warehouse. The pressures of production intensification—manifested through wages, bonuses, and efficiency targets—affect different worker groups in distinct ways. For example, while workers such as Xenon and the Roma face significant performance pressures, the Reytons are able to moderate their efforts. This disparity arises from varying levels of mobility bargaining power among workers (Strauss & McGrath, 2017). Furthermore, we established that workers' attitudes toward their labour are shaped not only at the production level (Burawoy, 1979) but also through interactions among the shop floor, the state, and the broader labour market.

Moreover, the role of the state is pivotal in this labour process. State interventions through asylum policies—including refugee dispersal and welfare regulations—have created a local labour market that coerces workers residing in Forge Valley into warehouse employment. This state involvement complicates the nature of effort bargains and adds another layer of pressure on workers.

The ability of management and agency to commodify labour power is unevenly distributed, influenced by the mobility power and compliance levels of different worker groups. This dynamic leads to the informal spatial division among racial class fractions within the picking department, resulting in a racially segmented workforce. The differences in mobility power and compliance significantly shape how workers interact with the technological and spatial arrangements of the warehouse, influencing their distinct experiences and understandings of the work environment.

In conclusion, this chapter illustrates how the vulnerable positions of refugees and migrants in the labour market shape their experiences on the shop floor, leading to the emergence of a competitive and racially divided work environment. Rather than focusing solely on managerial intentions, I have emphasized how broader labour market conditions affect workers' compliance levels and their various bargaining strategies. Workers’ experiences of coercion manifest in diverse ways, impacting their ability to navigate workplace demands. This interplay results in varying intensities of production, where some workers feel compelled to exert greater effort to secure their employment. Additionally, the state's role within the UK labour market serves to maintain the positions of white British workers within the occupational hierarchy.

**SeamlessCo**

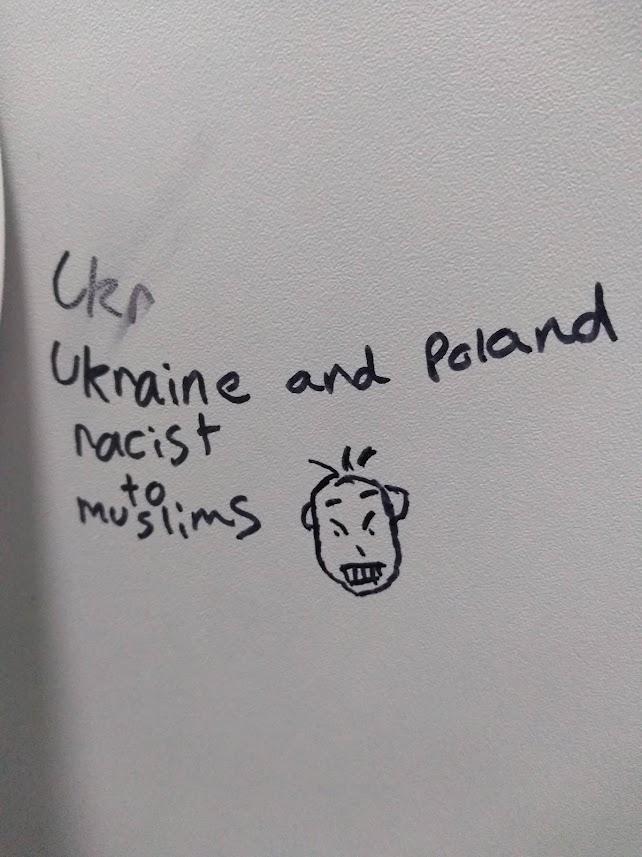
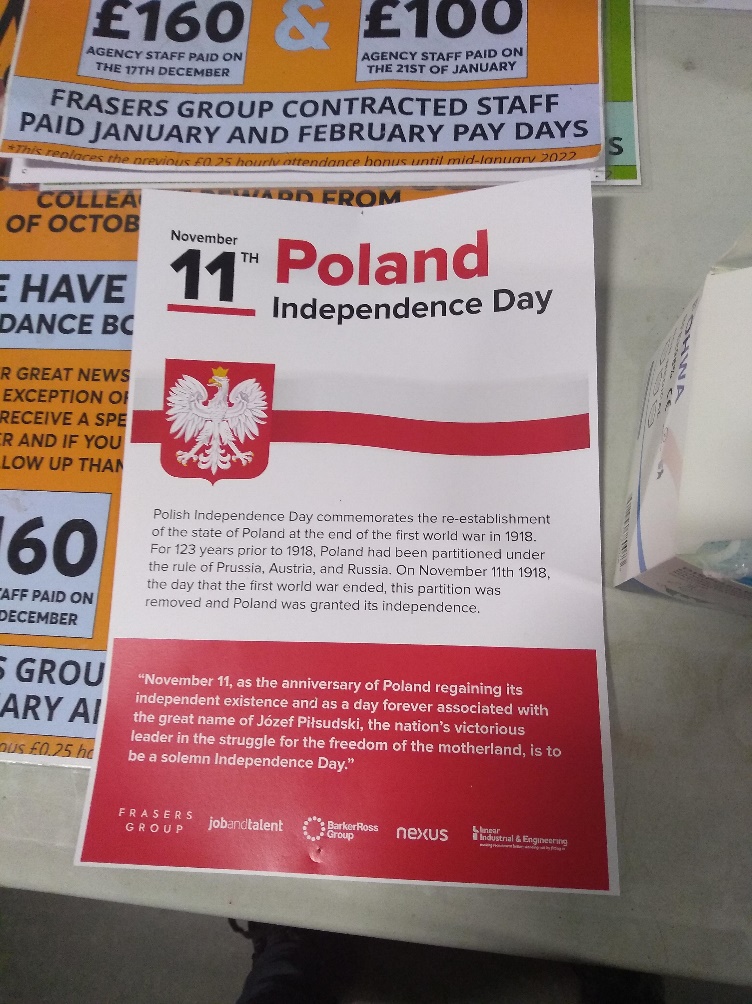
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Photo 24: Poland Independence Day Poster.

Photo 25: Graffiti in Floor 5 Toilet.



Photo 27: Picking Trolley.

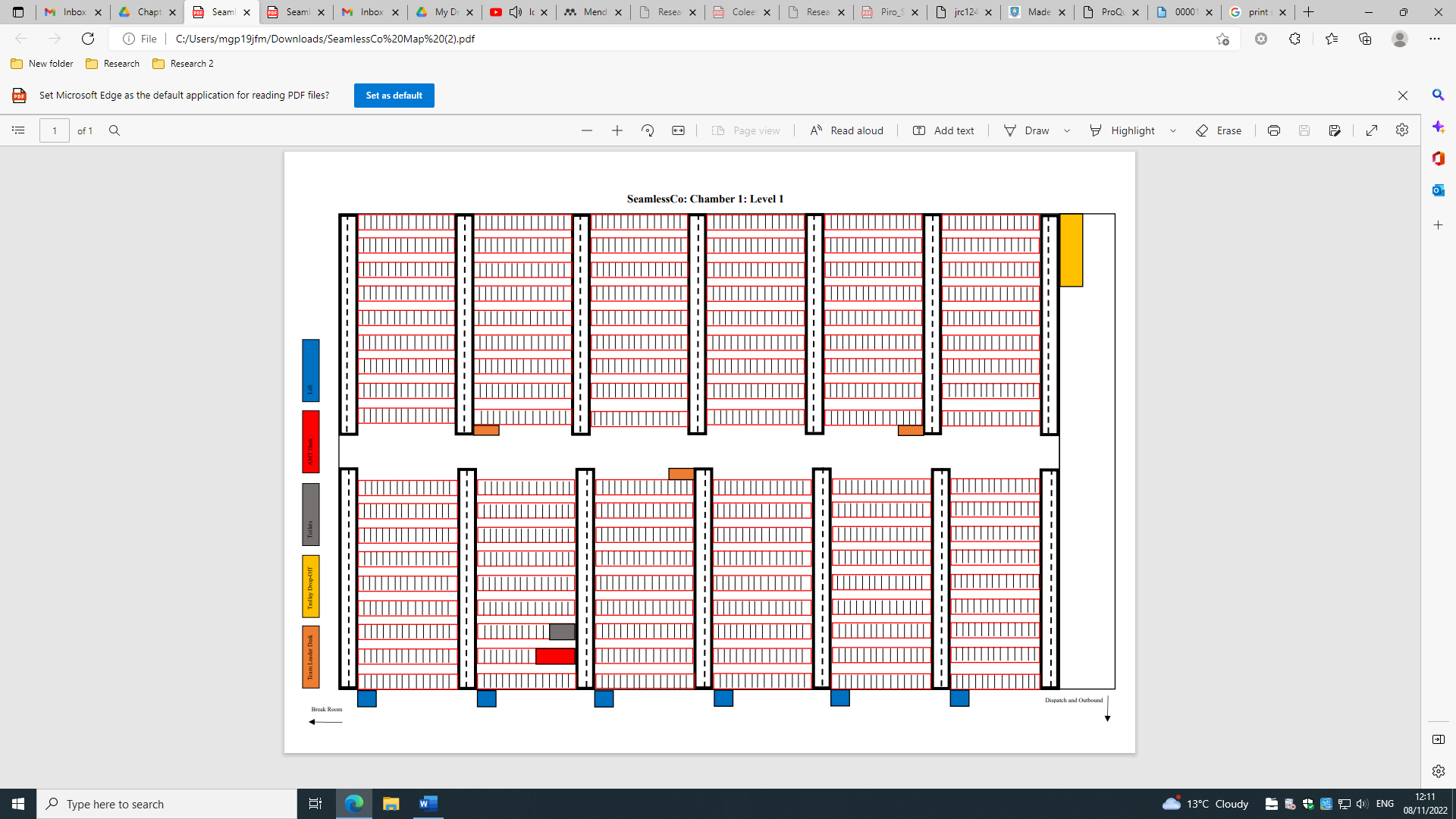
Photo 26: Picking Ailes.





Photo 28: Entrance Gate.

Photo 29: Ukraine Appeal.



**Figure 16: Chamber 1**

# CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSION

## 8.1 Introduction

In this thesis I examined labour experiences in the Sheffield City Region, UK. This involved actively working in two warehouses over a four-month period. The primary aim of the thesis was to understand the experience of labour. This was undertaken to gain a deeper insight into potential shifts in their material and political circumstances, aligning with broader initiatives to place labour at the forefront of a Logistics Political Economy (Newsome et al., 2015). In this way, the circuit of capital was not treated as an abstract economic concept but as a tangible force shaping the everyday realities of labour. Rooted in the lived experiences of warehouse workers and explored ethnographically, it unravelled how the circuit of capital, the need to keep value in motion, and the state's disciplining of labour shape the employment relation in warehousing. That is, how management attempts to extract surplus value and how workers’ respond.

The evidence presented has explored the experience of labour in the warehouse understood through the role of distribution, regarding the movement of value between moments in the circuit of capital, the state's role as a condensation of class forces and the social organisation of the warehouse through the lens of racial capitalism. The empirical chapters attempted to re-focus labour regimes on the dynamics of exploitation and resistance in the labour process. To do this, the empirical chapters first explored the state's disciplining of labour, through the uneven processes of social reproduction (Mezzadri, 2017); second, the attempts of capital to maintain the seamless movement of value between moments in the circuit, understood as exploitation; and third, labour's capacity to create friction between moments in the circuit of capital understood as resistance and more specifically, through mobility-effort bargaining (Smith, 2006). Together, these form the components of a warehouse regime in the Sheffield City Region.

The following sections outline the findings of the thesis and, in doing so, guide the reader through these three empirical components. The first section presents an analysis and discussion of the empirical findings on the production and reproduction of warehouse labour, the labour regime and how they are shaped by processes of racialisation. These are organised around the six research questions regarding the reproduction of labour power, exploitation in the labour process and resistance in the labour process. In addressing these inquiries, the chapter outlines the broader scope of the overall research. The subsequent section discusses the theoretical and methodological contributions. The theoretical contributions concerning racial capitalism are understood at three distinct levels of analysis: labour process dynamics, labour regime analysis and logistics political economy. These were explored through an embodied workplace ethnography, representing a key contribution to the field of political economy. The third section ties together the empirical and theoretical through the conceptualisation of the 'Warehouse Regime in Motion' and discusses the political implications of the research and avenues for future research.

## 8.2 Summary and Main Findings

This thesis contributes on three fronts: theoretical, empirical, and methodological. These contributions are unified by exploring how the interplay between the movement of value within the circuit of capital, the role of the state, and considerations of race collectively shape both the labour process and the politics inherent in warehouse work. The empirical contributions of this thesis are organised around three key themes corresponding to each research question. The first empirical contribution involves an analysis of workers' reproduction in the SCR (addressing sub-research questions 1, 2, and 3). The second contribution entails an analysis of the experiences of exploitation within the warehouse setting (sub-research Questions 4 and 5). The third contribution encompasses an analysis of resistance, including forms of mobility-effort bargaining occurring on the shop floor (sub-research question 6). These empirical contributions are succinctly summarised and elucidated in greater detail below. Answering these research questions achieves the broader research aims and helps to answer the main research question.

Overall, this thesis highlights that in FrictionCo and SeamlessCo, the mechanisms of exploitation appear to vary according to the mobility power of different racial class fractions. The interactions between managers and workers contribute to the production and reproduction of racial hierarchies at the point of production. It seems that managers may engage with workers' racialised status in the labour market, which influences workplace dynamics. Furthermore, workers internalise these dynamics, potentially reinforcing racial hierarchies within the warehouse. This suggests that race plays a significant role in shaping both the organisation of the labour market and the labour process.

