

Volume 7 Issue 2: Editorial

Sarah Attfield, University of Technology Sydney

Liz Giuffre, University of Technology Sydney

As 2022 comes to a close, we reflect on the year and events around the world that have affected working-class people. The Covid-19 pandemic continues to impact the most vulnerable, and with many nations now having abandoned all health measures and restrictions, it is inevitable that cases will continue and people will die. At the same time, the measures in place in some countries to help working-class people, such as furlough schemes, extensions of sick leave provisions to the precariously employed and the raising of unemployment benefit rates have ended, and workers are once again at the mercy of their bosses. At the beginning of the pandemic we wondered whether governments' realisations that insecure work was not good for the health of nations would have lasting effects, but outside of a few exceptions, it seems that the lessons from the pandemic have not been learnt.

However, it isn't all bad news! We have also seen an impressive increase in union activity, particularly in the United States and the UK, and it's possible that the tide is starting to turn in terms of years of hostility towards unions that has been created and encouraged by neoliberal governments. In the UK, Mick Lynch, the General Secretary of the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers has won over the public with his measured (and often very humorous) [responses](#) to anti-union questions posed by journalists and others during rail strikes. In the US, Chris Smalls, who has been instrumental in [organising](#) Amazon workers has continued to inspire workers to start and join unions in their workplaces, and in Australia (where the editors of this Journal reside), a new Labor government has been able to pass industrial relations legislation that will improve working conditions and union rights. We also note here the beginnings of a backlash against so-called 'gig economy' companies like the delivery service Deliveroo, which has now closed its operations in Germany, Taiwan, Spain, Australia and the Netherlands. As [Transport Workers' Union members describe](#), workers are treated so poorly they 'are not even considered workers' for these companies, and although this is just one of many of these types of services, we are optimistic that these types of closures will show such models are simply not sustainable and most importantly, absolutely unfair.

This issue was intended to be a special issue exploring class issues within popular music, and we do have some fine contributions within this theme (as outlined below). But we didn't receive as many as we had hoped and we wondered why this might be the case. It could be that people are still catching up on work missed due to the pandemic, or dealing with excessive workloads. And we know that many scholars are also carers or having to take on extra jobs due to redundancies, cuts to funding for scholarly activity etc. This is the case across the board and output has been affected. We have also considered another reason though – that popular music, like the arts in general has become very middle-class dominated, with working-class people finding it [increasingly difficult](#) to start careers in the performing arts. Researchers in the English-speaking world have revealed [how difficult it has become for working-class people to enter the creative arts](#), meaning that film, television, theatre, fine arts are excluding participation from working-class people. The result is a contraction of the depth and breadth of stories that are told – but also perspectives that can be represented authentically. Similarly, in music, limited access to resources, skyrocketing ticket prices; and diminished returns to artists have all taken a toll. What effect does this have on music made by working-class people and

that which reflects working-class experiences? Are we seeing the rise of a mainstream that is again, [middle of the road and middle-class](#)?

The problem starts early for working-class children who are not experiencing music education due to cuts to funding for music programs in schools, and for prospective students of music who are priced out of degrees, and can't afford to take on the debt burden of a degree that doesn't guarantee a job. We hope that industry bodies will start to realise and start more creative arts programs that are accessible for young working-class people (and we hope to see some research on these issues from Working-Class Studies scholars).

Having said this, we are delighted that we have four submissions relating to the theme of music and class. In 'Mamas If Your Daughters Grow Up to Be Cowboys, So What?': Women Refiguring Rurality and Class in Country Music', Lillian Nagengast gets the issue started with an article on women country music artists and the ways they use their music to articulate class experiences and to challenge male-dominated representations of working-class rurality. There are some great songs listed too that require a listen!

Michele Fazio, Aimee Zoeller, Mark F. Fernandez, Court Carney and Gustavus Stadler follow with 'Taking the Great Leap Forwards: Teaching Woody Guthrie in the College Classroom' which offers educators a series of lesson plans that use the music of Woody Guthrie (and others) to illustrate and start discussion on a range of topics in the classroom such as place, politics, famil, and love and the many intersections with class, race, gender and so on that exist within these themes. There is also a song list that should be compulsory listening.

In her personal essay, 'A Secret Fan of Despised Music', Lita Kurth takes the reader on a journey into her childhood and the significance of country music for her rural working-class family. This was music that was supposed to be uncool, but she always knew its worth. Some of the songs listed in the piece are old favourites of many rural working-class people and anyone who may also think that country music is uncool needs to listen to the songs and adjust their judgements.

The music section ends with two poems from Ian C Smith, 'The End of Lonely Street' and 'Songsters of the Troubled Heart'. These poems show the importance of music and song lyrics in the everyday lives of working-class people.

Following the music section, we have three very different pieces starting with an article by Lawrence M. Eppard, Jörg Neugschwender and Erik Nelson. In 'The American Poor and Working Class in Cross-National Comparison', the authors look at comparative data to determine the levels of poverty in the US compared to that of other sample countries and to ascertain where the US working class sit in relative terms.

Liberty Kohn's article is next – 'How COVID Vaccination Hesitancy, Social Class, and Economic Inequality Reveal a New Dimension of Public Trust' explores possible reasons for some working-class people's hesitancy to receive covid vaccinations in the US and looks towards issues of trust in public institutions for potential answers.

A personal essay from Kenneth Atkinson follows. 'Academic Work as Factory Work: A Former Blue-Collar Worker's Observations on Class and Caste in the Academy' outlines Atkinson's previous working-class occupations and experiences and compares them with the

classed and hierarchical system of the academy and points to some of the similarities in higher education institutions' approaches to the organisation of work.

This issue also contains eight books reviews (edited by Christie Launius) on a variety of topics such as Appalachian poetry, responses to the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire, Marxist theory, precarity and organising opportunities in the US higher education sector, a memoir of experiences as a working-class Chinese American, the gig economy, the effects of unemployment in the US and the rise of the health care industries in former industrial towns. Again, a great indication of the range of topics relating to class and working-class people that are being written and read (both inside and outside the academy).

Many thanks to all of our contributors, reviewers and readers. We hope that 2023 brings us more stories of hope for working-class people around the world. The level of scholarship and creativity that we see as editors of this Journal certainly makes us optimistic for the future.