Both warehouses can be considered despotic. FrictionCo uses a racial and gendered employment hierarchy. British and Polish men are in positions of authority and have access to the internal labour. Beneath them, FrictionCo uses a two-tier structure to split the workforce between sortation and loading departments. Polish women from Pit-Town labour in the sortation department, while Roma and Refugee men from Forge Valley labour in the loading bays. Both endure coercive control. SeamlessCo also has an employment hierarchy with British and Polish workers in positions of authority and with more autonomy in the work roles, access to permanent contracts and the internal labour market. Overall, the character of the regime is coercive.

At FrictionCo, the workforce is split between Polish women residents in Pit-Town, who have often worked for the company for many years (through the agency), and Roma and Refugee men employed by the agencies from Forge Valley. The Roma and Refugee men are subject to the most physical and intensive labour of the loading bays, with no upward mobility in the internal labour market. Managers solicit allegiance from Polish male team leaders in the loading bays, who invoke racialised imagery to devalue the loading bay and its workers. Due to the spatial and technical layout of the loading bays, managers use direct control through Polish team leaders to intensify production. Managers are successful because they also invoke the allegiance and commitment of Polish workers through national imagery and national solidarity through the celebration of Polish national holidays in the warehouse. Hiring Roma and Refugee men from Forge Valley gives managers and agencies flexibility in assigning shifts, particularly by coercing these workers into night shifts. Therefore, hiring practices are used to divide male, refugee and Roma residents of Forge Valley with female, Polish and Pit-Town residents on the shopfloor.

FrictionCo also uses gender to organise production in the sortation department. The sortation department is constructed as women's work (Elson & Pearson, 1981) – women are better suited for assembly work and are, therefore, mostly hired to work in this department. In the sortation department, agency officials use performance-scheduling to intensify production. This means tying flexible scheduling to individuals’ performance data, giving way to performance-discipline meaning workers continued employment is reliant on hitting performance targets. This performance-scheduling intensifies women's production, reduces their indeterminacy, and invades the porosity of the workday. Women on the line compete over efficiency targets to maintain specific shifts that fit with their reproductive labour.

Racialised state policies in the UK impact the shopfloor of FrictionCo. First, the end of freedom of movement has precipitated a return of Polish and other EU workers (Portes, 2023). The lack of cheap migrant labour in Pit-Town has led agency firms to increase their search for labour in nearby cities as a result, targeting new migrants and refugees in Forge Valley. For Roma workers, their segmentation within the local labour market, lack of English proficiency, pre-settled status and therefore extra-conditionality placed on receiving welfare have reduced their mobility in the labour market. For refugees, with a lack of English proficiency, forced dispersal to Forge Valley, lack of social networks and increased dependency following their asylum-refugee status change has reduced their mobility in the labour market. Together, these state policies of bordering and local labour market conditions have created a new highly flexible reserve army in Forge Valley. In Pit-town, the Polish migrants, many of whom have stayed because of family commitments, are employed with new migrants and refugees from Forge Valley. This division appeared to be reflected in workers deployment on the shop floor. This practice seemed to heighten competition among workers, illustrating how labour market dynamics can influence workplace interactions.

At SeamlessCo, located in Forge Valley, the workers are a mixture of established racialised minorities, Polish, Roma and refugees. Managers and agency officials have constructed a racial division of labour, with established racialised minorities, Roma and refugee all taking up positions in departments considered by management as the most de-skilled (Picking), and White British and Polish workers taking up positions in areas with some autonomy and with access to the internal labour market and permanent contracts.

In the picking department, it appears that agency officials employ performance-scheduling as a strategy to intensify production. This practice involves linking flexible scheduling to individual performance data, which effectively establishes a form of performance discipline. Consequently, workers' continued employment seems to hinge on their ability to meet specific performance targets. This approach to performance-scheduling contributes to the overall intensification of work in the picking department.

State policies in the UK impact the shopfloor of SeamlessCo. State immigration and welfare policies have combined with the conditions of the local labour market in Forge Valley to create a racialised labour market. Established racialised minorities, refugees and Roma, have limited employment opportunities outside of low-pay warehouse work, are coerced into work through the workfare regime, and some with limited recourse to public funds have given managers and agency officials opportunities for coercion in SeamlessCo.

Workers in Forge Valley are compelled to engage in informal production and extend their households to survive the flexible and seasonal nature of warehouse employment. With the exception of many of the refugees, they establish extensive social networks in the community to find work and circulate regionally and internationally in the search for work and improved conditions. This mobility of workers in Forge Valley enables SeamlessCo to build and maintain a versatile, just-in-time labour force, capitalising on the frequent turnover of workers to enhance production efficiency.

Crucially, FrictionCo has extended its reliance on an immobile migrant labour market in Pit-Town, with this flexible, just-in-time workforce in Forge Valley. These two groups are placed in direct competition with each other, fostering an environment of heightened intensity in the workplace. The interplay between these dynamics underscores the complex strategies employed by SeamlessCo, leveraging the circulation of its workforce and FrictionCo leveraging both its static and circulating workforce to drive competition and intensify the labour process between different racial class fractions.

Workers responded to the intensification of production in different ways according to their mobility power. Therefore, managers and agency officials' capacity to commodify labour power in production relied on the state's disciplining role in the labour market. However, these resistance strategies were on an individual level, and no collective form of resistance was observed.

Comparison across these two warehouses highlights the importance of racialised state policies and racialised labour market conditions in the exploitation of warehouse workers and the construction of race at the point of production. Understanding this is important for organising efforts. I will return to this point, but first, I will answer the research questions directly.

### 8.2.1 The Warehouse' Racial Reserve Army in the SCR

*1.1 RQ 1. How does national state policy influence labour conditions in the warehouse?*

The British State, through immigration and welfare policies, disciplines labour allowing warehouse workers’ labour power to be a desirable commodity for capital. In particular, chapter 5 evidenced how policies associated with the Hostile Environment and welfare policies were crucial in determining workers' differential mobility power.

The Hostile Environment can be understood as a process of bordering, which carves out racialised migrant workers from certain social and welfare rights, often by reshaping the parameters of inclusion and exclusion. I have shown a variety of practices aimed at establishing borders that selectively encompass migrant and refugee workers. This is frequently accomplished through bureaucratic mechanisms that involve redefining categories such as citizenship, workers, habitual residence, pre-settled, and settled status. This strategic redefinition effectively strips certain individuals of insider status, restricting their access to social provisions. This is experienced on a continuum that ranges from non-citizens to citizens in multi-status Britain (De Noronha, 2020). These bordering processes reduce workers' mobility power and heighten the pressure to acquiesce to employment under reduced wages, in deteriorated working conditions, and with diminished job security.

Relatedly, the expansion of the commodification of welfare, or 'workfare', does not just impact migrant and refugee workers but also British citizens. Here, the principle of conditionality has been well established in the UK's welfare system, accompanied by the imposition of sanctions in case of non-compliance (Vickers, 2019). From this perspective, the workfare regime characterised by punitive sanctions leaves the unemployed with little choice but to take on warehouse employment. This state-implemented immigration and workfare system significantly influences labour outcomes. The state controls workers' mobility through their differential inclusion in social provision and through the welfare system that threatens to sanction workers who fail to comply.

This grants employers authority over workers with minimal opportunities for negotiation regarding effort within the workplace. Table 8 summarises the argument concerning sub-research question 1, outlining the key explanatory variables at the national scale.

**Table 8: National Variables**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **National UK State Policy** | |
| **Warehouse Workers** | **Immigration Status** | **Access to Public Funds** |
| White-British | British Citizens. | Yes:  1. Back-to-work conditionality. |
| Second and Third Generation:  The Reytons | British Citizens. | Yes:  1. Back-to-work conditionality. |
| Roma | A8 (Pre-settled Status). | Yes:  1. Proof of Right to Reside conditionality.  2. Back-to-work conditionality. |
| Polish and Lithuanian | A8 (Settled Status). | Yes: Back-to-work conditionality. |
| Refugee | Refugee. | Yes: (following asylum-refugee 28-day transition) 1. Back-to-work conditionality. |

The constraints on access to public funds based on varying immigration statuses fragment the working class in Britain (Vickers, 2019). This state fractioning through variable immigration status and corresponding conditionalities related to access to public funds occurs within the UK's national border. This was evidenced through my ethnographic portraits in chapter 5, which the uneven social reproduction of its residents (Mezzadri, 2017). The findings indicate a racial fractioning within the working class, not only between citizen-migrant, that is, between long-established racialised minorities in the SCR (The Reytons), and new (A8) immigrants, but also differentiation among more recent (A8) migrants (those with settled and those with pre-settled status). The point was to understand how these national policies impacted workers' mobility (Alberti, 2014). However, before outlining the specific mobility practices of workers, it was necessary to understand how these national policies were impacting labour mobility within the specific labour market of the Sheffield City Region. The national state policies differently include/exclude workers from their reproduction. As a result, we have to look at the role of the labour market and how these local labour markets are organised to comprehend the particular circumstances of workers' reliance on warehouse employment. Therefore, I am now moving to the key explanatory variables at the regional scale.

*1.1 RQ 2: How does the local labour market influence labour conditions in the warehouse?*

I now turn to how the regional scale influences labour conditions in the warehouses of the SCR. The national state policies were explored in the context of the legacies of the Sheffield City Region's labour market. High unemployment, low wages, and racial segmentation in the labour and housing markets alongside the refugee dispersal policy had concentrated migrants and refugees within the SCR. It established racialised minority workers within areas experiencing higher levels of deprivation and poor housing conditions.

The national state policies establish a state-sanctioned framework for cheap, racialised labour, reducing workers' mobility power. This lack of mobility forces many immigrants, refugees and established racialised minority workers in the SCR to labour in the warehouses and in informal labour markets. The result defined the SCR as an 'internal border zone'. This refers to how workers can move between formal jobs, formal and informal employment, and between countries. These are the conditions that enable and constrain their mobility and participation in paid work. Moreover, workers' differential inclusion in welfare systems, including housing and benefits, within the SCR impacts their mobility power and leverage in the local labour market. Therefore, the internal border zone is composed of national immigration and welfare policy and, at the regional scale, the structure of the local labour market.

This local organisation of production introduces another set of constraints on workers' mobility power. That is, how different class fractions organise their social and economic relations within certain spaces of the SCR. This level introduced an analysis of workers social reproduction through informal economies, household structure, social networks, and micro-labour market conditions.

The first micro-region, Forge Valley, had a large supply of Roma, EU migrant workers, refugees and established racialised minority workers. These workers (apart from refugees) depend upon extended households, large social connections, and the informal economy for their reproduction, alongside formal employment in warehousing. Moreover, many of the refugees, without recourse to social networks, are immobilised by the asylum process and reporting requirements and immobility is reduced in the SCR.

First, established racial minorities and migrants residing in Forge Valley often face labour market segmentation, which significantly impacts job opportunities. This segregation contributes to these workers being disproportionately represented in less desirable positions within the Sheffield City Region. Consequently, many warehousing firms in the area exploit these labour market conditions, with some recruitment firms offering free or, in some cases, paid commutes on private buses, particularly during specific times of the year.

Second, workers of Forge Valley engage in informal production to complement their formal work in the warehouse. Forge Valley exemplifies distinctive labour market structures that emerged due to state immigration and welfare policies, the deregulation of the labour and housing markets, and the logistics industry's seasonal fluctuations. Formal employment in the warehouse guarantees the capitalist profit but not workers' reproduction. Hence, the deregulation of the labour market facilitates the casual employment of these workers in the local informal economy. Alongside the formal employment in the warehouses of SeamlessCo and FrictionCo, workers engage in the informal economy out of economic necessity. This enables the state and capital to outsource welfare and the social costs of reproduction to petty capitalists (hand car wash, building and gardening businesses and drug dealers) in Forge Valley.

Third, the workers of Forge Valley are coerced into extended households to survive. Immigration and welfare policies combined with the commodification of housing, the end of selective licensing in Forge Valley, the seasonal nature of formal warehousing employment and the high living costs force workers back into parental homes and extended households to share the costs of living. This allows the state and capital to outsource welfare, the social costs of reproduction to workers' households in Forge Valley, increasingly reliant on the household and extended social networks for survival.

Fourth, the workers of Forge Valley are reliant on extended social networks. These extended social networks are developed both in the home, particularly in HMOs, and within private spaces in the community (Sugar Town). In these spaces, workers increase their social capital in Forge Valley to engage in the informal labour market and move between extended households in the SCR to seek work opportunities.

The racial segmentation in the SCR has resulted in the overconcentration of established racialised minority workers, migrants and refugees in Forge Valley and employed in warehouses such as SeamlessCo. The informal economies, extended households, and dense social networks of the residents of Forge Valley are used to survive the seasonal and flexible nature of warehouse employment.

**Table 9: Local Variables**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Local Variables** | | | |
| **Warehouse Workers** | **Micro-Region** | **Informal Economy** | **Household Structure** | **Social Connections** |
| White-British | Pit-Town | No | Nuclear | Low |
| Polish and Lithuanian | Pit-Town and Forge Valley | No | Extended (Forge Valley) Nuclear (Pit-Town) | Low |
| Second/Third Generation:  The Reytons | Forge Valley | Yes  (Construction/Gardening Industry) | Extended | High |
| Roma | Forge Valley | Yes  (Hand-Car-Wash) | Extended | High |
| Refugee | Forge Valley | No | Single | Low |

*RQ 3: What mobility practices are evident?*

Following Alberti (2014) I examined workers mobility strategies. This was achieved in relation to the social reproductive sphere, highlighting the connection between production and reproduction (Mezzadri, 2017; 2020), in the development of mobility skills (Alberti & Sacchetto, 2024)[[49]](#footnote-49). I identified three areas of subsumption including international/regional migration, the development of social networks and the differential access to welfare. Overall, the workers had differential mobility power and utilised different mobility practices.

First, I suggested workers strategies to secure welfare was critical in understanding their labour mobility power (Benvegnu, 2018; Iannuzzi, 2023). I argued that the Reytons, were able to use welfare strategically between employment, allowing them to move between warehouses in the SCR, however this was markedly constrained by the imposition of workfare conditionalities. Second, the Reytons, maximised social networks in the community to engage in regional circulation between households in the SCR. While Ciupijus et al (2020) has shown the role of kinship networks in facilitating migrants transnational exit, my findings suggest that established racialised ethnic minorities in Britain also facilitate workers movements within a local labour market context. Third, this was closely associated with the extended household. Responding to Ceccagno and Sacchetto’s call to analyse the multiplicity of workers accommodations (2019), I showed how the Reytons’ reliance on the extended household was used as a strategic resource to move between warehouse employment. Fourth, I showed how the informal economy was used as a resource to increase workers mobility. The Reytons relied on informal and illegal jobs developed through social networks in the community. The Reytons, therefore, were able to maximise their social networks in the community, extend their households and engage in the informal economy to participate in regional industrial circulation in the SCR, following the fluctuation of the logistics industry. As a result, these workers mobility practices are both intra-sectoral and formal-informal. They move between warehouse employment in the SCR and utilise social connections to move between formal and informal employment.

While Andrijasevic and Sacchetto (2016b) have shown how dormitories can increase workers mobility prospects, my research findings suggest the commodified housing market in Forge Valley also led to forms of solidarity to develop that have the potential to spill into the workplace. For EU migrants, I showed how their concentration in HMOs in Forge Valley became a space to develop sociality, allowing them to build important footholds in an otherwise isolating industry such as logistics. This allowed information exchange regarding the local labour market, increasing workers job prospects and allowing them to handle the difficulties of warehouse work. It allowed them to ‘warehouse hop’ in the search for better conditions (Ceccagno & Sacchetto, 2019). The result was an analysis of Forge Valley as a particular commodified and privatised ‘dormitory’, home to warehouse workers living in overcrowded privately rented housing. EU workers living in HMOs in Forge Valley relied on these dense social connections within the household to engage in intra-sectoral mobility.

The Roma in Forge Valley engaged in international mobility between Forge Valley and Slovakia. The Roma engaged in industrial circulation between Forge Valley and Slovakia and relied on the informal economy (hand car wash) during downturns in the logistics industry. Therefore, this informal work was not only a steppingstone used to develop networks to gain better employment (Clark & Colling, 2017), but was used to survive the seasonal and flexible employment in the warehouse. My evidence suggests that the Roma did not use these informal jobs as a gateway to improved employment opportunities, but consistently relied on them to escape cyclical unemployment.

Moreover, the refugee's initial lack of social connections and economic position increased their dependency on formal employment. Dispersed to Forge Valley with few social connections, the refugees relied on formal employment in the warehouse.

Consequently, the workers in Forge Valley significantly differ from the stereotypical image perpetuated by statistics (chapter three) of working-class families characterised by single parenthood and long-term unemployment. Instead, they constitute expanded networks of extended families, often engaged in multiple jobs. In general, the reproduction of the labouring class in Forge Valley was characterised by the circulation of domestic and international workers. Therefore, we can understand Forge Valley as a 'circulation zone'.

In comparison, Pit-Town comprised council and ex-council housing located on the periphery of Sheffield city. White British workers and Polish workers were reproduced through nuclear families, with low social connections, increasing their dependency on the warehouse and in-work benefits. Moreover, changes to the composition of the labour market in Pit-town post-Brexit meant a substantial supply of Polish migrants with family commitments were dependent upon FrictionCo for their employment (Duda-Mikulin, 2022), further enhanced by the geographical isolation of the town. The lack of alternative employment opportunities, coupled with the uncertainties surrounding Polish migrants social and legal rights and family commitments, reduced their mobility bargaining power.

In Pit-town, the stability of working-class nuclear households hinges on the dual income of husbands and wives, typically ranging from £30,000 to £35,000 net. However, the community faces challenges when unemployment or marital breakdowns occur, as residents lack social connections beyond their domestic spaces. This limited social network means they lack additional resources, such as friends, job opportunities, and temporary accommodations, to navigate the temporal and seasonal cycles of the logistics industry. The narrative of Graham in chapter four illustrates how new-build households on the new working-class estates, oscillate between the security provided by dual incomes and the precariousness stemming from the lack of external resources, such as social networks and participation in informal economies. Furthermore, warehouse workers supporting nuclear families are particularly vulnerable to the seasonal and temporal fluctuations of the labour market, facing social disruptions caused by unemployment. Therefore, we can understand Pit-town as a 'static zone'.

The Sheffield City Region is historically forged by deindustrialisation, austerity policies, racial segmentation, and overall defined by its lack of employment opportunities and low wages (Thomas et al., 2020). In the warehouse industry today, two distinct patterns of reproduction coexist, each characterised by unique mobility practices. In Forge Valley, families have adapted to structural socio-economic factors by becoming flexible institutions. The types of employment opportunities, the young age of its inhabitants, welfare and housing policies and flexible labour, push the re-grouping of its members into extended households. This increases workers' mobility bargaining power as they develop mobility skills by building social connections in the community and households and rely on informal economies during the downturn in logistics. This translates into workers' regional and international industrial circulation, allowing capital to benefit from cheap and mobile labour power (Mezzadri, 2020).

In residential suburbs like Pit-Town, housing privatisation and reliance on workfare for Polish and English workers have incentivised wage earners to purchase council homes and increased female employment in logistics. This encouraged the formation of nuclear households in ex-industrial villages and estates on Sheffield's periphery, like Pit-Town, comprised of dual incomes, often derived from warehouse employment. The isolation of the workers in Pit-Town, the lack of employment opportunities, uncertainties for migrants following Brexit and the concentration of Polish families in the town reduce their mobility power and fragment their families because of a reliance on the warehouse, subject to seasonal fluctuations. In short, it is precisely the differential inclusion in welfare and the conditions in the local labour market that disciplines labour allowing warehouse workers’ labour power to be a desirable commodity for capital.

This section has examined the interaction between various state disciplining measures of mobility, contributing to forming a segmented labour market in the Sheffield City Region. This gives way to different mobility practices of workers according to their household structure, social connections and availability of formal and informal work in the micro-region of Forge Valley and Pit-Town. Consequently, workers have differential mobility power and employ different mobility practices to survive. The main point is that workers in Forge Valley express a higher degree of mobility than those in Pit-Town.

Therefore, the next section will return to the labour process to discuss how the employment relation is shaped in this social context. The uneven social reproduction of workers in the SCR is partly retranslated into the social organisation of the warehouses. The next section reveals how exploitation is experienced in the warehouse and how this can inform bargaining practices.

**Table 10: Mobility Practices**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Mobility Practices in the Sheffield City Region** | | | |
| **Warehouse Workers** | **Micro-Region** | **Mobility Practice** | **Overall, Character of Micro-Region.** |
| White-British | Pit-Town | N/A | Static Zone |
| Polish | Pit-Town | N/A |
| Second/Third Generation:  The Reytons | Forge Valley | Regional Circulation.  1. Formal-Formal Employment.  2. Formal-Informal Employment. | Circulation Zone |
| Roma | Forge Valley | International Circulation.  1. Formal-Formal Employment.  2. Formal-Informal Employment. |
| Polish and Lithuanian | Forge Valley | Regional Circulation.  1. Formal-Formal Employment |
| Refugee | Forge Valley | N/A |

### 8.2.2 The Warehouse's Racialised Extraction Mechanisms

*RQ 4 How are the mechanisms of exploitation in the warehouse experienced?*

*Racial Division of Labour*

In FrictionCo, the male Roma and Refugee's with temporary contracts worked the physical, labour intensive, dirty and teamwork-based Loading Bays. In the Loading Bay, the white British and Polish operated the Forklift Trucks and worked as team leaders. In the Sortation rooms, Female Polish workers, some with permanent contracts, worked the line as Belt-Sorters, while the Roma women with temporary contracts worked as Push-tray sorters. In Sortation, Polish women and White-British men held team leader positions. The agency officials were predominantly Polish women.

In SeamlessCo, the Refugee, Roma and The Reytons worked in the picking department. The Polish worked as lift marshals, team leaders and agency officials. The White British worked as team leaders and managers. Therefore, at both FrictionCo and SeamlessCo, there was a clear racial ceiling on the skill level that the Roma, Refugees and the Reytons could reach, with none exercising any sort of supervisory or managerial authority. However, the racial division of labour in FrictionCo was not static; it shifted over time in response to the changing labour market in Pit-Town and the end of freedom of movement. The scarcity of cheap Polish labour led to both a reliance on Polish workers who decided to stay (mostly with family commitments) and the extension of recruitment into nearby cities with large Roma and Refugee populations. The result was the promotion of male Polish labour into supervisory roles. Therefore, the racial division of labour in FrictionCo was developed in response to these changes in the local labour market.

Therefore, the evidence highlights, in both warehouses' racial segregation, whereby jobs with some level of authority or autonomy were protected as a White British or Polish preserve. At SeamlessCo, the more labour-intensive production areas, such as picking, became the reserve of refugees, Roma and second and third-generation migrants (The Reytons). At FrictionCo, the loading bays, considered deskilled and intensive, were the reserve of refugees and Roma. Moreover, a gender dimension was observed at FrictionCo, whereby Polish and Roma women were subject to similarly deskilled and intensive arenas of production in the sortation department.

Therefore, at both warehouses, a racial division of labour is constructed according to workers' mobility power. I will now explore how these elements contribute to developing and implementing a despotic mode of control in the two warehouses: performance-based scheduling. Performance-based scheduling is used at both warehouses but has different outcomes related to workers' mobility power. Overall, I have shown how labour mobility has interacted with forms of race management in the warehouses (Roediger & Esch, 2014).

*Performance-Scheduling*

Discussions of 'temporal flexibility' (Beynon, 1984; Gottfried, 1992; Heyes, 1997; Wood, 2020) have emphasised—managers' efforts to enhance coordination between labour supply and production requirements. Numerous researchers have emphasised that flexible scheduling grants significant power to managers in the workplace. This widespread practice establishes an alternative form of flexible control known as "flexible discipline." This approach significantly enhances managers' discretionary authority, allowing them to discipline workers flexibly outside formal procedures by adjusting their schedules. Such alterations can disrupt workers' home lives, reduce their income, and hinder their ability to plan. The subtlety and ambiguity of flexible discipline make it challenging for workers to determine whether they are being disciplined and to attribute the cause of their difficulties to their managers or shifting demand (Wood, 2016).

In warehousing, companies grapple with volatile fluctuations in consumer demand. Therefore, there are more exacting pressures for temporal flexibility than Wood's (2020) study of two major international retailers. In SeamlessCo and FrictionCo, temporal flexibility is achieved through performance-scheduling, which involves collecting and allocating individual workers' quantified performance data. Performance-based scheduling entails scheduling employees' work hours and shifts based on their individual performance and the organisation's operational needs. This scheduling approach aims to optimise labour allocation by aligning employee work hours with their productivity levels and matching staffing levels with fluctuations in customer demand.

Collecting key performance indicators provides an alternative method of establishing flexible despotism, known as 'performance discipline.' FrictionCo and SeamlessCo illustrate how performance discipline significantly enhances the power of the recruitment agency, allowing them to discipline workers who don't meet the expected level of productivity or 'low-performers' by altering their schedules or terminating their contracts. These alterations force workers to increase their productivity, closing workers' indeterminacy and the invasion of the porosity of the workday (although not all workers respond uniformly, a point we will re-examine). A significant advantage of performance discipline as a workplace control mechanism is its ability to shield managers from workers' grievances.

In both FrictionCo and SeamlessCo handheld, wearable devices and biometric finger scanners were used to produce metrics on productivity and prevent time theft, understood through the metrics 'time-off-task' and 'picking rate'. These metrics were used to rank worker performance. In FrictionCo and SeamlessCo, the two metrics in use, 'Picking Rate' and 'Time off Task', were used to monitor the workers' performance and started as soon as they clocked in for their shift. Distribution ratings systems were used to differentiate between high and low performers. Described in chapter 6 as 'in the red', these low performers made up the bottom 10% and were in constant fear over being temporally flexed (meaning receiving a text message from the agency to not come in for tomorrow's shift) and contract terminations. Those 'in the green' top performers were potentially awarded permanent contracts, although this remained at managers' discretion. Therefore, the performance management system in both warehouses operated with a punishment and reward system that operated on behalf of the recruitment firm (discipline) and managers (reward).

Therefore, these systems did not act autonomously but rather were agency-controlled (Vosko, 2010). In this way, the agency acted on behalf of algorithmic systems capturing performance data. Moreover, alongside algorithmic management, the agency took on a managerial role within the production process, not limited to tracking KPIs, but a more direct role in supervising and dividing everyday tasks.

By combining temporal flexibility with monitoring and quantifying established standards of effort, Performance-scheduling establishes a setting where workers are compelled to persistently endeavour to hit ever-increasing targets to avoid being flexibly disciplined. This implies that managers/agencies can reduce the hours and earnings of workers, not necessarily based on them being "insufficiently compliant", as per Wood (2016), but those who do not meet the required efficiency standards. This removes the subtle and subjective aspect of flexible despotism, whereby workers are unsure whether and why they are being disciplined. Instead, performance discipline is tied to workers' individual performance, giving rise to competition on the shopfloor between workers as they compete over efficiency targets. The result is an increase in the extraction of both absolute and relative surplus value. However, performance-scheduling was also contested, but the ability of workers to contest performance-scheduling was related to their mobility power, that is, their ability to quit work.

*RQ 5: How does this experience differ according to workers' mobility power?*

While all workers were subject to performance-scheduling, not all workers experienced this mechanism in the same way. At FrictionCo, performance-scheduling entailed the intensifying of work for both the loading and sortation departments. Regarding the politics of production, performance scheduling intensifies the division between different racial class fractions. In the sortation department, performance-scheduling shifted the conflict between workers and management into a conflict between Polish and Roma women. In particular, agency officials modified performance-scheduling, using Polish women's precarious position in the local labour market and social reproductive needs. In this respect, Polish women competed with Roma women for particular shift patterns, increasing the intensity of their work on the line and reducing their break times.

Performance could not be quantified in the Loading Bay of FrictionCo, so loading gangs were subject to direct control. In the loading department, work intensification was reached by team leaders' close monitoring and direction of the loading gangs. This had the effect of collectivising efforts and increasing socialisation among workers. In this way, intensifying work divided the workforce between the loading and sortation departments. Where the intensification of work created an individualistic and competitive atmosphere in the sortation department, it created a more cohesive and collective one in the loading department.

The employees in the two departments primarily interpreted this contrast through a lens of racial difference. For example, for the loading bay workers, the White workers of the sortation department earned more than them and had 'safer jobs' (meaning permanent contracts) and 'more boring jobs'. Meanwhile, the Polish women in the Sortation department thought the loading workers performed 'dangerous' and 'dirty' jobs. Within each department, the team leaders and supervisors fostered the fragmentation between the departments, using racial imagery to devalue the loading bay and its workers as 'Donkey work'. At the same time, they represented the sortation department as 'easy' and 'clean' work.

This portrayal aligns with the workers' understanding of the racial and gender divide between the loading and sortation departments, wherein the former is predominantly composed of refugees and Roma men. The latter consists mainly of White Polish women. The workers' perception of the racial and gender distinctions between the departments did not lead them to accept the strategies the managers employed unquestionably.

My general point is that the state has created the conditions for the exploitation of a new racialised reserve army of labour – subjected to the intensification of work in the warehouse. This means the manager attempts to eliminate unproductive time and maximise productive effort. However, the mechanisms for attempting this vary according to the technical organisation of each department and the different levels of labour power (work effort and mobility effort) and, thus, the bargaining position of the two working-class formations in each department. The different manager mechanisms to intensify work in sortation and loading further disconnect the social relations between these racial class fractions.

In comparison, in SeamlessCo, performance-scheduling was examined in the picking department. Regarding the politics of production, performance scheduling intensifies workers' division between different racial class fractions in SeamlessCo. In the picking department, performance-scheduling transformed the conflict between management and workers into a conflict between the Reytons, Roma and Refugees on the one hand and Polish and White-British workers on the other.

In the picking department, performance scheduling had the effect of spatially fragmenting workers in the picking department. While the Reytons attempted to retain some autonomy and laboured on the upper levels, the Roma, Refugees and Polish workers laboured on the ground floor. In this way, workers responded to performance-scheduling differently related to their relative mobility power. This fragmented the picking department between the labour-intensive 'ground zero' and the less intensive work on the higher floors, mirroring managers' capacity to commodify the labour power of different racial class fractions.

On Ground Zero, the Roma and Refugees were coerced into hitting performance targets. They were often working through break times. In contrast, Polish workers, more inclined to receive permanent contracts and 'put-away' tasks with increased autonomy, also attempted to hit performance targets. The Reytons, on the upper floors, did not attempt to hit performance targets and used their mobility in the labour market to rely on multiple additional forms of income.

The workers read these contrasting responses to performance-scheduling along racial lines. The Reytons despised the Polish workers for rate-busting because they believed they had been coopted into intensifying their labour, which was linked to their capacity to gain permanent contracts and tasks with greater autonomy. The Polish workers believed the Reytons were unqualified and unwilling to work hard. Regarding the politics of production, workers responded to performance-scheduling in different ways connected to their ability to reduce their overall effort. Their capacity to reduce their effort in production was, in part, related to their mobility power, that is their capacity to leave SeamlessCo and find alternative work (formal or informal/ legal or illegal). Because workers' mobility power in Forge Valley is forged through racial immigration policy, on the shopfloor this increased worker competition between different racial class fractions.

### 8.2.3 Disrupting Value in Motion

*RQ 6: How do warehouse workers resist these mechanisms?*

This section discusses the previous findings regarding workers' resistance strategies and mobility-effort bargaining (Smith, 2006; Hammer & Adham, 2022). It presents the findings and analyses distinct forms of double indeterminacy by exploring the connections between workers reproduction through the national immigration regime (RQ 1), the local labour market (RQ 2&3), and the experience of mechanisms of exploitation (RQ 4&5) and workers strategies related to mobility and effort in FrictionCo and SeamlessCo. As observed, the mobility of five labour categories—Reytons, Refugees, Roma, White Eastern European, and White British—is regulated to different extents and through diverse mechanisms by the state and the local labour market. The previous section answered questions four and five by examining how workers’ experience their work. I suggested that exploitation in the warehouses relied on both performance management and flexible scheduling, giving way to agency-controlled performance-based scheduling, meaning the attempts to contract a quantified amount of productive labour. Performance-scheduling enabled the agency to increase workers' efforts through performance discipline, meaning the threat of being labelled as a 'low performer' and subject to flexible scheduling or contract termination. Second, the firms used performance-scheduling to reduce worker's mobility by rewarding 'high performers' with the promise of permanent contracts. Therefore, performance-scheduling offered a coercive mechanism to control workers' effort and mobility.

However, RQ2&3 also outlined other forms of control, such as the racial division of labour. The suggestion was that performance-based scheduling was insufficient regarding the exploitation of labour, so additional measures operated side-by-side with algorithmic, technological surveillance, performance-measuring and ranking systems. I argued that this form of race management in the warehouse was used to increase competition between racialised fractions. RQ6, therefore, looks to understand the limitations of performance-based scheduling and on what basis these instruments of exploitation were limited.

The necessary effort and the specific 'content' of productivity remain indeterminate in a labour relationship (Smith, 2006). While both warehouses came close to the promise of a quantifiable determined amount of labour effort, there still entailed forms of indirect bargaining over effort. This section answers question six by examining the different forms of mobility power by looking at how warehouse workers resist the forms of exploitation in the warehouse. Overall, the result is variable forms of mobility-effort bargaining in the workplace. However, there are some regularities that we can abstract from the particularities of the case presented in order to understand the warehouse workers' production politics in the SCR.

This section, therefore, centres on resistance to performance-based scheduling, relating to the two forms of labour indeterminacy: effort and mobility power. Since workers' mobility power and mobility practices differ according to their racialised migrant status (RQ 1) segmentation in the local labour market (RQ 2&3), and uneven processes of social reproduction across the two micro-regions (RQ 2&3), the effects of performance-based scheduling are also delineated along 'racial' lines. This section centres on daily negotiations related to work effort and anticipated output levels, highlighting various strategies employed by workers to diminish their efforts and maintain autonomy in the production process. The objective is to illustrate that the determination and negotiation of labour effort are conventionally influenced by considerations extending beyond the workplace in terms of the worker's reproduction, including the state's role, local labour market, and micro-region.

Overall, the ability of employers and agencies to commodify workers' time in the warehouse appears to be influenced by the workers' mobility power. Consequently, the effectiveness of performance-based scheduling varies depending on workers' mobility differentials, which are shaped by factors such as state-defined immigration status and the structure of the local labour market in the Sheffield City Region. Additionally, micro-level variations, including household structure and social connections within the informal economy, seem to impact workers' capacity to resist managerial control. This variation allows some workers to maintain a degree of flexibility in the labour process. In summary, the firms' capacity to commodify working time in the warehouse varies in relation to workers' mobility power. Their ability to individualize and intensify effort through monitoring, technological surveillance, and performance metrics (Newsome et al., 2013) appears to depend on workers' relative mobility, specifically their ability to leave the warehouse.

*Mobility-Effort Bargaining*

Chapters 5 and 6 explored the everyday forms of struggle concerning workers' effort. In the two case studies of FrictionCo and SeamlessCo, I showed that workers' ability to reduce their effort in the warehouse and engage in mobility-effort bargaining largely depended upon the worker's reproduction. This included their immigration status, differential access to public funds, their position in the local labour market, and their living conditions. As I explored ethnographically in Chapter 5, the worker's immigration status, location in the local labour market and household arrangements habitually differ according to nationality and immigration status. In this way, the different racial class fractions developed different mobility practices. These different mobility practices among these migrant groups affected their ability to reduce their efforts in the warehouse and retain some indeterminacy despite the seemingly all-pervasive performance-scheduling they were subject to. As a consequence, workers' efforts, or the ability to reduce the effort in the warehouse, became segmented and racialised, contributing to heightened competition among various migrant groups and perpetuating ethnic and national divides.

Smith (2006) posits that the indeterminacy of mobility power shapes the dynamics between labour and capital, influencing the organisation of the labour process. Mobility power remains indeterminate as employers are uncertain whether an employed worker will stay with the firm, and workers are unsure whether their employer will renew the employment contract (Smith, 2006). The findings of this research highlight that mobility-effort bargaining is fundamental to comprehending labour-capital relations in both warehouses, impacting not only migrant workers but also British workers and refugee workers.

*The Reytons*

The Reytons are employed by SeamlessCo. Their mobility is controlled by the segmentation of the local labour market in which they have few options outside of warehouse employment. Segmented within Forge Valley severely limits their employment options outside of warehouse roles. Second, through the commodification of welfare, the Reytons may face sanctions or loss of welfare benefits if they do not comply with certain conditions, such as accepting warehouse employment. This creates a form of coercion where individuals are compelled to take specific jobs to maintain access to essential welfare support. This limits the Reytons' ability to exercise genuine choice in their employment. The fear of losing vital welfare benefits forces them to remain in warehouse employment despite the desire for change. This coercive element reduces their mobility by restricting their freedom to pursue alternative opportunities more aligned with their skills, interests, and personal goals. Mobility is also controlled by the agency and management in the warehouse through performance-scheduling. Performance-Scheduling entails contractual control, whereby permanent contracts are rewarded for consistent performance and intensified through the combination of performance and temporal flexibility, resulting in performance discipline.

This strong mobility control is partly offset by relatively high mobility-effort bargaining. This mobility-effort bargaining is constructed through workers' reproduction. The Reytons’ strategic use of welfare, informal work in Forge Valley and extended households means the Reytons rely on dense horizontal social connections in the neighbourhood to move between logistics firms by moving across the SCR in search of work and pooling resources in the home. Therefore, their high mobility power allows them to engage in several mobility practices to move between warehouses, sign up to multiple recruitment agencies, move between households within the SCR and rely on the informal economy and welfare during periods of downturn and between warehouse employment.

As a result of seasonal fluctuation in the warehouse, the Reytons are employed for short periods. This results in relatively high mobility power at SeamlessCo and low commitment, allowing workers to diminish effort through soldiering and minor sabotage in the workplace (discussions in social spaces). Performance targets and metrics are met with derision. The Reytons’ employment at SeamlessCo is circumvented by utilising voluntary time-off, enabling management to maintain and intensify the workforces labour with less mobility bargaining power.

*Ali and Xenon (Refugees)*

The Refugee workers are employed at SeamlessCo and FrictionCo. Their mobility is controlled by the state, the local labour market, the employer and the recruitment agency. The UK dispersal policy, designed to distribute refugees across different regions, significantly impacts their mobility power. First, forced relocation involves locating refugees in areas with no pre-existing social connections. Without a support network, refugees in Forge Valley experience social isolation, hindering their ability to navigate the labour market and access employment.

Dispersal to the SCR, with limited employment prospects and a segmented local labour market, leaves them with few opportunities to pursue employment outside of low-wage, warehouse work. Moreover, the 28-day move-on period provides refugees with limited time to adjust to their new surroundings, understand local opportunities, and establish connections within the community—the constrained timeframe results in increased dependency and pressure in securing employment. In summary, the 28-day move-on period, dispersal policy and structure of the local labour market significantly restrict the mobility-effort bargaining of refugees by imposing forced relocation and time constraints that impact their ability to find stable accommodation, secure employment, and integrate into the community.

Their lack of social connections in Forge Valley, their increased dependency following the 28-day move-on period, reporting requirements and language barriers reduce their overall mobility within Forge Valley. Moreover, their experience of the asylum process meant the state had conditioned their expectations to the extent that refugees such as Ali were thankful for their employment in FrictionCo despite the physical ailments this caused him. Overall, this translates to low mobility power at work. This was described in chapter 5 as a particular 'philosophy of work'.

I referred to this as a blend of job-related knowledge, personal history, migration experience, asylum experience, and subjective perspectives on the relationships between workers and managers/agency officials. Ali encapsulates all these elements as 'philosophy of work.' This was represented in his views of a 'decent' loading bay. For Ali, a decent loading bay involves continuous loading and unloading without the breaks afforded in the opposite bay.

In FrictionCo and SeamlessCo, the refugees such as Ali and Xenon often expressed high commitment in their philosophy of work. As a result, their indeterminacy was 'successfully' reduced through performance metrics and targets. This results in an invasion of porosity of the workday as they attempt to hit targets while working through break times. Refugees' situation in mobility-effort bargaining is much weaker than the Reytons.

*Gebrial and Marian (Roma)*

The Roma workers are employed at SeamlessCo and FrictionCo. Male and female workers represented a high percentage of the workforce at both firms. Their mobility is controlled by the state, local labour market, the employer and recruitment agency.

State immigration policies tie the Roma workers' access to welfare to their immigration status, particularly pre-settled status. The requirement to prove the right to reside for welfare eligibility creates a conditionality that impacts the mobility of Roma workers. Many Roma workers were not aware of the intricacies of immigration policies, including the conditionality of welfare access tied to pre-settled status. Language limitations hindered their ability to understand the details of immigration policies, reducing their awareness of how their immigration status impacts their welfare entitlements. The lack of awareness about the conditions tied to pre-settled status created uncertainty among Roma workers about the consequences of potential changes in their residence or employment.

The segmented local labour market in the SCR significantly curtails the mobility of Roma workers by confining them to limited employment options, primarily within warehousing. Moreover, their economic vulnerability is exacerbated as they depend on specific sectors, hindering their bargaining power for better working conditions or wages. The concentration of Roma workers in warehousing also pushes them towards informal employment practices, lacking legal protections and benefits associated with formal employment. This, in turn, limits their mobility regarding job choices and career advancement. Additionally, the specific employment of Roma women in certain sectors, such as hotels housing asylum seekers, highlights gender-specific occupational segregation, further restricting the overall mobility of the Roma workforce within the local labour market. These factors collectively contribute to constrained and limited mobility for Roma workers within the SCR.

This is offset by their social reproduction in Forge Valley, which allows them to use several mobility practices to move between warehouses and in and out of the UK. In essence, the social reproduction within the Roma community in Forge Valley counterbalances the constraints imposed by the segmented labour market. By relying on extended households and participating in informal economies, Roma workers can capitalise on social connections to enhance their mobility, moving between warehouses and exploring opportunities beyond the local context.

This results in relatively high mobility power at SeamlessCo and FrictionCo, coupled with low commitment. This dynamic empowers workers to diminish their efforts through practices like soldiering and minor sabotage within the workplace. Unlike the Reytons, the Roma's resistance strategies of both soldiering and leaving the warehouse are carried out collectively in kinship groups, often mirroring the extended household.

*Szymon and Anna (Polish)*

Szymon and Anna; two Polish workers work in FrictionCo, live in Pit-town and have a young family. The Polish community make up a large percentage of the workforce in FrictionCo. The structure and geographical isolation of the micro-labour market in the SCR intricately shape the mobility of Polish workers like Szymon and Anna in Pit-Town. The limited options for employment outside of FrictionCo contribute to a distinct lack of diversity in their job opportunities. The micro-labour market structure is characterised by a concentration of employment options within a specific sector, dominated by a single major employer, FrictionCo. This concentration creates a scenario where Polish workers find themselves with few viable alternatives, making their mobility within the labour market notably constrained.

Furthermore, the commodification of the welfare system plays a pivotal role in controlling the mobility of Polish workers. Rather than serving solely as a safety net, the welfare system becomes commodified, transforming essential social services into commodities subject to market forces. In this context, Polish workers may find themselves coerced into warehouse employment due to the conditional nature of welfare access. Sanctions tied to welfare benefits create a coercive environment, pushing workers to comply with specific employment conditions, often in the warehouse sector, to maintain access to crucial welfare support.

The combination of the micro-labour market structure, the commodification of the welfare system and family commitments creates a situation where Polish workers in Pit-Town experience limited mobility within their employment choices. The concentration of job opportunities within a single sector and the coercive influence of welfare conditionality shape their professional trajectories and restrict their ability to explore alternative employment opportunities. As a result, the mobility of Polish workers becomes tightly bound to the specific conditions set by the prevailing micro-labour market and the commodified welfare system in Pit-Town.

In FrictionCo, race and gender are also at work in the organisation of the labour market. In the post-industrial micro-labour market of Pit-town, I discovered a significant presence of Polish working mothers with limited qualifications, poor English language, and gendered familial responsibilities combined to fix them into warehouse employment. Fixed to employment in FrictionCo, they have gained experience specific to the company, many having worked there for five years or more. The deeply ingrained gender roles within their families significantly influence the terms of their employment. This influence is so pronounced that both management and labour agencies resort to coercive strategies rooted in familial expectations as a means of exploitation (Lee, 1998). By constructing shift times around women's double-burden, management and agencies can increase the effort on the line, stabilise the supply of experienced workers and keep wages low. The Polish women's low mobility power left them with little recourse but to endure sexual advances and increase their effort on the line, meaning a reduction in their indeterminacy and the invasion of the porosity of the workday. Within the warehouse, mobility is controlled through the agency and management in the warehouse through performance-scheduling. Performance-Scheduling entails contractual control, whereby permanent contracts are offered in reward for consistent performance.

Examining the case study reveals warehouses as a battleground shaped by the state's repressive policies, the organisation of the local labour market, and the structure of the micro-region. The regulation of migrant labour mobility within the workplace is pivotal, with the state, firm, and agency playing significant roles. It is crucial to recognise, however, that the authority exerted by the state and capital over migrants' mobility and labour is not all-encompassing. Workers retain a certain level of agency, allowing them to navigate the uncertainties tied to production and mobility, as proposed by Smith (2006, 2010).

**Table 11: Mechanism of Exploitation and Mobility-Effort Bargaining**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Micro-Region** | **Labour** | **Firm** | **Mechanism of Exploitation** | **Mobility-Effort Bargaining** |
| Forge Valley  ‘Circulation Zone’ | The Reyton’s | SeamlessCo | Performance-Scheduling | High movement between firms.  Reduced effort.  Retained some autonomy. |
| Roma | SeamlessCo and FrictionCo | Performance-Scheduling | High movement between firms and internationally.  Reduced effort collectively.  Retained some autonomy. |
| Refugee | SeamlessCo and FrictionCo | Performance-Scheduling | Low movement between firms.  High effort.  Invaded Porosity of workday. |
| Pit-Town  ‘Static Zone’ | White British | FrictionCo | Performance-Scheduling | Low movement between firms.  High effort.  Retained some autonomy. |
| Polish | FrictionCo | Performance-Scheduling | Low movement between firms.  High effort.  Invaded Porosity of workday. |

This section has given an overview of the day-to-day negotiations surrounding work effort and anticipated productivity levels. Drawing on my experience as a warehouse worker, I highlighted various strategies employees employ to decelerate the pace of work and diminish overall effort. I contended that workers' capacity to curtail their overall work effort hinges on their mobility power and the nature of their mobility practices. In essence, this section has demonstrated that, even within performance-scheduling, labour productivity is an ongoing negotiation between employers/agency officials and employees, influenced by factors extending beyond the confines of the workplace. While performance-based scheduling may appear all-pervasive, workers have found multiple ways to renegotiate the effort-bargain and push back the frontier of control. However, this relies on workers' ability to exit from the warehouse, leading to several forms of mobility-effort bargaining.

## 8.3 Contributions

In attempting to bring together the differing strands of this thesis in the form of a conclusion it is perhaps helpful to outline the contributions I have made. The thesis has been concerned with exploring empirically and ethnographically the forms of exploitation and resistance in the warehouse labour process in the Sheffield City Region. In turn this led us to highlight the limitations of the prevailing debates regarding both political economic approaches in logistics and in corollary approaches to understanding the warehouse labour process. In essence, bringing these literatures together allowed me to conceptually place the labour process within the local, and national political environment and within the context of the circuit of capital.

Therefore, the first contribution has been the development of logistics political economy. This was achieved by conceptually placing the labour process within the circuit of capital and within the political national and local environment using a scalar labour regime framework and exploring this ethnographically through covert participatory observation. Reconnecting a labour regime framework to the dynamics of the labour process allowed us to move beyond the relative autonomy of the labour process. Therefore, I will state the importance of considering the impact of the labour regime on the labour process. Overall, I am highlighting the connection between the point of production, the political national and local context and the overarching movement of value across the circuit of capital.

The second contribution, is the application of racial capitalism to an understanding of logistics political economy. This has taken place at three levels. First, the dynamics of exploitation and resistance in the labour process. Second, the regime, including national and local scales have been considered. Racialisation and the production of difference has therefore been theorised as structuring logics of the labour regime and labour process dynamics. Third, the circuit of capital and the movement of value. I suggest therefore, that value in motion relies not on rendering labour abstract, but on the social production of difference (Lowe, 1996).

First, I will outline at a conceptual level my contribution to logistics political economy through the reconnection of the labour process to the labour regime and at an abstract level to the movement of value across the circuit of capital. This was explored ethnographically, marking it out as a distinct contribution to the field of political economy. Second, I will outline at a theoretical level the application of racial capitalism to the theorisation of a logistics political economy. Together we can suggest that in this specific case, the movement of value across the circuit of capital is reliant on, “the creation and maintenance of migrant labour as a mobile, flexible source of racially subjugated labour-power” (De Genova, 2023: 10).

### 8.3.1 Connecting the Labour Process

Current logistics political economy has moved beyond a disconnected labour process and situated it at the centre of the circuit of capital, overcoming the missing link between labour process change and global value chain analysis (Newsome et al., 2015). The implication here is that the New Production Method has allowed the dominant retailers to extend a search for value across inter-linked firms within the network, i.e., into the warehouse labour process. I suggested that while overcoming the autonomy of the labour process, this literature, nevertheless privileges the chain, dislocating the labour process from its socio-political context. Therefore, more attention was needed on the interaction between this search for value within particular socio-political environments. The implication is that an overemphasis on the chain masked the particular socio-political conditions required for their ‘success’. What was missing was the interplay between exploitation and disciplining (Baglioni, 2021). That, is, the mechanisms that reproduce the conditions for warehouse workers labour power to act as a desired commodity for logistics capital.

Therefore, the purpose of using a multiscalar labour regime for this thesis, was not to narrow the focus solely to the workplace but rather to emphasise the point of production within a broader regulatory and institutional framework. Given the spatial concentration of warehousing within contexts of weak social and legal infrastructure (ITF, 2022) understanding workplace regimes and their dynamic and variegated labour processes was essential. In addressing this gap, my research re-centred labour process theory into the evolving framework of labour regimes, aiming to unravel the political mechanisms that discipline labour, and allow capital to develop particular management techniques that transform labour power at the point of production.

For all its many strengths, and recent innovations, the labour regime discourse understates the importance of the workplace as a key site for the extraction of surplus value (Newsome, 2015). While labour regime analysis continues to play lip-service to the employment relation, few have developed this in terms of management control strategies, labours indeterminacy and the immediate wage-effort bargain in the workplace. This thesis has attempted to move beyond this dislocation and reconnect these workplace dynamics within a national and local regulatory and institutional context. Therefore, the point of production has been considered within its local and national political context. However, it seems imperative to locate this labour regime (reconnected to the point at which value is created) within the overall circuit of capital. Consequently, the argument is that the labour regime, should not be divorced from the point at which value is produced and that this reconnected labour regime, should not be divorced from an overarching search for value. These scales of analysis will now be further elucidated.

Understanding the labour regime and its impact on the employment relation, meant first a focus on the state’s border regime. This thesis built on approaches to the Hostile Environment (De Noronha, 2020; Goodfellow, 2019) that suggests the Hostile Environment can be understood as a process of bordering, which carves out racialised migrant workers from certain social and welfare rights, often by redefining categories of inclusion and exclusion. Focusing on benefits, housing and social care, I have demonstrated a range of practices to construct new kinds of borders that act to differentially include migrant workers. Bordering practices can operate subtly with the primary goal of limiting access to a system to a carefully chosen category of individuals. I have extended this to analyse the impact of these bordering processes on workers mobility power.

Second at the local scale, using Jonas's (1996) local control regime and developments in labour geography this thesis explored the reproduction and consumption locales in two distinct social spaces within the SCR. Workers are subject to a racially segmented local labour market, meaning mobility is restricted locally through access to housing and labour markets and through refugee dispersal policy. This was explored through the two micro-regions, with their own distinct labour markets. Developing feminist approaches to the labour regime I analysed this in terms of the uneven social reproduction of labour (Mezzadri, 2017; Schling, 2022). Focusing on how the household structure, informal economies and social networks combine to influence workers capacity to effort-bargain in the workplace.

Using a scalar regime framework to analyse workers mobility power, I took this into the workplace scale, using labour process theory to analyse how managers attempt to ensure the transformation of labour power and to analyse workers effort-bargaining. In acknowledging the racial division of labour in both firms, I have highlighted the need to understand how the apparatus of production is linked with the organisation of labour. The organisation of the labour process, is partially predicated on the conditions in the local labour market. Therefore, we can only begin to fully understand the dynamics of the labour process through the changes to the political organisation of the local labour market. Consequently, the concern is to embrace the role of the state, in terms of the disciplining of labour and the opportunities this presents for capital to exploit labour in production.

The evidence indicates that the political and local environment significantly influences labour dynamics. At an abstract level, it appears that the state's regulation of labour enables capital to accelerate the movement of value within the circuit of capital by focusing on specific racialised groups of workers. These workers are subjected to intensified and often de-skilled forms of labour, highlighting how state interventions can shape the nature of work and the distribution of value in the labour market. Thus, we can understand the state's influence on the labour process as a means of enhancing the exploitation of racialised workers through the uneven and racialised forms of social reproduction. This dynamic underscores the interconnectedness between state policies and workplace practices, as both contribute to shaping the conditions under which racialised workers operate.

In conclusion, my research contributes to the ongoing exploration of workplace and factory studies, drawing especially on the Manchester School’s foundational approaches to an understanding of ‘production politics’ (Lupton, 1963; Wilson, 1963 & Cunnison, 1966). By situating the effort bargain within a labour regime framework, I have sought to demonstrate how gender (Pollert, 1981; Salzinger, 2004) and race (Ram, 1991) intersects with class to shape both the extraction of surplus and the social dynamics on the shop floor. This perspective emphasizes that racialised divisions are integral to understanding the complexities of power, control, and resistance in the workplace. My work thus adds a layer to existing factory ethnographies by illustrating how the effort bargain is not only a contest between labour and management but is also deeply mediated by racial hierarchies that mirror and reinforce broader social inequalities. In doing so, I hope to advance the conversation on production politics, highlighting that these dynamics cannot be fully understood without considering the wider social context in which both race and class shape workers' everyday experiences.

### 8.3.2 The Warehouse Regime: A Racialised Institution

The second contribution is the application of racial capitalism to labour regime and labour process theory. This section will outline this contribution in terms of the state’s disciplining of workers, mechanisms of exploitation in production and the resistance strategies of workers.

By adopting a racial capitalism theoretical lens to the study of warehouse labour, I have suggested that the movement of value across the circuit of capital, and evidenced through the distribution phase, is reliant on the racialisation of labour and the production of difference (Roediger & Esch, 2014). Here, I will outline how the regime was theorised using racial capitalism.

The specific processes of racialisation are spatially and political contingent and must be continually reproduced through processes of bordering. The concepts of bordering (De Genova, 2023) and multiplication (Neilson & Mezzadra, 2013) elucidate how migrant and refugee labour is differently included/excluded from an increasingly commoditised welfare system in the UK through policies associated with the Hostile Environment. I have argued that this contributes decisively to the production of racial class fractions through the state’s disciplining of labour. In essence, it is the politically established differential inclusion (Neilson & Mezzadra, 2013) that distinctly functions as a disciplinary force in shaping the conditions that enable migrant and refugee labour-power to become an appealing commodity for employers. These processes transform migrant and refugee labour in the SCR into a disposable 'reserve army' of labour.

Capital necessitates a surplus population not only to absorb displaced workers but also to serve as a reservoir of potential workers during periods of production expansion. The functioning of the reserve army of labour acts as a means to discipline labour while meeting the requirements of capital accumulation on an expanding scale. The political bordering of social welfare for migrant and refugee labour serves as a crucial disciplinary mechanism, managing all labour by multiplying categories of difference that fragment labour into competing and rival fractions.

These political processes of bordering have been internalised in the UK, so that migrants and refugees carry with them bordering practices every day. This internal bordering of differential inclusion ensures capital with a flexible and disposable ‘racial reserve army’ of labour in the SCR. Capital utilises these conditions so bordering practices increasingly permeate the shopfloors of the SCR’s warehouses.

In terms of managerial control mechanisms, the application of racial capitalism to labour process theory becomes evident. Capital exploits racial differences deliberately to foster competition and heighten production intensity on the shop floor (Lowe, 1996; Roediger & Esch, 2014). This strategic use of racial and gendered difference is aimed at extracting increased surplus value, particularly from migrant and refugee workers. Notably, the integration of performance management systems and flexible scheduling forms a coercive mechanism that significantly reduces workers' indeterminacy, invades the porosity of the workday, and increases overall effort.

The warehouses were also internally divided. Workers with limited mobility-effort bargaining power find themselves directed to the most intensified areas of production. This deliberate division based on racialised power dynamics underscores how racial capitalism influences the allocation of labour and shapes power relations within the labour process. Hence, we can interpret performance scheduling as a racialised mechanism of control within the broader framework of labour process theory. This perspective reveals the intricate ways in which race is embedded in managerial strategies, affecting both the organisation of work and the extraction of surplus value from workers.

Within the framework of racial capitalism, the analysis of workers' resistance through the lens of mobility-effort bargaining underscores the connection between racialisation, mobility power, and the UK’s border regime that shapes these dynamics. This connection is particularly influenced by factors such as immigration status, which results in distinct challenges for workers with different racial backgrounds regarding employment options and mobility within the labour market. The hostile environment, often perpetuated by discriminatory policies and practices, significantly impacts workers' capacity to resist managerial control.

For instance, when examining workers with precarious immigration statuses like refugees, the hostile environment becomes a determining factor in their racialised mobility. Discriminatory policies and practices contribute to limited alternative employment opportunities, exacerbating the vulnerability of workers. This restricted mobility is not merely a reflection of economic constraints but is also a consequence of systemic hostility that constrains the choices available to racialised workers.

In practical terms, a racialised worker, especially one subjected to the hostile environment, might find themselves compelled to endure adverse working conditions or longer hours due to the fear of potential job loss and the limited options for alternative employment. The hostile environment thus acts as a compounding factor, intensifying the leverage managers have in coercing increased effort and extracting higher levels of surplus value from racialised workers.

In summary, the racial capitalism framework highlights that resistance is not only racialised but also intricately connected to the hostile environment that determines workers' mobility. Discriminatory policies contribute to the shaping of the mobility-effort bargain, emphasising the need to recognise and address the systemic factors that influence workers' capacity to negotiate and resist managerial control within the labour process.

Overall, the warehouse regime is a racialised institution. Race and the production of difference serves as a fundamental organising principle for exploitation in both warehouses. This difference is politically established at national and local scales. As a result, Capital expediates value in motion through the circuit of capital through this social production of difference. This difference takes the form of labour power as a commodity in its movement through time and space. Therefore, it is the differential movement of labour power that sets in motion the movement of value through the circuit of capital.

**Figure 17: Conceptual Framework: *The Warehouse Regime in Motion***

National Political Economy of Mobility Control:

**UK Border Regime**

Regional Political Economy of Mobility Control:

Racial Segmentation of Local Labour Market

**The Sheffield City Region: Internal Border Zone**

Micro Labour Market: Household Structure, Social Connections, Informal Labour

**Forge Valley: Circulation Zone**

Micro Labour Market: Household Structure, Social Connections, Informal Labour   
  
**Pit-Town: Static Zone**

SeamlessCo:   
Exploitation: Performance Scheduling

Race Management

**Workplace Labour Regime: Racial-Performance Scheduling**

FrictionCo:  
 Exploitation: Performance Scheduling

Race Management

**Workplace Labour Regime: Racial & Gendered-Performance Scheduling**

**Character of Regime: Racial-Despotic-Mobility Regime**

Production: (C’)

Distribution: (LP)

Exchange: Money & Surplus Value: (M’)

Extended Circuit of Commodity Capital with Labour in Distribution

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## 8.5 Political Implications: Barriers and Opportunities for Organising

Tucked away between the rows of redbrick houses, located directly behind the towns square, the former, prefabricated town council, now home to the worker’s centre stands almost hidden from view. Painted a rusted red, with windows cased in metal bars, I make may up the ramp quickly. Despite the time of the year, it’s raining, and I was little prepared for such weather.

I’m welcomed through the centre and directed to a small room at the back of the office. Inside, Union memorabilia hangs off the walls. Posters of the Miners’ strike almost completely cover the back wall. The room is unusually dark for the time of day, but I can make out a fading, neatly drawn Kotwica on the whiteboard. Removing my mask, I open the small slits of windows that align across the one side of the room. Now the sound of the rain beats down on the corrugated roof. (Field Diary, August 2022).

I will use these experiences of union meetings at FrictionCo to review the barriers and opportunities for organising.

This research attempted to emphasise the crucial task of connecting labour with circulation and integrating the state and racial dynamics into the understanding of how racial capitalism structures the warehouse. The current debates in Logistics Political Economy on counterhegemonic politics underscore the challenges and potentials of repurposing or reconfiguring logistics and global supply chains and their infrastructures like warehousing for a post-capitalist future. While some argue for a massive delinking from the planetary warehouse (Bernes, 2013), others have argued that anti-capitalist politics should actively embrace the flows, connections, and universalisation of logistics. In this way, scholars have argued that these dynamics should be directed and channelled into more stable, enduring structures of collective distribution and democratic governance, including state mechanisms (Colas & Campling, 2022). Given the current conditions evidenced in this thesis of a racialised warehouse regime, my approach diverges.

I contend that democratic emancipation needs to have an anti-racist ambition. Exploring the warehouse has offered the opportunity to unveil and comprehend what is often concealed, forgotten, or intentionally obscured by those in power. Whether examining the state's disciplining of racialised labour in the SCR, capitals racialised mechanisms of value extraction in the labour process or the racial politics of the warehouse, understood as the capacity of labour to cause friction through mobility-effort bargaining, I have shown that the warehouse, as a key nodal point within the circulation of capital relies on the production of racialised difference. Therefore, the study underscores the imperative for anti-capitalism to be intrinsically linked with anti-racism, recognising the entangled nature of these systems and advocating for a transformative vision that addresses both economic and racial injustices in and through the state.

Participant observation in the warehouse and union meetings revealed significant barriers to meaningful horizontal ties among and between racial class fractions. This was explicated on the shopfloor, but also revealing through my experiences at the worker’s centre. Efforts to foster more meaningful engagement among workers, are crucial to develop a general class interest.

There was limited opportunity for workers from different class fractions to connect. The shopfloor offers little opportunity for socialisation, however when it does (loading bay) workers were able to break down barriers in communication and develop a general class interest through their shared experience of intensification. However, at FrictionCo the formal division of labour between departments hampered the development of meaningful relationships and hindered the potential for collective organising.

Moreover, observations within the warehouses indicate that the intensity of picking and language differences pose a significant hurdle to effective communication and collaboration, as Dave, a worker at SeamlessCo told me, “I just go the whole day without talking to anyone, there’s just no stopping, its constant, besides these people don’t speak English well”. These language barriers, limit the ability of workers to connect across various class fractions. The difficulty in bridging language gaps inhibits the development of meaningful relationships and collective organising efforts.

Additionally, in the formal meetings with the union, only Polish and British workers attended. The Polish workers could not understand English (although translation was provided). However, the shift towards Roma and Refugee workers at both workplaces suggests the need for additional translation services and language classes (Connolly et al., 2019). Efforts to address these barriers must include strategies to facilitate more meaningful exchange among warehouse workers. Creating opportunities for sustained relationships, both within and outside of formal meetings, is essential for fully realising the vision of rank-and-file power in the warehouse sector. Identifying individuals with knowledge of different segments of the workforce, fostering language skills, and implementing means for achieving connections will be critical steps in overcoming these barriers to collective organising in the warehouse. Top of Form

This analysis finds practical application when considering the unique dynamics of exploitation outlined in this thesis. To address the exploitation of the warehouse racial reserve army in the SCR, a set of measures may be needed to enhance the mobility power of workers, both in geographical and employment terms.

First, encouraging collaboration among workers across different workplaces strengthens solidarity based on shared issues, extending beyond work-related challenges. This includes addressing broader concerns such as migration, social and healthcare, and gender-specific issues for female Polish warehouse workers. Initiatives can expand efforts to organise the Polish community in Pit-town and establish communication with civil groups in Forge Valley, Sheffield, adapting to FrictionCo's expansion into new labour markets.

Fostering information-sharing, self-help, and self-organisation among migrant workers can be achieved by establishing alternative educational and social spaces, such as ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) classes. These initiatives, inspired by successful programs in London, not only enhance language skills but also promote awareness of work and community rights (Pero, 2020).

Building class politics out of intersectional discriminations experienced in the labour market involves migrants recognising and addressing their specific racialised immigration status and positions in the workforce (Grappi, 2021). This approach shifts from acknowledging diverse migrant positions to focusing on everyday issues, fostering alliances between 'old' and 'new' migrant workers, and developing inter-racial class action (Sivanandan, 1976).

Regarding the specificity of the racial class fractions within the racial reserve army, establishing a general class interest through multiplicity can serve as the basis for struggles around particular issues relating to workers' mobility and forming alliances between differently positioned groups (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013). This could include basing struggles around concrete factors limiting different groups' mobility power (Cillo & Pradella, 2018). For refugees and asylum seekers, this could include campaigning around the ending of compulsory dispersal, ending the prohibition of paid work, removing cessation of asylum support following refugee status transition, and advocating for improved acknowledgement of skills and experiences outside the UK, without imposing excessive fees, is crucial. This involves challenging barriers that hinder migrants from utilising their qualifications effectively in the new work environment, contributing to fairer and more inclusive labour practices.

## 8.6 Limitations and future research

While revealing the racialised management practices in two warehouses facilitated by the state’s border regime,this study acknowledges certain limitations in its research design and identifies potential avenues for future investigation. The qualitative case study approach employed here enables "theoretical generalisations" and is adept at probing exploratory research questions in considerable depth. However, it falls short of facilitating broad generalisations. The study's use of ethnographic participant observation, intertwining worker narratives with the researcher's own experiences, prompts questions regarding the applicability of the findings. It is crucial to recognise that the two case study firms don't serve as representatives of the entire UK.

While the experiences of the warehouse workers presented here offer important insights into the dynamics of racial and class divisions in the two warehouses, it is necessary to recognise the limitations of the data. The analysis is drawn from a small sample of workers, emphasising depth over breadth in line with ethnographic principles (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019). Hammersley and Atkinson (2019) argue that ethnography prioritises the detailed exploration of social contexts and individual experiences over the pursuit of generalisability. This focus allows for a nuanced understanding of the specificities of social phenomena; however, it also means that findings may not capture the full diversity of experiences within this region. The narratives shared by the participants are undoubtedly significant, yet they are inherently limited and should be viewed as indicative rather than exhaustive.

The reliance on a small number of informants means that some claims, particularly those concerning the representations of racial and class dynamics, may not fully encompass the complexity of the local workforce. For instance, conclusions drawn from single interviews can inadvertently oversimplify broader trends. While the insights gained are valuable for understanding the context of racialised management practices and their implications for workers, they do not provide a comprehensive view of the experiences of all racial and ethnic groups within the area. Therefore, it is crucial to acknowledge the partial nature of the evidence presented and consider the potential for different narratives that may exist beyond this study’s scope. Future research should seek to expand the sample size and engage with a more diverse range of voices to enrich the understanding of these dynamics across various contexts

Consequently, the study's conclusions are not universally applicable to sectoral or national levels. Despite similarities between the two firms, notable differences in work organisation exist. Given the scarcity of qualitative studies on work and employment in the UK warehousing industry, the chosen method provides an essential in-depth analysis. Nevertheless, extending this research to include findings from other logistics firms in diverse locations would offer additional perspectives on workplace dynamics and the peculiarities of the UK context.

Secondly, while stressing depth over generalisability, a notable constraint of this study lies in the limited access to migrant labour and specific migrant communities. This was especially prevalent in Forge Valley, where I live. While I was sometimes considered a 'Reyton' in desperate need of a job, it became evident in the fieldwork that gaining trust among the Roma community would take time. To overcome this issue, contact was made initially at the workplace and on the agency bus commute to FrictionCo. Identifying migrants with some level of English during this time. Enhanced access to migrant labour and specific migrant communities would aid in overcoming linguistic and trust barriers, fostering more insightful findings. This was also reflected in my decision not to access workers through institutional channels, which would have severely limited my access to a particular type of worker. It also affected how they perceived me as a student, or a researcher.

### 8.6.1 Future Research

This study explored the factors influencing workers' experiences in the SCR warehousing industry. It aimed to comprehend potential shifts in their material and political circumstances, aligning with broader appeals to refocus attention on labour. As a result, there has been a resurgence around labour regimes as a potential framework to explore this. By connecting labour regimes and the labour process with racial capitalism, the theoretical contributions of this thesis serve as a catalyst for future research on the state as a racialised institution and its application to the empirical study of the workplace through the racialised apparatus of production, mechanisms of value capture, and resistance.

Overall, this thesis has examined the specific racialised economic and political conditions in the SCR, similar conditions are likely present in other logistics clusters around the world. Therefore, the ‘warehouse regime in motion’ offers a framework for the future study of the role of racialisation of warehouse labour, particularly where there is a growing number of migrant workers employed in low-wage warehouse work with high turnovers.

Second, this thesis has examined the production politics of warehouse workers, this involved an examination of the apparatus of production. The apparatus of production has a dual character, which combines the reproduction of labour and the regulation of labour. This thesis has focused on the reproduction of labour and, hence, labour dependency on the wage relation. The research demonstrated a racialised despotic regime. However, to complete this picture of the warehouse in its social and political context, future research is needed to add the specific configuration of the more direct state regulation of the warehouse's production apparatus, by which I mean national labour regulation on working conditions that seek to liberalise labour markets and deregulate labour standards.

This thesis showed how the state directly “establishes the ties binding the reproduction of labour power to productive activity in the workplace” (Burawoy, 1985: 125). Future research is needed to establish the limits of this binding to methods of managerial domination in the warehouse that exploit workers' dependence on wages, such as performance-scheduling. This would involve implementing measures such as trade union recognition, establishing grievance mechanisms, and enacting collective bargaining legislation. These initiatives serve to safeguard workers from arbitrary dismissal, fines, and wage reductions, thereby bolstering the reproduction of labour power (Burawoy, 1985).

Second, this research has examined the racial class fractioning of the working class. The state's immigration regime and processes of internal borders create differential conditions of exploitation in the warehouse. Future research should take place through the experience of particular class fractions in these conditions. Considering the specificity of each dynamic of exploitation can lead to a better understanding of the measures to increase workers’ bargaining power based on the specific factors that constrain workers mobility. Understanding these differences can contribute to the discussion of the specific transformations that would be required to increase their capacity to struggle collectively.

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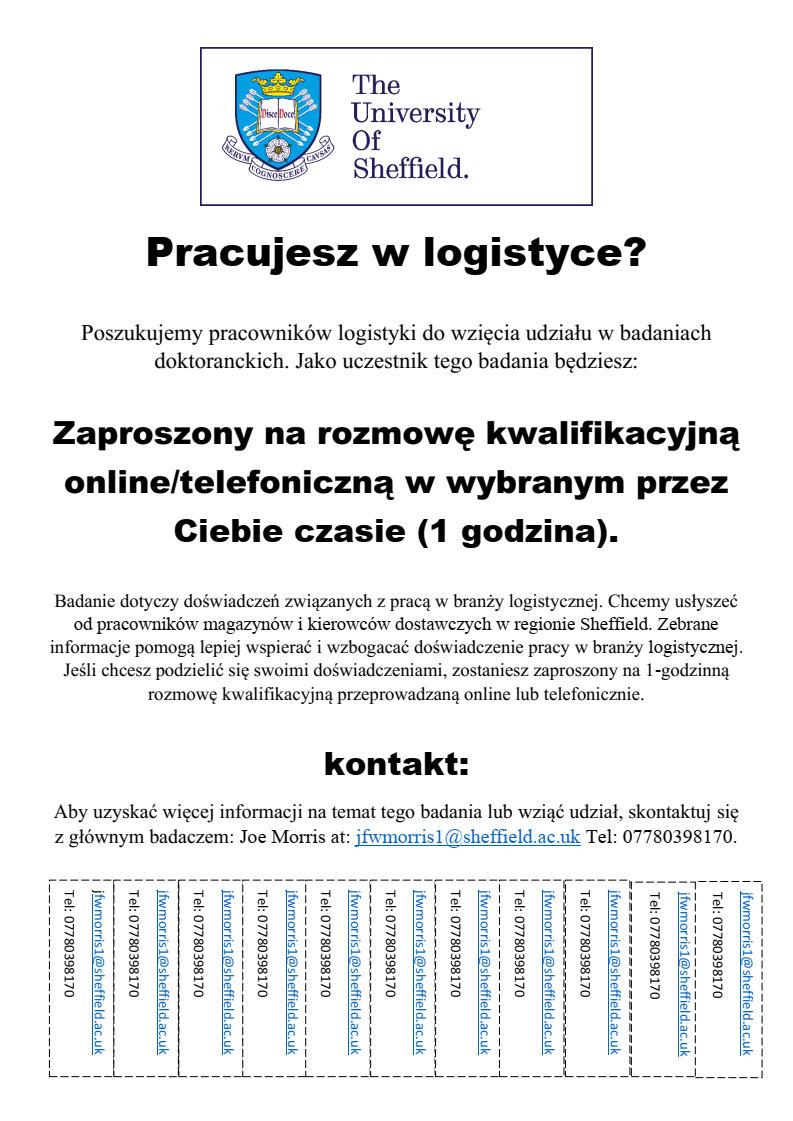
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# Appendix 1: Recruitment Posters (English and Polish)

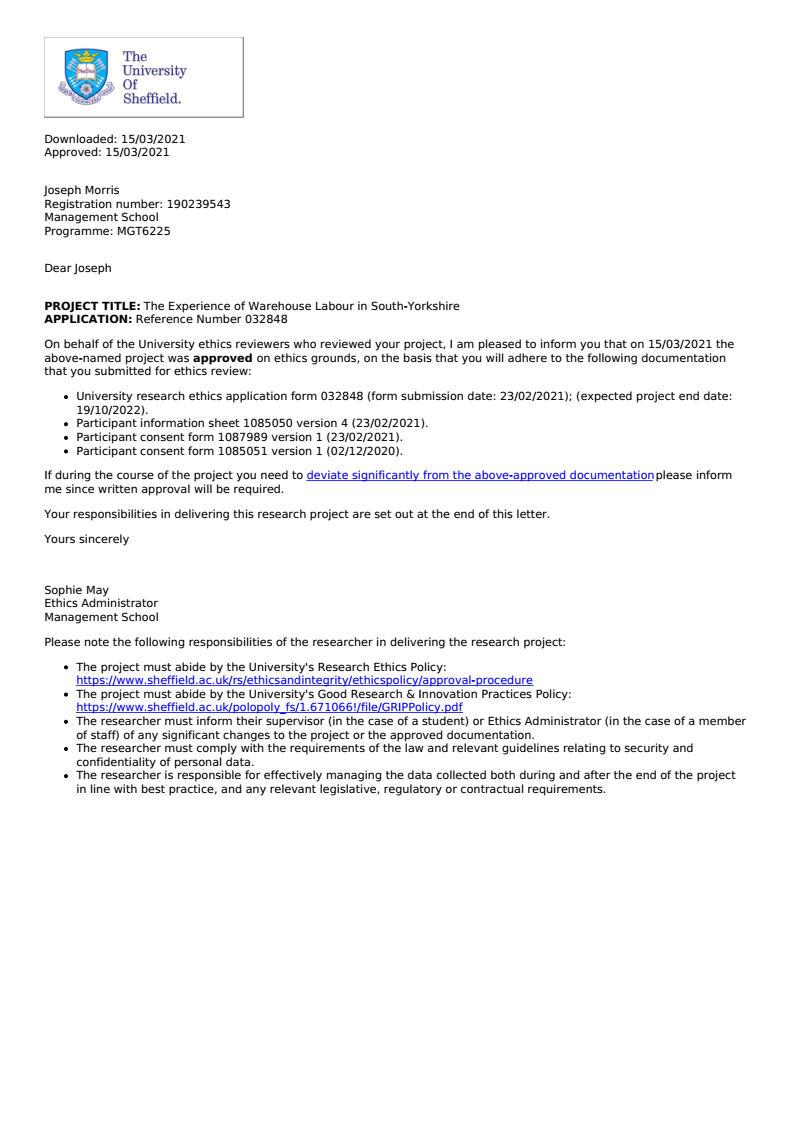




# Appendix 2: Interview Participants

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Name** | **Warehouse** | **Employment Agency** | **Nationality/ Ethnicity** | **Immigration Status** | **Contract** | **Age** |
| Mike | FrictionCo | FreshJob | British/White | British Citizen | Temporary | 25 |
| Tezza | FrictionCo | FreshJob | British/White | British Citizen | Temporary | 22 |
| Graham | FrictionCo | FreshJob | British/White | British Citizen | Temporary | 40 |
| Anton | FrictionCo | RecruitNow | Polish/White | Settled Status | Temporary | 43 |
| Agnieszka | FrictionCo | RecruitNow | Polish/White | Settled Status | Temporary | 40 |
| Denis | FrictionCo | BestRecruit | Nicaraguan/ Mestizo | Refugee | Temporary | 34 |
| Saanvi | FrictionCo | RecruitNow | Indian/Asian | Student Visa | Temporary | 23 |
| Absar | SeamlessCo | OptiRecruit | British/Asian | British Citizen | Temporary | 51 |
| Imran | SeamlessCo | OptiRecruit | British/Asian | British Citizen | Temporary | 23 |
| Antonela | SeamlessCo | OptiRecruit | Argentinian/ Mestizo | Partner Visa | Temporary | 30 |
| Lionel | SeamlessCo | OptiRecruit | Argentinian/ Mestizo | Work Visa | Temporary | 31 |
| Jonas | SeamlessCo | OptiRecruit | Lithuanian/ White | Settled Status | Temporary | 26 |

# Appendix 3: Ethics Approval



# Appendix 4: General Profile of SeamlessCo and FrictionCo Workers

**GENDER AND ETHNICITY**

The workers in the Loading department are all male, predominantly Refugee and Roma workers. FLT drivers are predominantly British and Polish, as are the loading departments team leaders and supervisors.

In the sortation department workers are predominantly female, Polish and Roma. The Roma and Polish women are split between push-tray sorters (Roma) and belt sorters (Polish). There is little (non-white British) occupational mobility between departments.

In SeamlessCo the workers in the piking department are male and female, Roma, White British, Refugee and Second and Third generation British.

**RESIDENCE**

In the Loading department the workers predominantly come from nearby cities (Forge Valley) via the agency bus. In the sortation department the Roma women arrive via the agency bus, while the Polish women are predominantly from Pit-Town. The British workers reside in Pit-Town.

In SeamlessCo the workers reside in Forge Valley and in the 1930s former steelworkers terraces compacted between the motorway and logistics cluster.

**HOUSEHOLD AND FAMILY**

With the exception of Ali (Refugee), the loading bay workers came from extended households in Forge Valley with enlarged social networks, where the average number living in the household is five, there are less than one unemployed member in each household. The Sortation workers came from nuclear households in Pit-Town, with limited social networks, only in one household (Mike, Tezza and Graham) are there more than two adults. Income between men and women is identical.

In SeamlessCo the workers are from extended households residing in Forge Valley.

**INFORMAL ECONOMY/OCCUPATIONAL BACKGROUND**

The Loading Bay workers have worked in a number of warehouses and informal jobs in Forge Valley. This includes Hand Car washes paid cash-in-hand.

In the Sortation Department the Polish women have generally worked in FrictionCo for a number of years. The Roma women have worked at FrictionCo for under one year and have previously worked in Hotel Housekeeping near Forge Valley.

In SeamlessCo the ‘Reytons’ highest level of education is A levels, have worked in a number of warehouses along the Sheffield-Rotherham Logistics Corridor and engage in the drug trade in Forge Valley.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Worker Profile** | | | | | | | | | |
| **Worker** | **Warehouse** | **Department** | **Union** | **Race** | **Gender** | **Age** | **Nationality** | **Residence** | **Contractual Status** |
| Adi | SeamlessCo | Picking | No | Arab | Male | 23 | British | Forge Valley | Agency |
| Omar | SeamlessCo | Picking | No | Arab | Male | 24 | British | Forge Valley | Agency |
| Naseem | SeamlessCo | Picking | No | Arab | Male | 23 | British | Forge Valley | Agency |
| Gabriel | FrictionCo | Loading | No | Roma | Male | 23 | Slovak | Forge Valley | Agency |
| Marian | FrictionCo | Sortation | No | Roma | Female | 21 | Slovak | Forge Valley | Agency |
| Elena | FrictionCo | Sortation | No | Roma | Female | 25 | Slovak | Forge Valley | Agency |
| Ali | FrictionCo | Loading | No | Black | Male | 49 | South-Sudan | Forge Valley | Agency |
| Xenon | SeamlessCo | Picking | No | Black | Male | 19 | Eritrea | Forge Valley | Agency |
| Dave | SeamlessCo | Picker | No | Asian | Male | 22 | Hong-Kong | Forge Valley | Agency |
| Vytas | SeamlessCo | Picking | No | White | Male | 25 | Lithuanian | Forge Valley | Agency |
| Szymon | SeamlessCo | Picking | No | White | Male | 24 | Polish | Pit-Town | Agency |
| Jan | FrictionCo | Team Leader | No | White | Male | 30 | Polish | Pit-Town | Firm |
| Jaco | FrictionCo | Supervisor | No | White | Female | 35 | Polish | Pit-Town | Firm |
| Graham | FrictionCo | Refuse | No | White | Male | 52 | British | Pit-Town | Firm |
| Mike | FrictionCo | FLT | No | White | Male | 23 | British | Pit-Town | Firm |
| Tezza | FrictionCo | Sortation | No | White | Female | 21 | British | Pit-Town | Firm |

# Appendix 5: National and Local Variables

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | | **Regional Variables** | | | | **National Variables** | | | **Mobility-Effort Bargain** | | |
| Labour | Firm | Local Labour Market | Social Connections/ Networks | Informal Economy | Household | Immigration Status | Housing | Access to Welfare | International Mobility | Intrasectoral Mobility | Labour Effort |
| The Reytons | SeamlessCo | Forge Valley | High | Yes | Extended Family | Citizen | Private Renting | Yes | Low | High | Low |
| Slovak-Roma | SeamlessCo | Forge Valley | High | Yes | Extended Family | Pre-settled | Private Renting | Limited | High | High | Low |
| FrictionCo | Forge Valley | High | Yes | Extended Family | Pre-settled | Private Renting | Limited | High | High | Low |
| Refugee | SeamlessCo | Forge Valley | Low | No | HMO | Refugee | Private Renting | Limited | Low | Low | High |
| FrictionCo | Forge Valley | Low | No | Low | Low | High |
| CEE (Polish/Lithuanian) | SeamlessCo | Forge Valley | High | No | Nuclear Family/HMO | Settled | Private Renting | Yes | High | High | Moderate |
| FrictionCo | Pit-Town (Captive) | Low | No | High (M) | Low (M) | Moderate (M) |
| Low (F) | Low (F) | High (F) |
| White British | FrictionCo | Pit-Town (Captive) | Low | No | Nuclear Family | Citizen | Private Owned | Yes | Low | Low | High |

1. Data collection was conducted between November 2021 and February 2022, during which COVID-19 restrictions were still in effect following the spread of the Omicron variant. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The framework for present-day logistics only emerged after transportation deregulation in the 1980s. The introduction of shipping containers to land-based intermodal transport during the 1980s represented a turning point, significantly expanding the scope of logistics (Levinson, 2008: 261). By the mid-to-late 1980s, the adoption of just-in-time (JIT) production and delivery, coupled with the integration of computerisation, accelerated the pace at which goods traversed the globe, thereby optimising coordination and efficiency (Bonacich & Wilson, 2008: 101; Levinson, 2006: 267). These operations exhibit remarkable adaptability, responding swiftly to shifting consumer demand, market dynamics, and broader global economic trends.  [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The geographic location for this study is referred to as the Sheffield City Region (SCR). However, it is important to note that during the course of this research, the administrative designation of SCR was replaced by the South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority (SYMCA). This change occurred in June, 2021, following developments in local governance aimed at consolidating regional authority under the new combined authority structure. Although the SCR designation is no longer in use, I continue to refer to it throughout this thesis for consistency, as it was the formal designation during the period of fieldwork. Where relevant, the term SCR should be understood in the context of this transitional period, reflecting the institutional framework that existed at the time of data collection. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The point here is that current analyses of the warehouse labour process only treat race as a sub-plot (See Phizeacklea, (1990). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Therefore, this thesis contributes to what has been referred to in labour process theory as its ‘connectivity problem’ (Newsome, 2015), that is, the linking of the dynamics of the labour process at the point of production with the wider political economy. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Just-in-Time is a method for structuring both the immediate manufacturing labour process and the buyer-supplier relationships between firms. It is underpinned by a broader framework of labour management relations. Its origins can be traced to the post-war Japanese car 'demand-pull' manufacturing process. This involves the elimination of waste from the production process, ensuring goods are only manufactured when customers dictate (Sayer & Walker, 1992). See also Graham (1996) for a workplace ethnographic study of the Just-in-Time model in car manufacturing in the US.   [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For a historical overview of the warehouse in the History of Capitalism, see Orenstein, 2019. Of note is Orenstein's conceptualisation of the Foreign Trade Zone as a "state-backed-warehouse" (2019: 20). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. One standout example is the wide-scale adoption of Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) tagging, which gained traction as it became cost-effective and standardised in the early 21st century. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The Transport & General Workers’ Union (T&GWU) held unique 'monopoly power' in the UK docks. The government anticipated that abolishing the Dock Labour Scheme would diminish this power, fostering increased competition and reduced wages, especially in non-scheme ports (Turnbull, 1991). Originating in 1947 and modified in 1967, the National Dock Labour Scheme underwent further changes in a 1972 industrial agreement. This agreement obligated employers to avoid compulsory redundancies and granted registered dockers the right to transfer if their company ceased operations. Registered dockers enjoyed average weekly wages exceeding the national average, notably higher than their counterparts in non-scheme ports. Despite criticism, the Scheme persisted into the third term of the Tory Government, labelled by The Times as a 'blatant anachronism' conflicting with market-oriented policies. In July 1989, the Government abolished the Scheme (Turnbull, 1991). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Here, I am referring to literature focused on global retailers with their own in-house logistics.  [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Here, I am referring to literature focused on 3PL firms, which highlight their relations with retailers. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. For example, Benvegnu (2018) found, many of the migrant families from the warehouse emphasised the role of the head of the family or their 'family project' in response to the devalued work in the warehouse. In these cases, the male head of the family saw his work in the warehouse as a sacrifice for the social mobility of his children. This had the effect of displacing mobility aspirations onto the children of recent migrants and second-generation migrants. At the same time, the persistence of an economic crisis in Italy limited the possibilities of both international and intra-sectoral mobility. These aspects combined to 'root' networks of migrants within particular communities associated with employment at the warehouse, even when they continued to move between warehouses. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. For an outline see Sivanadan, ‘Race Class and the Black Experience in Britain’ (1976). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Along with Vickers (2019), I suggest that the Hostile Environment's origins have evolved, mainly from New Labour Policy 1997-2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Strauss and McGrath describe mobility bargaining power as a “form of power exerted by workers in relation to their ability to exit employment relations in a tight labour market” (2017: 204). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. This approach differs from the grounded theory approach, where the researcher and the external environment are set aside during case study analysis, and theory is derived from emerging data (Sayer, 1992). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. The Kotwica symbol, historically linked to the Polish Underground State during World War II, represented the Polish resistance against German occupation and was later used by Solidarity, the Polish independent Trade Union (Osborn, 2020). In the context of Union meetings, Polish workers employed the Kotwica as a symbol to express distrust towards both the Trade Union leadership and FrictionCo. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Employing a rigid structure interviews could jeopardize the flexibility and exploratory nature intrinsic to these "ethnographic interviews" (Chen, 2010). Such structures might have hindered the researcher's ability to construct a foundational rapport and trust with the participants, restricting access to sensitive information crucial for the study. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. This involved practical information and guidance for migrants accessing and managing their status under the EU Settlement Scheme (EUSS). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. While working the 12-hour shifts and commuting to FrictionCo from Forge Valley, I often compiled these scratch notes the following morning. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. As a result of my 'explorations', my quantified output was often at a lower level than the required minimum. As a result of my being 'in the red,' I was subject to a performance improvement plan (PIP) in SeamlessCo.  [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. The name given by the Reytons to describe the ground floor of the picking department in SeamlessCo. I describe in chapter seven the importance of the racial division of labour within the picking department between those workers on ‘ground zero’ and those working on higher floors. I relate this spatialised racial division of labour to the ability of workers to retain some indeterminacy in the labour process. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Mobility skills are defined as, “the ability to access useful knowledge about better jobs, strategise over one’s labour market mobility accordingly, and manage productive and reproductive resources as mobile subjects” Alberti & Sacchetto, 2024: 188). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Warm banks are heated public spaces provided by councils, charities, and community organisations in the UK, where people can go to stay warm during winter if they cannot afford to heat their homes. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. The extended family household structure, or extended household, refers to a living arrangement where multiple adults, aside from spouses and unmarried children, cohabit on a daily basis (Gupta et al., 2020). This arrangement stands in contrast to the nuclear household, which typically consists of partners and their unmarried children. Various disciplines have expanded on the categorization of family structures, providing a more nuanced and fluid understanding of the concept of family (Niranjan et al., 2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. After my fieldwork, in January 2023, Sugar Town faced a temporary closure lasting several weeks due to a drive-by shooting that left eight bullet holes in the front window. This incident highlights the risks associated with the Reytons' involvement in the informal economy of Forge Valley. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. In Sheffield these community, third sector' partners' fill the gaps of an absent state.  [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. In Forge Valley, the Roma community mainly hail from two villages: Bystrany and Zehra. Gebrial and Marian, natives of Slovakia, hail from the town of Zehra, a place marked by a stark racial divide. In this community, the intersection of race and residence creates a distinct landscape, reminiscent of apartheid dynamics (Scheffel, 2013). The ethnic Slovaks live in the village, known as dedina, while the Roma population finds itself confined to the osada—a ghetto-like slum situated on the northern periphery. The term "osada," translates to "settlement," capturing the essence of communities that, while more enduring than camps, lack the rootedness of traditional villages. In Zehra, the complete overlap between race and residence manifests in the stark spatial separation of the ethnic Slovaks in the village and the Roma in the marginalised osada. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. As Burawoy (1976) demonstrated, migrant labour often entails a separation of the exploitation of labour-power from the sites (and costs) of its reproduction. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Here, I agree with Lowe (1996: 11) that, “capital is maximising its profits not through rendering labour ‘abstract’ but through the social productions of ‘difference,’ . . . marked by race, nation, geographical origins, and gender”. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. The sortation room is marked by several large industrial fans placed either side of the line-belt. These fans push hot air between the sortation workers on either side, rather than towards exit points. This was a common concern of sortation workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. The bonus system in FrictionCo fluctuated depending on the time of year. Higher bonuses were offered during peak times (December and January). [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. FrictionCo is said to have an ‘automation problem’, meaning that it has been slow to pursue partial automation of many of its activities in the warehouse. See Benvegnu (2018) for a comparison of a loading bay which is “partially automated”. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. I am suggesting the significance of the team leader in directing and intensifying work on the loading bay. Similar, observations have been made regarding the staying power of the ‘foreman’s empire’ and the construction of racial hierarchies within scientific management (Roediger and Esch, 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. This meant, following the break, continuous working of six hours. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Cages and stillages measured 7 feet tall and 3.5 feet wide. The lack of visibility made it difficult for workers to see over or around a full stillage. Moreover, the weight of the stillage meant moving them required significant strength and workers were reliant on the ramp to gather momentum. As a result, workers pushed the stillages resulting in a lack of control. Due to the uneven surface in the loading bay this led to stillages toppling over. The sheer weight of a full stillage increased the strain on workers bodies and led to ‘pinch points’ where workers hands and fingers became trapped between stillages. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. At the start of my employment at FrictionCo security operated with a traffic light system. After one week, they started to scan everyone individually. This involves the removal of jumpers, hoodies and shoes, and the checking of workers socks. This significantly affects the time taken between check-out and leaving the workplace. For the Sheffielders this means they can miss the agency bus which leaves 10 minutes after the official end of shift. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Munoz (2008), in her ethnographic account of women workers in a tortillas manufacturing plant in Tijuana, found a form of control ‘sexualised despotism’. This also had a racial component with managers favouring whiter Mexican women, than those with darker complexions. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. At that time, all communal seating arrangements in the break rooms were prohibited, with yellow and black hazard tape, enforced by the covid safety team. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. For example, Alimahomed-Wilson (2019) has shown how gendered-racialised ideologies about working class men of colour’s bodies associate these workers as “naturally fit” for the hard labour of warehousing. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. To ‘make rate’ in the sortation room it was necessary to move between stations in order to sort an increasing number of items. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. For example, readying a number of boxes on your section at the start of the shift will reduce the amount of time spent later looking for boxes and setting each up individually. Therefore, maintaining ownership of a section was related to achieving high-performance rates.  [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Bahir and I walked to SeamlessCo on many occasions. As a result, he never searched me when entering the warehouse. I reflect on the opportunity this gave me when note-taking in the methods chapter.  [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. A stock-keeping unit (SKU) is a scannable bar code.  [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. The Hong Kong migrant workers are on the BN(O) Visa (British national overseas), allowing them to live, work, and study in the UK.  [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Record of Conversation.  [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. There are no electronic league tables in the picking aisles as observed by Elliot & Long (2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. While the theft of variable wages became racialised through language discrepancies in SeamlessCo, the theft of base wages was also a common grievance in SeamlessCo. From August 2020 to August 2022, 'RecruitNow' was taken to 12 employment tribunals that resulted in it being ordered to pay money to workers, including 10 involving unpaid wages, unauthorised salary deductions, or a failure to award holiday pay (Das, 2022). [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. These ‘mobility skills’ are understood as, “the ability to access useful knowledge about better jobs, strategize over one’s labour market mobility accordingly, and manage productive and reproductive resources as mobile subjects” (Alberti & Sacchetto, 2024: 189). [↑](#footnote-ref-49)